



# [Post]Colonial Histories: Trauma, Memory and Reconciliation in the Context of the Angolan Civil War

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explains systematically and meaningfully, using evidence not contained in other works, why Japanese popular culture is a natural byproduct of Japan's individual and collective lived experience. The book's readable prose, numerous fascinating examples, and clever analysis make it accessible to all audiences. Adkins has produced a work that should be considered mandatory reading for all who wish to understand why and how J-Cult has reached its esteemed standing on the contemporary global stage.

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Benedikt Jager & Steffi Hobu, (eds.),  
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 Context of the Angolan Civil War**  
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In 2007, a former South African Defence Force (SADF) paratrooper, Marius van Niekerk, embarked on a journey to confront his shameful memories relating to his role in the Angolan Civil War. From Sweden (where he had gone into exile), Van Niekerk returned to Angola, where he had been deployed during the mid-1980s, and recruited three other veterans of the war to join his party: Patrick Johannes, who had been coerced to fight for the Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA); Samuel Machado Amaru, who was forcefully enlisted by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); and Mario Mahonga, who had fought for the Portuguese colonial army before he was recruited by the SADF to fight against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) regime. Van Niekerk had been conscripted at the age of seventeen, and the others had

been coerced into their respective militias at more tender ages. It is not clear how the three Angolans were induced to participate in the project, whose objectives they evidently did not share.

The journey involved the four veterans boarding a small boat on the Kwando River and heading for the Angolan interior. In Van Niekerk's mind, this journey was supposed to be an exercise in existential self-discovery, an opportunity for him to come to terms with his painful past and find (self-)forgiveness. Although Van Niekerk never explicitly stated what deeds or heinous acts he committed during the war, he carried a shoebox of photographs that included shots of trophy killings, amounting to a materialization of atrocities. Van Niekerk persuaded the others, despite their misgivings, that the photographs were vestiges of the cruelty of war and should be destroyed. The journey culminated in an act of ritual purification, with the burning of the photographs and other memorabilia of the war in a fire.

The project was filmed by the Swedish filmmaker Stefan Julén and co-directed by Christian Beetz. The debt to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* was made explicit by the title, *My Heart of Darkness*. The river journey and act of purification also mimicked the plot of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and the cleansing ceremony involved the sacrifice of a goat, which echoed the bloodletting of the Vietnam film. The intertextuality seems somehow contrived. Notwithstanding its atmospheric visual imagery and accomplished original score by the composer Jan Anderson, the film had many of the qualities of a reality television show. For this viewer, it gave the impression of having been staged. Van Niekerk's scripting of this autodiegetic documentary was entirely self-serving. As protagonist, focalizer, and voice-over narrator, Van Niekerk managed to direct the project so as to achieve his stated goal.

Although this is not readily apparent from the title, Van Niekerk's project provided the point of departure for the book under review. In their introduction, the volume's editors question whether "a whole book about

a film that has not gained international fame" is warranted (20). I had my doubts, but, obviously, the editors were convinced. Their rationale is that the individual essays have heuristic value and also discuss broader questions. Indeed, contributors problematize and engage with a range of topical issues that include, inter alia, reception theory (De Wolff); the ethics of memory (Dessingue); the performativity of history (Knutzen); representation and authenticity (Hobuß and Jager, in separate chapters); exegesis of the film soundtrack (Wagner and Skarpeid); trauma and art (Siegert); and the political aesthetics of mutilated bodies (Simonhjell). There are six essays that offer readings of aspects of the film and two that deal with projects only peripherally related to Van Niekerk's. Although the volume lacks cohesion, the essays themselves certainly warrant publication. The only exception is the indifferent opening chapter, which seeks to contextualize the film by providing a brief historical background of the Angolan Civil War. Among other things, it fails to explain adequately why South Africa and Cuba became involved and why the war lasted until 2002—well beyond the end of the Cold War, when the regional and international dimensions of the conflict were circumscribed.

This review will not offer an evaluation of individual essays but will confine itself to observations about how certain contributors to *[Post]Colonial Histories* approach Van Niekerk's documentary. There is a remarkable convergence of critical opinion respecting the conceptualization and actualization of this project.

Almost all of the contributors reckon that the project was founded on an asymmetrical relationship between the participants that replicated colonial power relations. Although the three Angolan veterans did not subscribe to his view that "all soldiers are alike and desire forgiveness," Van Niekerk projected his own needs onto them (131). He convinced them that they shared the same experience, despite their very different memories of the war. As Knutzen puts it, "[Van Niekerk] evades true dialogue with the others

by arguing and appears to prefer his own soliloquies... . He is defensive, seeming[ly] uninterested in acknowledging their perspectives as [equally valid] opinions” (131). Van Niekerk persuaded his fellow travelers of the necessity of burning his pictures, notwithstanding their initial protestations. His was the dominant voice throughout the exercise, and he controlled the narrative. The project was anything but a collective endeavor. Van Niekerk imposed his vision on the others, and they went along for the ride—as much to placate him as to exorcise the demons of their own pasts.

Several contributors note how *My Heart of Darkness* has been represented as a “universal film about war veterans” (53). This is done by positioning the veterans that appear in the film as victims. Van Niekerk unconsciously transplanted the discourse of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that entered the lexicon of the Western medical-psychiatric fraternity during the 1980s into the Angolan context. The treatment of PTSD sets much score by the cathartic effects of the talking cure for individual soldiers haunted by memories of their participation in or witnessing of gratuitous and unconscionable violence. Indeed, all those exposed to violence are summarily constituted as victims. Van Niekerk clearly believed that his inability to control his own violent tendencies and antisocial behavior could be ascribed to PTSD. This model, however, makes victims of all ex-combatants and veterans, even the perpetrators of atrocities. Although there is merit in the argument that victims and perpetrators cannot be differentiated in absolute terms, and that there is often overlap between these categories, not all victims are equal. An SADF conscript like Van Niekerk may have had limited choices, but he was probably able to exercise a greater degree of agency than his comrades who were more directly caught up in the war. Likewise, he exercised more agency than the other veterans in the making of the film.

De Wolff notes that Van Niekerk’s project can be read as a critique of the efforts by Angola’s elites to cement to

cement official memory discourse in the face of the challenge by a vernacular counter-memory narrative (64). The project was undoubtedly framed by the Western-style transitional justice discourse that has become ubiquitous and hegemonic. Unlike South Africa’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which followed a restorative, rather than a retributive, justice model, Angola opted for blanket amnesty. Like many other post-conflict and post-colonial societies in Africa, it had neither the means nor the political will to deal with the divisive legacy of its war. Angolans have paid a high price for conditions of (relatively) peaceful coexistence under the authoritarian MPLA regime. Corruption, fueled by windfalls from the oil boom, is rife, and inequalities have been exacerbated by the distorted development from that oil wealth. Economic and political elites have been the only beneficiaries of the post-war situation. Transitional justice discourse might exaggerate the chances of post-conflict societies attaining consensus and social cohesion, but Angola’s ethnic and other fault lines have been entrenched, rather than furthering the aims of national reconciliation. It is almost certain that *My Heart of Darkness* will never make any impression on the perceptions of ordinary Angolans. For the most part, it has been screened at film festivals and is unlikely to reach a wide audience.

By his own admission, the purpose of Van Niekerk’s project was to refashion his identity into one that fits a father figure (128), to transform himself from a perpetrator into a wholesome protector of his daughters. However, his wish to save his daughters from being exposed to his shameful past was undone. As Jager points out, the very pictures he set out to destroy were given new life by their filmic remediation, so his fear that his daughters will become aware of these pictures is not resolved (199). If anything, they are more likely to be highlighted, should his daughters view the film, which was, presumably, his intention. The project was also self-defeating in at least one other respect.

The ritual purification was supposed to provide Van Niekerk with the absolution of his sins. But, as Knutsen notes, there is nothing in the film to suggest that the journey and cleansing ceremony had any impact on Van Niekerk (137). To his credit, Van Niekerk did not frame his film as a Hollywood-type morality tale, and its final sequence can be interpreted as open-ended, rather than suggesting closure. This lack of resolution is typical of the film’s many ambiguities and contradictions, so we have no way of knowing whether the journey provided the redemption that Van Niekerk sought.

Siegert rightly points out that Van Niekerk’s “travelling back” to Angola project is not unique (218). A number of SADF veterans have undertaken trips to the erstwhile Angolan battlefields that serve as memoryscapes. They have done so for a variety of reasons. Elsewhere, I have examined two such journeys that were recorded as travelogues: one taking the form of a motorized convoy that amounted to a tourist safari, and the other a pilgrimage by a solo cyclist (Gary Baines, ‘Retracing Memories of War: South African Military Veterans as Tourists in Angola’ in Angel Alcalde and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas eds., *War Veterans and the World after 1945: Cold War Politics, Decolonization, Memory*, Routledge 2018, pp. 235–49). More recently, it has been reported that a number of SADF veterans have teamed up with their Angolan counterparts to co-operate on a range of tourism and cultural projects in Cuito Cuanavale (Bobby Jordan, “The new battle of Cuito Cuanavale,” *Sunday Times*, 25 November 2018, p. 12). Such exercises are invariably framed in terms of reconciliation between former enemies who revel in the camaraderie occasioned by their having fought one another, rather than dwelling on their ideological and political differences. Unfortunately, in Van Niekerk’s case, his well-meaning intentions were undermined by selfish motives.

Like the project it critiques, *[Post]Colonial Histories* has its shortcomings. Many of the essays cover

similar ground, so there is a fair amount of repetition. The quality of the writing, or translation into English, is uneven. Much of it is laden with jargon and tautology, which makes for tedious reading at times. In fact, virtually all the essays would have benefited from the services of a first-language English-speaking editor. This might have eliminated the factual errors, as well as stylistic infelicities. Still, the volume makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of how the trauma of Angola's civil war has impacted that society, even though our impressions are mediated primarily through the lens of an outsider.

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Anderson, Clare, ed.,

**A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies**

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One of the difficulties about becoming halfway competent in a field of research is the propensity to become temporally and geographically restricted. I presume I am not alone in the concern that, as knowledge in our chosen field deepens, the boundaries of this knowledge can shrink. As a historical archaeologist who has been researching the deployment and management of convict labor in the Australian context for nearly twenty years, I know that I have become (often by necessity) fixated upon certain places and periods. In some respects, this focus has allowed me to become an expert in such areas, but this has been at the expense of a good contextual grounding. *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* has gone a long way to arrest this slide toward academic

particularity and will prove a staple research reference from this point forward.

*A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* is a book about the history of penal transportation between 1415 and the 1960s, using eleven geographically and chronologically disparate studies to explore the social, political and economic impacts of displacement. The book has a clear antecedent in the 2013–18 Carceral Archipelago project. Clare Anderson, the book's editor, was the project's principal investigator, and a number of the book's contributors were also part of the project team. This research coherency is obvious, with all the contributions marked by the thoroughness of their research and breadth of knowledge. Emulating the arrangement of the larger book, each individual chapter is organized in a roughly chronological fashion. Basic framing questions like the numbers of convicts involved (where known), the places they were removed to, the methods used to get them there, and what they were forced to do upon arrival are discussed, providing a coherency that makes *Global History* eminently reusable as a reference text.

The eleven chapters are bookended by an introductory overview by Anderson and an epilogue by Ann Laura Stoler. Each of the chapters takes a particular geographic and temporal aspect of the global history of convict management, predominantly by nation-states, but in one case by the company-state of the Dutch East India Company. As one would expect, the more well-known unfree diasporas are covered in detail throughout the book: Timothy Coates and Christian De Vito separately delve into the expansive histories of the Portuguese (1100–1932) and Spanish (1500–1898) Empires. Similarly, the complex and deep penal histories of France 1452–1976 (Jean-Lucien Sanchez), Britain and Ireland 1615–1875 (Hamish Maxwell-Stewart), British India 1789–1939 (Clare Anderson), and Russia and the Soviet Union from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries (Sarah

Badcock and Judith Pallot) are all exhaustively covered.

The perhaps lesser-known aspects of global penal histories are also covered in *A Global History*. John Heinsen discusses the Scandinavian Empires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Matthias van Rossum turns to the treatment of prisoners by the great private commercial empire of the Dutch East India Company between 1595 and 1811. Ryan Edwards provides a piece on post-1800 Latin America, with Minako Sakata examining the penal history of Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chapters close with Mary Gibson and Ilaria Poerio's look at penal policy and practice in modern Europe (1750–1950).

This outline makes it clear the extensive geographic and numeric breadth of the convict experience: from the “quantitatively negligible” flow of transportees from Sweden and Denmark in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the millions displaced to the peripheries by the Soviet Union in the twentieth century (98). It is also clear that there were large experiential disparities in the length and manner of transportation, as well as the eventual destinations of those transported. Yet, despite this, *A Global History* makes it clear that the experience of penal displacement and incarceration was and is linked by a series of constants, with co-option of labor power a key consideration. As Stoler emphasizes, the exploitation of labor cannot be unlinked from the experiences of the unfree. Whether retributive or rehabilitative, this book makes it clear that convict labor was often at the forefront of state-building projects. This could be through unwilling deployment on military frontiers, as occurred in the Portuguese world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Convict labor was also mobilized to fill shortages where there were few other labor sources available (free, indentured, or enslaved). The Atlantic colonies of both Sweden and Denmark utilized convict labor in the absence of any other viable labor source. The labor power of prisoners was also heavily utilized in the creation and