



MONASH University

The Colony Under Gaze

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Abstract

South Africa and Australia are haunted with histories of dispossession and colonial control. The social, economic and psychological effects of which are still heavily visible today. The social identity of white patriarchy has been central to this devastation. In this thesis, I question how an artist, living in these contexts, may contend and bear witness to this? I investigate the notion of witnessing through the colonial archive.

Various artworks discussed in this thesis present methods that artists have, to varying degrees of success, positioned the viewer as witness. The theoretical positions of Giorgio Agamben (who locates the *lacuna*, wherein we are able to bear witness through that which is absent) and Georges Didi-Huberman (who discusses the photograph as a mechanism for reflective gaze) assist an understanding of this. The colonial archive, as discussed by Gayatri Spivak, Thomas Richards, and Eric Ketelaar, contains evidence of the imperial production of 'knowledge', revealing the ideology, values, and behaviour of its makers. In addition, through Derrida's text on the archival impulse, we see how the archive enables us not only to view the past but to consider the present and future. As such, the archive provides a site for the artist and viewer to critically reflect upon colonial atrocity and its effects then and now. The essential question of how a white artist might bear witness and be an ally in light of the BLM movement arises. My own installations, *Books on a White Background* and *The Miners' Companion*, which delve into the

colonial archive, aim to bear witness to the insidious assumptions behind the social identity of 'whiteness'. In these installations Homi K. Bhabha's notion of *mimicry and menace*, as well as the abovementioned theorists become valuable launching tools for identifying and displacing the colonial gaze.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'ALIZA LEVI', written over a horizontal line.

Print Name: ALIZA LEVI

Date: 27 October 2020.

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Please note, I have not engaged a copyeditor on this thesis.

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Introduction

In 1997, post-apartheid South Africa, I was sent on a work assignment to source a photograph of an indigenous plant at Reuters Stock Library in Johannesburg. During this pre-internet period, Reuters was the primary photographic agency and disseminator of visual information in the country. On arrival, I was directed to the cabinets of fauna and flora. Accompanying these were drawers labelled 'bushmen' and 'tribal people', generic colonial terms for Indigenous people of Africa. The drawers contained photographs of unnamed naked people standing in front of the gaze of a camera lens. These ethnographic photographs of Indigenous people categorised as 'fauna and flora' are emblematic of a continued colonial undercurrent in South Africa that persists into the present.

The experience of standing in front of the filing cabinets at the Reuters stock library felt like a metaphor for the role of involuntary accomplice that myself and others were born into in South Africa. A childhood spent observing a relentless, degrading system of classification and control. The past was still present.

I took a photographic slide of the Reuters cabinet and exhibited it in an interventionist group exhibition in 1997, which was held during the period of the second Johannesburg Biennale in the trading trade hall of the Old Johannesburg Stock Exchange. The

exhibition was entitled *Taking Stock*. My image, entitled *1997: Reuters Stock Library*, was projected life-size onto the wall, facing the seats that were previously reserved for stockbrokers. A virtual cabinet, realistic in size and colour, but inaccessible.



Aliza Levi, *1997: Reuters Stock Library*, 1997, photographic slide projection/installation, dimensions variable, installation view: Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Photo credit: Aliza Levi.

In my photographic treatment, the non-identified, ethnographic images of people of San/Khoi heritage that I had found in the Reuters drawers were not available to the viewer. Instead, the viewer was positioned to witness or spectate the method of archival classification used by the main distributor of stock photography at the time as opposed to the graphic, objectified images of people within the cabinet itself. The projected photograph bore testimony to the racist manner in which Indigenous people were being

categorised and commodified, despite the fact that it was 1997, post-apartheid. The content of the drawers was now made inaccessible to the viewer, a performative act of refusal.

The work *1997: Reuters Stock Library* marked the beginning of a particular pathway in my art practice. A direction that has led me to examine the use of the archive (and the lens) to bear witness to colonial atrocity. Specifically, to explore what it means for the artist to bear witness to colonialism and its effects, both past and present.

There are key concerns and questions that arise in this area of research, much of it pivots on the notion of testimony and bearing witness to the colonial archive. This thesis revolves around the question of what it means to bear witness. I ask: How might the artist use the camera to bear witness? How might the archive enable this? What does it mean to interpret, interpolate, or disrupt the archive through art? How might the artist work with the colonial archive, and point to its racisms and imperialisms, without reinscribing them? How do we, as artists, bring reflexivity to white social identity and contribute to processes of decolonisation? Such questions feel urgent in an era where the effects of colonialism are still apparent and the voice of the Black Lives Matter movement calls for action and for its allies to listen and to redress white privilege. This is something that I

am working on as a person prescribed from birth as white. I am still listening, I am still learning.

Methodology

There is irony in writing a thesis about decolonisation in that the very roots of academic research stem from colonialism, which too has sought to document, categorise, classify, and historicise. Ethnocentric bias in traditional research has been driven by and has further reinforced political and social agendas of western domination. Two decades ago, writer and professor of Indigenous education at the University of Waikato, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, stated that 'Research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary'.¹ This sentiment has not disappeared. The hurt and pain of colonial imposition persists and the real-life repercussions are visible socially, politically, and economically.

Tuhiwai Smith challenges objective assumptions in traditional research. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, she calls for the 'decolonization' of methodologies and 'a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices'.² In a similar vein, the

¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, London, 1991), 1.

² Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing*, 1.

feminist scholar Donna Haraway talks about the presentation of western research as the 'god trick a conquering gaze from nowhere' wherein the dominant ideology is maintained, reinforced, and reproduced in the name of research.³

Those of us doing research in academia need to ask ourselves whether we can work within a framework of academic practice without reinscribing the violence of the past and, if so, how? The answer might be (not to throw the baby out with the bath water, but) to embody methodologies that interrupt traditional academic discourse.

Haraway proposes a feminist constructivist approach to knowledge production. She suggests an interpretation of objectivity in what she terms 'situated knowledge' and asks us to pay attention to how our experiences, values, and expectations shape and affect the research we are doing. 'Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?'⁴ Haraway proposes partial and accountable dialogue for what one sees and how one organises what one sees.

It is with the above mentioned approach that I attempt to write this thesis and work with situational knowledge to consider my own positionality and identity. As Haraway notes,

³ Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 581.

⁴ Haraway, 'Situated', 585.

we need 'a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions'.⁵ This is crucial given the content of my artwork, the fact that I was raised as a white woman in South Africa during Apartheid, and that I currently live as an uninvited guest on Aboriginal land in the colonised continent of Australia.

Key terms/definitions

Before going any further, there are some key terms that need to be defined in this thesis. The term *to bear witness* is a primary part of the discussion. The origin of the word 'witness' (in old English) is *witnes*, which means both *testimony* and *witness*. It is derived from the word *witan*, which means *to know*.⁶ In this thesis, I use the term 'to bear witness' in order to reflect on what it means to be able to hold, understand, and convey knowledge of an experience, person, or event. This can be understood through a psychological framework as simply 'sharing our experiences with others, most notably in the communication to others of traumatic experiences'.⁷ As such, to bear witness means to be able to understand and convey an experience, and ideally to solicit empathy and

⁵ Haraway, 'Situated', 579.

⁶ 'Witness', *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/witness>, accessed 3 September 2020

⁷ Kristi Pikiewicz, 'The Power and Strength of Bearing Witness', December 2013, *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/meaningful--you/201312/the--power--and--strength--bearing--witness>, accessed 26 October 2020.

understanding. Bearing witness and testimony have various applications whether it be verbal, visual, or auditory, each of which has its own specific field of literature. My literature review of these fields is embedded throughout the following chapters.

Of further importance to this thesis is the term 'archive'. I use it in the tradition of collections of texts, recordings, and objects from the past that document the 'by-product[s] of human activity'.⁸ When we think about the archive, we usually conjure up an image of stored documents but not necessarily objects. However, objects make up a considerable part of the archive, and are the point of focus for my research. In this thesis, I refer to the term 'realia' as archivable or archived objects that are culturally specific and either stolen from Indigenous communities or present in the form of weapons, monuments, and statues – odes to imperial power.⁹

Chapter outline

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters grapple with questions of bearing witness and the archive and reflect upon artworks by several contemporary artists that engage with such matters. These chapters have a less personal, self-reflective

⁸ 'What Are Archives?', 2013, *International Council on Archives*, <https://www.ica.org/en/what--archive>, accessed July 7 2020.

⁹ Although the archive is often assumed to be of a two-dimensional documentative nature, an aspect of archival and library science is that of Realia, which are three-dimensional objects. Realia are readily found within the archives of the 'post'-colonies – whether it be in the form of objects taken from Indigenous communities or in the form of monuments, placards, statues, and other odes to imperial power.

approach. In the later chapters I reflect upon two works that I have produced and exhibited as part of this research project, and I situate these within my own personal and historical context.

In chapter one, I discuss the complexities of bearing witness as presented by Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, and Georges Didi-Huberman. These ideas are woven through a discussion of three lens-based artworks that grapple with bearing witness in the present: *The Day One Hundred Died* (2008) by Broomberg and Chanerlin; *80061* (2005) by Artur Żmijewski; and *I Forgive You* (2014) by Bindi Cole Chocka.

Chapter two considers the colonial archive as a site for the artist to bear witness to colonial atrocity. I consider the fact that the archive does not hold 'the truth', per se, but rather the constructed truth of a culture or individuals or group of people. In other words, the archive is a record of a point of view, ideology, and ruling systems. Here, Gayatri Spivak, Thomas Richards, and Jacques Derrida assist us in understanding the Empire's construction of knowledge. Eric Ketelaars' theory of archivalisation provides an explanation of how archives enable the artist to engage with the past and the present.

The chapter opens with a description of a performative intervention by Maxwele Chumani, one which instigated the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa. This is followed by an analysis of a performance by the artist Sethembile Msezane in response to colonial realia, Tom Nicholson's interventionist piece entitled *Unfinished Monument* (2011), and Brook Andrew's re-presentation of ethnography in his installation *52 Portraits and Vox* (2013).

In chapter three, I reflect upon my studio practice and my installation of photographs entitled *Books On A White Background* (2014–19). I argue that the installation bears witness to colonial atrocity in South Africa by returning the colonial gaze to observe and objectify white patterns of behaviour. I draw on Homi K. Bhabha's *Mimicry and Menace*, and Agamben's concept of the lacuna to frame this work and its intentions. I acknowledge my own identity as a white woman of Jewish heritage, born in South Africa, now living in Australia, and work outwards from this subject position. The theory of whiteness as a pattern of behaviour that too needs to be named, documented, and analysed are discussed through the writing of Melissa Steyn, Aileen Moreten Robinson, Richard Dyer, and Susan Petrilli.

In chapter four I discuss my installation *The Miners' Companion* (2015), which is a video performance derived from the text written inside a book of the same name. I explore the

role that language plays in perpetuating ideology, including Louis Althusser's writing on language and social inscription, with a particular focus on how whiteness is inscribed into language.

Chapter 1: To bear witness through the lens

The notion of bearing witness is broad and complex. It has been dealt with in literature across the breadth of the humanities, in fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the arts. In this chapter, I will specifically look at how the artist, as a visual interpreter of events, might bear witness through the lens.

I have identified three primary theorists who deal with the limitations of bearing witness yet ultimately present it as a possibility. In the book *Camera Lucida* (1981), Roland Barthes demystifies the notion that the photograph can represent reality.¹⁰ In his opinion, it is only through acknowledging subjectivity that it is possible to bear witness. Giorgio Agamben's writing on the limitation of testimony provides a complex lead into the subject. He uses the Holocaust as his reference point to say that no one but the person who is subject to and experiences such an event themselves can truly bear witness.¹¹ Furthermore, he states that the subjects' themselves cannot *convey* their experience through language. He believes that it is through listening to that which is absent that we may bear witness. This will be further expanded upon in this chapter.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1981).

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, New York, 2002).

If Agamben's proposition holds merit, how might the artist provide witness? The writings of Georges Didi-Huberman become useful within this discussion. In his book *Images in Spite of All* (2004), he reflects upon four photographs taken in secret by an intern in Auschwitz,¹² placing import on the visibility of resistance through the photographer's positioning, standing behind the door frame and illegally taking a photograph to smuggle out of the camp as visual testimony.¹³

To explore these philosophical and theoretical concerns within an art-historical framework, I will discuss three artworks in this chapter. First, in the photographic series *The Day Of One Hundred Dead* (2008) by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Channerin, the camera lens is removed to signify the impossibility of visually representing war. I then discuss Artur Zmijewski's video *80064* (2005), which positions the viewer as a spectator or witness to an ethically questionable performative experiment. Finally, I consider the video installation *I forgive you* (2011) by Bindi Cole Chocka, which invites the viewer to bear witness to the non-verbal bodily response to trauma. Implicit to all of the artworks discussed is the notion of witnessing. This is an important discussion in the context of my own lens-based practice in which the witness, the bystander, or the spectator plays a primary role.

¹² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008).

¹³ Didi-Huberman, *Images*.

The camera as witness

Prior to the invention of photography, visual records of people, places, and events relied on the artist's mimetic skill in painting, drawing, and sculpture. It is commonly invoked that the invention of the camera brought with it a belief that there was now an independent, objective method to represent reality. 'For the first time, images of 'real' life could be captured for posterity and sent around the world. Portraits of royalty and other celebrities (far more accurate than paintings) allowed members of the public to feel they were viewing these people 'in the flesh'".¹⁴ Brothers notes that, in the 1930s, people believed in the 'faith in facts and objectivity of photography'.¹⁵ War photography, which is the tradition in which authorities placed photographers in the centre of war zones in order to document the war for the public at home to witness, presents an obvious example and official endorsement of this belief.

However, post structuralist views brought a more critical understanding of the complex dynamic of photographic representation. Roland Barthes' seminal text *Camera Lucida*, often seen as the forerunner to post structuralist theory on photography, challenged the notion of photographic objectivity.¹⁶ In this book, Barthes reflects on the photographer's

¹⁴ 'Invention of Photography', *The British Library*, <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item106980.html>, accessed 10 January 2020.

¹⁵ C. Brothers, *War and photography: A Cultural History*. (London: Routledge 1997), 11.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

decisions such as personal selection, composition, print shade, depth, and so on that influence the viewer. But even prior to this, in his book *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes notes that 'the conventions of photography, moreover, are replete with signs'.¹⁷ As such, Barthes acknowledged the photographic image as the photographer's personal reality or way of seeing, and the viewer's interpretation as something inherently based on their personal and cultural context.

According to Barthes, the image is both denotative and connotative.¹⁸ It denotes apparent truths and connotes culturally specific meaning to the viewer. The cultural and historical context that the viewers themselves have experienced is also fundamental to the interpretation of the image. The viewer's interpretation of an image is based on their own experiences and beliefs. As such, the image is interpolated by the subjectivity of the maker as well as the viewer. He explains, in a memorable section of the book :

The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence—as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence ... The Photograph then becomes a bizarre (i)medium(i), a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest (o)shared(i) hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality.¹⁹

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Random House, Vintage Classics Edition, 2009).

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Rhetoric of the Image* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 50.

¹⁹ Barthes, *Camera*, 115.

Post production

A further element to take into account in photography (and its claim to truth) is image adjustment during post production. Although this has always been a part of photographic practice, given the production decisions made in the dark room, changes made to images are even more pervasive and easily applied in the digital age. Building upon Barthes, Geoffrey Batchen in *Phantasm: Digital Imaging and the Death of Photograph* (1994) explains that:

Traditional photographs – the ones our culture has always put so much trust in – have never been ‘true’ in the first place. Photographers intervene in every photograph they make, whether by orchestrating or directly interfering in the scene being imaged; by selecting, cropping, excluding, and in other ways making pictorial choices as they take the photograph; by enhancing, suppressing, and cropping the finished print in the darkroom; and, finally, by adding captions and other contextual elements to their image to anchor some potential meanings and discourage others.²⁰

If the photograph cannot represent objective reality, in that the ‘reality’ of a photograph is influenced by the photographer and its interpretation is informed by the viewer’s gaze, then how might we, as artists, bear witness through the lens? To answer this question, we

²⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, ‘Phantasm: Digital Imaging and the Death of Photography’, *Aperture* 136 (1994): 48.

need to take a step backwards and first ask: how might *a person* bear witness, per se? Or simply put, what does it mean to bear witness?

Agamben and the limitations of bearing witness

Giorgio Agamben's book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (2011) is regarded as a seminal text in which he examines the relationship between testimony and subjecthood. Agamben presents it to be impossible for anyone other than the subject first-hand to the event to bear witness. He differentiates between the witness and the spectator, arguing that the role of the witness is reserved for those who are direct participants in or observers of an event. Further, he states that this person cannot convey their experience through language. He refers to that which can never be placed into words. As such, he proposes that all testimony is problematic, in that even the narratives provided by the subject cannot enable witnessing.

Despite this, Agamben describes a modality of bearing witness through that which is *not* verbalised. This form of bearing witness resides within the gap between the telling, or the representation, and the actual event. 'The value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its centre it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority'.²¹ The role of the spectator is not to witness the

²¹ Agamben, *Remnants*, 52.

testimonial narrative but to witness the unspoken, the unmentionable, that which is not presented in the testimony. He calls this space ‘the lacuna’.

Testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non--language to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness.²²

Paradoxically, it is through the gap, the lacuna, that the artist – who deals in representation – is able to bear witness.

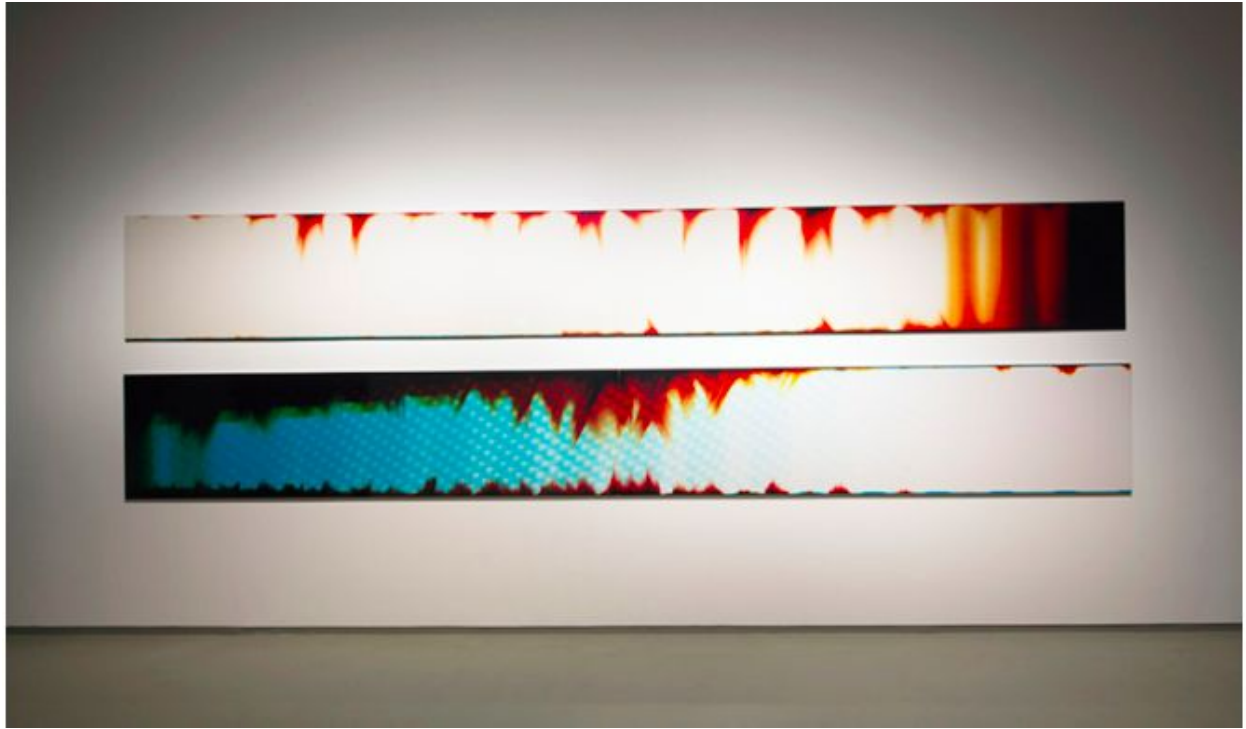
²² Agamben, *Remnants*, 39.

A visible lacuna



Broomberg and Channerin, *The Day Nobody Died*, June 8, 2008, Unique C-type, 762mm x 6000mm.

Agamben's notion of the lacuna, may be seen in the work *The Day of One Hundred Dead* (2008) by Broomberg and Channerin. In 2008, the artist duo were embedded as war photographers with British troops in Afghanistan. Instead of using a digital camera (as is current practice), the artists brought a fifty-meter-long, 72.6 cm-wide roll of photographic paper to the site. Each day Broomberg and Channerin exposed seven meters of the photographic paper to the sun.



Broomberg and Channerin, *The Day of One Hundred Dead*, June 8, 2008, installation view: *Liquid Archives*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2012.

The resultant non-representational images juxtapose all expectations of visually witnessing or spectating the war. Hues of colour move across the paper. Some of the images evoke an echograph, whilst others resemble a Rothko painting calling for existential silence and self-reflective contemplation.²³

Whilst the images are non-representational, the titles indicate that which we cannot view. Each print is named according to what occurred on site on the day that the paper was

²³ A medical measurement of internal body activity.

exposed. Titles included: *The day nobody died* (2008) and *The day of one hundred dead* (2008). As such, language guides us towards a juncture in representation. It signifies what we might have been privy to. Language points us towards the impossibility of witnessing at a remove.

Broomberg and Channerin deny the viewer the convention of realism and representing the war. Instead we are left with abstracted images of colour on the stretches of photographic paper. The artists remove the possibility of 'seeing' the war. This seems congruent with Agamben's proposition that there are no words or visuals to represent the unbearable.

Photography as a performative act

Broomberg and Channerin perform a statement that they cannot and will not provide visual representation of the war. The photograph exhibited on the wall presents us with a performative act of refusal. In 2010, the writer, curator, and critic Régine Debatty reflected on the work, saying that:

When it is impossible and even forbidden to faithfully communicate the pain and horror of the personal tragedy of soldiers waiting for the moment to fight or die, *The Brother's*

Suicide and *The Day Nobody Died* force us to reflect and imagine what we do not see and what we are not told.²⁴

By producing a photograph without using the lens, and naming each blank image according to what had occurred on the day of photographic exposure, the artists point us toward the limitation of photographic representation. The tradition of bearing witness to war through photography is challenged.

To bear witness through subjectivity

In an essay written for the exhibition *Memoire des camps*, the French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman grapples with the possibility of bearing witness through the image. He states that 'to know something you must be able to picture it yourself'.²⁵ This infers that despite the narratives of testimony, there will always be gaps, gaps which we need to be able to imagine. Didi-Huberman opens up the possibility of witnessing at a remove. He uses four photographs taken in secret by a *Sonderkommando*²⁶ in Birkenau in August 1944²⁷ to reflect upon photography as an act of both testimony and resistance.

²⁴ Régine Debatty, 'Manipulating Reality – The Day Nobody Died', *We Make Money not Art*, https://we--make--money--not--art.com/previously_community_performan/, accessed 8 June 2020.

²⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

²⁶ The *Sonderkommando* were interns who were forced to participate in the extermination process of other interns, mostly working in gas chambers.

²⁷ The photographic film was smuggled out of the camp in toothpaste containers.



Images taken by unnamed Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, Negatives no. 280-283 (published in Clément Chéroux, ed., *Memoire des camps: Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazis (1933-1999)* [Paris: Marval, 2001, 219-241]).

Prior to Didi-Huberman's essay, the photographs were not highly regarded given the fact that they are partially blurred, unconventional in composition, and saturated with black areas. But it is exactly these elements that Didi-Huberman finds significant. The fact that the photographs have obviously been taken in haste and secrecy, from behind a window and door frame, is what enables the viewer to imagine the situation.

The swathes of black which are the door frames in two of the photographs form the focal point of Didi-Huberman's discussion. They allow us to imagine where the photographer is and under what conditions they might be taking the photograph, inside a gas chamber where the *Sonderkommando* worked. The frame shows us that this photography is a secret act,²⁸ and points to the significance of the use of the camera to send proof out into the world as an act of both defiance and bearing witness. Wolfgang Brückle explains:

The photographer's fear of being discovered may have had an unfortunate impact on what he was able to depict. Yet he captured his own constraints and fear and courage all the better for precisely this reason. Didi-Huberman's point is that we have to find, in those counterintuitive features of the photographic sequence, indeed in the photographer's failure, a gestural quality; in the masses of black, the mark of a pure 'visual event'; in the phenomenological structure of the images, an equivalent to how a witness utters his testimony with pauses, silences, heaviness.²⁹

²⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Images*, 60.

²⁹ Wolfgang Brückle, 'Review of Images in Spite of All', *Photography & Culture* 4, no. 2 (July 2011): 126.

Perhaps the frames provide an absent space, a lacuna, which enables us to bear witness.

Both Didi-Huberman and Agamben use the Holocaust as the pivot on which to base their philosophies of bearing witness and representation. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben reflects on footage taken by the Allied Forces during the liberation of Belsen camp in 1945.³⁰ He notices that the cameraperson was able to film the horror of mass graves, however, when a survivor crossed the camera, the filmmaker turned the lens away.³¹ It is as if the view of the survivor, the person who is ‘bare life’, what he terms the *muselman*, the person stripped of all humanity, is too much to bear.³² Agamben writes about the impossibility of Holocaust survivors of Nazi concentration camps being able to convey the horrors that they witnessed. He states that only those that did not survive or the *muselman* (those who hovered on the border of death and could not speak) can provide witness to the Holocaust.³³ This, of course, is a paradox, given that these individuals are unable to talk.

³⁰ Agamben, *Remnants*, 50–51.

³¹ ‘The camera lingers almost by accident on what seem to be living people, a group of prisoners crouched on the ground or wandering on foot like ghosts. It lasts only a few seconds [...] the same cameraman who had until then patiently lingered over naked bodies [...] could not bear the sight of these half-living beings; he immediately began once again to show cadavers’. Agamben, *Remnants*, 51.

³² Agamben, *Remnants*.

³³ Agamben, *Remnants*.

Agamben equates the *muselman* to the victims of Medusa in Greek mythology: those that looked Medusa in the eyes were frozen, turned to stone.³⁴ This, he states, is the fate of the *muselman*, who has stared directly into the horror of humanity, and is made mute.³⁵ In addition, as conveyed through the filmmaker who turns his camera away, it is impossible for others to bear the gaze of the person who is a *muselman* in that they are the embodied living result of horror. As such, even the possibility of witnessing the witness is foreclosed.

While testimony can be expressed differentially, for instance visually or aurally, these modalities are broadly relatable in several key ways. Didi-Huberman finds room for testimony 'in spite of all'.³⁶ He challenges Agamben's use of the myth of Medusa by including the story of Perseus in the analogy. Perseus is required to behead Medusa for King Polydectes. This is an almost impossible task given that Medusa's gaze is the very object that would turn him into stone. Perseus visits Hesperides in search of a weapon and Athena gives him a shield with a polished mirror surface. On approaching Medusa, Perseus holds the shield up to her face. The shield blocks her gaze from him, Perseus does not turn into stone, and Medusa is forced to look at herself in the reflection of the

³⁴ Agamben, *Remnants*, 53–54.

³⁵ Agamben, *Remnants*, 53–54.

³⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Images*.

shield. It is at this point where the gaze is thrown back on herself that Medusa's powers are neutered and Perseus is able to behead her.

The reflective gaze

Didi-Huberman uses the analogy of Perseus as a means to express the possibility of bearing witness through the reflective gaze. The photograph, like Perseus's shield, has the ability to force the agency of horror to reflect upon itself:

In spite of everything Perseus opposes Gorgone, and this *notwithstanding* – this factual possibility in spite of the theoretical impossibility – bears the name picture: The reflection and the shield are not his only protection, they are also his weapon, his cunning, his tool for decapitating the monster. The initial impotence and fatality ('it is impossible to look at the Medusa') yields an *ethical answer* ('well then, I will counter the Medusa by viewing it *differently*').³⁷

The photographic images that I have discussed so far – Broomberg and Channerin's war photography, and the four images 'snatched from hell' at Birkenau – were captured on site at the time of the event. How might the contemporary artist, who is not present or subject to an historical event, represent and bear witness to it?

³⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Images*, 252.

Reflecting the past through the present

The Polish artist Artur Zmijewski bears witness to historical trauma through staging provocative events in the present. Zmijewski sets up unscripted interventions or experiments with voluntary subjects. The unpredicted behaviour that occurs within the event is filmed and exhibited. Kavka notes that Zmijewski plays the role of the anthropologist. He sees the films as leaning more towards the anthropological than the artistic.³⁸ This is also visible in the fact that Zmijewski does not use the camera as an overtly stylistic device but rather as a putatively objective tool to document his happenings, often using black-and-white and fixed-angle footage.

In the art work *80064* (2005), Zmijewski staged and filmed an event inside a tattoo parlour. Three people appear in the film: the artist, a tattooist, and an elderly man who is a Holocaust survivor. Zmijewski himself is of Polish descent, he is not Jewish and it is unknown as to what his family involvement was in the Holocaust. Nevertheless, in this work, he grapples with the history of the Holocaust through an intervention in the present. Prior to filming the event, Zmijewski invited the survivor to ‘refresh’ the tattoo that had been inscribed onto his arm in Auschwitz. The tattoo, one of millions like it, had reduced people to numbers and inhumane methods of control in the Nazi concentration camps.

³⁸ Misha Kavka, *Artur Zmijewski* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2009), 7



Artur Zmijewski, *80064*, 2005, video performance/installation, Poland.

At the start of the video *80064*, a power differential is visible between the artist and his subject. Zmijewski stands in front of a seated elderly man and a tattooist waits on the side. The artist does not introduce himself but asks the man to introduce himself to the camera. The camera points down towards the elderly man and up towards Zmijewski –

as viewers, we look down at the former and up at the latter.³⁹ The following dialogue ensues:

Artur: Can you tell us your name?

Jozef: My name is Jozef Tarnawa. I was born on April 16, 1912. Currently I am 92 years old.

Artur: You were a prisoner in Auschwitz right?

Jozef: Yes, I was a prisoner in Auschwitz. I ended up over there for no reason, I hadn't done anything.

Artur: When were you taken there?

Jozef: 4 December 1942. We arrive and it says '*arbeit nacht frei*' ['work sets you free'] on the gate. Holy cow! We had no idea that it was Auchwitz.

Artur: You hadn't known anything about Auschwitz before?

Jozef: I knew that such a camp existed but I had no idea where. I wasn't interested, no one was.

Artur: Can you show us this photo of Auschwitz once again?

[Jozef shows the camera a photograph of himself, taken by Auschwitz officers. It is a mugshot photograph taken from the waist up with three views, a frontal and left and right profile view.]

³⁹ Artur Zmijewski, '80064', *IDFA*, <https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/e42b89be-9d61-4934-b12b-19cf72988d95/80064>, accessed 10 January 2015.

Jozef: Every prisoner had a picture like this. No matter whether he or she was Jewish or not.

Artur: You still have your number from the camp don't you? Can you show us this number?

[Tattooist assists Jozef to remove his jacket and roll up his shirt sleeve.]

Tattooist: There you go.

Jozef: First I had a friend of mine stencil this number for me in pencil. And then the tattooist just followed the shape and that's why I have such a nice number.

Artur: Was it an important moment for you? Getting the number tattooed?

Jozef: No, it was a big deal. I've had it for 61 years.

Artur: Do you show it to people?

Jozef: If someone wants to see it then I do. Especially while I'm visiting the camp.

Artur: You must have seen a lot of people die?

Jozef: Many, many people. I saw how they carried them out of unit 11, or from the hospital. And how they transported them naked every day. I'm a survivor you see.

On our way to work we would see naked bodies on a carriage pulled by prisoners.

I saw this many times. It was the cruelest camp, Auschwitz.

Artur: You knew everyone was sentenced to death ... including you.

Jozef: It was the *Vermutung*, no one left alive. There was this guy Palitsch ... a *raport fuhrer*. He would walk on top of people. If someone made a sound, he stepped on his throat and waited.

Artur: What did you feel back then? A feeling of revolt?

Jozef: No, no revolt whatsoever.

Artur: Did you put up with the prospect of death?

Jozef: Completely, I came to terms with this. One had to endure, that's all.

Artur: Endure day after day, because it would end shortly?

Jozef: Day by day. Avoiding any conflicts. There are moments when I dream about Auschwitz. But it is all forgotten. One has forgotten about being in Auschwitz.

[Pause.]

Anything else?

Artur: I want to renovate your number.

Jozef: I beg your pardon? No, it's not necessary. Let's give it up seriously. Let's give it up and I'll be happy. Believe me it's not necessary, really unnecessary. It is clear ... if it was fuzzy or something ... but it is so clear. And it hasn't been changed or anything. No, no, seriously don't, I mean it. It won't be the same number, it will be restored.

Artur: It will remain the same. We won't corrupt it.

Jozef: No, no, seriously. I mean it.

Artur: But we talked about it, that this is the essence.

Jozef: Well, we did and I agreed. But I will be happy if we don't have this done to me.

Artur: The number won't turn unauthentic. It will be original. Things like that cannot change.

Jozef: It won't be original. Let an Auschwitz survivor look at it ... Renovated? What for? It does not need renovating.

Artur: But let's try doing it. It will be original, things like that cannot change.

Jozef: Well, if you really insist, then let it be, but I will be upset with you if anything happens.

Tattooist: Like everyone, who gets a new tattoo, you'll have to take care of it for a couple of days.

Jozef: But why are you imposing this burden on me, that I have to take care of it.

[Wipes a tear away from his eyes.]

Tattooist: All right, shall we move on with tattooing?

Jozef: All right, what can I say, after all I agreed on it.

[Camera turns to the tattooist preparing to tattoo.]

Tattooist: Can you pull up your sleeve a little bit?

Jozef: I'd never expected anything like this will ever happen to me again, that they would renew my number.

[The camera zooms in on the tattoo machine. The tattooist puts clinical gloves on and marks Jozef's aged skin with a pen. The buzzing sound of the tattoo machine blocks all

other sound. The camera zooms in on the skin, the tattooist, and Jozef's face. The gloved clinician tattoos the number onto him.]

Jozef: Let's see whether they won't remove my arm altogether.

Tattooist: They won't, I'll just apply some cream.

[Tattooist applies cream and wipes the arm.]

[A few weeks later, Zmijewski interviews Jozef at his home.]

Artur: Can you show us the number now?

[Jozef rolls up his sleeve.]

Artur: Tell us how you like your number now?

Jozef: Do I like it? I never liked it because I could not like it. It was made in such circumstances and for such reasons. Sure it looks nicer now. Now everyone will be able to tell it has been restored. He pulls his sleeve down. I have renovated it like some piece of furniture.

[The camera zooms out. The video ends.]

To bear witness to cruelty

The work *80064* is two-pronged. Zmijewski questions the act of forgetting and remembrance through renewing the tattoo whilst placing the viewer as spectator or silent accomplice to an uncomfortable and possibly cruel act of coercion. He takes a survivor of

severe trauma, and apparently diminishes his subject's agency in an experiment that, seemingly, reiterates the original trauma.

There are moments where the artist's callousness is more visible. Jozef mentions that he chooses to forget about being in Auschwitz and the artist responds by introducing the idea of refreshing the tattoo. Jozef states that he no longer wishes to do so. The artist persists, convincing him to do it. He claims that they had agreed to this previously and that Jozef should keep his promise. Jozef concedes. The interaction occurs after Jozef reflects upon the fact that he could not revolt against the Nazis, that he was forced to endure their sadism and do anything in order to 'avoid conflict'. Now, in this tattoo parlour, Jozef yet again feels he must concede, and compromise his agency over his own body in order to avoid conflict with authority. Of course, this coercion takes place under different circumstances which are not life threatening. Some might argue that the rehearsing of this trauma in a 'safe space' might alleviate or mitigate the pain associated with the original trauma, whilst others might argue that it triggers and re-traumatises.

As the tattooist prepares to reinscribe Jozef's concentration camp number, Jozef makes a final plea to someone other than Zmijewski.

Positioning the viewer

The viewer watches the artist cajole a Holocaust survivor into submission over his own body. Language is prescient. Zmijewski places himself in the role of authority, dominating and controlling the survivor's body. The viewer is positioned as innocent bystander, silent accomplice, and witness/spectator. We cannot intervene, we are limited by the screen. Perhaps an uncomfortable positioning is precisely what Zmijewski intends to evoke – the innocent bystander and the complicit, silent accomplice.

The artist reinscribes a past trauma through an intervention with a survivor in the present raising thoughts on cruelty, coercion, and memory. Questions around ethics might arise when watching this video. Does the subject have a choice to change his mind given the pressure that is placed on him by Zmijewski under the context of the camera and his own previous experiences with authority? What right does an artist who is not a survivor himself have to request a survivor to revisit a traumatic memory? Whilst the video asks us to consider the pain of the other, we are brought into questioning the morality and ethics of using vulnerable subjects to make art. Is it justifiable to make this artwork given the manner in which the subject, Jozef, is compromised? What right does Zmijewski have to exercise power over and reinscribe the pain of a Holocaust survivor in the name of art?

Beyond the verbal

I have mentioned that Agamben presents the problematics of testimony and language. He does, however, provide an alternative to listening to the narratives of survivors.

In its form, this book is a kind of perpetual commentary on testimony. It did not seem possible to proceed otherwise. At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. As a consequence, commenting on survivors' testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna or, more precisely, attempting to listen to it. Listening to something absent did not prove fruitless work for this author. Above all, it made it necessary to clear away almost all the doctrines that, since Auschwitz, have been advanced in the name of ethics.⁴⁰

Where is the lacuna in the work *80064*? Perhaps it is in the moment after Jozef unwillingly concedes to undergo the procedure and the eerie sound of the tattoo machine begins to buzz. Or in the desperation, when Jozef silently wipes tears from his eyes prior to the start of the procedure.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Remnants*, 13.

Between words, within affect

Is it in that which is absent (Agamben's lacuna), between or beneath Jozef's words, in the tone of a voice, the facial expression or emotive response that we may bear witness?⁴¹ If the lacuna is to be found within such a non-verbal, affective state, then it might be useful to look at the artwork entitled *I forgive you* (2012) by the artist Bindi Cole Chocka. In making this work, the artist invited individuals to sit alone in a room and asked them to focus on a painful event that had occurred in their lives. A video camera was set up and participants were asked to look into the lens, focus their thoughts on the event, and repeat the words 'I forgive you' at their own pace for five minutes.

⁴¹ Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (New Yorker Films 1985) is of interest for its interviews with survivors in their homes (post-Holocaust) with an intentional shift away from the then prolific use of images of the camps and its interns to bear witness. In these interviews, we are drawn into the affect held in the voices, facial expressions, and emotions of those being interviewed.



Bindi Cole Chocka, *We all need Forgiveness*, 2014, installation view: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.



Bindi Cole Chocka, Still photographic detail of *We all need Forgiveness*, 2014, installation view: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

The resultant work is an intimate view of each person's face, staring and repeating the words 'I forgive you'. Some of the individuals repeat the words in a monosyllabic manner, with subtle changes of vocal and facial expressions, hiding emotions. Others express pain and anger, often crying whilst speaking. The participants' voices and facial expressions are acutely visible to the viewer. In Chocka's installation, we are denied any background information; neither facts nor historical representation of the past are revealed. This plus the fact that the participants do not utter any words independent of 'I forgive you' perhaps presents a possibility for the lacuna that is far greater than what we see in the work *80064*.

The National Apology or a quest for absolution

In the work *I forgive you*, we stand and observe the subjects' facial expressions in their attempts to forgive. Yet we do not know what it is that the participants are forgiving. It might be pertinent to look at the artist's background in order to try to understand the drive behind the work. Cole Chocka is an artist descendent from the Wathaurong people. Her previous studio practice has explored Aboriginal politics and identity, as well as the iconography of the Christian faith. She states that 'the majority of my creative practice to date has been about reconciling my identity with the world, and mostly reconciling that

Aboriginal part of me.'⁴² In addition, Cole Chocka notes that much of her studio practice is influenced by her Christian faith. On the artist's own website, it is written: 'Chocka's work often references her life story and experiences, such as her heritage, the importance of Christianity in her life, and the impact of politics, the law and other power structures on her lived experience and that of her family and community'.⁴³ Thus her work *Forgiveness* ought to be read in relation to both her Aboriginal heritage and her Christian beliefs.

As previously mentioned, the context in which a photograph is seen has a significant influence on its interpretation and reception. In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd publicly apologised to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the Australian continent for past atrocities inflicted upon them by the Australian government. The apology took the form of a larger-than-life 'Sorry' that was broadcast across the nation, and viewed on screens globally. Seen and interpreted in relation to its broader political context, we might conclude that Cole Chocka's work, which is tied up as it is with Indigenous politics and was shown four years on from Rudd's Apology, is providing the nation with the reconciliatory exchange that it was hoping for. Cole Chocka's

⁴² 'People Like Me', 2019, *Melbourne Immigration Museum*, <https://museums.victoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/resources/identity/people-like-me/>, accessed 24 February 2020.

⁴³ 'About', *Bindi Cole Chocka*, <https://www.bindicolechocka.com/about>, accessed 13 February 2019.

installation might present us with the screen speaking back – saying 'I forgive you.' This also befits the confessional tradition of absolution in her Christian faith.

Whilst some saw the National Apology as a resolution of sorts, there has been critical analysis of the 'gesture'. Many Indigenous Australian artists have questioned the sincerity of the Apology. We see this in the artist Tony Albert's work *YRROS* (2008), which parodies the National Apology. An enlarged sign of the word 'SORRY' is written in reverse and embedded with images of kitsch ethnocentric memorabilia of Indigenous people.



Tony Albert, *Sorry*, 2008, found kitsch objects applied to vinyl letters, 99 objects: 200 x 510 x 10cm (installed). The James C. Sourris AM Collection, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

The artwork parodies the National Apology by making the word both arbitrary and reversible. Reflecting on this work, Chari Larsson notes: 'Ten years have now elapsed and with discussions pertaining to Indigenous constitutional recognition reaching a political impasse, we are left to uneasily consider: what, if anything, has changed?'⁴⁴ Various commentators, like the non-Indigenous Australian art historian Rex Butler, have critiqued the Apology along these lines too. Butler relates: 'a curious sense of let-down because nothing actually happened, nothing appeared to be different the day after'.⁴⁵ He criticises the Apology for a 'misrepresentation of the historical facts, for its simplifying of the complexity of the motivations behind the original policy, for its bad faith, for its playing to a white audience, for its lack of an accompanying package of financial compensation'.⁴⁶ Like many others, Butler supposes that the Apology was an act of placation that attempted to appease without actually redressing the real life consequences of colonisation.⁴⁷

Jacques Derrida reflects on the global proliferation of national apologies given to historically dispossessed Indigenous populations.⁴⁸ He states that a nation's call for

⁴⁴ Chari Larsson, 'Tony Albert's politically charged kitsch collection confronts our racist past', *The Conversation*, 7 June 2018, <https://theconversation.com/tony-alberts-politically-charged-kitsch-collection-confronts-our-racist-past-97696>, accessed 2 March 2020.

⁴⁵ Rex Butler, 'Apology (not) accepted', *Broadsheet* 38, no. 2 (2009): 134.

⁴⁶ Butler, 'Apology', 135.

⁴⁷ Butler, 'Apology'.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness* (London: Routledge 2001).

forgiveness is rarely an act of altruistic behaviour or even remorse, but rather, it is done with an expectation of an exchange – whether it be political, economic, or otherwise. He explains: ‘The language of forgiveness, at the service of determined finalities, was anything but pure and disinterested. As always in the field of politics’.⁴⁹ The apologies, he surmises, take the form of confessions stemming from the Abrahamic tradition (which includes the Christianities, Islamism, and Judaism). National apologies have become a universal political language. Derrida terms it ‘the globalization’ of forgiveness.⁵⁰ Further, Derrida turns his attention to international human rights, asking questions about our capacity to forgive, heal, and reconcile. In particular, he states that there are deeds that are not possible to forgive, such as the Nazi Holocaust. He states that, ironically, the notion of forgiveness can only exist within situations that are unforgivable; he argues that the term would not need to exist if we did not need to forgive.⁵¹ Paradoxically, then, there is only forgiveness where there is the unforgivable. The atrocities endured by Australia’s Indigenous peoples, including genocide, dispossession, and the core subject of Rudd’s Apology – the removal of children as part of the Stolen Generations – can rightly be considered unforgivable. Just as we cannot forgive the unforgivable, nor can we ever assume that we are able to bear witness to the unforgivable. The Truth and Reconciliation

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism*, 31.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism*, 31.

⁵¹ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism*, 31.

Commission in South Africa was based on the ethic of absolution of punishment through confession. It, too, has been criticised for its lack of repercussion for perpetrators nor compensation for survivors and their family members.

Forgiving the unforgivable: a paradox

Derrida proposes that forgiveness can only be incited in relation to that which is unforgivable. Agamben proposes that testimony can only be heard through that which is absent, the lacuna. In the video work *I forgive you*, there is no verbal exchange. The participants, presented alone in front of the camera, all repeat the same three words: 'I forgive you'. There is no narrative. Words do not reveal the event that they are notionally forgiving. The story is not told – it is only present as a form of haunting, it unfolds through what is 'unsaid' and 'unknown', indeed what is unsayable and unknowable. The words on their own give us little insight, but combined with non-verbal expressions, such as eye movements, vocal changes, emotional responses in the participants' repetition of the sentence 'I forgive you', we become witness to an intimate process. We see every crease and change of expression on the participants' face, from mild discomfort to the release of tears. We witness or spectate a very intimate, personal process. Could this somatic, nonverbal expression be the lacuna?

Cole Chocka disrupts the power of a master narrative by focusing on the personal bodily processes of each individual. We, as viewers, find ourselves positioned to view an act of forgiveness. The first-person direct phrase 'I forgive you' coupled with the eye-contact made between the speaker of those words and the cameraperson functions to position the viewer as the recipient of said forgiveness. In other words, the fourth wall, the boundary between viewer and actor/participant, is broken. It is interesting to note that in Zmijewski's video, the artist is present and the dialogue is held internally within the screen between Jozef, Artur, and the tattooist, a fourth wall is preserved. This point of the fourth wall is of interest to my own work *The Miners' Companion*, which will be discussed in chapter four. In Cole Chocka's video, the artist is not present. We, as viewers, are positioned as subject to the participants' forgiveness and we are also positioned as witness or spectator to the participants' emotional process. There seems to be a direct and literal request by the artist to consider and bear witness to the emotions and past traumas of others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed some of the complexities of what it means to bear witness at an historic remove and specifically through a camera lens. Both Agamben and Didi-Huberman provide a pivotal point of discussion. Agamben proposes that it is impossible for anyone to bear witness through language (testimony), and that it is in the

space between language, the lacuna, that we are paradoxically able to bear witness. Didi-Huberman equates the lens to the shield of Perseus in the face of Medusa. He presents the possibility of bearing witness through the presence of subjectivity and self-reflection.

War photography provides a prime example of government-endorsed portrayal of the photograph as objective testimony. In the work *The Day One Hundred Died*, the artists Broomberg and Chanerlin, positioned as war photographers in Afghanistan, perform an act of refusal by shutting off their lenses. The activity of exposing paper to the sun opposes the concept of conventional war photography. The viewer is left with a gap, a lacuna in the form of abstracted colours that defies the tradition of visually bearing witness through war photography. Through the use of language via the title of the artworks, the artists guide us towards that which we cannot witness at a remove. Perhaps these abstracted images, performative acts of resistance, are like the shield of Perseus held up to journalistic conventions and expectations, or a kind of act of resistance to war itself.

The artist Artur Zmijewski forces the gallery viewer to consider what it means to bear witness through his documented social experiments. In *80064* he provides an uncomfortable visitation into historical atrocity through filming his interaction with a

Holocaust survivor in the present. Although the artist is physically present in the work, he is not present as a force of Didi-Huberman's resistance but rather, an authoritative voice that reinscribes trauma onto the survivor. Zmejwsky positions the viewer as a spectator or bystander to bear witness to a rehearsed or 'renovated' trauma.

In the video installation *Forgiveness*, Bindi Cole Chocka removes the narrative of history and invites us into an intimate process in which individuals process an unnamed trauma. The viewer observes the participants' repeat the same three words 'I forgive you'. Viewed within the Australian context, the video might be interpreted as a response to the 2008 National Apology, issued four years earlier by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, given that Cole Chocka at that time explicitly aligned her work with Indigenous politics. In this installation, there is no narrative. As viewers, we are positioned either as subject to this forgiveness or spectator/witness to a reflective, non-verbal, emotive process. Perhaps a reminder of Agamben's philosophy that words and language present an impossibility, we are asked to bear witness through that which is absent and in-between words, the lacuna.

Despite the limitations, I have identified various possibilities in which the artist might bear witness: the lacuna (Agamben), visibility through resistance (Didi-Huberman), and understanding connotation (Barthes). All of the artworks discussed in this chapter are direct documentations of an event that occurred on site, whether it be the US War in

Afghanistan (1999–present) or an event created by the artist in the studio. The next chapter asks: what does it mean for the artist to bear witness in their art through material that was produced in the past? To answer this question, the next chapter delves into what it means for the artist to bear witness through the documents, photographs, and objects of the past, and specifically from the colonial archive.

Chapter 2 : The archive and colonial atrocity

In this chapter I will discuss the potential that the archive holds for bearing witness. The colonial archive is of specific interest, filled with documents, objects, and ephemera that were produced by colonial infrastructures which hold their insidious belief in their right to enact control over indigenous people. In the previous chapter we have seen that subjectivity simultaneously gets in the way of bearing witness (Barthes and photographic truth) but when pointedly present, it can enable us to bear witness (Didi-Huberman – resistance and the visible frame). The archive is a site of subjectivity where the values, ideologies, and systems of those that created and maintained them are to be found. As such, the archive provides a rich context for the artist to bear witness to the past, and moreover to the present.

Through the archival theories of Eric Ketelaar and Jaques Derrida I discuss the potential that the archive holds to bear witness to both the past and the present. I reflect upon the empire's production and (mis)use of 'knowledge' to assert power as proposed in the writing of Gayatri Spivak and Thomas Richards. In this chapter, I assess four visual interventions into the colonial archive: the performative action by Chumani Maxwele, which triggered a movement for political change; Sethembile Msezane's embodiment and reinterpretation of a statue from the Zimbabwe ruins; a domestic intervention entitled

Unfinished Monument (2011) by Tom Nicholson, which grapples with the dispossession of land; and an inversion of ethnographic museum presentation in Brook Andrew's installation *52 Portraits and Vox* (2013).

The archive in contemporary art

Over the last two decades, the archive has gained momentum in the contemporary art world. The significance of the exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (curated by Okwui Enwezor and held at the International Center of Photography) and its catalogue indicated, as early as 2008, the proliferation of artists who have either created their own archives or have worked with previously established archives in the production of new work.⁵² Through understanding the structural makeup of archives, the theoretical underpinnings, as well as the act of archiving, we can begin to understand why the model of the archive provides a portal for the artist to bear witness. But first, let us take a look at a recent performative intervention with an object of realia from eighty years ago.

The archive: a site of both the past and the present

⁵² Okwui Enwezori, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Ann Arbor: International Center of Photography Press, University of Michigan, 2008).



Marion Walgate, *Statue of Cecil John Rhodes*, Bronze, 1934,
University of Cape Town. Photo credit: Danie van der Merwe.

In 1934, a statue of the British governor Cecil John Rhodes was erected on the steps of the esteemed educational institution of The University of Cape Town. Rhodes was a governor who infiltrated Africa, and built railroads and structures over Indigenous land. He is infamous for instituting the Glen Grey Act, ‘a document that is often seen as the

blueprint for the Apartheid regime that was to come'.⁵³ The Glen Grey Act effectively disinherited people of their land by restricting African access to land ownership rights. As such, Indigenous people (the majority of the population) could not become owners of the means of production. The Act also imposed a ten shilling labour tax on all Africans who were unable to prove that they had been in wage employment for at least three months in a year. Wage employment generally referred to working in mines and on the land as labourers.⁵⁴ In 1887, Rhodes also erased the voting rights of Indigenous people with the Cape Parliamentary Registration Act.

The statue

The sculpture of Rhodes, made in bronze by Marion Walgate, under the patronage of the University of Cape Town, was erected in honour of this now infamous prime minister. It was placed at the helm of the University symbolically looking out over the land, as if the man himself was surveying it as his very own possession.

Eighty years later

On 9 March 2015, the student activist Chumani Maxwele carried an empty bucket to an informal settlement on the urban periphery of Cape Town – a typical community of

⁵³ 'Cecil John Rhodes', *South African History*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/cecil-john-rhodes>, accessed 28 June 2019.

⁵⁴ 'Cecil John Rhodes', *South African History*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/cecil-john-rhodes>, accessed 28 June 2019.

shacks marked by impoverished living conditions due to long-standing social inequality. On average, thirty residents share one outside portaloo.⁵⁵ Maxwele filled the bucket with human excrement and travelled with it to the University of Cape Town. He walked with the container, his acquired symbol of social inequality, through the corridors of the nineteenth-century colonial buildings. When he reached the centre of campus, known as Jamieson Steps, Maxwele stood in front of the bigger than life-size bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes and threw the contents of the bucket onto it.

⁵⁵ 'South Africa: Malodor and sanitation in low-income settlements', *Archipel*, <https://archipel--co.com/wp--content/uploads/2019/12/BMGF--Malodor--Sanitation--South--Africa--report.pdf>, accessed 15 April 2019.



Chumani Maxwele protest intervention, University of Cape Town, 2015. Photographer unknown.

Photographs of Maxwele's intervention spread on social media, triggering daily protests in front of the statue. Seen as an embodiment of Rhodes and his legacy, the sculpture became a site to address colonialism in South Africa at large.



Protestors at University of Cape Town, 2015. Photographer unknown.

#RhodesMustFall

Protests evolved into a political campaign, which was named the #RhodesMustFall movement. The primary goal of the movement was to decolonise education in South Africa. Newspapers, television, and social media were saturated with articles and letters. The actions ignited protests in universities around the country. Debates ensued about colonial statues, the colonial names of university buildings, colonial education,

affirmative action, student admission policies, and labour conditions for university workers.

The #RhodesMustFall campaign gathered momentum. Students occupied the UCT administration building and produced a long list of demands, one of which was to remove the statue. The university senate met to decide on its fate. There were three options: the statue could be destroyed; it could remain and be reworked to educate the public on colonialism and its effects; or it could be placed in storage and archived with other objects of realia. The #RhodesMustFall movement wanted it to be removed and accompanied by changes to educational systems throughout the university.

The senate decides

On 8 April 2015, the University of Cape Town senate (which consists of both academics and students) voted on the fate of the statue. The votes were almost unanimous. The statue would be dismantled and placed in the university archives. On 9 April, a large crowd bore witness to the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes.



People celebrate as Rhodes statue is taken down, 2015. Photo credit: David Harrison.

During the week before the removal of the sculpture of Rhodes, the artist Sethembile Msezane prepared a costume in her studio for a performance work to be enacted next to the sculpture of Rhodes. She gathered hair (both fake and real, human and animal) and

combined it with armatures to attach to her arms like wings. The artist also constructed a mask made of traditional African beadwork and hair, to cover her face. She explained:

I believe that South Africa's memorialised public spaces are barren of the black female body, so last year I started doing performance art to draw attention to the issue. The character I'm portraying here depicts the statue of the Zimbabwe bird that was wrongfully appropriated from Great Zimbabwe by the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes. It currently sits in his Groote Schuur estate.⁵⁶

Msezane's costume was based on the ancient soapstone sculpture of the bird of Zimbabwe found in the Great Zimbabwe ruins. The city of Great Zimbabwe was built by ancestors of the Shona people in the 11th century. Modern Zimbabwe was named after these ruins which cover 1,800 acres. The soapstone bird sculptures are each about 40 centimetres tall and stand on ninety centimetre columns. They were originally installed on walls and monoliths within the city.⁵⁷ When Rhodes infiltrated Zimbabwe (and renamed it Rhodesia), he took the Zimbabwe bird sculptures for himself and placed them on display in his private residence in Cape Town. This residence (Groote Schuur) has been preserved as a museum, one of the Zimbabwe bird statues remains there on display.

⁵⁶ Erica Buist, 'Sethembile Msezane performs at the fall of the Cecil Rhodes statue', 9 April 2015, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/15/sethembile-msezane-cecil-rhodes-statue-cape-town-south-africa>, accessed 10 March 2019.

⁵⁷ 'Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Essays Great Zimbabwe (11th–15th Century)', *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/zimb/hd_zimb.htm, accessed 10 September 2020.

The question of gender is inscribed into the Great Zimbabwe's bird sculptures, which sit on eggs sculpted out of the same soapstone (an image of a physically passive but protective maternal being). A soapstone crocodile climbs up the side of the plinth, symbolic of potential danger to the female bird and her offspring.



Zimbabwe Bird sculpture from Great Zimbabwe Ruins, dated 11th century
Photographer unknown.



Zimbabwe Bird sculpture from Great Zimbabwe Ruins, c.11th Century
Photographer unknown.



Sethembile Msezane, 'Chapungu—The Day Rhodes Fell' (2015), University of Cape Town. Photographer unknown.

An artist intervenes

On the day of the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, Msezane stood on a plinth with the powerful wing-like structures attached to her arms (no eggs to protect, no crocodile threat). Every ten minutes she held her arms up as if, when viewed from the correct angle, she was about to rise and lift Rhodes off his plinth and remove the man that infiltrated Southern Africa.

In her performance, Msezane reinvented and embodied a stolen, archived object which symbolically removes the statue of Rhodes (the man who stole the object of realia that she now embodies). The artist revisits the archive, confronting and inverting intersectional oppression. Through the symbolic objects of the past, Msezane reinstates the presence of BIPOC women in an act that displays strength and independence.

Bearing witness to those who bear witness

The removal of the statue was photographed by many people. In the image below, the photographer David Goldblatt bears witness to the many people who, too, bear witness with their camera phones. These photographs have become part of personal archives and are most likely already archived in the folders of social media.



David Goldblatt, *The Removal of the Statue of Rhodes at the University of Cape Town*, 2015. C-Type photograph. Varied dimensions.
Photo credit: David Goldblatt.

The archive as a site to bear witness

The performative activity around this now archived object brought to light, and reflected, the essence and many layers of grievance around colonialism in the South African context today. The statue had become a site to express anger with the colonial past and the lack of socio-economic and educational change in the present. The statue became a site to bear witness to colonialism and a place to perform resistance to circumstances past and present.



Rhodes sculpture boarded up, 2015. Photographer unknown.

The statue of Cecil John Rhodes now sits in the national archives amongst other objects of realia.

If the archive could speak

The statue itself holds an invisible narrative that spans nearly a century. Its creation in 1935 was a statement of reverence and power for a man who stole land and exploited Indigenous people (as previously mentioned in the pre Glen Grey Act). It bore witness to the years of Apartheid, the division of land by racial hierarchy, to anti-apartheid protests,

the political liberation of a country and the celebration, the disappointment and frustration of the lack of subsequent socio-economic change.

More recently, with the advent of the BLM movement, further protests have been held globally with calls to dismantle statues of colonists, such as that of the statue of Rhodes at Oxford University, which still remains in place, as well as two statues of Captain Cook in Sydney, which the New South Wales premier has expressed that she plans to protect.⁵⁸ Whilst some officials have refused the rewriting or removal of colonial statues, others have accepted such change.⁵⁹ The example of the #RHODESMUSTFALL campaign opens a series of important questions about memorials, colonial history, and its representation. Maxwele and Msezane's interventions show us how an object from the past might bear witness and disrupt the present.

The archives and subjectivity

Many post-colonial theorists propose that by examining the subjectivity of the archives, we are able to unravel the values and ideologies behind those that constructed and maintained them. In other words, documents, images, and objects are embedded with

⁵⁸ 'Four ways to help settle Australia's colonial statue debate', *ABC News*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.google.com.au/amp/s/amp.abc.net.au/article/12356234>, 10 September 2020.

⁵⁹ Katie Pickles, 'Removing monuments to an imperial past is not the same for former colonies as it is for former empires', *The Conversation*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.google.com.au/amp/s/theconversation.com/amp/removing-monuments-to-an-imperial-past-is-not-the-same-for-former-colonies-as-it-is-for-former-empires-140546> accessed 10 September 2020.

beliefs, ideas, and events that enable us to bear witness to systems of the past and their implications on the present. Literary theorist Gayatri Spivak reflects on the subjective bias of the colonial record in India. She refers to ‘a hegemonic nineteenth-century European historiography (which) has designated the archives as a repository of ‘facts’’.⁶⁰ These so-called ‘facts’ are filled with ideological presumptions and bias and ‘the fabrication of representation of historical reality’.⁶¹

Spivak describes a document of ‘Statistical and Geographical Memoir of the Hill Countries Situated Between the Rivers Tamas and Sutlej’, which an English colonist visiting from New South Wales in his early twenties wrote in 1811. The script was written with little knowledge of the area, from rumours and interpreted conversations. Yet the resulting document became part of the authoritative colonial record and was treated as an objective and accurate account.⁶² Spivak notes that colonialism presented ‘an alien ideology established as the only truth, and a set of human sciences busy establishing the ‘native’ as self-consolidating other (‘epistemic violence’)’.⁶³

As with Spivak, Thomas Richards emphasises that the Victorian system of subjectively collating knowledge was used to construct and assert colonial power.⁶⁴ As Marnoff

⁶⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives’, *History and Theory* 24, No. 3 (Oct. 1985): 249.

⁶¹ Spivak, ‘The Rani’, 271.

⁶² Spivak, ‘The Rani’, 263.

⁶³ Spivak, ‘The Rani’.

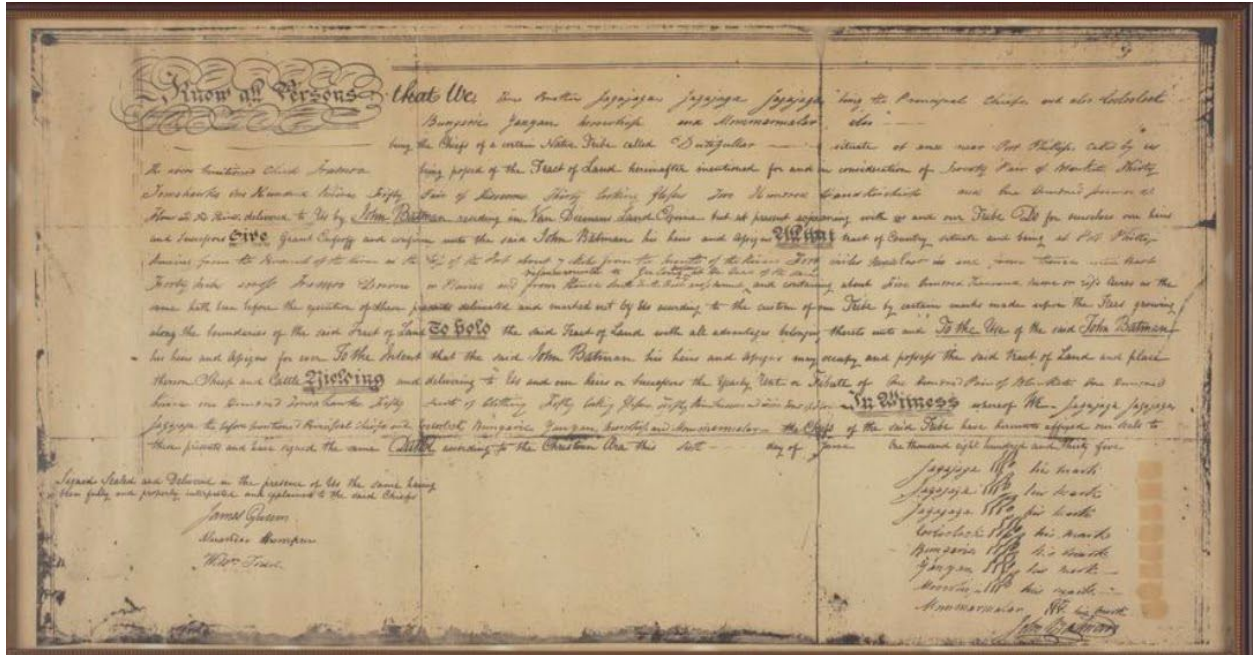
⁶⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive, Knowledge and Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

succinctly notes, he explains it as ‘the fantasy of the imperial archive’ in which the state superintends all the knowledge of its empire and thus imagines that it controls all the territory that it surveys and documents’.⁶⁵

Through the writings of Spivak and Richards, we see that an imagined and false notion of white superiority and control over colonised territory were created and perpetuated through knowledge production. This concept is primary to this thesis (as will be unpacked in the following chapter), in that my own work pivots around colonial knowledge production in my installation *Books On A White Background*. For now, however, we will continue to explore the concept in relation to other artists.

An intervention in the Australian home

⁶⁵ Marlene Manoff, *Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines* (Washington, D.C.: Hopkins University Press 2014).



Framed print of the Batman Deed, 1835, ink on paper, 60 x 32 cm, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

The State Library of Victoria holds a document that marks a traumatic turning point in the lives (social, political, economic, and spiritual) of the Wurundjeri people. The document, a treaty written in 1835, was named after John Batman who sailed to the bay of Port Phillip (which was named after the first British governor of NSW Captain Arthur Phillip) on a mission to obtain land. Batman's boat was loaded with various domestic goods and objects for barter: scissors, flour, blankets, tools, and other staple goods. In exchange for these goods, Wurundjeri leaders were putatively asked to put their tribal markings on a document that, according to Batman, gave European settlers control of six-hundred-thousand hectares of land.

Given the varied understanding of land ownership, treaties, and language, the document was signed under impossibly spurious circumstances and inaugurated the dispossession of Indigenous people in the area. The three 'original' copies of Batman's Treaty are currently stored in the archives of the British Museum, the National Museum of Australia, and the State Library of Victoria.

The artist and the passerby

In 2011, the non-Indigenous Australian artist Tom Nicholson stood on a street in Melbourne and handed out A4 documents to passersby. The following words were printed on the paper:

THIS CHIMNEY COMMEMORATES THE CITY'S FIRST CHIMNEY

HEARTH OF THE CITY'S FIRST LIVING ROOM

THE CHIMNEY BUILT BY WILLIAM BUCKLEY, MURRANGURK,
ESCAPED CONVICT AND A WATHAURUNG MAN FOR 32 YEARS

FOR JOHN BATMAN, AUTHOR OF BATMAN'S TREATY

THE WORDS BATMAN CLAIMS HE SIGNS WITH WURUNDJERI ELDERS,
6 JUNE 1835, THE WORDS THAT TRIGGER THE CITY WE INHABIT. THIS
CITY'S EVERY CHIMNEY RE-ISSUES THAT BRICKLAYING. BATMAN'S
CHIMNEY BUILT BY BUCKLEY REACHING TOWARDS THE SKY
THROUGH THE ROOFTOPS OF THE CITY'S STREETS ALL OVER.
COLUMNS OF BRICKS FOR THOSE WORDS, OUR DISPOSSESSING.
OBELISKS TO THAT HOME-MAKING.



Tom Nicholson, *Unfinished monument to Batman's Treaty*, 2011—. An ongoing action involving the distribution of off-set printed A4 paper plaques; to be attached, framed or unframed, to the chimneys in people's living rooms.

Nicholson asked pedestrians to take the page home and place it above their hearths in a similar manner to the way one would place a plaque on a monument.



Tom Nicholson, *Unfinished monument to Batman's Treaty*, 2011–. An ongoing action involving the distribution of off-set printed A4 paper plaques; to be attached, framed or unframed, to the chimneys in people's living rooms.

Unfinished Monument to Batman's Treaty is described as 'an ongoing public sculpture project engaging Batman's Treaty, its history and its meanings'.⁶⁶ Nicholson uses the archived treaty as the impetus for the work. He does not reproduce a copy of the archived

⁶⁶Tom Nicholson, '[Unfinished monument to Batman's Treaty](http://tomn.net/projects/2011_03/)', 2011, Tom Nicholson, http://tomn.net/projects/2011_03/, accessed 5 November 2019.

treaty per se but chooses to name it in his intervention. The work questions assumptions about past events and points the viewer towards the questionable circumstances around colonial land acquisition.

The viewer

The artist intervenes directly in the hearth of people's homes by sending his own piece of writing into spaces of family gathering and safety. As such, the viewers experience the work in a personal space. The information that they read will impact them differently depending on their own heritage and background. For a person who has no Indigenous heritage, this installation might create awareness of the past and bring about reflection on current complicity in the politics behind the land that they currently inhabit. For Indigenous people, it is a recognition of the land that their ancestors might have/most likely lost and an acknowledgement of the impact of this dispossession.

Nicholson's inscribed paper invites the participating public to transform their chimneys into monuments: 'In this way, the city's chimneys are gradually re-inscribed as commemorations of the city's first chimney, becoming parts of an ever-growing monument to the city's conflicted origins, potentially as vast as the city itself'.⁶⁷ Through

⁶⁷ Tom Nicholson, 'Unfinished monument to Batman's Treaty', *Postcolonial Studies* 15, 2 (2012): 191–201, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13688790.2012.708468>, accessed 12 December 2020.

these monuments viewers are asked to witness, acknowledge, and critically parse Batman's Treaty and its effects for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Melburnians alike.

Words as medium

Nicholson uses language to evoke and disrupt the conventional understanding of place. Yet the artist's words are measured. The lack of didacticism or hyperbole allows the viewer to make up their own mind. The words 'Batman claims' and 'dispossessing' ask us to consider the validity of the treaty and to question the claims to land that we are living on. Through the words 'This hearth' (which, when placed in the home, infers *your* hearth, *my* hearth), self-reflection is encouraged.

In the home, above the hearth, Nicholson's A4 document inscribed with words becomes an object of disruption and a conduit to consciousness. The viewer is asked to bear witness to the history of the land. They are asked to recognise the illegitimacy of Batman's Treaty and the horrific repercussions for Indigenous communities that lived on and with the land on which their house has been built for many tens of thousands of years. Through naming and drawing attention to an archived colonial treaty and situating it as circumspect (through the use of the words 'Batman claims'), we are asked to bear witness to and question white privilege.

The archive as a social institution

The basic process, the activity of archiving, is to collect, classify, and file records, documents, and objects from the past. This involves selecting what should or should not be kept, and how the information should be classified. As such, the archivist is a boundary keeper and by putting some records on a pedestal and in a specific context, the archivist creates meaning and narrative.

The archival theorist Erik Ketelaar views the archive as a social institution.⁶⁸ He notes that the manner in which we categorize, code and label contains a hidden tacit narrative of that institution. Hence, civil servants and records managers shape contents and contexts of the record, displaying their own political and social stance. 'At every stage of the record's trajectory some 'archiver', while activating the record, tells a story'.⁶⁹ Archives contain the voices of the documents, the bureaucrats, the archivists, and the researchers who all use and manage the files. The archivalist is not external to the archive that they create.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Eric Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives* (Archival Science 1: Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 131–141.

⁶⁹ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 140.

⁷⁰ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 140.

Archives contain the ideologies and presuppositions of those who create them. This might work well for artists who want to understand, witness, and reflect on the social and political views and actions of a specific time and group of people. Ketelaar calls this ‘Semantic Genealogy’.⁷¹ By this, he means to interrogate not only the administrative context but also the social, cultural, political, and religious contexts of the record’s creation, maintenance, and use. He states that it is not a matter of looking at the record, but rather, looking *through* the record and beyond it and in so doing, making contexts transparent.⁷² Ketelaar notes that ‘every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record’.⁷³ Despite its claims to objectivity and neutrality, we cannot regard the record as an artefact with fixed boundaries of content and context – the record is a mediated and mediating construct. It is an ever-changing construction. It is not a noun, but a verb.

A site of colonial knowledge production revealed

In his installation *52 portraits & Vox: Beyond Tasmania* (2013), the Wiradjuri artist Brook Andrew makes colonial subjectivity and knowledge production visible for public scrutiny and historicization by re-assembling colonial objects, curios, and ethnographic texts. The Director of Murrup Barak Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development,

⁷¹ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 137.

⁷² Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 132.

⁷³ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 137.

University of Melbourne Ian Anderson writes that the work reflects 'the resonances of a global cultural process that re-ordered much of humanity through the perspective of colonising peoples'.⁷⁴ The exhibition title is derived from a book of drawings by anatomist Richard Berry: *Transactions of the Royal Society of Victoria*, published in 1909. Volume five of this rare book presents fifty-two Tasmanian unnamed Aboriginal skulls which were kept in both private and public collections. Skulls of individuals – unnamed, unburied, and photographed by colonisers.



Brook Andrew, *52 portraits & Vox: Beyond Tasmania*, 2013. Installation view: Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne. Photo credit: Christian Capurro.

⁷⁴ As cited in Nathalie Obadia, 'Brook Andrew', *Art Map*, <https://artmap.com/nathalieobadia/exhibition/brook-andrew-2013>, accessed 13 August 2019.



Brook Andrew, Detail of *52 portraits & Vox: Beyond Tasmania*, 2013. Installation view: Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne. Photo Credit: Brook Andrew.

In the centre of the room, Andrews placed a vitrine akin to that used in European ethnographic museums in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵ Inside the vitrine and on top of an unopened archival box is the photocopied version of Berry's book. Below it is a Dharug stone axe from Emu Plains, New South Wales; a photo of a tree incised with Wiradjuri markings; and a small plastic skull facing out the back of the vitrine. On the bottom level, resting on the glass, is a series of drawings and photographs of Aboriginal skulls, a box of

⁷⁵ Annette B. Fromm, 'Ethnographic Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage', *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5, no. 2 (December 2016): 89-94.

slides with thick glass lantern slides laid out next to it, a reel of film, and two books by the former director of the Anthropology Museum at the University of Sydney, S.L. Larnach's *Australian Aboriginal Craniology and The Craniology of the Aborigines of Coastal New South Wales*. In a corner of the vitrine lies a Wiradjuri parrying shield, two colour lithographs *Ozeanische Völker* (1890) and *Afrikanische Völker* (1885), and dried emu feathers that themselves look like skeletons.⁷⁶

Traditionally, objects in most western museums were displayed with a label that contained information of place and culture compiled by an ethnographer (usually a white male). Andrews does not do this. Instead, he attaches an enlarged wooden megaphone through a round hole that is cut into the glass of the museum cabinet. The skeleton is posed as if it is speaking into it. The megaphone is the conduit between the objects and images inside the cabinet and the viewer who is willing to bear witness. It invites that which is objectified, unnamed, and silenced to have a voice. Yet, the subjects of the display do not speak, there is no sound. Perhaps we can apply the Agambenian notion of the lacuna to this absent voice as we bear witness to colonial atrocity in the southeast Australian context – a history of collecting and exhibiting Aboriginal human remains.

⁷⁶ Rex Butler, 'Framing the voice/voicing the frame', *Index Journal 1: Identity* (2019), <http://index-journal.org/issues/identity/framing-the-voice-voicing-the-frame-on-brook-andrews-vox-by-rex-butler>, accessed 7 July 2019.



Brook Andrew, Detail of *52 portraits & Vox: Beyond Tasmania*, 2013, installation view: Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne. Photo credit: Christian Capurro.

52 portraits

Andrew's own postcard collection, which contains images of unnamed Indigenous/First Nations people globally, forms the basis of portraits that surround the walls of the installation. Postcards are traditionally small in size, hand held with the viewer looking down upon them. For this exhibition, Andrew enlarged the images to life-size and placed them on the wall to stare back at the viewer. In doing so, he restores dignity and power to each person on the postcard whilst bearing witness to colonial processes of

objectification. Perhaps, yet again, in the absence of words held in the silent stares of the portraits of people once photographed, we bear witness.

The archive as a portal to the future

Further to the theories that note that the archive gives us insight into the past and the present is theory that situates the archive as a signifier of the future. In his text *Archive Fever*, Derrida speaks about the archive as being not merely a 'thing of the past ... the archive should call into question the coming of the future'.⁷⁷ Ketelaar interprets this to mean that every interpretation of the archive is an enrichment, an extension of the archive.⁷⁸

In addition, every activation of the archive changes the significance of earlier activations. We read the record differently according to the place and time we are reading it in. In other words, the document does not speak for itself but only in relation to its semantic genealogy.⁷⁹ As such, 'the archivization produces as much as it records the event'.⁸⁰ By reconfiguring the archive in the work *52 portraits & Vox: Beyond Tasmania* Andrew bears witness to the past and demands a different future.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

⁷⁹ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 137.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how the archive presents the artist with an opportunity to uncover ideological systems and historical narratives of the past, to question the present and to demand a different future. Ketelaar assists us to understand how the archive holds the views and values of its creators. Spivak and Thomas emphasise that the subjective production of knowledge that has been used to assert control and power is widely visible within the colonial archive. As such the colonial archive holds potential to bear witness to colonialism, by turning the documents and objects against their original intention. We see this in various works of art produced in both South Africa and Australia. Chumani Maxwele's performative intervention on an object of realia and the statue of Cecil John Rhodes challenged colonial structures within the educational system and triggered the #RhodesMustFall movement. The artist Sethembile Msezane used an object of realia (the Zimbabwe bird) to refigure a patriarchal and colonial narrative of the subservient black female body through performing a symbolic removal of the statue of Rhodes.

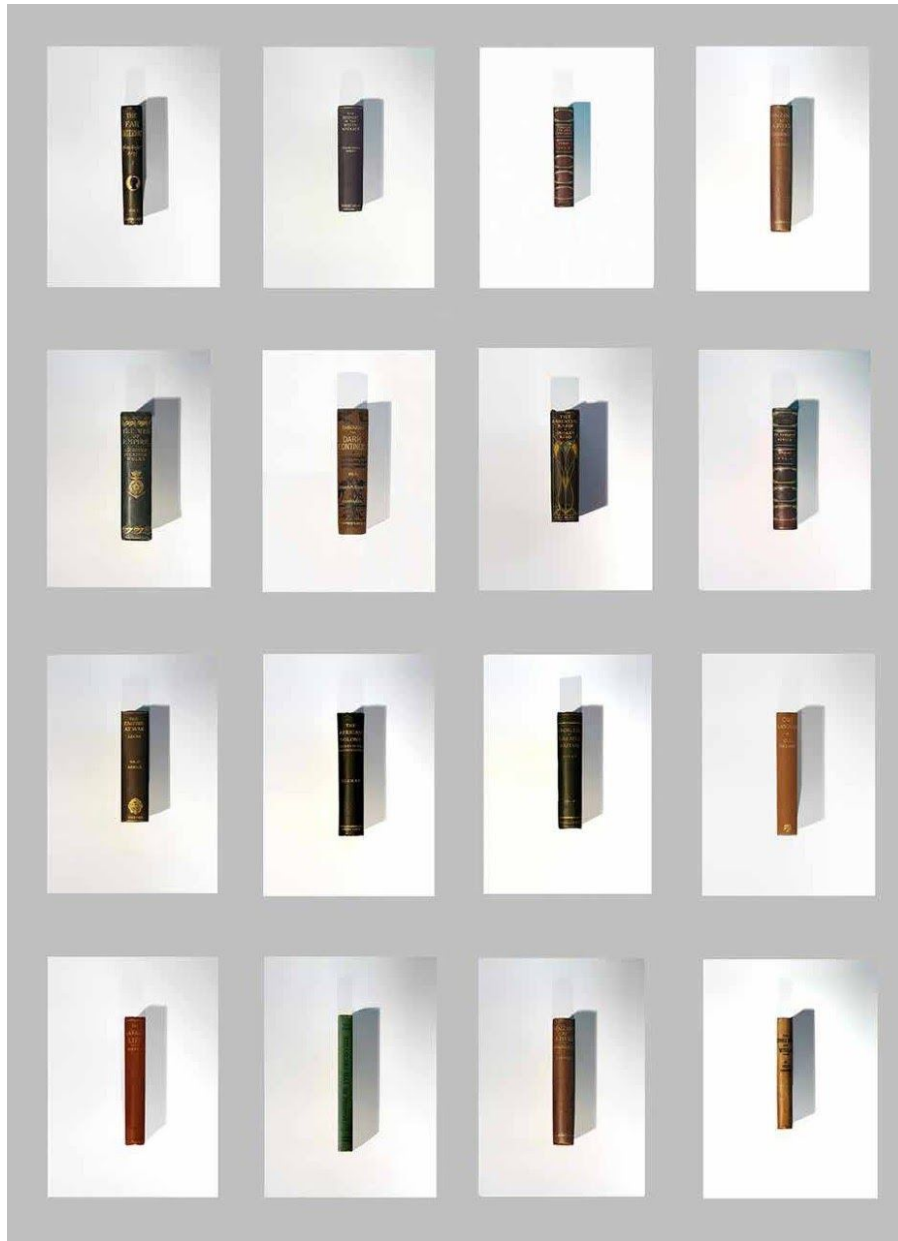
In Australia, an archived treaty from 1835 forms the basis of a work by the artist Tom Nicholson to bear witness to the original and ongoing dispossession of land belonging to the Wurundjeri people. Nicholson distributes pieces of printed paper and requests pedestrians to create memorials out of their hearths. He interrupts personal living space

and asks the home dweller to acknowledge the history of the land that they occupy. The artist Brook Andrew creates his own archive and displays objects and documents in an installation that reveals ethnographic atrocity. In his reinterpretation of a museum display, he simultaneously bears witness whilst offering dignity and voice to Indigenous people.

Through both theorists and artists we see that the archives hold information that provide artists with the opportunity to bear witness to the past, to disrupt the present, and to reconsider the future.

Chapter 3: Books On A White Background

“Fact is simply fiction endorsed with state power”⁸¹



⁸¹ Saidiya Hartman in conversation with Alexis Okeowo, October 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/26/how-saidiya-hartman-retells-the-history-of-black-life>, accessed on 1 Nov 2020

Aliza Levi, *Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photographs, 59.4 x 42cm each.



Aliza Levi, *Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photographs, 59.4 x 42cm each.

The term ‘archivalisation’ was coined and defined by Eric Ketelaar as the moment where there is a conscious or unconscious choice taken to consider something worth archiving, which is to say preserving for future generations.⁸² It is the moment that precedes what Derrida terms archivisation, by which according to Ketelaar, Derrida means ‘the creative phase before capture’.⁸³ Ketelaar describes it as ‘the searchlight’ and quotes Karl Popper saying

What the searchlight makes visible will depend upon its position, upon our way of directing it, and upon its intensity, colour, etc.; although it will, of course, also depend very largely upon the things illuminated by it.⁸⁴

How might we understand this in relation to the colonial archive - a place of pain and suffering, where the presentation of so-called ‘knowledge’ was used to dispossess and abuse people. Is it of any use to persevere on the past when there is the important job of moving forward toward empowered futures (such as within the decolonising project of Afrofuturism). Achille Mbembe makes a point in saying that

a museum properly understood is not a dumping place. It is not a place where we recycle history’s waste. It is first and foremost an epistemic space. A stronger option would

⁸² Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*.

⁸³ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 133.

⁸⁴ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*, 133.

therefore be the creation of a new kind of institution, partly a park and partly a graveyard, where statues of people who spent most of their lives defacing everything the name “black” stood for would be put to rest. Putting them to rest in those new places would in turn allow us to move on and recreate the kind of new public spaces required by our new democratic project.⁸⁵

In other words, there is a place where we need to order and situate the insidious objects of the past in order to move ourselves forward. As white people, who wish to ally the BLM movement, moving forward would mean taking responsibility and acknowledging our heritages: our privileges and obligations.

In this chapter I will reflect upon the ‘searchlight’ behind my installation *Books On A White Background* (2014–2018). A series of photographs that bears witness to objects of colonial atrocity in both my birthplace and my adopted country. The question of bearing witness to colonialism has been at the forefront of my studio practice since the making of *1997: Reuters Stock Library* (mentioned in the introduction of this thesis) and a process of archivalisation has led to the installation *Books On a White Background*. In the discussion that follows, I reflect upon the development of the series, and in particular, the manner in which I have turned the camera gaze back on itself in order to observe the behaviour of the colonists. I argue that in so doing the series bears witness to the construction of whiteness in a colonial context. I will further explain the manner in which

⁸⁵Achille Mbembe, 2015
<https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive>

I have disrupted these racist and imperialist books by objectifying them, trapping them, placing a shadow of darkness next to them, as well as contextualizing them as part of a fascist institution. Themes of ethnographic representation, colonialism, and whiteness as a cultural and social phenomena that violates communities, are all discussed.

Two colonised countries

Given that social identity is primary to the content of my work, at this point it is important to address in more detail the history of my own context and heritage. As a South African-born artist now resident in Australia, I have lived in two countries traumatised by colonial forces. The writer and professor in criminology Juliet Rogers notes that despite the nuances and differences in form, there is a common thread that weaves itself through these countries. She reflects upon the socio-economic violence that has permeated generations and refers to 'the unspeakable struggles' of those notionally born free of Apartheid in South Africa, and its similarities to those who are born free of official discrimination in Australia.⁸⁶ Rogers identifies struggles both large and small, infrequent and everyday, horrific and bureaucratic, listing:

not only large scale violent events (massacres, murders, practices of rape and other forms of genocide) but ... the broad effects of policies of violence (including socio-economic) on the identities,

⁸⁶ Juliet Rogers, 'Over weighted hope – the unspeakable burdens of the 'born free'', lecture, *Reconciliation Colloquium*, University of Cape Town, 29 February 2014.

endeavours and capacities for hope and creativity of Indigenous people both past *and* present.⁸⁷

As is well understood, more than two decades after the official end of apartheid, despite the constitutional changes in 1996, the socio-economic effects of colonial atrocity and apartheid persist.⁸⁸ The economy remains in the hands of an elite minority, wealth is disproportionately attributed to a small, middle and upper class populace, many of whom were benefactors from years of apartheid. Reliable education and healthcare are inaccessible to most, as is decent housing, sanitation, and further basic needs. Fifty-five percent of the population live below the poverty line.⁸⁹

Australia has its own unique colonial trajectory. The government-sanctioned abuse of Indigenous communities was legally dismantled, in part, with the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975, but the long-term effects of the White Australia Policy and past atrocities including genocide, slavery, and Stolen Generations, are visible today in the continuing marginalisation of First Nation communities, political agency, and connection with Country. The National Apology given to Indigenous Australian people in 2008 was an acknowledgment of the past, yet it did not have much impact or change in real-life

⁸⁷ Rogers, 'Over weighted hope'.

⁸⁸ 'South Africa's New Constitution Approved', *South Africa History*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/south-africas-new-constitution-approved>, accessed 19 November 2020.

⁸⁹ 'Men, Women and Children: Findings of the Living Conditions Survey', 2015, *Department of Statistics South Africa*, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12075>, accessed 10 December 2015.

circumstances for Aboriginal communities. Intergenerational trauma persists alongside a history of financial disadvantage and economic oppression.⁹⁰

Positionality and social identity

Much of the damage done by white individuals and institutions is perpetuated in the absence of any substantive self-reflection, and is caused, in part *by a lack of* self-reflection on the nature of white occupation of Aboriginal land. To move towards remedying this deep violence, Donna Haraway proposes that reflexivity is important in the creation of situated knowledge.⁹¹ As such, I will now outline the contours of my situation and subjectivity, including my own relation to whiteness.

My family originates from Europe. Both of my grandfathers arrived in Africa with the emotional and socio-political baggage of Jewish immigrants fleeing pogroms from Lithuania and Nazism in Germany. My grandmothers were born in South Africa and were children of immigrant refugees. My ancestors' newfound life in South Africa held some irony in that they were able to find safety from anti-semitism within a racist regime. Research into my family history indicates that my family did not personally support the

⁹⁰ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2002).

⁹¹ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 579.

National Party and at stages they were involved in anti-apartheid activism, but it is important to stress that white political activists in South Africa still benefited from apartheid.

As a second-generation immigrant, born in South Africa during apartheid, I grew up in the category of a white person and in the constructed privilege of white rule. Given the stories of both of my grandfathers, I was acutely aware that this position of safety and privilege was not a constant. I knew that circumstances had changed flippantly for Jews throughout history. For instance, there was a period of time in South Africa when there was an active lobby for Jewish people to be categorised as ‘non-white’, which would entail them being subjugated to apartheid oppression.⁹² Further, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a South African anti-semitic movement called the Grey Shirts whose primary goal was to eradicate Jews.⁹³ Fortunately, this movement did not gain traction, and my South African ancestors were able to live a life of relative freedom.

Knowledge of pogroms and the Holocaust was passed down to me. At the same time, I was aware of the racist system that I was growing up in. I was confused by the dichotomy

⁹² 'Dr. Verwoerd used the (newspaper) columns of Die Transvaler to maintain that Jews should be relegated to an inferior position in the life of the country. At one stage, for example, he urged strongly that a numerus clausus should be introduced in the universities, thus limiting the participation of Jews in professional activities'. Franz Althuber, *Die Kapstädter Jazzszene als eine Form der Rebellion gegen politische Diskriminierung und Unterdrückung sowie ihr hegemonialer Aufstieg*. Diplom.de, 2009, 14. Blatant supporters of such policies could be seen in mens clubs and sports associations that did not allow Jews to enter.

⁹³ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–45* (London: Routledge, 2001), 338

between family history and current circumstances of white privilege. As a child, I watched discrimination occur on a daily basis and felt that I had limited capacity to intervene. I felt deep shame to be part of it and I felt mute and unable to change this. Activities that I took part in through the anti-apartheid movement never felt enough.

A studio enquiry into colonialism

Well into a post-apartheid country, as an adult, I moved to Australia to live with my Australian partner. It was triggering to find myself living in yet another country steeped in violent colonial history. The subject came to the fore in my studio practice. It was evidently important to me that I should begin to connect the two sites and their violent histories.⁹⁴

I began a personal enquiry into the discourse of colonialism. This entailed a search for books authored by anthropologists, ethnologists, and laypersons traveling through or living in Australia and South Africa in the nineteenth century. I found such books in the archives of libraries, private book collections, second-hand book stores and dealers. The books contained commentaries on travels and settlement both prior to and during colonisation. The contents and narratives of the books revealed the white settler ideology

⁹⁴ Whilst in this investigation I explored books from both countries, in the Monash exhibition I decided to exhibit only the books from colonisation in Africa in order to have congruence with the video *The Miners' Companion*, which specifically relates to South Africa.

of the times. Whilst I could cite examples of this here, it would contradict the purpose of not revealing them in the exhibition. Suffice to say that texts were anchored in racist assumptions that constructed Indigenous people as primitive, savage, and at the disposal of European settlers. I was horrified and shocked and felt a strong push to both expose and bear witness to this.

Photographing the archives

Camera on hand, I established a method of photographing the books. I placed each one on a white board, and took the photograph from above so that only its spine was visible (the decision to do so will be explained further in this chapter). The lighting and positioning of each book were kept precise and continuous throughout each shoot. The composition was maintained, measured, and repeated. The resultant work is a photographic series of book spines, floating against a white background, displayed on the wall in the structured manner of a collection or, indeed, an archive.

Put very simply, the term ‘collection’ is defined as the grouping of objects of a particular genre. *Books On a White Background* is a grouping of colonial objects that display the Empire’s construction and (mis)use of ‘knowledge’. Colonial subjectivity and knowledge

production is visible in the titles of the books. The insidious methods of classifying Indigenous people are laid bare for the viewer to witness.

An archive of photographed objects

Tom Nesmith speaks about 'seeing *with* the archive'.⁹⁵ In this series, I have asked: what does it mean to see *with* the archive through the lens? Each book, seen separately without the context of a bookshelf and placed on white board under photographic lights, became an object to scrutinise. The camera became a tool to view and capture these objects. The result was the formation of a photographic archive of the objects of colonial knowledge production – here brought together not to be used but to be observed and analysed.

Photography and ethnography

A significant part of 'knowledge' production in the colonies was enacted through ethnography.⁹⁶ Ethnographers were traditionally white (and predominantly) men who collated information about cultural and social practice of cultures other than their own.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Tom Nesmith, 'Seeing with Archives: The Changing Intellectual Place of Archives', conference paper, Association of Canadian Archivists, Ottawa, 6 June 1997; as cited in Ketelaar, *Tacit Archives*, 132.

⁹⁶ The term ethnography is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as 'the scientific description of different peoples and cultures, with their customs, habits and differences', *Oxford Dictionary of English*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/ethnography>, accessed 7 June 2020.

⁹⁷ Chidi Ugwu, 'History of Ethnography: Straightening the Records', *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 9, no. 7 (July 2017): 77–81. 'Lewis Henry Morgan is credited in some circles with being the first to do a formal, systematized ethnography. But available records so far show that the French man, Joseph-François Lafitau, was the first to undertake systematized ethnography, having studied the Iroquois with ethnographic methods that were – even in today's terms – evidently more

Visual ethnography (film and photographs) formed a large component of Eurocentric ethnology. Indigenous people and their cultural artefacts and living environments were placed under the camera's gaze. According to the American-Australian visual anthropologist, academic, and documentary filmmaker David MacDougal, visual anthropology is a performative anthropology of the presentation of objects and re-enactment of experiences in the world.⁹⁸ Anne Marsh's reflection on the performativity of photography might prove useful here. Marsh reflects upon the fetishistic space of the coloniser wherein the 'other' is observed through the lens.⁹⁹ The subaltern (in Spivak's terms) was subjected to performing culture for the camera and presented as a bizarre (and often savage) other. Typically, there was no regard for permission or consent as to where and how the images would be used, nor following of cultural protocol for the maintenance and display of said images. Photographs and objects taken of First Nations were displayed in a proliferation of ethnographic museums in the West through the

thoroughgoing than Morgan's. Some writers hold that Branislow Malinowski should take the credit for the systematization of participant observation (the cardinal method in ethnographic fieldwork) – he did his 'pioneering' study from 1914 to 1918. However, some records show that Cushing, who had finished his own fieldwork about 30 years (1879 -1884) before Malinowski's, had done the things for which some scholars regarded the latter as having broken the path to systematized participant observation'. P80 'If entering Targets 'social life, learning their language and observing them from the inside in order to report about them from an insider's viewpoint defines participant observation, then Joseph François Lafitau (1681-1746) is, from available records, the arguable pioneer. If we say a solely scholarly status must be part of the criteria and then disqualify him because of his missionary status, then that credit will go to Frank Cushing (1857 to 1900)', 81.

⁹⁸ David Macdougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 272.

⁹⁹ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing 2003)

nineteenth and twentieth century.¹⁰⁰ Through such mechanisms, the social construction of Indigenous people as a primitive other was created and reproduced.

Cultural objects under the gaze

The practice of ethnography included the collection of cultural objects from Indigenous communities. The objects were either photographed or taken by ethnologists and explorers to white communities and placed on display (for example the Zimbabwe Bird statue as mentioned in chapter two). The tradition of public display began in the sixteenth and seventeenth century with cabinets of curiosity, filled with ephemera from cultures outside of Europe.¹⁰¹ ‘The cabinets of curiosities speak more of earlier collectors’ preoccupations and preconceptions about the world, and their place in it, than they do about the items they contain’¹⁰². Usually, the objects had a cultural or religious function in Indigenous communities but once they were placed in European settings, they became non-functional objects on display, with white ethnographers and viewers enacting a sense of curiosity and power over them.

Turning the gaze on whiteness

¹⁰⁰ Fromm, *Ethnographic Museums*, 89–94.

¹⁰¹ Fromm, *Ethnographic Museums*, 90.

¹⁰² John E. Stanton, *Ethnographic Museums and Collections: From the Past into the Future* (Canberra: Australian Museums and Museology, 2011), 2.

The described ethnological practice of object theft and display might be seen in the installation *Books On a White Background*. In this series of photographs, I explored the caverns of white institutions just as white male ethnographers explored Indigenous spaces. I pulled each book off the shelf, gazed at it as an object of curiosity, and photographed it. I took the captured photographs of the books in my camera to institutions for display. I exhibited each book individually, devoid of original context, and as a flattened image – an object to be viewed within its own frame. The book objects lost their original function in that I foreclosed the racist, imperial narratives inside them. The process was not dissimilar to the tradition of ethnology of fetishising and presenting objects from a specified culture, and in so doing removing their original purpose.

Mimicry

By using tools and formats akin to colonial ethnographers, yet displacing or reversing the gaze, the series could be seen as a subversion from within. In Homi K Bhabha's writing *Of Mimicry and Man* (2001), he talks about using the same motif or style of the authority which one is criticising in order to challenge that institution. 'I want to turn to this process by which the look of surveillance returns ... where the observer becomes the observed', this, Bhabha says is 'at once resemblance and menace'.¹⁰³ The series *Books On A White Background* mimics the methods of the coloniser, and with the selection of its

¹⁰³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 129.

ethnographic subject, is intended to create menace. This menace is intended to destabilise the colonial gaze.

Photography

The viewer might ask why I, the artist, used photography as the medium. Why did I not collect and place the actual books on display? As previously mentioned, the books, when captured through the lens, become objectified and muted. I attempt to disable their influence whilst simultaneously providing evidence of the insidious beliefs of their authors. The books are simultaneously revealed and shut down. I reduced their information to an image in a performative act of both trapping and bearing witness. Let us refer back to Didi-Huberman's use of the mythology of Medusa as discussed in chapter one. We recall that Perseus holds his mirror-like shield up for Medusa to look at herself, and it is because of the reflective gaze that Perseus can behead her. I would like to think that these photographs provide an opportunity for viewers to reflect upon and disable or behead white narratives in colonial histories.

The lacuna

The photographs of the books, as objects, foreclose the internal content. As previously mentioned, the narratives of the books are shut down as the viewer is prohibited access to

the information inside. In retrospect, I see this action as a continuation of the work *1997: Reuters Photographic Agency*, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis – an image of a cabinet projected onto the wall; realistic in size and colour, its contents rendered inaccessible. The fact that I intentionally kept the cabinet closed was a performative act of refusal. The same might be said of *Books On A White Background* wherein the books' content, the authors' narratives, are made inaccessible and the books hang on the wall in a muted capacity. This is especially true of books that have no titles, or where titles are broken up due to an ageing spine and might relate to Agamben who states that 'the value of a testimony lies essentially in what it lacks', and that, 'ultimately, in testimony, the empty place of the subject becomes the decisive question'.¹⁰⁴ I would like to recall Agamben's explanation of the lacuna mentioned in chapter one: It is through the absence of narrative, the lacuna, surrounded by fragments of meaning, that we are able to bear witness.

¹⁰⁴ Agamben, *Archive*, 34.



Aliza Levi, *Untitled (Lacuna)* in *Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photograph, 59.4 x 42cm.



Aliza Levi, *Untitled 2 (Lacuna) in Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photographs, 59.4 x 42cm.

Titles and images on a spine

Despite the fact that the books are closed and trapped behind the lens, they are not completely absent of suggestion. Most of the books have titles on their spines, which allow us to bear witness to colonial assumptions and behaviour.

The book spines that have images on them offer further association: for example, the spine entitled *The Great Goldlands of South Africa* is embossed with an image of a white man, dressed in long military-style boots and pants, standing in the forefront with his one hand on his hip and a mining pick in the other. In the background is an image of a semi-naked Black man dressed in a 'loincloth' bent over carrying a crate. Presumably these foreign lands are 'Great' not only because of their riches, but the potential to use black men as labourers. Placed as an observed object through the lens and in the framework of the installation entitled *Books On A White Background* (which contextualises the object within white patterns of behaviour), the image on this book spine overtly displays white entitlement and dispossession.



Aliza Levi, *The Great Goldlands of South Africa* in installation *Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018,

C-type photograph, 59.4 x 42cm.

The archival impulse

The manner of display becomes important to the way in which the series is understood. Given that these photographs form a collection of objects, I operate like an archivist who chooses which objects to display and what order to display them in. Drawing on Derrida's writing, Hal Foster coined the term 'Archival Impulse' to describe this kind of practice in contemporary art.¹⁰⁵ Vered Maimon reflects on the term 'archive' as not just suggestive of a dusty file cabinet full of old documents but, following Michel Foucault's influential *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, a regulatory discursive system, a set of a priori historical rules that determine the conditions of possibility for statements, i.e., what can be said and seen in specific formations of knowledge.¹⁰⁶

As such, the artist as archivist is a boundary keeper – forming a narrative (even if deliberately fragmentary, incomplete, or nonlinear) in their method of archiving. Just as the archivist is not external to the archive that they create, the artist is subjective in their selection of what should and should not be kept. Likewise, in my series *Books On A White Background*, I have chosen to print and display specific titles. When these titles are hung next to one another, they form a syntax. My choice of titles and the order in which I

¹⁰⁵ Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110 (2004): 3-22.

¹⁰⁶ Vered Maimon, 'Review of Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art', *CAA Reviews*, 2008, DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2008.41

hang the photographs influence the meaning of the installation. Initially I searched for books that revealed historical attitudes and dominant ideologies of the colonists. Yet, as I immersed myself in the project, I began to notice that in displacing the titles from their context (providing neither date nor content of the books), various levels of association might occur pending on the time and place and by whom they were being seen, the personal values and assumptions of the viewer. In other words, the connotative aspect, as emphasised by Barthes, was broad. Examples of this follow.

The archive as past, present, and future

I found myself being drawn into the titles not only through what *was* but what still *is* or *seems* to be, and I became interested in the discussions that could occur around the work. What has changed and what has not changed? I noticed that the titles on the books could apply to present attitudes, conditions, and policies. For example the book title *Strangers May Be Present* might still relate to asymmetrical interrelationships between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people.

Titles that were written a hundred years ago resonated not only with their colonial-ethnographic origin, but with questions around today's socio-political climate.

An affirmation of both Ketelaar and Derrida's view that the archive presents us with the past, the present and the future all at once.¹⁰⁷ Derrida:

The question of the archive is not (only) a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal. An archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.¹⁰⁸

Books On A White Background might position the viewer to bear witness to the past as well as consider circumstances in the present. For example, the book title *Strangers May Be Present* might evoke thoughts on xenophobia or the mistreatment of refugees that is highly visible in Australian politics and news media today. The title *The Gulf Between* written seventy years ago might evoke thoughts on today's visible gap between rich and poor, exemplified by the Occupy protest chant 'we are the ninety-nine percent'.

¹⁰⁷ Ketelaar, *Tacit Narratives*.

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.



Aliza Levi, *Strangers May be Present in Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photograph, 59.4 x 42cm.

The order of hanging

Although the inference of each title might be broad when viewed on its own, the syntax that is formed through the order of hanging helps construct the narrative of the exhibition. I became intrigued with what could be expressed when placing one title next to the other. For example when the title *Rhodes* is hung next to the title *Tell the White Man*, it might be read as a request for white men to be reflexive, to look at the roots of imperial imposition, and to think about what this means in the present.



Aliza Levi, *Tell The White Man in Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photograph, 59.4 x 42cm.



Aliza Levi, *Cecil Rhodes in Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photograph, 59.4 x 42cm.

Books On A White Background, Monash University, February 2020



Aliza Levi, *Books on a White Background*, installation view: Monash University, Melbourne, February 2020. Photo credit: Aliza Levi.

In the iteration of *Books on a White Background* at Monash University in February 2020, the order of the photographs begins on the left hand wall (and reads clockwise) with books written on the launch of exploration. It shifts to books that reveal racist assumptions around settlement and the so-called ‘saving’ of Indigenous people. This is

followed by titles that emphasise patronising attitudes of ‘us’ and ‘them’, an othering of Indigenous people. The next titles on display reflect upon capitalism and the (mis)use of Indigenous people in Africa for labour. The final book on display is hung upside down, its title *Ourselves Writ Strange* is intended as a self-reflexive comment on the absurdity of white patterns of behaviour, which is a key intention of the installation more broadly.



Aliza Levi, *Ourselves Writ Strange in Books on a White Background*, 2014–2018, C-type photographs, 59.4 x 42cm.

A risk of reiteration

To reveal and display insidiously racist texts is obviously accompanied with the risk of causing further offense. The titles differ in levels of confrontation: some are quite broad in inference whilst others are more specific (such as the book entitled *Strangers May be Present* versus the book entitled *Black But Comely*). This raises the question of whether and how to display the books without re-inscribing or reinforcing the violent assumptions of the colonists, but rather, contradicting and exposing the original intentions of their authors and publishers. My organisation of the 'syntax' of the book titles in such a way as to elicit white self-reflection provides one answer to these important questions. As might the series title.

Naming whiteness: a portal of disruption and reflexivity

By naming the series *Books on a White Background*, I hope that I guide the viewer towards the intention of the work. The title holds dual meaning. It alludes to both the formal composition of the work as well as the colonial subject matter, it points to the social identity of the authors as well as myself, the maker. To quote photography historian and theorist Geoffrey Batchen, the title is used 'to anchor some potential

meanings and discourage others'.¹⁰⁹ By suffusing the series title with the word *white*, the books are held accountable to a particular sector of people and their behavioural patterns.

Naming whiteness, according to numerous theorists, presents an immediate disruption of the racist norm. In his book *White* (1996), Richard Dyer points out that whiteness is largely unnamed in the mainstream media and amongst white people it is not usually presented as 'a' race, but assumed and presented as 'the' human race.¹¹⁰ By this, he means that 'whiteness' and its ensuing patterns of behaviour are enforced as the norm. Dyer:

In the West, references to whiteness are absent from habitual speech and writing; in descriptions of people, if a person's race is not mentioned, he or she is automatically taken to be white. Whites tend to speak of themselves as representatives of 'people' in general ... This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture.¹¹¹

The global majority do not fit into the constructed category of 'white'. 'The notion that whiteness is, on the one hand nothing in particular, and on the other representing the human race, relates to radical acts of denial'.¹¹² Naming and looking at whiteness

¹⁰⁹ Batchen, *Phantasm*, 48.

¹¹⁰ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1996).

¹¹¹ Dyer, *White*, 70.

¹¹² Dyer, *White*, 71.

constitutes an important redress to the construct that white people are ‘*the* people’. It acknowledges that whites are a particular, socially identified group of people with constructed patterns of behaviour passed on through generations (by using the word *background*) such as dispossession of land, racism, entitlement, and privilege. Through naming whiteness in this series, the books are contextualised as part of that white identity construct, and the installation asks the viewer to reflect on that fact.

Melissa Steyn, who holds the South African National Research Chair in Critical Diversity Studies and is widely known for her publications on whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa, stated that there has been resistance to talking about whiteness.¹¹³ She is of the belief that in order to dismantle the power structures built around it, more research is needed into how whiteness operates.¹¹⁴

Steyn traces whiteness as an identity construct created in the 1500s by Europeans travelling to Africa to establish power over territories.¹¹⁵ ‘Discourses were tailored and co-opted to construct a master narrative of whiteness’.¹¹⁶ This coincides with what Indigenous feminist theorist Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to as the ongoing legacies

¹¹³ Melissa Steyn and Don Foster, ‘Repertoires for Talking White: Resistant whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2008): 25–51.

¹¹⁴ Steyn and Foster, ‘Repertoires’.

¹¹⁵ Melissa Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn't What it Used to Be: White identity in a changing South Africa* (New York: State University of New York Press: 2001), 6.

¹¹⁶ Steyn, *Whiteness*, 6.

of the White Australian Policy that shaped national identity for most of the last century and the persistent failure to fully address Indigenous sovereignty claims.¹¹⁷

In her book *Decolonising Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes about knowledge extraction and Western research as a practice that positioned Indigenous people as lesser and other.¹¹⁸ Further, the production of ‘knowledge’, as Richards reflects, formed and reinforced the basis of the colonial Empire.¹¹⁹ The use of repetition in the display of *Books On A White Background* might convey a sense of this.

In the Monash exhibition, I exhibited thirty-three of the book spines that I have captured with my camera. This amount is about a third of what I have actually photographed over the years, and that amount was just approximately one percent of the colonial books that I found in the various archives.

The semiotician Susan Petrilli identifies whiteness as an imperial project.¹²⁰ Likewise, Moreton-Robinson refers to ‘transnational whiteness’. She reflects upon ‘a transnational

¹¹⁷ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory a Methodological Tool’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 28, no. 78 (2013): 331-347.

¹¹⁸ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

¹²⁰ Susan Petrilli, ‘Whiteness Matters: What Lies in the Future’, *The Official Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 180 (2010). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2010.034>.

process of racialisation', which is uncontained, has no fixed boundaries, and reinscribes social hierarchies through national imaginaries.¹²¹

Of further import to this discussion is what Moreton-Robinson refers to as white virtue. Her edited book *Transnational Whiteness Matters* (2008) focuses on 'how virtue is redeemed and recuperated through narratives of white subjectivity, national identities and Indigenous dispossession'.¹²² Through the text she reflects on claims and virtue that are saturated in transnational whiteness. An important question arises for me in this series as to whether I am reinstating a sense of virtue by the fact that I am a white person producing this work that is critical of whiteness. In other words, does progressive whiteness merely present another reassertion of white virtue? Or am I asking people to take note and listen – to look at history and take responsibility for what has been done? By displaying these books, do I reinscribe the subjugation of the Black subject or do I reveal and bear witness to the subjugation of Black sovereignty that colonialism enforced? These are difficult questions. There are certain interventions in the work that, I of course hope, might support the latter proposition. I shall now outline some of these interventions.

¹²¹ Moreton-Robinson, 'Towards'.

¹²² Moreton-Robinson, 'Towards', 11.

Highlighting the shadow

For one, I created a defined and enlarged shadow in the photographs as a metaphor of the shadow that colonialism has cast on society. Jungian psychology presents the shadow as the representation of 'a reservoir of human darkness'.¹²³ In *Books On A White Background*, the shadow is intended to represent the deep problematics of white identity. It is a shadow of shame.



¹²³ Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Flamingo/Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 262.

The grey band



Aliza Levi, *Books on a White Background*, installation view: Monash University, Melbourne, February 2020. Photo credit: Aliza Levi.

The interior hallway walls of Western institutions such as museums, government buildings, and prisons are often painted in two-tone with the bottom being a darker colour (usually grey or green) and the top being a lighter color (usually white). This tradition is intended to mask the scuff marks made by people walking through the corridors and

rooms, and has become an aesthetic unanimous with public institutions bearing large amounts of foot traffic. In my installation, I painted a grey band around the room to evoke such an institutional setting. A place in which authority has been assumed and through which ideology (often fascist) is perpetuated. This is combined with flat fluorescent lighting in the room as a further reference to enclosed institutional spaces where natural light is usually limited and substituted with cost-effective fluorescent lighting.

I am not the first person to use the colour grey in this way. The artist Hito Steyerl reflects on Adorno's use of a grey-walled lecture room in her video installation *Adorno's Grey* (2012). The video is projected onto four grey screens and is surrounded by gallery walls that have been painted grey. In the video, Steyerl revisits and critiques Adorno's assertion of Hegel's book *Philosophy of Right* (1821) in which he wrote that 'when philosophy paints its grey in grey, then it has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk'.¹²⁴ This has been interpreted in philosophy as Hegel saying that we can only understand what we have done after the fact, or at the moment at which it is too late. Steyerl regales how Adorno is critiqued by his students for not taking part in social change protests despite the social theory that he espouses. Howard states that she

¹²⁴ Mimi Howard, 'Hito Steyerl's Grey Zone', *Another Gaze*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.anothergaze.com/hito-steyerls-grey-zone/>, accessed 7 July 2020.

‘insists that we keep our eyes on the gallery wall, the pedestal, the art storage facility, the cultural centre’ – the institutions that, without rigid and focussed attention, might otherwise disappear from plain view, like the construct of whiteness itself.¹²⁵ Steyerl challenges institutions that contradict themselves.

Conclusion

The installation *Books On A White Background* mimics the ethnographic tradition of observing, collecting and displaying cultural ephemera. However in my approach, the tradition of fetishising Indigenous objects is replaced with objects of white culture. As such, the gaze is turned in on itself.

The colonial archive is embedded with the empire's production of so-called knowledge which, as theorists such as Richards, Moreten-Robinson, and Steyn reflect have shown us, have been used to gain control over people and territory, whether in South Africa or Australia. I have photographed these books in order for the viewer to observe and to bear witness to white patterns of behaviour, here fashioned as continuous with colonial and imperial behaviour.

¹²⁵Howard, ‘Hito Steyerl’.

Books on a White Background turns the camera gaze onto the ethnographers themselves and bears witness to ethnographic assumptions and racism. It exposes the views and representations of the past, questions the present and the future. The use of a shadow that is almost disproportionate to the size of the books is placed as a metaphoric shadow of shame. A grey band is painted on the wall beneath the photographs to evoke an institutional setting where ideology is perpetuated through the production of words and documents, and the construction of archives. The choice of books, their titles, and the order of hanging, influence how the work is read. By placing different book spines next to one another, a narrative evolves that bears witness to, rather than reinscribes, the development and atrocity of colonialism in South Africa.

On completion of this photographic series, questions still plague me. Is it enough to simply trap and display the books as objects? Should there be further intervention or a more obvious, literal disruption of the books? Comfort might be found in the quote by the philosopher of ethical phenomenology Emmanuel Levinas who states: 'Bearing witness is not expressed in or by dialogue but in the formula "here I am"'.¹²⁶ Each book spine,

¹²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers London, 1991), 145.

placed as an object to be viewed, perhaps presents this possibility: here it is, blatant evidence of the dispossession and racism caused by colonialism, and here I am (as viewer) ready to acknowledge and bear witness to this. While there exists a broad argument that looking at the traumas of the past reinforces the victimisation of the oppressed, throughout this exegesis I have argued that the past needs to be witnessed and self-interrogated in order for us to move forward into an empowered, egalitarian future.

Chapter 4: *The Miners' Companion*

The photographic series *Books on A White Background* captured, muted, and objectified artefacts of South African colonialism. The content of the books was intentionally shut off from the viewer. Expanding upon this enquiry, I wondered whether it was possible to expose and examine the writing inside a book without reinscribing its narrative. One of the books that I found during my research was written like a script. It contained phrases and instructions translated from English to Fanagalo. I decided to attempt to work with and bear witness to the narratives inside the book. In so doing, I asked: How could I use the content of the book to encourage reflexivity and critique in the viewer?

The enquiry resulted in a video installation entitled *The Miners' Companion*, a performative video in which an actor reads the text from the book out loud. In this chapter I will describe the installation and the manner in which it disrupts the colonial narrative. Drawing on Bhabha's concept of 'menace' through mimicry, as well as returning to the theories of Didi-Huberman and Agamben, I will argue that the viewer becomes a bystander and a critical witness to the colonial narrative. In addition, Hannah Arendt's *Banality of Evil* and aspects of Louis Althusser's philosophy on language will be discussed in relation to the installation. Arendt's commentary presents evil actions as being terrifyingly normal, whilst Althusser gives insight as to how ideology is fundamentally inscribed in language.

The book

The book entitled *The Miners' Companion: Translations from English to Fanagalo* (published in South Africa in 1953) is comprised of translations of singular words and phrases from English to Fanagalo. The content in this book differs from most books of translation that assist foreigners to communicate with locals. Here, there are no words of social etiquette and niceties or polite queries of people and place. Instead, the translations consist of authoritative statements, questions, and instructions.

The History of Fanagalo

The book is composed in this way because Fanagalo was developed as a lingua franca in the South African mining industry. It is a pidgin, rather than a fully fledged language, that developed during the colonial period and is still used today. The language was formed in order to bridge communication between speakers of various languages in the mines (such as Zulu, Xhosa, Shona, Dutch, English and Afrikaans).¹²⁷

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, mine managers in South Africa were usually English or Afrikaans speaking and mineworkers consisted of migrant workers who spoke indigenous language from broader Southern Africa, a geography that

¹²⁷ 'Fanagalo', *South African History Online*, https://www.sahistory.org.za/site-search?search_api_fulltext=fanagalo, accessed 28 May 2020.

contained multiple languages. Pidgin languages are usually based on the language of a colonising or trading power, such as English in Papua New Guinea for example. Fanagalo, however, presents a rare case of a pidgin that is comprised and derived primarily from Indigenous languages such as Zulu and Xhosa. One therefore assumes that the local populace had agency within/over their relations with foreigners through the primacy of their first languages within this pidgin. However, this, unfortunately, was not the case.

The name of this lingua franca gives insight into its function as a language. Fanagalo means 'do it like this', a term that reveals its use as a language of authority, model, and instruction. Fanagalo was usually used to assert dominance and control over the Indigenous populace by the mine owners and contractors. It is, in this sense, a direct example of white entitlement and domination which brings to mind a reading of Spivak in which she considers three letters sent from India to Europe by European travellers. She reflects on how these letters consolidate 'the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground. He (the colonist) is worlding their (indigenous peoples) own world ... obliging them to domesticate the alien as Master.'¹²⁸

Language as reality (language as a script of reality)

¹²⁸ Spivak, 'The Rani', 253.

The philosopher Louis Althusser states that language creates our reality. In his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* he writes that the subject is 'always, already written'.¹²⁹ He believes that as subjects, we are inscribed by ideology through language. In other words, we are born into specified languages that are already steeped in ideology, which continue to shape our beliefs and values throughout our life. We are subjects to socio-political and cultural scripts. The language found in *The Miners' Companion* has strong implications.

Althusser once wrote that: 'Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle amongst themselves as enemies. Other words are the site of an ambiguity: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle'.¹³⁰ The phrases and words of Fanagalo, to extrapolate on Althusser's thought, inscribe ownership and control over land, minerals, and the mine workers who, as mentioned previously, were comprised Indigenous people from the region.

¹²⁹ Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (New York: NYU Press, 1970).

¹³⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: NYU Press, 1971), 8.

The making of a video installation

The text inside the book *The Miners' Companion* is written like a script. This prompted me to reveal the narrative by working with performance and film. I employed a white South African male actor to sit and read the text in the book out loud in front of a video camera. He sat, in twenty-first-century clothes, in front of twenty-first-century technology, reading a book from seventy years ago. A reactivation and expression and a layering of the archive in time and place. The resulting video became an inquiry into positions of power and displacement through language, both in the past and the present.

The archive as past and present

I remind the reader of the discussion in chapter two where I showed, with reference to Derrida, that the archive is not confined to the past, but gives room to critically reflect upon the present and the future. Such is the potential of performing the archive through the lens. This installation is intended to create space for reflexivity in the present on the part of the viewer: what impact does language from the past hold for us today? And how do the words in this text apply to current situations, visible or invisible?

Displayed in South Africa, the video might not only evoke the distant past, but also more recent events concerning worker relations. Mining of gold, diamonds, coal, iron ore, and platinum was and still is a large source of wealth in South Africa. It also continues to be one of the primary sites of the exploitation of workers. 'Major safety hazards like collapsing tunnels, falling rocks, toxic fumes, high temperatures and intensive noise. Many miners suffer from diseases like silicosis and tuberculosis (TB), and countless miners are still not given adequate compensation for hard and risky labour'.¹³¹ The mining workforce (which is made up primarily of Black men) are paid minimum wages to labour in supremely dangerous conditions, spending hours cramped underground.¹³²

In August 2012, mine workers at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, in North West province South Africa, went on strike for fair pay. The ensuing protest became a site of police brutality where thirty-four mine workers were killed, and seventy-eight were left seriously injured.¹³³ The atrocity evoked fears of past methods of policing and governing, which was still vivid in the memory of a post-apartheid country (the event was compared in the media to the 1976 shootings in Soweto). Police were blamed for their violent

¹³¹ 'Mining Conditions in South Africa', *Mining Africa*, <https://www.miningafrika.net/mining-news/mining-conditions-south-africa/>, accessed on 11 March 2020.

¹³² 'Mining Bodies: The history of the South African mining industry and the bodies that are exploited', *Nelson Mandela*, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/mining-bodies-the-history-of-the-south-african-mining-industry-and-the-bodies-that-are-exploited-1>, accessed 22 December 2019.

¹³³ 'Marikana Massacre 16 August 2012', *South African History*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/marikana-massacre-16-august-2012>, accessed 30 October 2019.

response and lethal use of their power.¹³⁴ Evidently, the Marikana Massacre has direct relevance to BLM concern in the United States over police brutality.

The video in context

Seen elsewhere in the world, the video might evoke reflection on labour and power relations and/or migrant labour, and, importantly, the use of language as a form of domination and control. This is especially true of the Australian context, where hundreds of distinct Aboriginal languages have been endangered if not destroyed by the processes of colonisation. I prefaced the installation at Monash University in Melbourne with the following words:

Acknowledgement to Language

I would like to acknowledge the languages of the Kulin nation, the original custodians of this land. I give my respect to the strength and history of all Kulin nation languages. I would like to extend this acknowledgement to all languages that have been misused, negated, or annihilated through colonial history.

¹³⁴ Peter Alexander, 'Marikana: Autopsy of a Cold-Blooded Massacre', *Journal des anthropologues* 136-137 (2014): 353-369.

Performing the archive

Recall that Anne Marsh describes the act of taking a photograph as inherently performative.¹³⁵ Barthes equally talks about the camera as a tool of performance. In chapter three, I reflected upon *Books On A White Background* and how I performed the role of ethnographer photographing the artefacts of colonialism. In *The Miners' Companion*, I filmed a performance of colonial language in front of the camera, and as such, performance occurred both behind the lens (by myself as cameraperson, director) and in front of it: I directed an actor to perform the archive.

I asked the actor (Fritz van Reynolds) to dress in clothing that might be worn by a white-collar bureaucrat. I made the setting banal and non-identifiable, placing him in front of a white wall. Although it is horizontal in format (as per the tradition of the moving image), the composition is similar to that in *Books On A White Background*, a vertical figure against a white background.

¹³⁵ Marsh, *Darkroom*.



Aliza Levi, still from *The Miners' Companion*, 2014, two-channel video installation, installation view: Monash University, Melbourne, February 2020.

In this respect, Hannah Arendt's writing on the banality of evil feels pertinent to consider here. Arendt wrote the report for the *New Yorker* in 1963 at the time of the Nazi perpetrator Adolf Eichman's trial. Arendt focused on Eichman as being 'terrifyingly normal'.¹³⁶ The terror, she stated, lay in the fact that he seemed to be an ordinary, bland bureaucrat with an 'inability ... to think from the standpoint of somebody else'.¹³⁷ Arendt was criticised for implying that Eichmann's behaviour was not driven by evil intention

¹³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 276.

¹³⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 49.

but rather, by ignorant following. From this, it could be inferred that Eichman was not to be held accountable for his acts. Althusser's argument that ideology is unconsciously inscribed might have the same implications. A larger discussion is at hand that questions whether unconscious bias absolves a person from wrongdoing. Arendt's focus on the perpetrators' intention rather than the act itself is balanced by her writing on totalitarianism where she recognises the evil, horrific drive behind the Nazi system. Perhaps we can interpret her writing on banality as the utter horror of how the act of evil can present itself as the normative operatus in the majority of individuals. In South Africa, apartheid was presented as the acceptable norm, the banal reality. Television, radio, and newspapers were banned from reporting any resistance to the regime through Acts such as The Internal Security Act, No. 74 of 1982, The Publications Act of 1963 and further state of emergency acts throughout the years.¹³⁸ The bureaucratic force was a 'whites only' job as were management roles within industries such as the mines. The system maintained and perpetuated itself as a given. I wished to convey and reflect on this constructed normality of evil in the video.

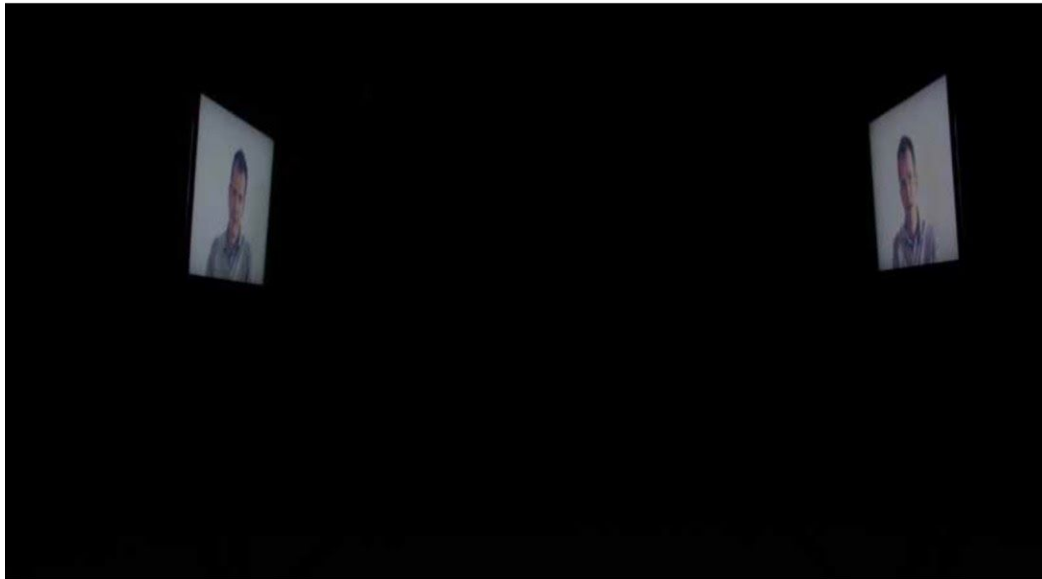
¹³⁸ Max Coleman, *A Crime Against Humanity: Analysing the Repression of the Apartheid State* (Cape Town: Human Rights Commission, 1998).

Disrupting the narrative

I was concerned that I might replicate and reinforce the racist ideology by opening up the book and reading its insidious text out loud. How was this going to be any different to a presenter on television? A lesson teaching language on a YouTube video or an audiobook? I needed to disrupt the narrative in a significant way. So, I attempted to adhere to Bhabha's concept of mimicry and menace wherein that which is being performed is similar but not quite the same, and as such creates menace and disrupts the norm.

Mimicry and menace

The video presents a white man teaching a language. Nothing in his physical presentation seems to be out of the norm. He is reading from a book. The difference in this video is that the man's student, his subject, the recipient of the instructions, is himself. In other words, the man is subject to himself, and instructs himself.



Aliza Levi, stills from installation view of *The Miners' Companion*, 2014, two-channel video installation,
Monash University, Melbourne, February 2020.

Making the work

I filmed the actor twice. In the first shoot he read the English version and in a separate shoot he read the Fanagalo. Each shoot was filmed in a single long take of forty-seven minutes. This required a deep level of concentration on behalf of the actor.

The timing of the pause between each sentence was crucial. We needed to leave enough silence between sentences so that his one self would appear to be watching and listening to his other self when played on two screens simultaneously. To achieve this timing, I placed the actor on a seat in front of a white wall. I stood behind the camera lens a few meters away. Following the reading of a sentence, the actor looked up and straight ahead at me. I then silently mouthed the translation of the next sentence back to the actor whilst he sat and watched. At the end of my silent performance of a sentence, I indicated to the

actor that he should look down at the script and read his next sentence.



Aliza Levi, still from *The Miners' Companion*, 2014, two-channel video installation, installation view: Monash University, Melbourne, February 2020.

The installation

For the exhibition, I installed the videos on two screens facing one another so that the actor would be seen reading the English text on the one screen, and he would reply to himself in Fanagalo on the other. A video of a white man teaching himself a language

steeped with instructions and colonial ideology. A euphemism for the world of white patriarchy at large, which forms and reinforces its own loop of dominance and privilege through language. Marsh refers to 'a phallic discourse in which men take centre stage', and notes that 'the language of the Father privileges a one-dimensional view of the world, the universe and nature, through the construction of language. Woman is not all in this discourse, she is an unknown outsider, an other.'¹³⁹ Equally, we might insert the word 'Indigenous' next to that of 'woman'.

The script that the actor reads is patronising and oppressive. For example the phrase 'Wena Lova, Ayi Lova', which translates to 'You are loafing, you must not loaf', and 'Pikinin, fikisa lo ntambo ka manzi lapa', which translates as 'Piccanin, bring the water-hose'.¹⁴⁰ The term 'pikinin' means 'Black child' and has a history of demeaning, racist application in the U.S slave trade, Australia, and South Africa.¹⁴¹ In this case, he is calling an adult mineworker a child. Ironically, by teaching himself the language, the man appears to instruct himself, and admonish and belittle himself. He becomes the subject of his own behaviour.

¹³⁹ Marsh, *The Darkroom*, 253.

¹⁴⁰ *The Miners' Companion* (Chamber of Mines Publication, 1953), 83–89.

¹⁴¹ Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identify, Discourse, and Racial Popular Media* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

The viewer as witness

Where and how is the viewer positioned in this installation? Viewers might experience themselves as subject to the words of the instructor. Like in Cole Chocka's work, the fourth wall is broken. Here they might experience themselves as the recipient of demeaning language and an oppressive authority. In the case of white people viewing the work, this might assist Spivak's request that 'the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other'.¹⁴² Or, as Agamben stated, to bear witness is to 'place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it'.¹⁴³ So, how does it hold for the viewer that has lost their land and language? The work has the risk of triggering trauma in viewers who have suffered racism and class oppression. I therefore made the decision to place the two screens opposite one another at a close distance so that the viewer becomes a witness to the man's interaction with himself rather than subject to the man's instructions.

In chapter one, I mentioned Didi-Huberman's analogy of witnessing through the photographic image to Perseus' victory over Medusa. Perseus cannot behead Medusa because her gaze will turn him to stone before he is able to. He uses the shield as a mirror

¹⁴² Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic*, 121.

¹⁴³ Agamben, *Remnants*, 161.

to force Medusa to look at herself. She is distracted by her own image and Perseus is able to behead her. Perhaps we can apply this concept to the installation *The Miners' Companion*. The viewer stands and watches the two screens. The actor is absorbed into an image of self, he looks at himself, and replies to his own image. The viewer watches and reflects on the absurdity of this behaviour and is able to deconstruct it without being subjected personally to his demands. As an external agent, they are witness to the man's absurd behaviour.

The viewer is positioned as the bystander or perhaps the ethnographer or museum visitor observing and witnessing a recording of culturally specific behaviour. In other words, the coloniser's behaviour is placed on display to be gazed upon by others. As with *Books on a White Background*, the traditional gaze in ethnography is reversed. White behaviour is presented as a cultural and social phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be observed.

Lacuna

In chapter one, I reflected upon Agamben's argument that witnessing lies in the lacuna. Where do we experience the lacuna in *The Miners' Companion*? In this video installation, there is a silent moment between each sentence where the man lifts his head, and gazes at his other self, it is a small moment before that other self talks back. This momentary

pause between the next sentence might present us with a lacuna and the space to reflect and consider. It might even be the moment where Medusa gazes back at herself and in this case where the white man might begin to reflect on his own behaviour and the implications of the sentences that he utters.

Further non-verbal aspects of the performance might enable us to bear witness. We listen to the tone of the voice or watch the patronising look of the actor. Perhaps, even the scar on his forehead, a mark of violence, indicates or references us to bear witness to something. Could it be a symbol of the harmful mark that he places on himself and society? Could it be a mark that signifies the violence of his own words?

The title

The title of the installation is based on the title of the book which originally, as the name suggested, intended itself to be a companion to the person who needed to talk to (Indigenous) people in Fanagalo. As a title to this installation, it takes on a sardonic meaning. In the video, the man's companion is himself. I would like to suggest that he is companion only to himself and other white men that are like him in their racist, classist behaviour.

Conclusion

To listen to the inner narrative in this book is not a comfortable experience. The intention is to encourage reflexivity in the viewer. Faced with colonial content we are forced to reflect upon the confluence of racism and classism.

Conclusion: The Colony Under (the) Gaze

In this thesis I have investigated what it means for the artist to bear witness to colonial atrocity. The first chapter dealt with the notion of bearing witness in general, as well as what it means for the artist to bear witness through the lens. The theories of Giorgio Agamben and Georges Didi-Huberman have proved useful to the discussion, both of whom discuss the limitations of bearing witness to the Holocaust. Agamben locates the lacuna, that which is absent in testimony, as a place to bear witness. Didi-Huberman equates the photograph to Perseus' shield, which forces Medusa to look at herself – in other words, he argues that it is through self-reflexivity that the monster is dismantled. Barthes' writing on 'the connotative' aspect of a photograph recognises subjectivity in the artist's production of a photograph and in the viewer's interpretation of a photograph.

The three lens-based artworks that I discussed in this chapter position the viewer in different ways. Broomberg and Channerin's performative act is a refusal to bear witness to images of war. The artists discard the lens and expose photographic paper to the sun, inducing an abstract field of colour, in the image *The Day of One Hundred Dead*. The title refers to that which we are not able to see. It is left to the viewer to imagine. An uncomfortable evocation of trauma is presented in Artur Zmijewski's *80064*. The video piece displays the artist convincing a Holocaust survivor to renew the tattoo that was

placed on his body in Auschwitz. The participant is reluctant to do so. The viewer is positioned as a voyeur or innocent bystander to a morally questionable situation. In the third work mentioned in this chapter, the artist Bindi Cole Chocka invites the viewer to be part of an intimate process of forgiveness either as witness or recipient to video projections of people repeating the words 'I forgive you'. Each filmed participant was asked to say these words in front of a camera whilst thinking about an event or experience in their lives. The lacuna might be present in the affect expressed as each participant slowly repeats the same three words.

In chapter two, I investigated the archive as a site for the artist to bear witness to colonial atrocity. This entailed reviewing archival theory, post-colonial writing on knowledge production, and looking at various interventions in the colonial archive. Chumane Maxwele's performative protest on an object of realia, the sculpture of Cecil John Rhodes, evolved into the #RhodesMustFall movement. The removal of that sculpture into the archives was accompanied by a performance of the artist Sethembele Msezane, who embodied a further archived object of realia, the Zimbabwe bird to symbolically reassert power in the Black female body.

Gayatri Spivak and Thomas Richards locate the ideological bias and falsities in imperial knowledge production. Both theorists discuss the manner in which 'knowledge' was used

as a tool to assert and justify colonial imposition, dispossession, and control. The colonial archive (which is filled with this ‘knowledge’ and is found in museums, libraries, and institutions) is therefore a prime site for the artist to bear witness to the ideology and assumptions of colonialism.

The artist Tom Nicholson acknowledges the dispossession of Indigenous people through naming the archived Batman’s Treaty on peoples hearth’s in his work *Unfinished Monument to Batman’s Treaty*. The intervention bears witness to the past and encourages people of white privilege to reflect on the land that they occupy.

Brook Andrew’s exhibition *53 Portraits and Vox* bears witness to the violence of colonial ethnography in his display of lithographs, skulls, and other paraphernalia from the colonial archive. The enlarged gramophone that has no sound and the silent stares of photographs of Indigenous people taken from his personal archive of postcards present a lacuna.

Chapter three pivoted towards a self-reflective mode. Here, I have examined my installation *Books On A White Background*, a photographic installation of insidious texts, book spines from colonial imposition. It was important to reflect on my own background here as a white Jewish woman born in South Africa. Theorists that identify whiteness as a

cultural construct and site of false assumptions are significant to discussing the work. I questioned whether the series confronts ‘whiteness’ as a violent ideology as opposed to reiterating it. Homi K Bhabha’s concept of ‘menace and mimicry’ is brought into account. I argue that this installation mimics the tradition of ethnography by using similar methods of capturing ‘culture’, yet in this case, it is the colonists that are placed under the gaze. The colonial texts are turned into mute, non-functional objects trapped behind the lens in a manner that is akin to the way in which colonial ethnographers trapped images of cultures other to them and placed them on display. The books become cultural objects of a specified culture. As such, in this installation, the production of whiteness becomes obvious and observable. Their inner narratives are absent, and they are presented as a singular spine surrounded by emptied space. There is a *lacuna* present in which we are able to bear witness. The title of the series, which contradicts the assumption that whiteness is a universal norm, guides the viewer to reflect on the identity of ‘whiteness’. The shadow as a symbol of violence and shame and the strip of grey paint on the wall that runs the length of the room underneath the photographs signifies the institution, so often cloaked in ‘white neutrality’ and deserving of scrutiny. Through such interventions, the viewer is required to reflect on the scarring ideology of colonialism.

Chapter four analysed my video work *The Miners’ Companion*. In this installation I reveal the narrative inside the book of the same name. Given that the book contains

translations of instructive phrases from English to Fanagalo, I refer to the writing of Althusser who reflects on the inscription of language in the formation of personal and social identity. An explanation of the process of making the work reveals the performative component of both the actor and myself, as director, behind the lens. The aesthetic decisions of the actor's costume and setting reinforces a context of bureaucracy and banality. This was contextualised within Hannah Arendt's writing on the banality of evil.

Through a performative reading of this archived book, I bear witness to the racist and classist system of colonial imperialism. Bhabha's *Mimicry and Menace* is once again applied. The actor literally mimics a mine manager in both his words and tone. Menace is seen in the fact that the actor speaks to and instructs himself in a demeaning manner. The behaviour is presented as a tautological loop – a repetition and reinforcement of language used to produce the identity of whiteness.

Within this research I have found various methods by which art may bear witness to, primarily, colonial atrocity through the archive. I have located artists that have used their art to interpret, interpolate, or disrupt the archive and contribute to the process of decolonisation. Self-reflection and listening (especially to that which is absent) prove key to bringing the viewer to bear witness to racism and imperialism. As the social activist

and renowned South African photographer David Goldblatt once said, ‘I suppose at best, I had hoped we might see ourselves revealed, as it were, by a mirror held up to ourselves’.¹⁴⁴

In this body of work, I have tried to de-normalise whiteness, colonialism, and patriarchy through the lens – drawing on all the objective connotations of photo-based media in so doing. In short, I put the structure of the colony under the very gaze that it so violently wielded and continues to wield in newly insidious formats. My process of enquiry continues as I try to unravel what it means to be an artist raised as a white woman, and as a third-generation survivor of anti-semitism, in a colonised country. I am still listening, I am still learning.

¹⁴⁴ David Goldblatt cited in Rachel Kent, ‘Encountering the subject: David Goldblatt’s photography’, *Museum of Contemporary Art*, 2 October 2018
<https://www.mca.com.au/stories-and-ideas/encountering-the-subject-david-goldblatts-analytical-photography/>, accessed 27 October 2020.

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