

# [dis][re] locations of whiteness

Rachel Collett | SOMAD and *CriSHET* talk  
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“I’m not sure South Africa is ready to talk about whiteness” – these were Prof. Nyoni’s reservations about being asked to facilitate this talk, just days after Adam Catzavelo’s racist rant went viral on social media – one more symptom of an underlying problem. I had proposed to look at how white people, people socialised as white, in South Africa, could respond to the critiques around whiteness that have been raised strongly in the last few years. I now propose to do this by looking critically at how white bodies have been depicted in my own paintings and those of white South Africans in the canon of post-apartheid “high” art, because these show a response to feeling implicated/ashamed. Having done this research, I have been able to see similarities in these artists’ works and a body of work I begun in 2015 – so I am going to show that body of work while unpacking the contexts and concepts that have led me to critique it. I’ll then look at the works of well-known artists that to some extent have informed my own thinking in ways that need to be re-examined.

The Fallist movements have highlighted the visual symbols of white power that remain in the universities, the eurocentrism of the teaching curriculum, the paucity of black academics, as well as the issues of the inaccessibility of the university to the majority of South

Africans. Whiteness, as defined by Raka Shome, is a “power –laden discursive formation that privileges, secures, and normalises the cultural space of the white Western subject” (in West and Smidt 2010:10). Whiteness as a normative power-laden discourse constructs the university as an enabling environment for white bodies to move in and be in.



I want to borrow Sara Ahmed’s idea of “use” here.

In a lecture titled *The Institutional As Usual: Diversity Work as Data Collection* (2017), she says:

Some objects are made in order to be used. We might call these objects designed objects. What

they are *for* brings them into existence. A cup is made in order that I have something to drink from; it is shaped this way, with a hole as its heart, empty, so that it can be filled by liquid. We might summarise the implied relation as “for is before.”

At this prompting, we could think of the fact that this university was built by the apartheid government and was intended to further its ideology. Ahmed continues to say (ibid):

However even if something is shaped around what it is for, that is not the end of the story...Use can correspond to intended function, but use doesn't always correspond to intended function.

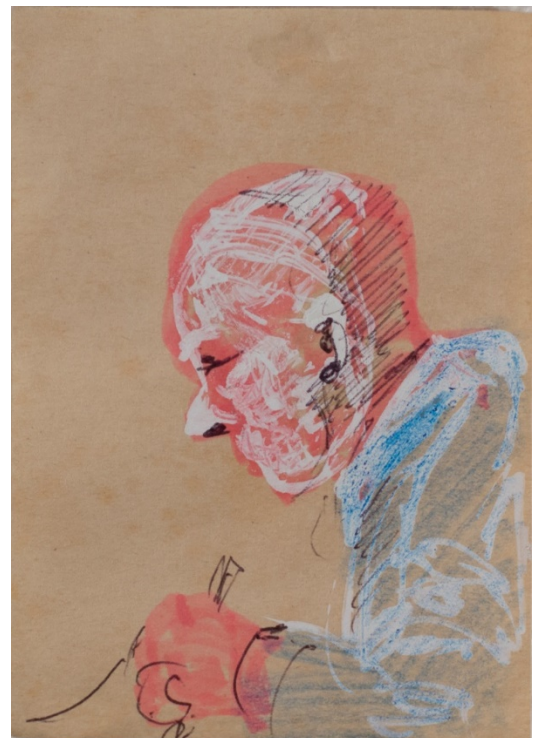
She notes that the possibility for re-use can come afterwards, although we are “used to thinking of possibility as precedent” (ibid). She argues that, to quote (ibid):

...intended functionality can mean who something is for, not only what something is for, and this means something can be used by those for whom it was not intended.

In our context, when talking about whiteness, Ahmed's image of a path is particularly relevant. She says (ibid):

Use can involve comings and goings. Take the example of the well-trodden path.

The path exists in part because people have used it. Use involves contact and friction. The tread of feet smoothing the surface- the path is becoming smoother, easier to follow. The more a path is used the more a path is used. How strange that this sentence makes sense.



Ahmed goes on use the metaphor of a path to illustrate how habit

becomes ingrained  
(ibid):

A path can appear like a line on a landscape, but a path can also be a route through life. Collectivity can be acquired, as direction – the more a path is travelled upon the clearer it becomes. And a path can be kept clear, or maintained. You can be supported by how a route is cleared.

Heterosexuality for instance can become a path, a route through life, a path that is kept clear or maintained, not only by the frequency of use, and the frequency can be an invitation, but by an elaborate support system. When it is harder to proceed, when a path is harder to follow, you might be discouraged. You might try to find another route. A consciousness of the need to make more of an effort can be a disincentive. Just think about how we can be dissuaded by perpetual reminders of just how hard something would be. Deviation is hard. Deviation is made hard.



Thoughts, feelings; they too have paths. Within empirical psychology, the path is in use as a way of thinking about thought. John Locke, for example, once suggested that thoughts “once set agoing, continue in the same shape they are used to, which, by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy and as it were natural” ([1690] 1997, 531). Used to: that which is wearing. A history of use is a history of becoming natural.

A garment becomes more attuned to the body the more the garment is worn. I will return to the well-used garment in due course. The example of the lock and the key suggests that it is through use that things become easier to use. Less force might be required to get a key through a lock. This is how acts of use are the building blocks of habit: if we take habit as our unit, we would miss these smaller steps, which accumulate to take us somewhere. If use takes time, use saves time; use makes something easier to use, less effort is

required to complete an action.

So what these movements did for me as a white academic was to disrupt my use: to make me uncomfortable within the university space. They displaced my knowledge base as the sufficient norm, they displaced my body from the office and classroom, from the staff kitchen and from the library. I experienced a sense of powerlessness, of feeling like chaff to the wind. What this adds up to for me is/was a discomfort – an unsettledness, a settled and unsettled crisis of identity, a threat and an invitation.

My research is informed by these experiences of being unsettled (resettling), of feeling implicated in the same old habits of use, in taking the path well-travelled while talking about the other path, of feeling shame but not knowing what to do with that feeling and how to affect change. How do we take those feelings and make them useful? How can shame and guilt that comes from complicity be productive, be used to clear new paths?

The African-American philosopher George Yancy says about studying whiteness that “[w]hile guilt may result, this is and should not be the aim of the field, that said guilt can be deployed productively; it needn’t result in an emotional dead-end” (2016: 11).

Perhaps the question I am asking could be re-phrased as such: how could I allow these feelings to work on me, not so much so that I can change things as so that I am changed, not so much so that I become productive as that I become re-constituted as a self. The work of seeing oneself clearly becomes the work of

becoming a self who can see more clearly.

But even to talk about how white people can deal with their whiteness seems to be running some risks, which are worth unpacking. What I now propose in this talk is to unpack some of these risks, and then to talk about how these have shown up in attempts to make about whiteness.

One of the principal goals expressed by writers in the field of whiteness studies (such as West and Steyn) is to destabilise such normative whiteness by making this discursive formation “visible” (West and Smidt: 2010; McEwan and Steyn 2013: 3). This process of making visible is complicated in South Africa, in that there is at once a heightened consciousness of race and the privilege that may attend it, and arguable, a constant suppression (or sublimation) of this knowledge, referred to by Melissa Steyn as the “ignorance contract” (in McEwan and Steyn 2013: 3). It has been pointed out that taking whiteness as your research object can, in fact, risk re-centering it because you are focusing on the feelings and reactions of white people, so these take center stage, even as they are being critiqued. Steyn and Conway point out that one can fetishize something through critiquing it, and significantly this is linked to where whiteness is associated with skin colour – they note that the white body becomes the object of both censure, and also of desire (2010: 287). So re-centering white experience is one risk (perhaps this is why I’m attracted to this, because it makes my

experience important while acknowledging the problems?). Another risk highlighted by Leon de Kock (2010: 15), is essentialising whiteness – assuming that all whites have the same lived experience, disregarding gender, class, religious belief and other shaping influences – so it is important to bear in mind that whiteness (or whiteness) is the discursive power formation, and does not refer to the total lived experience of white people, but to something that they have a relationship to and need to examine.

Other risks are discussed by Yancy (2016: 11):

1. White scholars may have careerist motivations and wish to remain marketable.
2. Linked to this – there is a risk that one engages intellectually but not through action and not in one’s own life – the field could become “over-intellectualised”. He uses the metaphor of a set of concepts to be mastered like calculus.

He makes the point that the study of whiteness must remain an active political process (ibid). Another risk particular to this time is that my modelling myself as a reformed or reforming white or exceptional white (something that I will inevitably try to do, to some extent), in posturing in this way I ask you to neutralise anger that may exist towards me and by extension all white people. Then there is the question of “seeing yourselves clearly”<sup>1</sup> as white – de-

decolonial process. Can this process of seeing oneself clearly be related to the attempts to make whiteness visible, so that white people can

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<sup>1</sup> In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes about the need for colonized people to see themselves clearly. Mbembe (2015) takes this phrase up as a way of framing the

centering whiteness: is this a possible task for the white person?

So given these risks, why do I think that this is something I should attempt? For two reasons: firstly – it does not have to be either “white talk” or silence. I want to believe that.

Secondly, I think there is the potential for white people to “do their own work” and reach other white people, but that this does not have to, and perhaps should not, happen in isolation or in enclaves.

Yancy offers some way to engage with these risks, writing (2016: 11):

The radical way in which I conceptualise the field would entail whites to become un-sutured from the ties that bind them to structures of power, to undergo experience of crisis and productive disorientation, where the normative structure of whiteness fails as a place of shelter. What are whites really prepared to lose?

He argues that we need of a form of Bildung – a growth narrative, that allows for vulnerability in white people, but at the same time he says that this regrowth and becoming reborn is linked to “narrative disorganisation” where our old stories of ourselves are disrupted (ibid).

So that leads me to a barrier to letting these experiences change one, which is what is termed “white talk”, which is the kind of talk that we as white people engage in as a defence mechanism when

confronted with inequality and racism, whether personal or structural.

White talk consists of the following kinds of phrases: That happened a long time ago and things are different now; everyone is capable of racism; I give a lot to charity, I am good to my domestic worker, I’m putting her children through school; I don’t say racist things; Ok if I can’t say that, tell me what to say (this one I see myself in); things are difficult of us too.

Alison Bailey summarises white talk like this: when confronted with white racism towards black people in conversation, white people tend to dodge the problem (detour, bypass, distract, or “flutter” around it) in a number of ways – by focusing on their own goodness in one way or another (being defensive), by exceptionalising themselves, by saying things are in the past, by feeling victimised or silenced and not interrogating that, by wanting to be told a “rule” rather than to understand “what do you want me to say?”; by generally trying to avoid feeling discomfort (2014: 38).

She adds to “white talk” by extending it from just verbal talk to body language and physicality (2014:42). Sometimes our bodies might contradict what we say, for instance when talking about something that shows how you are good, you might be really tense and this shows up the defensiveness of the speech act (ibid). The author encourages examination of the “work” that words are doing (often to shield or protect us from fear and anxiety and maintain our positive self-image and

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also learn to see themselves more clearly as part of this process?



sense of safety or “invulnerability”) (2014: 43). It is interesting that she keeps returning to the idea that fear, insecurity and anxiety are the drivers of defensive, or “fluttering”, “white talk”. She, like Yancy, recognises that the ability to be hold vulnerability, as opposed to be defensive, is important in really hearing what is being said about race.

I wondered if I could see “white talk” in my paintings and the work of others?

### *The white child as innocent*

One common experience that white writers and artists go back to in trying to make sense of themselves is childhood, and these works seem to be common in the years just before and after 1994- perhaps as white people were making sense of what the change meant for their identity.

In her first solo exhibition, the sculptor Claudette Schreuders engaged imaginatively with memories of her own childhood (fig.2). In this work, white figures form a circle, and are playing a game with a doll. The doll is a racist stereotype of blackness- the Golliwog doll. Are the figures adults or children? This is somewhat unclear because all of the artist’s figurines are represented with child-like proportions. So the figures could reference both adults children. The title, *Speel-speel* (Play-play), refers to the idea of play, and of imitation (as in it’s a play-play gun), and so the activity can be interpreted as a form of game that foreshows reality. Through childhood and adult “play”, a sense of a (false) white superiority is reinforced through

exercising control over a (symbolic) black body.



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One reading of the work is that white children are socialised into racism which then continues in adulthood. Does this make the children innocent and make

<sup>2</sup> Claudette Schreuders. *Speel-speel* [Play-play] 1996. Jelutong, English lime, avocado and poplar wood, enamel and oil paint. 60 x 70 x 60cm.

<sup>3</sup> Claudette Schreuders. *Mother and Child*. 1994. Cypress and American basswood and enamel paint. Height: 91 cm.

their (later/adult) racism something that they cannot help?

The figures in the image seem to be unconscious of the violence of their play – their expressions are strangely blank – and the tension in the work is that the audience can see the violence that the people acting it out cannot.

Schreuders' *Mother and Child* (fig. 3) image again may serve to comment on the way that white power was naturalised. This could be further unpacked. The white child, even as an infant, has a level of nascent privilege and power over the black care-giver. Again, the work may suggest that the white child is scripted into privilege and power, and perhaps into a naturalised sense of entitlement to these.

There is a similar tension Penny Siopis' depiction of childhood in *My lovely day* (fig. 4). In this work old home school footage of her mother as a child playing in the 1950's is screened inside a makeshift cinema. The text over the screen are memories of the kinds of things Siopis remembers her grandmother saying. One is invited to reflect on the attitudes towards being in Africa espoused by the adult and on the sheltered childhood of the children, to whom these attitudes are being passed down.

Brett Murray's installation on Robin Island called *Guilt and Innocence* (fig.5 and 6) recreated a mantelpiece or wall display of family photos inside a prison cell at Robin Island. The point I assume

the artist was trying to make was to juxtapose his privileged and protected childhood with the reality of the political violence that gave him that privilege. In one of the



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<sup>4</sup> Penny Siopis. *My lovely day* (still).1997. Single-channel video, sound 21 minutes 12 seconds. Edition of 3 + 1 AP.

<sup>5</sup> Brett Murray. *Guilt and Innocence* 1962-1990. 1997. Installation detail.

<sup>6</sup> Brett Murray. *Guilt and Innocence* 1962-1990. 1997. Installation detail.



photographs the artist's childhood body is wrapped in the old South African flag. He is literally covered, protected, by apartheid, and clearly a beneficiary, but there is also a sense in which he is constrained, held close by the flag, immobilised, made static.

All of these artworks frame white childhood as innocent even while they try to unsettle it. Is there a sense that collectively, there is attempt to say – I was conditioned this way, so I do not know how to be different? I am basically good, there is just this sort of unfortunate unconscious bias?

Could this be a form of the “fluttering” of white talk that Bailey talks about?

The relationship between the self and the social world is shown as straight-forward or naive. The expression on the children's faces is blank, or happy. The relationship between the child and the land is also shown to be natural or untroubled. The white body in relation to nature finds its naturalised space in the innocence of childhood no less in these works than in more sentimental paintings or photographs of children on the beach.

But my own experience of being a child body in relation to the land and to black bodies is not so straightforward.

My experience was that the racism of white adults was quite visible to me as a child. I remember feeling, as a child, complicit in those acts of psychological violence and dehumanisation, in the sense that I felt ashamed, and felt like a coward, and that feeling of shame comes from a knowledge that, at some level, you are choosing to be silent, and not get into trouble yourself, even if that choice is a

constrained and difficult one. These choices become habits, become paths.

So the white child, I'd argue, is not, or not always, as unconscious as these works want to persuade us. Applying Shirley Tate's theory that unconscious bias is actually not really unconscious, but rather a conscious buy-in to a system that maintains one's relationship to power (2016), and linking this to habit and use, a habitual use of, I wonder if one cannot read these works as a sort of evasion of responsibility through the appeal to the idea that deeply conditioned bias becomes a naturalised default. What the artists may lead us to think is that the path well travelled is the inevitable path, and this may blunt our desire for those more difficult pathways that create new habits.

In this way, these images may engage us in a form of “fluttering” or evasion of ongoing responsibility through their appeal to their beginnings in innocence when they had no choice but to be complicit.

Are guilt and shame productive in these works? Partially – in that they may make the viewer more aware of the shaping influence of racist views on children. However, the risk of focusing on racial attitudes as inherited is missing the way that they are knowingly maintained. Is this a lost opportunity to be vulnerable to confronting oneself as an agent, not a pawn, in this?

### *The adult white body*

One attempt to unsettle the adult white body has been to make the body abject. In Kristeva's sense, abjection is a human reaction of horror and disgust, that may

express itself as turning away, vomiting, or other physical reactions that cast off something like an open wound, a corpse, or refuse. We turn away from these things with a bodily reaction, she suggests, because these things are profoundly threatening to us on some level. They threaten the person's sense of bodily integrity. To see a corpse reminds us of our mortality, to see blood outside our bodies reminds us that we are vulnerable and could be wounded, or even split open. We are reminded that ourselves are pourous, decaying, mortal things, and so we try to redraw our boundaries and keep ourselves intact: "...refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 1984: 3).

In a broader sense, abjection is a response to things out of place, things that cross boundaries and borders: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1984: 4).

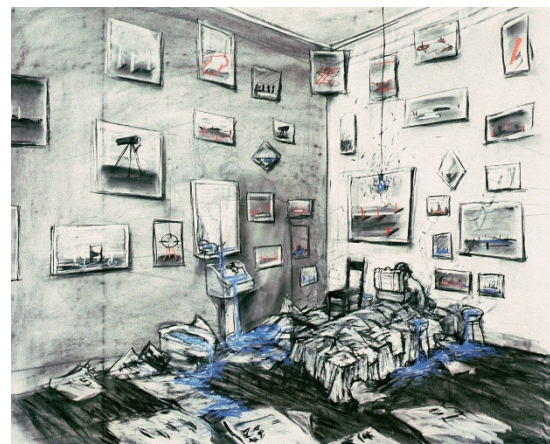
Artists engaged with abjection in many ways. White artists in South Africa have created images of the adult white body that are abject in the sense of being downcast, grotesque, and shame-filled. Good examples of these bodies are William Kentridge's many self-modelled protagonists in his films of the early 1990's (fig 7; 8; 9; 10; 11).

One sees these characters, based on the artists own physicality, naked, leaking

water through the body, overwhelmed, eating to excess, lying in hospital beds.



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There is a telling moment in the film *Felix in Exile* when one of his self-modelled characters looks through the bathroom

<sup>7</sup> William Kentridge. Still from the film *Felix in Exile*. 1994. 35 mm film. 8.43 min.

<sup>8</sup> William Kentridge. Still from the film *Felix in Exile*. 1994. 35 mm film. 8.43 min.

<sup>9</sup> William Kentridge. Still from the film *Felix in Exile*. 1994. 35 mm film. 8.43 min.

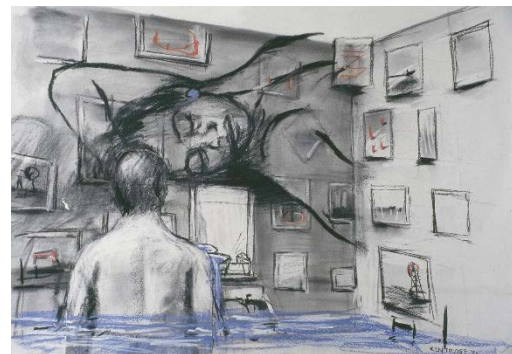
mirror and looks at Nandi, (perhaps his lover?), through a looking device. What I think the artist is aiming for is a moment of mutual recognition, but although they are able to see one another, they are not able to be together and he remains in the desolate room with her outside. The character, Felix, is overwhelmed by the sight he is seeing, of black men murdered, with blood spilling from them. His abjection is a reaction to that confrontation. He is not able to process it and it overwhelms him.

In racial terms, white selves are constructed in relation to those they other. So abjection, as a casting-off process, as rejection or refusal to look, is what maintains boundaries between white selves and others and keeps the white self intact. True recognition may involve an unravelling of the self.

Bailey suggests that white people, when confronted with their racism, engage in distancing mechanisms (white talk) in order to maintain the unity of the self (2014: 47). She argues that we have a self-image that is relatively unified, that we are good people, and that this breaks down when we are confronted with the ways in which we are not good, with the multiplicity of ourselves, which is difficult to handle (ibid).

While Kentridge's protagonists experience grief and a dissolution of their old selves, his films ultimately serve to secure the white subject a continuing central place in the narrative – the mourning figure is ultimately one for whom the viewer is asked to feel

empathy for as he mourns his complicity and trapped-ness and isolation. This form of shame seems to me to have been part of a process, but only a step – otherwise it becomes the emotional dead-end and re-centres whites as victims of their own privilege and political actions. It is particularly telling that the viewer is led to empathise much more with Kentridge's character in the film, than the black bodies, taken by the artist from news photographs. So these are real people, whose deaths become less important in the film than the grief of the white protagonist. Their pain is used as the fuel for the narrative about the difficulties of being white.



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<sup>10</sup> William Kentridge. Still from the film *Felix in Exile*. 1994. 35 mm film. 8.43 min.

<sup>11</sup> William Kentridge. *Drawing for the film Stereoscope*. 1998–99.

Charcoal and pastel on paper  
78 x 123 cm.

In contrast to Kentridge, whose fictionalised alter ego is overwhelmed by the triggers of abjection (bleeding corpses), and so becomes unravelled, Peter van Heerden's performances in the 2000's position his own white body as that which is cast off or rejected, as a raw open wound (figs. 11 and 12). He himself becomes the abject, that which we as audience wish to reject and look away from to preserve our sense of self. He performs naked, covers himself in blood and other fluids, allows his body to be symbolically wounded and killed, and enacts the performance of crimes (such as rape). The white male body becomes the thing that the audience must find revolting and in this way the process of othering is inverted for white audiences—assuming that the audiences on some level relate to Heerden, it is their bodies that become the problem that is difficult to look at. It is important to note that Heerden performs in spaces where white heterosexuality is normative, such as the KKNK. His work has been interpreted as infiltrating the laager of white masculinity in order to question it (Lewis 2016). His work has also been interpreted in terms of the abject (Balt 2009). My reading is that van Heerden inverts the process whereby black bodies have been abjected (cast off, put aside), turning that process on to himself and in this way performing an attempt to own the dark, violent aspects of whiteness instead of psychologically transferring them on to other groups. His performances could be read as a form of healing ritual in which white bodies re-integrate the violence they have denied.

Shame and guilt in this work are owned and taken on by a white body. Van Heerden is clear that this is part of his intention (Nunns 2007: para. 4):

He contends that South Africa's current social ills are the residue of colonialist rule and attributes the problems facing South Africa's blacks to the dehumanizing effect of centuries of racist policies. "We desperately need to unpack all of this stuff and examine it," he said, "because it's never going away".



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<sup>12</sup> Peter van Heerden  
*6 Minutes*. 2006. Performance.

<sup>13</sup> Peter van Heerden. *Bok*. 2006. Performance.



Dean Hutton's more recent controversial work *Fuck White people* (fig. 13), could also read in terms of abjection: Hutton has created a suit emblazoned with the phrase Fuck white People, a phrase that came from the T-shirt worn by Wits Student Zama Mthunzi (Pather 2016: para 8). Hutton wore this suit to various events, taking the message on their own body into various spaces. The suits repeated message calls for white people to be done violence to, to be cast off, to be revolted against, to be abjected, but there is also, to me as a viewer at least, a level of serious but humorous play in the performance, that comes from the repetition of the message and the fact that it has been made into a suite worn with gold shoes- this to me signalled a level of critical engagement with the message and made we want to understand the premise of the art piece better, and why a white person would wear it.

When it was displayed in the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town, this suit was hung up next to wall paper with the same message, and accompanied by gold shoes. The abstract next to the work explained the premise. Hutton contextualises the message on the T-shirt: the front had said "Being black is shit" and the back had read "Fuck white people". The message had context to it, and this context was lost in the media reporting of the T-shirt, which just focussed on the second half of the message (in Pather 2016 :9). Hutton's statement references the "structures, systems, knowledge, skills and attitudes

which keep White people racist which are to be rejected confronted and dismantled" and invites fellow whites to "learn to fuck the White in you, too" (in Pather 2016: para. 7).



14

By performing this message, Hutton makes whiteness into the thing to be "thrust aside in order to live". Hutton's gender queer body also crosses boundaries and resists classification, thus posing a threat to heteronormative gender-binary thinking. In the context of wearing this suit, their body becomes a messenger, an active agent, and their work is a call, not only to confront oneself with violence of whiteness, as in Kentridge and van Heerden's work, but to

<sup>14</sup> Dean Hutton. *Fuck White People*. 2015. Suit and wallpaper. Photographs by Retha Ferguson. Images accessed:

<https://10and5.com/2016/08/18/creative-womxn-dean-hutton-on-using-love-to-disrupt-starting-with-the-self/>.



deploy one's own body strategically and bravely.

In 2015, I made a series of paintings as part of an invitation to contribute to an evening of "readings" curated by Abri de Swart as part of his ongoing project called Ridder Thirst – (a thirst for getting rid of) – when we were asked to reflect back on our relationship to a specific place that we had in common, which was Stellenbosch, the town and university. I later expanded that project to be reflect not only on Stellenbosch, where I spent a number of years as a student, but also on the other places that I have been formative for me: where I grew up ( then Grahamstown, now Makhanda), my grandfather's farm in the karoo, and PE where I live now. I projected these images, and told stories about my experiences in these places alongside them in a kind of fragmentary way.

But why I am included these images here is because I can now see certain resonance in my own work with the kinds of representation that I have been critiquing – with the nostalgia for a so-called innocent childhood, and the use of signs of abjection – leaks, unravelling, stains, and bleedings out. I am not going to attempt an in-depth critical re-reading of my own images in this forum, but the works of unpacking how whiteness is presented in the works of those who have influenced me has helped me to, as a starting point, recognise the tendency to white talk, even as we try to examine whiteness critically.

In closing I'd like to return to offer a few of those phrases that have stuck with me from this research:

The one is from Yancy, who advises white people to "tarry", to stay longer and to dwell with the voices of people of colour (2016: 13).

The other is from Bailey(2011: 14), who challenges white people to shift the question: what can I do, which reads, how does all of this affect me, how do I make sense of it, what is my role here – a question that is very normal and I have asked myself many times. But she challenges us to see vulnerability as strength, and to ask, rather than what can I do, what can be done?

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