Mark Gevisser Columnist

LIFE

MARK GEVISSER: Ghosts, old wounds, and psychic traumas

If we are not going to be haunted by the violence of our past, we are going to need to talk about it

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01 JUNE 2021 - 05:00 *by* MARK GEVISSER

Sue Williamson and Siyah Ndawela Mgoduka, 'That particular morning'. 2019. Two-channel video installation. Picture: SUPPLIED

In *It's a Pleasure to Meet You,* a 2016 video installation by the artist Sue Williamson, the curator Siyah Mgoduka is filmed in conversation with a woman named Candice Mama. Both are the children of fathers murdered by the state during the 1980s. Mama describes her intense encounter with Eugene de Kock, her father's killer, which ended in tears and embraces. But all Mgoduka ever got from Gideon Niewoudt was when the security policeman stuck his tongue out at the then-

"It becomes normal for me, the anger and the bitterness," Mgoduka says to Candice Mama in the video, which was part of a Williamson retrospective at the Goodman Gallery in London recently. Mgoduka was a year old when Nieuwoudt set a bomb in the car carrying his father and three other policemen from Motherwell, outside Port Elizabeth, in 1989, because they had allegedly joined the ANC.

He describes his envy of white children with two parents (unlike most of his black contemporaries, who only had mothers) and with "the ability to just run away and go to England and Australia and live out your life there". He imagines meeting Nieuwoudt's own children: "I'm pretty sure those kids go to therapy, 'Oh yes, my dad killed people you know'," whereas "90%" of black people "never went to therapy." He voices his anxiety: "Something's going to happen if you keep on being overlooked. Things are already happening if…."

He can't finish the sentence and Candice Mama steps in to help him: "Ja".

" The very idea of being 'born free' is 'meaningless' from a psychoanalytic perspective. "

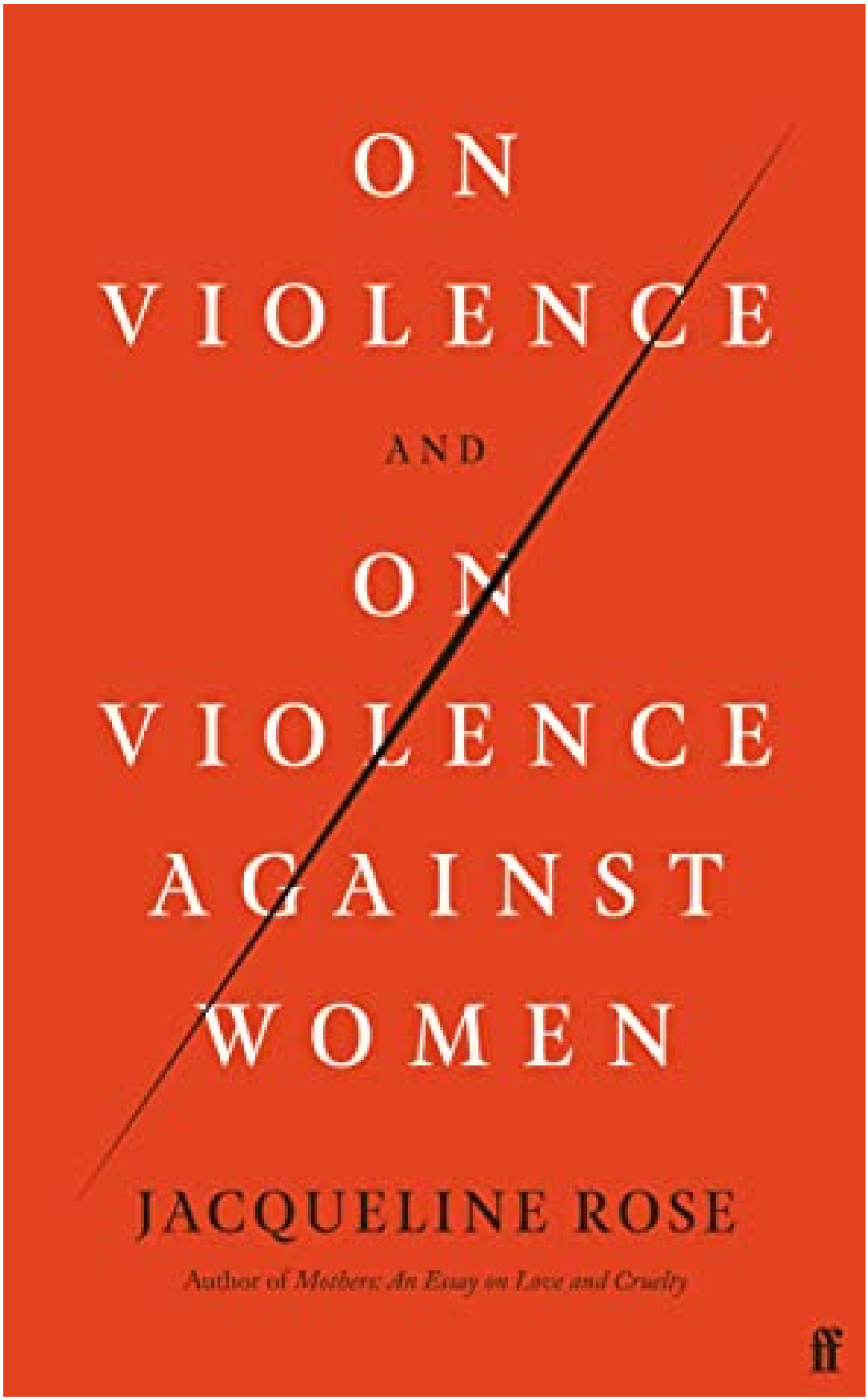
- Jacqueline Rose

It's a deeply moving moment, given Mgoduka's manifest gentleness. In the elision one can hear the written words of the psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (who commissioned the video): "Trauma is passed on intergenerationally in subtle ways through stories and silences, through unarticulated fears and the psychological scars that are often left unacknowledged."

There are two interconnected SA schools of thought doing the crucial work of trying to understand the psychic underpinnings of our troubled country. The first uses psychoanalytic theory to understand how the "monsters" of our deep political unconscious emerge to destabilise our society, primarily with violence: see my essay on Wahbie Long's *Nation on the Couch* here, last week. The second, led by Gobodo-Madikizela, understand these "monsters" as "ghosts", and is interested in the way historical trauma is transmitted across generations. SA is one of several countries living in a state of "haunted

Conflict Hauntings, describing the weight of this burden on the "born-free" generation.

At Stellenbosch University, where she is a professor, Gobodo-Madikizela has established a global nerve centre for the study of transgenerational trauma, which the brilliant psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose describes as "One Long Scream": the title of an essay about a conference on the topic at Stellenbosch in 2018. The "scream" is that unforgettable wail of Nomonde Calata at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when she told the story of her husband Fort Calata's abduction and murder in Cradock in 1985.



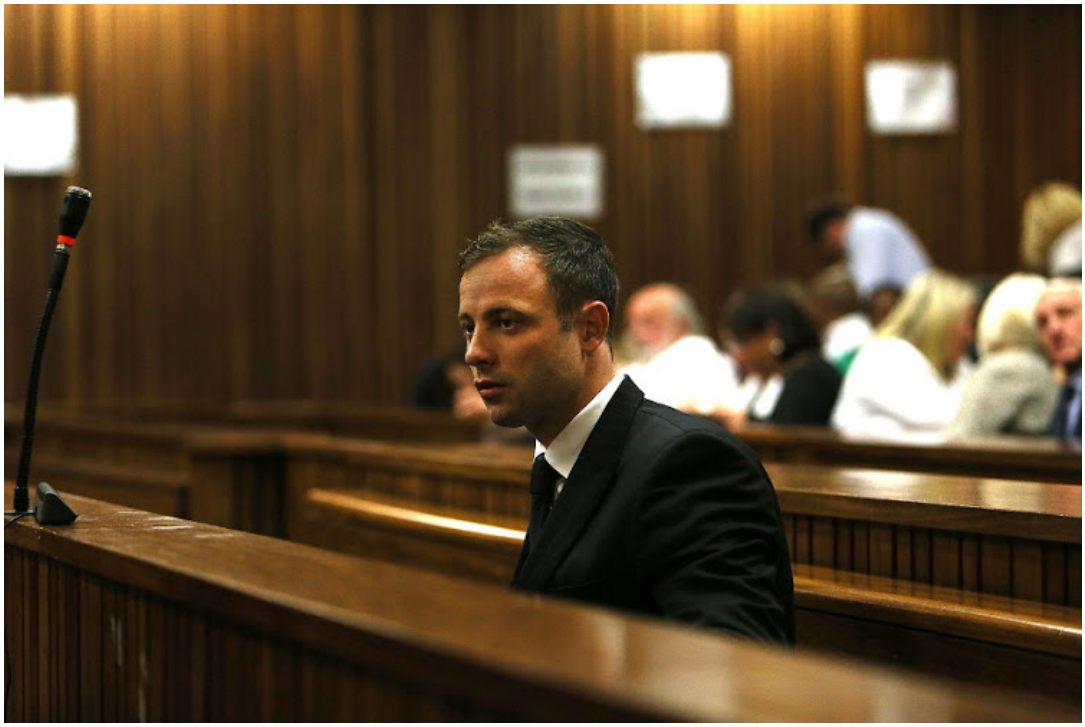
Picture: SUPPLIED

The essay is in Rose's new collection, *On Violence and On Violence against Women,* which has a particular focus on SA, the author explains, because the country "presents us with the problem of what

rainbowism drove Calata's scream underground, back into the political unconscious, out of which it has erupted, unprocessed and untreated, into the violence of our society.

Through a close reading of the Oscar Pistorius trial, Rose parses the "irrational fear" that Pistorius claimed as a defence, of a black intruder in his bathroom, when he shot his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp to death: "Whichever way you look at it," she writes, "the killing of Reeva Steenkamp was either a race crime or a sex crime".

Rose has no sympathy for Pistorius, but she reminds the reader of what is "axiomatic" to the psychoanalytic frame: "Violence is the mental property or portion of everyone." But "it is also something that is cast off like a discarded children's toy, an aspect of the inner world which nobody wishes to own or have ever owned." The result is that we "stamp out our living, anguished, relationship to violence itself". Through repression, suppression, denial or a host of other strategies, "our minds are endlessly engaged in the business of tidying up the landscape of the heart so that ... we can feel better about ourselves." Pistorius' fate is evidence that this is "a losing battle".



Oscar Pistorius during his trial. Picture: REUTERS

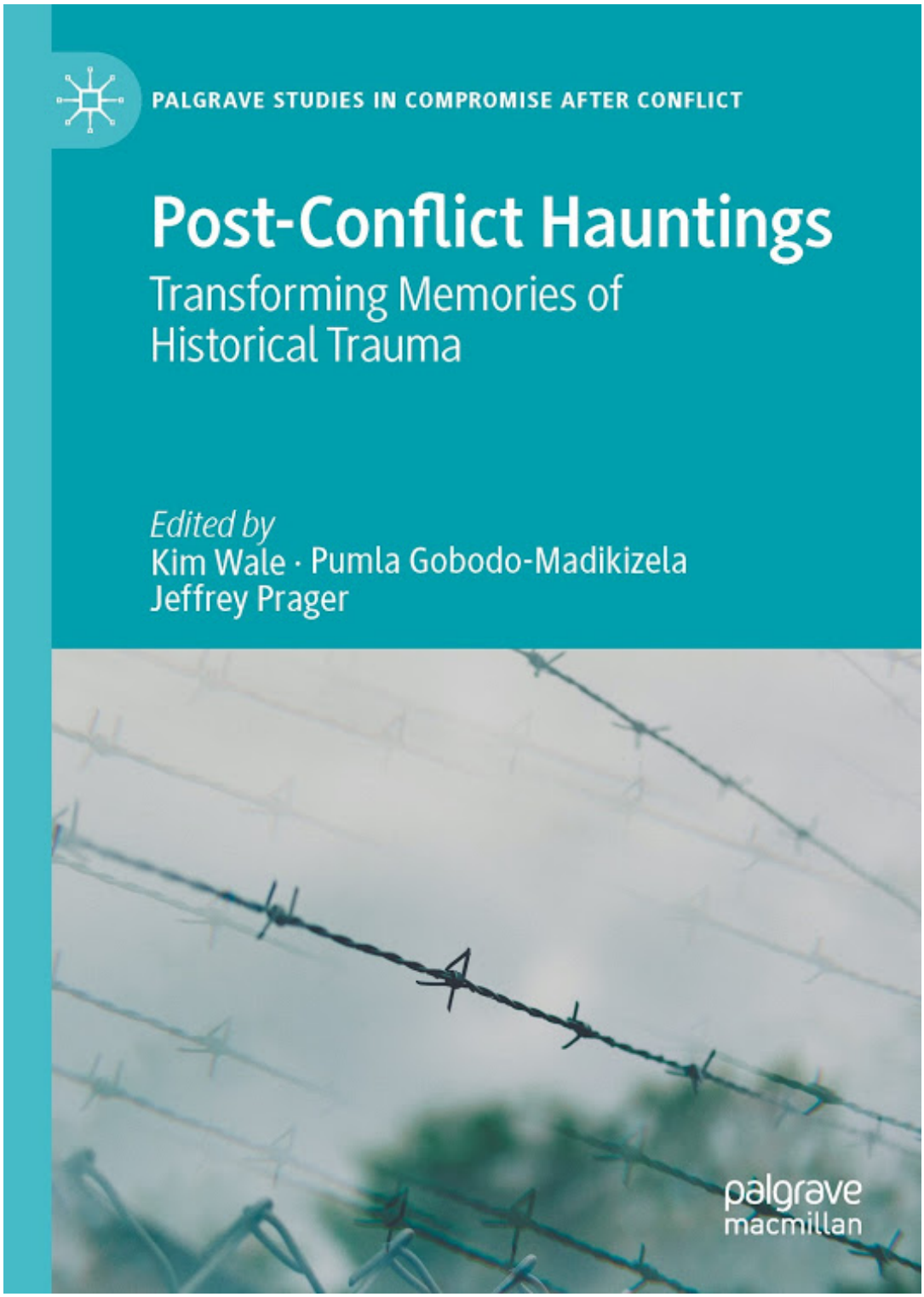
The notion of being "haunted" by "transgenerational trauma" was defined in the 1970s by two French analysts, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Introducing their influential work in translation, Nicholas Rand wrote that we lay the dead to rest — that we cultivate

nocturnal pranks, but because, unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us."

For this reason, Rose admires the way the Fallist insurgency of 2015 — the subject of another essay — brought "back to life a violent history which the nation was, and is, trying to transcend and forget". This "injunction to transcend history" places an impossible demand on those deemed to have been "born free", the very idea of which is "meaningless" from a psychoanalytic perspective (which holds that "nothing perishes in the mind") or from the *ubuntu* perspective, which sees our identities as deeply relational: if I am someone because you are someone, these "yous" are not just families and compatriots but ancestors too.

"To be born free is not to have been born at all," Rose declares. And elsewhere: "We are always haunted". She refers to a paper given at the Stellenbosch conference by the University of Cape Town legal scholar Jaco Barnard-Naude, "a rereading of the classic story of Pandora, in which the evils that spill from her box are the ghosts of past wrongs unavenged and forgotten. The one item left in her box, when evil has thus been exhumed, is hope."

If I ever knew the hope part of the Pandora myth I had forgotten it. Intrigued, I found the Barnard-Naude essay, published in *Post-Conflict Hauntings.* He demonstrates how "Pandora's box" is not an earthen jar full of evils given to the girl by Zeus as a way of punishing humans from stealing fire from the gods, as is conventionally understood. Rather, it is a grave that Pandora must tend. It is the tending of the grave itself "which liberates ghosts": this becomes "the condition for hope to be left behind", in the earthly remains.



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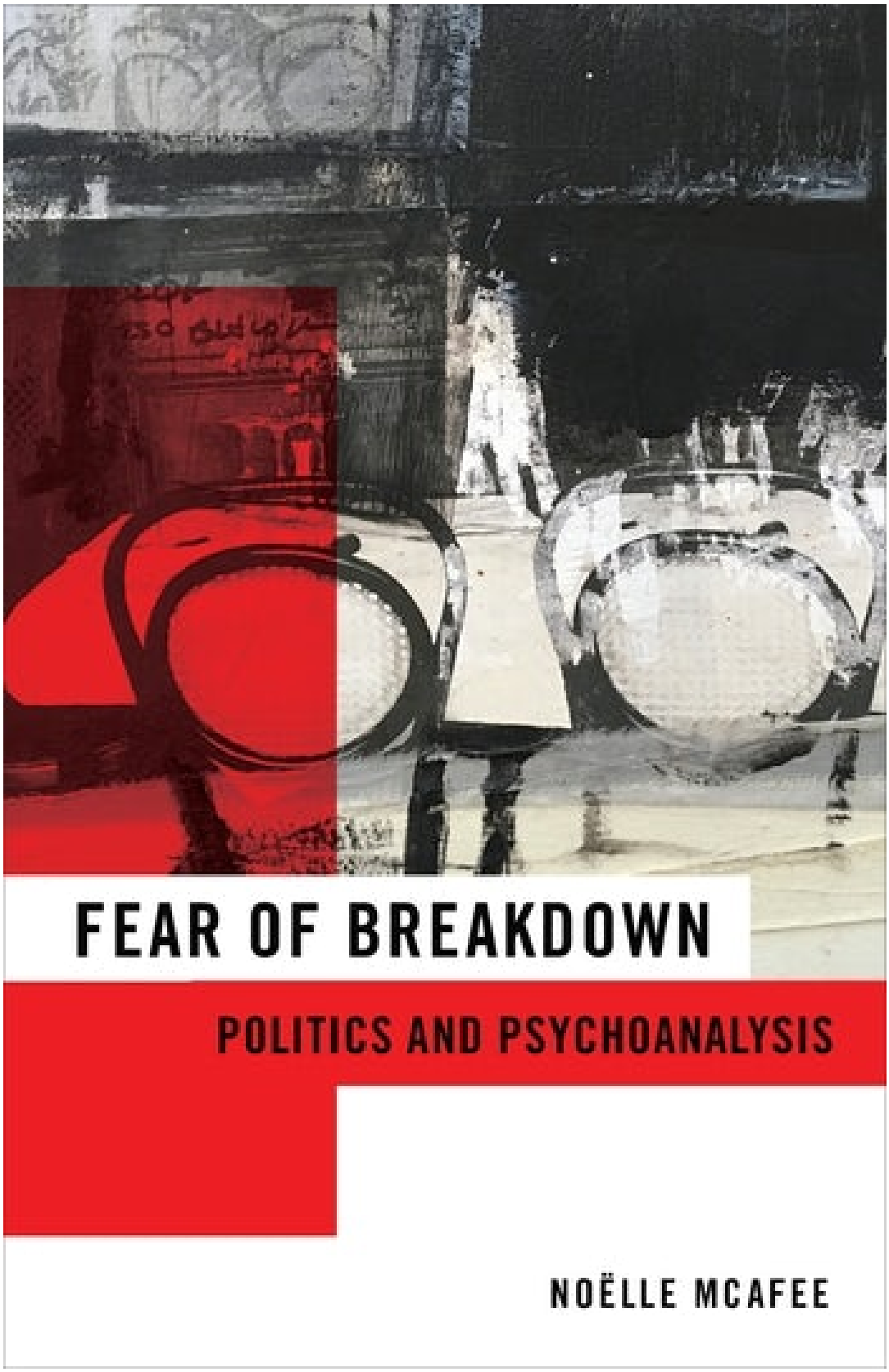
The notion of being "haunted" by "transgenerational trauma" was defined in the 1970s by two French analysts, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Introducing their influential work in translation, Nicholas Rand wrote that we lay the dead to rest — that we cultivate our ancestors and understand their suffering — "not because we may want to appease them or prevent them from perpetrating their nocturnal pranks, but because, unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us."

Barnard-Naude notes the “obvious resonances between this understanding of psychoanalysis and indigenous belief systems and cultural practices in Africa.” He does this to link the communion with ancestors that is so much part of African life with the kind of “reparative” work that comes through “dealing with one’s ghosts” in psychoanalysis: both are a kind of “talking cure”.

Reading this, I thought of something Rose writes in her book: “Trauma is history, not pathology.” The “talking” is not necessarily a “cure”, as Freud would have it, but an attempt to understand history and learn from it. Rose’s “core argument” is that “violence will not diminish, let alone cease”, if it continues “to be something which people turn away from, blot from their minds, prefer — at least as far as they personally are concerned — not to talk or think about”.

The solution of finding some kind of generative hope through dialogue or deliberation suffuses all the works I have been reading. Gobodo-Madikizela insists that hope can be found in the kind of encounters that she has helped set up between perpetrators and victims; which she experienced herself with Eugene de Kock and wrote about in her book, *A Human Being Died That Night.* Long writes that hope resides in our ability “to find each other over and over again” — though he notes that hope “cannot exist” while “rampant inequality remains locked in place”. If trauma is history — of inequality, of privation, of abuse — the work of repair is not only internal, but that of righting those wrongs.



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Another important thinker on the subject is the US philosopher Noelle McAfee. In *Fear of Breakdown,* she writes that mindful public deliberation — democratic practice — is the only way through the reality that "politics is haunted by ghosts, old wounds, and traumas". These phantoms fuel an impossibly idealist politics — rainbowism, for

anxieties and paranoia", which manifest in toxic "nationalism, fundamentalism, racism, patriarchy, and the like".

I am grateful to a *Business Day* reader, William Currie, for bringing McAfee's work to my attention in his online comment to last week's review. Using the work of Melanie Klein, McAfee shows — writes Currie — how "we tend to operate politically within the model of [Klein's] paranoid-schizoid position, always on the attack or defence, slightly manic and full of blame, fanned by the algorithms of social media that push us into holding extreme positions."

What we need, instead, is what McAfee terms "the depressive model of democratic politics": "Growing up, moving beyond the black and white of adolescence and toward a more mature understanding of the complexities and ambiguities in politics, and learning to live with ambivalence and uncertainty. This calls for radically questioning our own preconceptions and points of view and being willing to discover that the others in our midst, whom we were so sure were the devil, might possibly have a perspective, maybe even a point, we should consider."

For Currie, President Cyril Ramaphosa's leadership models this kind of deliberative democratic behaviour — so often seen, by his critics, as indecision or vacillation, a sign of weakness. Is the only alternative Julius Malema, who told an African diplomat on the floor of the Pan-African Parliament last week that he would "kill" him? Malema models anger as a political virtue; McAfee would see him, I imagine, as a textbook study of the enraged, murderous child defending against "primitive agonies".

Both psychically and politically, writes McAfee, we live a conundrum: "We find ourselves ruled by others even when we think we are ruling ourselves." Caught in the Ramaphosa-Malema predicament — between seeming inaction and murderous rage — is it any wonder that we take matters into our own hands in an attempt to demonstrate that we do "rule ourselves", much as the vigilantes of Zandspruit did two weeks ago, when they necklaced nine alleged criminals on a soccer pitch?

Part of a burnt garment worn by one of the nine victims of vigilantes on a soccer pitch in Zandspruit. Picture: GALLO IMAGES/CITYPRESS

Intergenerational trauma

I worried, last week, about the ghosts of this violence beneath the feet of the children "joyfully" playing football on the pitch two days later — and what this might mean for the transmission of intergenerational trauma into their own lives. But there is another, more hopeful, path.

Two years after her first video of Siyah Mgoduka and Candice Mama, Sue Williamson colloborated with Mgudoka, this time in dialogue with his mother Doreen Mgoduka. In it, the mother describes how she had to "bury" her grief so she could raise her young children: "You are playing a happy person when you are not." She also describes the death of her own father, and how she and her siblings — young children — were forced by the apartheid authorities to move out of their township home within a day: she relived this when she lost her husband.

In the video she tells her son that the only reason Gideon Nieuwoudt was convicted (he got 20 years) was that Eugene de Kock had come forward with evidence. Siyah had never previously heard this, and it becomes clear that mother and son have never previously spoken of his father's death and its aftermath except, once, when as a boy he challenged his mother to find another man and she wept.

We know from the previous video with Candice Mama that all Siyah

listens to his mother, and says this is the first time he has not felt "angry and bitter" while talking about his father. He has just become engaged to be married, and thinking about raising his own family has made him anxious about dying: the spectre of his father's disappearance means that he goes through every day saying to himself, "Don't die. Don't die."

His mother nods with empathy: "I think he is going to be the husband and father he wants to be," she says of her son. He responds that, listening to his mother, and — implicitly — thinking about making his own family, has made him "completely softer and more accepting of what has happened", even if he hasn't "forgiven anyone."

I would argue that what we are watching, in this video, is a young man tending to his ghosts, working them out of the crypt of the unconscious into which they have been locked by family trauma. He is finding hope, rather than pain, in his father's remains.

This is actually rendered physical. At the beginning of the video, Siyah is struggling to remember something concrete about his father: "He liked clothing," he says. His mother agrees, recalling that at his recent engagement ceremony she thought her son looked really smart — and only later realised he was wearing one of his father's jackets. The video cuts to an image, and there Siyah is in a spiffy pale blue blazer, smiling at his fiancée while the elders in traditional dress sit around them.

Mother and son laugh gently: "He was a year old when [his father] died," Mrs Mgoduka says, "but even today he can wear a piece of his clothing…."

The past can be something that you wear with pride rather than a ghost that haunts you.

- *On Violence and on Violence against Women,* Jacqueline Rose (Faber)
- *Post-Conflict Hauntings: Transforming Memories of Historical Trauma,* edited by Kim Wale, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Jeffrey Prager (Palgrave Macmillan)
- *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis,* Noelle McAfee (Columbia)

- *It's a Pleasure to Meet You*, and *That Particular Morning*, video installations by Siyah Mgoduka and Sue Williamson (viewable at https://www.goodman-gallery.com/artists/sue-williamson)