Spheres of Ambivalence: The Art of Berni Searle and the Body Politics of South African Coloured Identity

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Erin M. Schwartz

August 2014

© 2014 Erin M. Schwartz. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled
Spheres of Ambivalence: The Art of Berni Searle and the Body Politics of South African Coloured Identity

by
ERIN M. SCHWARTZ

has been approved for
the School of Interdisciplinary Arts
and the College of Fine Arts by

Andrea Frohne
Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts

Margaret Kennedy-Dygas
Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT

SCHWARTZ, ERIN M., Ph.D., August 2014, Interdisciplinary Arts

Spheres of Ambivalence: The Art of Berni Searle and the Body Politics of South African Coloured Identity (242 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Andrea Frohne

Berni Searle is an artist based in Cape Town, South Africa who uses her body in performance and photographic works. In this dissertation, articulations of identity within the context of Searle’s work are examined in their social-historical relationships. Searle, in her art, both uses her body to illustrate constructions of identity and reclaims her body (and by extension, other similar bodies). These performances of articulated identity considered through the rubric of *reprendre* will elucidate the construction of Coloured identity in the South African body politic. These performances will also allow a consideration of counter-spaces for discussing political agency.

Since the collapse of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 the citizens of the new, non-racial state have had to contend with lasting effects of the violence and racism that founded much of South African history. Coloured identity emerged as a distinct one early in the development of South African nationhood. Problematically, Colouredness has been associated with absence and socio-political marginalization that tended to undermine this community’s agency during the apartheid era and after. The trend can lead to contesting racial tropes of national belonging that only serves to increase disenfranchisement in a new democracy. Berni Searle, as a Coloured woman, engages such histories in insightful ways by embodying the shifting paradigms of Coloured
identity. In so doing, Searle also participates in important discourses in the African contemporary art community.

Using Searle’s work as a lens through which to examine issues of identity, body and enfranchisement, this dissertation demonstrates how her works open up spaces to discuss political agency and racial identity in the post-apartheid era. Such considerations carry important theoretical weight for discourses in South Africa regarding the importance of racial identity in the new nation. In addition to Coloured identity, Searle’s works also engages with issues of immigration in a transnational context, which give her work significance beyond the specificity of South Africa. The dissertation contributes much needed detailed analysis of Searle’s work, contemporary South African art, and discourses on Coloured identity during South African history.
DEDICATION

To Donald
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thanks must be given to all those who have guided me in the development of this project. My dissertation chair, Dr. Andrea Frohne deserves special thanks for her advice and commitment to this project throughout. The other members of the dissertation committee, Dr. Charles Buchanan, Dr. Vladimir Marchenkov, and Dr. Jennie Klein, all have my gratitude for their insights and dedication that have made this dissertation successful. Thanks to Dr. Salah M. Hassan, Cornell University, for his comments and encouragement during our conversations at the dissertation writing workshop in Philadelphia. I must acknowledge the invaluable conversations with Dr. Yegan Pillay, Ohio University, about Coloured identity in contemporary South Africa. Thanks to Dr. Sean Jacobs, The New School, for his insights on Cape Town that helped clarify important facts about that city.

The curators at SITE Santa Fe were especially helpful and supportive to me during my research visit there, as was the staff at the Fowler Art Museum at UCLA. The librarians at the Smithsonian Library in Washington D.C. were also extremely supportive during my research there. The staff and curators of the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, in particular, Federica Angelucci deserve special mention for making me feel welcome in the Gallery and for allowing me access to their collection of materials. Special thanks must be extended to Professor Rowland O. Abiodun, for challenging me to clarify my theory and refine the importance of this work. Also, Dr. Fred Smith, Kent State University, has my deep gratitude for his continued support of my work, and for his guidance and advice.
Finally, I would like to acknowledge the late Stuart Hall (1932-2014) whose theories have had a profound influence on my progress as a scholar and on this dissertation project. I am much indebted to Professor Hall’s work and his keen insights on the construction of identity.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction: Articulations of the Body, Art, and History</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South African Politics, Art and Berni Searle</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embodiment and Articulation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity and Race Politics in Berni Searle’s Art</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Searle’s Performance of the Other</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berni Searle through the Rubric of <em>Reprendre</em></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Die Groot Andersmaak: The Great Other-Making of Coloured Identity</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Constructions of Racial Identity in South Africa</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Racial Politics of Apartheid and Artistic Interpretations</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South African Politics and Coloured Identity Post-Apartheid</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Articulated Self: Body, History, and Reclaimed Narrative Spaces</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town Cannons: Trans-Atlantic Articulations of History and the Body</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency, Body, and New Narratives</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Aesthetics of Trauma: The Black Smoke Rising Series</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Burning Tire and the Traumatic Imaginary</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 4.1: Deaths related to political violence and to necklace/burnings..................156
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>For Fatherland</em>, 1994</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>A Darker Shade of Light</em>, 1999</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>Vapour</em>, 2004</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>About to Forget</em>, 2005</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>Day for Night</em>, 2008</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Berni Searle, <em>Interlaced</em>, 2011</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Map of Modern South Africa</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Paul Stopforth, <em>Elegy—For Steve Biko</em>, 1981</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Sam Nhlegethwa, <em>It Left him Cold—The Death of Steve Biko</em>, 1990</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Penny Siopis, <em>Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage</em>, 1985</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Berni Searle, Untitled from the <em>Colour Me</em> series, 1998</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Ana Mendieta, Stills from the <em>Silueta</em> series, 1973-6</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Berni Searle, Installation photo from <em>Traces</em> exhibition, 2001</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Mwangi Hutter, Stills from <em>Coloured</em>, 2001</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Berni Searle, Performance stills from <em>Snow White</em>, 2001</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Berni Searle, Video still from <em>Alibama</em>, 2008</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Carrie Mae Weems, Selections from the series <em>From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried</em>, 1995-6</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Berni Searle, Still from <em>Lull (Black Smoke Rising I)</em>, 2009</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.2: Berni Searle, Still from *Gateway (Black Smoke Rising II)*, 2010 ..........147

Figure 4.3: Berni Searle, Still from *Moonlight (Black Smoke Rising III)*, 2010 ..........148

Figure 4.4: Minnette Vari, *Firestone*, 1995 ...............................................................160

Figure 4.5: Billy Mandindi, *Lifebuoy*, 1995 ...............................................................162

Figure 4.6: Kendell Geers, *Eeny Meeny Miny Mo*, 1989 ........................................163

Figure 5.1: Berni Searle, Stills from *Home and Away*, 2003 .....................................175

Figure 5.2: Berni Searle, Stills from *Seeking Refuge*, 2008 ......................................183

Figure 5.3: Berni Searle, Stills from *Mute*, 2008 .......................................................188

Figure 5.4: Moshekwa Langa, *Temporal Distance (with a Criminal Intent) You Will Find Us in the Best Places*, 2001 .................................................................196

Figure 5.5: Ghada Amer, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 2001 .......................................199
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: ARTICULATIONS OF THE BODY, ART, AND HISTORY

This dissertation examines several recent works of art by contemporary South African artist, Berni Searle, who features her own body in performance, video and photography. The shifting currents of political social discourse regarding Coloured, South African identity are a key element within Searle’s work. Tracing themes which revolve around the signifier of her body, and African contexts, it will be shown how Searle performs symbolic gestures of constructed racial identity while simultaneously imbuing her self-image with a political relevance. Searle uses her body as a representation of the body politic as it refers to racial identity in South Africa. Through her career, Searle’s images and themes have moved from South African specific references to broader, global contexts so that her art participates in dialogues with African and global contemporary art spheres. In so doing, her work clears a space for confronting and reclaiming constructions of racial and national identities. In this dissertation, these performances of articulated identity are examined through the lens of reprendre to engage the construction of Coloured identity in the South African body politic. This will also allow for a contemplation of counter-spaces for discussing political agency.

Searle’s art throughout her oeuvre exposes the complexity of South Africa’s construction of racial identity, with her ultimately, examining its implications on the body. The objectives of this dissertation are: 1) to clarify through Berni Searle’s work the discussion of how the Coloured body has been constructed socially in the body politic
of South African identity discourse, 2) to trace how Berni Searle uses her body and the tension of presence/absence thereof to illuminate these constructions and reclaim oppressed bodies, 3) to consider how such a positioning of her body provides a counter-space for discussing political agency in contemporary South Africa and abroad, engaging with issues of globalization and immigration in a transnational context, and finally, 4) to consider Berni Searle’s positioning within the larger context of contemporary South African art and current global art.

Often portraying herself as a witness or silent participant in ambiguous tasks, Searle distances herself from the viewer, subduing her own personality to the symbolic body in the performance. She creates places in her pieces that are sometimes familiar but often uninviting or unstable. The understanding of the world and the experience of one’s identity is always tied to and known through the body. In many cases it is Searle’s identity within her works that provides an anchor for the viewer, offering context needed to pull the audience into this realm. The importance of experiencing these worlds through a body is emphasized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “to be a body, is to be tied to a certain world…”¹ The specificity of Searle’s body ties her work to a place, symbolic and ambivalent, but rooted. As will be demonstrated in this dissertation, Searle is located specifically in an African and/or South African context using particular significations for that placement, while at other times her work positions her within the larger, global context of contemporary art. Searle’s self placement in constructed spheres of ambivalence is suggestive of the questioning nature of her work.

As Merleau-Ponty maintains in his writing and as Searle illustrates in her art, the body is the location of identity and the vehicle for understanding the world. Phenomenologically, her works propose a shifting locale of identity when the signifiers of that locale suggest innovative historical definitions. When these signifiers take on new meanings, as with the shifting phases of Coloured\(^2\) racial identity construction, the knowledge of oneself and one’s experience of the world also necessarily take on greater significance. Searle proposes root sources for the signifiers she enacts but rarely names them outright. As art historian Liese van der Watt observes, the visual metaphors of instability in her works move one from “identity politics to identity activism, from identity as category to identity as process and becoming.”\(^3\) These developments of transformation, identity and activism are what are of importance to this dissertation. The processes provide an interpretive space to consider how Searle’s pieces engage with and complicate political discourse. About the possible interpretations of her work, Searle has said:

In the South African context particularly, my work does have a significance in terms of imagining myself, because that is a process by which I am claiming something. And it’s not as if I want to project that the only people who can use black bodies are black people. But if you look at it in the larger scheme of things, that there is this absence, that there is this glaring gap, then it is a problem. And I see the work as somehow contributing to that debate, not without it being contentious, I’m sure. You have to take responsibility for what it is you do, and if, in the process of being criticized, you are forced to think about your intentions

\(^2\) In this dissertation the racial labels “Coloured,” “white,” “black,” “Indian,” among others are being used according to how they were defined (albeit loosely) during the apartheid and immediate post-apartheid era of South Africa’s history. This is appropriate given Searle often uses South African specific racial identities and is herself South African. As will be addressed in this work, these terms have been, and are being contested however the social groups signified by these labels are stable ones.

and what kind of impact that has in a particular context, then that is not a bad thing. 4

South African Politics, Art and Berni Searle

Searle’s work addresses, in part, the very histories often denied by official records, textbooks and other sources of historical information, namely slavery, immigration, the struggle for equality, among other topics. The critique of this tradition is important to the current work, in that deconstructing these signifiers of otherness is an implicit part of Searle’s art. This is also an essential theme in the work of many contemporary artists in the global art community, as it has been developing over the past twenty years. 5 By reading her art through such critical discourse it opens space for the previously silenced to find a voice. Searle’s enactment of the body in many of her works suggests a person struggling to locate and define identity and agency in spite of a dominant historical discourse of oppression.

Texts about South African art written before the collapse of apartheid were very often presented from monadic, unproblematized white, elitist points of view. A typical survey volume, Hans Fransen’s Three Centuries of South African Art: Fine Art, Architecture, Applied Arts, published in 1982, provides a long, thorough and extremely well researched history of European-derived art styles in colonized South Africa. Slavery is mentioned, in passing, but the focus of South African history is on the trials of settlement during British occupation. History is divvied into the “Dutch Period,” the “British Period,” and finally the “South African” period, the lattermost beginning with

the creation of the 1910 Union of South Africa. Apartheid is glossed over without anything about the violence or ethics of the policies. This text provides an interesting glimpse into the South African academy’s establishment of attitudes regarding race relations under the apartheid regime:

The black population also benefitted from this prosperity, but to a lesser degree and more indirectly [than the white population]. South African blacks have for years been among the most highly developed in Africa, and the potential for further economic progress among this group is vast indeed.

He goes on to say that the people of “mixed blood” share in “the whites’ culture.”

Issues of racial identity in contemporary art are addressed summarily in one of the final chapters. Protest art is mentioned in a section labeled “Black Artists,” where Fransen does offer some degree of directness, though with some still problematic suggestions.

Black art exists almost exclusively by virtue of white liberals’ benign interest. Teachers are white, art administrators are white, the gallery directors are whites, and so are the critics and the buyers. Our black artists have virtually no black audience. So can South African black art really be regarded as black art at all?

The patronizing tones are evident, and though his observations about white-controlled art administration and education have merit, the overall suggestion of this quotation is that black artists are only marginally South African. Following this section, like an odd afterthought, at the very end of the book is a short chapter on Prehistoric rock art and “traditional” Black architecture. The entirety of indigenous and pre-colonial South African art fits neatly into twelve out of four hundred pages of text. Acknowledging that Fransen was restricted by the mores and expectations of his time, and therefore, most

---

7 Ibid., 213.
8 Ibid., 359.
likely, could not have presented a historical text about South African art in another way in 1982, still does not diminish the point that the Western academic tradition was stifled by those attitudes.

This dislocation of non-white art in scholarly work is not at all unique to South African texts. As Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie writes, Euro-American academic discourse is typically built upon a modernism that uses African culture as a backdrop for narratives about the supremacy of Western art. He places such seminal academic art history survey texts as Janson’s *History of Art* and Stokstad’s *Art History* in a tradition related to Joseph Conrad and G.W.F. Hegel, which relegated non-Western art to a past-tense, ahistorical, non-place.

Searle’s works are active in questioning the politics of commodification and classification and how black and Coloured female bodies have been described and controlled by the mechanisms of apartheid. The culture of contemporary art in post-apartheid South Africa is one in which artists have considerable freedom to explore ideas of body and race. Negotiations of painful histories and violent memories are often confronted in post-apartheid literature, theater and visual arts of the nation. The enactment and engagement with these memories are key to forging identity. As Ohio based South African author Zakes Mda writes, “Memory is vital to identity. Memory loss leads to loss of identity, because who we are is fundamentally linked to memory.”

---

but Mda goes on to caution that blind clinging to memory is ultimately harmful, “for that would make us perpetual victims of our past.”

Prior to the collapse of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic government in 1994, non-white artists in South Africa could sometimes receive patronage but often not tuition to a formal art school. Places that did offer art training to blacks and Coloureds included the Johannesburg Polly Street Art Center, where students were typically under a great deal of pressure to make marketable work. In the 1970s establishments of art centers such as the Michaelis School of Fine Art (at the University of Cape Town) helped feed the growth of art by non-white artists. After the Soweto uprising in 1976, South Africa saw an explosion of independent initiatives in Cape Town, such as the Community Arts Project (CAP). Despite the official backing of some of these schools and initiatives, much of the fine arts created during the 1970s and 80s escaped government censorship due to a conception that the fine arts were peripheral to society concerns.

Where artwork was funded and supported by official agencies it was generally expected to be of a kind that was conventionally uncontroversial. Images containing sexual or political content, for example, were not acceptable or considered appropriate. By the 1980s and 90s such content was becoming more and more common in South

Africa as the political and social fabric of the nation began to unravel. Public exhibition of difficult works were now no longer as strictly suppressed as they had been in the past; however, as Emma Bedford points out, South Africa maintains a strong, patriarchal, Calvinist culture in which conservative attitudes towards race and sexuality are still predominant.\(^{14}\) Nevertheless, the use of the body in contemporary South African art has been a recurring theme. South African women artists like Penny Siopis and Minnette Vari (to name only two) have consistently used their bodies and abstracted bodies to directly challenge ideas of South African womanhood.\(^{15}\) Like Searle would do as well, their confrontations of the human form are socially and politically charged. Such representations are “neither objective nor neutral. They are permeated by values, prejudices and self-awareness.”\(^{16}\) The questioning of femininity and womanhood in these works brings to light the turbulent place feminism has had in South Africa, argued across racial lines. White women often proclaimed that feminism eroded their feminine sexuality, while Black women maintained that feminism was a foreign import that could dilute racial heritage.\(^{17}\) The end of apartheid and the creation of a “rainbow nation” in South Africa has not entirely erased these conflicts. The relationship between art and politics in South Africa, as elsewhere, is quite close. As Jacques Rancière argues, art and politics are contingent. To make art is to displace the borders of that art. “Art cannot simply occupy the space left behind by the weakening of political conflict. It has to

\(^{15}\) Marion Arnold, Women and Art in South Africa (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 131.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 131.
reshape it, at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics.” This sort of engagement and challenge is present in the work of many contemporary South African artists, as praised by Annie Coombes:

One of the strengths of their [this generation of South African artists’] work is the articulation of broader issues within this specificity. Their early work was also characterized by an engagement with the dialectical relationship between past histories and lived experience in the present. Rather than deny history they mobilized (and in some cases invented) historical memory as a tool for dealing with the contractions of life in contemporary South Africa.

Berni Searle was born in Cape Town in 1964 where she now lives and works. She began her professional art studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where she graduated with a BAFA in 1987 and completed her MAFA in 1995, also at UCT. Her art works often literally immerse her body in signifiers of the past, in spices and pigments, for example, questioning the politics of commodification and classification and how black and Coloured female bodies have been described and controlled by the mechanisms of apartheid. The calculated presence/non-presence of her body in her works indicates her control of the narratives being challenged and those being newly written. Asking many questions often but providing ambiguous answers, Searle’s works place the viewer in a state of reflection wherein one must decode the visual meanings of the works vis-à-vis his or her own personal understandings and bodily identity.

In South Africa the brutally oppressive regime of apartheid officially began in 1948. Literally meaning “apartness,” it was a thorough and violent program of racial

---

separation for the maintenance of white minority rule. In addition to the separation of races, freedoms of speech, the press and rights to assemble were also routinely suppressed. Okwui Enwezor, drawing from Edward Said, posits that the racism of apartheid was based on two inventions: an ontological description of a history-less native and an epistemological description of the native as devoid of knowledge and subjectivity. While policies of racial segregation were not unique to South Africa their extreme nature and the fact that they took hold precisely when civil rights and decolonization were taking huge strides across the globe, made it infamous. In the 1950s, crude racial classification systems were developed. Thousands of “whites” were suddenly classified “Coloured,” Indians became “Malays” who were classified as “Coloured,” and the Japanese became “whites.”

Berni Searle was born in Cape Town in 1964 and classified as a Coloured of mixed Malay heritage, during a time that would bring great anti-apartheid activism and governmental violence. Searle’s ancestry includes maternal great-grandfathers from Mauritius and Saudi Arabia who married Malay women. Her paternal lineage consists of great-grandparents from Germany and England. Searle noted, “to be defined as Coloured is to be neither white nor black, it is an acknowledgment of identity as neither fixed nor final.” While the term itself has been contested, the racial category denoting a certain group with beliefs and customs has been a stable one. South African scholar

---

23 Van der Watt, 242.
24 Ibid., 240.
Mohamed Adhikari, University of Cape Town, argues that Coloured South Africans make and maintain their own identity politics and that this is not merely an identity that oppressors put upon them. This issue will be explored in more detail throughout the dissertation.

Searle continues to live and work in Cape Town. Before her graduation from the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1995 she was honored with several prestigious awards and scholarships. She received the MacIver Centre for Science and Development scholarship (1992-1995), a DAAD scholarship (1992-1995), and an ASATT Grant with a four-month residency at the Canberra Institute of the Arts, Australian National University (1992). She began exhibiting internationally as early as 1994, in the Second Johannesburg Biennial. At the Biennial, she was listed as Bernadette Searle and provided an installation piece entitled *For Fatherland* (Figure 1.1) consisting of three resin screens, semi-translucent, accompanied by an audio recording of the “Bushman/San dialect, Khomani” which was a language believed to be evacuated by the 1970s. In 1998 Searle was honored with the International Art Critics Association (AICA) Award in conjunction with UNESCO at the 7th International Cairo Biennale.

---

In 1999 a conference related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was held at Witwatersrand along with an exhibition entitled *Truth Veils* at the Gertrude Posel Gallery, located on campus. In this exhibition Searle displayed pieces from the *Dis-Coloured* series including “Palms of the Hands,” and “Nape of the Neck.” (This series will be discussed further in Chapter two, figure 2.2.) The same year, Searle exhibited in the *Staking Claims: Confronting Cape Town* show. This exhibition was curated by Emma Bedford from the South African National Gallery and held at a site
known as The Granary, which has had many historical functions. At one time it was a court, and then later a prison for women. In this space, Searle exhibited the piece *A Darker Shade of Light* (Figure 1.2), which consisted of photos of her lower back and the back of her neck displayed in light boxes.²⁷ That same year, Lien Botha curated the show *Bloedyn* as an experimental collaboration between artists and writers. Berni Searle collaborated with the poet Anoeschka von Meck on the piece *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (You Must Move Away). Searle’s imagery was shown alongside Von Meck’s Afrikaans poem and an audio recording of the Khoi-San language made in 1936, which presented a poignant story of displacement.²⁸ That year also saw the first presentation of the *Colour Me* series at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet (See Chapter three for a discussion of this work, figure 3.1). In the year 2000 she became the FNB Vita Award Finalist, won the Minister of Culture Prize at DAK'ART 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, was nominated for the Award for South African Contemporary Art sponsored by DaimlerChrysler, and was granted a British Council Grant and Gasworks residency. (A list of Searle’s important exhibitions is given in Appendix A.)

²⁸ Ibid., 252.
In 2001 Searle participated in the re-dedication of South Africa House, the seat of the South African High Commission in Trafalgar Square, London. Searle and several other artists were invited to create installation works to interrogate and reclaim the official space and its 1930s paintings of stereotypical “tribal” life complete with “warriors” and servants bowing before the coming of “white civilization.” Searle’s contribution is discussed in more detail in Chapter two. That same year, at the Venice Biennale, Searle displayed her now iconic piece *Snow White* (Figure 3.5). Coombes relates Searle’s nudity to traditions of nude protests by African women like those in the 1990 Dobsonville, Soweto protests.\(^{29}\) In this piece, Searle places herself on a stage

\(^{29}\) Anne E. Coombes, *History After Apartheid*, 254.
topless while white pea flour is poured over her body. Pea flour is a common ingredient in *roti*, or dipping bread, which is a food often associated with Malay and Indian communities in South Africa. By so doing, Searle moves from passive object to active signifier by manipulating and thus reshaping the signifier of whiteness. Searle literally colors herself white suggesting the marking of race on the skin under the apartheid regime. The dough she makes does more than just suggest the act of nourishment, as Elisabeth Kley notes, “No longer an abstract political concept, whiteness becomes a substance – kneadable, controlled, and presented as something to eat.” In this work, Searle objectifies whiteness, its placement and removal from her skin, an indication of the problematic rubrics of classification enforced by the apartheid regime. The kneading of the dough indicates how one can begin to control the methods and presentation of identity. As Searle herself stated, “the self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. [. . . ] one’s identity is not static, and is constantly in flux.”

Works like *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999) and *Snow White* (2001) demonstrate a trend in Searle’s early career towards themes that will continue through her oeuvre and are part of the focus of the current research. Themes of embodiment, post-colonial identity and articulated identity as shown through the representation of the body give her

---


works an important political relevance. This is a primary concern for this dissertation which maintains that the body based works of Berni Searle provide socially useful demonstrations of the rubrics of Colored female identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Many of her pieces from the 1990s to the mid-2000s focus on specifically African or South African locales. From there, it will be demonstrated in Chapter five how Searle moves into global themes of place and migration.

Most of the written work on Berni Searle has been in the form of brief exhibition review articles, entries from exhibition catalogs and a few articles from feminist, African studies, and art journals. One of the more sustained theoretical analyses of Searle’s work was done by Pumla Dineo Gqola, University of Witwatersrand, in her article for African Identities, “Memory, Diaspora and Spiced Bodies in Motion: Berni Searle’s Art.” In this article, Gqola focuses on three key works by Searle from the years 1999-2001 which feature the coloring/discoloring of her body using spices and pigments. Gqola suggests that Searle’s work from the Dis-Coloured (1999) series (figure 2.2, wherein Searle has colored portions of her body, like the palms of her hands with henna ink and photographed them in detail) shows a deconstructive tendency which reflects the inadequacy of racial categorization by suggesting a slippage between skin colored naturally and artificially. Further, Gqola uses the concept of iterability drawn from Jacques Derrida to indicate that Searle’s repetition of gestures and images from one series to another allows for a proliferation of meanings which simultaneously contain both

---

34 Ibid., 131.
something new and something referred.\(^{35}\) While Gqola’s application of Derrida and Lacan to Searle’s work is enlightening and engaging, in the space of this particular article it seems to cut off a more in depth conversation about how the absence/presence duality in Searle’s works might have more weighty social connotations for discussing ideas of political agency in contemporary South Africa. It is my contention that such a deeper reading of Searle’s more recent works will showcase how counter-spaces of discourse can be claimed for historically excluded peoples.

Another writer to discuss Searle’s work in depth across a series of articles and publications has been South African Liese van der Watt. From her doctoral dissertation on South African visual culture to her art historical articles, Van der Watt has offered sustained and nuanced readings of Searle’s work over the past several years. Beginning with her dissertation, entitled “The Many Hearts of Whiteness: Dis/investing in Whiteness through South African Visual Culture,” she address the “invisibility” of whiteness as a racial identity during and after the apartheid regime.\(^{36}\) In the later chapters of her dissertation, Van der Watt describes Searle’s work in terms of the dissolution of identity signification, suggesting that works like Snow White (2001) and the Colour Me series (1998) in figures 3.1 and 3.5, can be seen as metaphors for the instability of identity as a category and instead activates identity discourse by positing it as a process of becoming.\(^{37}\) She has continued her discussion of these themes in exhibition catalog and journal articles. In her 2003 article originally published in Art South Africa she describes Searle’s work as being less about racial identity politics as it is about the

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{36}\) Van der Watt, 240.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 245.
The estrangement of identity. Van der Watt discusses a few of her works from the late 1990s to 2003, and states that Searle’s relation to identity is “still in formation. … Read in this way Searle’s art is not simply about the fluidity of identity, but more than that, about the radical insufficiency of all identity.” These concepts are addressed again by Van der Watt in her 2004 article for the journal *African Arts* where she relates this conceptual positionality to Searle’s use of her own body.

Again, Van der Watt quite elegantly suggests that static categories of identity construction are not adequate to describe Searle’s representational strategies, but she stops short of offering any real suggestions of how to develop methods of looking and analyzing which would more fully articulate the nuances of signification at play in these pieces. My dissertation project fills that gap by seriously disseminating the articulated political and social signifiers of race and the body presented in selected pieces of Searle’s for the purpose of exposing not just how discourses can be confined or how they can exclude but rather how they can be re-defined and opened up to new dialogues.

There have been several doctoral dissertations in the past twenty years which discuss the representation of the black (and/or Coloured) female body in visual culture. Betty Ellerson’s 1994 dissertation along with Terry M.T. Provost’s 2001 dissertation

---


39 Ibid., no page number.


42 Terry Marie Therese Provost, “Profiles of the Black Venus: tracing the Black Female body in Western Art and Culture, from Baartman to Campbell,” Ph.D. diss., Concordia University (Canada), 2001, In
give fascinating examinations of the progression of visual discourse on the subject of the black female body. Both of these works provide important background research about historical modes of interpretation and representation of the African female body, but neither mention Berni Searle’s work. Liese van der Watt’s doctoral dissertation, discussed above, is the only one to address Searle’s work directly and she does so in terms of her research into the instability of whiteness in South Africa. Mary Louise Swan’s 2009 Master’s thesis examines Berni Searle’s work Home and Away (2003, in figure 5.1) in relation to how it represents the intercontinental tensions between Europe and Africa by using representations of the Strait of Gibraltar.  

My dissertation project will be the only one that looks exclusively at Berni Searle’s work in an effort to describe and analyze the significance and depth of her representation of the body.

Embodiment and Articulation

As many of the writers noted above indicate, the theme of embodiment is essential to Berni Searle’s work. Mark Johnson argues, “philosophy needs a visceral connection to lived experience” in order to be relevant to human existence. Focusing on the use of Searle’s body allows for an examination of how she becomes “both the

subject and the object of the work.”

The political relevance of using one’s own racially identified body in a work of art is further described by Stuart Hall as being a process of “translation and re-appropriation [which] is literally a kind of re-writing … a re-epidermalization, an *auto-graphy*.”

The choice of artist and specific works for analysis in this dissertation were a part of the interpretation itself. An object for interpretation is an aspect of that interpretation. Art objects are temporal, their beingness is a becoming-object, not a being-object.

Performance based works shot on video, which are many of the works under consideration here, help frame their own interpretation by imbuing the object with an intentional self-consciousness, which, as Sandra Kemp maintains, “enables both performers and their audiences to assess what is happening, to decode whether it works or not.”

The idea of embodiment as it relates to the work of Berni Searle includes the physical characteristics of identity, such as her race, nationality and gender. These tropes of identity are, as indicated by Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn, “mutually constitutive, and although each category has commonsensical meanings, none can be reduced to an essence separate to their social performances.”

Using the term Coloured to describe her racial identity is to use an already politically loaded term. Historically the term Coloured referred to people of “mixed” racial heritage in South Africa, and was

---

47 MacKenny, 16.
once considered a derogatory racist term. Identifying terms based on phenotype have been used to deny populations of people a specific nationality by reducing their identity to physiognomy. By claiming and referring to this identity and the associated history, Searle destabilizes her own racial classification. This kind of self-reflection is a key characteristic of Searle’s work and is also an important component to the idea of embodiment in art. As Iris Marion Young indicates, a “person’s subjectivity is conditioned by socio-cultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that [one] has not chosen.” This idea echoes the sentiments of Frantz Fanon that the self is created through the acts of recognition by others. The ‘body politic’ itself is a social artifice, as social scientist K.M. Fierke maintains, it “is a construction that is always in the process of being produced; it is not a fixed category.”

In relation to Berni Searle’s work, from her obvious use of her body in pieces such as Colour Me (1998), Snow White (2001), in figures 3.1 and 3.5, and the Dis-Coloured (1998) series, in figure 2.2, to the more subtle suggestions of bodily presence/absence in works like the Black Smoke Rising (2009-10) series, in figures 4.1-3, or Alibama (2008) in figure 3.6, her presence is the locus for a multiplicity of complex signifiers of identity. Her being there, the specificity of her body, grounds these pieces in a particular point of view and a particular socio-historical-personal narrative. Her works present intricate narratives that are both abstract and concrete, not in contradiction, but

rather in a dialectic where the specific representation of her body with her history is located within and complementary to the broader, historical narratives of Coloured South African women at large. The act of re-locating these signifiers is itself a political engagement that participates in a play of political power. Locating and disarticulating these specifics and abstractions will be the key theoretical work in this dissertation. The theoretical concepts of articulation and reprendre that are used in this research are necessarily and essentially tied to their expressions in and through the body.

Embodiment and the acknowledgement of the physical factors of identity are of keen importance to current theory by illuminating the lack of those referents in much modern philosophy. Modernism, derived in many ways from Enlightenment thinking, speaks often of a universal subject which is, upon closer inspection, not universal at all. This Eurocentrism is described by Samir Amin as a paradigmatic distortion “from which the majority of dominant social theories and ideologies suffer.” As Stuart Hall once observed, “I have not yet fully recovered from the staggering realization that whenever the universal human is invoked, certain people had better duck because it isn’t intended for them.” The group of “certain people” would include non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual beings. The inclusion of these “subaltern” identities into theories of embodiment and subjectivity forms an important basis for post-colonial theory. The

54 Erwin A. Jaffe, Healing the Body Politic: Rediscovering Political Power (Westport, CT: Preager, 1993), 5.  
57 Being “subaltern” is not necessarily related to being post-colonial or an ethnic minority, as explained by: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 310.
concept of the “subaltern” and how one “speaks” is currently being re-thought and revised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.\textsuperscript{58}

The idea of articulation in the current research is one that allows for a consideration of the multiple representations of identity, both specific and abstract, in Searle’s work. Stuart Hall’s notion of articulation is an umbrella method to bind theories of the body, race, and politics. Articulation theory, as used here, is extended by Hall from its application by Marxist writer, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci wrote that in regard to the articulation of identity, “it is essential to conceive of man \[sic\] as a series of active relationships (a process),” wherein it is the interaction or power-play of relationships that creates the individual.\textsuperscript{59} Hall thus draws upon the idea of articulation to refer to specific, historically grounded accounts of class and racial struggle connected to and located within ideological formations.\textsuperscript{60} This idea that class, gender, race and ideology are articulated, that is, connected but separable, is a very important one taken up by Hall from Gramsci.\textsuperscript{61} Hall uses the metaphor of an articulated truck to explain how things like race, class and gender are, “connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions.”\textsuperscript{62} This dissertation takes the theory

as a way to look at linkages of race and politics in Searle’s work, and the historical provocations and contemporary ramifications of them. This is useful for exploring the subtle ways her art signifies the past and current positions of social identity in South Africa and abroad. Hall is thus positioned because his theory of articulation permits a subject to be turned theoretically inside-out and simultaneously made problematic at its historical and contemporary conjunctures. Explained further by Jenifer Daryl Slack:

The ways in which articulation has been developed, discussed and used tend to foreground and background certain theoretical, methodological, epistemological, political and strategic forces, interests and issues. As theory and method, articulation has developed unevenly within a changing configuration of those forces. It carries with it ‘traces’ of those forces in which it has been constituted and which has constituted. To understand the role of articulation in cultural studies is thus to map that play of forces, in other words, to track its development genealogically.63

It is worthwhile to repeat that articulation in a Cultural Studies context is not just a connection but the \textit{process} of making connections.64 Identification is a process of becoming, which is constantly being negotiated. Identity, according to Hall, refers to the meeting point, the point of \textit{suture}, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’.65

This meeting point and process imply a structured but supple relation between parts, where these aspects of identity are articulated, but remain independent. They are joined, but not by necessity. Hall can avoid abstraction and ahistoricism by following Gramsci’s

---

65 Ibid., 6.
example of using specific, historically grounded accounts of class structure within ideological formations.⁶⁶

Works of art that make use of the artist’s body display the physical signifiers of identity. Considered through the theory of articulation, those signifiers may be read, misread, or re-read by the viewer in a complex manner. In an art history context this allows one to theorize and interpret symbols of social identity like language, race and nationality in relationship with each other. The shifting nuances of potential meaning make any declarations of identity unstable. To use an example which will be further elaborated on later in this dissertation, Berni Searle’s video piece *Alibama* (2008) evokes signifiers of race and nationality within a specifically framed context, the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town. Searle’s connection to racial identity, only provisionally indicated by her skin color, is made more stable through the use of the Afrikaans-language song *Daar Kom Die Alibama*, a song traditionally associated with the Coloured populations of the Cape. The point of view, at least in the first portion of the video, is from the top of the Castle, a structure built to enforce white colonial presence and power in the region and an important symbol in the development of white Afrikaner identity. The song itself is thought to have originated from a battle in Table Bay in the 1860s by an American Confederate ship against an American Federal ship in which the Confederate *CSS Alabama* was victorious. In this piece, signifiers of racial and national identity (Coloured, South African) are placed in juxtaposition with competing signifiers (white authority: The Castle, *CSS Alabama*, Afrikaans), only to be further displaced and complicated in the second portion of the video when the scene shifts to a private one in a

bath tub. The grand-historical narratives alluded to are given a different, competing foundation, one of a personal narrative. This suggests an examination of the complex histories of identity in South Africa (and beyond) as they relate in a macro-historical context and also in a micro-personal context. It is a rejection of coherent identity which allows for an acknowledgment of subject complexity. As Judith Butler maintains, identity is construed through opposition and rejection, while rejection also suggests that on some level identification (with the identity rejected) has already taken place.67

In this example, symbols in the artwork, such as the castle, the ships in the bay, and the lyrics and melody of the song, can be disarticulated from their original significations in order to be reclaimed and reflected upon. Searle initiates this in the second half of the piece where the castle is replaced by an intimate interior setting, the ships in the bay are substituted by crepe paper boats, and the grand chorus’ confident rendition of the song is instead presented by a halting duet of a mother and son. The threads of identity and history are unraveled by Searle to indicate their constructed and articulated nature. The connections between these symbols in the first half of the artwork places the signifiers in a particular social-historical context, one that is close to conventional narratives about South African identity. These linkages, however, are contingent and can be undone. Searle demonstrates this disarticulation in the second part of the work. This analysis is elaborated in Chapter three.

Articulation theory posits identity as a series of active relationships that are connected to form identity structures, but those relationships are fluid and can be broken.

---

or altered. It is a theory of contexts that characterizes social formation without falling into reductionism and essentialism. This process of looking at each signifier and its connection to the others will open an understanding of meanings in a way that is deeper, and more complex. The signifiers of identity in Searle’s work are articulated through a complex relationship, which being articulated, constitute the very contexts in which they are found.

This level of complexity is necessary in opening a critical space for reflexivity. Representation is a problematic process, but one that has immense potential. Stuart Hall further suggests that this kind of interpretation and reflection enables people “to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position.”

Further, scholar and writer Kwame Anthony Appiah proposes that one should “live with fractured identities; engage in identity play, find solidarity, yes, but recognize contingency, and, above all, practice irony.” Throwing open these spaces for negotiation permits for an analysis of the hegemonic structures of dominance that creates and constitutes so many aspects of personal and social identity. Like the idea of articulated identity, the concept of hegemony can also be read from Gramsci as a process.

---

68 Slack, 114.
69 Ibid., 125.
of “conjunctural politics” that is useful for understanding how modern regimes of power seek to define and control populations.\(^72\)

Movement, destabilized identity, contingency and dislocation are all suggested in Searle’s piece *A Matter of Time* (2003), which consists of video shot of her feet from below as she walked across a clear, acrylic support made slippery with olive oil, perhaps a reference to the Mediterranean, which relates this piece to *Home and Away* (2008), discussed below. The texture and lines of the soles of her feet are clearly visible, but distorted by the motion. The movement disfigures her body, which remains identifiable but changed. The apparent deformation of the feet suggests how bodies are molded and defined by observation, containment and migration. As she walks across the support she slips and struggles to maintain her balance, making this piece “less lyrical” and “more agitated and tense” than some of her other works of the period.\(^73\) The activity and the performed identity are disarticulated into non-specific signifiers where the viewer’s vision is distorted by the pressure of the body in motion. *A Matter of Time* (2003) is connected to *Home and Away* (2003), in figure 5.1, and *Snow White* (2001), in figure 3.5, the three of which were displayed together in Cape Town during the exhibition *Float* in 2004. A reviewer of the exhibition in the Johannesburg newspaper, *Sunday Independent*, observes the themes of presence, work, and loss apparent in all the works. The reviewer


\(^{73}\) Van der Watt, “Disappearing Act,” 27.
noted that taken in whole these works demonstrate that “the human will is sidelined,” abandoned to work, routine, and nature.\textsuperscript{74}

Work, loss and location are also key elements in the 2004 piece \textit{Vapour} (Figure 1.3), which opened in the Athlone township in Cape Flats. This site specific work consisted of five rows of five large pots filled with water over flames in a large field. Place and absence come together in \textit{Vapour} where Searle’s presence is implied but only minimally. The power of the work extends from the conflation of public and private spaces pulling apart and examining the articulated meanings of the social, cultural and personal. The uniqueness of this work was observed by Magdalena Kröner:

\begin{quote}
The novelty of this work is that for the first time the formal strength of the composition dominates over the artist’s reference. The production and destruction of energy displayed in the installation and her drawing on the elements of water, air, and fire creates a certain optimism, but is at the same time alarming and ambivalent.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

In this piece, Searle takes over a public space to suggest the public/private dichotomy of the act of cooking and eating by using pots over fires as many homes in Cape area townships do not have stoves. Food and identity are referred to also in \textit{Snow White} (2001) and \textit{Colour Me} (1998). These acts are important cultural parts of defining identity as well as survival. Certain ingredients, spices and cooking techniques are associated with particular ethnic identities, becoming an articulation of the process of identity. In Searle’s words, \textit{Vapour} (2004) explores “the way individuals feel connected to a broader

\textsuperscript{74} “Review: Float,” \textit{Sunday Independent} (13 June 2004): 10. Searle was also named an Artes Mundi Shortlisted Artist that year.

Particularly in a South African apartheid context, food was an important marker of cultural identification. In an interview with the current author, South African scholar Yegan Pillay stressed the significance of culinary traditions in maintaining a sense of community and continuity during the apartheid era. Further, the enactment of identity as a process or activity is foregrounded in these works as well as in *A Matter of Time* (2003) and *Home and Away* (2003), mentioned above.

*Figure 1.3. Searle, Vapour, 2004. Michael Stevenson Gallery.*

Racial Identity and Race Politics in Berni Searle’s Art

This dissertation will examine multiple signifiers of racial identity as they relate to the body politic of South Africa as performed by Berni Searle in her artwork. Searle

---


77 Yegan Pillay, interview by the author, 24 April 2013.
suggests, in subtle ways, the racial politics of belonging and the methods that those identities shift over time and place. Racial or ethnic identities are an important aspect of personal and social identity in nations across the globe, while definitions and constructions of “race” are not consistent. Race and class became closely associated in a way that reflects Charles W. Mills’ thesis that race is a political system. Race as a concept has no logical or biological foundation. As Appiah summarizes, Darwinian notions of race and reproduction can be held out scientifically in cases of some isolated groups of plants and animals, but not in the human species. He maintains that “there are biological races in some creatures, but not in us.” Mills indicates “race is unreal—in the biological/anthropological sense, race does not really exist,” however, “race is real—in the sociohistorical/political sense, race does exist as a categorization with a massive effect on people’s psychology, culture, socioeconomic opportunities, life chances, and civil rights.” The relationship between racial identity and political agency is an important and reoccurring theme in most of Berni Searle’s artwork.

South African scholar David Theo Goldberg describes the process through which modern states become intimately involved in the articulation of race, gender and class. Goldberg writes about how notions of race developed in the fifteenth century Mediterranean and were quickly expanded to mark Europe and its extensions. Rapidly, the concept of race took hold in Europe as means to “rationalize social arrangements of

79 Appiah, 73.
80 Mills, 77.
power and exploitation, violence and exploration. Race was turned into a foundational code.\textsuperscript{82} Racial conception had three main prompts, according to Goldberg. First, curiosity as an interest or cultural fascination with that which is different; secondly, exploitability for those who are different and can be marked as labor; and lastly, threat, which promotes fears of survivability, insecurity, loss, and so on.\textsuperscript{83} He goes on to describe how race and nationality became joined in this conception. This will be especially relevant in the history of the South African state where official citizenship was historically defined in direct racial terms. Goldberg writes:

Race figures the national even as it transcends it; and in transcending race gives the nation its transcendental character, its larger, ultimately globally extensionist imperative. Fashioned in the expansive colonial and imperial laboratories of Euro-modernities, there’s a sense too in which the logical reach of race was inherently extra-national, was drawn inevitably to fulfill itself colonially, imperialistically.\textsuperscript{84}

Charles W. Mills writes in detail about the structure and creation of racial identity in modern nation-states. In particular he focuses on discussion of racial relationships and dynamics as they serve to bolster a normative “white” privilege in capitalist nations where to be non-white is to be outside normative and inclusive concepts of nation and class. The main thesis he supports is that race itself is a political system.\textsuperscript{85} This system is relational, and not monadic. There cannot be “white” without the “other” or “non-white” races. This relation is dynamic rather than static. It changes over time, just as the rules governing racial membership also shift. As relational and variable categories of

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{85} Mills, \textit{Blackness Visible}, 74.
representation race is “only contingently tied to phenotype: a given appearance is neither necessary nor sufficient for inclusion” in a given race.\textsuperscript{86} Considering race as a political system means that racial identities are inherently bodily. One’s body becomes the sign of his or her subjugation. This “body politics” is one that maintains white hegemonic control over the non-white body through means of political, social and economic domination.\textsuperscript{87} The process of breaking down monolithic constructions of race and examining their constituent elements can be seen at work in pieces like \textit{Snow White} (2001) and \textit{Coloured} (1999) among others, while the socio-economic ramifications of these constructions are addressed or implied in pieces such as \textit{Alibama} (2008), \textit{Home and Away} (2003) and \textit{Seeking Refuge} (2008). Each of these works will be examined in detail in later chapters.

That racial identity is an element articulated with others in an important linkage is acknowledged by Mills. He writes:

Society can be thought of as a complex of interlocking and overlapping systems of domination and exploitation, and I am by no means asserting that race is the only one. My claim rather is that it is an under theorized one and that it has repercussions for holding the overall system together that are not generally recognized.\textsuperscript{88}

One would be hard pressed to find a nation in which racial identity and race consciousness has had deeper impact than twentieth-century South Africa. Long before the official establishment of apartheid by the National Party regime in 1948, racial identification for the purpose of establishing and maintaining, often violently, white

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 116.
racial supremacy had been the unfortunate and tragic foundation for much of the history of that nation. Mills’ descriptions and understanding of racism and the constructions of racial identity are extremely useful for examining how such regimes attempt to regulate membership in racial categories. In his work, *The Racial Contract*, Mills describes how modern nations divide space and people, and by dividing, define and control them. These “contracts” are based on bodies and politics, specifically, what bodies can have access to politics and which ones cannot.\(^89\)

Searle’s piece *About to Forget* (2005), in figure 1.4, refers to moments of forgetting and remembering as it relates to placement within racial-national family narratives. The work deals with intermediate space of,

> memory where a sense of return and a sense of loss are simultaneously invoked. The process of forgetting entwines both the presence and absence of memory, and, in between, a series of gradually fading after-images of people and events that linger in the mind.\(^90\)

Searle uses several photographs from her family in the piece, from which she created red crepe-paper silhouettes. The figures floated in warm water where the color bleeds as the water moves. Concepts of affection, connection and the family are evoked and questioned. Her family history, with connections to Africa and Europe, float and are distorted by the currents of historical discourse. Nationality, location and phenotypically-derived racial identity are questioned and destabilized, demonstrating the loose ways in which such identity rubrics are created and articulated. Social constructions of identity bleed into the personal and familial through private interactions with individual


photographs and mementoes. Remembering and forgetting are closely intertwined and are a part of the personal narratives individuals weave to define their place within the larger social structure. As Einar Børresen wrote describing this piece, “Strong personal stories of break-ups between family members, and the absurd racial classifications and reclassifications of the apartheid regime are related to the work.”\(^{91}\) The process of disarticulating her family history complicates easy understandings of heritage and belonging. The new space opened for negotiation exposes the articulations of social formation.

---

*Figure 1.4.* Searle, *About to Forget*, film stills, 2005. Michael Stevenson Gallery.

Examining the symbolic use of the body in representation by Berni Searle is a way to understand the complex relations of the body politic in South Africa. This idea is based on a concept of the body-as-situation. This can be understood as the way the facts of embodiment and environment affect one’s actions. One’s situation determines the exercise of freedom. This concept recognizes that subjectivity is conditional on one’s social-historical environment.\(^{92}\) Women body artists have enacted themselves in relation to long-standing codes of female objectification, thus disarticulating gendered

---


\(^{92}\) Young, 101.
oppositions structuring conventional models of art production. Recognizing that “a person’s subjectivity is conditioned by socio-cultural facts,” allows the current research to dis-articulate the facets of gender that are socially constructed and constrained in a manner that will permit a reading of the specifics of Searle’s presentations as a microcosm of larger social-political issues. It is important to the artist as well that viewers and critics understand her work beyond the specific and biographical. Searle noted,

one of the burdens we have in terms of South African history is that we’re always brought back to the experiences which we can’t deny but which can become a framework which is very limiting. […] If people knew nothing about me and nothing about where I’m from they would still be able to see a whole lot of things to relate to in a personal way. For me it’s very important that the work can do that so that it doesn’t actually exist solely within the confines of one’s own circumstances.

As indicated by Mills, race is only one factor in the complex system of social identity. Goldberg expands on that by relating the history of racial identity to the construction of nationalism. Nationalism and national identity, as defined by Benedict Anderson and explained by Goldberg, are inherently paradoxical. Anderson writes that a nation is an “imagined community” which is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” He details the conditions that led to the spread of nationalism across Europe but makes a note of

94 Young, 101.
95 Dawn Kennedy.
96 Benedict Anderson, 6.
Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa as well. This nationalism was pioneered by Boers who turned their local Dutch into a literary language, positioned as something other than European. In a South African context, the imagined communities of British and Dutch colonies turned independent nations was from the beginning, racially and linguistically defined. (Chapter two will explore the historical development of South Africa as a nation in more detail.) From the earliest European colonies on the southern tip of Africa, ideas of language, culture and identity struggled to maintain imperial orders of racial hierarchy. As Afrikaner identity came into itself against European nationalities, it enlisted the usual nationalist tropes of ancient heritage, cultural superiority, and natural connection to the land. For Afrikaner settlers, South Africa became the Vaderland. This kind of idiom suggests something one is naturally tied to, and things that are natural are rationalized as unchosen, like skin color, gender, or patronage; one cannot choose nationality, one is born to it. Names given to non-white populations like “natives,” or “Bantus,” placing those others in a paradoxical relationship. They belonged, but had no connection to the nation, while, more aggressively, racial slurs erased nationality, reducing identity to biological physiognomy. Nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies while “racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations.” Colonial racism helped shore class divisions amongst members of the privileged race. Some Englishmen were superior to

---

97 Ibid., 75.
98 Ibid., 143.
99 Ibid., 122.
100 Ibid., 148-50.
others, but those other were still superior to “the natives.” This rationalization allowed for Afrikaner South Africans to rail against British dominance in terms of defending their racial right to persist, while simultaneously holding that their independence and ascendancy must, naturally, come at the expense of the non-whites who happened to occupy the same lands. These histories are addressed directly in chapters three and five of this dissertation in analyses of works such as Alibama (2008) and Seeking Refuge (2008).

Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Searle’s Performance of the Other

Searle’s works engage in a postcolonial critique by performing the fragmented, post-modern other, recasting the objectified body as the active agent, that is to say, as the subject. In performing this other-making, her work engages in an implicit critique of the artistic academic tradition while still participating within it. One piece that demonstrates this is Day for Night (2008, figure 1.5), a four-channel video projection which offers a full 360-degree view from an unused lighthouse on the Stavanger fjord in Norway. The title refers to an early filmmaking technique where shots filmed during the day were made to look like night. The video rotates the viewer around, positioning one in an alternate world, exotic and unsettled. The sequence collapses four hours at dusk into five minutes. This, combined with the specifics of the Norwegian summer (eighteen hours of daylight), creates an odd, eerie space shifting in and out of time. In this piece, the artist makes the northern European setting uncanny and foreign, compressing time and distorting the image. A lighthouse, symbolic of warning and a location marking the

101 Ibid.
presence of danger, becomes a surreal and dislocated land. Here she presents European identity as something other, abnormal, and potentially dangerous. The natural features of the landscape are re-cast as a distortion through the lighthouse lens. An object meant to illuminate trouble becomes a signifier of difference, a warning about the lenses through which the world is seen. Einar Børresen suggests the estrangement of the viewer from the landscape places one in a specific position in relation to history. Searle is a stranger here and presents herself (briefly, in the film) as grounding agent, the only thing in view not distorted by the lens. This implicit critique on Eurocentric discourse reflects on the processes discussed by Stuart Hall responsible for constituting subjectivities, activating the space for political agency and commentary.

Figure 1.5. Searle, *Day for Night*, film stills, 2008. Michael Stevenson Gallery.

Identity is both a practice and a category of analysis. As it relates to practice, identity can be a political signifier of action founded on the idea that action “may be

102 Børresen, 11.
grounded by a *particularistic self-understanding*.”104 Identity is based just as much on what one is not as what one is. The self is also constructed from where one is or is not.105 Postcolonialism is a specifically postmodern intellectual discourse that theorizes the effects of the cultural inheritance of colonialism and imperialism.106 Of specific importance to this dissertation is a consideration of how postcolonialism can reveal the ways that representations of difference have been rationalized and commodified for the purposes of establishing and maintaining Western-controlled hegemony. Using postcolonial theory places this dissertation within the larger scope of post-modern theory, though post-colonial theory often levels a strong critique of modernism and post-modernism alike. Modernism, as criticized by post-modernism, is plagued by an assumption that a culture (Western) has a unique global-social position of authority to effect social change and that said culture has some kind of parental obligation to those outside its culture to produce change. Post-modernism is a tactical fragmentation of modernism. Similarly, post-modern art no longer drives discourse forward, as modern art supposedly did.107 Theories in these discourses can be quite obtuse and at worst “often operate as glib smokescreens for those too lazy to map the rich texture of political and cultural exchanges and appropriations that complicate such terms and render them meaningful.”108

Post-modernism gained credence in aesthetic and cultural writings beginning in the 1980s. Many of these texts emerged from anti-Enlightenment philosophies and are characterized, in part, by a preference for difference and fragmentation over uniformity; a rejection of metanarratives, a rejection of imperialism, and a focus on the importance of popular culture and consumerism over “high-brow” elitist authority.\textsuperscript{109} The theories of hybridized and contingent identity that came from these discourses led to the formation of the Post-Modern Subject, described as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. It is an acknowledgment that identity is historically, not biologically defined, having no coherent “self.”\textsuperscript{110} As described by Jean-François Lyotard, “…no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now much more complex and mobile than ever before.”\textsuperscript{111} This relates to Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe’s account of the postcolony, a “specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes […] The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion.”\textsuperscript{112} In the postcolony, the Post Modern Subject is in a shifting state of redefinition. The postcolonial citizen exists in historic continuity with the colonial subject, where class, gender and race were instrumental in the definition of colonial nations. The postcolony has the signifiers of identity shifting but remaining stable, creating a sense of frustration among those who desire a radical change in the social order. In this configuration the

\textsuperscript{112} Achille Mbembe, On the Postcolony (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 102.
postcolony is the same, but also different, and the individual in such a society finds themselves striving to find footing in the new order. If identity is a practice and a process, Berni Searle’s work *Seeking Refuge* (2008), discussed in Chapter five, performs a dislocated, postcolonial subject in the implied form of an immigrant, left out of popular discourses of belonging and left struggling to define being and belonging with a fragmented sense of self. In the “imagined communities” of modern nation-states and postcolonies, the body politic of any given place is defined and redefined through policies of inclusion and exclusion, where race, gender, ethnicity, among other factors determine standing.\(^{113}\)

Postcolonial theory pulls from deconstruction and psychoanalysis (among other theories). Olakunle George, in his work *Relocating Agency* rigorously examines the development of postcolonial thought from its separation from the advanced-capitalist first world discourses of post structuralism to the “retroactive explanatory paradigms” of Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s idea of post-coloniality as both a conjuncture and a strategy. George moves beyond these concepts of the postcolonial subject as necessarily reliant upon imperialist definitions of otherness to positioning post-colonialism as a strategy to designate agency by exposing that identity is text. Drawing from V.Y. Mudimbe he addresses the idea of agency in explaining how the de-centered subject can still manage to function without becoming hopelessly essentialized.\(^{114}\)

---

\(^{113}\) Benedict Anderson, 78.

Berni Searle through the Rubric of Reprendre

This dissertation will participate in the process of unraveling layers of meaning to disarticulate selected works of art. Irit Rogoff writes that “a theorist is one who has been undone by theory,” and that it is the role of theory to unravel itself. V.Y. Mudimbe’s concept of reprendre will be used methodologically as a tool towards this goal.

Mudimbe, in The Idea of Africa, describes how seventeenth-century European philosophers, historians, missionaries, etc. used Africa/Asia/America as an abject land of symbolic otherness. Everything not in the idealized fantasy of European myth was to be found in these “savage” lands. He further describes European interest in African art during and through the colonial age. He maintains that as Europeans became more acutely aware of their changing world they sought to connect with their own “primitive” past. Africa was a convenient place to find a contemporary-archaic culture. Africa was something safely non-European (and thus, barbaric) that symbolically proved to the Europeans their own evolutionary path. Thus Europeans could conceptualize Africa in Europe’s margins. Combining what Mudimbe characterizes as a voracious appetite for raw resources to fuel urbanization and industry, along with zealous evangelical Christian attitudes, the European colonials found it easy to justify their expansion, exploitation and marginalization. Mudimbe’s contribution to African studies has been immense, in part

---

117 Ibid., 60-5.
due to his giving an “archeology of African knowledge” in the same vein as Michel Foucault.118

Especially relevant for the current research is the use of the Congolese-French term *reprendre* that Mudimbe employs. Translated, the term literally means to take back again; to regain. Mudimbe provides additional meanings. First, *reprendre* can mean to take up an interrupted tradition, second, it can be used as a methodological assessment, and third, it implies a pause, or meditation.119 What is significant about *reprendre* is the way it can be used methodologically. Mudimbe addresses issues of de-centered subjectivity, privileging the subject without essentializing it, while identifying agency as a dynamic that is not yet theorized.120

Searle’s negotiations of de-centered subjectivity will be explored throughout this dissertation. Pieces such as *Interlaced* (2011, figure 1.6), a major three-screen video installation for a solo exhibition in Bruges, Belgium demonstrate this. The piece was a site-specific installation in a well preserved medieval city and important trading port since the thirteenth century. Searle’s focus in the piece was the effects of mediation and communication often found in these encounters. Filmed in the Gothic chamber of Bruges’ town hall, the piece shows Searle with her hands painted in gold leaf, in a gold cloak, then a black veil. The chamber’s association with King Leopold II-- responsible for the brutal exploitation of the Congo -- and the use of gold in the work, has frightening but ambiguous connotations. The work is accompanied by music from South African

119 Mudimbe, 155.
120 George, 84.
composer Neo Muyanga. The entire piece offers a ritualistic and mesmerizing “meditation on belief and power systems, on the relationship between individuals and communities, and a contemplation of beauty, loss and transcendence.”\textsuperscript{121} This performance of meditation activates the space and the histories invoked. Liese van der Watt observes “Searle’s works seek not origins, but networks, not purity, but crossings, not endings, but processes.”\textsuperscript{122} In the act of unraveling these articulations of identity, Searle opens a space for reclaiming suppressed and silenced voices, providing the possibility of agency for a different body politic.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{interlaced.jpg}
\end{figure}

Searle’s work \textit{Seeking Refuge} (2008) was included in the important exhibition \textit{Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa} held at the National

\textsuperscript{122} Van der Watt, “Disappearing Act,” 28.
Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. in 2013. Incorporating significant installations by Ghada Amer, El Anatsui, and fellow South African artist Strijdom van der Merwe, the addition of *Seeking Refuge* (2008) positioned Searle’s work within an international discourse on the essential nature of land and place to political agency and identity. *Seeking Refuge* (2008) is also indicative of Searle’s shifting themes in her work from specifically South African and African topics to global subjects (discussed in Chapter five). Both this work and *Interlaced* (2011) perform a dislocated subject who is mutually an agent and a symbol. She acts in these pieces in ways that are determinate while subverting through ambiguity primary identification as an individual.

In this dissertation, *reprendre* will be used as a way of understanding hybridized identity, such as Coloured, female, South African, not as a diluted identity or a compromised identity but as a reclaimed identity. As a methodological rubric, *reprendre* is a way of reflecting upon the totality of Searle’s embodied performances of articulated identity. This deeper engagement with Searle’s work will allow for a meaningful understanding of subjective identity to emerge that will allow for a consideration of political agency in a contemporary context both within South Africa and abroad. Doing so will create a synthesis of those elements that opens spaces for political agency that can be recognized and claimed. This serves the objectives of this dissertation by tracing how Searle uses her body to illuminate these constructions on the one hand and reclaims her body (and by extension, other similar bodies) on the other. These manipulations and performances of articulated identity, considered through the rubric of *reprendre* will
illuminate the historical and social construction of Coloured identity in the South African body politic.
CHAPTER 2: DIE GROOT ANDERSMAAK: THE GREAT OTHER-MAKING OF COLOURED IDENTITY

Berni Searle, in her art, symbolizes the body politic of racial identity construction in South Africa. The “body politic” is a metaphor for the population of a nation where the people are figuratively constructed as a living communal entity. As a social artifice, the body politic is constantly changing. By presenting and scrutinizing the narratives and historical structures of nationality and race, Searle re-claims such accounts to engage in a counter-discourse that confronts traditional understanding of these identities. This chapter addresses the historical and political development of race in South Africa from early European/African encounters to the aftermath of the apartheid regime. Works such as *For Fatherland* (1994) and *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (1999) engage with colonial encounters and the beginning stages of racial-national identity construction in South Africa. The *Dis-Coloured* series (1999) interrogates the ephemera and documentation of colonial archives in a manner that is similar to how *On Loan: Acquired, Preserved, Transformed* (2001) questions ethnographic practices and normative representations of culture during apartheid. Searle’s work, considered through the lens of reprendre as an articulated and embodied expression of this tradition, clears spaces for re-negotiation and new understanding of political agency in contemporary South Africa. Berni Searle intricately suggests, in her art, how the shifting dynamics of identity are under the ever-present weight of history.

---

123 Fierke, 22.
Being Coloured, at various points in South African history, has been an identity fraught with contradiction, denial and struggle. As South African scholar Mohamed Adhikari, University of Cape Town, describes,

Because of their ambivalent position within the society and the insecurity that this engendered, Coloureds were continually modulating their reactions to their situation in order to strike a balance between their assimilationist aspirations, the realities of their exclusion from the dominant society, and their fears at being cast down to the status of Africans.  

The history of this racial category has been contested from its first written appearances in the seventeenth century through the bitter struggles against apartheid. Complicated by loaded signifiers of nationality, religion and language, Coloured identity has shifted over the centuries from being a category associated with lack and subordination to being considered an identity rich with unique culture and pride. Politically, Coloured public figures and activists have promoted, in turn, white-assimilationist attitudes or Black Consciousness inspired Coloured Rejectionism. The shifting currents of political social discourse regarding Coloured identity are a key element within Searle’s work; work that in no way simplifies or streamlines the issues invoked.

Mohamed Adhikari argues that the term Coloured should be capitalized, even though it does not derive from a proper noun. This has become common practice in South Africa and there is a notion that so doing is justified because Coloured people are recognized as a distinct ethnic group. The term refers to a phenotypically varied social group with highly diverse cultural and geographic origins. In 2010, over 40% of South

African Coloured people live in the greater Cape Town area. Adhikari goes on to identify some key characteristics in the formation of Coloured identity. First he identifies a desire to assimilate into dominant society supported by political movements to be enfolded into either middle-class English speaking society or Afrikanerdom. Second, he maintains that Colouredness has an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy. They were generally described as not as good as whites, but better than blacks. In Afrikaans they were referred to as Bruine Mens (Brown Men) or derogatorily as half-naatje (half-breeds). Lastly, Adhikari identifies the marginality of Coloured people as a key characteristic. This indeterminate, shifting status is a feature of Coloured identity that Searle directly invokes in pieces such as Colour Me (1998) and Alibama (2008) among others, discussed in the next chapter.

Searle engages in complex visual associations calling into question easy understandings of stereotypes and signifiers. Erving Goffman, in his seminal work on social performance suggests that public performances of identity often coincide with accepted stereotypes and standards, even subconsciously. When one encounters someone who does not conform, one may assume fraud. He goes on to write that,

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him [sic] in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he [sic] has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is.

---

127 Ibid., 2.
128 Ibid., 8.
129 Ibid., 169.
130 Ibid., 17.
132 Ibid., 13.
In terms of racial and national identification, there are socially constructed signifiers of belonging, which at their most simple, are stereotypes. Searle subverts these simplistic understandings of identity, and in so doing reclaims the complex visual associations, fundamental to establishing a community to create a space for discussing political agency.

All people, in one way or another, participate in the construction of their own identity, but in a South African context, with the shadow of apartheid still in living memory, creating one’s sense of self takes on a deep level of political importance. As in the quote which gave this chapter its title, Die Groot Andersmaak, South African author-in-exile Breyten Breytenbach suggests that being South African is “a process of becoming. …to build the great Other-making. We make each other.”

Breytenbach writes, in Afrikaans, “Suid-Afrikanerskap is’n wordingsproses. Suid-Afrikanerskap loop deur die afbreek van apartheid en die help bou aan die groot Andersmaak. Ons máák mekaar.”

From her early works in the 1990s, such as Colour Me (1998) and Snow White (2001), to her more recent works addressing social violence (Mute [2008], The Black Smoke Rising Series [2009-10]) and immigration (Seeking Refuge [2008], Home and Away [2003]), Searle has intricately suggested how spheres of identity change under the demands of history. Narrative—personal, national, and global—is inevitably present in

---

her works. Through these images and performances, she demonstrates the self-recognition of identity-making and the responsibility and agency in the becoming.

Historical Constructions of Racial Identity in South Africa

Berni Searle’s work *For Fatherland* (1994), with its references to a paternalistic formation of national belonging (for early Afrikaners the South African *veld* was often referred to as the *Vaderland*), and its presentation in the form of a triptych, is suggestive of conceptions of South African identity firmly rooted in European colonial origins. The inclusion of the native language of the Khoisan, Khomani, subverts this understanding by making reference to the land clearing policies of early European settlers, forcibly removing indigenous inhabitants.

Both *For Fatherland* (1994) and *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (1999) subtly suggest the interactions (peaceful and violent) between Europeans and Africans from the establishment of intercontinental trade routes that existed throughout central and eastern South Africa long before permanent European settlement. In 1486 Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape. In 1497 Vasco da Gama traded with the Khoikhoi in the Cape, usually peacefully. By the late sixteenth century, Portuguese posts were collapsing and the Dutch revolted against Spanish control, beginning an era of Dutch colonialism and expansion. In the 1850s Dutch ships were routinely sailing to India, supported by African colonies and ports.

The political and colonial expansion of European influence across the African continent would be foundational to the conflicts and displacements referenced in *For*

---

135 Ibid., 37.
Fatherland (1994) and Julle Moet Nou Trek (1999). In combination these pieces present a powerful continuity in their narratives. The gradual establishment of a European fatherland, based on hierarchical understandings of race, language, culture and religion on the native land of the Khoisan peoples would form the basis for policies of subjugation, enslavement and violent displacement. The language of the first peoples of the cape (Khomani) would be subjected to the imperial domination of Dutch, English, and Afrikaans, until its eventual extinction. Julle Moet Nou Trek, is a command (you must move away…) given in Afrikaans presumably to a Khoisan or non-Afrikaner person. The implication, of course is that the “you” being addressed is displaced, forced to “move away” because that person is no longer welcome in the “fatherland,” and indeed these acts of displacement are done For Fatherland, for the continued stability of the new nation. South African scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola explains, “The speaker is separate from the collective s/he addresses in the second person plural, and is therefore secure where they are unsteady. S/he can stay put.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, the establishment of national identity is invariably linked to conceptions of race, ancestry and language. Exclusions and borders are drawn along these cultural lines in order to define and give the appearance of stability to the included groups. By using Khomani in juxtaposition with references to Afrikaner history, Searle “speaks” for those who were denied a voice under colonial occupation. In relation to these actions Kathryn Smith comments:

Working through the particular histories of disenfranchised subjectivities, and what has been left in the wake of that history, allows [Searle] to explore what has been lost, whether it be through incorporating sound elements of ‘forgotten’

---

136 Gqola, “Memory,” 129.
Khoisan dialects in *Julle Moet Nou Trek* for Lien Botha’s *Bloedlyn* exhibition, or trying to figure her own position to an oppressive past.\(^{137}\)

Searle is not bodily present in either of the works that use Khoisan recordings. Her absence marks an ambiguous relationship with the histories confronted. She appropriates the language of possible ancestors (many in the Cape Town Coloured community have a claimed Khoisan heritage as a way to counter marginalization and legitimize cultural belonging)\(^{138}\) but keeps her distance. She neither affirms nor denies her connection to the culture symbolized. Her tenuous position places her simultaneously as insider and outsider, someone who is both speaks and has been denied a voice. This is not a paradox, but indicative of how identities have been articulated through historical interventions.

Apartheid was a policy of racial segregation based on a white-supremacist ideology and often violently enforced. Officially, apartheid began after the 1948 elections in South Africa that brought the National Party (NP) to power. However, the racist policies, attitudes and systematic exploitation and disenfranchisement of the non-white populations of South Africa had been established in practice as far back as the earliest fifteenth century relationships between indigenous South Africans and Portuguese explorers.

Political power and agency were embodied in the European male leader in the popular imaginary *against* the native inhabitant, or by extension, the mixed-race person. Narratives of nationalism and belonging were written with specific racial and gendered identities inscribed, placing the other in a migrant identity of dislocation. The native

\(^{137}\) Kathryn Smith, n.p.

peoples of South Africa found themselves, under British and Afrikaner rule, immigrants in their own homeland. The politics of dispossession are referenced in Searle’s work *Seeking Refuge* (2008) which is discussed in detail in Chapter five.

The first known cultures in the Cape region were the Khoisan ancestors known to have been established there by at least 1000 B.C.E., by the year 300 C.E. Bantu-speaking peoples were migrating south of the Limpopo River. The Khoikhoi, called Hottentots by early white settlers, were descendants of hunter-gatherer groups. The Korana people were on the Orange River, whereas the Gonaqua and others were interspersed with the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape. (See Figure 2.1, Modern map of South Africa) The largest concentration (tens of thousands of people) was in the South West Cape. Called the Cape Khoikhoi by white settlers, they would receive the brunt of white expansionism. Prior to settler displacement the Khoikhoi were organized in twelve chiefdoms that the Dutch termed nations. The Khoikhoi were mostly herders while the San people were hunter-gathers. A Khoikhoi losing their heard might become a San, but the groups had different traditions and the interactions between the nations were often confrontational. The conflicts between Khoikhoi and San and their confrontations with white settlers seeking to take their collective lands and herds are invoked in Berni Searle’s collaboration with poet Anoeschka von Meck, *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (1999), where Searle’s images, figures sculpted from red earth, von Meck’s poem (in Afrikaans) and a recording of the Khoi-San language, Khomani, presented an emotional narrative of displacement and loss.

---

141 Leonard Thompson, 21.
language was believed to have gone extinct in the 1970s, alluded to in Searle’s earlier work, *For Fatherland* (1994) that invokes the building of monuments and suggests the importance of cultural-linguistic definitions of nationality and place by using as the title an Afrikaner word for the country (Figure 1.1). (These works are also described, in brief, in Chapter one.)

![Map of modern South Africa. Nations Online Project.](image)

*Figure 2.1.* Map of modern South Africa. Nations Online Project.

The *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) or Dutch East Indian Company, established social/racial categories in the Cape arranged in a hierarchy that determined
access to land, movement and other rights. The corporatization of colonialism is an important part of the performance Searle offers in *Interlaced* (2011) discussed in Chapter one. Searle’s veiled face and gold-leaf covered hands have horrifying historical connotations to a time when human life was measured in raw materials. From 1602 to 1799 the VOC operated in Amsterdam. The company established a permanent settlement at the Cape of Good Hope. As an international corporation, their colonial influence in the region was considerable.¹⁴²

Under VOC control the Castle of Good Hope began construction in 1666. Jan van Riebeeck (1619-1677) was posted to protect company interests at the Cape in 1651. The Dutch farming class known as Boers (later Afrikaners) expanded their reach across the region coming into increased conflict with the Khoikhoi. The British would overtake the colony from the Dutch in 1795 only to return via treaty in 1803. Between 1652 and the abolishment of the slave trade in 1808 approximately 63,000 people were forcibly taken to the Cape. The importation of enslaved people from other regions in Africa and from India began to significantly shape the social and economic landscape of the Cape Region. Increased dependence on slaves and products from other colonies would amplify tensions between colonists and the Khoikhoi as land for expansion became more contested.¹⁴³

Berni Searle makes implicit references to the slave and spice trade in pieces such as *Colour Me* (1998) and *Traces* (2001), where bodies and spices are represented as signifiers of color and status, where in reference to this history, people of color where

¹⁴² Leonard Thompson, 40-41.
¹⁴³ Ibid., 46-50.
treated as commodities, dehumanized and subjugated. Searle, in engaging this history, rewrites and re-invests agency to those who were historically denied it. More on these pieces will be offered in Chapter three.

Enslaved people brought to the Cape were from many regions: approximately 26% were African, 25% came from Madagascar, 25% were Indian, and 22% were from Indonesia. People of “mixed-race” heritage were commonly referred to as mulattoes by the Dutch and were highly prized as slaves. The British would refer to this population as Afrikanders. By the 1700s mixed race communities grew like the Griqua, a Muslim community drawn primarily from enslaved people became increasingly insular in the Cape. Most likely in response to the changing currents of identity and the threat of British domination, the same time period meant that a new sense of Afrikaner identity was emergent. This tumultuous time set the stage for the many conflicts between ethnic and racial groups in the region for the next three hundred years. Each group continued to vie for power, necessitating the creations of conditions for inclusion and exclusion to their respective identities that shifted and were redefined.

The story of South Africa’s multi-racialism is tied to Berni Searle’s own family history. Her heritage includes European, African, Middle Eastern and Asian ancestors. In the work About to Forget (2005) Searle takes several family photographs and through crepe-paper analogues dissolves them in water, evocative of how the passage of time and distances shift perceptions of family and belonging, and how ancestry can be defined,

---

144 Ibid., 53.
145 Giliomee, 69.
forgotten or erased in accordance to the need to identify with one group or another. This work also addresses issues of national identity and is discussed Chapter one.

This period saw increased Khoikhoi resistance to white dominance as more European groups came into South Africa and expanded. By 1807, the population of Cape Town was 34% Dutch, 29% German, 25% French, and 5% non-European. In 1822 Afrikaans was a recognized distinct dialect separate from Dutch, used in both white and mixed-race households. South African Afrikaners made collective cultural efforts to distance themselves from the European Dutch to solidify claims of an ethnic identity rooted on African lands against British colonial dominance.146

British expansion in South Africa included the re-conquest of the Cape Colony in 1806 and the expulsion of all Africans from the Western Territories in the years 1811-12. The Boer uprising (also known as the Slagtersnek Rebellion) occurred in 1815, followed by the creation of the Zulu Kingdom by Shaka (reigning from 1816-1828). By 1820 the British were bringing settlers into the Cape Colony. They officially emancipated colonial slaves in the same place in 1834. Concurrently, from 1834-5 the British fought and eventually defeated the Xhosa. Threatened by British military authority and Imperial domination, the “Great Trek” of Afrikaners into the Transvaal occurs over the years 1835-40 bringing them into hostile contact with the Zulu Kingdom as they pressed into Zulu territories. This will be an extremely important event to the later twentieth century development of Afrikaner nationalism and pride. The Afrikaners threw back the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1835. Shortly after, in 1843, the British annexed Natal then defeated the Xhosa again in 1847. In the 1860s diamond mining became an important

146 Leonard Thompson, 77.
enterprise for the British, and mining began in earnest in Griqualand by 1867. The British ultimately were able to conquer the Zulus in 1879. Transvaal Afrikaners regained independence in 1880. Gold mining opened on the Witwatersrand by 1886, and three years later Transvaal commandoes conquered the Venda people (who, under apartheid, would have their own Bantustan in the north-eastern section of the nation), completing the white conquest of African populations in South Africa.147

In the shifting politics of this time period, race and class became closely intertwined in a way that reflects Charles W. Mills’ assertion that race is a political system, and that racial identity has political ramifications.148 The form of racial segregation established in South Africa was unique in that whites were so heavily dependent on non-white labor, and that the whites themselves were ethnically divided. The Afrikaners and English considered themselves to be distinct races and only rallied together when white supremacy itself was threatened.149 The racism promoted by colonials was used to distinguish classes between the whites.150 This type of inter-white racial hierarchy is still part of the social fabric of South Africa even after the collapse of apartheid. Tropes of racism and class became intertwined in language (English and Afrikaans) at this time where racial difference was described using metaphors of animal classification. Some of these systems are elaborated in South African literature.151

147 Ibid., xvii.
148 Mills, Blackness Visible, 74.
149 Leonard Thompson, 186.
150 Anderson, 150.
151 A good example can be found in: J.M. Coetzee, Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (New York: Penguin, 1997), 102. In this section a boy asks why animals must be hurt and killed, alluding to a Coloured friend of his who was whipped for running away. In the answer violence is naturalized as a God-ordained domination of one species over another, for the other “…the price of being on the earth, the price of being alive,” was subjugation.
Indeed, the systems of black labor exploitation were in place long before Afrikaner racism gained self-consciousness, it was an essential part of British Imperial policy. Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane, himself South African, argues that racial exploitation very early on was entangled with class exploitation. He writes that “racial oppression and class exploitation are inexorably intertwined in the modern world; they cannot be neatly separated for the sake of theoretical purity.”

It is in these spheres of identity that Berni Searle explores the complex and intertwined nature of embodied identity. The South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902) ended English conquest and imperial dominance in South Africa. The war itself had profound implications for the future of the region. The Afrikaners (this identity, distinct from Dutch, became increasingly radicalized in the early twentieth century) were victims of British imperialism, and the South African War was an imperialist war. The nationalism inspired by the conflict quickly turned into cultural chauvinism. David Theo Goldberg explains that “race is imposed upon otherness, the attempt to account for it, to know it, to control it.” The South African War began a change in the development of South Africa as a racial state. It marked a global shift away from British concepts of colonial domination where race was something exterior to European civilization toward a conception of a nationally internalized concept of race. Goldberg writes,

153 Giliomee, 206.
154 Magubane, 246.
156 Ibid., 165.
...the racial state trades on gendered determinations, reproducing its racial configurations in gendered terms and its gendered forms racially. Bodies are governed, colonially and postcolonially, through their constitutive positioning as racially engendered and in the gendering of their racial configuration.  

Mudimbe’s idea of *reprendre* as applied to an analysis of Searle’s art will provide a useful reading of the way Goldberg describes how bodies were socially positioned. Reclaiming this historical narrative in order to disarticulate it (to turn it “theoretically inside out” as described in Chapter one) provides not only a counter-space in which to critique conventional historical narratives, but to allow oppressed voices to reclaim authorship of those narratives. In the post-apartheid era, understanding how to integrate these voices in the body politic of South Africa has important ramifications, for that country, as elsewhere.

In the *Truth Veils* exhibition held at Witwatersrand in 1999, Berni Searle displayed pieces from the *Dis-Coloured Series: Palms of the Hands, Small of the Back, Nape of the Neck, Under the Belly, Soles of the Feet*, (Figure 2.2). These photographs displayed details of the named body parts, stained with Egyptian henna, looking like bruises, hung without frames off a shelf so that the ends of the prints were rolled on the floor. Black henna was sprinkled on the shelves and on the scrolled ends of the photographs. Above the shelf, smaller, framed images recreated her body, but not her face, fragmented, like slide specimens.  

Annie E. Coombes comments on the content of the piece, and the complex nature of the representation:  

There seems to me to be a dialectic relation established between the component parts of this installation and the assumption of verifiable racial hierarchies promoted throughout apartheid legislation and the so-called scientific scrutiny  

---

157 Ibid., 99.
that underpinned it. By on the one hand appropriating (visually) the language of science assumed as an elucidating discourse designed to make ‘truth’ visible but on the other hand only hinting at rather than stating ways in which such ‘evidence’ could be read, Searle draws attention to the spurious ‘visibility’ and ‘transparency’ (objectivity) of scientific investigation – in this case where it specifically relates to questions of race and ethnicity. In other words, this is not just some witty ‘po-mo’ indeterminacy at work here but a more attentive mobility of different kinds of visual metaphor and particular properties of certain media in order to provoke a critical engagement.\(^{159}\)

Coombes, in this selection, recognizes the multiplicities of readings suggested in complex layers of Searle’s works, for instance, the Egyptian henna. This African material is traditionally applied for beautification, but is being used in *Dis-Coloured* (1999) to signify violence. The subtle reference to the way culture can be twisted by discourse is indicative of the kind of challenging metaphors and symbols that continue to be an important aspect of Searle’s oeuvre.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 247.
In *Dis-Coloured* (1999), Searle isolates parts of her body but excludes her face. Her individuality is subdued to documentation of pieces. Moreover, the regions depicted are not areas typically displayed in public (small of the back, under the belly), they suggest private or intimate spaces. Searle commented,

I identified parts of the body that are vulnerable but not highly visible or often exposed. I stained these areas with black Egyptian henna, leaving a temporary bluish-purple mark that resembles bruises. Photographs of these areas were taken under a pane of glass, which resulted in a heightened and distorted sense of what was being seen. Things don’t add up on other levels: the substance that makes the mark is different to the colour of the mark itself. Areas which are softer like the tummy, absorbed less henna than hardened areas, like the soles of the feet.\(^{160}\)

---

The images treat the subject matter as though the henna stains were bruises and these are police photos recording abuse. The whole of the body is divvied up into slices of the private displayed as public. The camera intrudes on the vulnerable areas of the body to document and classify. The subtleties of skin color, imperfections, and stains, are laid bare. Here Searle consciously dis-articulates the body, distorts the viewer’s perspective of it and alters the primary means of its ability to be racially classified (by altering the skin color). Gqola comments on the deconstructive nature of the piece, “The series is therefore not about un-doing, but about breaking down, and also disssing coloured as discursive construct that overdetermines.”

The photos are stained and dusted with henna. This gives the appearance of official observation and interference (as though the surfaces have been processed for fingerprints), but also suggests the instability of the scientific document. Under the re-organization systems of apartheid, official racial statuses for thousands of people were altered; many people previously categorized as white became Coloured, many other Coloured persons became re-classified as black. The myth of race as a “natural” category of scientific discourse was exposed during its own creation. Objective documentation, the photographs, are “framed” so as to shift the borders of racial inclusion and exclusion. The metaphorical fingerprints of the regime desiring scientific language to justify brutality and exploitation are evident on the surface of the documents themselves.

By destabilizing the tools of official records, Searle suggest that the “truths” created by these systems are contingent on framing and construction. By subjecting her body to such self-scrutiny (made public through exhibition) Searle implicitly questions

---

the framing of her own body, asking, what does it mean to be in this body? In
objectifying herself she reclaims this history and narrative becoming both subjected to
scrutiny and the one scrutinizing. Both identities are claimed. Searle challenges “the
dynamics of power” by stressing her agency “as well as the ways she has been written on,
coloured by processes which she evokes from the past.”

Considered through the methodological assessment of *reprendre*, Searle is
playing two roles in this display and in so doing she presents a non-essentialized subject
that acts as an agent in the act of re-writing historical narratives. She exposes, and is
exposed by this activity. She demonstrates how these signifiers of identity and
classification are constructed and documented and in so doing provide a space for critical
engagement with those histories, challenging those truths, thus regaining agency over
their creation. The relationship between the camera and her work is addressed by Searle,
“The use of the medium also draws attention to the way photography has been used, often
as a way of producing ‘evidence’ that systematically classifies and categorizes
information.” The smaller prints in the exhibition “disrupt expectations because they
contain more ‘information’ than the relatively larger digital prints.”

The Racial Politics of Apartheid and Artistic Interpretations

Racial identification is a positional choice made by people to delineate with which
groups they wish to be identified. Race is political and social, but racism as a discursive
practice has its own ‘logic.’ Hybridity is a “process of cultural translation, which is

---

162 Ibid., 127.
163 Bester, “Interview with Berni Searle”
agonistic because it is never completed, but it rests with its unpredictability.”  

The “logic” of apartheid was, of course, one of domination and exploitation. The “right” to land and home for one group of people came at the expense of another group defined by racial dissimilarity. Race was a convenient way to mark difference for the purpose of exploitation. The relationship between class and race is further remarked upon by Antonio Negri, who writes that “racism is a class point of view, but through racism, the violence of the class point of view is multiplied a thousand times.” He associates the dualism of racism with capitalism, as both are based on a violent separation. He describes apartheid as a division of the proletariat along the lines of color, brutal exploitation, imitation of the Nazi’s methods of territorial expansion together with the utilization of enemy labor power, and finally an attempt to encourage tout-azimut, fratricidal wars.

The goal was to prevent a united “insurrectionary subject” from emerging. Racialized subjectivity under colonialism and apartheid deprived the colonized of individualism and ego-identity. This distinction is necessary for the whites maintaining it. It creates not just “the other” but a dependant other which exists only in relation to the independent white subject. White is never “not-black” as a “self-identical, self-reproducing term, white draws its ideological power from its proclaimed transparency, from its self-elevation over the category of ‘race’.” In racist discourse white is its own other but black is always, as Diana Fuss writes, “the negative term in a Hegelian dialectic

---

166 Ibid., 112.
continuously incorporated and negated.” The “mixed-race” person within such a social duality, can find him or herself positioned as a kind of “doubled-other” disconnected from both black and white identity. Mohammed Adhikari discusses the politics of this positioning at length but it is manifested in many ways. Naomi Tutu, daughter of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in a lecture and discussion session on the topic of race mentions growing up in South Africa where in her community the term “Coloured” was a derogatory one that carried the stereotype of an unkempt, lazy person. It wasn’t until years later that she realized that Coloured people had the same, empty stereotype of black people. Demonstrating how persons of color, under oppression and segregation, began to perpetuate the ideas of difference and othering promoted by the official regime.

Mark Sanders comments of Afrikaner nationalism as it relates to language,

In an abyssal historical irony, given the origins of the tongue in which Afrikaner nationalists ground its existence (to which Breyten Breytenbach constantly points), it shuns hybridity and measures purity. This identity is—if indeed it is—no more than a step away from the phobia of ‘blood mixing’ [Bloedvermenging] that so obsessed Geoffry Cronje, the ‘mind of apartheid.’ Afrikaners thus needed apartheid to justify their own distinctiveness as volk. Afrikaner identity was so afraid of its own hybridity that apartheid became the only way to affirm its transcendental (as opposed to contingent) existence.

This existence was founded on two inventions, as described by Okwui Enwezor. The first was the ontological description of a history-less native population, and second, the

---


169 Sanders, 82.
epistemological description of the native as devoid of knowledge and subjectivity.\textsuperscript{170} Whites could thus posit themselves as bringers of civilization and history, not taking away from the indigenous population, but rather giving context to a people they deemed outside of discourse. In the South African context, the Castle of Good Hope is an excellent symbol of this idea. In Searle’s piece \textit{Alibama} (2008) this symbol is disarticulated and the multi-dimensions of its historical narratives are explored, opening up the space to meanings beyond the evocation of white supremacy and colonization, as discussed in the next chapter.

After the South African War a period of reconstruction began proto-apartheid policies of racial segregation, non-white disenfranchisement and pass-laws.\textsuperscript{171} The South African Union was founded in 1910 and organized into four provinces. The African Political Organization (APO) was the most dominant Coloured political pressure group in the Early Union until the more radical movements of the 1930s and was founded in 1909.\textsuperscript{172} The African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 to provide legal, political voice to the black population. In 1913 the Natives Land Act (Act number 27) was passed to keep blacks from legally re-claiming land taken by white conquest. This law incorporated segregation into the law for the first time in South Africa.\textsuperscript{173} The Act prohibited sale of land to blacks by whites, and vice versa and also set up black

\textsuperscript{170} Enwezor, “Reframing the Black Subject” 24.
\textsuperscript{171} Leonard Thompson, 227.
\textsuperscript{172} Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough}, 68-70.
\textsuperscript{173} Leonard Thompson, xix.
“homelands” to settle displaced Africans. In 1914 the ANC submitted a petition to the Union government to stop the Act, but was not successful in doing so.\footnote{174 T.R.H. Davenport, \textit{South Africa: A Modern History}, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1991), 270.}

The APO promoted the interests of the petit bourgeois among the Coloured, meaning their aims were primarily assimilationist. Within the APO English was preferred as being more civilized and educated, whereas Afrikaans (especially the Cape dialect used by so many Coloured people) was considered low-class and too close to the language of the oppressors. Language is important to the development of identity, as will be examined further in Searle’s use of language in \textit{Home and Away} (2003) which uses English verb declinations to dramatize the tension of migrant identities. The existence of the ANC and APO as well as innumerable other non-white political groups demonstrates that despite the efforts of the Union government, there was wide resistance to the changing political landscape. At no point in South African history was the oppression of non-white populations completely uncontested. Searle’s work brings attention to these marginalized histories by questioning and examining the ways the categories of exclusion came into being.

The South African Union sided with Britain during the First World War, but this decision led to violence and rebellion in the Afrikaner community. The conflict was fuelled by a war-devastated economy with extreme unemployment. Jan Smuts (1870-1950) became Prime Minister in 1919.\footnote{175 Heather Deegan, \textit{The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After} (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 3.} He was reconciliatory with the English and lost the next election to J.B.M. Hertzog of the NP. The policies of National Party turned
increasing racist and promoted itself on the basis of a romanticized notion of Afrikaner identity.\textsuperscript{176}

The first printed reference to apartheid was in a pamphlet publishing the proceedings of a conference held in 1929 in the Free State town of Kroonstad. A reform church reverend supported separate churches and religious education for Coloureds and blacks.\textsuperscript{177} By this time the term Afrikaner had solidified its popular meaning to refer to white South Africans of Dutch descent who spoke Afrikaans as their first language. Non-white, especially the growing and diverse Coloured populations, also spoke Afrikaans as a primary language, but was decidedly not considered a part of the racial/social category of Afrikaner.\textsuperscript{178} In 1929 the NP solidified its power. They received the majority of the Afrikaner vote but no more than 10\% of Coloured votes. The contested relationship between Coloured people and NP policies is apparent at this stage, and one that will continue up to and through the post-apartheid elections of the 1990s. In the 1930s Afrikaner poverty levels grew. This same time period saw increased Afrikaner nationalism in reaction against British economic policies, fueled by the promotion of Afrikaans in literature.\textsuperscript{179} Early apartheid apologists like N.P. van Wyk Louw (1906-1970) tried to contextualize the “race problems” of South Africa to the “problems of Europe.” Louw lectured in Europe about South Africa’s \textit{Rassevraagstukke} (Racial Questions). He saw racial segregation as consistent with European ethics and political

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{176} Benedict Anderson, 143. \\
\textsuperscript{177} Leonard Thompson, 259. \\
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 265. \\
\textsuperscript{179} Giliomee, 280-9.
\end{flushleft}
Coloured identity was shifting at this time collectively towards an assimilationist mode of co-existence with the white state. The complicity of the Coloured population with the establishment of anti-African racist policy is part of the subtext of *Alibama* (2008) discussed in the next chapter.

In 1939 the government of the South African Union had split. J.B.M. Hertzog (1866-1942) served as Prime Minister from 1924 to 1939 and wanted neutrality in the growing European conflict. Jan Smuts thought the Union was obliged to support Germany. In a very close decision South Africa backed the Allies. This decision polarized the country and set the stage for the NP victory in 1948. During this time resistance to exploitation and segregation increased. In 1946 approximately 70,000 to 100,000 African miners went on strike. The government responded with violence. In 1950 the government passed the Population Registration Act, which officially categorized racial identity. It was followed by the Group Areas Act, which created racially zoned areas. In 1952 the ANC and other organizations officially began passive resistance campaigns, and the ANC published the Freedom Charter in 1955. (See Appendix B for a calendar of some of the major events of apartheid and the struggle against it.)

Through the 1950s and 1960s black resistance movements, like the ANC, became increasingly organized and radicalized. The international community began its isolation of South Africa in the 1960s forcing South African companies to invest internally. This

---

180 Sanders, 57-8.  
181 Giliomee, 295.  
182 Deegan, 28.
created an economic boom, meanwhile government enforcement of apartheid polices became alarmingly violent.\textsuperscript{183}

The South African Coloured People’s Organization (SACPO) was founded in 1953 in association with the ANC and with many of the same aims. The Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) was a left-wing radical movement, one of the many radical Coloured political organizations active until the state crushed opposition in the 1960s. They published a newspaper, \textit{The Torch}, from 1946 to 1963.\textsuperscript{184} NEUM sought to unify all South Africa’s racially oppressed populations. Their leadership felt that Coloured, black, and Indian fighting and prejudices were based on superficial differences exacerbated by racist mythology propagated by the white minority to dismantle unified resistance. In the newspaper being Coloured was considered an active racial group with political agency and choice.\textsuperscript{185} This latter view is one still maintained by South African scholars such as Mohammed Adhikari and Yegan Pillay. Dr. Pillay, in interviews with the current author on this topic, has asserted that Coloured identity is “stand alone,” which is to say that it is not contingent on other racial groups.\textsuperscript{186}

Hendrik Verwoerd (1901-1966) was elected Prime Minister in 1958 and remained in office until his assassination in 1966. Under his term the Sharpeville Massacre occurred in 1960, and the government banned African political organizations (including the ANC, NEUM and SACPO). A year later South Africa would become the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and formally left the British Commonwealth. In 1964 Mandela and

\textsuperscript{183} Leonard Thompson, 343.
\textsuperscript{184} Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough}, 98.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{186} Yegan Pillay, interview with author via telephone, 24 April 2013.
other ANC-PAC leaders were given life sentences.\(^{187}\) Just after Voerwoerd’s assassination the social-political face of the rest of the African continent began a process of radical change. Between the years 1966-68 Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland all gained independence. Mozambique and Angola gained their independence in 1975-6. Tensions mounted in South Africa coming to a head in 1977 when approximately 575 died in Soweto and other townships during large-scale protests.\(^{188}\) After the Soweto uprising, the rise in Black Consciousness caused many Coloureds to reject that identity as a white creation and instead to promote a unified black identity. This spurred on “Coloured rejectionism” wherein some Coloured activists rejected their identity as being a contrivance of white supremacy.\(^{189}\) Some have suggested that although this idea had good intentions, rejectionism was ultimately not sustainable as decades of racial segregation had already formed strong ties of racial solidarity in the Coloured community. Suggesting any group could put aside that identity is untenable.\(^{190}\)

The violence sparked a United Nations arms embargo against the RSA in 1977. P.W. Botha (1916-2006) of the NP became Prime Minister in 1978, staying in office until 1984. During his terms Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) won its independence in 1980. In 1984 the RSA published a new constitution giving limited enfranchisement to Coloureds, Indians and Asians, but not blacks. Due to the reforms of that constitution, Botha became the President. The pass laws were finally repealed in 1986 amidst rampant violence across the country, and during the same year a State of Emergency was declared.

\(^{187}\) Leonard Thompson, xx.
\(^{188}\) Ibid., xx.
\(^{189}\) Adhikari, Not White Enough, 134.
\(^{190}\) Yegan Pillay, interview with the author, 24 April 2013.
In response, the United States of America passed an anti-apartheid act over President Ronald Reagan’s veto. This support helped inspire a three week mine strike by approximately one-quarter million African workers in 1987. Two years later F.W. de Klerk (b. 1936) of the NP was elected President of the RSA. Under his leadership, Nelson Mandela and many other activists were released in 1990. That year and the next negotiations were held to begin the process of repealing apartheid policies and establishing democratic procedures. In 1994 South Africa’s first free and democratic elections were held, Nelson Mandela won the Presidency for the ANC. The violence and instability of this era, including necklacing, is implied in Searle’s trilogy, *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10) which will be examined in detail in Chapter four. Since the 1990s there has been an increase in politicized Coloured identity as fears of marginalization resurface.

At that point, in the mid 1990s, South Africa counted approximately 3.2 million Coloureds in its population. About 83% spoke Afrikaans as their first language, with the rest usually having English as their mother language. Almost 85% of Coloureds live in the Western and Northern Cape provinces. The Cape Malay (the group with which Berni Searle is identified) are a large community of about 180,000 in the mid-1990s living primarily in the Western Cape. Descendants of Afrikaners, Khoikhoi, and Indian slaves, the group historically is predominately Muslim with their first language being

---

191 Leonard Thompson, xx-xxi.
Afrikaans. During this period of violent upheaval many contemporary artists attempted to engage with the implications of change in their work.

Njabulo Ndebele, South African scholar and Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, describes the difficulty of making art in the aftermath of apartheid. The whole country was in a persistent absurd theater, as Ndebele describes it. He claims Kafka could not have written about cruelty and insanity anymore compellingly than the stories revealed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The reference to Antonin Artaud is well taken. In his book, The Theater and its Double, Artaud writes that,

…poetry is anarchic to the degree that it brings into play all the relationships of object to object and of form to signification. It is anarchic also to the degree that its occurrence is the consequence of a disorder that draws us closer to chaos.

The Theatre of Cruelty is meant to recognize the anarchy around us and bring mysticism back, to revel in the chaos. Dealing with the aftermath of the social-political upheaval in South Africa during the 1990s has been a heavy challenge for contemporary artists. White artists in particular have struggled to reconcile their recognition of their brutally maintained status of privilege against the need for healing and reconciliation in the new “rainbow nation.” Rainbow nation was a term reportedly coined by Archbishop

---

196 Ibid., 81.
Desmond Tutu in 1994 to describe the non-racial, inclusive government to be built by the country’s first democratic election.  

Midcentury South African modernist painting tended to show differing characteristics based on color divisions. White painters tended to look to indigenize local culture with borrowed European ideas as well as to validate their own minority-authority. Black artists of this time tended to illustrate cosmopolitan, urban Africans, expressing a right to the city, education and modernity at large. As the apartheid regime eventually collapsed South African artists such as Paul Stopforth, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Penny Siopis (among many others) would directly address the violence used by the government to maintain oppressive control. Considering the common themes and issues addressed by these artists allows for an understanding of the South African art world as Searle began her career. Just prior to Searle becoming internationally active in the mid-1990s, these other artists had established themselves as willing to directly engage in political debate through their work. By the 1970s and 1980s South African art of a more overtly political nature came to international attention. This includes the powerful series by Paul Stopforth, *Elegy-For Steve Biko* in 1981 (Figure 2.3). The death of Steve Biko became a commonly invoked symbol of outrage and struggle, seen also in Sam Nhlengethwa’s, *It Left Him Cold- The Death of Steve Biko*, 1990 (Figure 2.4). The use of Biko as an image was a double reference to violent activism. Biko was killed in custody, but during his life

---

197 Nelson Mandela further explained the meaning of the phrase during his first term in office by saying, “Each of us is intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld- a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.” Qtd. In: Kathryn A. Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1996), 71.

his writings were heavily influenced by Frantz Fanon. Fanon described the self as created through acts of recognition. The racist gaze on the black body denies the recognition of humanity by the racist and by the black subject. Only violent struggle could break violent oppression.199 The use of Biko’s body positions the activist like a martyr, whose identity transcends the individual to the level of icon.200 In Chapter four of this dissertation another visual icon with violent connotations in South African culture, the burning tire, will be examined as its own symbol of death and activism in Searle’s trilogy *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10).

![Image](paulstopforth.com)

**Figure 2.3.** Paul Stopforth, *Elegy—For Steve Biko*, 1981. www.paulstopforth.com

Figure 2.4. Sam Nhlengethwa, *It Left Him Cold – The Death of Steve Biko*, 1990. Goodman Gallery.

No less political, even without the direct references to activists killed in the struggle against apartheid are the works of Penny Siopis (Figure 2.5). Her works explore a history of disciplining the female body in South Africa. Brenda Schmahmann identifies the key to Siopis’s works is what Julia Kristeva defines as “abjection.”²⁰¹ In Siopis’s works bodies are exposed and tossed into visual-cultural chaos with motifs of carnage and suffering. Siopis, Jane Alexander, William Kentrigde, and other white South African artists continually engage with notions of how race play into their understanding of the new nation. Identifying “white-ness” and complicating it has been an important one for race theorists in South Africa. Liese van der Watt argues that in South Africa whiteness has never been invisible:

If anything, white privilege heightened the visibility of whiteness for both those included and excluded from the category, and the anti-apartheid struggle effectively foregrounded illegitimate white domination and hegemony.\textsuperscript{202}

Critics like Enwezor and Oguibe argue white artists who use the black body in their art as a continuation of the subjection of black identity. Van der Watt though criticizes Enwezor claiming that he continues to classify white- and black-ness as monolithic and undifferentiated.\textsuperscript{203} The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will bring a discussion of Coloured-ness into this already dynamic discourse. The focus of other academic works on exclusively black or white narratives misses an essential factor of South African identity and diversity. Berni Searle’s work often subtly and with complexity addresses these nuanced issues.

\textsuperscript{202} Van der Watt, “The Many Hearts of Whiteness,” 15.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 31.
Van der Watt goes on to cite the art of Minnette Vari and Kendall Geers, which critiques the notion that identities are fixed and predetermined. Even though they never challenged whiteness as such, whiteness remains integral to identity. She situates this discussion into a wider theoretical debate. Briefly, scholars working in the field of identity politics have long struggled for greater visibility of minority groups, arguing that greater visibility would bring greater representation. But they have been criticized by poststructuralist critics for positing an essentialist identity where the representation is taken to be the Real. So, for instance, Sue Ellen Case (1996) has taken issue with Judith

204 Ibid., 44.
Butler’s notion of the performative or constructed subject, arguing that this is an attempt to evacuate the active body by situating the subject always already inside of discourse. Case advocates a politics that would give greater visibility to the underrepresented and the subaltern- specifically in her case the lesbian body- and in so doing she wants to recharge essentialism as a way to create solidarity. On the other hand, as Phelan points out, ‘the hitherto under-represented other’ is often fixed through visible representations.²⁰⁵

History restructures identity. Michael J.C. Echeruo writes,

In this sense, our modern (or postmodern) condition is not our identity, and does not negate our identity. It is our history, including the many ways our intellectual history has permitted us to reflect on our selfhood, that has modified the circumstances under which we express our identity.²⁰⁶

It is precisely a consciousness of this history that Berni Searle brings into her representations, inviting the viewers to see beyond the surface colors, textures and landscapes to the deeper signifiers of history and identity. Understanding her works vis-à-vis other artists’ exploration of similar themes will illuminate her importance to contributing to the discourse on the body politic. The aforementioned artists have all created works with specific political messages. Searle’s art is in the same cultural conversation and is best understood in dialogue with these artists.

Robert Thornton brings in Kwame Appiah and Achille Mbembe while discussing South Africa and argues that the nation in the 1990s was a postmodern one but not a postcolonial one. He maintains that apartheid was rampant modernism, and that post-

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 199-200.
apartheid is postmodernism, but apartheid was also postcolonial. In Africa, as Appiah points out, Modernization was synonymous with colonization. A key part of this process was the bureaucratic administration.

There is a profound continuity that connects the colony with the postcolony, and this is the resilience of administrative practices themselves. These are culturally revealed in the postcolony but they are not wholly other or wholly different from the colony.

This perceived continuity of disenfranchisement in post apartheid South Africa would have violent consequences during several waves of anti-immigrant violence in 2008. These events are addressed in Searle’s works *Mute* (2008) and *Seeking Refuge* (2008) discussed in detail in Chapter five.

The motto of the apartheid state was *eendrag maak mag* (Unity is Power). This was a lie, but also its most zealous hope. Apartheid failed because it undermined its goal of unity with constant marking difference, in the aftermath “the logic of difference remains, but now it lacks the political, philosophical and aesthetic image of unity of the (total) nation.” South African politics is meta-politics, always about the nature of power itself. The future of South Africa is to be always in transition, always one step ahead of the apocalypse. To be successful it must be in a state of permanent transition, like Trotsky’s idea of a “permanent revolution.” The end of history in South Africa would be apocalyptic, thus constant transition will hold it, precariously, together.

---

208 Ibid., 139.
209 Ibid., 142.
210 Ibid., 158.
In 2001, the seat of the South African High Commission in Trafalgar Square, London was re-dedicated. The building had originally been established in 1933 and lavishly decorated with many paintings, sculptures and murals designed and executed by white South African artists. Since the 1994 change in government officials had been calling for a re-decoration of The South Africa House (as the Commission building was known) and for permanent removal of several racist murals. Many art historians and conservators argued that the murals, though displaying offensive stereotypes of Africans did still have artistic and historical value. At the re-opening of the house several contemporary artists were invited to display installation pieces to effectively reclaim and question the space. Berni Searle’s contribution was a piece entitled On Loan: Acquired, Preserved, Transformed. In this work, she appropriates two paintings original to the building done by painter Jan Juta in 1933. Juta’s paintings depict black “warriors” and “water bearers” as generic archetypes of “tribal” life in an unidentifiable landscape. Searle placed a red acrylic box over the murals, transforming and scrutinizing the narratives.

Jan Juta’s work was featured prominently in South Africa House though current art historians typically categorize him as a “second-rate painter who only received his commission through nepotism.” Searle interrogates Juta’s image of Africans (a depiction Coombes describes as “generic indigeneity”) by setting the displays off from their decorative function. So altered, the murals were no longer illustrative or aesthetic;

---

214 Lewin, “Racist Paintings.”
the boxes preserved and transformed Juta’s work. Searle described her boxes as a “counter-strategy to ethnographic practices of display.”\textsuperscript{215} By acting like a museum curator, Searle questions the normative nature of the archetypes presented. She reclaims the images and the official building through an act of appropriation as preservation. The work asks: what is being shown, by whom, and for what purpose? She refuses to take the images on face value and challenges the viewers to turn their attention onto the meaning of the representation and the context of its creation. After the exhibition was over most of Juta’s murals were covered by removable panels. Lorna de Smidt, South African political scientist and art historian in charge of South Africa House’s refurbishment, said of the decision to not paint over the murals, “We had to acknowledge the past, and accept that it is there. You can’t just airbrush things out of history and pretend they didn’t exist.”\textsuperscript{216} By offering a counter-narrative, Searle’s interaction with Juta’s work opened the images to critical discourse engaging the past in a reflective and ironic way. Juta’s original work engaged in a specific type of “other-making” conditioned by the imperialist racism of his time. Searle interrogates this process by exposing it as a process; she suggests Juta’s images are not a representation of “truth,” but rather an artificial construct, a relic of antiquated thinking. This artifact is put on display, as though it were in a historical museum. In so doing, Searle takes over the process of other-making, positioning Juta’s culture as something to be studied and analyzed, something “other” and outside of constructive discourse. The act itself becomes a performance of

\textsuperscript{215} Coombes, \textit{History After Apartheid}, 291.  
\textsuperscript{216} Lewin, “Racist Paintings.”
reclaiming, an act of *reprendre* that imbues the original space with new understanding based on historical positioning.

South African Politics and Coloured Identity Post-Apartheid

After Mandela’s term as President, the office has been exclusively held by members of the ANC. Concurrent with Mandela’s terms in office and his immediate successors, Berni Searle was just beginning to make a name for herself on the international art scene (she graduated from UCT in 1987 and gained her MAFA in 1995) responding to this early era of South African democracy with works such as *For Fatherland* (1994), *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (1999), and *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999). Mandela was followed by Thabo Mbeki (in office from 1999-2008) who was elected for two terms, but resigned due to legal complications, shortly after the outbreaks of anti-immigrant violence that in part inspired Searle’s piece *Mute* (2008) discussed in Chapter five, in figure 5.3. Kgalema Mothlanthe was appointed by the party to serve the remaining year of Mbeki’s term before Jacob Zuma took office as the newest elected president in 2008. At the time of this writing, Zuma is the incumbent. (The next general election is scheduled for 7 May 2014.) According to studies completed by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) for the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa, the ANC’s dominance is a trend likely to continue in future elections.\(^\text{217}\)

The primary demographic both the ANC and National Party (NP) have tried to court in the Western Cape has been the Coloured population. Many in the Coloured

community have accused the ANC of “Afro-chauvinism” accentuating Coloured fears of marginalization that the NP and other parties have been quick to court. Interviews of voters in 2011 in Cape Town indicated that race was still a major factor in determining for what party citizens cast their votes. As discussed by BBC reporter Karen Allen, “The Western Cape is the only province not controlled by the ANC and also the only province where people of mixed racial origins are in a majority.”

Given increasing voter frustration with the ANC in recent provincial and national elections the NP since 2008 has risen from its own ashes rebuilding as a multi-racial, inclusive party founded on right-wing, nationalist, conservative social and economic values. With slogans like *Maak suid Afrika reg!* and *genoeg is genoeg* (Make South Africa Right, and Enough is Enough) the NP has seen a modest resurgence in recent years. In provinces with the highest concentration of Coloured populations (the Western Cape) more conservative parties have had more support.

The history of Coloured struggle against racism and marginalization has often put them politically and socially in conflict with black South Africans. Through an analysis of popular culture and vernacular language tropes (including jokes and racial slurs) Mohammed Adhikari demonstrates the cultural belief that racial purity is to be held in higher regard than a hybrid status “closer” to whiteness. Better to be black, than mixed. Racial hybridity has been (and he maintains to some extent still is) seen as inferior to

---

220 NP slogans and policies can be seen at their website: www.nationalparty.co.za.
“pure” groups. The popular understanding of Coloureds as descendants of mixed sexual liaisons has cast them as inferior to both blacks and whites. Wrapped in the social shame of hybridity is also the shame of illegitimacy and a connection to a “savage” past.\textsuperscript{222} In Cape Town, particularly, racial animosity between black and Coloured people persists and has become enfolded into the political debate. Many black voters feel that post-apartheid Affirmative Action policies have been unfairly beneficial to Coloureds. Coloureds feel quite the opposite, specifically that the ANC neglects Coloured voters.\textsuperscript{223} Fears of marginalization for both black and Coloured people have led to the continuation of negative stereotypes in both communities. Naomi Tutu, daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has spoken publicly about recent work to confront these negative attitudes that still need to be overcome in order to further conversation.\textsuperscript{224} These fears have been emphasized by many historians who even in the post-apartheid era still downplay or entirely overlook the contributions of Coloured people to South African history. Many schools of thought deny Coloured people a significant role in the making of their own identity. They assume that Coloured identity is only a white-supremacist created identity and therefore a negative identity. Against this Adhikari claims that by its very nature, social identity is largely and in the first instance the product of its bearers and can no more be imposed on people by the state or ruling groups than it can spring automatically from miscegenation or their racial constitution. Social identity is cultural in nature in that it is part of learned behavior and is molded by social experience and

\textsuperscript{222} Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough}, 24-8.
\textsuperscript{223} Karen Allen, n.p.
social interaction. At most, social identities can be manipulated by outsiders—but even then, only to the extent that it resonates strongly with the bearers’ image of themselves and their social group as a whole.\textsuperscript{225} This is related to a description of racial identities ascribed to people under the apartheid regime as described by Dr. Yegan Pillay. Coloured identity has a cohesiveness because of its forced segregation from other racial groups. The struggle against apartheid challenged the notion of being referred to as Coloured but ultimately did not erode the cohesiveness of the identity over all.\textsuperscript{226}

In the post-apartheid era there is still much ambiguity in the Coloured community. A cliché adage is first they were not white enough, now they are not black enough. This expresses the frustration felt at continued marginalization. Since the dismantling of the apartheid racial classification system, many have steadfastly emphasized their Colouredness, some in flagrantly racist, anti-African ways.\textsuperscript{227} Since 1994 a stereotype has emerged of the Coloured person being particularly racist. While this is unjustified, there are many in the Coloured community who are highly sensitive to issues of race.\textsuperscript{228}

In the HSRC report to the IEC it is demonstrated that dissatisfaction with the ANC government is particularly strong in areas with high Coloured populations. Across the nation only about six percent of Coloureds feel satisfied with the way democracy was working in South Africa, as compared to over 20\% of Africans. As the report states, “race still appears to play a very important part in the lives of people in South Africa.”\textsuperscript{229} Further the report indicates that voter apathy is on the rise in the Coloured community as

\begin{itemize}
\item Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough}, 33-36.
\item Pillay, interview with the author, 22 May 2013.
\item Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough}, 178.
\item Ibid., 181.
\item HSRC, 5.
\end{itemize}
voters come to have less confidence in the political parties.\textsuperscript{230} In an attempt to reclaim political agency there has been a trend in some areas of the Coloured community to lay claim to a Khoisan or “first people” heritage. A 2009 documentary on the topic indicated that some Coloured peoples in Cape Town hoped that proving such ancestry (through genetic testing) would affirm their belonging.\textsuperscript{231} This dissertation will contribute to the dialogue between races by disarticulating the embodied and social-political nature of identity in order to provide a deeper understanding of those rubrics and how they operate within the body politic.

Despite attempts to destabilize or disrupt their culture, Coloured identity has been a consistent one in South African history. The myriad of social constructions and conflicts that have shaped contemporary Coloured-ness lends itself to consideration through the lens of \textit{reprendre}. Coloured identity from the beginning has been an identity of multiplicity and hybridity. During the course of South African history, Coloured people have had to consider how to frame their “color” (choosing whether to emphasize their “whiteness” or “blackness” or specific ethnicity, like Khoisan). This community collectively participates in a reclaiming of histories to challenge oppression and maintain culture and tradition. Identity is complex and fluid. It is historical, personal, political and social. It is lived and known through the body in its particular environment. Berni Searle, like some post apartheid South African artists, has found ways to perform, dis-articulate and challenge these environments that oppress in order to expose their systems and open space for interrogation and reflection.

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{231} Chace, \textit{I’m not Coloured}. 
Searle engages with histories of oppression by opening up counter-narratives and appropriating specifically South African signifiers of categorization and exclusion, as seen in *Dis-Coloured* (1999) and *On Loan* (2001). Embodying the marginalized subject she transcends victimization to expose the constituents of articulation that have been historically assembled by the agents of apartheid. In both pieces elements are placed under scrutiny to expose the contingencies of the historical subject. Through such examination Searle breaks normative assumptions about the stability of identity and opens space for dialog, claiming room for agency and political discourse.

In the next chapter discussions of the works *Colour Me* (1998) and *Alibama* (2008) will demonstrate some of the ways Searle draws upon the complex history of South Africa and the intricacies of Coloured identity to create a new political discussions on the nature of racial and social identity in the post-apartheid nation. Through specific references to colonial and trans-Atlantic trade routes and to her own personal history, Searle meaningfully conflates the grand historical narratives of nationality and race to her own personal story of South African-ness. Doing so engages the private within the larger national-social commentary. Being South African is a process of becoming. In the “great Other-making” of this process, Searle indicates the struggle of every person in every culture to determine his or her own place and meaning within the flow of history. Presenting her body covered in spices, or perched upon the Castle of Good Hope, is to present a body conscious of history, involved and actively engaged with it. The political significance of her representations are only intensified given the political climate as it
relates to racial identity in contemporary South Africa, as outlined above. These histories are brought to life in Searle’s performances.
CHAPTER 3: THE ARTICULATED SELF: BODY, HISTORY, AND RECLAIMED NARRATIVE SPACES

Berni Searle, in her artwork, engages with the articulated and contingent signifiers of identity in such a way as to dis-invest them of stable, monolithic meanings. Playing with the tension of absence and presence in the works considered in this chapter, she creates indeterminate spaces, collapsing normative historical discourses. Works such as Colour Me (1998), Traces (1999), Snow White (2000), and Alibama (2008) employ signifiers of racial-national belonging articulated through the mechanisms of the South African body politic. By performing symbolic gestures she confronts and reclaims identity. Exposing these articulations she makes it possible to engage in counter discourses about the histories represented and positions Searle’s work within a larger sphere of contemporary African art discourse.

Invoking the inter-continental movements of immigration, colonialization, and the slave trade, and the effects of these narratives on the body politic of South Africa, Searle opens dialogues with previously oppressed voices allowing for political agency to be claimed by those typically ignored in such discourse. Placed in continuity and dialogue with other contemporary artists, such as Ana Mendieta, MwangiHutter (formerly known as Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hutter), and Carrie Mae Weems, as will be done here, the issues of embodiment and identity rewrite old narratives to move beyond victimization to empowerment and agency.

In post-apartheid South Africa it is not uncommon for some members of the Coloured community to claim Khoisan heritage as a way of connecting to the “First
Peoples” of the Cape, and to find stability in a “pure” African ancestry. South African scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola, University of Witwatersrand, holds that this is in part performed to counter racist discourses where the term Coloured is used pejoratively in order to distance Coloured people from African identity, and to counter academic narratives of the Khoisan peoples as an extinct race. She explains that

…foregrounding Khoi identity is not to pretend that these racist discourses do not exist, but to choose a particular self positioning in relation to them. It is to contest the racist academic and popular discourses which declare that Khoi and San identities are vacated spaces.232

This movement is indicative of some members of the Coloured community desiring to re-cast their body politic by shifting emphasis on an assumed heritage. It demonstrates what Fierke maintains, “that community identity is neither fixed nor static; rather, communities of recognition are constituted and reconstituted through the movement and the circulation of emotion …and given resonance and power through memory.”233 Claiming and remembering the plight of Cape Town’s indigenous population provides means for this community to re-actualize their own political agency in the post-apartheid era. By the early nineteenth century, the Khoisan had been largely subjugated and displaced from their lands and those still living in the region worked as laborers for white farmers, and in some cases, enslaved.234

Berni Searle directly addresses the history of slavery in works such as *Colour Me* (1998) and *Alibama* (2008). The international reach of the institutions of slavery and

233 Fierke, 79.
oppression are evoked in her works that suggest the violent ways in which Asian, Indian, and African diasporas have been forcibly made. By examining the spices and bodies traded, and the location of their displacement, the Castle of Good Hope, the images discussed in this chapter disarticulate the “untidy identity formations” inherent in diasporas.235 The histories on display in these works are the history of Cape Town, Searle’s own Cape-Malay heritage, the history of Khoisan subjugation, and the history of trans-continental slavery.

The Colour Me series opened at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet on 7 April 1999 (Figure 3.1). In this work, Searle literally immerses her body in signifiers of the past questioning the politics of commodification and classification and how the mechanisms of apartheid have attempted to describe and control black and Coloured female bodies. The calculated presence/non-presence of her body in her works indicates her control of the narratives being challenged and those being newly written. This piece is often viewed as a reference to her “slave ancestry” but Searle explains,

in reality, I have very little knowledge of where my family came from, beyond my great grandparents. On a personal level, the use of spices refers to the tentative connections between myself and my great-grandparents who came from Mauritius and Saudi Arabia, which I experience only vaguely through food.236

In this series, Searle photos herself lying on a gallery floor, nude, exposed except for a thick covering of various spices on her body. The color of the spices covers, signifies, but also seals her mouth, silencing, threatening to choke or to suffocate. She thus positions of herself “Coloured” by the signifiers of colonial commodity, the spices, and she subjects her body to the viewer scrutiny while simultaneously challenging the

viewer’s gaze. That the piece is performative is acknowledged by Searle, however she explains:

My works have a definite performance character to the extent that they invoke movement and indeterminacy. But there is an assumption that because it’s performative, I perform. I have been asked on a number of occasions to do performances. The problem with ‘performing’ is that I am more directly and easily consumed or exoticised, which I’m trying to avoid. Mediating the ‘performance’ through lens-based media provides me with options to reconstruct myself in the process. Ana Mendieta describes the ‘performativity’ as actions that are derived from and located within a grid of power relations. It’s not just artistic but something that is more embedded in everyday life and culture. This sums up the significant potential of the ‘performativity’ for me.  

![Figure 3.1. Searle, Untitled from the Colour Me series, 1998. Michael Stevenson Gallery.](image)

In the Colour Me (1998) series one sees complex signifiers in the spices, the body and the gaze Searle employs to make the viewer feel at once implicitly and complicity

---

237 Bester, “Interview with Berni Searle”
connected to the histories evoked. The direct eye contact seen in the piece engages and
confronts the viewer, not asking for sympathy or help, it is a challenging gaze that
demands the viewer respond. It requests the viewer engage in dialog in viewing the piece
and the confluences of this nude female body with the consumer product. In picking apart
the signifiers of identity, her body, the spices, the gaze, one can complicate them
historically. Kathryn Smith observes about the piece that Searle is:

Interested in exploring present day responses to the idea of being of ‘mixed’
heritage, but also vehemently resisting victimization, Searle’s choice of palette in
*Colour Me* alludes to the most base racial stereotyping: red (paprika), yellow
(turmeric), brown (ground cloves) and white (pea flour). Covering her naked
body with spices and flour and presenting herself for our observation, the hues are
at once seductive and deadly, carrying with their opacity an implicit threat of
suffocation and burial.  

The spices are nominally a reference to Cape history but also to her specific
family history. This sutures the specific into a grand historical narrative. The spices are
not just an abstract reference to trade; they are also a signifier of personal family memory
for Searle. The one is not subsumed to the other, for neither is monolithic. Her display
of her body is in a position typically associated with submission- on her back – but that
viewing is mediated by the directness of her gaze. Her gaze is not submissive. Its
directness is indicative of power and control. Those eyes speak, the power of the
communication perhaps magnified that in many of the images in the series the mouth is
completely obscured. The covered mouth, un-seeable for the thick layer of spices, is
indicative of silence, perhaps the silence of the enslaved peoples traded, bought and sold
like the spices themselves, but also suggestive of the loss of the specificity of the
personal. This is just as much a reference to her own family past as it is any reference to

---

238 Kathryn Smith, n.p.
South African Cape history. The silence, the lack of language produced is symbolic of the lack of knowledge. Searle notes how little she actually knows about her family history. What connections she has are known to her tangentially through smells and tastes of food. Her family history is known through impressions of taste, through consumption, a sense both invoked and denied by the covered mouth.

Though this is a still image, her body is not passive. She is looking, this is an activity. She is still, but it is a tenuous stillness. Her body covered in a thick layer of dried spices, a coating that can crack and be sloughed off at any moment with any movement. Her gaze actively looks but her body is pinned down. She must hold still in order to stay intact: moving is destruction. Here one can read the stillness of the body as the female Coloured body stiflingly created, defined and oppressed by previous racist discourses of race and gender. *Moving* can destroy it; she acknowledges the tenuous, flaky, dusty material of history as something produced, packaged, traded and consumed but also something that can be shaken off and brushed away. Her body is the point where the arbitrariness of these articulations of color come together. Her skin is “coloured” by the other, and she recognizes that. Her eyes seem to indicate movement yet to come, a movement that will mean the erasure of the abstract generalizations of history which can be overcome at any moment by movement up, forward, leaving behind mere traces.

*Colour Me* (1998) is a piece alive with the tension of possibility, a piece caught on the edge of action, in the moment before passing through the past and reclaiming the future. It is a national narrative lived personally and bodily by each individual. Do I stay, oppressed, defined by my oppressors, or do I rise and shake off the weight of history and
claim something new?  *Colour Me* (1998) is agency in potential, showing a moment of self-recognition when the responsibility of acknowledgment and identity are at hand.

About *Colour Me* (1998) and the related series, *Traces* (1999), Liese van der Watt analyzes the status of the covered body:

> The body present bespeaks disappearance as it is smothered and suffocated by the spices covering it, and the body absent is very much present in the outlines left in the spiced powders. The body moves between absence and presence; never still, it appears and disappears. The multiple selves, situated in continual movement between appearance and disappearance, invoke ideas of reinventing the self over and again. These photographs simultaneously underwrite stasis and movement, liminality and legibility – they are a dialectic between presence and absence and between coming and going.

Considered through the rubric of *reprendre*, the tension commented on by Van der Watt reflects the spaces occupied and vacated by the subjects of historic discourse. The suffocating opacity of the spices, and their vibrant colors, shields the body from the viewer while simultaneously marking the skin as an object for the gaze of others. Searle embodies the shifting paradigms of identity construction, demonstrating how such discourse can be dis-articulated. A synthesis of those elements into a new, reclaimed interpretation is an act of *reprendre*. The relationship of the individual body to the entity of a state or culture or race is one governed by political-social rules of suturing where linkages are made that are contingent on the histories being written, not essential to or inseparable from the body. Searle’s ability to be present when absent and vice versa negotiates new space for reflecting upon the nature of political agency in the post-colonial or post-apartheid era. As Kathryn Smith explains about *Traces* (1999), “The

---

work now begins to speak explicitly of the representational ‘absence’ of ‘othered’ bodies in the history, politics and visual culture of apartheid South Africa and beyond.”

The importance of these works beyond a South African context can be seen by placing them into continuity with the *Silueta* (1973-6) series by Ana Mendieta (Figure 3.2). Mendieta (1948-1985), a Cuban born artist who worked in the United States, presents the female body hidden in or suggested by natural shapes and materials. The tension in this series is the one between presence and absence in a manner very similar to Searle’s work. Mendieta is always present but not quite tangible. Like a chameleon, she blends in or only leaves a trace behind. The specificity of her unique identity is dissolved into the feminine-type-shape, into the natural world, into elemental forces. Evoking ideas of a mother goddess both always present but never seen, Mendieta creates spaces of ambiguity to invite the viewer into a contemplation of his or her own relationship with this shape and the natural setting. The tension between specific and abstract is one similarly evoked by Searle. In Searle’s series the viewer engagement is much more direct and her body is never fully subsumed into the background. The spices are not camouflage, and even in *Traces* (1999, Figure 3.3) when the body is gone it has the feel of a body just gone, the spices on the smooth gallery floor not yet swept away, but likely to be at any moment. Mendieta’s *Siluetas* (1973-6) seem weather-worn and eroded, suggesting something ancient, elemental, but still evolving. Searle’s pieces have immediacy to them that suggest an action unseen, a person about to arise or a person arisen, leaving behind a trace. The action is taken but only while the viewer wasn’t

---

240 Kathryn Smith, n.p.
looking. History can pass one by. The moment to move, to strike, to claim one’s future, can be fleeting.

*Figure 3.2. Ana Mendieta, Stills from the *Silueta* series, 1973-6. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.*
In the case of both Searle’s and Mendieta’s works, the bodies as female are significant. Mendieta understood her art as inseparable from her body and her cultural heritage. There is a history in consumer capitalist societies of conflating the female body with objects of desire and consumption. Also, historical personifications of place have typically been female. Thus, the female body already has a position in Western society as an archetype or universal sign, devoid of individual specificity. The ephemeral positioning of Mendieta seems to connect with this history while this is complicated in Searle’s work. Her presence in *Colour Me* (1998) maintains the weight and stability of

---

individuality, but perhaps under erasure. *Traces* (1999) however presents the female form in the transient way seen in Mendieta’s work. Taken in conversation with each other, the dynamics of location are used as signifiers of feminine identity as located in the “natural” be it a landscape or spices. Mendieta goes so far as to describe her series as a “dialogue between the landscape the female body.” Both artists re-write narratives of belonging and place through the feminine form.

Similarly, Kenyan-German artist Ingrid Mwangi (currently using the collaborative name MwangiHutter with her husband, Robert Hutter) posits her body as the site of discourse dependant on confused racial signifiers of skin color. When Mwangi says in a commentary on her 2001 work *Coloured* (Figure 3.4), “I am the stage,” she confronts the viewers’ understanding of racial categories through the constant affirmation and denial of herself in autobiographical journeys through self-reflective African and European lenses. Ingrid Mwangi was born to a Kenyan father and a German mother and has lived in both Africa and Europe. Her own references to her status as “mixed” make for a significant comparison to Berni Searle. Her works often invoke her status as someone in-between, too white to be Kenyan, and too black to be German; someone left out of conventional, binary discourses of race and identity. Through her performances, Mwangi identifies herself as the “hyphenated person” (Afro-German or German-Kenyan, etc.) displaying the inherent fallibilities of racial-national identity and the dualities of interior/exterior, other/self, African/European. Okwui Enwezor describes modern art as

---

243 Ibid., 11.
an internalized awareness of hierarchy and contemporary art as an “evisceration of the idea of the authority of originality and the aura of the image.”

Ingrid Mwangi performs such an “evisceration” through citation of her own body as the troubled unity of both subject and object.

Figure 3.4. Mwangi Hutter (Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hutter), Stills from Coloured, 2001. www.ingridmwangiroberthutter.com

The comparison between Mwangi Hutter’s Coloured (2001) and Searle’s Colour Me (1998) provides interesting insight into the integrated way that nationality and race become constituent of modern identity. Mwangi, in Coloured (2001), brings the perceived status of the black in Germany as an outsider to the fore. The performance/installation features several monitors surrounding a central stage and a large projection screen. The monitors display images of Mwangi’s head, torso, legs and feet, with each monitor’s image altered so that the feet appear very dark and the face very light with a gradation of tone going up the body. The projection is a loop of Mwangi’s performance where she gesticulates, slaps her thighs and arms and crawls on the ground while making odd, undulating noises. Drawing emphasis to her skin above all else, she is

---

displayed at once fragmented and whole. She becomes unified in the performed confrontation of her own body, she remains fragmented in the disjointed body parts categorized sequentially as white to black. Her body, in the installation, remains on the periphery. She surrounds the viewer, but does not physically occupy the same space. She projects her body as a conflict to the viewer. She states in her description of the work, “I lie and listen. Slowly groaning, grating noises. Muttering, gasping, moaning, sighing, sniffing. Shaking, cursing, screaming. Hit the stage. Play it. I am the stage. In between quiet, listening.”246 The sounds she makes are almost pre-linguistic, raw and indicative of discomfort or suffering or perhaps even a rage beyond words. The audience is denied conversation with the performer and placed in the position of taking her on in a realm of wordlessness where the sounds become an extension of the physical body. In *Coloured* (2001) Mwangi places her body as the stage upon which racial signifiers are played. The stage is hit, the floor of it by Mwangi’s hands, her own body is struck by her hands. Hit, struck, like an act of violence, performed against herself where she is always outside, beyond the space of the viewer. Considered as a political act, the self-violence on display is transformative in its “reconstitution of the boundaries surrounding the individual body…and larger ‘body politic.’”247 The centrality of the viewer places one in the position of having to identify oneself with or against the fragmented image of Mwangi. The materiality of her body in the piece immediately places the viewer in a state of awareness about his/her own body. Empathy, rejection, categorization and

---

247 Fierke, 51.
identification are all ideas presented to the viewer in a way that makes one question one’s own centrality and position.

Considered from the point of view of Charles W. Mills’ thesis that race is a political system, MwangiHutter’s work and Searle’s art asserts that the primary signifier of racial belonging is the skin, and it is exposed as a shifting surface, not monolithic but rather contextual and performative. Both MwangiHutter and Searle confront the viewers in these works with the recognition of the process of racial other-making. Both are confrontations, through the acts of self-violence in MwangiHutter’s work and in the aggressive use of the gaze in Searle’s. That both pieces are made within a few years of each other, independently, in different parts of the world (Germany and South Africa) suggests an increased awareness on the part of these artists of the importance of language in defining who belongs and who does not belong in certain national identities and the importance of race to those categories. Both artists negotiate, in their native countries, their unchosen statues as in-between racial others, historically denied political agency in the construction of identity.

David Theo Goldberg maintains that race is integral to the emergence and development of the modern nation-state. “In general, modern states are intimately involved in the reproduction of national identity, the national population, labor and security in and through the articulation of race, gender, and class.”\(^{248}\) The increased reference to Colored identity in Searle’s work beginning in the 1990s is significant. Fears of marginalization have been fueled by the concept that Coloured-ness has an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy. Historically, Coloured people

\(^{248}\) Goldberg, “Racial States,” 235.
have been categorized as neither white nor black, a type of non-identity defined by what one is not, and thus without real foundation.\textsuperscript{249} Searle’s work is a metaphor for the instability of identity which moves from category to becoming.\textsuperscript{250} Further, Tamar Garb writes that “Searle is part of a new generation of South African artists whose reclaiming of the past involves a renegotiation of the land and a recovery of the silenced voices of its subjugated population.”\textsuperscript{251}

The tension of presence and absence within Searle’s work is a space clearing gesture that opens up the possibility of discourse. She is positioned in such a way in \textit{Colour Me} (1998) to reclaim the complicated histories signified by her body, her gaze and the substances used. Using the concept of reprendre one can gain a deeper political understanding within this discourse. The gaze Searle employs and her bodily presence become the turning point on which the personal and historical revolve. The specificity of her presence or lack thereof is indicative of the reclaiming of personal and national narratives asking directly the question, what does it mean to be a Coloured woman? The critical questioning offered by these pieces is a locus for debate and discourse that can help empower conversations on the nature of race, gender and nationality by opening spaces where confrontational voices can be heard. In comparison to artists who use similar motifs and references in their works, one can see the subtle and nuanced way in which Searle offers a commentary on the post-apartheid condition that is also relevant to similar questions of embodiment and belonging outside the South African context. Both

\textsuperscript{249} Deegan, 11.
\textsuperscript{250} Van der Watt, “The Many Hearts of Whiteness,” 245.
general and specific, Searle, Mendieta, and MwangiHutter present their bodies disconnected from but also tied to the political spheres that have defined the political agency typically afforded to such bodies.

Articulation theory posits that it is possible to theorize and analyze symbols of social identity in relationship to each other. The de-centered subject on display in the pieces examined in this chapter occupies an indeterminate space as both subject and object, the paradox of which invites the viewer to contemplate the nuances of the historical narratives. The body in Searle’s work is articulated in a way that may suggest domination by outside forces, but resists victimization. Acknowledgement of personal political agency is weaved into the structure of these images showing how the signifiers of identity-construction have become articulated and suggests ways to challenge it. As posited by Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, articulation is not a necessary connection but one that can constitute the subject within a given context. By taking back this narrative, Searle reclaims it and challenges it, making her body a symbol of the oppressed in the body politic of South Africa’s social-national discourse.

Cape Town Cannons: Trans-Atlantic Articulations of History and the Body

The tenuous and variable nature of Coloured identity is further emphasized in Searle’s 2001 performance piece, Snow White (Figure 3.5). In this work, Searle filmed and photographed herself on a dark stage, lit from above kneeling, nude. This is the only work considered in the current writing that was presented as a live performance. Slowly

---

252 Slack, 114.
pea flour was sifted onto her body from above, literally coloring her skin a lighter shade. Pea flour is an important ingredient in *roti* bread, dipping bread common in Malay and Indian South African households. After being lightly covered by a thin layer of flour, Searle began kneading the material, adding a small amount of water, and making dough. In this work, unlike in *Color Me* (1998), Searle becomes an active agent, moving, grasping, kneading and transforming a superficial coloring into a form of substance. She exposes the shifting dynamic of phenotype as a racial marker by scraping it off her body, exploring the lie behind the fairy tale of the “fairest of them all:” Snow White.
Colored identity is by its historical construction a hybrid identity. As Adhikari indicates, racial hybridity has been (and to some extent still is) seen as inferior to “pure” groups. The popular understanding of Coloureds as descendants of mixed race liaisons in
South Africa casts them as inferior to both blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{254} Because of this bias, many schools of thought deny Coloured people a significant role in the making of their own identity. There is the assumption that Coloured identity is only a white-supremacist created identity and therefore a negative one.\textsuperscript{255} However, as Adhikari goes on to say:

By its very nature, social identity is largely and in the first instance the product of its bearers and can no more be imposed on people by the state or ruling groups than it can spring automatically from miscegenation or their racial constitution. Social identity is cultural in nature in that it is part of learned behavior and is molded by social experience and social interaction. At most, social identities can be manipulated by outsiders – but even then, only to the extent that it resonated strongly with the bearers’ image of themselves and their social group as a whole.\textsuperscript{256}

This is supported by a 2009 documentary on Coloured identity, \textit{I’m not Black, I’m Coloured: Identity Crisis at the Cape of Good Hope}, produced in Cape Town. In the film one of the interviewees, Dr. Michael Adams, laments the use of “Coloured” as a derogatory term though he acknowledges himself being ambivalent about it. Adams goes on to wish that Coloured identity and distinctiveness could be recognized by white and black South Africans.\textsuperscript{257}

Searle addresses this inequity by critically examining the articulated threads of historic Coloured identity construction. The video \textit{Alibama} (2008) opens with a brief establishing shot of Berni Searle and a young boy on the outer walls of the Castle of Good Hope holding black paper streamers (Figure 3.6). The panoramic is filmed from Signal Hill, one of Table Mountain’s peaks, now called Bo-Kaap. The audience begins

\begin{footnotes}
\item[255] Ibid., 35-6.
\item[256] Ibid., 36.
\item[257] Kiersten Dunbar Chace, \textit{I’m not Black, I’m Coloured: Identity Crisis at the Cape of Good Hope} DVD (Cape Town: Monde World Films, 2009).
\end{footnotes}
to hear the first few words of a song, *Daar Kom die Alibama*, sung by a low, solitary male voice in Afrikaans (See Appendix C for lyrics in Afrikaans and English). The song slowly continues:

*Daar kom die Alibama*
*Die Alibama, die kom oor die see,*
*Daar kom die Alibama,*
*Die Alibama, die kom oor die see.*

Approximately thirty seconds into the six-minute twenty-second work the shot switches angles to look up at the sky. The scene is framed so a hand is visible at the bottom of the screen holding a streamer that whips wildly across the blue, nearly cloudless sky. At this point, a chorus joins the male voice in the song, a late nineteenth-century folk song, still popular amongst Afrikaans speaking Coloured communities in Cape Town. The origin of the song, *Daar Kom die Alibama*, is contested. The prevailing theory is that it refers to the Confederate States of America ship *Alabama* seen by locals from the mountains.\(^{258}\) The CSS *Alabama* stopped in Cape Town during the American Civil War in 1863 after capturing and raiding the United States ship *Sea Bride* in Table Bay, a natural bay on the Atlantic, overlooked by the city of Cape Town.

In the 1990s use of vernacular Afrikaans by Coloured people could be seen as an act of resistance to dis-invest the language of its authoritarianist white-supremacist by making it uni-vocal.\(^{259}\) Searle and her son sing the song and the viewer sees shots of paper boats and streamers in a bathtub. The next version of the *Daar Kom die Alibama* song is slower and in mournful quality not usually associated with it. Figures of a

\(^{258}\) Garb, “A Land of Signs,” 12.
\(^{259}\) Adhikari, *Not White Enough*, 168.
woman and boy appear for only twenty seconds though their vantage point is implied for the rest of the film.260

Figure 3.6. Searle, Video still from _Alibama_, 2008. Michael Stevenson Gallery.

Just after the first minute mark the chorus of male voices fades briefly to the background and for almost twenty seconds one hears only the sound of the strongly gusting breeze off the bay. The camera begins to slowly pan across the bay as the chorus comes back into the song, repeating it in whole twice. As the camera view slowly crawls across the calm waters of the horizon, the viewer sees a few commercial vessels on the

ocean, some coming toward land, some going out to sea. The vessels, though in reality quite large, seem rather small and fragile framed on this panoramic seascape, apparently motionless as the viewer’s gaze sweeps gently past them to the slow, steady pace of the song that continues:

Nooi, nooi, die rietkooi nooi,
Die reitkooi is gmaak,
Die reitkooi is vir my gmaak,
Om daar op te slap.
[Repeated]

Die Alibama, die Alibama,
Die Alibama kom oor die see,
Die Alibama, die Alibama,
Die Alibama kom oor die see.

Januarie, Februarie, Maart, April, Mei, Junie, Julie
Januarie, Februarie, Maart, April, Mei, Junie, Julie
Augustus, September, Oktober, November, Desember
Augustus, September, Oktober, November, Desember

Hy kom oor die see.
Hy kom oor die see.

Just as the camera nearly completes its pan across the bay, when land has come back into view on the right hand side of the screen and just a moment before the chorus reaches the end and climax of the song, the screen suddenly flashes white and the ghosted image of a cannon barrel is seen as a cannon blast shatters the calm reverie built up over the previous three minutes. The weapon heard and shown is the noonday gun, the oldest functioning cannon in the world which fires daily over Cape Town. The cannon image fades nearly as suddenly as it appeared and for a moment the viewer is looking only at a blank, white screen. One’s sense of perspective is disturbed as a small amount of red dye

\[\text{261 Ibid.}\]
appears as a swirl in the upper corner of the screen and the viewer realizes that one is looking, quite closely, at a white bathtub filled with clear water. The viewer’s proximity is brought into focus as one sees the source of the swirling red dye when a crepe paper boat slowly drifts across the screen. About ten seconds after first seeing the tub and approximately twenty seconds after the cannon blast, one hears the song begin again. This time it is not a chorus, but a single female voice, echoing in what sounds like a small, enclosed space, like a bathroom with tile walls. The woman’s voice sings softly and patiently as a child’s voice joins her hesitantly and awkwardly attempting to find the melody and repeat the lyrics.

By the four minute mark, black crepe paper streamers have joined the red boat and the once clear water is now noticeably murky with black dye. The two voices which had not been in unison before, briefly find harmony approximately ten seconds later in the chorus, “Oh Alibama, die Alibama…” the unity is again lost as the child drops out momentarily while the woman’s voice continues “Die Alibama kom oor die see…” Tentatively harmony is again reclaimed and lost as the chorus is repeated. Just prior to the five minute mark the smoky water is visually pierced by a black streamer diagonally across the screen. The streamer unravels as the water becomes darker and darker, the dye leaching out visibly from the paper. The song ends and there is silence. By five minutes and forty seconds, the shot transitions back to the seascape from the bathtub. At this point one hears nothing but the wind and again just after the six minute mark we see black streamers held by hand whipping in the wind as the screen fades to black, bookending the work. The ambiguousness of the final cross fade shows, as Tamar Garb
describes, “the loaded site of history is overlaid by the lilting strains of a lullaby marking
the margin between wakefulness and sleep, spectacle and dream.”

*Alibama* (2008) is suggestive of trans-Atlantic negotiations of race and white
dominance reclaimed as personal narratives of place and identity. The song sung in this
piece, *Daar Kom die Alibama*, is used like a grand narrative, in the sense that Jean-
François Lyotard critiques “grand narratives of legitimization” as being no longer
credible. Lyotard positions himself against a meta-narrative, where “meta” is a
privileged discourse which claims to situate all other discourse while remaining
unhistorical and constant. In *Alibama* (2008) one sees Searle disarticulating grand
narratives of South African history and national identity through the appropriation of the
song. The song lyrics refer to reed mats (“Young girl, young girl, the reed-bed girl”) and
month names. Historically, enslaved people were often named after months of the year,
and slept on reed mats they wove themselves. The noble sounding opening strains
coupled with the sweeping panoramic Table Bay are suggestive of a sweeping narrative
of history. Sung with the sobriety of a national anthem it conflates the imagined
community of South African identity with Afrikaner nationalism, its *Vaderland*
connotations and *Voortrekker* romanticism, with the Cape Coloured community within
history. The performance of the song ennobles it, glorifying the culture that sings it,
positioning the Cape Coloured community with in that grand narrative. *Die Alibama kom*

---

262 Tamar Garb, “The Poetry of Place” Berni Searle: Recent Works 2007/8, Michael Stevenson Gallery,

Feminism and Post-Modernism” in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven
"o’er die see" connects the Cape community to the world at large, not as a footnote to history, but as active members of their community. There is an element of nostalgia also present in this piece, as noted by Sarah-Jane Johnson,

The first aspect of the video brings to mind the slave heritage of the Cape. At the sound of the noon gun, the scene changes …and Berni Searle and her son sing in place of the Malay chorister, changing the mood of the work to reflect the nostalgia related to the passing of culture and heritage from one generation to the next.²⁶⁴

Negotiations of this identity writ large across the seascape are begun in the local and the personal. When the song is sung by Searle and her son, they are both not seen, like the chorus was not seen- but the two untrained voices struggling to find unison across generations is indicative of how the personal micro-history of individual identity is acknowledged and passed on within the larger macro-construction. The song still exists because mothers sing it to their children, not because choruses boom it out along the coast. Ultimately the association of the song with intimacy and local family connection rings more powerfully than the chorus’ evocation of power and nationality. While national anthems are created by governments for the maintenance of national identity, songs like *Daar Kom die Alibama* by a minority group are sung as a voice of expression and identity in a time and place that might seek to enforce silence and erasure. The grand chorus is a legitimization of the song, its history and the group associated with it. The intimate singing of the song is symbolic of its origin, its future and its individual importance as family history. The song itself (the lyrics and melody) has a history, but its

narrative is not confined to official constructions and recordings. Whether sung by a chorus or a mother and son, the music has meaning and weight beyond the lyrics. The cannon blast marks a violent break between the macro- and micro- narratives of the song, in effect “inserting violence into the picturesque and doubt into the poetics of nostalgia.” By reminding the viewer of the smaller-personal significance of the song, Searle reclaims its history and her connection to the song and its singers. In this passage where the viewer hears Searle singing the song, one sees small crepe-paper boats floating in a tub. Here the construction of images is historically referent but still hers. The paper boats stand in for the giant shipping vessels visible on the horizon in the preceding section of the film. She has made the trans-national into the personal, the global into the intimate. *Alibama* (2008) continues, as Farrell suggests, “Searle’s working method of choosing a personal point of departure and then building a highly aesthetic and emotional atmosphere around it. Her work is simultaneously tender and powerful, uniting seductive formal elements and socially relevant messages.” The castle where we see her standing is part of her history, and her son’s. She asserts a right to it and to its representation and claims its creation as South Africans do. This stake of a Coloured woman to a monolith of white-dominance and a symbol of both racial oppression and Afrikaner nationalism is one typically denied by conventional discourse, where the non-white persons of history are deprived of partnership or capability to participate in the building of monuments and the writing of history. By positioning herself thus, Searle (re)claims that space as hers. The Castle, the Bay, the city, they belong to her as much as

---

anyone else no matter who writes the history texts. Furthermore, they have *always* belonged to her, this is a reClaiming, an acknowledgement of legitimacy beyond the ofICIAL or the conventional.

The displacement and political disenfranchisement of Coloured people in post-apartheid South Africa was also discussed by Dr. Adams in *I’m not Black, I’m Coloured*, where he said, “The black man rules the land. The white man owns the land. Where is the Coloured man?” Searle reclaims this space, this history for the Coloured people of the Cape. In so doing, she acknowledges their legitimacy as participants in the creation of the new South Africa.

Berni Searle’s work *Alibama* (2008) appropriates a common Afrikaans language song. Afrikaans is a heavily creolized language derived from Dutch. Its use in this piece is important for both being a language used by Afrikaners to give form to their nationalist yearnings and cultural distinctiveness and for being the primary language for the majority of the Cape Coloured population.

Post-Apartheid South Africa has become increasingly concerned with issues of language equality. English is effectively the lingua franca of South Africa, but upward mobility and economic and political success all require multi-lingual ability. Language is itself not an oppressive agent, but institutions have used language as a tool towards that end. A language is only hegemonic insofar as the institutions that use it are.”

---

267 Chace, *I’m not Black*.
establishment of a democratic government in 1994 Afrikaner identity has seen many linguistic negotiations to reconcile its history with the new non-racial nation.  

Searle’s reflection on the complex narratives of language, location and belonging are similar to the challenging work of artist, Carrie Mae Weems. The disturbing images of legalized bondage and torture presented in her series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995-6 (Figure 3.7), makes the inhumanity of American slavery painfully human in the suffering body. Like Searle’s disarticulating the Castle of Good Hope and bringing the personal and national narratives of belonging into focus around that object, Weems, in From Here I Saw (1995-6), appropriates photographs to bring the subjects into a discourse about the ownership and dissemination of history. This is Weems’ way of dis-articulating national narratives of slavery and reconstruction through an examination of who controls history and who has access to it. Weems, an African American artist and 2012 recipient of the U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts, specifically appropriates images of slavery from large institutions of American knowledge, like the Smithsonian and the Harvard University archive. Many of the images were early daguerreotypes she had previously used in classroom lectures. She writes her own captions for the images, thus engaging the viewer with questions about the legitimacy of reproduction and image ownership. By directly claiming images owned by a powerful and wealthy institution, Weems challenges who has the “right” to history.

---


270 The entire series can be viewed online at: http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html.

Harvard charged that Weems used the images without permission, in violation of copyright laws, and warned that they would sue if she did not desist. About the threatened legal action, Weems said, “I don’t think I have a legal case, but maybe I have a moral case.” Weems thought that the discussion about who had the right to own images of brutalized slaves was an important one to have in public, and informed Harvard of her intention to continue using the images, saying “…we can have this conversation in court.” Harvard subsequently declined to press the suit, and has since purchased Weems’ series for its collection.\footnote{PBS, “Carrie Mae Weems,” segment from the episode \textit{Compassion}, season five of the series, \textit{Art21}, last modified on 7 October 2009, http://www.pbs.org/art21/watch-now/segment-carrie-mae-weems-in-compassion.} In the captions Weems addresses, personally, the figures represented re-actualizing their subjectivity. The “dialogue” she opens with these persons in the photographs acknowledges their suffering and victimization while giving dignity to their strength and perseverance. The historically silenced are not given voice as much as they are allowed to retain subjectivity in their silence. The gaze of the viewer is challenged to see the humanity in these people and not merely detached institutional narratives.
Bookending the series of colored photographic prints, are images of a Mangbetu woman, taken in the early twentieth-century. She faces toward the photos of American slaves in profile, showing the distinctive coiffure traditionally used by the Mangbetu culture in the region (Democratic Republic of the Congo).\textsuperscript{273} Weems positions this

woman as the storyteller, her caption at the beginning proclaims, “from here I saw what happened,” and her voice is indicated throughout the rest of the series until the end, where looking back on the images the Mangbetu woman is captioned, “and I cried.” The African woman is positioned in relation, out of time, to the plight of slaves in North America in an effort to reclaim their stories as part of Africa and in continuity with the struggles of Africans in the post-colonial era. This structures the piece to suggest a Pan-African, all-inclusive body and identity. By taking the histories of slavery, colonialism, and the appropriation of images, Weems makes connections across the Atlantic in a reclaiming gesture, suturing African and American discourses into an intimate lament. She suggests that these histories are shared, and as such, should be open to engagement.

In a similar way, but through different means, Searle also engages with a notion of who controls or has a right to claim histories. The Castle is hers the way the photos are Weems’. Both position herself in relation to the histories signified by the implied violence of the castle and the documented violence of the photos. Both are parts of their respective national histories and both are connected. The docking of the Alabama at Cape Town, at least twice, lead, to a huge celebration on the beach where the captain, Admiral Semmes, handed out provisions seized during the attack. The debate over individual liberty and the right to freedom based on racial identity exploded in violence that nearly destroyed the United States in a conflict that rippled across the globe.274

The connection between the British authority of South Africa and the growing hostility between English and Afrikaner which would erupt into its own war (The South African War, formerly referred to as “The Boer War,” 1899-1902) that would shape

274 Garb, “A Land of Signs,” 13
South African history. Ultimately the US re-united and slavery was abolished in law, though racial equality and freedom remained yet to be realized in practice. Both nations experienced extreme periods of violence in the process of defining who belonged as enfranchised citizens. Neither the U.S. Civil War nor the South African War resolved issues of location and national identity for all their respective citizens.

Searle uses the popular folk song, *Daar Kom die Alibama*, presented here as a grand narrative, which is in turn reworked into a personal one confronting the transatlantic reach of white supremacist governmental ideology. That the song is very popular among Cape Malay peoples (which is how Searle identifies herself), suggests the conflicted nostalgia associated with the song. Searle is positioned in this piece both as insider and outsider. She is on the Castle, a witness to the seascape with its stunning beauty and commercial vessels. And yet the celebratory song is sung, at first, by an all male choir. The presence of Searle and her son are only bookmarks until after the blast of the cannon. Extending from the concepts of Stuart Hall, Searle’s cultural identity, like her physical positioning is fluid and dynamic. As Hall explains, “But it is precisely because it comes out of very specific histories and cultural repertoires of enunciation, that it can constitute a ‘positionality’ which we call, provisionally, identity.”^275^ Liese Van der Watt suggests that Searle’s works in general are metaphors for the instability of identity.^276^ This kind of metaphor is often spoken of in performance works where artists

---


use their own bodies, becoming, as Virginia MacKenny suggests “both the subject and the object of the work.”

The specific history of Daar Kom Die Alibama, the historical event commemorated by it, along with the popular appropriation of the song by the Cape Coloured population is evoked and reworked by Searle in Alibama (2008). For the first half she is literally silent, but then after the rupture of the cannon-fire she re-claims the song (and its implications) as an intimate exchange between her and her son. The grand seascape and large commercial vessels are replaced by a bathtub with little crepe paper boats and streamers. The historical and the personal are linked in an articulated connection that is not essentailized, not itself definitive. The crepe paper boats begin to dissolve, leaching their colors into the water.

In Alibama (2008) Searle locates a specific structure, the Castle of Good Hope, as an indeterminate place. This kind of indeterminacy is written about by artist and theorist Adrian Piper who conceives of the artist as an “embodiment of the artwork,” where the artist’s presence is itself a way to lessen the condition of art’s autonomy. The specifics of one’s personal and social identity throw the reading of the work into a non-abstracted focus. Interwoven with personal, nationalist and historical narratives, Searle’s appropriation of the natural seascape, juxtaposed with her placement atop the castle as the grand chorus sings suggests the complexity of post-apartheid Coloured identity. The song, in Afrikaans, not only refers to both the common language spoken by the majority of Cape Malay Coloureds, but also signifies simultaneously Afrikaner nationalism, which

---

277 MacKenny, 15.
strove to pioneer a new literary language out of local Dutch dialects into a new identifier of nationalism distinctively separate from Europe. Searle here articulates as well as links, the continuity of language and history to the specific enunciations of locality. She enacts the personal transmission of identity continuity to the next generation. The castle, like the bathtub, becomes a place where historical narrative and personal narrative intertwine with the echoes of the folk song. Seeming as continuous as the seascape, through a careful dis-articulation of the specific suggestions of locality and identity, one can see how the careful linkages of circumstances, histories and signifiers are cautiously stacked like masonry stones of a mighty castle, and yet are as fragile as crepe paper boats in a child’s bath. The echoes of the song, eventually overpower even the blast of the cannon, and it is the quiet continuity of the song and its specific historical/social implications subtly articulated within it that communicate the tenuous and fragile nature of self-understanding and articulated identity.

The artworks examined in this chapter share certain themes and symbols. Read together it is possible to trace ideas of color, commodity and placement. The spices highlighted in Colour Me (1998) were part of the trade that fueled colonial regimes in Africa, a trade that included people sold into labor. Snow White (2001) includes both the materials and bodies traded, and implies domestic labor and exploitation. Both works destabilize normative ideas of race constructed on phenotype, by dramatizing how phenotype is only peripherally used as a marker of racial distinction. In the colonial history that subsumes some races to servitude and subordination within a system of consumerism and dominance, Alibama (2008) uses specifically South African symbols to

\[279\] Anderson, 75.
expand the discourse beyond the specifics of the RSA or the continent, to make linkages to a global system of commerce and exploitation, including the trade of spices and construction of ports, monuments, and castles.\textsuperscript{280} Such fortifications became a part of the burgeoning national identity and growing racial consciousness. The effects of the inter-continental slave trade are evoked not just with the suggestion of the CSS \textit{Alabama} but with the appropriation of a song that has normalized the historical event as a celebration. The positioning of Searle and her son atop the Castle of Good Hope pulls out the thread that links these works together. In all these pieces she presents herself as a decentered subject. She is the body, the commodity, but she also is the colonizer. She is European, but not white; she is African, but not black. As mentioned, other artists have engaged in similar dialogue about the nature of race, gender and nationality, referring to their specific national histories, as well as, dynamic issues of belonging, identity, ownership and representation. Considering all of these artists’ works together helps illuminate the important theoretical issues evoked, and all of the works mentioned can be seen as attempts on the parts of these artists to \textit{reclaim} historical narratives. This act of \textit{reprendre} allows classically defined tropes of identity to be opened and expanded to finally include the objectified bodies of those represented within them.

\textbf{Agency, Body, and New Narratives}

Deconstructing these elements of identity allows one not just to compare and contrast these tropes but rather to reflect upon the whole that is created. The bodies on

\textsuperscript{280} A visual reference to this also made in the installation piece by South African Strijdom van der Merwe, \textit{Land Reform}, 2013, in Washington, D.C., suggesting the continued importance of these historical references to contemporary discourse.
display in *Colour Me* (1998) and *Snow White* (2001) are on the surface subjugated and submissive, but those elements, like many of racial identity, are only surface. The bodies in *Colour Me* (1998) look and challenge, speaking without moving. The potential is of one who recognizes and engages with history and society. The hope is that one can engage and should do so (perhaps indicated by *Traces*, 1999). This political activism is suggested also in the works of Weems, Mendieta, and MwangiHutter, all of whom suggest the importance of authorship and body representation are complicated by historical narratives of oppression and difference. *Snow White* (2001) destabilizes whiteness and manipulates it as she performs a “domestic” activity but in so doing creates and suggests consumption--consumption is participation. In *Alibama* (2008) Searle’s presence is more peripheral. The grand chorus of history seems to advance without the signifier of her presence until the lie of such narratives is exposed by the cannon and the song sung near the bathtub. National identities are built on histories of violence and exclusion, trade and conquests, but such identities are maintained through personal choices, interactions and experiences. The New South Africa has been built by people represented by the Castle, the ship, the song, the spices, and the labor. The significations of multiple, overlapping racial and ethnic identities can be read here as a microcosm of South African history. South Africa has been a place where all these elements have been inexorably intertwined. Searle, in these works, claims these histories, and these threads and invites the viewer to take them up in the tangled totality of what they are, not to untie the knots, but to reflect upon the complexity of South African post-apartheid identity. Searle comments on her presence in her work:
… Exposing myself therefore involves a process of claiming, and points to the idea that there are a range of axes that inform identity with are interconnected, determining relationships of dependency and domination in any given context…Agency is executed in what one chooses to show or not.\textsuperscript{281}

By choosing to represent her body as the focal point for undermining the mechanisms of race and nationality, Searle dis-invests the traditionally oppressive descriptions of their weight by shifting these discourses onto the local and personal. Grand narratives are constructed from ideologies perpetuated by structures of political power. In South Africa these configurations have historically been overtly racial and racist. Searle posits her body as a type of analog for the ‘body politic’ of those who have been controlled, defined and excluded by dominant discourses. Her gaze and her presence challenge the normative power relations of these dialogues, effectively bringing them under erasure. This undermining effect brings Searle’s (and by extension, other oppressed bodies) agency as a potent counter-narrative. The paradigms of history and control are questioned and new power relationships suggested and explored.

Doing this exposes these histories in a way that can allow for reflection, acceptance and healing. Through the history of the Coloured population, their often indeterminate positioning and struggle for recognition and legitimacy, Searle reclaims and reflects a history of all South Africans. In so doing she opens spaces of belonging by acknowledging all aspects of these histories. As representations of her vacillate between action and inaction so she represents the shifting dynamics of political discourse in South Africa. Some persons in South Africa built castles, others fought against those castles, still others participated on one or both sides in various different ways. Some of those

\textsuperscript{281} Tracy Murinik, “More Than Skin Deep” \textit{Mail and Guardian Friday, Johannesburg} (30 April- 6 May, 1999): 5.
histories were celebrated while others were oppressed. They are all tied together in the building of twenty-first century South Africa.
CHAPTER 4: THE AESTHETICS OF TRAUMA: THE BLACK SMOKE RISING SERIES

The violence that marked the apartheid era created a cultural trauma that is still known in South Africa. During the period of upheaval that would lead to the collapse of apartheid, South African artists such as Kendell Geers, Minnette Vari, and Billy Mandindi selected the symbolic image of the tire as an icon of both victory and devastation. Similarly, South African composer Phillip Miller adapts the state means for reconciliation to allow listeners to confront still raw emotions. Berni Searle participates in this national discourse on healing through the *Black Smoke Rising* series, completed over the years 2009 to 2010 and consisting of three short videos.\(^{282}\) Destruction and transition are key themes in this series where Searle’s own body is only peripherally shown in the first of the three. The narrative that unfolds in the trilogy is a surreal engagement with the mechanisms of change and the violence of oppression and revolution. This series offers a space for reconciliation and healing by suggesting the signifiers of violence and altering their context in order to reclaim and expand the discourse of trauma in the twenty-first century.

The *Black Smoke Rising* series is comprised of three videos called *Lull*, *Gateway*, and *Moonlight*. The imagery of fire, burning tires and rolling black smoke combine to create a narrative arc starting with *Lull* (2009), in which the sublimity of the burning tire in a beautiful, green landscape gives way to the dislocation of the viewer’s perspective in

---

\(^{282}\) The entire trilogy can be viewed on Berni Searle’s youtube channel: [www.youtube.com/user/BerniSearle](http://www.youtube.com/user/BerniSearle). Images from the related photographic series can be viewed at the Michael Stevenson Gallery website: [www.stevenson.info](http://www.stevenson.info)
Agency and presence are then reasserted in the last part, *Moonlight* (2010). This chapter reads the arc, in part, as a suggestion on how violence has been a vehicle for South Africans in effecting change both during and after apartheid. Also examined is the importance of the symbols of the burning tire and fire to contemporary South African artists as they negotiate the difficulties of maintaining and defining a new country. Such interventions are necessary for the body politic of the new South Africa in order to build a more inclusive nation built on concepts of democracy and freedom.

Political scientist, James R. Mensch, explains that the body politic is transcendent; it moves the individual into the collective without the one losing its sense of individuality to the other. 283 Searle’s series engages this movement through her evocative images. In the work, *Lull*, from 2009 (Figure 4.1), the viewer first encounters a quiet, idyllic landscape. It is lush and green with a view of a river or lake just visible in the background. Sounds of nature are heard and birds fly in the sky. Searle is seen mid-ground center sitting in a swing hanging in a small clearing. One hears her voice humming softly an indistinct tune as she slowly swings in the center of the frame as if gently pushed by the breeze. She is cradled in the seat-shaped swing facing away from the viewer. The viewer watches, vicariously lulled by the quiet, peaceful scene. Just before the one-minute mark she leaves the swing and walks off screen. The humming continues. Approximately thirty seconds later the scene shifts. Searle is seen in the background facing the water and where the swing once was now a tire on a rope swings from one edge of the frame to the other in a fast moving arc. The tire is burning and the

golden flames and black smoke trace its path across the abundant landscape. At this point the humming stops.

_Sound of nature continue in the background but the crackling noise of the fire dominates the soundtrack as the tire’s swing eventually slows. The tire distorts and disintegrates as the flames sheath its surface. The smoke, thick and black, swirls and pulls away from the tire as the breeze pushes it away. By the six minute mark Searle is no longer in the background and the rope finally gives way. The tire falls out of frame and for a short while a few flames can be seen leaping up from the bottom of the screen. Soon, though, the smoke takes over, rolling across the scene obscuring the view of the landscape until eventually the piece ends with the screen completely black. Searle describes the piece (quoted here at length):

_In this body of work, the tranquility of the landscape is unexpectedly disrupted by a tyre set alight, a potent and sinister symbol of political protest, particularly in_
South Africa. The work was conceived at a time of a growing and pervasive 'air of discontent' in this country, which has recently been beset by protests by unions and mass demonstrations against poor service delivery. These protests can be seen as an extension of the sociopolitical dynamics that played out in the xenophobic attacks on 'foreigners' in May 2008, when immigrants became the scapegoats on whom similar frustrations were unleashed.

The barricades of burning tyres set up during these protests are reminiscent of anti-apartheid riots and demonstrations. Accompanied by struggle and freedom songs, there is a strange sense of déjà vu to the situation.

The burning of tyres is also an insidious symptom of poverty and unemployment. On the outskirts of cities, tyres are burnt overnight to recover the wire inside. This is sold as scrap for as little as 40 cents per kilo, and many tyres need to be burnt to obtain a kilo of metal. Laws have recently been instated making possession of this wire illegal and prohibiting scrapyards from buying it. However, tyres continue to be set alight, often as 'fuel' for burning the plastic off other metals, with harmful toxic effects for people in surrounding areas and for the environment.

In South Africa, as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, the frustrations and levels of desperation will continue to grow. These simmering tensions have the potential to erupt, and, as in the video, black smoke threatens to engulf the garden.\footnote{Berni Searle, “Black Smoke Rising” Summer 2009/10: Projects (26 November 2009- 16 January 2010), accessed 20 April 2011, http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/black_smoke_rising/index.htm.}

\textit{Gateway}, which premiered in 2010, opens with a still shot of a small house on a bright, sunny day (Figure 4.2). The house is white and is foregrounded, though a small portion of the neighborhood can be seen in the background. One hears the noises of an urban community, voices, traffic, children playing, et cetera. Then a high-pitched tone is heard for a few seconds, after which two people exit the house holding a blue bucket between them. As they leave the frame, the tone returns. As the tone continues over the static shot of the house exterior it becomes clear that it is a person’s voice, humming. At about the 46 second mark one sees flames in the windows of the home. As the flames grow and begin to consume the façade of the house, the viewer’s sense of perspective is challenged when it becomes clear that the flames are burning a photo of the home. A few
seconds after the one minute mark the voice becomes a mournful singing as the photograph burns, blackens and curls while at the same time the neighborhood noises of before return, this time as whistling, yelling and commotion as the piece ends when the photo is completely consumed by the fire and turned to ash leaving only a black screen.

Figure 4.2. Searle, Film still from Gateway (Black Smoke Rising trilogy II), 2010. Michael Stevenson Gallery.

*Moonlight* was released the same year as *Gateway* and opens with a scene of men moving back and forth across a burned landscape pulling burning tires behind them with ropes (Figure 4.3). Ludwig van Beethoven’s Piano Sonata number 14, the *Moonlight Sonata*, plays in the background. The canonical music is performed much slower in tempo than how the piece is typically played. This distortion of the music suggests both the deformation of culture associated with violent change, and the versatility of art in addressing social transformation. There are also connotations of class division as the men seen burning the tires are perhaps doing so to collect the scrap wire. This is indicative of poverty and a low-class position, whereas the music of Beethoven is
associated with high-art cultural sophistication and upper-class values built upon European-derived standards of aesthetic taste. The tempo allows for the dissonance of the piece to linger and become more pronounced to the listener’s ear, creating a sense of unfamiliarity and disconnection with the music. Just after the two minute mark the smoke swirls across the frame as a burning tire is pulled across the field of vision in slow motion. The scene cross-fades into inky water swirling over a blue and white background that appears to be an abstract landscape. The swirls of ink in the water roll over the scene like storm clouds or smoke. By the four-minute mark the view is almost completely obscured. By four minutes and 50 seconds, the ink is drawn away from the top of the picture plane, leaving just the abstracted blue mountains, and then the film ends.

![Figure 4.3. Searle, Still from Moonlight (Black Smoke Rising trilogy III), 2010. Michael Stevenson Gallery.](image)

Each part in this piece features fire and the act of burning in a significant manner; the burning tire bookends the trilogy. Fire can be seen here as an element of transition
and transformation. The flames also have important significance to the use of fire as a weapon during the resistance struggle against apartheid. The presence and non-presence of Searle’s body provides a tension that is significant throughout the trilogy. Searle only appears in the first part, she opens the video but then quickly assumes a background position. She is then not seen in the next two parts. Taken continuously the three parts suggest a tension between personal and national narratives similar to what was discussed regarding *Alibama* (2008) in Chapter three. The opening shot of *Lull* (2009) locates the viewer with Searle but not necessarily in conversation with her. Her back is turned. She does not acknowledge the viewer; the audience is positioned as a voyeuristic onlooker.

The burning tire that replaces the artist in *Lull* (2009) is captivating and beautiful. The color in the scene is saturated giving the rolling flames as glistening, golden appearance. The stationary viewpoint, the camera never moves, suggests passivity in relation to the quick rushing arc of the tire. Its movement is hypnotic in its tempo. Searle comes and goes in the background largely unnoticed because the viewer is transfixed by the tire. The swinging flames lull the viewer into a passive state inviting him or her to see the scene in with a detached sense of its sublimity. That the fire is destructive and that burning tires have an important and violent meaning in the context of South African history is known and recognized, but *Lull* (2009) invokes the catastrophe indicated by the sign and aestheticizes it.

This process does not rob the sign of its political significance (which will be elaborated upon below) rather it opens it by focusing on the image of revolution and death and transcending it to the level of icon. The personal space of the swing and its
association with innocence and children playing is appropriated and transformed into the burning tire, a horrifying symbol of death with its associations to necklacing. The burning tire is also an aesthetic object, an example of the sublime, it is a vision that is both beautiful and terrible. The viewer watches the inevitable slowing of the tire’s swing, only really having time to reflect on the implications of the image after it has been destroyed and fallen from rope, out of frame. Even at that point, reflection is obscured by the thick, black smoke which sweeps up and masks the sight of the flames.

The passivity of the fixed, detached spectator-positioning in *Lull* (2009) continues in *Gateway* (2010). The title of this film makes reference to the N2 Gateway housing project that was an administrative failure in its attempts to provide low-income housing to people living in informal settlements along the highway between Cape Town and the airport. The massive R92 million project was rushed by the local government into production without a proper business plan. Residents in areas like Boystown (outside of Cape Town) rejected proposed building designs as unsuitable and demanded “proper housing” after nearly twenty years of government promises. All construction stopped after an internal audit by the city government determined that building costs would exceed their expected federal subsidies by almost twice the amount. The political and economic failure of the project has contributed to increased dissatisfaction with local and

---

national governments in poverty-stricken areas, in some cases leading to protests and violence.\textsuperscript{287}

The disconnection that so many of the disenfranchised in South Africa feel in relation to the government is presented in \textit{Gateway} (2010) as the viewer watches and observes voyeuristically two young people take the blue bucket from the non-descript façade (looking very much like the type of housing the N2 project would have constructed). The people do not look at or in any way acknowledge the viewer. The change comes when the flames appear in the windows of the home and the sounds around the scene change. The viewer feels a heightened sense of awareness that something has happened, that something is wrong. There is commotion. Then, however, the point-of-view collapses, as one realizes the home is not real but a photograph. The social becomes the personal and symbolic, as the intimacy of the private photograph is slowly reduced to ash. The loss is positioned in a more individual scale in relation to the viewer. The generic house belonging to someone else suddenly takes the characteristics of a special memento or cherished memory, consumed by fire before our eyes, leaving nothing behind. \textit{Gateway} (2010) ends on a black screen suggestive of a complete dislocation. There is no sound, no ground, no people. The personal has collapsed into ash and then nothingness. Like the end of \textit{Lull} (2010) there is a feeling of loss but perhaps a hope for transition.

\textit{Moonlight} (2010) brings movement into the trilogy. The camera is no longer static there are cuts and effects, like the slow motion. While the landscape presented is

harsh, burned and inhospitable, it immediately feels more real than the saturated greenery of *Lull* or the surrealism of the façade in *Gateway* (2010). This film was shot in a vacant plot in Philippi with Table Mountain in the background.\(^{288}\) Philippi is a township in the Cape Town area. During the 1980s it was a place of refuge for many black South Africans displaced from the Bantustans during the violent upheavals of the time.\(^{289}\) Currently, Philippi is slated to undergo several large scale building projects including rail stations and corporate development of agricultural areas.\(^ {290}\) The location is thus significant for its relationship to the narratives of displacement in the building of the new South Africa while currently being a center of poverty and disadvantage. The viewer’s engagement with the other figures in the piece, which are the men pulling the tires, is indirect. They do not gesture to the viewer, but one feels at least that one is in the same space with them, unlike the distance observed in *Gateway* (2010). The unlikely soundtrack to these men’s labors is the *Moonlight Sonata* which is at once familiar and comforting against the harsh images but simultaneously dissonant and sluggish, made coarse by the slower tempo. The beauty of the sonata is eroded through the temporal distortion allowing the roughness and dissonance naturally a part of the piece to linger as the smoking tires pass one’s field of vision. The beauty of the golden flames in *Lull* (2009) is replaced here by dirty, scarred tires billowing thick, black smoke with only a trace of flame leaping up here and there. The smoke that within the previous parts

---


seemed like a curtain closing the videos, in Moonlight (2010) becomes the main component. From the tire it is transformed into expressive line and delicate shapes, when the scene shifts and morphs the smoke into inky water. The gritty, ugly reality of it has been transformed into the soft and flowing undulation of tone and shade over the abstracted landscape.

The beauty of Lull (2009) is exposed by the harshness of Moonlight (2010), demonstrated with the slow motion of the smoking tire. Just as the sonata requires the elements heard to be a beautiful piece of music, it loses some of that beauty when one’s relationship to it (through the slow tempo) is altered. The beauty of Lull (2009) is apparent in Moonlight (2010), the elements are there, but one’s relation to it is altered. In retrospect Lull (2009) seems dreamlike and Moonlight (2010) is the waking reality. Gateway (2010) then suggests a nightmare pulling one from slumber to certainty. Searle attests, “My work speaks in layers of both fantasy and reality.”

The Black Smoke Rising series (2009-10) gestures to the dream of the rainbow nation while exposing the hard reality of the trauma and displacement still part of South African society. Interpreting through Charles W. Mills and Benedict Anderson (discussed at length in chapter one) one can understand this series as a dramatization of the “other-making” still in process in the new South Africa. Nations define themselves through negotiations of inclusion and exclusion. The poverty-stricken and the homeless still find themselves in shifting positions not quite a part of the new nation.

Considered through the lens of reprendre the series suggests a quiet reflection before a storm of violence. Lull (2009) has connotations of peace and abundance, the

---

idyllic landscape however is marred by the golden-burning tire. The act of destruction disrupts the beauty of the landscape and obscures the promise of peace. Even in the dream one cannot escape the ever-present signals of how the system has failed to yet achieve its aims. The marginalized burn tires for income or in protest just as, over twenty years ago, others burned tires to tear down the mechanisms of apartheid’s racial-social-economic oppression.

*Gateway* (2010) presents the illusion of progress, the façade and the name referencing the government’s desire to reach out to its most disadvantaged citizens, undermined by economic incompetence and poor planning. This failure in turn inspires violent protest and more burning. The fire consumes the illusion and turns it into ash, exposing the inadequate ways the new nation has negotiated with its internal others. *Moonlight* (2010) puts the viewer into stark confrontation with the reality of the new nation as one is sutured into the repetitive actions of the men burning and dragging tires across a desolate lot in a Cape area township. References to poverty and protest metaphorically play out under the weight of culture in transition, signified by the distorted sonata. Philippi is a place devoid of the “culture” and prosperity aspired to by the new government, the people of this place enact an erasure of the ideal through the (illegal) act of burning tires and harvesting wire. By appropriating the image of the tire Searle makes a double reference to the past and present and gestures toward an ambiguous future.

The narrative arc is engaged in the present as it had been in the past. The wishful end of *Moonlight* (2010) draws the smoke from the picture revealing a hope for a pristine
future, but this image is a fleeting artist’s rendering, thus also a fantasy. By exposing the
continuities between past and present, Searle opens up this space for dialogue with this
marginalized body politic in the new South Africa. Reclaiming their current narrative
and weaving it into the larger, national story is to suggest that their plight is the South
African discourse and the new nation will never be complete until the dream is realized
for all its citizens.

The Burning Tire and the Traumatic Imaginary

The association of fire and especially the burning tire to the violence that ushered
the collapse of the apartheid regime is a readily accessible, and specifically South
African, symbol. The violence of this era was wide spread and endemic. In the South
African context, as Don Foster indicates, violence should be understood multi-
directionally. Violence was state-driven but also reactionary and revolutionary. The
act of necklacing took on important political meaning during this era of struggle.
Necklacing, defined by the TRC as “the practice of placing a car tyre around the neck of
a victim and setting it alight,” was also a term sometimes used to describe the burning of
corpses, or of houses with living or dead occupants still inside. Elsewhere in the TRC
report the act was categorized as “black on black violence on the East Rand in KwaZulu
Natal which arose from rivalries between the IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party] and the UDF

292 Don Foster, Paul Haupt and Maresa de Beer, eds. The Theater of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists
in the South African Conflict (Cape Town: Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, 2005), 56.
293 TRC, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 3 (Cape Town: TRC and Dept. of
[United Democratic Front] and later the ANC.” In the 1980s and 1990s approximately 20,000 people died in political conflict. Cape Town became known as the “Necklacing Capital of the World.” Clifton Crais describes the act as “precisely the politics of evil played upon the bodies of its victims by the people whose intolerance is directly related to a Manichaean vision of a world of evil and good.” It became an infamous means of murder between 1984 and 1992, when more than 980 people were so victimized. Papers and official reports typically referred to the practice as a form of black-on-black violence in townships. Agents of apartheid often spread misinformation which lead to these incidents, or even staged necklacing to appear as though others in the community had done so. Table 4.1 documents the dramatic numbers of political deaths and deaths by burning or necklacing through the years 1984 to 1989. The incorporation of burning tires into this trilogy by Searle is clearly a marker to this history.

Table 4.1. Deaths related to political violence and to necklace/burnings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Political Violence Deaths</th>
<th>Necklace/Burnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>175 (164)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>922 (636)</td>
<td>67 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1352 (834)</td>
<td>306 (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>706 (361)</td>
<td>19 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>1149 (401)</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>1403 (474)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5707 (2870)</td>
<td>700 (191)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table adapted from *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 2. (Cape Town: TRC and Dept. of Justice, 1998) 389. The numbers in parentheses are taken from TRC databases, the other numbers were compiled from other sources.

---

294 Ibid., Vol. 1, 1.
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was responsible for exposing the human cost of the violence that occurred during this time. As a generic term, a truth commission is typically created to clarify and acknowledge truth, to respond to needs of victims, to contribute to justice and accountability, to outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms and to promote reconciliation and reduce tension. In South Africa, such a commission was first proposed in 1992. It was brought into existence with the promotion of the National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act No. 34 of 1995). It was inaugurated in December 1995 and opened hearings in April the next year. The TRC was the largest and most empowered truth commission to date. It had the power to grant individual amnesty, conduct legal searches, seize property, subpoena witnesses and implement a witness protection program. It was charged to do all this with a staff of approximately 300 personnel and a budget of $18 million per year for two and a half years.  

The TRC was comprised of three committees: The Human Rights Violations Committee (HRVC) which was tasked with collecting statements from witnesses and victims; the Amnesty Committee, which processed and decided amnesty applications from individuals; and the Reparations and Rehabilitations Committee, which designed recommendations for a reparations plan. Testimony was gathered from over 21,000 victims and witnesses, of which 2,000 appeared in public hearings. There were also about 7,000 applications for amnesty for acts committed in the time period between 1960 and 1994. The TRC produced a five volume report released in October 1998.  

---

government made no commitment to implement the TRC’s recommendations, largely because of the commission’s indictment of ANC criminality.\footnote{Ibid., 42-5.} The last two volumes of the report were offered in 2003. The published versions of the reports are so large and expensive that few South Africans have access to them.\footnote{Cole, 7.} Currently, the reports are available for free download from government websites. The increasing availability of the internet in South Africa has opened up possibilities for engagement for many of its citizens. The ability to access political reports and documents is a key component of this changing state of communication between the government and the people.

From the beginning of the TRC’s public hearings the commission received criticism for being a traveling show and a media circus.\footnote{Ibid.} HRVC chairperson Desmond Tutu remained adamant that the TRC was not entertainment, nor did it intend to make the harrowing testimony into a spectacle. Tutu maintained that the committee sought to give voice and language to the unspeakable. Catherine Cole has described the activity of the TRC as continuation of a long performance tradition within South African law. Cole approaches the TRC hearings as a performance which occupied a liminal space.\footnote{Ibid., 17-29.} Though the efficacy of the TRC has been questioned in the years since it was convened, generally there has been a consensus that the conversations about the horrors, violence and trauma inflicted by apartheid and brought to light by the commission, have been positive and necessary to national healing.
In the years after, South African artists have also dealt with the lingering trauma of apartheid and the extreme violence that accompanied its collapse. Njabulo Ndebele discusses the difficulty of making art in the aftermath of apartheid. He suggests that even Kafka could not have written about cruelty and insanity any more compellingly than the stories revealed by the TRC. Iconic images from this period included the burning tire. (At the time of this writing, tires are still regularly burned in protest actions.) Colin Richards discusses how life under apartheid was itself a spectacle. He states the most, … significant icon of the harrowing decade of the 1980s was the burning tire. The burning tire associated with necklacing branded South Africa’s liberation struggle in its final decade and is seared into the consciousness of millions. The tire has become part of our traumatic imaginary.

The tire also became a part of South African artistic vocabulary as evident in some of the important pieces of artists Minnette Vari, Billy Mandindi, and Kendell Geers. In 1995, Johannesburg-based artist Minnette Vari created Firestone, a full size recreation in porcelain, of a Firestone radial (Figure 4.4). The simple composition reifies the object of the tire, presents it as pristine and perfect. It comes close to the aestheticization seen in Lull (2009), while making the icon of the tire something both dignified and fragile. The signification of the traumatic is there, but only as a reference. The object has been sanitized, and made white- no longer black. The tires in Searle’s trilogy are real tires; the flames are real flames. The significations of violence, oppression and revolution had effects on real bodies. While the narrative Searle presents in Black Smoke Rising (2009-

---

302 Ndebele, 23.
10) is surreal, punctuated by moments of the sublime and bizarre, the weight of reality keeps the discourse grounded in a visceral history of violence and oppression.

**Figure 4.4.** Minnette Vari, *Firestone*, 1995. Goodman Gallery.

Vari’s work presents the tire as a reified object. She has stripped the tire of its reality, dis-investing it of some of the associations of horror and making it a fragile object of contemplation. No flame is evident in the piece (other than the ironic occurrence of “fire” in the brand name). It is not disfigured or scarred. It is perfect, iconic. Created in 1995, it elevates the potent image to the level of discourse. The clean, whiteness of the object is indicative, also, of the ways history can be “white-washed” and sanitized.
Searle disarticulates the signifiers of location and violence through the tire. Vari questions it ironically. Firestone tires have been manufactured in South Africa since 1936. As a corporation it was a major economic player during the apartheid era.

Vari’s work seems especially disconnected from violent connotations of necklacing when compared to Billy Mandindi’s 1995 piece, Lifebuoy, and its unsettling assemblage of doll parts and bodies (Figure 4.5). The chains penetrate and shackle the mutilated parts of the tire and its wooden crate. The tire holds and defines the space of the dismembered bodies, white and black, melted and distorted. The title suggests something onto which to cling, for life and for salvation. Mandindi attaches that word and its associations to a grotesque reminder of how violence built and shaped South African life. That necklacing was typically associated with black on black violence, but it has been revealed that pro-government agents often promoted or enacted the deed to create division and instability is suggested by the inclusion of both black and white body parts. Also relating to the uneasy positioning of necklacing as a black on black crime is Kendell Geers’ provocative piece Eeny Meeny Miny Mo, (sometimes listed as The Counting Out Song) from 1989 (Figure 4.6). Here Geers presents a large tire with a racist rhyme printed around its perimeter. In the space of the tire, people are caught and killed, either to eliminate suspected informers or to incite violence between resistance groups. The tire was iconic in South Africa in a way similar to the body of Steve Biko (see discussion of figures 2.2-3). State-initiated violence provokes “counter-violence and disorder along with submission,” as political scientist, Erwin A. Jaffe, explains. Further,

---

he indicates, while political power is often fuelled by a desire to establish order and control, violence demands obedience of the body politic and ultimately, “breeds chaos.”

Biko’s corpse became an object focal point for artists who reified Biko’s specific victimization, but the real tragedy was that Biko’s death was not, in fact, exceptional or uncommon. Like the tire, the resonance of the icon rings in its devastating commonality, not its uniqueness.

Figure 4.5: Billy Mandindi, Lifebuoy, 1995. Goodman Gallery.

---

305 Jaffé, 8.
Searle’s piece, *Lull* (2009), presents a still beauty most similar to *Firestone* (1995) while the destructive potential of the fire so blatantly referred to in *Lifebouy* (1995) is still present in the video piece. An interesting similarity among all these particular works is how they position the viewer in conversation with this distinctly South African symbol. In each case the art suggests and indicates a known, shared trauma. It also suggests a type of complacency. The beauty that sways the viewer in *Lull* (2009) must make one question the spectator’s relation to the burning tire. Is the viewer responsible for the tire being set alight? Seeing the film from a position of anonymity (not being acknowledged as an active agent in the film) suggests the potential for victimization. The viewer in *Lull* (2009) does not move, does not confront, does not run. The static nature of it is indicative of contentment or perhaps a sense of helplessness. Minnette Vari’s treatment
of the same symbol is nuanced differently, but has many of the same implications. The tire, a symbol of struggle, fear and death, is glorified and made precious. Behind the “rainbow nation” aspired to by leaders like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are untold violence and unspeakable suffering. Instead of offering the newly-democratic country a monument to a particular person or to a generalized idea about freedom or justice, Vari commemorates the vicious and brutal struggle that should never be forgotten. The spectator, again, is challenged to define his or her own experience related to the icon.

Geers, in a confrontational fashion common to his oeuvre, presents the image with mocking, racist language. In this piece white guilt is clearly indicated in cases where necklacing was used by agents of apartheid, as in one of the first detailed references to the crime in the TRC report. Maki Skosana is identified as the victim of a necklacing incident carried out by Vlakplaas\textsuperscript{306} agent Joe Mamasela.\textsuperscript{307} The insidious and institutionalized racism of the regime is played upon in Geers’ juxtaposition of text and object. The tire not only refers to necklacing but also the industrial mechanisms that gave apartheid its power. Kenneth Christie explains that apartheid was not like other forms of colonialism nor was it Nazi-like genocide. It was a way to maintain industrial productivity of the non-white population for the benefit of the white minority. It was a way to allow for exploitation and minimize the threat of proletarian enfranchisement.

Between 1960 and 1990 approximately 16.5 million people were criminalized as a result

\textsuperscript{306} Vlakplaas was the name given to the South African Police Counterinsurgency Unit working for the apartheid government. The name came from the farm west of Pretoria where they were headquartered. The unit functioned as a paramilitary death squad, capturing, torturing and killing opponents of the apartheid regime.

\textsuperscript{307} TRC, Vol. 1, 445.
of having no passes or being in unauthorized areas. Access to industrialization and transportation were weapons used in the systematic dehumanization of the majority of South Africans during apartheid. Geers prints the casual racism on the side of a tire that might be used on a Vlakplaas bakkie (a common South African term for a truck).

This level of confrontation is absent from Searle’s series. Coming so many years after the end of apartheid, The Black Smoke Rising (2009-10) series is much more reflective, and in keeping with Searle’s usual idiom, more symbolic than direct. There is anger in Geers’ and Mandindi’s uses of the tire. Searle utilizes the tire and the flames as images of reflection, loss and memory. Fear is present in the series and the instability of the viewer’s position and the collapse of the spectator’s perspective across the series is indicative more of a sense of loss than guilt. The eyes that beholds the flaming tire in Lull (2009), who witnesses the destruction of memory and place in Gateway (2010), and who is grounded in the destroyed reality of Moonlight (2010) might be a perpetrator of violence and not (only) a victim is a potential left open by the series. Perpetrators of violence typically do not feel emotionally connected to the acts they commit and usually employ means of reassigning guilt to others. The arc in this series, at the least opens the door to empathy and conversation.

Politics, class, and race are intertwined in ways described by David Theo Goldberg, Charles W. Mills, and Stuart Hall (explained in the first chapter). As South Africa struggles to define itself as a new nation the negotiations of citizenship continue to be debated and defined. By extending the narrative beyond the specificity of her body,

---

309 Foster, 62.
Searle provides a counter-space for discussing the current violence of the country in continuity with its recent past. In so doing she exposes the structures of oppression and inequality inherited by the new order from the old regime. South Africa is still a racial state as described by Goldberg. The political system of race and class continue to shape and scar the rainbow nation, requiring narratives of reconciliation and healing.

Reclaiming Narratives of Reconciliation

Philip Miller is a South African musician and composer who makes reference to the violence of the 1980s and early 1990s by using recordings of testimony from the TRC. **REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony**, written ten years after the conclusion of the TRC, premiered in 2006 in Cape Town, and was staged in 2008 in Johannesburg was directed by Gerhard Marx. The composer, Miller, stated that he had “complicated questions about the sounds of grief…” and was struck by the theatricality of the TRC proceedings. Miller states, “It was theater, it was spectacle. What makes what I was doing so different from what was happening at the TRC, anyway.”

Clearly influenced by the poet-journalist Antjie Krog, who documented the TRC in her well known book, *Country of My Skull* (1998), Miller used, as Catherine Cole describes, a “Brechtian disconnect between performer and ‘character.’” Race and gender are destabilized, and visual, aural, and textual clues do not clarify identity, at least not with any certainty.” It is described by Miller as a “spiritual work,” in which he wanted

---

311 Quoted in: Liza Key, *Rewind a Cantata: Based on Rewind*, DVD, dir. Liza Key (Johannesburg: Key Films, 2009).
312 Cole, 144.
the “rawness and authenticity” of the TRC recordings. This had special importance for the section titled, The Cry of Nomonde Calata, which blends a professional singer (soprano Kimmy Skota) giving a mournful aria with the recorded testimony of Calata, during which she is overcome with emotion and gives a heart-breaking, sobbing cry on the stand.

The entire cantata tells the harrowing story of the suffering during apartheid oppression and the horrors of the violence used to enforce it and then overthrow it. Miller combines traditional African rhythms, conversing vocal lines, and powerful choruses. He intertwines a string octet, full chorus and solo singers with recorded testimonies and news footage from the TRC hearings. If one listens to the entire performance, the first few tracks embody a brief sense of triumph and procedure, by combining the oath of honesty the witnesses took on the stand, and move into celebratory whistling and chanting. The inclusion of actual testimony begins in the third track, Rewind, where the chorus and the recorded testimony repeats the phrase “rewind the picture…” The importance of speech and testimony is emphasized a few tracks later in Rewind: The Goat, with the repeated phrase is “say it. Say it now.” The cantata drives forward to the powerful section Offering of the Birds, which has a strong, forceful choral section. The momentum of Birds flows into the quieter No Greater Than, which speaks of empathy and humanity.

The emotional heart of REwind is heard in the section Mrs. Plaatjies, a heartbreaking song recounting the story of the titular person describing the shooting death of her son, Lutando. The mother recounts in lingering, loving detail the moments before

---

313 Key interview.
the shooting, as her son made a peanut butter sandwich, leaving crumbs on the counter before going outside to play. The horror and loss sweep through the listener as the singer repeats a plaintive cry, “where is my son, my only child?” The solemnity of this track is broken in the very next section, which has signers performing over and with an infamous recording of P.W. Botha’s refusal to apologize for apartheid. Botha, in the clip, explains that he is “a believer… I am blessed by my creator.” He describes apartheid as an Afrikaans word meaning “good neighborliness.” The chorus mocks Botha, repeating his words. When, in the recording, a person in the audience snickers, Botha snaps, “who’s laughing?” The whole chorus laughs and whistles. The lead signer, baritone Fikile Mvinjelwa, repeats the question in a paranoid staccato, while the chorus bitterly mocks. In this turn the denial of white government officials is confronted and guilt assigned. After the emotionally wrenching Mrs. Plaatjies, this song gives an aggressive release. Reconciliation, forgiveness and healing are themes addressed in the last quarter of the cantata. It includes testimony from Winnie Mandela, where she apologizes for the violence to which she was an accomplice. The whole piece, just over an hour long, ends with the popular Zulu-language gospel song, Thule Sizwe, which provides an uplifting and hopeful conclusion.

The emotional arc in REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony (2006) is broad and powerful. It is indicative of the struggle artists in all media have had to stay relevant in post-apartheid society. While it can be argued that violence has been the foundation of every nation state, the TRC report specifies that

---

Violence has been the single most determining factor in South African political history. The reference, however, is not simply to physical or overt violence—the violence of the gun—but also to the violence of the law or what is often referred to as institutional or structural violence.\textsuperscript{315}

The cultural trauma is still experienced in South Africa. Artists close to the time of the upheaval (Geers, Vari, Mandindi) picked up on the powerful icon of the tire as a visual symbol of both triumph and catastrophe. Philip Miller appropriates the state vehicle for reconciliation to invite listeners to express and vent the still present tumult of anger, grief and pain. Berni Searle, in the \textit{Black Smoke Rising} (2009-10) series, continues this narrative, subtly exposing how violence not only has been a vehicle for shaping South Africa but also has scarred the country. The issue of agency in Searle’s works, like the others, is confronted in how one uses and defines these cultural icons. There is an imperative in the series that one must not forget how and why these symbols became a part of the South African imaginary.

Achille Mbembe writes that, “the postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion.”\textsuperscript{316} The binaries of personal/public, absence/presence, dream/reality, beauty/destruction, that collide in the \textit{Black Smoke Rising} series (2009-10) demonstrates the reading of apartheid as an absurdist spectacle and violent excess (suggested by both Ndebele and Mbembe) and the means with which to begin to overcome it. By finding the personal in the national narrative or by reading the national as the personal narrative, the two collapse into the same to make both accessible. The dynamics of presence and non-presence is

\textsuperscript{315} TRC, Vol. 1, 40.  
\textsuperscript{316} Mbembe, 102.
addressed by Liese van der Watt, who suggests that “Searle’s strategies of in/visibility enacts her/our struggle for identity by being never completely anywhere.”

The common symbol in the Black Smoke Rising (2009-10) series is fire. Fire consumes, transforms, and destroys. It can and has been used as a tool and a weapon. In this series it burns tires, houses, photos, and landscapes. The shifting and violent histories that have brought South Africa to the point where it is currently, that has seen it transition from one kind of state to another, have left the nation still struggling to define itself. Current efforts within South Africa against unemployment, crime, and violence lend testament to a battle still being fought. This new nation, not quite two decades old, fights to synthesize its past and refine new national identities and symbols.

The aestheticization of trauma presented in this series serves as a means of making spaces for reflection. One is pulled into the narrative of the series in Lull (2009) only to be dislocated and plunged into an indeterminate space of the personal and social in Gateway (2010). The burning tire, reified and aesthetic, dances golden flames across a lush green landscape, but is eventually lost to the obscuring thick black smoke. Gateway (2010) suggests a transition bringing the viewer’s position into focus. When the flames imply a personal injury and the smoke and ash become much more individual and intimate. The references to ruined landscapes, failed housing projects, fires and destruction have a post-apocalyptic feel to them. Moonlight (2010) in its movement and realism (compared to the other two) implies waking up from a dream to an unpleasant reality. The dissonance of the Moonlight Sonata suggests how the familiar has been made unfamiliar. The foundations of South African society have been forever changed.

---

The use of a European work of classical music proposes the normative ideology of white-European domination. The music is not destroyed, but its inherent dissonance is exposed and examined as the visual signs of cultural change and destruction are dragged across the screen. In so doing, those same ideologies of racial hierarchy and dominance, once positioned as natural and inevitable, are exposed as false constructions of political authority.

The suggestion is that culture must be disarticulated in order to be eventually rebuilt. Disarticulation does not mean destruction, as the music is still recognizable even though distorted. Likewise, South African history and culture is still there, though changed. The struggles of decades past are not over, the harsh landscapes reflect the lives ruined in the course of South African history. But just as the dry, smoky landscape transitions to the cool, blue abstraction at the end of *Moonlight* (2010), so the potential for South Africans to create their own future is illustrated. Ultimately the conclusion that can be drawn from the *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10) trilogy is that while the fight and transition continues the potential to realize a better future has never been closer. Burned landscapes can be re-planted, burned houses can be rebuilt. The ashes of history can be used to build a foundation for a more peaceful future through reflection and reconciliation.
CHAPTER 5: MIGRANT SIGNIFIERS: CLAIMING THE PLACELESS OTHER

Narratives of belonging and identity have been integral themes in Berni Searle’s art explored throughout this dissertation. In the works examined in this chapter, *Home and Away* (2003), *Seeking Refuge* (2008), and *Mute* (2008), Searle expands her aesthetic language to include discourses on the globalized immigrant community. In previous chapters, Searle’s art maintained a distinctive position in relation to South African and African identities and locations. In this chapter, her themes evolve to include issues of migration and diaspora in a global context. Suggesting, in various ways, that all populations are migrant, Searle destabilizes normative understandings of social-national belonging by incorporating immigrant and displaced identities. The political messages of sympathy towards migrant communities are apparent in these works in a way that invites reflection upon current political policies in South Africa and abroad. As Jacques Ranciere has written, “Art cannot simply occupy the space left behind by the weakening of political conflict. It has to reshape it, at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics.”

Contributing to an important contemporary social discourse on citizenship, human rights and in/equality in South Africa and elsewhere, Searle emphasizes the act of leaving and conversion to articulated spheres of social identity. Rather than signifying place and “home,” Searle changes and redefines historical-social signifiers in transition. The art under consideration in this chapter engages with identity in movement, in-between locales. Connecting leaving and arriving entire populations of immigrant cultures must

---

318 Rancière, 49-50.
negotiate their places with larger community structures that might seek to circumscribe their movements and rights, and restrict their access to the signifiers of belonging. On a larger level, this is a journey that has shaped South Africa. White, colonial immigrants redefined the rules of belonging to the land in order to exclude indigenous populations and disenfranchise any who could not lay claim to specific cultural heritages. In the “new” South Africa, internal others (the impoverished and homeless, among others) still have claim to South African identity but only peripherally. Marginally, they are attributed the rights of citizenship but positioned like migrants in their native country. Broader still, processes of identity-in-transition are being performed by numerous populations around the world, placing Searle within the context of global themes of place and identity explored by many contemporary artists.

Charles W. Mills indicates that nations divide space and people in a process to negotiate who belongs and who does not. Those who do not “belong” under official dispensation may be expelled or tolerated in so much as the social-economic system may require such “others” as labor. In the post-apartheid era the economic wealth of South Africa (relative to other nations in the region) has made it a popular place for exiled, migrant and refugee communities to find employment. The influx of “foreign” labor into areas of high poverty and unemployment has unfortunately sparked violent protests and attacks against members of these populations. Those who marginally belong to the nation lash out against those they feel should be excluded. Through violence the disadvantaged in South Africa claims collective authority and inclusion. David Theo Goldberg writes:

A primary factor in the formation of social groups is the self-recognition of (potential) group members in the image of an authority (whether institutional or personal). This recognition may be realized in terms of various media. *Interpellation* is the process by which individuals are hailed or called to subjectivity by others, and so it presupposes mutual recognition by individuals. The formation of subjectivity is inherently social.\(^{320}\)

Anti-immigrant violence reached an especially fevered pitch in May 2008. Full scale riots lead to many deaths which were very reminiscent of the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s.\(^{321}\) Treating these narratives with subtlety and empathy, Searle reforms and connects with migrant and diasporan identities to complicate simplistic binaries of us/them, suggesting the ways South African culture is diasporan with its own “internal exiles.” Martinican writer, critic and poet, Édouard Glissant describes the internal exile as “individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole.”\(^{322}\)

### De-centered Subjectivity in Exile

South African artist, Rory Bester, says *Home and Away* (2003) “poses the threat of space that has to be negotiated entirely without the scaffolding of support that expressions of identity so often provide.”\(^{323}\) As the piece begins, one screen shows sky and the other ocean water. Searle is seen floating across the screen on her back in the water (figure 5.1). Throughout the entire six-minute piece, there is no music; the

---


\(^{322}\) Glissant, 19.

predominant sounds are the blowing wind, lapping water and a boat’s engine. The camera angles cut and change throughout the piece creating, at times, confusing points of view where the viewer is briefly unsure what direction he or she is looking. The shorelines come into view for a while on the screens. One screen shows the wake of the vessel (where the camera is stationed) going away from shore. The other screen shows Searle in various positions, drifting through then past view, sometimes close up, and other times at a far distance.

Figure 5.1. Searle, Stills from *Home and Away*, 2003. Michael Stevenson Gallery.
The only words spoken are in a voice-overed whisper by Searle. Approximately thirty seconds into the piece one hears her slowly whisper, “I love… you love… he loves… we love… you love… they love,” as she floats, bobbing face up in the ocean. After a few more seconds the declension is repeated, this time with the verb “feel,” the phrase “we feel” is heard at about the three-minute, twenty-second point, when seaweed can be seen under the water’s surface where Searle floats. As the monologue continues, “you feel… they feel…” comes about twenty seconds later. Searle drifts away from the camera as its point of view levels with the horizon. The boat pulls away from her, leaving her behind. The next section of the voice over begins just before five minutes with “I leave… you leave…” and so on. At this point the wake of the boat can be seen. This section ends with Searle’s line “they leave,” at which point water is all that can be seen on either screen. The screen that began with water fades to black while the other screen fades to white.

*Home and Away* (2003) was filmed on the Mediterranean Sea between Morocco and Spain. The images on one screen shot near the coast of Spain, the other near the coast of Morocco. Both coasts are seen in the background, recorded with a camera suspended from a crane on a boat. The ambiguity with which the scenes were composed suggests uncertainty of location and provides a tension between the concepts of place and identity. Searle floats between Europe and Africa, between two continents, between identities, belonging in neither place, claiming neither shore. Significantly, this piece was Searle’s first to be produced outside of South Africa and it was first exhibited at the
2003 Grahamstown Festival, in Grahamstown, South Africa, the same year Searle was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award.\footnote{Ibid., 96-98.}

Searle’s body in \textit{Home and Away} (2003) can be read as a floating signifier. Her body, her identity, are unstable, with no clear referent to either place or associated races/ethnicities/nationalities. Searle explains that “the body is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. …one’s identity is not static, and is constantly in a state of flux.”\footnote{Fowler Museum, UCLA, “Berni Searle” \textit{Continental Rifts}, exhibition brochure (February 2009), n.p.} She is a woman in an in-between place, caught in a current between continents but not apparently trying to reach either shore (in the film it never appears that she’s actively swimming, only floating or treading water). Her individuality and own personal identity are unstable. No clues are given that would anchor her to a particular place vis-à-vis the film. Neither her clothing nor her skin color indicates a clear identification with either Morocco or Spain, the speech used in the film is English, which is not an official language of either country. The shifting sense of location is commented upon by Liese van der Watt:

> Whether this is Morocco or Spain is neither clear nor necessary to know, as it signifies land generally, an anchor of recognition in our attempts to locate the drifting body somewhere in place or time. The body becomes a sculpture of sorts, its corporeality enlarged and altered by the billowing mass of fabric, wet and animated and glistening with a life of its own.\footnote{Van der Watt, “Disappearing Act,” 23.}

Theorist Edmund Husserl has written about the connection of the ego to the body. He maintains that the ego cannot distance itself from its body; thus, the perception of its body is blocked, limiting the perception of ego. The body, though, is “freely” moveable by means of the ego and its will. The ego perceives the object-world through the medium
of body-sensations. The body is thus a “field of localization of its [the body’s] sensations.” Searle subdues her own ego-identity in this work to float in this field of localization, which is both specific and ambiguous. Specific, in that, this was performed in a particular place at a particular time by a specific person. Ambiguous, in that, the self is not clearly identifiable or place-able within the given setting. The scaffolding of support that Rory Bester mentioned is flowing and dynamic, not rigid and maintaining. Searle must continually tread and move to keep her head above water; she must work with and against the water to maintain her. She negotiates this space as a hazard. It buoys her, but also threatens her. She floats in an indeterminable way in a determinable sea. (Her location—the Mediterranean—is known, her relationship to the location is not and her movement within the location is ambiguous.) Her bodily position throughout the piece is tenuous. She shifts at times very close to the viewer, and other times she drifts at the edge of view.

Her voice is detached, a whisper in a voice over. The “I” in the monologue is also detached. It is not an active “I” with agency but a descriptive “I” in a list of declensions. The verbs used are all in the present tense. The “I love” is presented as no more important than the “you feel” or the “we leave.” The “I” is subjected to the verb, not only in terms of grammar (if these are sentences then “I” is the subject) but in terms that the “I” like the “you” or the “we” is subjected to the action of the verb. The pronouns are used as subjects in incomplete sentences without objects. The I/you/we/they/he/she constructions all float in a sea of signification as subjects that are groundless and

---

unsupported like the body of the artist. The lack of a grammatical object begs certain questions. I love (whom)? The verb love, in this tension acts on the subjected “I” then in an intriguing way. I love can be supposed as almost a state of being. This tension and grammatical ambiguity extends to the other verbs, feel and leave. The tension, “… you feel (what?)…they leave (where?)…” binds the subjects with the verb. The ego (I) and its relationship to the other (you/they/he) is limited by the body. Its actions (love/feel/leave) are limited by the lack of scaffolding on which to secure those connections to others and obtain an object. Without a clear foundation for the self, for the ego-identity, there can be no clear association to the other. Without a relationship to the other, object-desire becomes uncertain since the means to establish want, need and possession are all reliant upon understanding of relationship of self to other.

The migrant or diasporan figure in Home and Away (2003) makes subtle references to Searle’s own family history. As discussed in previous chapters, Searle’s family history is varied, including Middle Eastern, Malaysian, European and African ancestors. Her own family and genetic history have traversed these waters and crossed these borders. Contemporary politics made Searle a Coloured South African woman, but could she not also be a diasporan European or migrant African? Her performance in the waters between Europe and Africa demonstrates the arbitrariness of current racial/ethnic categories. As described in the first chapter of this dissertation, white English and Afrikaner South Africans are also immigrant, diasporan communities of Europeans. Afrikaner nationalism sought to erase ties to Dutch ancestry by claiming a specifically African heritage based on conflict and language, but it is an identity placed at odds with
the black African other. The paradox is normalized by claiming both a European “superior” status in relation to native Africans while demanding a special status as “native” South Africans.

The setting of this piece between Africa and Europe places it at the juncture where concepts of “The West” have been formed in contrast to “The East” or the “Global South” and the myriad of social-economic constructs of otherness that cultural theorist Stuart Hall often refers to as “the rest.” The historical (not geographical) construction of “the West” is fourfold, for Hall. First, it allows one to categorize societies as a conceptual tool. Second, it is an image(s) in a system of representation with all its associations and opposites. Next, it provides a standard of comparison to demonstrate how societies are alike or different. Lastly, it provides criteria of evaluation which produces knowledge; in this way it functions as ideology. The rise of “the West” is not historically internal, it is global. These categories also provide an illusion of homogeneity against the fact that Europe has many internal others and diasporan communities. Disarticulating European identity involves a complex understanding of its creation. Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses this history in his process of “provincializing Europe” without falling into the trap of cultural relativism. Europe, he maintains, “is demonstrably an imaginary entity, but the demonstration as such does not lessen its appeal or power.” Further, he warns that “the recognition that Europe’s acquisition of

---

the adjective ‘modern’ for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history.”

Home and Away (2003) addresses:

migrant crossings from Africa to Europe in search of better opportunities, it also suggests uncertainties and arbitrariness of place, nationality, and identity. The film combines the anonymity of the ocean waters and the indeterminacy of two continents in order to challenge fixed or bounded notions of personhood.

This point is relevant to the artwork Seeking Refuge (2008, Figure 5.2) as it speaks to these issues while it performs a de-centered, placeless subjectivity similar to what was described by Mudimbe in his work on the structures of African knowledge.

This work was also produced outside of South Africa, shot on the Canary Islands on Lanzarote. Part of Spain, the islands have a contested, politically charged history of illegal immigration, given their location so close to the western coast of Morocco and Western Sahara. The artwork was created for an exhibition called Travesía (Crossing) about migration at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Las Palmas is the co-capital of the Canary Islands with Santa Cruz).

The work opens with a hand in the middle of the screen, stained with henna to the forearm, holding a black cloth that is violently whipped by a very strong wind. This shot is intercut with shots looking straight down at Searle’s feet, also stained with henna in a shape that looks like a shoe or slipper. As in Home and Away (2003), the camera is active, moving around the scene in multiple cuts. As the piece proceeds, one watches the artists’ feet walking on barren, rocky, harsh terrain. The scenes cut between the feet

\[^{330}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{331}\text{Fowler Museum.}\]
\[^{332}\text{George, 84.}\]
walking on rough stones, course black sand, and thick crusts of sea salt. There is no music or voice only the loud sound of the beating wind against the microphone. The shots looking down on the feet are intercut with shots from behind, still focused on the feet, and long sections of Searle walking, with some difficulty against the wind, across the unsympathetic landscape. She is wrapped in black cloth, which at times she tries to use to cover her head, but the wind buffeting her is too strong. She wanders back and forth across the landscape, where she’s going to or where she’s leaving from is not addressed. Though this person is seeking refuge (as the title suggests) there is none to be found here. Her movements are slow and methodical, not hurried or frantic. She walks carefully, finding her footing on the unstable terrain. The viewer only hears the constant roar of the wind and the soft crush of salt and sand under her footsteps. Just before the five minute mark, in a long shot of rolling black sand, she makes her way to the center of the screen, where there is a slight depression in the landscape. She carefully lies down, her back to the camera. The shot stays on the still form for several seconds before finally fading to black.
Figure 5.2. Searle, Stills from *Seeking Refuge*, 2008. Michael Stevenson Gallery.

The silent protagonist in *Seeking Refuge* (2008) wanders an inhospitable landscape with no clear destination or origin. The setting on the Gran Canaria Islands so close to the western coast of Africa (near Morocco and Western Sahara) is suggestive of immigration and dislocation. This character is displaced in a diasporan limbo. With only henna and black fabric as ambivalent markers of identity and belonging, she becomes a symbol of the condition of being diasporan or migrant. As Michael Echeruo describes, being in a diaspora requires the primary condition of a possible, however unlikely, return.
While some in the world may have a “forever home” seen as both a physical place and a source/root/origin of lineage, the figures in *Seeking Refuge* (2008) and in *Home and Away* (2003) have no possibility of return for there is no clear indication from where they come. Instead, they are in the process of travel. Whatever shore the figure from *Home and Away* (2003) is washed upon, whatever place the wandering woman in *Seeking Refuge* (2008) finds remain unknown as we witness the process of bodily movement through water and across land. It is in this way that Searle performs the tenuous social position of migrant communities across the globe. Whether in South Africa, the United States, Spain or Morocco migrant communities make up increasingly important portions of society. But their displaced status often leaves immigrants floating, never at home and always singled out as other in their adopted land. As noted by Sarah-Jane Johnson, Viewers do not need to know that Searle is a South African woman to understand her conceptual vernacular as she continues to perform personal and public narratives that make profound contributions to a global feminist discourse.

Even with these conditions and placing, Searle presents migrant types that are sympathetic to the viewer. In both cases the viewer cannot help but feel empathy for these silent wanderers. According to the psychologist Janet E. Helms, sympathy with the other is a key feature in one’s own racial self awareness. Helms’ well-known racial identity models maintain that,

The developmental process involves successive differentiations of increasingly more sophisticated racial identity ego statuses whose objectives or measurable manifestations are schema or information-processing strategies. The maturation or evolution of the more sophisticated statuses makes it possible for the person to

---

334 Echeruo, 13.
335 Sarah-Jane Johnson, 2.
perceive and respond to racial information in one's internal and external environments in increasingly more complex ways.\textsuperscript{336}

This is to say, that one’s ability to understand and sympathize with a racial other is indicative of the level of sophistication with which one understands his or her own racial identity. Searle’s performances indicate an empathy with and perhaps even a feeling of kinship with these estranged others. Most people, she demonstrates, are at some level or other, migrant in their home countries. The complexities of racial and national origin are apparent in the history of the Coloured people of South Africa (chapter two discusses this history), but also to the history of whites in South Africa, who are also migrant. Searle’s performances suggest the complicated ways in which populations become classified as other while some peoples become classified as belonging. In the discourse of South African history, those of non-European heritage (even in part) were made other in their native land, dispossessed to a white minority which wrote their history as the “natural” inhabitants, through conquest, of the land.

An ideology of belonging and origin has been essential to the history of South Africa, but indeed as Goldberg writes,

\textit{The political theology of race seeks to account for origins, circumscribes rationality, motivates the social fabric and its constitutive forms of exclusion, orders politics and grounds power, liberating cruelty from constraint. Race, in short, grants embodiment to the will to power.}\textsuperscript{337}

Further, Lyotard writes that,

one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the

\textsuperscript{336} Janet E. Helms and Donelda A. Cook, \textit{Using Race and Culture in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice} (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 84.
\textsuperscript{337} Goldberg, \textit{The Threat of Race}, 254.
messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent.  

In these performances Searle destabilizes taken-for-granted ideas about racial and national identity and belonging. She exposes the lie that ethnic identities are constant by using her body as a signifier of the rootless, voiceless other, and in so doing reflects the reality of identity back on those who cast the migrant as other. The I/we/they of *Home and Away* (2003) are both at home and away. They are simultaneously ones who belong, feel, love and those who are forced or choose to leave. Leaving, however, is always followed by arriving. Just as the silent wanderers in these films await arrival *somewhere*, so the viewer begins to understand the journey that identity takes across borders. Nearly all people are migrant or have been migrant at some point in their ancestral past. While some people continue to be defined in this way while others are not, is more indicative of current social-economic policy than it is of natural, stable categories.

*Reprendre*, Trauma, and Errantry

These issues are brought closer to home for Searle in the piece *Mute*, also from 2008. This work addresses specifically the tragic outbreak of violence expressly directed toward migrant Africans across South Africa and in Cape Town. Remembrance and commemoration are key factors in this work, which deals with contemporary and historical echoes of world politics.

Édouard Glissant uses the concept of errantry in a way that will be useful for connecting these works of art as he describes varieties of identity in its relation to

---

338 Lyotard, 15.
violence and distance. Glissant defines errantry as not apolitical, and not inconsistent with the will to identity. A given culture’s claim to legitimacy and entitlement are always, for Glissant, sanctified by violence. Searle’s positioning of herself in and out of clearly defined circles of identity places her in this errant situation. Echoes of chaos and history resound with each other in an examination of *Mute* (2008), *Home and Away* (2003), and *Seeking Refuge* (2008). Looking at all three it will be demonstrated how Searle exposes articulations of contemporary history and violence, repeated in cycles from the apartheid era to the twenty-first century (in *Mute*) and echoes them in the intersections of European and African identity by reclaiming and transcending specificity.

About video installations in general, Boris Groys notes that the spectator is put into a tenuous position of choice: stay and watch, or leave. The spectator has to “develop an individual strategy of looking at the film. … The time of contemplation must be continually renegotiated between artist and spectator.” *Mute* was produced in 2008 and challenges the spectators to negotiate their emotional positioning vis-à-vis both the artist and the crime depicted (Figure 5.3). The film opens with two screens side by side showing their scenes simultaneously. On the left hand side one sees a black x-shape floating on a white ground. As the scene unfolds it appears to be a black paper shape floating on water as the color from the paper bleeds and begins to give the water a smoky, hazy look. At the same time on the right hand screen the scene is very dark and hard to

339 Glissant, 144.
see. One can just make out a figure on the edge of a light being cast by a flashlight. The entire four minute and eleven second film is completely silent. Approximately twenty seconds in, another x-shape appears on the left screen to be accompanied by a third fifteen seconds later. On the right hand screen one is presented with a series of still images that slowly fade into a sequence where the scene transitions to a close-up on the spot of light on the ground to a wider shot where the spectator can see the person (apparently a police officer) holding the flashlight.

Figure 5.3. Searle, Sills from Mute, 2008. Michael Stevenson Gallery.
As the piece unfolds the silence becomes increasingly noticeable. The movement on both screens and the somber emotions invoked by them put one in the mind of a commemorative moment of silence that extends into a long, almost uncomfortable period. By one minute in, Searle’s face is faded into the left hand screen, though the x-shapes are still seen floating over the top of her, creating an inky veil over her features. The right hand screen continues to reveal some of the details of the crime scene. Searle is presented in full motion, while the right hand screen continues in still shots. She looks directly at the viewer. Just before two minutes Searle appears to become very emotional and begins to cry, wiping tears off her face. On the other screen more investigators are seen (three in total) wearing police vests. One minute before the end of the work, one of the investigators bends over to pick up something off of the ground while the other two (one holding the flashlight, the other a shotgun) look on. The viewer cannot see what is being collected. Just before the piece ends, Searle seems to compose herself and stops crying while the men on the opposite screen continue their activities. The piece ends, with both screens fading to black. Regarding the dramatic placement of the body in the work, Anne Coombes comments, “Searle is a mistress of the art of defamiliarization and the sense of uncanny provoked by the tension between absence and presence.”

*Mute* (2008) makes a direct commentary on the shocking wave of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee violence in South Africa during May 2008. The events leading to the death of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave became paradigmatic of the xenophobia that erupted in the region. Nhamuave, a thirty-five year old Mozambican (working and living

---

in South Africa legally), was beaten and then set on fire during a township riot. The horrifying images of his death, caught on film, earned him the nickname “The Flaming Man,” and became iconic of that wave of post-apartheid violence that caused thousands of non-South African foreigners to flee and left over sixty dead.\textsuperscript{342} This violence came to a head in South Africa after a long period of economic instability after the collapse of apartheid. Gillian Hart, South African economic theorist, describes how during the 1960s through the 1980s, some three to four million black South Africans moved from viable farmland into Bantustans.\textsuperscript{343} This created urban-like density in rural, undeveloped areas. Taiwanese industrialists moved into the Bantustans in the 1980s with subsidies from the government to industrialize the “border” areas while keeping blacks out of urban areas and disenfranchised.\textsuperscript{344} The slow pace of progress after the first democratic elections in the 1990s left many black South Africans frustrated about continued disenfranchisement in favor of cheap, foreign labor. In 2008 demonstrations became increasingly violent. Ana Miljacki explains how typically the state controls apparatuses to manage public expressions of nationality (parades, celebrations, sports, etc.). Public demonstrations and riots are activities to reclaim public space for public voice. “They [the crowds] were on

\textsuperscript{344} Ibid.
the streets in order to speak in their own name, claiming back the oldest medium for
collective representation: the city.\textsuperscript{345}

Densely packed urban centers became hotbeds for these violent outbursts, as they
had been during the anti-apartheid violence of the 1980s and 90s. However, foreign and
rural immigration relative to South African urban and economic growth had built up over
decades. By 1945 South Africa had eleven cities with populations over 100,000. By
comparison, in that same year Egypt had ten cities with similar population sizes, Nigeria
with only four cities, and the seven cities of comparable size existed south of the Sahara
outside of South Africa. This changed radically in the next thirty years. By 1975 the
number of cities with populations over 100,000 on the continent went from 49 to over
120. By the year 1990 approximately one-half of all Africans lived in urban places.\textsuperscript{346}

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s many African economies declined, but South Africa’s
grew. By the 1980s South Africa’s GNP per head was about US$ 2,500. Wealth,
however, was extremely unevenly distributed.\textsuperscript{347} This urban and economic growth
(relative to other nearby nations) caused increasing levels of immigration, both legal and
illegal, through the time period. Along with the 62 people killed in May 2008, over
100,000 immigrants were displaced during riots in many townships. The violence
included beatings and necklacing, and government troops were called in to re-establish

\textsuperscript{345} Ana Miljacki, “Classes, Masses, Crowds: Representing the Collective Body and the Myth of Direct
Knowledge” \textit{Making things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy}, eds. Latour, Bruno and Peter Weibel
\textsuperscript{346} William Todroff, \textit{Government and Politics in Africa}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press,
2002), 78.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid., 81.
The majority of those implicated in perpetuating these acts of violence were among the poorest citizens in the country. A study on the riots conducted by the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) concluded, in part, that:

many of those who participate in the violence are unemployed, live in poverty, and see no prospect of a change in these circumstances. Theirs, they feel, is a half-life, as they are unable to participate as full citizens in the economy and society. Impoverished young men, in particular, experience this as the undermining of their masculinity as they are unable to establish families. Protest provides them with an opportunity to exert their masculinity through violence and to experience themselves as representing the community and fighting on its behalf. Unless wide scale strategies for social and economic inclusion address this issue, social fragmentation and violence is likely to continue.\textsuperscript{349}

In \textit{Mute} (2008), Searle acts as both a witness and a mourner. Her position is that of Glissant’s “one who is errant, (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) [who] strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he [\textit{sic}] will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.” The will to identity for Glissant, “the search for a freedom within particular surroundings,”\textsuperscript{350} is indicative of the reclaiming gesture that Searle performs. She embodies herself but she also defamiliarizes the self in ways to dislocate the signifier of her body. In \textit{Home and Away} (2003), \textit{Seeking Refuge} (2008), and \textit{Mute} (2008) she is both identifiably present and yet, indeterminable.

The shifting paradigms of diaspora identity are examined through multiple lenses. In \textit{Home and Away} (2003) the continental tensions between Africa and Europe find a focal point in the floating body of Searle, detached from both places and yet inexorably connected. Visually and physically she is tied to both in the works; as an abstraction, her

\textsuperscript{348} Cole, xiii.
\textsuperscript{349} Von Holdt, et al., 3-4.
\textsuperscript{350} Glissant, 185.
body is the association between the two and the break between the two, claiming neither yet linked to each. In Searle’s own family history she treads waters at the intersections of some of her own ancestry. Her own family has linkages across the Mediterranean in claiming and questioning what it means to be a Coloured person in South Africa. Her body serves as a nexus point for the complex articulations of nationality, ethnicity and race that collide and flow across the Mediterranean Sea. In *Seeking Refuge* (2008) again Searle moves, isolated, across the inhospitable planes of migrant transitory places. Shelter is not to be found except in the acceptance of the harsh, unforgiving landscape. It is only when she lies down on the course sand, accepting the dislocation and refusing the abject wandering archetype that she finds peace and stillness. It is at the point of greatest vulnerability that she enacts the greatest strength. In *Mute* (2008), finally, Searle remains voiceless and challenges the viewer with a crushing total silence in memorial to those immigrants who in the process of their own wandering and seeking were killed or forced by violent xenophobia to flee South Africa. In this last piece she is most clearly South African, most identifiably herself. She presents herself in mourning, weeping silent tears for those who are socially and politically voiceless. The tears of Searle are an echo of Nhamuave’s (the “flaming man” who became, in the media, symbolic of the tragedy, discussed earlier) family’s tears, and of the tears of everyone who was affected by that wave of violence. As in the *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10) series, violence is referenced through the tension of non-presence (in *Mute* [2008] no body or victim is seen, only police investigators and Searle). The violence against migrants is a continuation of the process of othering that began in South Africa centuries ago, where European immigrants
renegotiated paradigms of identity to recast their status as belonging and the status of Africans as other. In the great other-making of South African history, the categories of immigrant and citizen have been fluid and unstable.

The violence, including necklacing and burning, continue directed at the scapegoats least likely to be able to resist. Their voicelessness becomes Searle’s tears in testament and witness. The struggle for survival is indicated in *Home and Away* (2003) and *Seeking Refuge* (2008), the loss of self, home and life plaintively exposed in *Mute* (2008). Searle presents this history trough the body-as-situation. Considered through the idea of *reprendre* Searle engages with a non-essentialized subjectivity that is errant (as described by Glissant) to claim the totality of post apartheid (or post-colonial, in contexts outside of South Africa) shifting rubrics of identity. The specific references to particular locations, times, and persons is subsumed into larger global frameworks of disadvantaged immigrants moving into urban centers in the search for freedom and prosperity (this search is the “will to identity” for Glissant.)

By representing the nuanced complexities of these histories, Searle legitimizes migrant communities’ requests for equality and rights, while exposing the contradiction and construction in narratives of belonging.

**Breaking the Boundaries**

Searle identifies with the migrant body, giving agency to the “other” by proposing a dialogue of empathy and understanding, and questioning these histories of how persons come to be included or excluded in discourses of belonging. The South African artist, Moshekwa Langa, and the Egyptian artist, Ghada Amer, engage in similar exchanges by

---

351 Glissant, 185.
subverting the textual ways otherness is perpetuated across borders. Both Langa and Amer destabilize conventional concepts of “home” and “belonging.” They both live in Europe and not in their “native” countries, re-writing narratives of inclusion by denying ideas of essentialized identity. Their negotiations of symbols of location and identity question normative definitions of what it is to be members of diasporan communities. They both provide an insight on the translation of identity across the boundaries of Africa and Europe.

Moshekwa Langa lives in the Netherlands and negotiates, like Searle, questions about the hierarchies of place as social constructs. As an international artist, Langa became interested in subverting the status of maps as methods of understanding and disseminating cultural and national places. In Langa’s installation piece, *Temporal Distance (With a Criminal Intent) You will Find Us in the Best Places* (2001), the urban landscape is made variable, dislocated through the use of string, candlesticks, toy cars and other objects (Figure 5.4). Proportion is destroyed as is any sense of location. Here Langa questions how a person can ever know where one is located or from where one comes. Langa explains that “although there is a physical object manifestation, the place and space mapped out here is completely imaginary, although it covers a lot of ground (distance).”352 This personal questioning comes from Langa’s experience in the Netherlands where he moved to from South Africa. While there viewers routinely asked what Africa was like and where Africa was in his work.353 His experience in the

Netherlands suggested to Langa that others would always view his work as being necessarily located in an African-identity paradigm. His experience brings his work in close conversation with the Searle and MwangiHutter artworks described earlier in this dissertation, but also speaks to how the African artist, working abroad, is often positioned as commenter on his or her own “otherness.” Similarly, Searle, in the pieces under discussion in this chapter, locates how voice and agency are typically tied to national placement.

Figure 5.4. Moshekwa Langa, *Temporal Distance (With a Criminal Intent) You will Find Us in the Best Places*, 2001. Goodman Gallery.
These realizations lead Langa to create his map series. In these works various maps are re-inscribed, locations destroyed and new spaces created, undermining the authority of the dissemination of geography. Langa describes maps as being both useful and useless,\textsuperscript{354} meaning that as rigid lines dissect the continent of Africa delineating national identities determined by outside authorities, the partitions of provinces and cities are completely meaningless as they actually relate to people living in the real geographic area. Langa’s works thus attempt to destroy the de-humanizing universalizing of mapping as a European obsession with control and ordered knowledge. This dislocation of identity from geography and questioning of who belongs to what national boundaries is connected to the previously discussed works of Berni Searle. Searle, like Langa, questions and breaks down the hierarchies of map making and nation making where some people belong while others are migrant.

Ghada Amer is an Egyptian artist who has lived and worked in France and the United States. Much of her art addresses the shifting signifiers of identity in transformation, both in terms of linguistic translation and cultural change across time and borders. In the 2001 piece, \textit{Encyclopedia of Pleasure}, Amer uses an installation of cotton cloth boxes adorned with golden thread script (Figure 5.5). The text is a French translation of an English translation of a late tenth-century treatise on eroticism by Abul Hasan Ali Ibn Nasr Al-Katib.\textsuperscript{355} In this work the modern, Western assumptions about the oppressive (and often assumed to be abusive) treatment of women in Muslim societies is

\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 101.

challenged by Amer’s use of a Muslim work exalting feminine sexual pleasure. This indictment is as much against Western concepts of Islam’s backwardness as it is against the actual sexual oppression legally codified in her native Egypt. The distancing caused by the multi-layered translation, wherein much meaning is lost, further gives a sense of erosion and loss to the piece; loss of feminine sexuality, and loss of a firm basis for identity for Amer, an independent, female, diasporan artist. Like in *Home and Away* (2003) and *Seeking Refuge* (2008), Amer’s work suggests what is lost in migration when groups come into contact with and under the political biases and assumptions of others. Identity is defined in political terms in *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (2001) and symbolized by closed shapes. These “containers” of identity (sexual, national, and religious) can be moved, rearranged or hidden. They become floating signifiers of the control of identity under the dominance of a political régime. Just as the migrant bodies in *Home and Away* (2003) and *Seeking Refuge* (2008) are dislocated in ambiguous landscapes where place and belonging are continually deferred.
The boxes in *Encyclopedia* (2001) are stackable, movable. They are empty inside. Such has historically been the place of the veiled woman in nationalist discourse. Frantz Fanon writes about the veiled woman during the Algerian revolution suggesting that the veiling was an assertion of a distinct identity.\(^{356}\) Amer posits embellished cloth as an empty signifier holding nothing, because the translation of the complete woman, as a living, sexual, thinking being, has been incomplete, lost and suppressed through history. Her boxes suggest a space in which new configurations of meaning can be assembled, connected to an identification with her Muslim and female identity, but not solidly rooted.

in a fixed relationship which denies her any other realms of self-reflection. The boxes and their references to veiling are akin to the veiled figure battling to find footing in *Seeking Refuge* (2008). The woman is seeking a new home, stability, but finds none in the harsh landscape. She is out of context, much like the translated words on Amer’s boxes. She is moveable through her own agency but dislocated through international policies and racial/ethnic/class positioning. Like the boxes can be moved and re-ordered to create new associations, so the wandering migrant in Searle’s work will have to move and re-order her own sense of self to find a new community and identity.

Langa and Amer’s work also connect to the globalization and hybridity necessary to the negotiation of new spaces for identity. Both of these artists’ works connect Africa to the outside world through a personalized lens, as Searle does. Hybridity demands that one read across cultures. Langa’s maps and Amer’s boxes hold out conflations of cultural signifiers to which viewers are denied complete access. The placement of her body on the land and in the sea, likewise makes Searle’s placement indeterminate. Maps and boxes have hard edges; they cut off the sight of the viewer abruptly, disrupting complete comprehension of the material. Identity for these artists is in a constant state of flux. Langa’s maps cannot be read; Amer’s boxes are a translation of a translation written in gold on unsteady stacks of cotton cloth. Just as global borders shift and cultural understandings change, these artists’ work places the viewer on shaky (sometimes inhospitable) ground.

Searle, Langa, and Amer are all African artists working within the sphere of global, contemporary art. This sphere has grown in relation to a dramatically increasing,
trans-national, audience for contemporary art addresses “…the larger context of a world shaped principally by the forces and flows of global capital.” Artists such as William Kentridge, Robin Rhode (both South African), Yinka Shonibare (Nigerian), and El Anatsui (Ghanaian) work in the same global spheres that Searle occupies, examining many similar themes as the works discussed in this chapter. As Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, in the introduction to *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present,* explain,

> …much art produced in the last twenty years arises, on the one hand, from artists who have grown up, been educated, and work in a context removed or critically distant from normative, Western art historical and social historical concerns. On the other hand, for those who have been educated in the Western/North Atlantic tradition – obviously a diverse body of individuals – many have at best an ambivalent relationship to the history of Western art and see themselves participating in an integrated, international art system.

The movement of people and populations from one continent to another across unstable terrains reflects the international in Searle’s work, which is particularly evident in this chapter. This work has demonstrated how Searle uses her body as a conflation of archetypes and specific referents to suggest the tenuous connections between place, migration and movement. Identity as a process of becoming and overcoming is a major theme that links these works of art. Movements of populations from one continent to another across unstable terrains of meaning are indicative of the way identities are formed. The rootless “I,” the wandering subject, relegated to a position of abject placelessness is pushed to physical, emotional and political marginalization. Searle’s

---

358 Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, 3.*
dramatization of these plights does more than just open doors to sympathy—though it seems the viewer is intended to be empathetic—her enactments suggest the historical journeys taken by countless others who through choice or force have been moved from one homeland to another and struggle to define themselves in a new cultural environment. Her movements suggest the routes taken in the past by current populations and their parallels to newer migrant communities. In so doing she humanizes these populations and opens space for legitimizing their claims to political belonging and enfranchisement. By including the other, Searle gives them voice and place.
CHAPTER 6: REPREND L’IDENTITÉ

This dissertation has examined several works of Berni Searle’s in a way to illuminate the manner in which she exposes the shifting currents of political-social discourse regarding Coloured, South African identity. The numerous symbolic gestures she uses give her work and image important political relevance. Her work has been demonstrated to be a signifier of the body politic in South Africa through its disarticulation of the many overlapping elements of identity. John O’Neill writes about the body politic,

…the repressive function of modern rationality has inevitably led to a search for a new political symbolism which I believe can be understood in terms of a more articulated notion of the body politic. The body politic is the fundamental structure of political life. It provides the grounds of ultimate appeal in times of deep institutional crisis, of violence and terror, of hunger and exploitation.  

This chapter furthers expands the idea of *reprendre* as a tool for analysis to provide articulation of the body politic. A summary of some of the key elements of the previous chapters will be offered along with more background on Mudimbe’s thought as a foundation for addressing the main objectives of this dissertation as proposed in the introduction. How these objectives help reclaim Coloured, South African identity in a complex and social-politically relevant way are expanded upon.

---

Dr. V.Y. Mudimbe was born in 1941 in Jadotville, Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). He is a respected philosopher, professor and author. He currently serves as the Newman Ivey White Professor of Literature at Duke University. Mudimbe’s book, *The Invention of Africa*, was first published in 1988 and is still considered an essential text on the colonial and post-colonial encounters between Europe and Africa. Michael Syrotinski explains that,

Mudimbe transposes Foucault’s analyses of the complicity between formations of power and epistemological orders to a colonial and postcolonial African context, so as to expose the often hidden colonial origins of present-day thinking about Africa and its continued dependency on this heritage.  

Further, the importance of Mudimbe’s contribution to scholarly analysis is commented upon by Ato Quayson, who indicates that *The Invention of Africa* is not unlike Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, in that Mudimbe describes the ways Africa has been described within the Western academy. It is within this framework, and expanded upon in his 1994 work, *The Idea of Africa*, that Mudimbe proposes a concept of *reprendre* with three possible meanings: taking up an interrupted tradition, a methodological assessment, and the implication of a pause or meditation.

These distinctions of meaning come specifically from Mudimbe’s use of *reprendre* as a Congolese-French word. The use of the language itself suggests an act, by Mudimbe, of reclaiming the language of colonizer to provide a vocabulary for describing the post-colonial position. The word originates in France but has been transformed by

---

360 Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 83.
361 Quayson, 67-9.
362 Mudimbe, 155.
the colonial encounter in much the same way as Mudimbe describes the transformation of Europe through its complex relationship with Africa.

In this dissertation *reprendre* is taken as a point of mediation and reclaiming. In Searle’s work one sees how she plays facets of identity in ways that can be recognized and disarticulated. In the previous chapters, these elements have been singled out and analyzed. Using Mudimbe’s overall idea of *reprendre* then allows one to create a synthesis out of these individual parts. Doing so demonstrates how Searle reclaims and activates historically marginalized identities. Her positioning within her works is one of an agent, not as a passive observer or detached commentator. In this manner she takes on multiple identities but does so in a way that does not contradict or contrast, rather the multiplicities that she performs indicate the layered and nuanced ways that identity is constructed, socially, personally and politically.

In the introduction to this dissertation an art historical background was presented that described the predominance of the white, privileged subject within the academic discipline overall. Complicating this tradition is the current status of post-colonial theory, with its general interest in destabilization and the challenging of hegemonic discourses of power. Berni Searle’s location and personal history as a Coloured South African, and as a contemporary artist after apartheid, are relevant to this context as explained through the conceptualizing rubrics of embodiment and articulation as process. The structure of racial identity as a political signifier was outlined and linked with concepts of gender and nationality. Mudimbe’s concept of *reprendre* was suggested in that chapter as a means to analyze and understand these articulations as ways of opening
up spaces for political agency. By disarticulating the numerous, overlapping elements of identity evident in Searle’s pieces, one can find spaces for engagement and action. In this way, Searle reclaims oppressed and marginalized identities by exposing the mechanisms through which they were so constructed. Placing Searle within this theoretical and historical context is a significant contribution made by the current project as it is the first such academic effort to analyze Searle’s oeuvre in a comprehensive manner. Through brief readings of works like *For Fatherland* (1994) and *About to Forget* (2005) the first chapter examined the intricate and overlapping articulations of multiple identity signifiers on the body politic of South Africa.

The second chapter of this work was primarily concerned with expanding the historical construction of Coloured identity in South Africa. Race and belonging have been intimately intertwined in South African history since the first European contacts in the region. The development of racial identity within Dutch and British colonies became the foundation for the construction of racial identity in modern South Africa, with racist ideology and nationalist conceptualizations of blood and belonging a key factor to how colonial forces organized themselves in relation to indigenous populations. People of “mixed” heritage have, since these earliest colonial times, been subjected to an intermediate and subordinate class often defined in terms of lack and non-place. However, despite this, Coloured persons did manage to maintain a relatively cohesive social and political identity over the centuries. Although contested, Coloured identity politics remains strong in the country after the demise of apartheid. The collapse of that regime also established new challenges for artists to find ways of negotiating their
representations in the new order. Berni Searle emerges as a significant artist during the mid 1990s and begins to attract international attention during this turning point in South African history. By relating the threads of identity construction apparent in Searle’s work to the history of Coloured identity in South African history, it can be demonstrated how the histories of this group of people can be read as a larger narrative of social identity construction.

The act of conflating the personal in the national and vice-versa was part of the interpretive process presented in his dissertation. Searle’s personal, family history is reflective of the uncertainties and transitions apparent in the construction of identity throughout the history of South Africa. Pieces such as *Julle Moet Nou Trek* (1999), the *Dis-coloured* series (1999) and *On Loan* (2001) help deconstruct the paradigms of other making that was such a foundational part of South African history. By drawing attention to how these bodies have been defined and/or oppressed Searle performs a space-clearing gesture to allow dialog with the subject historically denied agency or voice.

Chapter three of this dissertation examined specifically the works *Colour Me* (1998), *Snow White* (2001), and *Alibama* (2008) as they related to the shifting and complex trajectories of Coloured identity. The personal and historical was collapsed into dislocated narratives of personhood and belonging in both *Colour Me* (1998) and *Alibama* (2008). The former, in particular displays the tension of agency in potential, an agency that is given movement in *Snow White* (2001) where action subsumes a commodity product into a false signifier of race which can be scraped away and transformed. The act of transformation thus creates something potentially nourishing.
Through a visual discourse Searle distorts then reveals her body in an activity that is productive but still ambiguous. In *Alibama* (2008) the narratives are expanded to a trans-continental dimension examining the importance of language, monuments and location to personal and national histories. The confrontational gaze seen in *Colour Me* (1998) gives way to a peripherally present body in *Alibama* (2008). Grand narratives of race and nation are sung across the ocean and in intimate settings collapsing the perspective of the viewer into an indeterminate space of recognition and reflection.

By disarticulating the various threads of identity in these works, one can then reflect upon the myriad of ways these threads have become entangled. The bodies on display make complex references to stillness and activity, race, history, language and place. Grand narratives are invoked but challenged through an appropriation of song and language to demonstrate ownership and destabilize normally understood positions of belonging. None of the identities presented are monolithic or static. Like the foundation of the state of South Africa itself, these histories are exceedingly complex and intertwined. Post-apartheid South African identity is built upon a shifting foundation of political and social constructions. What this does then, is open space for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Coloured identity in particular, and post-apartheid identity in general. The indeterminacy suggested by so many of Searle’s works is indicative of the unfixed nature of all tropes of identity.

The next chapter addressed the aesthetics of trauma indicated by Searle’s *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10) trilogy as it related to the politics in South Africa at the time and to other artists’ appropriation of cultural signifiers. The collapsing perspectives in this
series dislocate the viewer from the personal to the historical in a dream-like transition from one setting to the next. Familiar things are made unfamiliar and the icon of the burning tire resonates with unsettling connotations. This series has visual connections with art from other post-apartheid artists who invoke these symbols, but also to the TRC and the healing processes with which South Africa still contends.

The instability of post-apartheid South African identity is addressed and related to the politics of violence that has been a part of that country’s history. Her own tenuous absence/presence within the series frames it in an uncertain way. It is Searle’s story the way it is South Africa’s story, both personal and national. The conflation is not a reduction but rather a reflection of the way histories are made and disseminated, not through abstract concepts, but through lived experiences. The use of fire and smoke within the series has connotations of destruction, of battles past and present in the shaping of a young country. The shifting and collapsing points of view are indicative of the fragile status of identity construction. Trauma is symbolized and aestheticized in this series to create a narrative of nation building in which each individual must reconcile with his/her own positioning in the new state. In this new era, all identities are indeterminate and must be reshaped. Negotiations will not result in a permanent status, but will have to be revisited and rearticulated constantly as the new nation grows and changes. Through this reflection Searle suggests ways of reconciling with the trauma of the past while leaving space open to move into the future.

Chapter five looked at three of Searle’s works that address notions of diaspora and migration. In these three works the uncertainty of location was tied to a
destabilization of identity reliant on place and/or national signifiers. Placement, grammar
and voiceless-ness became tools with which she makes herself indeterminate in the
conflicts of belonging between the West and the Rest, particularly in a work like *Home
and Away* (2003). Through these pieces, Searle questions global constructions of
belonging based on race and class and questions why some communities are defined as
“other” because of a migrant status while other communities are defined as belonging or
“natural.” That these socio-economic distinctions often lead to disenfranchisement and
violence are addressed in works such as *Seeking Refuge* (2008) and *Mute* (2008) where
Searle provides parallels between current victims of xenophobic violence and historic
South African events. In so doing, she engages with a larger dialogue in contemporary,
global art about the paradigms of identity and location.

Searle uses herself as an anonymous focal point in these works. She is positioned
in an unstable relationship between subject and other. The ties to her own family history
are expanded to an archetype to suggest the commonality of these crossings in the social
constructions of identity in history. In reference to violence and rejection she positions
herself as victim, not to gain pity, but in a demonstration of how claiming certain
identities always involves rejecting other identities. That to be positioned in one context
is to articulate one’s identity with a particular set of histories and ideologies. Identity is a
process of becoming and is ever-shifting. Post apartheid South Africa, is still dealing
with the aftermath of this kind of becoming, but the story is not unique to that nation.
Violence is implied through the tension of non-presence and non-placement that is
suggestive of the great other-making that defines identity construction. By enacting these
struggles Searle activates the position of other giving voice and the potential for agency. She reclaims the voice of the voiceless.

This dissertation has demonstrated how an in depth analysis of Berni Searle’s work can lead to a better, deeper understanding of the fluctuating nature of identity construction in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond. Part of this analysis has been to express the myriad of ways identity is constructed and controlled, and how through that history political agency can be given or denied. Searle’s work acts as a lens through which to examine these fabrications. She presents socio-politically charged spaces for discourse and agency within the body politic of the new South Africa. This provides an implicit critique on the methods of power and control exerted by governmental and Western systems of authority both during and after the colonial era. Transcending this oppression while not denying or diminishing its past and continued effects are key elements to why Searle’s art is so engaging and provocative.

Articulation and Positioning

As explained in the introduction to this dissertation the concept of articulation used in this research is taken from Stuart Hall, who adapted the idea from the works of Antonio Gramsci. In this way, articulation is a way of understanding “how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.” Stuart Hall seeks a non-reductional theory of determination and social practices, or ideology and culture and politics. Articulation refers to complex

historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structure unity out of complexity, difference, and contradiction. In articulation theory there is an absence of guarantees and a shift of focus from origins to effects.\textsuperscript{364} It is precisely the idea of shifting trajectories and non-stable formations makes the notion of articulation ideal for examining Searle’s work. Her positioning under the rubric of Coloured identity in South Africa lends itself to an understanding of how idioms of identity are specifically articulated by social-historical forces. Under apartheid those categorized as Coloured or “mixed race” occupied an ambiguous position, neither full citizens, nor complete subjects.\textsuperscript{365} Coloured persons in South Africa have had to find ways to construct coherent identity markers even in the face of oppression and denial. As Stuart Hall indicates, “identities declare not some primordial identity but rather a positional choice of the groups with which they wish to be associated.”\textsuperscript{366} Having an identity thus is choosing an identity, which is in itself a long series of relational choices.

How the Coloured people of South Africa came to be positioned has been addressed. Identity construction is a complex negotiation between persons who in their interactions with each other through the mechanisms of power and the hierarchies in place create the other in relationship to themselves. No identity is static or monolithic, it moves and changes on linkages made in certain environments at certain points in history, and is thus always in a constant re-negotiation. There is no atomic level of identity, that is, there is no fundamental core from which identity can be marked or objectified.

\textsuperscript{366} Stuart Hall, “Conclusion,” 210.
Individual aspects of identity that articulate to form complex social identities include things like race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and economic class, among many others. In this dissertation only a few possible threads of identity have been examined to demonstrate the complex ways these linkages occur and fluctuate.

In the works *Alibama* (2008) and *Colour Me* (1998) historical conflations of people and commodity were enacted to show the linkage between race and national belonging in the construction of the Coloured body. Narratives of domination and ownership were complicated and challenged through the use of the gaze and appropriation of language. The positioning of oppressed bodies as such was not presented in a way that suggested helplessness or powerlessness, but rather agency-in-potential that allowed for resistance and acknowledged autonomy. Those oppressed, though overpowered, were not powerless. The important processes through which marginalization becomes historicized are reclaimed as spaces where positioning as other was not a loss of culture but rather a substantiation of autonomous identity.

Works like *Home and Away* (2003) reveal the complexities of globally-shifting identities and exposes the lie of identity as fixed or rooted in a concept of homeland or original place. Belonging is a sense of being-at-place which is a social construction based on paradigms of power built on history. In any given country, some people belong, others do not. The foundations of how these rubrics of identity have been formed are complex, but have been naturalized in political discourse to maintain communities of exclusion where certain, selected others do not have access to the full benefits of belonging. The violence these choices can engender are referenced in *Mute* (2008) and
the *Black Smoke Rising* series (2009-10). These are positional choices made at the national and personal level. Searle, in these works, sutures the two together to open a dialogue about how concepts of homeland and citizenship become constructed and enforced. The ethnic and national constructions of belonging that are being negotiated in South Africa now are along the same lines of racial-national belonging that were part of the construction of the apartheid state. By reflecting South African history onto the contemporary issues of migration and violence, Searle expands the conversation to include the means through which others are created and secluded.

The often violent means through which others are isolated is demonstrated in the *Black Smoke Rising* (2009-10) trilogy. The icons of change that arose in the transition from apartheid government to democracy were ones laden with violence. Contemporary and past connotations of fire and burning are intertwined to reveal the complex ways that the past and the present are continuous with each other. The “new” South Africa struggles with many of the same challenges as the “old” one did. Governments can be changed, but populations of people who for centuries had grown under an ideology of exclusion and difference, cannot be made to feel unified and cohesive in a short period of time. If the future of South Africa is to be a “rainbow nation” painful transitions and growth need to be occur.

It has been commented on in previous chapters how the calculated presence and absence of Searle’s body has played into the readings provided. Female body artists enact themselves in relation to long-standing codes of female objectification thus
unhinging gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production. In many of Searle’s works she is presented as a kind of archetype. While this can be seen as an objectification of her own subjectivity, this provides only a flat reading of her work. It has been shown how Searle often intertwines histories on both the micro and macro levels to create linkages between them and demonstrate how the personal shapes the national and vice-versa. Positioning herself as story teller or character in the story, Searle weaves in her own personal tale as well as claiming a female voice in the narration of identity construction. She is telling and framing herself as the subject of her own story.

Embodying the Body Politic

This dissertation has primarily focused on works of art that feature Berni Searle’s body. The tension of her presence and absence and the usual presentation of herself as a silent witness or participant in ambiguous place or tasks puts Searle’s body in relationship vis-à-vis the symbols and locations shown as well as to the viewer. All people are part of a body politic, the positional choices each person makes activates potential movements in or out of possible spheres of identification. Not stable, not static, identity within a given body politic is known and chosen based on limitations of physicality and personal interaction. As Jaffe indicates:

To be embodied is to be physically situated. It is to exclude other persons from the position one occupies in viewing the world. This exclusion happens throughout our lifetime and results in a plurality of viewpoints and corresponding interpretations. With this comes the task of bringing them together. The need to do so arises from a second fact springing from our embodiment: As embodied, we are dependent on the world. We live by drawing our sustenance from it. As social animals, we can only do this through each other. Thus, our need of the

---

367 Amelia Jones, 152.
world is also a need of one another. Our embodied nature is such that we can neither be nor be conceivable without one another.\textsuperscript{368}

In a community of subjectivities both entirely separate from yet entirely dependent on each other the ways individuals negotiate and participate in constructing the identities of others and themselves is foundational to how the current globalized post-modern world is organized and interacts. Searle’s aesthetic embodiments of ambivalent spheres of identity encourage a space of empathy and understanding based on mutual recognition of how people come to be so construed. The method of \textit{reprendre} is a tool for unraveling those symbols and histories in totality and in mediation on their expanded meanings. Spaces for political agency can then be more broadly assumed by persons historically denied it.

Demonstration of Objectives

In the introduction to this dissertation four objectives were outlined. By using the frameworks of articulation and \textit{reprendre} each of these objectives will be addressed to clarify their points. The objectives of this dissertation are: 1) to use Berni Searle’s work to illuminate the discussion of how the Coloured body has been constructed socially in the body politic of South African identity discourse, 2) to trace how Berni Searle uses her body and the tension of presence/absence thereof to illuminate these constructions and reclaim oppressed bodies, and 3) to consider how such a positioning of her body provides a counter-space for discussing political agency in contemporary South Africa and abroad,

\textsuperscript{368} Jaffè, 7.
finally, 4) to consider Berni Searle’s positioning within the larger context of contemporary South African art and current global art.

To illuminate the discussion of how the Coloured body has been constructed socially in the body politic of South African identity discourse, this dissertation has addressed the major historical factors and events that were essential to its formation. Coloured identity in South Africa has been contested and challenged but is considered to be stable and cohesive within the community. The positioning of Coloured people in the mechanisms of power in South Africa has also changed from one era to another. From the very beginning of the colonial encounter in South Africa, people of “mixed” racial ancestry have been positioned by white-controlled regimes as marginalized populations. Likewise, many times black populations have also treated Coloured persons as inauthentic in their claims to African-ness. Despite these kinds of rhetoric, Coloured people have maintained their cultural distinctiveness where the connotation of “mixed” is not to be associated with a “diluted” or compromised heritage but rather as something unique and positive. Though the Black Consciousness movement and other resistance movements at times encouraged rejectionism to unify black identity against the structures of white power, the cohesiveness of Coloured identity did not diminish. The concentration of this minority in the Cape area has given some political weight in that region where both the ANC and NP regularly court their patronage in the post-apartheid era.

Berni Searle’s work illustrates this history by enacting the Coloured body in a way that disarticulates the tenuous links between history and race. Coloured identity has
been contested both socially and legally (in the 1950s laws establishing identity based on
color were notoriously ambiguous about who belonged in the Coloured category) but its
insistence on biological determinism exhibited through skin color is challenged and
destabilized though many of Searle’s works. Body/place/commodity are shown in the
ways they have been historically conflated. The bodies presented in Colour Me (1998)
and Snow White (2001) are “colored” bodies that are subjected to their classifications
even while they defy them. The Castle of Good Hope is a nexus where those bodies and
commodities were traded and where South Africa was linked to larger global network of
exploitation based on race and class. The work Alibama (2008) positions Searle at that
place in a claiming gesture that sutures her history into the grand narratives being written
and rewritten in the country. Bodies that at one time did not belong now do, while other
bodies have taken the place of dehumanized other. Mute (2008) suggests the violence
and its ramifications on a society that is such a historical part of identity building. The
process of change and rewriting has often been violent, as indicated in the Black Smoke
Rising (2009-10) series. These grand histories and narratives have historically excluded
Coloured and female authors that Searle consciously places herself within these narrative
contexts is a gesture of reclaiming those narratives and reaffirming the continued
presence of these marginalized communities within these discourses.

The tension of presence/absence of Berni Searle’s body in her art demonstrates
these constructions and reclaims oppressed bodies. In all of the works discussed in this
dissertation Searle was visually present within the work at least peripherally and in some
cases she was the main visual focal point. Likewise in many of the pieces considered she
does not use her voice (*Home and Away* [2003] and *Alibama* [2008] are the notable exceptions). Her presence as a Coloured woman performing ambiguous tasks opens up space to consider the ways such bodies have been displayed and framed across history. That she is usually voiceless suggests the political oppression typically placed upon these bodies. Where she does speak it is to disseminate and claim the history present in the song *Alibama* (2008) and its connotations of national identity and racial belonging, or as the ambiguous and disembodied speaker in *Home and Away* (2003) who loves, feels and leaves in an indeterminate space of dislocation. Positioning herself as subject of the story (as in *Colour Me* [1998] or *Snow White* [2001]) or teller of the story (as in the *Black Smoke Rising* [2009-10] trilogy) she frames the narratives being told in relation to her own positioning as a Coloured South African woman. Even when not visually present she still acts upon the scene. In this way she indicates how even those who have been marginalized or removed from official histories still have histories to claim. The processes and abuses of colonialization and slavery still have significant ramifications in South Africa, the United States, European nations and elsewhere. Searle meaningfully and emotionally addresses the continued, human cost of other-making.

Throughout this dissertation Searle’s artwork has been placed in conversation with other contemporary African and South African artists, positioning her within the larger context of contemporary African and global art. Her art engages with significant themes of identity and post-colonial subjectivity that are an essential part of the contemporary art world. The artwork of Berni Searle is challenging, complex, aesthetic and thoughtful. The nuanced way she addresses the past and current challenges of South
African identity construction allows viewers to engage with often difficult aspects of contemporary culture in a significant way. Her work performs an important task for contemporary South African artists to continue to find ways of reconciling the chaos of their nation’s past with the desire to build a more prosperous and peaceful future. She does not shy away from difficult topics or suggest easy paths of understanding, but rather through carefully constructed, layered images of history, identity and place, she lays a foundation for accepting and transcending the past and making room for the future.

Considering how such a positioning of Searle’s body provides a counter-space for discussing political agency in contemporary South Africa has been a major theme in the current research. By reclaiming continuity with history, Searle exposes the political agency present in the positioning of identity. Political agency refers to the positive implementation of rights, the possibility for action, and the exercise of social liberties. Coloured identity politics has been a politics of defining place as an oppressed minority within a larger political system historically based on racial segregation, white supremacy, and exploitation. The shifting paradigms of Coloured agency within the political systems of South Africa before, during and after apartheid have been in response to the availability of rights and the desire for social change. The Coloured population has created its own culture. Other identity groups have shaped that culture, but as indicated by Mohammed Adhikari and others, identity is created and formed in large part by the group itself. Refusing to be marginalized, Searle performs her identity within the complex signifiers of South African identity in a way that activates her claim on those

---

histories. By performing the positioning of Coloured identity in the past she reaffirms the right to political agency in the present. The articulations demonstrated in her works provide an interpretive space to reflect upon the dynamic movements of identity discourse in a manner that allows the reclaiming of political agency.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


_____.


_____.


Echeruo, Michael J.C. “An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project.” In *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities,* edited by Isidore Okpewho,


http://stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/about_to_forget/index.htm


http://stevenson.info/artists/searle.html


Miljacki, Ana. “Classes, Masses, Crowds: Representing the Collective Body and the 
Myth of Direct Knowledge.” In Making Things Public: Atmospheres of 
Democracy, edited by Latour, Bruno and Peter Weibel, 234-243. Cambridge: 

Mills, Charles W. Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race. Ithaca; London: 


____. “Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness.” In The Changing Terrain of 


Mwangi, Ingrid. Your Own Soul. Edited by Berthold Schmitt and Bernd Schulz. 

Ndebele, Njabulo S. “Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative.” In Negotiating 
the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa, edited by Sarah Nuttall and 


Pillay, Yegan. Interview by author via telephone, 24 April 2013.


### APPENDIX A: A TIMELINE OF SEARLE’S MAJOR EXHIBITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>EXHIBITION</th>
<th>PLACE</th>
<th>ART WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Second Johannesburg Biennale</td>
<td>Johannesburg, South Africa</td>
<td>For Fatherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Truth Veils</td>
<td>Witswatersrand University, Johannesburg, South Africa</td>
<td>Dis-coloured series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Staking Claims: Confronting Cape Town</td>
<td>The Granery, Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>A Darker Shade of Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Bloedyn</td>
<td>Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>Julle Moet Nou Trek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet, Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>Colour Me series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Venice Biennale</td>
<td>Venice, Italy</td>
<td>Snow White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>South Africa House Re-Dedication</td>
<td>London, United Kingdom</td>
<td>On Loan: Acquired, Preserved, Transformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Berni Searle Solo Exhibition</td>
<td>University of South Florida, Tampa, United States</td>
<td>Home and Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Aardklop Festival</td>
<td>Atholne Township, Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>Vapour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>51st Venice Biennale: Always a Little Further</td>
<td>Venice, Italy</td>
<td>About to Forget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>University of South Florida, Tampa, United States</td>
<td>Night Fall, Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Berni Searle: Recent Work</td>
<td>Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>Alibama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Travesia</td>
<td>Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria</td>
<td>Seeking Refuge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>On the Edge</td>
<td>Stavanger, Norway</td>
<td>Day for Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>Berni Searle: Recent Work</td>
<td>Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa</td>
<td>Black Smoke Rising Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Interlaced</td>
<td>Bruges, Belgium</td>
<td>Interlaced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Exhibition/Event</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Art Series/Photographic Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>DAK’ART Guest Artist</td>
<td>Galerie Nationale, Dakar, Senegal</td>
<td>Black Smoke Rising series and related photographic series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Berni Searle: Refuge</td>
<td>La Galerie Particuliere, Paris, France</td>
<td>Photographic series based on Seeking Refuge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Bellagio Creative Arts Fellowship</td>
<td>Rockefeller Foundation, International</td>
<td>No works announced at the time of this writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table is not meant to be a comprehensive list of every exhibition or piece of art ever displayed by Berni Searle. It is intended to inventory the debut of some of her most important works and to give a general sense of the scope and time span of her career to date.
APPENDIX B: CALENDAR OF MAJOR EVENTS DURING THE UNFOLDING OF APARTHEID STRATEGY TO PRESENT DAY, 1948-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Internal Event</th>
<th>External Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>National Party comes to power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Suppression of Communism Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Defiance Campaign (over 8000 arrests)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1953 | Public Safety Act  
Bantu Authorities Act creates separate authorities for blacks |  |
| 1955 | Congress of the People adopts Freedom Charter (26 June) |  |
| 1956 | Arrest and trial of 156 Congress Alliance leaders (all acquitted March 1961)  
March of 20000 women on Union Buildings (9 August) |  |
| 1958 | Verwoerd becomes prime minister |  |
| 1960 | Anti-Pass Law Campaign  
Sharpeville massacre (21 March)  
Banning of ANC and PAC (28 March)  
State of Emergency (30 March – 31 August) |  |
| 1961 | ANC adoption of the armed struggle  
Republic declared | SA withdraws from Commonwealth |
| 1962 | Sabotage Act |  |
| 1963 | Rivonia Trial: Nelson Mandela imprisoned at Robben Island  
‘Ninety-day Detention’ Act | Rhodesia declares UDI |
| 1965 |  |  |
| 1966 | Vewoerd assassinated (succeeded by B.J. Vorster) |  |
| 1967 | Terrorism Act |  |
| 1970 |  | SA expelled from Olympic movement |
| 1973 |  | UN adopts International Convention on Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid |
| 1974 |  | SA barred from General Assembly |
| 1975 |  | Invasion of Angola by SA forces  
Independence of Mozambique proclaimed (25 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Simonstown Deliberations on total strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Death of Steve Biko in detention</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Rhodesia becomes Zimbabwe (18 April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Banning of 17 organizations and 2 newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td>SADC formed to counter SA influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>P.W. Botha succeeds Vorster as prime minister</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Internal Security Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>UN mandatory arms embargo</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>United Democratic Front launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>UN Resolution 435 providing for Namibian elections</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Tricameral constitution adopted (3 September)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vaal uprising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Over 32,000 SADF troops deployed in 96 townships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Partial State of Emergency withdrawn (7 March)</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Banning of 17 anti-apartheid organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National State of Emergency declared (12 June)</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>F.W. de Klerk succeeds P. W. Botha as state president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Nelson Mandela released from prison, begins negotiations with government</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>First democratic elections under universal adult suffrage, Nelson Mandela wins for the ANC becoming South Africa’s first black president. (10 May)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mandela declines to run for a second term. Thabo Mbeki wins election for ANC. (16 June)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Large outbreaks of violence targeting immigrants across Cape Town and Johannesburg, death of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave (May). Kgalema Motlanthe takes up office of the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Jacob Zuma wins the general election for the ANC (9 May).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Death of Nelson Mandela (5 December)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>The fifth quinquennial election under universal adult suffrage will be held on 7 May 2014. President Zuma is the incumbent for the ANC. Twentieth anniversary of the end of apartheid.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: DAAR KOM DIE ALIBAMA LYRICS IN AFRIKAANS AND ENGLISH

Song: Daar Kom die Alibama

Author Unknown, 19th century.

AFRIKAANS:

Daar kom die Alibama,
Die Alibama, die kom oor die see,
Daar kom die Alibama,
Die Alibama, die kom oor die see.

Nooi, nooi, die rietkooi nooi,
Die rietkooi is gmaak,
Die rietkooi is vir my gmaak,
Om daar op te slaap.
[Repeat verse]

Die Alibama, die Alibama,
Die Alibama kom oor die see,
Die Alibama, die Alibama,
Die Alibama kom oor die see.

Januarie, Februarie, Maart, April, Mei, Junie, Julie
[Repeat verse]
Augustus, September, Oktober, November, Desember.
Januarie, Februarie, Maart, April, Mei, Junie, Julie
[Repeat first three verses]

Hy kom oor die see.
Hy kom oor die see.

ENGLISH:

There comes the Alabama,
The Alabama comes over the sea,
There comes the Alabama,
The Alabama comes over the sea.

Young girl, young girl, the reed-bed girl,
The reed-bed has been made,
The reed-bed has been made for me,
To sleep on.
[Repeat verse]

The Alabama, the Alabama,
The Alabama comes over the sea
The Alabama, the Alabama,
The Alabama comes over the sea.

January, February, March, April, May, June, July
[Repeat verse]
August, September, October, November, December.
January, February, March, April, May, June, July
[Repeat first three verses]

He comes over the sea.
He comes over the sea.