

Untold Stories and Disconnectedness. The Dilemma of Conscript Veterans of the Bush War ¹

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Abstract. This exploratory article scrutinizes the ways in which 12 white Afrikaans-speaking former conscripts - who experienced combat during the long-drawn-out low-intensity war along the border between Angola and Namibia – understand, give meaning to and deal with their violent conflict experiences in the context of political change in South Africa. The article highlights some of the predicaments faced by men who had seen and done violence during a war that has been remained largely undisclosed to the public. The former conflict is also increasingly reinterpreted as having been unjust. The paper argues that Afrikaner identity has long been constructed as somehow ‘spoiled’ and that this affects the ways in which ex-combatants can express their memories and lived experiences of the war. Yet veterans are increasingly creating ways in which to , as remembering subjects, are nonetheless slowly finding ways to redistribute their experiences in an effort to make sense of the past.

Keywords: war; violence; trauma; Afrikaner; identity; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

1. Introduction

I find it very hard to get on with people... [I] never talk about it, what’s the use, people don’t want to know... I feel very insulated and unfeeling... sometimes I respond with this overpowering anger... Some of Paul’s blood and guts were splattered on my face... I just went and shot him... [SWAPO

¹ I wish to thank the participants in the study for their willingness to explore this difficult topic. Thanks also to the reviewers, as well as the Trauma Reading Group at LUMC. This article was written during my stay at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in Wassenaar in the Netherlands (2007/2008).

soldier] it haunts me... I am always angry... Some things can just trigger it... and I was right back there seeing their faces... I have this carving he made [Paul]... sometimes I sit and just stare at it... *ek is bossies, alles in my is gestol* [I am crazy everything in me is congealed].

(Pieter de Jong, veteran of the border war)

Pieter de Jong, a former conscript and war veteran, seldom discusses his experiences of the Namibian border war, or bush war as most veterans refer to it. As he points out, people are reluctant to hear about it because they are not interested in revisiting this particular period of South Africa's past. De Jong also expresses a continued feeling of what can be referred to as disconnectedness² – a sense of alienation from wider society, family, friends, colleagues, the deceased of the bush war and his own feelings. This appears to be related to having been exposed to repeated violence or having committed violence during the course of the bush war.³

Although many men, including de Jong, choose to remain silent about their experiences or try to forget them, there has recently been renewed academic interest in South Africa's involvement in the Angolan/border/bush war (Baines & Vale 2008). This follows on years of silence and secrecy about it. In the interim, while the social sciences and humanities have been reluctant to tackle the subject, a literary genre in Afrikaans popularly referred to as *grensliteratuur* (van Heerden 1983; Joubert 1985; Strachan 1997; van Coller 1990; Baines 2003; Bothma 2006; Roos 2008), has developed apace. After 1988/9 an increasing number of professional soldiers⁴ also published memoirs of the war. Lately more personalised narratives and compilations from interviews with ex-conscripts have appeared (Holt 2005; Thompson 2006; Batley 2007).

This exploratory article falls within the sub-discipline of medical anthropology⁵ and focuses on the understandings of 12 white Afrikaans-speaking conscripts who experienced combat during the protracted low-intensity war along the border between Angola and Namibia. The participants in the study were recruited through a snowball sample method. All of them were at some stage under fire, had killed somebody and/or had witnessed the death of one or more of their fellow

² Winkler, writing about her own experience of rape stresses that this sense of disconnectedness, like trauma, is deeply subjective and cannot necessarily seen on the body, e.g. in the form of scars (Winkler 2002: 252).

³ Since the notion of the 'border' is in itself a construct, I use the term bush war, similarly constructed, but perhaps less politicized at the moment.

⁴ Geldenhuys 1995, 2007; Malan 2006; Breytenbach

⁵ The study is exclusively qualitative and emic.

South African and Namibian soldiers. The project was registered with the university and I obtained the necessary ethical clearance to conduct it. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants and in accordance with my agreement with them, all their names were changed. The men in the study group are not purported to be or supposed to be representative of all servicemen, ex-combatants or Afrikaner males in general. All of them have tertiary education and are in their late forties and fifties. They were asked to participate on the basis of their experiences: of having been conscripts, being 'bush war veterans' as well as their language,⁶ and self identification as Afrikaners.⁷ Of more import was that they were exposed to stressors such as fear and death, and caused death or severe harm to others during the war (Green 1990: 1638).⁸

The article draws on the understanding that trauma is culturally informed and produced (Lomsky-Feder 2004) while simultaneously being embodied and corporeal. Because anthropology in South Africa has given scant attention to the experience of former conscripts in the bush war, I draw extensively on local sociological and psychological studies for background. The research on which this paper is based, began as an exploratory study in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings and what was popularly called the *Boetman is die bliksem* in debate in some Afrikaans newspapers.⁹ I wished to gain a better understanding of how men made sense of and tried to deal with the violent war experiences against the backdrop of the political transition in South Africa. The research has since been expanded.¹⁰ At the time of this exploratory

⁶ Although about a third of all conscripts were English speaking, the South African Army in particular was experienced as an Afrikaans institution, in a political system where Afrikaners were paramount. I was interested in how, and if, the men in my study would relate their own, or ascribed, identity as Afrikaners to the meanings they attached to the TRC hearings and their own understanding of it. At the time there also was a great deal of discussion in the press about the culpability of 'Afrikaners,' however they may be identified, for the atrocities of apartheid.

⁷ Here I use the term as both an ascribed identity as well as one of self-identification.

⁸ The ultimate aim of this, as well as related studies in which the author has been and still is involved, is to gain a better understanding of how people make sense of doing and experiencing violence, how they find ways to deal with it, or whether they are unable to come to terms with such experiences.

⁹ In response to a book by Willem de Klerk (2000) about the Afrikaners, a psychiatrist published a letter in the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Beeld* and argued that the younger generation of Afrikaans speaking men suffered from psychological exhaustion. Subsequently journalist Chris Louw wrote a scathing open letter to De Klerk.

¹⁰ I have included more participants as well as websites in the study. For a discussion on websites see also Baines 2003.

study, the TRC¹¹ appeared to be the sole official and state-sponsored South African body that supported and called for alternative narratives about the war by former conscripts (cf Liebenberg 1996). Although there was a special hearing on compulsory military service, very few former conscripts used this forum to tell their stories.

Literature on the TRC indicates that the Commission was informed by efforts to enhance individual and national reconciliation via the notion of confession. This happened in conjunction with discourses concerning repentance, forgiveness, and therapeutic notions of healing. As a confessional model, it was largely based on religious notions about forgiveness and therapeutic understandings of trauma, telling about it and the subsequent possibility of healing (Battle 1997; Robins 1998; Swartz & Drennan, 2000; Colvin 2003; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). This discourse did not resonate with participants in my study, even though they had arguably been coerced into the war through conscription. While they had not refused to do military service at the time, and even retained some fond memories of it, they all expressed misgivings about the discrepancies between political propaganda, misinformation, the reality they had faced and dealt with in the bush war, and the subsequent negation of the personal sacrifices they had made. In this regard Baines stresses that many veterans now think they were deceived and betrayed by South Africa's political leaders of that era, and feel keenly the lack of attention and support given to them to deal with their harrowing and life-changing experiences (Baines 2008: 12). As with all armed conflicts, the passing of time will possibly make more information available about the bush war and result in new interpretations of, and meanings being attached to its historical events and processes, as well as to personal and shared experiences.

I try to explore the ambiguities of the representation and experience of a group of white Afrikaner men of a particular generation, members of a South African minority who, as a group, have largely in media, academic and certain political spheres come to be represented as oppressors, victimizers and/or beneficiaries of apartheid.¹² It is neither an effort to reclaim their particular understanding and representation of history and violence nor to assert that it is more or less true than the emerging post-apartheid narrative and process of memory making; but rather, it is an attempt to gain insight into the subjective meaning that these former conscripts place on it (Prager 1998). While this paper focuses on a small group of conscripted men who were exposed to various kinds and levels of combat

¹¹ The TRC did not give attention to the operations of the South African Defence Force outside the borders of South Africa either.

¹² There are also positive representations of Afrikaners, the TRC and the war, e.g. de Klerk (2000), Giliomee (2003) but the focus of my own paper relates to a particular kind of representation and how the participants in the study made sense of it.

violence, I acknowledge and stress that veterans are differentially affected by violence and its aftermath,¹³ and that the ways in which conscripts make sense of their experiences in the bush conflict would probably be different from those who were professional soldiers. As an anthropologist I also argue that extrapolations can be made from a small group of participants such as this one.

Although all the men in my study are Afrikaans-speaking I must stress that, despite some media representations, Afrikaners can hardly be considered a homogeneous group, and not all people identify equally strongly with this identity. At the time of the TRC hearings and in the apartheid era preceding it, the iconic representation of Afrikaners was frequently negatively stereotyped in ways reminiscent of what Goffman calls "spoiled" identity (Goffman 1963).¹⁴ The participants in my study also raised this 'spoiledness' of identity in relation to their efforts to make sense of their war experiences, as well as their hesitation to engage with the TRC hearings. I explore this issue in the remainder of the paper and attend to understandings of trauma, violence, expatriation and reconciliation from the perspective of the men themselves.¹⁵ In the first section I provide a brief background on relevant aspects of the conflict.

2. The bush war

In 1989 Cuban troops withdrew north of the fifteenth parallel in Angola and the South African troops left Namibia under the auspices of the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG). From 1975 South Africa had become increasingly involved in a protracted 'border war' on Namibian and Angolan soil, until shortly before their withdrawal.

The majority of white South African men above the age of 16 who left school between 1967 and 1994 were conscripted into the South African Army. The majority of the conscripts were just out of school or university and (for the major part) they were required to spend two consecutive years in the army and were subsequently called up for annual tours of duty, for eight years. State propaganda of the time was couched in terms of a war between Communism and anti-Communism and a 'just' defence against the 'total onslaught' of Communism and

¹³ See also Gear, 2008.

¹⁴ In anthropology ethnic identity is viewed as largely developed through a political process and emphasis on boundaries based on certain characteristics, such as language, history, geography and its interpretation etc. Individuals choose to identify with certain components of ethnic identity in different ways and at different points. Identity is not fixed (Brubaker & Cooper 2000).

¹⁵ Often called the emic perspective in anthropology.

its infiltration into South Africa.¹⁶ All the men in my study were raised as members of one of the Dutch Reformed Churches and they related that, at the time of the war, these institutions represented the ideology of Communism both as violently anti-religion and morally dangerous. The discourse of anti-communism was frequently imbued with imagery of a fight for religious freedom, and against the 'anti-Christ.' In a submission made to the TRC during the special hearing on conscription, an Afrikaans-speaking chaplain argued that the church gave the war a "justified character" (TRC 1997). He further gave evidence that soldiers were issued with a special edition of the New Testament and the Psalms with a message from P. W. Botha¹⁷ bound into it. Part of the message read: "This Bible is the most important part of your military equipment" (TRC 1997). Vale reports that the official publication of the Dutch Reformed Church only started to raise questions about the war in Angola in 1988 (Vale 2008: 37).

The border conflict itself was cloaked in secrecy. South African civilians had scant knowledge about the experiences of conscripts in the battle zone, in a war that was ultimately inconclusive, and where all former 'truths' have since shifted (Cock & Nathan 1989; Draper 1999; Gear 2002; Baines & Vale 2008). As a result of official censorship, the narratives of conscripts concerning border duty have until recently remained largely marginal and unexplored (Cawthra et al. 1994; Baines 2003). The activities of the South African Defence Force outside the borders of South Africa fell outside the parameters of the TRC and the hearings on conscription paid little attention to this issue.¹⁸

3. Conscription

A limited amount of research has been done on the psychology of warfare and combat in relation to South African conscripts, including the largely historical narrative accounts of military experiences (Hooper 1990; Fowler 1995, 1996;). A number of studies on the psychological aspects of conscription have been done by Davey (1988), Feinstein et al. (1986), Flischer (1987), Foster (1991) and Draper (1999). Price (1989) gave attention to key socialization processes, namely masculinity, patriotism and the emphasis on pride in the military. Feinstein et al. (1986)

¹⁶ According to Vale (2003) the Cold War influenced South African politics. At the same time both anti-communism, as well as communism as ideologies and practices were important in South African and the global politics, of which South Africa was part and contributed to. Cold War politics, communism and anti-communism affected governance, political parties and movements, military conflicts, ideologies, and everyday life.

¹⁷ Former Minister of Defense and later State President of South Africa.

¹⁸ See Saunders (2008) for a more in-depth discussion on this topic.

examined the attitudinal influence of students, and the mothers of conscripted sons in South Africa. The study highlights that the role parents, family and socializing institutions such as the school-cadet system, peers and the media played in developing attitudes concerning conscription are also important to our understanding (Feinstein et al. 1986). Furthermore, research has pointed to a link between some of the psychological aspects of commencing the initial stages of national service, and related it to developmental and transitional life crises (Flischer 1987).

A study by Cock (1991) focused more closely on experiences of white male conscripts and scrutinised their socialization into brutality. She argues that this process turned individual thinking men into a group of soldiers who responded to orders. During training, conscripts were taught to respond promptly to authority, to be dominant, competitive, aggressive and insensitive, and to dehumanize the 'enemy.' Notions of aggressive masculinity were effectively deployed to turn such young men into soldiers. Some of the processes involved excessive physical exhaustion and an emphasis on fitness and stamina. Conscripts also gave accounts of conditioning through depersonalization, and of intense male bonding. In many ways conscripts were coerced into violence and warfare, for example through legal, ideological and social coercion, and influenced by the expectations of girlfriends, peer groups and parents. Coercion and compliance exacerbated the brutalizing effects of conscription and border duty (Cock 1991; Draper 1999). Responses to conscription included acquiescence, allegiance or retreat, including delaying conscription by first undertaking tertiary studies, by avoidance, emigration and sometimes by suicide. Conscientious objection was a more contentious response (Cock 1991).¹⁹

4. The 'bush' war and disconnectivity

In psychiatric literature it is accepted that the experience of violence, as its subject, perpetrator, witness or in combinations of these, can deeply affect anyone. In psychiatric terms, and in line with psycho-trauma models, the apparent emotional scarring described by the Pieter de Jong above, including depression, flashbacks, violent rage, an inability to interact with people, severe mood swings, disturbing dreams, anxiety, psychic numbing, apathy or being "*gestol*" as Pieter put it, are viewed as classical manifestations of violence-related suffering (Gabriel 1982; Korber 1992; Boscarino 1995; Grossman 1995; Shay 2002; Stein et al. 2007). In this

¹⁹ According to Conway the End Conscription Campaign was most effective on English-language campuses (Conway 2008: 82).

regard the work of Gear (2002; 2008), although focusing more widely on the problems faced by ex-combatants in general, indicates that the symptoms of a veteran like Pieter could equally be constructed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 'Syndromes' like PTSD are viewed as resulting from incomplete emotional and cognitive processing of traumatic experiences (De Jong et al. 2003).

Treatment for the inability to process traumatic events is usually undertaken through various forms of psychotherapy and the use of pharmaceuticals. This includes an acceptance of the need for therapy (Tucker & Van Niekerk 2006), either individually or as a group, recalling and reliving, confronting and mourning through narrating experiences, feelings and meanings. Through this process, it is believed, traumatic experiences can be processed and cognitive and emotional connectedness can to some extent be restored.²⁰

The use of the word "*stol*" by Pieter de Jong, is significant. In Afrikaans it means that something congeals, stops flowing, hardens, coarsens, or freezes. Pieter, as well as all the other participants, used the words *bossies*, *bosbefok* or *bosbedonnerd* when they discussed the sometimes cruel and callous behaviour and responses they themselves displayed or witnessed in the combat zone. Baines calls it the "permeable borderline between madness and sanity" (Baines 2008: 6) while Conway opines that "its origins were influenced by the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exhibited by troops who served on 'the border'" (Conway 2008: 84). Rogez refers to it as "cracking up" (Rogez 2008: 121).

Although all the participants in my study reported signs or symptoms²¹ which could be understood to indicate some level of post traumatic stress (Macnair 2005), this particular model, while powerful, has nevertheless been contested and discussed in the field of anthropology (Young 1995; Jenkins 1996; Summerfield 2001) psychology (Eagle 2002; Stein et al. 2007) and cultural psychiatry (De Jong 2003). For the purposes of analysis I accordingly draw on anthropological and related literature concerning violence and trauma linked to armed conflict, and understand the concept of '*bossies*' as a culturally informed way of expressing disconnectedness at various levels. I accept that this local construction as used by the participants in my study is probably both informed by the discourse of PTSD, even while they may resist the labelling of post-traumatic stress as a 'disorder.'

Through the optic of anthropology, to be or go *bossies* or *bosbefok* [bushfucked] can be interpreted as going wild, outside of humanity, becoming animalistic. The symbol of the bush also appears in literature in the form of a forest or dark wood. In the *Inferno*, Dante opens with: "When I had journeyed half of our life's

²⁰ Personal comment Joop de Jong, cultural psychiatrist.

²¹ The main symptoms are grouped together in relation to hyper-alertness or hyper-arousal, intrusion and emotional constriction or numbing.

way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray" (Canto I, lines 1-3). The forest or wood is a place where one gets disorientated or strays off course – spiritually, physically, psychologically, morally or even politically. Thus the bush/dark forest is a metaphor for disorder and bewilderment (Hubbard 2009). Similarly, in fairy tales the forest is represented as a place of danger, the uncanny or a lack of reason. The bush/forest/wood is also liminal – an in-between space – and once a young person has entered, he is changed when he emerges again (Hawthorn 1997).

The bush can also be understood as a cultural way of expressing a feeling of social, spiritual and personal disconnectedness. To be *bossies* can signify being so coarsened as to be beyond, or cut off from, social and moral order. This metaphorical state of 'frozenness' and brutalization is confirmed by the limited number of studies done on the psychology of warfare and combat in relation to conscripts in South Africa (Hooper 1990; Fowler 1995, 1996; Gear 2008). Research by Davey (1988) on military experiences in the South African Defence Force (SADF) equally revealed severe problems with intimacy when they subsequently returned to civilian life.

All the participants in my study were under the age of 23 by the time they had first killed or seen violence and death. From being young immature 'boys' they were forced to mature rapidly (Draper 1999) or to develop mechanisms such as 'doubling' and psychic numbing to separate themselves from their weapons and thus 'enable' them to kill (Korber 1992), to be violent in the situation of the 'bush' war, and also to avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of guilt (Draper 1999).

Writing about the TRC, Foster (1997) emphasised that the killing done, e.g. by ex-conscripts during the 'bush' war, could be understood as historico-political disorderings (Foster 1991) comprised of power, anti-communism, anti-colonialism and political governance. He argued that modernity, ideology, and cultural and organizational forms enabled them to view their violent acts as moral and worthy and accordingly facilitated it. Draper stresses that there were individual differences between conscripts, and some were more violent than others (Draper 1999). She emphasises that it was the perceived task of the military to 'fight communism,' which meant that they were expected to kill 'terrorists.' The belief that South Africa was under threat was heightened by the presence of Cuban and East German forces in Angola, as well as Marxist-leaning governments in both Angola and Mozambique.

According to Hendrik de Wet, one of the participants in my study:

I was to all intents a boy going to do my duty to fight those atheist Communists who were threatening all we believed in – our country, religion, families. I never even considered objecting, only cowards did that

and for me, only 17 at the time, it was that or two years in the military jail, so we were told... our national anthem at the time said: *Ons sal offer wat jy vra, ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe, ons vir jou Suid-Afrika* [We will sacrifice what you ask, we will live we will die for you, South Africa]. I thought it was the right thing to do, to be willing to die to protect the country, my family.

Draper similarly stresses the influence of discourses concerning patriotism, sacrifice, the danger of communism [*rooi gevaar*/red danger] and 'terrorists' (who after 1994 were transmogrified into resistance fighters) that came to symbolise evil, danger and a threat to the survival of all that was held near and dear, were very influential (Draper 1999). She found that conscripts did not really view objection as an option, mostly because they were still immature and inexperienced. The fathers of some had also been in the Second World War. Their families expected them to go through this masculine rite of passage and to come home as men. Conscripts presented the power of social and ideological discourses on military service as an almost overwhelming force that rendered them powerless to resist it. She concludes that they were nevertheless not the dupes of an oppressive ideology and its related practices (Draper 1999). Cawthra et al. also gave attention to the use and influence of political propaganda and indoctrination during training (Cawthra et al 1994). The authors focus on a number of psychological effects of conscription, such as dehumanization, alienation and fear. They both mention the high rate of suicide among conscripts.

One psychological case study of an Afrikaner male by Korber (1992), indicates that he used the mechanism of 'doubling' and psychic numbing to separate himself from his weapon, and this made it possible for him to kill. The former conscripts in my study stressed that they were almost totally unprepared for the experience of training and particularly for the sometimes surreal 'reality' of border duty. The next section attends more closely to the subjective experience of warfare.

5. Experiencing war violence

The first contact... I cried and called mamma, mamma... here were people I did not even know in a strange place, trying to kill me... I kept rolling and rolling, but he wanted me, nobody else, he wanted to kill me, it was a terrible realisation... death was there, I was so very, very afraid ... the back of Tom's head exploded, right onto me... I became so numb and unfeeling... he was shot in the legs, it was horrible seeing the pieces of meat lying everywhere, when he heard me he turned around, it shocked me, he looked so young... I jumped right onto him, shouting fuck you fuck you

fucking *bliksem*... on his mangled legs... I have never heard anyone scream like that, but later you become cold and uncaring... for a long time I dreamed of Tom and of that boy... it was such a terrible, terrible waste. So many people died, we did awful things, my cousin, friends died... all for nothing... and we have to pretend it has all gone away... they haunt me sometimes... once I thought I saw Tom at an ATM, my heart went cold, hot, like an electric current, I grabbed this man, it was nobody I knew, he smacked me, I was so humiliated, but for a moment, he had been Tom...

(Hendrik)

The realisation that under certain circumstances one had to kill or be killed was both frightening and electrifying for Hendrik. According to Collins (2008) and Shay (1995), during battle soldiers can become caught up in an intensive 'frenzy' of anger, fear and alarm, which drives them to kill. In Draper's (1999) study a conscript describes how the members of his patrol laughed when the body of a man he had shot somersaulted backwards. However, in the night he thought about this man, that he had also been loved by someone – the conscript sat with the muzzle of his gun in his mouth for a long time afterwards. Thus, once the 'frenzy' had passed, Hendrik, like Draper's (1999) participant, had to continue with his 'work' as a soldier and eventually he succeeded – he became 'cold and uncaring,' i.e. *gestol*. Participants in my study talked about the bush war as a period of camaraderie, heroism, adventure, but also of pain, anger, sorrow, fear, regret, indignity, nightmares, distress and tedium. Like Draper's (1999) conscripts they sometimes were fearful of dying or being wounded, filled with aggression, grief, detachment, dissociation or compassion.

They hit a landmine... it overturned... bodies were strewn everywhere... it is only there you realise there are also people in this country, not just terrorists, they suffered too... A little boy was still alive, his jaw and arm was blown away. He cried and cried while they shot at us, we were ambushed... one of the *outjies* crawled to this boy, he held him, and then his chest was completely blown away... I held him, he begged me to help him, he was so afraid to die... I could not do a thing... we had a kind of memorial service and we all cried.

(Andries Venter)

Like Andries, many had to deal with the death of close friends, or acquaintances and the realisation that the war had a terrible impact on local civilians. Some

described, how in certain moments, the humanity of the 'enemy' was harrowingly revealed. For Frans du Plooy this happened when he wrenched a protection amulet as a trophy from the wrist of a man who had been shot: "I thought he was dead but he opened his eyes and said clearly *moenie, dis myne, hy sal jou spook*.²² I threw it away. Later with the body counts, I saw him again, he was dead. I went to look for his *muhti* and put it in his pocket" (Frans du Plooy).

All the participants' narratives about the war were filled with such strange contradictions and paradoxes. In Draper's (1999) study two conscripts described how in moments of violence, small acts or words suddenly returned their own humanity, for example, when an old man started to hit a conscript on his back and shouted at him not to kill, or when a man who was being kicked on the ground turned around and begged for his life. The men in my study said they were sometimes haunted by things they had done, people they had killed, or friends who had died. In her study, Draper (1999) tells of a conscript who had executed a badly wounded man who was in severe pain and had no prospect of relief. He said that he had made a decision then to kill him, and afterwards he had to carry the life of this man with him forever.

In my study all the men expressed a sense of disillusion about their involvement in the war and were in some or other way of the opinion that the bush war had been, as Andries said, "a terrible, terrible waste...."²³ Gear (2002) reports that many respondents from the South African Defence Force (SADF) who participated in a study on ex-combatants and violence during a time of transition, expressed anger and a sense of being betrayed by the former government. They felt excluded from and insecure in relation to the new governmental emphasis on affirmative action. They lost their jobs, status and more. Gear's participants (2002) said it was very difficult for those who stayed in the armed forces, to come to terms with integrating into a new defence force that included former enemies (Gear 2002). What rankled most for the veterans in my study was that the war had brought no resolution or closure for those involved before they were returned to civilian life. Although the war had "been scorched into [his] eyeballs" (Jan Pieterse), the meaning they had attached to their experiences, the sense they were able to make of it, turned out to be highly ambiguous in the changed world in which they now had to live.

During and after the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and in the process of political transition (Mamdani 1996, 2000, 2002; Robins 1998; Borer 2003; Soyinka-Airewele 2004; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela

²² Many of the people in the northern part of Namibia, as well as many SWAPO soldiers could speak Afrikaans.

²³ There are also many ex-conscripts who do not feel this way.

2007), the shifting nature of notions of truth, falsehood and justice, legitimate and illegitimate violence, victims and perpetrators, amnesty and prosecution in a country with a violent past (and present) were starkly etched for all to see. Current research on violence is often characterised by an analytical differentiation between private and public, inside and outside, home, community and state, political and criminal, heroes and villains, beneficiaries and oppressors, past and present. These distinctions, however, cannot always be sustained and often obscure rather than elucidate the variegated expressions and outcomes of violence (Feldman 2002; Rotberg & Thompson 2002; Villa-Vicencio & Verwoerd 2002; Borer 2003; Gibson 2003; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). My own narrative has to be understood against the background of a society in transition where history, and a violent past and present have been reinterpreted and revised in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in history books, academic papers, museums, historical sites, historical tourism and other public spaces of representation. In the process, individual and assumed collective identities of violators and sufferers shifted or coagulated in the public imaginary, mostly in stereotypical, but also in new ways. It was so unexpectedly different from the experiences of South African veterans in the past, when they had returned from the battlefields of the Anglo-Boer war, the two world wars, even South African Air Force (SAAF) pilots who fought in the Korean conflict.

6. The TRC

In this section, I try to understand forgiveness and healing as it was promoted by the TRC, as the appointed representatives of the state. This construction seemed almost anathema to the conscripts in this study. Although all white male South Africans were conscripted, only five who had been involved in military action outside South Africa gave evidence (TRC 1997). According to Baines conscripted soldiers did not give evidence to the TRC because: "Some reported that the lack of public knowledge about the war created suspicion of their stories, while others were summarily dismissed as sympathy seekers or outright liars" (Baines 2008: 6).

The TRC also put great emphasis on confession (and forgiveness) as a path to reconciliation, but this somewhat simplistic approach has been widely criticized (Borer 2004; Robins 1998). The TRC has been criticised for its use of a particular narrative framework reminiscent of Christian notions of catharsis, confession, reparation, and redemption (Desjarleis et al. 1995). On the other hand, it is recognised that in many non-Western settings trauma recovery involves witnessing, testimony and reparation, as in the case of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process (Andermann 2006). In this regard Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela

(2007), while focusing on the trauma of victims and/or survivors of violence, emphasise that in order to heal trauma it is imperative that the memory of it should be narrated to an audience that will listen in an appropriate way. While the TRC focused on the narratives of victims in South Africa, soldiers who killed during the war in Namibia were arguably not constructed and perceived in this way. The TRC thus had a positive psychological outcome for some, but not for others.

The narratives presented to the TRC were coached and illuminated in a particular and restrictive way and it has been argued that they may increasingly become a kind of "guidebook by which the past is interpreted and understood in relation to the present" and through which particular categories will be constructed and made available for individuals to recollect: to talk, think, and 'feel' about the past (Prager 1998: 138-139). The memories of the former conscripts in my study were far more contingent and fluid, as they tried to make sense of the past and to reinterpret it in relation to the total *volte face* of the symbols and meanings they had been trained to embrace.

According to Borer (2003) the legalized discourse of human rights (and of the TRC) tends to set up a dichotomy of perpetrators and victims as two distinct groups, each assumed to be homogeneous (Borer 2003: 1089). In reality the differentiation is difficult to sustain, as demonstrated during the hearings of the TRC. People who were represented as victims in one situation might be seen as perpetrators in another and *vice versa*. Similarly, what was formerly viewed as legitimate violence, e.g. the actions of the SADF and the security structure was now represented as oppression, and even criminal action. The heroes and enforcers of 'border security' in the past were reinterpreted as perpetrators and violators while the people they had previously perceived as the terrorists, unruly mobs and criminals they were acting against, were now represented as heroes, freedom fighters and innocent civilians. This ambiguity was illustrated through submissions which related how people were killed or persecuted because they had been perceived as collaborators or informers in the past, even though they had actually been blameless. In a similar vein, TRC submissions indicated that people who had previously been viewed as heroes of the resistance and of a just cause, had 'broken' under torture and betrayed comrades, or were reconstituted as defectors, traitors and human rights violators (Borer 2003, Krog 2002).

For the conscripted veterans in my study, who like many others were forced to respond to call-up for military duty, this discursive metamorphosis of former subversives and enemies into legitimate freedom fighters and innocent civilians was very disturbing. It seemed to undermine and eradicate the very essence of the rationale for their actions, the meaning they had attached to their traumatic behaviour and their subsequent efforts to cope with and endure its aftermath.

The realisation that the people they had killed because they had assumed them to be collaborators and followers of a highly demonized ideology and/or political grouping were neither sub-human nor faceless, but ordinary civilians, some heroes and some innocent, was vividly reinforced in the weeks and months of the TRC hearings. This process presented the men in this study with a searing paradox. Similar contradictions also affected the hitherto revered heroes and freedom fighters of the ANC, on whom aspersions of human rights violations were subsequently cast during the TRC hearings and in its final report (Borer 2003: 1096).

In relation to its hearings on conscription, the TRC had been criticised because most of the individual testimonies submitted were anti-conscription and against the SADF²⁴ – participants were largely portrayed as victims of the state and/or as sufferers of PTSD. The bush war was far more complex and the veterans in my study, as well as two ex-conscripted veterans who actually made a submission to the TRC, were both recipients and agents of violence, suffering from it and also inflicting it. What the TRC showed, but did not always reflect on, was that people who were victims in one situation might be perpetrators in another, be both offenders and defenders.

As indicated above, the TRC specifically gave attention to narratives about trauma. According to Colvin: “With the inception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ‘storytelling’ arrived as a privileged mode of publicly communicating painful experiences [...] part psychotherapy, part legal testimony and part historiography, ‘telling your story’ has become a powerful, if ambivalent way to contribute to a new history of the old South Africa [...] memory worth talking about – worth remembering – is memory of trauma” (Colvin 2003: 153).

This kind of ‘trauma talk’ is nevertheless both potentially fraught with pain and difficulty, and also has hierarchies. Particular combat narratives about trauma, e.g. that of MK soldiers who fought against apartheid, are easily deemed more genuine and creditable than that of conscripted soldiers who fought on behalf of the former government. At the same time, being labelled as a person who has a ‘disorder’ such as PTSD was perceived by the group I studied as stigmatizing and an indication that the sufferer lacked fortitude – it was even interpreted as a form of attention-seeking, self-centred weakness.

The submission of two former conscripted bush war veterans to the TRC similarly did not focus on themselves – it dealt with the need for and ways to assist traumatized veterans. They did not relate their own stories and memories of trauma. According to Macnair (2005) even psychotherapists find it difficult to listen to accounts of atrocities narrated by a perpetrator. It is essentially something

²⁴ Personal comment Ian Liebenberg.

unspeakable and veterans were aware of this intuitive response of most listeners. Men like Jan, Wynand and the others were expected to have the mental toughness, the psychological stability to be able to deal with their experiences and with the things they had seen and done. After all, as members of a privileged white group their current personal existential crises of trauma are like that of Afrikaners, increasingly being perceived as self-inflicted. In this regard many bush war veterans still prefer to remain silent, even though they realise that they are somehow unlike conscripts who did *not* experience combat.

Regardless of how the TRC may be construed or contested, the hearings focused on the apartheid state. Apartheid was legalised by the National Party, itself associated in local and global perception with Afrikaners – however that group may choose to construct itself. Although this construction could be seen as an example of spoiled identity, or at least an ascribed typecast, it was nonetheless the reality that confronted the participants in my study.

In a Goffmanesque (1963) sense, a spoiled identity is a form of stereotyping that stigmatizes, e.g. certain ‘ethnic’ identities (like that of Afrikaner). It can be based on outward appearance (e.g. race) and/or linked to a perceived inner deficiency (e.g. Afrikaners are racists/oppressors etc). I expand on this in the next section, starting with international representations of Afrikaners in my own discipline, anthropology.

7. Spoiled identity?

In the 1980’s, Vincent Crapanzano, a renowned anthropologist, published the scathing ethnography, *Waiting: the Whites of South Africa* (1985). In this book he portrays the white (Afrikaner) inhabitants of a small town in a wine farming area in the Western Cape (Franschhoek) as self-satisfied racists who had largely isolated themselves from outside opinions and affairs and were waiting for the inevitable future, and its changes, to disappear and leave them alone. Following in the footsteps of Crapanzano, Scheper-Hughes (2004), a medical anthropologist who has published widely on violence, studied this town in the wake of the new ANC government and of the TRC.

In a subsequent publication she openly referred to Afrikaner identity as “spoiled” (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 361).²⁵ In this regard she writes of her shudder of horror when she was associated with Afrikaners as a result of the Dutch sounding pronunciation of her surname in South Africa and the whiteness of her skin. She makes it clear that she wants to distance herself from “them”

²⁵ For her the most ‘spoiled’ identity is that of Coloured.

[Afrikaners], their “wretched past” of institutionalized racism and as “sly and absent fathers” who had “spawned” (by way of miscegenation) the coloureds, but did not claim them (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 360). Scheper-Hughes takes great pains to express her disdain for the Afrikaners, who, she argues, invented and reinvented their ethnic histories ²⁶ and, whom she opines, despite their apparent stigmatization, developed a strong oppositional identity and related political organizations “to fly in the face of such prejudice” (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 360). Thus, she writes, “Boer civil servants can flaunt their language, their ‘*backkies*’ [sic] and their backyard *braais* [sic], their semi-literacy, and their white tribal dreams” (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 361). She states that like Zulus, Boers [Afrikaners] are seen as “dangerous” and are feared and reviled.

As the title of this section intimates, the view held by Scheper-Hughes’ (2006) is reminiscent of Goffman’s (1963) ‘spoiled’ identities. As indicated above, Goffman links the latter to stigmatization. It often originates with others’ perception of outward appearance (e.g. being white, Afrikaans-speaking), which, in turn is constructed as being representative of some character or mental defect (being racist). Such notions harden into stereotypes that become generalised as being master attributes of a group, e.g. being Afrikaans-speaking is to be ascribed an identity of being an Afrikaner, a *boer*, poorly educated, inherently racist and repressive. A ‘spoiled’ identity is assigned by others, but has very real effects because an individual comes to represent a group, and thus comes to stand for all the negative connotations associated with that group and vice versa. Scheper-Hughes’ generalization is a case in point – she describes a particular young, Afrikaans-speaking man (he does not identify himself as an Afrikaner, she does), and simultaneously burdens him with all the ignominious attributes she uncritically associates with Afrikaners (the harsh sounding language, their pickup vehicles, being illiterates who work for the civil service, eating *braaiivleis* and behaving like ‘tribals’) (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 361). Thus, for her, the young man’s standing is low, he has little status or reason for respect in her eyes because he becomes the signifier for Afrikaners, whom she finds loathsome. As Goffman (1963) argues, such interpretations associate, e.g. ethnic identities, such as that of Afrikaners, to believed blemishes of individual and group character and of moral fibre. By association both individuals and the group are brought into disrepute, e.g. as being low class, dishonourable, backward racists. What makes such ‘spoiling’ of identity even more insidious and complex is that those who are ascribed such undesirable attributes, are seen as personally responsible for their stigmatization,

²⁶ In anthropological theory all ethnic histories are in some sense ‘invented.’

e.g. Afrikaners are viewed as racist because they are believed *in toto* as being implicated in engineering, supporting and benefiting from apartheid and the oppression of the black population.

Since the United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity, one could by extension assert that Afrikaners will continue to be tarnished by association. As Goffman (1963) would argue, they are typecast as not quite human transgressors of social norms and rules. This is certainly the case in which Schepers-Hughes (2006) portrays the Afrikaner. She further adds the stigma²⁷ of history and place to the analysis of a particular group (in this case Afrikaners) to represent them as defective, contaminated and flawed. Although the men in my study did not construct their own identity as Afrikaners in this way, they were nevertheless very aware of the prevalence of such portrayals and felt simultaneously angered, but also defensive about and constrained by it.

I want to argue that this negative characterisation or perception of the Afrikaners, is not new, but can be traced back in history. As one participant, Jan Venter, in my study said:

If you equate Afrikaners with *apartheid* then that part is permanently spoiled, like part of being German and held responsible for Hitler and the Holocaust. But being an Afrikaner, having roots in Africa, is a hell of a lot more than that... [we] grew up with stories about how we were abused and despised by the English, that we shed our blood for this soil... the news stories takes you way back into a deep feeling of belonging and alienation, and shame, there was always something negative about being an Afrikaner, you were somehow a bit deformed. Now we have become stereotypes again, the carriers of a huge debt of guilt and neglect and lacking in human compassion and a sense of justice...

(Jan)

Jan's narrative indicates an awareness of the history of the stigmatization adhering to Afrikaner's perceived 'deformity' of in the first instance, morality and character. In 1902 Colenbrander wrote about English perceptions "dat de Boeren eigenlijk bastaards zijn, afkomelingen van slaven moeders en Hottentotsche vrouwen" [that the farmers were actually bastards, descendents of slave mothers and Hottentot (Khoi) women/wives] (Colenbrander 1902:10). At the time the *boere* or Afrikaners were represented in certain settings and discourses as not quite white, and thus, through extrapolation, as not really civilized. They were

²⁷ See, e.g. Falk (2001) on stigma.

constructed as the bastard children of slaves and Khoi women.²⁸ I want to argue accordingly, that Afrikaners were, at the time, already ascribed a spoiled identity. In this instance they were portrayed as transgressing European norms through perceived miscegenation. They were identified as the offspring of two other equally 'spoiled,' and thus despised groupings, the slaves and the Hottentots.²⁹

This contention is given some support by Freund (2001), who argues that 18th century European and colonial discourses and motifs about the inferiority and degeneracy of the indigenous Khoi at the Cape soon shifted to the Dutch Boer inhabitants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The latter were increasingly discursively likened to the local 'natives' in perceived lack of civilization and morality. The earlier emphasis on Afrikaners as the outcome of miscegenation accordingly shifted to them as being somehow barbaric.

The second negative characteristic that thus contributed to the 'spoiling' of identity, is that of place (namely as being of Africa, the 'dark' continent) (Comaroff 1993). An acute awareness of the constant shifts in the negative perceptions attached to Afrikaner identity in the past and present was evident in the narratives used during my own study: "We are, have always been seen as the stereotypes,

²⁸ The history of the Dutch at the Cape is well known (cf Giliomee 2003). When they first came to the Cape it was not to settle it – yet settlement soon ensued. The first settlers were often those who worked for the Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VOC) and had little hope for advancement in the Netherlands, where land and opportunities were scarce. In Dutch society at the time, many were probably already tainted by class and poverty. Initially only a few European women came to the Cape, but marriages and relationships between men and slave or Khoi women produced offspring, some of whom were subsequently accepted in 'white' society, mostly because they could claim patrilineal descent through their fathers and carried their European surnames (Heese 1984). In 1973 South African poet and author Breten Breytenbach said in an interview that the Afrikaners "are a bastard people with a bastard language. Our nature is one of bastardy... like all bastards – uncertain of their identity – we began to adhere to the concept of purity. That is apartheid. Apartheid is the law of the bastard" (Coetzee 1999: 2). Anton, the ex-conscript quoted, is a descendant of the Bassons and the Potgieters, both families of whom male ancestors had intermarried with women who were either of Khoi or slave descent (Heese 1984). Although there has recently been efforts by some Afrikaner men to claim their 'African' roots, for example through Krotoa or Eva, a converted Khoi woman as the *volksmoeder* [mother of the tribe] of the Afrikaner, the 1984 publication of Heese's *Groep sonder Grense*, in which he exposed the mixed origin of many Afrikaner families was a source of embarrassment and even shame at the time. Heese had laid bare a core Afrikaner myth – that they were racially 'pure.' Yet the history of apartheid was, first of all, based on the notion of racial separation, of the Europeaness of the 'whites,' and by extension, of the Afrikaner. Apart from the issue of 'mixed' origin, negated or claimed, it is not only the right-wing *verkrampste* [conservative] Afrikaner men who think of themselves as natives of Africa (albeit white).

²⁹ There were also positive views of Afrikaners, e.g. during the Anglo-Boer War. For further background see Giliomee (2003) and Pakenham (1979).

villains in the past, evildoers in a new memory, the white mark of shame on the black consciousness. We have always been stereotyped and controversial. Afrikaner identity is a paradox" (Anton Mynard).

As Anton argues, there are many indications that the Afrikaners were initially viewed as being European in appearance, yet nevertheless somehow tainted by place, by Africa and by their insistence on their historical connection to the continent. According to Heese (1984) British portrayals of Afrikaners were often derogatory and intimated that they were not completely 'white' and 'civilized' and were thus lesser human beings. They were construed as having, as Anton intimates, gone native. Although European or white in appearance and origin, they had become (like) Africans and had apparently negated their European (and thus civilized) roots.³⁰

Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2006), above, uses this contestation of African identity that Afrikaners assert, to signify her loathing of them as a group. To her they are uncouth European whites, unrepentant racists who have no claim to belong in and to Africa. In a way reminiscent of occidental discourses discussed by Freund (2001) she draws on imagery of dubious origin, backwardness, being lower class and somehow 'rural' to represent Afrikaners as semi-literate civil servants who drive pickups and thrive on outdoor barbecues. At the same time she cannot acknowledge that Afrikaners could somehow have really become African. Yet she simultaneously equates the Afrikaner with a 'real' (to her) indigenous group like the Zulu, in a way very similar to what Freund calls the Westerner's assumed prerogative to identify, name and invest with significance that which it observes in the country of the other (Freund 2001). Scheper-Hughes (2006) thus touches on aspects that have recently been debated in Afrikaner claims of belonging to Africa, namely that of origin, place and language.

Although the 'spoiledness' of identity shifts over time and can even disappear, this seems not to have been the case for the Afrikaner. In the wake of colonial disengagement, the association between the National Party, apartheid and Afrikaners reinforced perceptions of them as a homogenous group of unrepentant racists, especially after the racial ideologies of Nazi Germany were discredited (Giliomee 2003). Jan highlights that, like the stereotypical association frequently made in the public imaginary between the Holocaust and German identity, Afrikaners are often equated with apartheid and racism. This strong negative public association hardened during and after the TRC hearings. It is also very gendered.

³⁰ The fact that they rejected English as *lingua franca* probably added to this negative portrayal of Afrikaners.

Whence will words now come? For us. We who hang quivering and ill from this soundless space of Afrikaner past? What does one say? What the hell does one do with this load of decrowned skeletons, origins, shame and ash?

(Krog 2002: 128)

I watched the TRC hearings and read the papers. It was sickening and revolting. The things about Vlakplaas, the torture seared my very soul... sometimes I could hardly bear it to know these are our people, it is us...

(Wynand Pienaar)

Antjie Krog (2002), Afrikaans poet, writer and TRC reporter for the SABC has grappled most publicly with the sense of embarrassment, alienation, belonging, anger and complicity of being an Afrikaner, and white, in South Africa today. Krog was lambasted by members of the Afrikaans public as a sell-out. Even leading Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach, who spent seven years in prison for anti-apartheid activities, intimated he thought that she was wallowing in self-indulgent, liberal guilt. She was also criticized for muddying the veracity of 'truth' as presented at the TRC hearings and for appropriating the stories of pain and suffering of real victims through the subsequent publication of her book, *Country of My Skull* (Braude 1998; Robins 1998; Ross 2003). Yet, as one Afrikaner male (Danie van Wyk) in this study said: "I read her horrific book... the broadcasts... it was... that story of the man who looks at his portrait and sees only corruption and evil." Danie was referring to the *Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde about a man who commits many inequities which, though invisible in his public countenance, are reflected in his portrait. The story of Dorian Gray is about moral ambiguity – his public identity seems normal, but he is made aware of his twisted psyche and transgressions through his likeness in the portrait.

Throughout the hearings of the TRC many Afrikaners equally had to gaze into such a reflection of atrocities committed by men who were Afrikaners. Like Krog (2002), Danie expressed the self-recognition of the many Afrikaans surnames of men who appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Krog wrote that the way they walked, talked, joked, dressed etc. resonated with her memories of Afrikaans fathers, husbands, uncles and sons. They sickened her but remained mortifyingly and distressingly familiar and recognizable as signifiers of her own spoiled identity as a descendant of the Dutch *boere* [farmers] (Krog 2002: 113).

Although many people who identified themselves as Afrikaners, and especially the older generation, contested their complicity in apartheid, the vehement discussions that followed on TRC revelations seemed to indicate that many felt

affected by an oppressive 'spoiledness' of identity as people who are constructed, at worst, as having perpetrated apartheid and its atrocities and, at best, as having benefited from a system of gross inequity. Added to this is the reality that this kind of spoiled identity is, as Falk (2001) writes, also in a sense earned. Through their conduct in the past and present many self-identified Afrikaners have contributed to the attaining of stigma for the whole group.

I have argued that, even before apartheid, Afrikaner identity was stigmatized, especially in British colonial discourses where they, like the African population, were seen as outside the moral space of humanity. The institutionalization of apartheid shifted such discourses to Afrikaners as racist oppressors, a perception that many Afrikaners have been confronted with at some time or other.

At certain moments, all the men who participated in this particular study had experienced being typecast as Afrikaner oppressors, e.g. when a colleague asked Jan Pieterse whether he was a racist, or when a foreign visitor said to Hennie Botha: "What you Afrikaners did is disgusting." Kobus Venter, another participant, said: "Most of the time I ignore people who make assumptions about me. I know they have very stereotyped ideas, but it does not affect who I am." He said he was most disturbed when his daughter asked him: "Pa, are we racists, did we oppress people? That hurt... [that] she had to ask it... it means she has to face it, even if in a small way." Thus, even Venter's daughter, who was born in 1990, is confronted with the negative connotations ascribed to her identity.

Despite the denial of especially the older generation³¹ (Theissen 1997) many people who are identified or identify themselves as Afrikaners, men and women, old and young are at times confronted with the assumptions about who and what they are. For the men in my study, as will be discussed in the next section, the fact that they had killed enemy soldiers, seen deaths during the border war and behaved inhumanely at times, exacerbated their feelings of disjunction and emotional discomfort. They were also deeply uncomfortable with the TRC's notion of confession and forgiveness. These aspects are elaborated in the next section.

8. Ideas of forgiveness and guilt

I want to argue that for the conscripts in the study, although Christians, the idea of public confession and gaining forgiveness was difficult to countenance. They saw this as self-serving and unfair to people who had suffered or been victimized.

³¹ Some Afrikaner politicians made public apologies and a number of Afrikaner academics signed a statement of apology.

In this regard a quote by Hannah Arendt about personal guilt and the Holocaust seemed to encapsulate a great deal of the feelings of the conscripts: "I cannot walk away from myself [...] if I do wrong, I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in unbearable intimacy (Arendt 2003: 90).

The ideas expressed above resonated very much with ideas that developed after the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, namely that one cannot forgive on behalf of the dead and one cannot forgive the unforgivable (Krog 2006). The perpetrator thus has to live with the burden of guilt – a notion that seems to agree with the way in which the participants in my study understood the dogma of their church. They all stressed that a 'trespass' against another is a sin against God, who alone can bestow real forgiveness and redemption. Forgiveness is a very private process of repentance and even when begging for it, a supplicant might never be certain whether or not he has been redeemed. One can ultimately only know whether it has been granted after death. If others forgive you, you can still be disconnected from God, the eternal and the dead you have wronged.

In her book *Regarding the pain of others* (2002) Susan Sontag discusses the Second World War photograph by Jeff Wall, titled "Dead Troops Talk." In the photograph the dead Russian soldiers lie, sit and kneel in positions that give the impression that they are in conversation with each other – they seem focused on each other and to have no interest in the young man who appears in the photograph and who is searching through their stuff, or the living men standing at the edge of the picture – those who killed them or witnessed their death. Responding to the photograph and Sontag's analysis of it Reis (2004), a medical anthropologist writes: "It is the apparent conversation of the dead amongst themselves that emphasizes the divide between the world of those who suffered pain and died and those who stand outside it. The living and the dead have nothing to say to each other" (Reis 2004: 106).

According to this view the living and dead are cut off from each other and one cannot ask the living for forgiveness for the pain and suffering of the dead. This understanding was to some extent echoed by the men I am writing about, as well as by others who participated in the TRC hearings. Paul van Vuuren testifying at the TRC said: "You know you say you are sorry, but on the other hand, is it also empty words [...] I mean here I walk up to a person I don't even know... And I say, listen here, I'm sorry. I mean isn't it just empty words? (Krog 2002: 93).

I do not really believe that asking for forgiveness changes anything... means I am actually forgiven. It is between God and myself... saying you are sorry has become so cheap and people do not really believe it if you are Afrikaans... I detest the self righteousness of it ... who am I supposed to ask... you find a way to live with your guilt... I feel sick when I think how

little feeling I had for this man, for some of the locals but I do not even know who he was...

(Jan Venter)

When a war veteran has killed a stranger, who is he supposed to ask for forgiveness?

(Manie Steyn)

Unlike Gobodo-Madikizela's (2003) surmise that the choice of exercising forgiveness can be empowering, and even a profound kind of revenge for the victim, the complexity of exculpation was highlighted by the outrage that followed on Adriaan Vlok's public acts of contrition when he first washed the feet of the Reverend Frank Chikane and then the feet of the mothers of the Mamelodi Ten. As an anthropologist, reading the commentary in newspapers and listening to snide public remarks about him, one surmised that as an older Afrikaner male, an ex-member of the apartheid government and former Minister of Police he could be viewed as an example of 'spoiled' identity. He was seen as a morally 'polluted' man who could not simply be cleansed by apologising and humbling himself. He was perceived as far too big a sinner, someone who had far too many heinous deeds to answer for. He was constructed in public discourse as an embarrassment – an old man trying to come to terms with his actions in a way that made many people, including Afrikaners, squirm with discomfort. His search for personal redemption apparently could not reconnect him to the social whole and he could not be forgiven for the deaths he had not personally committed, but was linked to. As I indicated above, what was striking in the narratives of ex-conscripts in my own study was their rejection of the ideas of confessional and forgiveness as promoted by the TRC. Swartz & Drennan argue that the TRC can be seen as a religious body offering absolution and healing by decree rather than by a process of working through, a process which is private and time-consuming (Swartz & Drennan 2000: 212). In Calvinist church doctrine trying to find redemption is an ongoing process that is not easily resolved.

We cannot even begin to talk about forgiveness for guilt, it is almost like adding insult to injury, publicly throwing ash on our heads but knowing it is not so simple, this cannot be just excused because we ask for it. There is the right to anger, hurt, of having made victims that we need to recognise and respect... I do not think we will all suddenly start to love and forgive each other but at least there is a tacit understanding, a very reluctant realisation that we had benefited from a terrible system, perhaps not all in the same way...

(Wynand Pienaar)

Signing a paper saying I am sorry seems so demeaning to people who suffered... I feel very uncomfortable with placing such a burden on others to try and forgive you... it is like something from Oprah Winfrey. Saying I am so sorry, forgive me changes nothing, people do not suddenly have houses or work or good lives because I say sorry, it is all so nauseatingly self-serving... does not make you less culpable...

(Frans)

While a person can publicly declare himself responsible e.g. for apartheid or the death of a SWAPO soldier, for veterans like Frans and Wynand absolution is not so readily found. Personal forgiveness can be extended by another without the guilty person ever asking for it. At the same time, one can ask for forgiveness from another, and be forgiven (or not), and still be guilty. The veterans seemed to view the public narration of guilt as unseemly and self-seeking – it put a burden on those who were wronged to either forgive or be seen as unforgiving. In case of the latter, a lack of Christian charity, and thus an unwillingness to extend forgiveness, can in itself be seen as a sin. While the ex-conscripts can sign a document for apology and reconciliation set up by the TRC, they were convinced that such action would not really bring redress and be simply self-serving ‘empty words.’

As the response, especially of whites, to Vlok’s search for expiation seemed to indicate, the suspicion or perception that a perpetrator’s contrition is not sincere, too little, too late or not directed at the ‘correct’ victims is viewed as not necessarily contributing to the restoration of social and moral connectedness and reconciliation. This was reiterated by the response of Shirley Gunn, that Vlok’s behaviour was “provocative and insensitive,” and that Vlok needed to directly apologise to “his victims” (BBC News 28th August 2006). As Frans said, rather than contributing to healing, asking for forgiveness could be distressing and burdensome to those who had suffered.

9. Breaking silence

The TRC nevertheless made the emergence of contesting memories and narratives about the bush war more possible, and this trend has been slowly gaining impetus. In this regard Baines argues that: “ex-combatants from both sides have earnestly begun to explore their place in post-apartheid South Africa by revisiting the memories of their military experiences. They are breaking rank and telling their stories” (Baines 2008: 2).

Swartz and Drennan equally stress the import of the unheard and unattended narrative memories of veterans in relation to the theatre and “drama of forgiveness” of the TRC (Swartz and Drennan 2000: 212). As with Vietnam veterans, for a long time after the United States withdrawal from that arena, the narratives of former conscripts who were deployed outside South Africa are still at odds with the process of public memory-making, particularly since they blur the boundaries between heroes and victims and between perpetrator, victim and beneficiary.

At the same time, and arguing from the collective as starting point, Swartz & Drennan (2000) question the assumption that a process of national healing will bring about individual healing and see this view as problematic, incomplete and fragmented. Borer (2003) furthermore argues that, just as victims are not a homogeneous group, neither are the ‘perpetrators’ and/or beneficiaries of oppression. The issue is further complicated because the ‘morality’ of violence perpetrated by the state and those resisting it, presents an unresolved conundrum (Borer 2003).

Despite the problems raised about the notions of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation promoted by the TRC, the process did at times recognize the complexity, as well as the fact that there was a great deal of slippage between religious and individualised notions of reconciliation and societal, political understandings of it (Borer 2004). As with many legal and trauma discourses aimed at healing, the narrative nevertheless had to take a particular form, and as Prager argues, it could not give sufficient recognition to “the extraordinary complexity of individual subjectivity” but rather reduced or disciplined, e.g. experiences of war, to “external material conditions that impinge upon the person” (Prager 1998: 131). In this regard Borer (2004) uses the notion of reconciliation as ‘thin,’ i.e. based on the assumption that political conflict and discord is normal and to be expected. Reconciliation, like forgiveness and healing, is complex, multi-layered and constantly progressing. Thus for Wynand: “still... the constitution and emphasis on human rights does at least signify something about what is happening here.” Absolution, reconciliation and healing will always be difficult and might be reached by some but not others in an ongoing cycle from one generation to the next.

The government tries to give redress by affirmative action, taxing the hell out of us, rewriting history to show how dreadful we were and every now and again reminding us that nothing has changed. Sometimes it pisses me off, I was retrenched, but without that lovely package they all talk about in the media. But I can live with it, I have done so many different jobs since then. There is no quick redemption, no quick redress. We are here, we are not at

war with each other, our children go to mixed schools... maybe they will redeem us or scorn us or reject the burden we have created for them

(Frans)

10. Conclusions

The paper tried to raise some of the dilemmas faced by a group of white Afrikaner males in the aftermath of apartheid and work of the TRC. The men were involved in armed conflict outside South Africa, an issue that has remained largely mute in the public debate about culpability. I have tried to argue that the bush war veterans felt affected by a spoiled identity that, while not new, has discursively shifted over time from backwardness and the taint of going native, to that of being unrepentant, racist oppressors.

This identity is further complicated by the experiences and acts of violence outside South Africa. While much of the 'reconciliation' promoted in South Africa has taken the form of a public confessional, and the hope of forgiveness, this is not possible because in the absence of a full confession by members of the former government, the new South African government will have to take responsibility for atrocities committed in e.g. Namibia and Angola by its predecessor. Much of the war has not been disclosed to the public, or has been largely negated as unjust. This makes it difficult for former conscripted bushwar veterans to deal with their highly subjective memories and trauma of a war in which they experienced and committed violence. In a sense their identities are triply spoiled – because they are white and Afrikaans (and thus viewed as racist), seen as complicit in apartheid and finally because they are reminders of a war nobody cares about anymore and that the present government would rather forget.

Veterans, as remembering subjects, are nonetheless slowly finding ways to redistribute their experiences. New spaces for the articulation of their voices are evident in the slowly emerging anti-heroic publications as well as on websites for veterans (Baines 2003, 2008). These sites provide bridges between the narratives of ex-conscripts who had shared experiences in the bush war. Here ex-conscripts and war veterans are trying to find ways to re-connect, to converse, remember, make meaning and hopefully come to terms with the past.

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