Truth & Lies

Jillian Edelstein
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Abstract
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mrs Mzimela, Dirk Coetzee, Singqukwana Malgas, Hennie Smit, Exhumation at Boshoek

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Jill Edelstein has been actively working in editorial and advertising portraiture for more than a decade. In the foreword to her recent publication, *Truth & Lies*, she writes:

I became a press photographer in the Johannesburg area at the beginning of the 1980s. Growing up white in apartheid South Africa entitled one to massive and instant privilege. It led to complicated emotions — among them anger and guilt. Photography was a way, for me, of channelling those emotions. At the time I believed that by pointing a camera at security police, or at Casspirs (armoured personnel carriers) cruising the townships, or by documenting clashes between protestors and riot police I might help to change the situation in our country. (*Truth & Lies*, Granta, 2001, 12)

Having established her roots in photojournalism, Jillian left her native South Africa in 1985 to enter the more competitive European editorial field, initially working for the *Sunday Times* in 1986 as a freelancer. She has since established herself as one of Britain’s foremost portrait photographers for which work she has received a number of prestigious awards including the Photographers’ Gallery Portrait Photographer of the Year Award, The Kodak U.K. Young Photographer of the Year Award, and a Portrait Award at the Association of Photographers Annual Awards (all received within a six month period between 1989 and 1990). 1989 also saw the creation of a project titled ‘Affinities’ — a photographic series representing working partnerships in London and New York. This appeared as a regular photo slot in *The Saturday Telegraph Magazine* for eighteen months in 1993 and 1994 under the title ‘Soul Mates’ which culminated in her first solo exhibition in 1994 at The Special Photographers Gallery in the UK and at The Bensusan Museum in South Africa. In 1999 Jillian was overall runner up in the Polaroid European Final Art Awards. She has exhibited at The National Portrait Gallery since 1989: her work has been included in ‘Women by Women’ 1989, the show on ‘Comedians’ 1994, ‘Faces of the Eighties’ 1995, the Kobal Awards exhibition 1996, ‘Women by Women’ 2001, ‘Business Partnerships’ sponsored by NPG/British Telecom & Management Today, 2001, and is featured in the

In 1997 she won the VISA D’Or in Perpignan for her work on The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Jillian spent four years covering the hearings in large cities and small towns throughout the country. Of this experience she observes:

I knew the contradictions and the controversies that raged around the Truth Commission right from the start. But nothing prepared me for the emotional world within the community halls and courtrooms in which we observers witnessed the testimonies and confessions of the victims and perpetrators where truth gave way to lies and lies gave way to truth.

I often pondered over why people agreed to be photographed. For the victims, I guessed it might have been because they wanted to reclaim their dignity, their past, or to feel acknowledged for the part they had played. Largely it seemed to me they were grateful to have had the opportunity to share their experiences and to make public their painful stories. Perhaps this process of being in front of the camera was part of that ritual. It was harder to comprehend why the perpetrators offered themselves up so willingly for a portrait, often proudly, as if they had played some heroic part in South Africa’s history. (Truth & Lies, 12–13)

Her work on the TRC culminated in the book Truth & Lies published by Granta in October 2001, and was exhibited in that year at The Association of Photographers Gallery. It is Granta’s first photographic publication, edited by Liz Jobey and designed by Peter Dyer, with co-editions being published in France, USA and South Africa. The photographs and text that follow have been reproduced from this book.
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

'Outsiders have been sentimental about the South African process, as they have been about Nelson Mandela, the rainbow nation and so on. Everyone likes to watch catharsis, especially if it is someone else's. For insiders, citizens of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation was not a spectacle; it wasn't entertainment. ... No one who was there was entirely sure that such a bitter catharsis was always a good thing for the country or the individuals to go through. There is an African proverb: Truth is good, but not all truth is good to say.

'As Alex Boraine, deputy Chairperson of the TRC, makes clear in his recent memoir, the impetus for the creation of the Commission in 1993 was not just the desire by the majority to unmask apartheid, but also to deal with the legacy of violence in the African National Congress liberation struggle itself. ...' There were three phases of the process: first, victims testified in vast public hearings carried on South African television and radio; then there were amnesty hearings in which perpetrators testified and were cross-examined in order to receive amnesty; finally there were specific sectoral hearings, on the judiciary, business, the media. The process began in 1995, and the amnesty portion of the process was concluded in June 2001.

... ‘Nothing proved more controversial, inside or outside, than the amnesty provisions of the South African model. For outsiders, the victims’ claims to justice were being sacrificed for the sake of conciliating the white power structure. For many insiders, especially victims, the amnesty provisions were asking a society of victims to display a scarcely human forbearance. What outsiders often failed to understand, and insiders knew in their bones, was that the basic reasons for amnesty were political. Amnesty was the precondition for a peaceful transition of power.

... ‘[because] there has been a Truth Commission ... an essential taboo has been broken: the moral legitimacy of the liberation struggle has been subjected to scrutiny, and if the justice of the struggle has been reaffirmed, the crimes committed in the name of the struggle have been identified. It would be an impermissible lie to believe that all is permitted a people who have suffered ultimate injustice. The TRC may have made it impossible to give voice to this lie. As Jillian Edelstein’s memorable photographs show, the truth is imperishably lodged in the hearts and minds of those who were there’ (Michael Ignatieff, ‘Introduction’, Truth & Lies, 15–21).
Mrs Mzimela

JE diary entry, 7 June 1998:

Bheki Ntuli, a local trade union official from the Empangeni area in Natal, took me to meet three families who had testified before the Truth Commission. One of them was the Mzimela family. Mrs Mzimela told me that in October 1994 her relatives had gathered at her house for a big party. It had been raining. In the distance she had heard the sound of people singing. Suddenly a group of Inkatha ‘impris’ — warirors — burst in. They opened fire. Her husband and three other men, including a local cattle herder, her cousin, Lucky, and her nephew, Sipho, were shot dead. Mrs Mzimela went into her house and emerged with an old Lion matchbox. It contained the bullets she had picked up after the shooting. (158)
Mrs Mzimela, with the bullets that killed her husband and two of her relatives, near Esikhaweni, KwaZulu/Natal, 7 June 1998
Dirk Coetzee

Dirk Coetzee was the first commander of the special ‘counter-insurgency’ unit at Vlakplaas. He has ordered the deaths of many ANC activists, including Griffiths Mxenge, a human rights lawyer, who was stabbed forty times at Umlazi Stadium in Durban, and Sizwe Kondile, a young law graduate from the Eastern Cape, who was interrogated and beaten then handed over to Coetzee who had him shot and his body burned. ... In August 1997 he was granted amnesty for Mxenge’s murder. At the TRC hearing in Durban, Coetzee was asked what he felt about what he had done to the Mxenge family. He said he felt:

... humiliation, embarrassment and the hopelessness of a pathetic, ‘I am sorry for what I have done’ .... What else can I offer them? A pathetic nothing, so in all honesty I don’t expect the Mxenge family to forgive me, because I don’t know how I ever in my life would be able to forgive a man like Dirk Coetzee if he’d done to me what I’ve done to them. (110)

JE diary entry, 26 February 1997:

I follow Dirk Coetzee’s detailed instructions down jacaranda-lined Isipingo Street. For a few short weeks every year, this dull brown town is turned purple by a mass of exquisite blossom. My first impression is of how heavily Coetzee has incarcerated himself. His Rottweilers are snarling, and the barbed wire around the metal gates glistens in the sunshine. Tea is served in china cups on a floral tray. So civilised, I think, holding my cup and saucer. I notice that wherever Coetzee goes, the leather purse which hangs off his wrist like a little handbag goes with him. ‘It contains a gun,’ he informs me. ‘I take it everywhere, even when I go to the toilet.’ (110)
Dirk Coetzee, Pretoria, 26 February 1997
3. Singqokwana Malgas

Singqokwana Malgas was an ANC veteran who had been imprisoned on Robben Island for fourteen years for his anti-apartheid activities. He had originally been sentenced to twenty-two years but, represented by Nelson Mandela, his sentence was reduced on appeal. While he was in prison, Malgas’s house had been repeatedly firebombed and one of his sons had been killed. He suffered a stroke, partly as a result of his injuries from torture, which left him confined to a wheelchair.

When he first appeared at the Truth Commission hearings in April 1996, Malgas avoided describing his ordeal at the hands of the security police. But under questioning by Alex Boraine, the deputy head of the Commission, he finally gave details of his torture. He described the ‘helicopter method’ in which a mask was put over his face to suffocate him, and then a stick was inserted behind his knees from which he was hung upside down. He broke down during this testimony and tried to cover the ‘shame’ of tears with his hands. Archbishop Tutu, who was presiding over the hearings, was so moved that he, too, began to weep. Malgas told the Commission that he would like to tell his torturers, ‘If we were only going to get freedom over our dead bodies, I’d like to make them aware we’ve got freedom’. He died in 1999. (130)
Singqokwana Malgas, New Brighton township, Port Elizabeth, 13 February 1997
Hennie Smit's eight-year-old son, Comio, was killed in 1985 by a bomb blast in the Sanlam Shopping Centre in Amanzimtoti, Natal, just before Christmas. Four other people were killed and over sixty injured. Three MK members were arrested and sentenced to death. It was claimed that the bomb had been planted in retaliation for a raid by the security forces on an ANC base in Maseru, Lesotho, which had killed nine people. The three MK members were executed.

Hennie Smit spoke very movingly about how, after one of the bombers, Andrew Zondo, had been hanged, he had gone to visit Zondo’s parents to console them. He told the Truth Commission that at first he hated all blacks for killing his son, but now he had come to realise that his son was a hero of the struggle who died so all South Africans could be free. Mr Smit became an outcast in his own white community of Pretoria:

I told newspapers that I thought my son was a hero, because he died for freedom ... he died in the cause of the oppressed people. A lot of people criticised me for this. They thought I was a traitor and they condemned me. But I still feel that way today.

Mr Smit lives in Pretoria where he buried his son. He breeds doves and repairs broken television sets. (204)
Henni Smit with his dove, Snow White, Pretoria, May 1997
Exhumation at Boshoek

JE diary entry, 17 March 1998:

In November 1985 three young ANC guerrillas were killed by security police and taken to Abraham Grobbelaar’s farm at Boshoek to be buried. Thirteen years later the crowd wait patiently in the hot sun amid the stench of death and the uncertainty. Instead of three corpses, the grave yields up twelve, sealed inside black plastic bags. The unidentified bodies are numbered A1, A2, A3 and so on. The digging stops when the sun begins to set. The gruesome task would be resumed the following day. (212)

Joyce Mtimkulu, who discovered that her son, Siphiwo, had been shot and detained, poisoned by the security police, released, kidnapped again and finally killed, seemed to speak for many when she told me, after listening to the testimonies of those responsible,

‘at least now we know what happened’. (Edelstein, ‘Foreword’, 13)
Exhumation at Boshoek, near Rustenburg, Northern Province, March 1998