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**The Relationship Between White Guilt and Reparation:  
South Africa and the TRC**

Bachelor's Thesis

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## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on  
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Jami Pick

**Length of the Thesis: 80,244**

## **Abstract**

Despite efforts of reconciliation and the transition to democracy, rampant inequality persists in contemporary South African society. This thesis aims to contribute to the debate over the TRC's effectiveness at targeting and remedying injustice in addition to exploring the presence of white guilt in the South African context. This is integral to understanding reconciliation more broadly as well as gaining a holistic view of how South Africa has been shaped to be the way it is today. In line with this broader goal, this thesis deals with the relationship between white guilt and reconciliation, specifically in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It seeks to investigate the possible presence of white guilt in the white South African population during the operation of the TRC, as well as whether those that were responsible for the creation and the functioning of the TRC were aware of white guilt as a phenomenon and its reparative potential. A quantitative method is used to tally and catalogue occurrences of the word "guilt" in Amnesty Hearing transcripts and the TRC Final Report, followed by a qualitative analysis of these texts to mitigate the loss of context and to evaluate them more rigorously.

## **Abstrakt**

Navzdory snahám o usmíření a přechodu k demokracii přetrvává v současné jihoafrické společnosti nerovnost. Cílem této práce je přispět k debatě o fungování Výboru pro pravdu a usmíření (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, dále jen TRC) zaměřením se na nespravedlnost a její nápravu a zároveň prozkoumat přítomnost tzv. bělošské viny v jihoafrickém kontextu. Tato vina je nedílnou součástí širšího pochopení usmíření a klíčová pro získání uceleného pohledu na to, jak se Jihoafrická republika vyvíjela do své současné podoby. Práce zkoumá vztah mezi „white guilt“ a procesem rekonciliace, konkrétně v kontextu TRC. Snaží se prozkoumat možnou přítomnost pocitů viny u bílé jihoafrické populace během fungování TRC a také to, zda si ti, kteří byli zodpovědní za vznik a fungování TRC, byli vědomi této emoce a jejího potenciálu v procesu reparace. Kvantitativní metoda je použita k sčítání a katalogizaci výskytů slova „vina“ v prepisech slyšení a v závěrečné zprávě TRC, následuje kvalitativní analýza těchto textů, která výsledky kontextualizuje.

## **Keywords**

Truth and Reconciliation Committee; white guilt; South Africa; reconciliation; transitional justice

## **Klíčová slova**

Výbor pro pravdu a usmíření; bělošská vina; Jihoafrická republika; usmíření; tranziční spravedlnost

## **Title**

The Relationship Between White Guilt and Reparation:  
South Africa and the TRC

## **Název práce**

Bělošská vina a reparace. Příklad Jižní Afriky a Výboru pro pravdu a usmíření

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## Introduction

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa is a seminal institution in the nation's transition from apartheid to democracy. It was established in 1996, after the democratic transition, founded by then President Nelson Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu – two of the most well-known figures associated with the country's fight for freedom and equality. Alongside political negotiations and the drafting of a new constitution, the TRC played a pivotal role in confronting past atrocities and fostering reconciliation among South Africans<sup>1</sup>. Yet, amidst the commendations for its efforts, criticisms persist regarding its effectiveness, particularly in addressing the entrenched inequalities that continue to afflict contemporary South African society<sup>2</sup>.

My thesis examines the TRC's dynamics, focusing specifically on the interplay between white guilt and the pursuit of reconciliation. The definition of white guilt I will use characterises this phenomenon as a self-focused group-based emotion, stemming from actions perpetrated against one racial group by the insider racial group (to which the individual experiencing the emotion claims membership to). This conception of white guilt is inspired by work done on the topic by authors such as Klandermans et al. (2008). Central to my inquiry is whether white guilt, individually and collectively, influenced the TRC's operations and the broader quest for societal healing. Combining quantitative analysis, using transcripts from Amnesty Hearings and the TRC Final Report, and qualitative exploration, my thesis sheds light on the presence and implications of white guilt within the context of the TRC.

The post-apartheid era in South Africa has been marked by strides towards democracy alongside persistent socio-economic disparities. Despite the TRC's mandate to address historical injustices and facilitate reconciliation, the enduring inequality underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of its outcomes and limitations. By examining the role of white guilt in the TRC process, my thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the efficacy of transitional justice mechanisms and their capacity to address systemic

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<sup>1</sup> A valuable and comprehensive source for works pertaining to the TRC is *The Limits of Transition: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission 20 Years on* (2017). This book guides the reader through seminal articles and critical excerpts from South African authors and gives insight into the discourse surrounding the TRC, providing multiple perspectives through the lenses of various disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n24/letters> (as mentioned in Krog, 2017) for particularly biting criticism of the TRC in the form of letters sent to a British literary magazine by several contributors.

injustice. While the focus remains on the TRC and its specific historical context, the implications of this investigation extend beyond the borders of South Africa.

Understanding the complexities of reconciliation, particularly in societies grappling with legacies of oppression, offers valuable insights into the broader challenges of transitional justice and social cohesion worldwide. In exploring the intricate nexus between white guilt and reconciliation within the TRC framework, my thesis adds to the comprehension of the historical trajectory of South Africa and the universal quest for healing and justice in societies scarred by conflict and oppression.

By analysing the occurrences of the word “guilt” in documents provided by the Truth Commission Special Report website, insight can be provided into whether there was evidence of white guilt at the time of the TRC’s Amnesty Hearings, and furthermore, whether the TRC was aware of this possibility (and if they instituted any measures with this phenomenon in mind). I will inspect two kinds of texts: transcripts from the Amnesty Hearings and the TRC Final Report. In order to provide a more thorough evaluation, occurrences of the word “guilt” will be catalogued according to the context surrounding how it is used and the statistics extracted from this part of the research will be supplemented by an in-depth qualitative analysis of the relevant texts.

Firstly, I will guide the reader through the necessary context by providing an exposition on South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After this, white guilt and the differing views on the circumstances surrounding its manifestation as well its relationship with reconciliation is discussed. This leads to a deeper exploration of the manners in which attempts were made toward reconciliation in South Africa. Subsequently, after a brief section on the methodology I employed in my research, I will outline my findings. This is followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

## 1. South Africa and the TRC as Case Study

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established after the democratic transition by Nelson Mandela, supported by the newly-elected African National Congress government (the ANC being the party Mandela headed at the time). What the Commission was meant to achieve, as thought of at the time of its conception, is not widely agreed upon. Some purposes include giving a platform to and shedding light on truth (whether this refers to a commonly agreed upon version of the truth or the individual truths of different citizens) or, on the more extreme end of what such an institution can feasibly achieve, secure reconciliation sufficient for the well-functioning of South African society moving forward. It is frequently debated whether the TRC was able to achieve these different objectives.

Despite the fervent critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the most notable condemnation being that the African National Congress utilized the TRC purely as a legitimizing tool, the reparative potential it had is clear. Many other nations have used it as a model for their own truth-finding institutions. It was the first of its kind which offered hearings in which victims and perpetrators could testify at the same forum. Furthermore, the TRC was the first truth commission which held victim hearings in public and which individualized amnesty (Krog, 2017). In many ways, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is synonymous with the transition period. It is rather obvious that it managed to provide victims with at least some catharsis during and in the immediate aftermath of the hearings. South Africans also seemingly managed to “move on” as a nation with its new government and constitution, after all (even though now some opt to call the country a “failed state”<sup>3</sup>). However, it is unclear if the TRC managed to reach its full reparative potential or whether it did in fact provide citizens the healing needed for the country to move towards a more just and integrated state.

It is important to note the timeframe of the reconciliation being discussed. The following work aims not to address reconciliation in today’s time nor the aftermath of the reconciliation period of the 1990s to a notable extent. The TRC as a process was formed and carried out in the throes of the transition period, in the midst of the difficult debates between the incumbent and new governments. According to Albie Sachs (a notable ANC lawyer and

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<sup>3</sup> A 2023 report by Harvard University’s Growth Lab titled GROWTH THROUGH INCLUSION IN SOUTH AFRICA is often quoted as a source for qualifying South Africa’s failed state status.

activist who helped to construct the TRC), it was six months before the first democratic elections were held in 1994 when the ANC first discussed the theme of accountability in terms of the crimes committed by ANC-affiliated individuals as part of their political pursuits (2017). From meetings such as these, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was borne. The first formal hearing was subsequently held in 1996 and the last hearing was held two years later. The duration of the operation of the TRC is as contentious as the timing of its conception. As mentioned before, detractors are quick to point out the opportunistic nature of the TRC as a means for the African National Congress to gain legitimacy while simultaneously offering a “Get Out of Jail Free card” to the politicians and the violent peons of the previous regime. It must be mentioned, however, that the ANC-led government (albeit that the party is now losing votes) continues to enact policies of affirmative action today in order to correct the unsightly injustice the majority of South African citizens still face after decades of democracy. That being said, it can be difficult to look at such measures without wondering if it is too little, too late. What is notable about the time frame of the TRC, however, is how white guilt may manifest over a period of time. Arguably, the swift execution of TRC hearings would have allowed any guilt which might have been present to be in its most palpable, observable state. This is because feelings of responsibility for past injustices may dwindle as the aforementioned acts stretch further into the past (and therefore further away from the present consciousness of society and perhaps even the consciousness of perpetrators).

Just as memory, emotions decay. If white guilt as a phenomenon might decay as time passes, with the distance between the current day and the years of overt racial oppression increasing, the timing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission may have been crucial. Although it may often seem more detrimental than beneficial to compare the case of South Africa and apartheid with other cases of racially-based systems of oppression (such as with the United States), what seminal authors such as Steele have to offer in regards to white guilt remains invaluable. Steele (1990) describes white guilt as a loss of authority – a loss of authority that was transferred from white Americans to African Americans. In fact, he goes as far as to say that the vulnerable nature of white Americans during the social changes of the “black-is-beautiful late 1960s” all but “demanded” African Americans to step into the vulnerability and absorb the power and authority lost by the ingroup (Steele, 1990). This was how an urgency of repentance was cultivated in the United States. To feel guilty towards the

treatment of a certain group calls for a transfer of power to them. This phenomenon indicates an instrumentalization of white guilt which could be important in terms of policymaking. If parallels can be drawn between the American and the South African cases, it may actually have been of the utmost importance for the ANC to enact a swift process of reconciliation via the TRC for any rectification of injustice to be effective. In this case, the timing of the TRC might not have been purely out of convenience and self-interest. That being said, perhaps the time which have been afforded to white South Africans since the time of the TRC can enlighten them of their privilege and what injustices were truly enacted during the reign of apartheid. The reasoning that some white South Africans employ to explain away any affiliation with the aforementioned racial injustice in regards to the fact that the apartheid government employed propaganda techniques and kept the public in the dark about the true goings-on at time would therefore cease to be a coherent response. The fact that guilt can be “explained away” in this manner, along with the influence of time on reconciliation, contributes to the divisive nature of white guilt (among other factors).

In short, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a tool of reparation in South Africa’s transition period. Whether it was successful at enacting justice, reconciliation and reparation in the short and long term is debatable, especially in terms of its ability to address and utilize any possible white guilt which may have been present at the time. The true motivations behind the TRC as well as which strategies were knowingly employed are also not wholly agreed upon in the literature. This second aspect of the TRC is especially difficult to investigate in a meaningful way without merely speculating.

## 2. White Guilt and its Divisive Role

White guilt is discussed in the context of different fields, such as sociology, psychology and philosophy. Many works written by South African authors spanning different fields mention, at least in part, white guilt and its impact on contemporary South African society. A significant number of authors agree that white guilt exists, but the levels of white guilt experienced by different white South Africans is not agreed upon.

According to Iyer et al. (2003), white guilt is a form of group-based guilt. Group-based guilt is an emotional experience derived from one's ingroup being responsible for immoral advantage. White guilt as a more specific phenomenon is a dysphoria felt by those within the ingroup when they are focused on the illegitimate racial advantage over the outgroup (Iyer et al., 2003). White guilt, just like guilt as it is normally understood, is an emotion. Other emotions are conflated with guilt and are often mentioned within the same sphere as white guilt. Such emotions include shame and embarrassment, often in reference to white people's perception of themselves as a racial group. Swim and Miller (1999) state in *White Guilt: Its Antecedents and Consequences for Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action* that "Shame and embarrassment imply a belief that others will perceive Whites negatively" (p.501). However, depicting white guilt as such does not paint the full picture. It is for this reason why Swim and Miller, among other authors, assume a more holistic approach in defining this phenomenon. They characterize white guilt not only according to its public aspect (how others perceive the individual's social group). What is also taken into account are other components of collective self-esteem, such as private evaluations of the social group from the individual's point of view and how much the individual values having membership to the social group relative to it being a part of their identity (Swim and Miller, 1999). In regards to the origin of white guilt, it is argued that being aware of one's white privilege is what manifests white guilt along with a sense of gratitude for not being in the racial outgroup (Steele, 1990). This emphasis on an awareness of white privilege is an integral part of, or at least a defining link to, white guilt. That being said, in the South African context, the acknowledgement of white privilege may be a more contemporary facet of white guilt. Indeed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused mainly on the horrific actions of injustice (and particularly tangible crimes) which occurred in recent memory. The perpetrators of injustice at the time of the TRC, therefore, would have had more to feel guilty

about than the general white privilege they had enjoyed up until that point (and perhaps even afterwards).

In regards to the South African literature, Visser's 2008 work *How to live? Guilt and goodness in Rian Malan's "My Traitor's Heart."* is a good example of the discourse surrounding white guilt. Visser (2008) analyses "My Traitor's Heart", the autobiography of the notable South African journalist and writer from during the time of apartheid, Rian Malan, by making ties and inferences stemming from moral philosophy. She comments on how it acts as an investigation into both personal responsibility and communal guilt in the South African context (Visser, 2008). The fact that white guilt is a notable theme within South African non-academic literature, alongside academic works, highlights how important it is not to overlook it in regards to socio-political matters.

White guilt can only stem from an admission of wrongdoing, but the extent to which so-to-say "regular citizens" are responsible for the repressive regimes they lived under is disputed in the perpetrating group. The white South Africans who lived under apartheid claim their innocence through an ignorance regarding what injustice truly was being perpetrated under it, blaming instead a small group of political elite. Furthermore, even more white South Africans claim that they were too young to accept any responsibility for Apartheid, even in the nineties. However, white privilege and the enduring benefits of apartheid are hard to dispute in contemporary South Africa.

Studies such as those done by Klandermans et al. (2008) show that white guilt can be influenced by a variety of factors. Political ideology, for example, might be a predictor of white guilt. In the face of an injustice so morally reprehensible and the scope of which is so great that the reparation of it seems "impossible", white guilt may look to the uninformed like a negligible side effect of the transition process (Caflich, 2020). However, white guilt is not simply another negative emotion associated with a highly politicized and emotional event such as Apartheid. It is helpful to analyse the ways in which white guilt may aid reparation. Whether the absence of white guilt may have hindered reparation, specifically in South Africa, is a dually important question to consider. In summary, white guilt is divisive in terms of which subjects exhibit it and under which conditions and it is also divisive in terms of whether it aids reparation.

## 2.1 The Source of the Duality of White Guilt

As I previously mentioned, Klandermans et al. (2008) draw the lines along which South African (white) Afrikaners exhibit collective guilt about apartheid along political ideology. More specifically, their preconditions for the presence of white guilt are as follows: individuals who strongly identify with the offending group and have liberal views exhibit collective guilt and those also strongly identify with white South Africans and have conservative views do not exhibit collective guilt (Klandermans et al., 2008)<sup>4</sup>. That being said, other findings suggest that collective guilt will not develop in certain circumstances, as individuals may deny the darkness of the past. This indicates that there may be such a strong denial in individuals that it seems as if there is not any white guilt present, even though there is some form of guilt present subconsciously. By observing the multi-faceted nature of white guilt, it is rather unsurprising why its presence and form can be divisive.

If one disregards in which circumstances and in what form white guilt manifests, its relation to reparative acts can differ among authors. White guilt is often found to be a predictive indicator of support for affirmative action. However, it is important to specify the kind of affirmative action being discussed. The positive correlation between white guilt and support for affirmative action refers to the kind of affirmative action which manifests as monetary compensation, but not noncompensatory efforts which aim to promote equal opportunities, as shown by the study done by Iyer et al. (2003). However, within the broader literature on transitional justice, financial compensation as a form of affirmative action is seen as the more effective tool for restitution. The same support for compensatory affirmative action programs in the presence of white guilt was found in Swim and Miller's 1999 study. Work done by Klandermans et al. (2008) shows that white guilt is predictive of a positive view of affirmative action. This is an especially salient finding considering that their work focuses on white South African subjects and the fact that affirmative action is viewed overwhelmingly negatively by this group (Klandermans et al., 2008)<sup>5</sup>. It is argued that forms

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<sup>4</sup> Although there are some issues with relying on the liberal-conservative self-placement as an indicator of political ideology, Klandermans et al. are confident in their use of this self-placement due to how politicized the country was during the time of apartheid.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted, however, that the research of Klandermans et al. was conducted in the 2000s and focused on young white South Africans as subjects of study. In other words, the subjects they analysed would have been children at the time of the TRC and the democratic transition. This work, although interesting to the field of white guilt more broadly, may be even more applicable to those wishing to pursue research on white guilt in South Africa in a more contemporary sense.

of affirmative action which focus on equal opportunities instead of financial means are generally the most preferred and least controversial of its kind. This may be because they do not imply a perpetrator. Affirmative action achieved through equal opportunity policies only imply that “racial inequality exists and that it should be rectified” (p.199, Iyer et al., 2003). In this way, the offending group is not directly targeted and it is not required of them to take responsibility. There is no implication of guilt and therefore the need for compensation is not suggested. This is a reason why white guilt may not be an indicator for support for non-compensatory forms of affirmative action per se. Another theory as to why white guilt may be positively correlated with support for affirmative action relates to the relationship between white guilt and prejudice. More favourable attitudes toward affirmative action have been associated with lower levels of prejudice. It may be the case, however, that white guilt predicts support for affirmative action independent of this factor. Indeed, it would be an oversimplification to claim that higher levels of racism indicate a lack of support for affirmative action and vice versa and would cause researchers to overlook many other potentially important factors. A factor such as this that was ignored for a long time in the literature is in fact white guilt (Swim and Miller, 1999). The importance of the predictive power of white guilt must not be overlooked in this matter.

The literature surrounding the presence of white guilt in individuals who identify as white and politically conservative and how it manifests is lacking. Perhaps this is due to the seemingly common understanding that these individuals do not in fact experience collective guilt towards members of other racial groups which their racial group has persecuted in the past. Another possible reason could stem from the impossible nature of observing a psychological or emotional phenomenon which the observed individual is not himself/herself aware of due to severe suppression of said phenomenon. What is known about white guilt in conservatives is almost exclusively included in research and work done which does not focus on this specific topic. A good example of the deficiency in the literature surrounding this aspect of white guilt is *Redeeming Apartheid's Legacy: Collective Guilt, Political Ideology, and Compensation* by Klandermans et al. (2008). Although the authors provide the salient finding of a lack of the presence of white guilt in participants identifying as conservative (and who strongly identified with the perpetrator group), which corroborates the findings of studies done by others such as Doosje et al. (as cited in Klandermans et al., 2008), the reasoning behind why this is the case is completely omitted. Indeed, the main focus of this

study is to observe the nature of the relationship between the collective guilt of white South Africans and attitudes toward reconciliation. That being said, Klandermans et al. (2008) offer more on the subject of white guilt in conservatives than most other authors in the literature do. It seems the literature as a whole omits further inspection of white guilt in conservative individuals.

The work of Klandermans et al. (2008) is mentioned in another notable work on the topic - in *Towards the End of the White Guilt Era? The Rise of Nostalgic Whiteness and Magical Populism*. Here, J. M. Persánch (2020) explains the existence and prevalence of multiculturalism in the Western world as resulting from a societal white guilt in the aftermath of the atrocities committed in World War II. However, multiculturalism created social insecurity and uncertainty and could ultimately not fix the feelings of white guilt in society which persisted despite all the time that has elapsed. Important events such as 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis shook the social fabric and turned Western society away from multiculturalism and toward nostalgia, a dangerous nostalgia which can be used by populist politicians to gain support through preying on people's emotions (Persánch, 2020). However, the author's mention of the overlap between restorative nostalgia and conservatism in certain examples remains the only comment on how white guilt manifests on the right side of the political spectrum. No explanations are offered as substantiation for this claim. Furthermore, it is unclear how applicable this information is in regards to conservative white South Africans. It is debatable to what extent South Africa was influenced by the west in terms of the multiculturalism on which much of what Persánch argues relies on.

Affirmative action, although relevant in contemporary South African society<sup>6</sup>, is not an accurate depiction of the exact measure the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to utilize in order to aid the process of reconciliation in post-Apartheid South Africa. Albie Sachs (cited in Van Marle, 2017) stresses that the TRC process focused on dialogical truth in which "people coming from different backgrounds and with different interests come together to debate and contest the truth" (p.48). This truth generating aspect of the TRC was deemed necessary in order for the country to move forward without ill feelings (both stemming from guilt and revenge) and to establish a common dialectic basis from which society could

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/28/south-africas-controversial-race-quota-law-stirs-debate> for an example of how affirmative action is still a relevant point of discussion for South African citizens today.

function. However, the aforementioned link between affirmative action and white guilt serves to prove the importance of considering white guilt in reconciliation efforts more broadly.

White guilt is a self-focused emotion which arises out of identification with a group which has enacted injustices. If an individual identifies with such a group (white South Africans, in this case), they may exhibit guilt depending on whether they truly believe the aforementioned “unjust” actions were wrong and depending on their political ideology (liberals tend to exhibit collective guilt and conservatives do not). However, different authors use different measures for political ideology. There are also a range of different factors which may influence whether an individual exhibits white guilt or not to begin with. Part of the divisiveness surrounding white guilt stems from differences in the ways in which it manifests and under what circumstances. It is clear that group membership necessitates feelings of guilt (i.e. one cannot feel guilt on behalf of a group one does not feel a part of) and this characteristic of white guilt is included in what is considered white guilt as per this thesis. However, other inferences about white guilt may be drawn from the conclusions of this thesis and work which can be built upon it. The different facets of white guilt are not fully known and it may be detrimental to assume that one can know with certainty all the factors which influence it, especially at the time of writing.

## 2.2 Depressive vs Reparative States of Mind

Since guilt is an emotion, whether it is phrased as “white guilt” or “collective guilt” (both phrases will be used interchangeably for the purpose of this thesis), it is explored extensively in the field of psychology. Two states white liberals can be found to be in, according to the Kleinian tradition, are the paranoid-schizoid and depressive states of mind (as cited in Caflisch, 2020). In *“When Reparation Is Felt to Be Impossible”: Persecutory Guilt and Breakdowns in Thinking and Dialogue about Race*, Caflisch (2020) explains how viewing reparation as an “impossible” endeavour and guilt as “unbearable” from the perspective of white liberals “can lead to a shift from depressive to paranoid-schizoid states of mind” (p.583). She seems to indicate that, in order to prevent the breaking down of thought and reflection in white, liberal subjects (and to avoid an aversion towards racial reparation in daily life), these subjects need to be in or to revert back to the depressive state of mind (Caflisch, 2020).

J. M. Persánch’s (2020) work also deals with white guilt as a driver of political change. Another interesting facet of the work is the transferability of collective guilt as social responsibility – i.e. social responsibility as a phenomenon which lies within groups which display or have feelings of collective guilt, which may be a reason why conservatives do not support acts of societal reconciliation in the form of affirmative action etc. (Persánch, 2020). However, a possible lack of social responsibility (and therefore white guilt) could corroborate what other authors have added to the discussion and explain at least partially why white guilt is absent in the white conservative camp. Antjie Krog (2017), for example, describes a lack of regret and guilt on behalf of white South Africans in her explanation of why reconciliation efforts in South Africa (particularly in terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) have failed. The “interconnectedness-toward-wholeness” approach noted by Krog (2017) can also be linked to the social responsibility previously mentioned.

According to a study done by Dull et al. (2021), “In the context of high social responsibility, White guilt related to more civic action” but “in the context of low social responsibility, White guilt corresponded with less civic action” (p.1081). Social responsibility refers to a person’s commitment towards contributing to their society or community in this case (Dull et al., 2021). In this way, attempting to utilize white guilt to secure the efficiency of reconciliation might be a misguided strategy that could possibly lead to the opposite of the

intended effect. The presence of white guilt within individuals may also make them averse to learning more about racial injustice. In fact, denial of discrimination is a way for people to reduce their guilt.

It is disputed to what extent white guilt aids reparation. However, the work of many authors point to the fact that white guilt can have an impact on white people's perception of reparatory policies and acts (which in theory can aid reparation and reconciliation as a whole). The extent to which it has this relation with reparation and under which circumstances differs in the literature. Furthermore, white guilt can only be conducive to reparation when it is not being used by white individuals to deflect responsibility (through the illogical mindsets it can create) or when it manifests as persecutory guilt, in which case the individual identifies with the suffering of the victim group in a masochistic way due to the "suffering" of being "accused" by being associated with reprehensible actions. Whether white guilt can aid reparation, therefore, also depends on whether those who exhibit it are in the schizoid-paranoid or depressive state of mind (Caflisch, 2020).

## 2.3 Reconciliation in South Africa

There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, therefore one could forgive but not reconcile and vice versa. Krog (2017), a famous South African writer, argues that the “interconnectedness-towards-wholeness” approach linked to a broader African philosophy makes these two terms inextricable. Perpetrators asked for amnesty during the Amnesty Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but this is only the first step toward reparation - “it means to admit to wrongdoing, and asking to be forgiven. The concept of transitional justice can therefore be neatly embedded in the interconnectedness-towards-wholeness: the acknowledgement of guilt and the forgiveness create the transition period in which the perpetrator is assisted to change for the better” (p.16). She argues that black people issued their forgiveness freely and were not pressured to do so by community leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu or by the African National Congress (in order for the party to legitimize itself). Furthermore, it is a misunderstanding to say that black citizens forgave their white counterparts because they did not understand what was at stake at the time. According to Krog (2017), “Whites were forgiven, because within a particular epistemological and ontological context it seemed the obvious thing to do in order to change profoundly both whites and an apartheid country” (p.17). Guilt is therefore an essential ingredient of the reparation process (in which both forgiveness and reconciliation takes place) which may have been missing to a meaningful extent during the transition period of South Africa. However, this may say everything about South African people and little about the TRC itself. Regardless, black citizens often have misgivings today about how effective the reparation of the nineties truly was.

As with affirmative action, it seems as if efforts towards reconciliation cannot reach full reparative potential unless there is support for it. In other words, reconciliation can only work to its fullest capacity if it is desired and supported by the whole population (including offending and victim groups). There are multiple accounts from within and outside the African National Congress regarding the true motivations and goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the discussion of whether it was successful at meeting whichever ends it set out to achieve are debatable. However, considering the feelings of the white population in terms of guilt may be crucial in attempting to understand why or why not the TRC was ultimately able to achieve meaningful and long-lasting reconciliation post-

apartheid. There is something to be said about the de jure power of the South African constitution which came into being alongside the TRC, which was incredibly progressive for its time in comparison to the constitutions of other African countries. The insistence of the ANC that the South African notion of Ubuntu<sup>7</sup> strongly influenced, if not inextricably so, the constitution-making process is not accepted by authors such as Magobe Ramose (as mentioned in Van Marle, 2017). Indeed, “President Mbeki’s decision to give a once off payment to victims that appeared at the commission as well as his decision to grant amnesty to those who didn’t apply via the TRC process without consulting the families of the victims” (p.49) stands in opposition to the supposed interconnectedness which the ANC claims underscores the Constitution and Ramose argues that in fact Ubuntu and the Constitution are contradictory in a fundamental way (Van Marle, 2017). Besides the Constitution, the ultimate de facto power of the TRC has been investigated not only since its inception, but more so as inequality in South Africa has become increasingly unavoidable. Instituting justice is a sensitive matter in terms of time and form. Emotional aspects of transitional justice need to be taken into account for the victims of racial discrimination to benefit from reconciliation in a meaningful way.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was successful in providing a relatively swift transition into democracy. However, many often criticize the TRC for the many ways it was deemed to be not successful in enacting long-term reparation. One reason that has been attributed to this failure is that amnesty was given to white society in a broader sense without this group having ever asked for forgiveness. The TRC did not address the responsibility which white, every-day citizens have toward reparation, because it did not address how such people (despite not having committed horrendous crimes themselves) contributed and benefited from the apartheid system to a significant extent. Because of this, the forgiveness black citizens issued in the nineties was not utilized in order to enact justice and the reconciliation they hoped for was never realized. However, the lack of guilt within the general white South African populace is but one theory. Furthermore, the question remains if whether those who applied for amnesty (the criminals the TRC focused so heavily on) felt

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<sup>7</sup> See Antjie Krog’s *Rethinking Reconciliation and Forgiveness at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and her “interconnectedness-towards-wholeness approach” for an appropriate explanation of what Ubuntu means when it is referred to.

guilt over their actions or if they simply wanted to be pardoned and protected from any legal ramifications.

### **3. Methodology**

Analysing the transcripts of the Amnesty Hearings is a crucial step toward identifying the possible presence and nature of white guilt within perpetrators. Furthermore, analysing the TRC Final Report is important in order to grasp whether the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission understood white guilt and the role it plays within reconciliation. This two-pronged strategy may help us to better understand whether the TRC aided in reconciliation and provide possible reasons for its efficiency or inefficiency in reaching this goal. Although this thesis does not aim by any means to target or provide solutions to South Africa's problems on a broader scale, it seems highly likely that many of the country's issues stem from its long and painful history with inequality. It is important for both South African and international policymakers and seekers of justice to understand the TRC and the South African case for reconciliation in order to make informed and effective decisions.

The term "guilt" was counted manually in all texts under the headings of "Amnesty Hearings" and the "TRC Final Report" and their affiliate folders and sub-folders, as explained previously, in order to obtain the necessary data for quantitative study. During this initial phase of obtaining data, the race of the person uttering the word "guilt" in terms of the Amnesty Hearings is not taken into account. It should be noted that "guilt" is also tallied according to the addition of certain characters ("guilty") and with a disregard of capitalization (both "Guilt" and "guilt" forms part of the relevant data collected). Furthermore, the linguistic differences between the two different kinds of text do not have an effect on the way in which the phenomenon of guilt will manifest – for example, whether the text is written in first or third person, the word "guilt" may appear regardless. This methodology is then supplemented by a categorization of the circumstances surrounding every instance of the use of the word "guilt".

Three categories of the use of the word "guilt" can be identified in terms of what is referred to in its use: guilt in the emotional, physical or legal sense. Simply put, and as to avoid further confusion, guilt in the "physical" sense refers to when an actor has committed an act – i.e. they are "guilty" of committing a certain act. The legal use of the word occurs most frequently across all documents. In this case, court appointed officials may ask amnesty applicants if they were or were not found "guilty" at court (at a previous point in time as part of separate cases). Other examples include whether speakers or perpetrators pleaded guilty or

not at these aforementioned cases. Although the most relevant categorization of the word “guilt” is when the word is used in the emotional sense, cases in which “guilty” is not used in the emotional sense still provide some meaningful insight into the nature and spirit of the TRC Amnesty Hearings. The context surrounding the use of “guilt” within texts are analysed in order to deduce to which category an instance belongs.

The manifestation of the word “guilt” as an emotion is the central interest of the data. This categorization can be further divided into two groups: personal admissions of guilt and discourse surrounding guilt more broadly. It is this first division that is even more pertinent to analyse than the second group, even though all emotional categorizations of guilt provide the opportunity for interesting (yet rather idiosyncratic) deductions in a preliminary sense. Identified as an emotion, “guilt” is analysed as per the definition of white guilt given in the introduction of the thesis if the race of the relevant speaker is white.

At the last level of analysis, using contextual evidence, the race of the speaker in terms of the Amnesty Hearing transcripts is deduced. It is at this point that any possible instance of white guilt may be identified. In other words, white guilt is identified whenever a speaker, who is white, seemingly displays guilt about his/her actions as per the emotional categorisation of the word “guilt” outlined earlier. The racial aspect of this guilt is inferred due to the topics discussed within the Amnesty Hearings always pertaining to apartheid and the injustice perpetrated under this system, whether explicitly or implicitly. However, only looking at the data through a quantitative lens is not enough. Just because “guilt” was mentioned, that is not an indication of guilt being experienced by speakers. The research thus employs a methodology which provides a more concrete basis on which inferences may be drawn and for further analysis. The flagged uses of the term “guilt” most relevant to the research at hand is discussed and analysed qualitatively. This is important for certain nuances in individual cases that may otherwise be overlooked to be taken into account. Since white guilt is an emotion, it would be unwise to ignore the emotionally charged nature of people’s experiences. In order to do this, context surrounding the speaker’s lives and the crimes being investigated are also necessary in the case of the Amnesty Hearings.

#### 4. The TRC and White Guilt

According to the United States Institute of Peace, “The TRC took the testimony of approximately 21,000 victims; and 2,000 of them appeared at public hearings. The commission received 7,112 amnesty applications. Amnesty was granted in 849 cases and refused in 5,392 cases, while other applications were withdrawn”<sup>8</sup>. This illustrates the intensity and difficulty of the task the Truth and Reconciliation Commission undertook in analysing and processing amnesty applications. The resulting dataset is subsequently diverse and rather sizable in scale. The term “guilt” (and the various forms it may take, e.g. “guilty”) occurs 758 times across the texts studied as per the Methodology section. It appears 651 times total in the Amnesty Hearings documents and 107 times total in the TRC Final Report.

	Amnesty Hearings	TRC Final Report
Frequency	651	107

**Figure 1: Frequency of the term “guilt” across data<sup>9</sup>**

Although this frequency may seem notable in size at first, it must be mentioned that the overwhelming majority of cases in which “guilt” is used is in the legal sense. In fact, only 2.3% of the occurrences of “guilt” in the Amnesty Hearings transcripts and only around 23.4% in the TRC Final Report are used in the emotional sense.

	Emotional	Physical and Legal
Frequency	15	636

**Figure 2: The frequency of the word “guilt” in the Amnesty Hearing documents as categorized by the nature of the word**

	Emotional	Physical and Legal
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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/12/truth-commission-south-africa#:~:text=The%20TRC%20took%20the%20testimony,while%20other%20applications%20were%20withrawn.>

<sup>9</sup> All figures are based on data from my own findings.

Frequency	25	82
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**Figure 3: The frequency of the word “guilt” in the TRC Final Report documents as categorized by the nature of the word**

Furthermore, in the transcripts of only two hearings is guilt mentioned on behalf of white individuals, totalling to a number of five times in which “guilt” appears. In the TRC Special Report, although guilt as an emotional phenomenon is mentioned frequently throughout various chapters, guilt expressed on behalf of white citizens can only be identified in two texts. Here, the term “guilt” is employed four times. As per the aforementioned white individuals who experienced guilt, the hearing transcripts mention “Mr Du Plessis” as well as “Mr Benzien”. The TRC Special Report tells the story of “Nicholas ‘Oupa’ Links” and the guilt he experienced after he killed a black youth and a message from an anonymous contributor who sent in a message to one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s “Registers for Reconciliation”. However, the details of these cases will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.

It is not useful to compare the Amnesty Hearing transcripts with the TRC Special Report in terms of the frequency of the occurrence of the term “guilt” used in the emotional sense. However, it is worthwhile to point out the lack of guilt which can evidently be found in the Amnesty process, considering the apologetic nature inherent (and vital) to it. The crucial point to understanding the significance of this finding lies in the relationship between guilt and reconciliation. As has been mentioned earlier, apologies are fruitless if not backed by the motivation, not only to change one’s behaviour and actions, but also to proactively repair the damage of the past and to work toward a better future. This missing element may be originate from a lack of guilt. That being said, the increased tendency for “guilt” in the emotional sense to be mentioned in the TRC Final Report, in comparison to the Amnesty Hearing transcripts, does provide valuable insight into the paradigm of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Textual evidence proves that the architects of the TRC did indeed recognize the existence of the phenomenon of “guilt” (although the term “white guilt” is never mentioned expressly).

One of the most striking features of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Amnesty Hearings is the amount of focus centred on crimes committed by individuals affiliated with the African National Congress in the years leading up to democracy. The main perpetrator of apartheid, well-known to even the least informed Westerners overseas, is the

white South African (particularly the Afrikaner). However, this aspect of the struggle for freedom and equality fought up until the nineties seems to take a backseat in favour of focus on crimes which were committed by members of the ANC. In this way, the guilt referred to throughout the TRC Special Report does not refer to white guilt only, but includes guilt experienced by South African citizens of all races for all manner of reasons.

In "*Meeting the Man who Organised a Bomb in My Car*", Albie Sachs (2017) recounts the debates surrounding crimes of torture members of the African National Congress committed in prior years as part of the liberation struggle. Two camps within the ANC at the time were that 1. The use of coercive force on behalf of ANC members were evidence of the naivety of the perpetrators and that more focus should be placed upon the crimes of the ruling racist government 2. It was important to address the evidence and the injustice enacted by members because it is the morally correct thing to do and in order to maintain legitimacy for the ANC (Sachs, 2017). The second camp seemingly managed to exert more influence over the eventual creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, particularly in the creation of the TRC Final Report. It is important to note the fact that the ANC did indeed address actions on behalf of its members which were violent and unjust in nature, even if the aforementioned actions contributed to the ultimate liberation which underscored the ANC's cause.

Sachs (2017) also mentions a meeting held in 1993 near Johannesburg about the aforementioned debate surrounding the use of torture. According to what he recounts Professor Kader Asmal to have said during the meeting, it seems as if the main reasoning behind the TRC to begin with was, according to the Professor, to "examine[s] not only what our people did to the relatively few captives in our hands, but also the experiences of thousands and thousands of people who were tortured, victimized, assassinated by the regime." (as cited in Sachs, 2017, p.26). In Sachs' (2017) own words, "paradoxically, ironically, the truth commission in South Africa was set up not by an ANC government wanting to expose the crimes of the previous regime. It was set up by freedom-fighters anticipating that they would sooner or later be in the government, wanting to help the ANC usher in our new democracy with clean hands; with no secrets; with nothing to hide. We wished to find a way of dealing with the atrocities of the past, whoever had committed them, as a nation" (p.26).

Additionally, guilt (in the emotional sense) was expressed more frequently in the case of black amnesty applicants over all the Amnesty Hearing transcripts analysed. It is unclear whether the focus on the past transgressions of ANC members in the TRC process was due to a desire to establish legitimacy or due to a moral responsibility as Sachs (2017) and others may claim, but it is indisputable that the African National Congress did not unfairly target white perpetrators as a means of accruing legitimacy for the establishment of the new regime. That being said, some may argue that this is ultimately one of the failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – a failure in properly addressing the crimes of those who sustained the system of apartheid, questions of complacency aside.

As a result of the strikingly small number of occurrences of personal admissions of guilt in the emotional sense, it will be possible to discuss them all here. The following transcripts and texts referred to specifically make up the entirety of the aforementioned category.

In the case of Mr Du Plessis<sup>10</sup>, amnesty was applied for in connection to several crimes involving the operation of an underground organization. Mr Du Plessis, along with another individual named “Mr White”, were the founders of this underground organization. The crimes mentioned surrounded the acquisition of funds, ammunition and weapons via theft that were thought to be needed to carry out the subsequent operations of the organization. The most notable crime mentioned was the murder of multiple people at a robbery at a farm committed by Mr White. Although Mr Du Plessis was not present at the time of this specific crime and he was subsequently not put on trial for it, he was found guilty in the court of law for other unspecified crimes. However, it can be deduced using contextual evidence that his incarceration had to do with his previous pursuit of the acquisition of firearms through illegal means. During this period of time (which is to say the late eighties and early nineties), all of Du Plessis’ actions relevant to his amnesty application surrounded the underground organization he helped to create.

At the start of his hearing, the advocate which was present asks him to recall his background as a preamble to the crimes he ultimately committed. Mr Du Plessis speaks of his tumultuous childhood, his mother’s suicide and the profound impact his overbearing father and his extreme political views had on his upbringing. He mentions that his father was a

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<sup>10</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/amntrans/pretoria/54888.htm>

member of “Blanke Bevrydingsbeweging”, a white liberation movement, and that he himself attended meetings of this movement with his father in his youth. At a certain point in time, the BBB (as Du Plessis calls it) was outlawed by the South African government (even before the democratic transition) and it subsequently became an underground organization. After matriculating, being part of a failed underground organization in Namibia and serving time in the military in South Africa, Du Plessis attempted to create his own organization with people who shared his political vision. He was scared that black citizens and the “Communist monster” would overthrow the whites in the country and that he had some sort of duty to combat this injustice, seeing as whites were at the top of the evolutionary chain according to his views.

The militaristic, steadfast and cold-hearted Mr Du Plessis described by the amnesty applicant himself at the start of the hearing completely changes in character by the end of it. The social worker connected to the prison in which Du Plessis served time in 1994 recounts how the “feelings of guilt which they were dealing with in respect of their offences, came out prominently in my talks with them and remorse which they expressed were genuine”<sup>11</sup>. Du Plessis explains that this change came about during his time in prison when he converted to Christianity – “The feelings of guilt which wracked me, the feelings of reproach about the people who had been killed, all those negative emotions towards other political parties and other races which I had experienced, all those things I am released from by getting to know Jesus Christ.”.

Although the sincerity behind Mr Du Plessis’ testimony is indeed palpable, the jarring nature of the juxtaposition between the hatred and contempt this man felt toward other races and his new, peaceful dogma would be notable to even the most optimistic of readers. However, this is not to say that Mr Du Plessis does not understand the gravity of his past actions. This example simply serves to illustrate the truth-telling nature of the TRC’s Amnesty Hearings. Furthermore, a witness who used to be romantically involved with the aforementioned Mr White claims that to believe such a total reversal of views would be “unrealistic”. To her, persons such as Mr Du Plessis may revert to his extreme political views just as easily as he found God. Indeed, Du Plessis does come across as a damaged, insecure

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<sup>11</sup> Mrs J Theron speaks not only of Mr Du Plessis, but also of a Mr Van Wyk in this context. The reason behind the omission of Van Wyk and his apparent feelings of guilt is due to the lack of his presence during this specific hearing.

individual who simply requires an idea and institution to devote his life to in order to give himself the illusion of a higher purpose (whether he finds this in a white supremacist political group or religion). This case also serves to show that the uncomfortable nature of the hearings was vital to their purpose – to allow a platform for multiples “truths” to come together in the same space, even if they clash.

Psychologist Sarah Maria Kotz prepared a report on the next amnesty applicant to be discussed, Mr Benzien<sup>12</sup>. So as with the previous case, we have a third person (a medical arbiter of some sorts) giving a truth about the applicant and what he feels. Mr Benzien worked for the apartheid government in terms of security and was accused of severe and violent misconduct including the torturing of witnesses in search of evidence and proof of guilt. Unlike with the case of Mr Du Plessis, Mr Benzien does not give his own testimony. Instead, we rely on the opinion of Ms Kotz to deduce what his possible mindset might be and what he was feeling at the time of the hearing.

Ms Kotz describes at the hearing, with direction from the line of questioning given to her by the advocate present, how initially Mr Benzien thought his past actions were justified. Mr Benzien “felt that the reasons why he was doing it actually justified the methods because he believed he was saving his country from serious terrorist threats. He believed he was protecting people from bombs in shopping centres etc”. However, Ms Kotz is of the belief that Mr Benzien’s conscience was indeed touched by the terrible nature of his past transgressions, whether he wanted to admit so or not, and that this part of his psyche eventually made its way to the surface as time went on. Along with “the additional stress of knowing that once he testifies everybody, including his wife and children, would know what he had actually done”, Mr Benzien’s conscience seemingly led to adverse effects on his health (leading to, for example, a broken back).

Mr Benzien’s case brings forth arguably one of the most notable conversations of the hearings:

*ADV DE JAGER: Something else which I would like to know is this, does one try to do away with the unpleasant things in your past by means of your subconscious?*

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<sup>12</sup> [https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/amntrans/cape\\_town/54672.htm](https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/amntrans/cape_town/54672.htm)

*MS KOTZ: I think a person's mind is such that you actually have a saturation point and you can only absorb so much information because it is unpleasant and then it gets blocked out. It's a human tendency to deal with something which you have done wrong or something that is unpleasant so you then rather forget about it, especially if you feel guilty about it.*

*ADV DE JAGER: Is that your diagnosis of what happened in his case, that he actually was sweeping these aside, these things that he wanted to block out?*

*MS KOTZ: Yes that's the way I see it.*

Why would someone such as Mr Benzien apply for amnesty if he continued to believe that his actions, even when charges were laid against him for crimes against humanity, were justified? The most obvious yet pessimistic answer would be that he simply asked for forgiveness in the most legal and bureaucratic sense in order to receive pardon for his crimes. Indeed, Mr Benzien's case was so notable that it has been mentioned by other authors writing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Albie Sachs (2017) recalls how Mr Benzien cried on live television on a different day of the hearing after being confronted by a former ANC member whom he had waterboarded when he was part of the apartheid government's Security Branch. Benzien was seemingly simultaneously repulsed by his past actions and moved by victims' willingness to allow him an opportunity to carry on with his life by telling the truth of what he had done at the hearing. This case serves to show an incredibly salient question surrounding white guilt during the TRC process – if not guilt, what emotion is there among these white citizens, whether complacent or actively malicious in their actions? The answer is denial. In the case of Mr Benzien, there was a deep psychological component to his denial. To him, denial was a coping mechanism which eventually failed to keep his conscience suppressed and led to him having an emotional breakdown in front of the entire country. However, denial to others may mean a denial in the literal sense of the term – a fundamental disagreement about whether apartheid was morally reprehensible as an institution, disregarding perhaps more visceral acts of violence and injustice. It seems unlikely that restitution can take place under such forms of denial. Although catharsis was seemingly an outcome of Mr Benzien's case, an apology can ultimately only be accepted if

the actions being apologized for are deemed reprehensible and regrettable by the offending party.

In Subsection 23 of Volume 5 of Chapter 9 of the TRC Final Report, the story of Nicholas ‘Oupa’ Links and his reconciliation with the Jonga family is recounted<sup>13</sup>. In the late eighties, Links defended his home against a gang of youths who were attacking his house, resulting in his daughter getting hit in the head by a rock. A shot fired from his gun ultimately cost the life of one of the aforementioned youths, Matan Jonga.

Links was working for the police force at the time. According to the text, he felt “extremely guilty” not only because the victim was so young (Jonga was 21 at the time) but also because his superiors at the police station “congratulated” him for his first murder “and offered further lethal weapons and one hundred rounds of ammunition” as reward for this accomplishment. Links’ guilt ultimately led him to leave the town in which the incident took place, the memories only compounding the extreme guilt which plagued him. He did eventually return years later, however, and was apparently “well received by the community”.

On two separate occasions Links expressed guilt and remorse for what had occurred and had specifically asked for forgiveness from the Jonga family – once after a human rights violations hearing he attended and once more at a meeting organised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission between the affected parties. During the latter event, a member of the Jonga family acted on behalf of the family to offer their forgiveness.

The case of Links’ guilt differs from the cases previously mentioned, not only due to the form of how the information is relayed to the reader. The reader is merely informed of crucial information (how Links felt, how the Jonga family responded to Links’ request for forgiveness etc.) from a third-person point of view in an almost storytelling tone. The case also highlights the difficulty involved in reconciliation, even on a person-to-person basis. At the meeting between Links and the Jonga family facilitated by the Commission, nearly all those present were left in tears by the end of it. Not only were both Links and the family of the victim affected by the other party’s immense suffering, but it was a platform for these individuals to express their heartache as well. The representative of the Jonga family who came forward to offer Links forgiveness was especially reluctant to do so as she did not wish

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<sup>13</sup> <https://sabctr.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter9/subsection23.htm>

to be in the position of representative for the entire family. Furthermore, she offered “that the matter could not be completely resolved in such a forum and that a meeting of the elders of both sides of the family should be called”. It is at this point where Ramose’s (as mentioned in Van Marle, 2017) “Christian theological model” gains some credibility, as “The clergy at the meeting suggested that a reconciliation service be held, culminating in a communion mass and community feast”. This is not at all what the representative of the Jonga family had expressed earlier as a solution or a means to achieve some sort of reconciliation and emotional relief. Furthermore, the morally abhorrent behaviour of Links’ compatriots in the police force is a notable feature of the text. This is not because it is uniquely cruel, but because it seems to have been common behaviour of white individuals involved with governmental security. Although as reader one tends to gain empathy for Links’ situation, as it comes across as if he did not agree with the behaviour of his superiors in celebrating his taking of a black life, questions of complacency may sneak their way into the mind upon reflection. Surely Links must have known the political and moral calibre of his compatriots in the police force. The only time we as readers are aware of that Links stood in opposition to their feelings, however, was when it involved him directly. Finally, it is questionable what Links’ motivations were behind repeated requests for forgiveness from the victim’s family. Although it may seem like a rather impossible endeavour to discover people’s true intentions in these TRC processes, it is difficult not to imagine Links as a man suffering direly from his own conscience who was desperate to seek relief from this pain (instead of his main priority being to ensure that Ubuntu is re-established between himself, the family and the community through his actions and words).

In the same volume and chapter as the previous case, section 38 (titled “Reconciliation and individuals: registering one’s individual commitment”) can be found<sup>14</sup>. After the opening of several “Registers for Reconciliation” across the country in 1997, contributors were allowed the opportunity to express their regret for their contribution and complacency towards the apartheid regime via letters and internet messages.

One contributor had the following to express:

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<sup>14</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter9/subsection38.htm>

*I can only say I chose not to know. I chose the safety of my own comfort over the pain of knowing... I raised my children with privilege, whilst those around me were deprived. I am so deeply sorry! And the opportunity to express this regret and offer apology does not unburden me. This privilege allows me to reach even further into my soul to express the remorse that I feel. It impels me to seek in my own small way to repair the damage to our people and our land caused not only by 'perpetrators', but also by us, the bystanders, in the tragedy of our past. It impels me also to rejoice in the present freedom to build a new and great South Africa.*

In this subsection it is described how this forum for people to express the “the regret and contrition they felt for past wrongs” came about because the public asked for such a platform, although it had previously been discussed informally by some Commissioners. Not only did many people submit messages, but some “were accompanied by donations to the President’s Fund for Reparations”. The above message from an anonymous contributor also highlights this wish for repairing actions to accompany the expression of regret. Without reparation, even on the individual level, guilt over the injustices of the past may remain. In other words, the subject remains “unburden[ed]” even when remorse has been expressed.

Besides questions of whether white South Africans used certain platforms provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as means to relieve themselves of their guilt, reparation after horrific acts of injustices can seem to be “impossible” at times. The emotional impact of what is deemed to be irreparable societal harm is discussed by authors such as Caflisch (2020). This phenomenon may lead white subjects to attempt to victimize themselves in order to deal with the intensity of their guilt. However, the optimistic willingness of some white South Africans to add their part to reconciliation and healing South African society is expressed by this subsection (although it may be rather idiosyncratic).

The aforementioned anonymous contributor closes their entry thus:

*It's not too late – yes, I could have done more in the past, could have been more courageous. I regret that I didn't. But now there is a new opportunity to commit to this*

*country... to build respect for human rights, to help develop the country, to make the ideals enshrined in the constitution real.*

The term “guilt” is often mentioned in the TRC Final Report and the same sentiment is expressed throughout it – apartheid has “left a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge”<sup>15</sup>, South African citizens need to “transcend”<sup>16</sup> this legacy and that there is a need for a “moral and spiritual renaissance”<sup>17</sup> which will transform guilt into social responsibility. It is clear that the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were aware of the phenomenon of guilt more broadly, although white guilt is never mentioned specifically, and its presence would paralyze any progress for South Africa politically, socially and otherwise. Furthermore, the overall message of the Report indicates an awareness of the necessity for negative emotions such as guilt to be transformed into or utilised to enact meaningful change (although it is never specified how this is to be done).

The TRC Final Report also makes direct reference to many kinds of individuals who may have experienced guilt at that time and for what reasons. Those who rebelled against the apartheid government often felt guilt regarding the effect of their actions on those close to them<sup>18</sup> and those who had given in to providing the police with information under circumstances of duress or violent torture felt guilt for betraying their comrades<sup>19</sup>. According to the Report, these instances of guilt are also important to take into consideration and that South Africa could not move forward with such intense negative feelings still being harboured by some of its citizens.

However, by far the most important text in the TRC Final Report needed to understand the relationship between white guilt and reconciliation in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Subsection 21 of Volume 5, Chapter 4 – “White Communities/Conclusion”<sup>20</sup>. Shockingly, even as the main subject of the text surrounds the impact of apartheid and the TRC on white communities, the crimes (and subsequent guilt) of ANC-affiliated individuals are still mentioned. It is also stated that perpetrators who “viewed

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<sup>15</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter9/subsection33.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter9/subsection33.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume1/chapter5/subsection13.htm>

<sup>18</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume4/chapter10/subsection14.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume2/chapter3/subsection11.htm>

<sup>20</sup> <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter4/subsection21.htm>

themselves as defenders of their nation” acted in a manner which “appeared justified in what they viewed as a war context”.

The apologetic nature of the text notwithstanding, the following quote underscores the most important finding to be gained from an analysis of the TRC Final Report – those involved with the functioning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were aware of the vital need for the proactive participation of the white community in the process toward reconciliation and also recognize the overall failure of white citizens in doing so:

*The absence of white South Africans at the Commission hearings has been disappointing. If true reconciliation is to take place, white communities will have to take responsibility and acknowledge their role as beneficiaries of apartheid. The consequences of this lack of participation are likely to perpetuate the polarisation of South African communities and further obstruct processes of reconciliation.*

This does not mean that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission knew of the absence or existence of white guilt and its role in reconciliation, but this does prove that the TRC was aware of a certain missing component that was required to effectively institute justice. Indeed, there is an inequality still palpable in South Africa today and “the polarisation of South African communities”, in their own words, persist. Was the TRC unsuccessful at providing what was necessary to facilitate a path from guilt to reconciliation or was the guilt and subsequent desire for reparation never there to be utilized to begin with? Despite the remorseful tone of the text (as well as the manner in which the TRC was carried out more broadly), it does indicate that TRC resigned themselves to this failure – a failure which they place not upon themselves, but the white South Africans who did not participate in their planned processes of forgiveness or supported the vision they had promoted of the new South Africa.

## 5. Discussion

It would be unfair and unscientific to make a broad claim about what white citizens felt in South Africa at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the Amnesty Hearings prove, it was a mixed bag. However, it is notable that all white individuals did not feel the same amount of guilt, if any. The subsection “Reconciliation and individuals: registering one’s individual commitment” that was previously discussed describes how some white citizens felt as if the TRC was a tool used to punish white South Africans instead of a tool of reparation. One white individual who attended a workshop held by the Commission was quoted as saying that “somebody has to be punished and this is where our Afrikaners had to take their punishment”.<sup>21</sup> Various such “explanations” (one must be wary of using the word “excuses”) are employed by white South African citizens in order to mitigate their guilt or simply to justify what the apartheid regime had done. It is not uncommon to hear phrases such as “We didn’t know what was going on. We were being fed propaganda by the government.”, “It was only a few bad apples, such as those in the police, who harmed black people” and “It was the older generations who created and perpetuated this system. I was too young to understand what was going on and to contribute to the injustice.”.

Furthermore, there seems to have been a notable fear among white citizens (especially amnesty applicants) to speak about their role in apartheid and their knowledge of injustices which had occurred because they felt as if everything and anything may be held against them in the future. In this mindset, a reversal of roles may be observed where white individuals paint themselves as victims as a defence mechanism against accepting the awful reality of their guilt, their contribution to the system of apartheid and the subsequent responsibilities which now rest with them as a result. This phenomenon is best explained by Caflisch (2020). Although Caflisch’s work focuses on white individuals who identify as liberal in their political orientation, it seems highly plausible that the “paranoid-schizoid” state of mind can occur independently of political orientation. When white guilt paralyzes the individual experiencing it, they may suppress it and are therefore not able transform it into behaviour or actions that are useful in the process of reconciliation (Caflisch, 2020). Another conclusion may be that this paralyzing effect occurs within both white individuals who identify as

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<sup>21</sup> <https://sabctr.c.saha.org.za/reports/volume5/chapter4/subsection21.htm>

conservative politically and white individuals who identify as liberal conservatively and that it simply manifests differently.

We can deduce from the analysis of Amnesty Hearing transcripts and the TRC Final Report a list of possibilities regarding the nature of the relationship between reconciliation and white guilt in the South African case:

1. There was a lack of white guilt due to a disagreement surrounding whether apartheid as a system was truly morally reprehensible and this deficiency could therefore not have aided reparation. It may have even acted as a barrier toward efficient and sufficient reconciliation.
2. White guilt was indeed present, but was disguised by a refusal to accept responsibility and a projection of victim status on the perpetrator group by white South Africans as a psychological defence mechanism. In this case, white guilt could also not have aided reparation and the aforementioned “schizoid-paranoid” state of mind was a harmful factor in the process of enacting meaningful change.

Notwithstanding what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did manage to achieve, it failed to adequately guide white South Africans toward reconciliation and instead focused on the cases of a few white individuals who committed unjust acts as well as offending members of the African National Congress. By employing this strategy, the TRC did not address the responsibility the average white citizen had in regards to apartheid. That being said, if point 1 accurately describes the circumstances of the time, even if the TRC did attempt to highlight the responsibility of white individuals who did not commit violent crimes, doing so would have been futile. Apologies must be backed by a recognition of wrong-doing along with the desire to enact change and this aspect of reconciliation cannot occur when white citizens deny the reality of apartheid as well as the reality of their own emotional state. In the TRC Final Report, the TRC’s disappointment in the lack of participation by white citizens is indeed noted. It may be worthwhile to consider if it was the moral responsibility of the TRC to call upon the white citizens of the country or whether it was the duty of these citizens to put aside their own psychological grievances for such an important purpose and the critical need for the transition. However, it is the institutional aspect of white guilt and the TRC which is under investigation for the purposes of this research.

The failure of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in utilizing and addressing white guilt is a contentious possibility also because of the debate as to what it was initially aimed to achieve. Albie Sachs (2017) emphasises the importance of addressing atrocities to get extreme sources of pain out of the way in order to “reach a proper historical analysis of the structured and institutionalized injustices” (p.32). He goes on to say that the deeper, more enduring transformations which were required should come about via voting and the subsequent functioning of the new Parliament (Sachs, 2017). However, no consequent policies or public measures were instituted to address the responsibility and guilt of the average white citizen. This does not bode well for the TRC’s defence against accusations that it hurriedly doled out amnesty with little consideration on their impact on reconciliation in a broader sense. That being said, one cannot really criticise the TRC for not achieving something it was never meant to.

Karin van Marle (2017) is heavily inspired by Judith Butler in *Jurisprudence after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and emphasizes Butler’s concepts of “grievable” and “livable”. These concepts are important to consider in terms of the success of the TRC in its ability to foster reconciliation. For a life to be grievable, it needs to be determined to be worth grieving if lost. For a life to be livable, individuals need to live free from negative feelings such as revenge (on the side of victims) and guilt (on the side of perpetrators). It is debatable whether the “truth” the TRC cultivated both during the TRC hearings and afterwards contributed to a society in which citizens have “grievable and “livable” lives. Regardless, it is vital to establish the possibility for discourse and for individuals to express their knowledge, even if the way they view South Africa is in opposition to the heterogenous truth TRC maintains. However, “To merely reject the workings of the TRC as a failure in totality in a way subscribes to totalising theory, to realpolitik in the strictest sense of the word” and doing so would be unhelpful (p.56, Van Marle, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

A worthwhile topic of study for future research may include the role of women in reconciliation, particularly in the case of South Africa. One of the most salient criticisms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the omission of women in its processes. The aforementioned “Christian theological model” proposed by Ramose (as cited in Van Marle, 2017) criticises the fact that it was two clergymen (albeit one black and one white) who were appointed to lead the Commission. This emphasis placed on Desmond Tutu and Alex Boraine excluded women and certain communities from the TRC and the Constitutional precedent it set for the future societal relations of South Africa. Van Marle (2017) notes how the work of Louise du Toit on the phenomenology of rape “reveals how not only women, but also a certain knowledge together with women previously excluded have not been addressed or included by the workings of the TRC” (p.50). According to Du Toit (as cited in Van Marle, 2017), the TRC failed to provide “a new starting point in which women could be present as embodied beings, political subjects and citizens” (p.50) and links the continuance of horrific rates of sexual violence in South Africa to women’s incomplete citizenship in the country.

The lack of focus on the possible gendered aspect of guilt does omit insight into the relationship between white guilt and reconciliation. Furthermore, the transcripts of the Amnesty Hearings as they were found in the Truth Commission Special Report website were already translated into English by translators who were present at the hearings. It is reasonable to assume that certain nuances were omitted in these translations, which may have led the subsequent analysis of the hearings to be incomplete or not sufficiently rigorous. The diverse nature of South Africa which is so fundamental to the country’s DNA as the oft-quoted “Rainbow Nation” lends itself to be a valuable opportunity for insights in the field of reconciliation, but it also may complicate studies in which researchers are not properly acquainted with the appropriate context and understanding that is necessary. Those interested in researching this field should be aware of this danger. As was previously mentioned, political identification may be a strong indicator for white guilt. By studying the transcripts of the Amnesty Hearings and the TRC Final Report, it was not feasible to take this factor into account. Lastly, it is crucial to point out that simply because an amnesty applicant did not utter the word “guilt” during their hearing, that does not indicate that they did not indeed feel some sort of guilt for their actions.

Guilt can be a rather elusive phenomenon to study. The nuances which underscore it (for example, the fact that a person may deny their guilt as a psychological coping mechanism) require further study as an important aspect of guilt in their own right. As per the current study, the research was sadly bound by this simplification for the sake of drawing preliminary conclusions surrounding the relationship between white guilt and its relationship with reconciliation in the case of the TRC. This is why further study in terms of the TRC, white guilt and reconciliation in South Africa (particularly in terms of quantitative research and through a psychological lens) would be highly valuable to the field of transitional justice as a whole.

White guilt was present during the TRC process and the Amnesty Hearings, as well as the country as a whole during the time of the transition. Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed the most widely known and severe cases of atrocities, the debate surrounding amnesty being too readily given to applicants has not been resolved and will likely never be. The question of whether the TRC, as nearly the sole tool for reconciliation used by the ANC government, did enough to address and utilize white guilt for effective reconciliation depends on how significant levels of white guilt were at the time. Although the research does prove that there were at least some instances of white guilt and the TRC acknowledged the existence of guilt within white individuals, more work is required on white guilt in South Africa in the context of the democratic transition as well as in a more contemporary context. Insights such research would provide are key to better understanding ways in which past injustices may be effectively addressed for a better future. Although this work in itself did not attempt to investigate the present problems South Africa as a country is facing, as well as the ways in which we have arrived at this point, it is crucial for researchers to be asking questions about the impact of the TRC. Today, South African politicians are pointing to different groups of people and organizations and utilizing them as scapegoats. Only through thoughtful policymaking and by exploring (and perhaps challenging) the different “truths” held by South African citizens can the country move forward.

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