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"*I Have That Clip Here!*": The spectre of digital media in the construction and narration of life histories

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Title: "*I Have That Clip Here!*": The Spectre of Digital Media in the Construction and Narration of Life Histories

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This article draws from a collection of oral history interviews about the 1996 Worcester bombings in South Africa to examine the interface between digital media and the ways people remember and narrate their lives. It reflects on the case of one individual – whose sister died of injuries sustained in the bombing – who was singled out across various interviews for her unwillingness to forgive the perpetrator, and thus for her resistance to the Worcester community's public pursuit of reconciliation in subsequent years. In the testimonies, she was frequently identified with reference to a now-viral video clip – footage from a Victim-Offender Dialogue in 2013 – during which she angrily lambasted the perpetrator. Working with this clip as a gravitational centre, the article explores how the circulation of the video clip has mediated both how the event in question is remembered, and how its protagonists are constructed – consistently

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reactivating their interaction and recalibrating its significance in the broader narrative of the bombing, and of the reconciliation process that followed. Through probing the entanglements of individual and collective memory with representations in public history and audio-visual media, the article highlights the need for oral history methods that respond to the mediation of memory as digital practices increasingly seep into social life across the globe.

Keywords: oral history; digital media; public history and collective memory; post-apartheid; reconciliation discourse

Introduction

On Christmas Eve in 1996, a racially motivated bombing in a shopping centre in Worcester, South Africa, killed four people and wounded nearly 70 others. Considering that, at the time, the "new" South African era of post-apartheid peace and reconciliation had ostensibly been ushered in, the blatant hatefulness of the attack was particularly shocking and devastating. Over a decade later, the story of this bombing resurfaced in the public consciousness when a group of survivors went to meet one of the perpetrators, a man named Stefaans Coetzee, in prison — opening the door for a wider, more substantive engagement and reconciliation process to take place between the Worcester community and Stefaans. The process hoped to transform that first instance of interpersonal reconciliation into a broader reckoning with the structural and socio-economic legacies of apartheid that remained the source of ills and inequalities in Worcester decades after the advent of democracy. Initially, my PhD research set out to merely look at this process: to understand how it came about, what kind of forces it had to contend with, what it meant to its different stakeholders (in the context of their individual histories and life experiences), and what it ultimately achieved. As any scholar

would know, though, research rarely abides by the "merely" and, indeed, although I approached the oral history interview encounters with defined questions and interests, the testimonies produced some unexpected observations and questions about the practice of doing oral history itself, and about working with interviews in a time and world where our daily lives are increasingly intertwined with digital media and technology.

As I spent time in Worcester, interviewing victims, survivors, and other community members and stakeholders, a clear and consistent narrative emerged around the bombing and the subsequent reconciliation process, that featured the same series of key events and the same cast of key characters. Notably, several interviewees made mention of one particular individual – a woman named Neliswa Busakwe – whose sister, Sweetness, had been working in the supermarket where the bombing took place and later died as a result of her injuries. In most of these interviews, Neliswa was singled out for her vocal unwillingness to forgive and reconcile with the (now) remorseful perpetrator, a view which she expressed to him directly during a public Victim-Offender Dialogue (VOD) in 2013.[2] At this event, which was attended by more than 1000 members of the Worcester community, a number of people were invited to share their diverse perspectives on the issue of forgiveness. Neliswa was one of those invited and, in this moment, she shared that she was not prepared to forgive Stefaans, and confronted him, saying, "*I hate you. I hate you*."

These words triggered the questions on which this article turns, for they were quoted to me in interview after interview – including by interviewees who had not even attended the VOD that day, and so had not witnessed the exchange for themselves. Neliswa was also not the

[2] The Victim-Offender Dialogue (VOD) is an initiative that was launched by South Africa's then-Minister of Correctional Services, Mr Sibusiso Ndebele, in 2012. The purpose of the VOD was to provide a restorative conflict resolution process that actively involved the victim(s), offender, and community affected by an offence, in order to more holistically address the harm caused by it, and to ultimately support the offender's successful rehabilitation and future reintegration into society. The Worcester case became the flagship of the initiative.

only person on record as being either unwilling to forgive Stefaans, or indifferent to it all. So why, then, does she – and this interaction with the perpetrator – occupy such a prominent place in the collective memory around the bombing and the reconciliation process, as it emerged through the interviews? There could be several factors at play, but I venture to suggest that the answer came in my own interview with Neliswa in 2022, where towards the end of our interview – as she was explaining how her eventual decision to forgive Stefaans was key to helping her forget the ordeal – she referred to the event in a particular way:

> I don't think about him. I don't think about him. I even….there was that…that video of that VOD. It just went viral this year. Then the other girl asked me, "*Neliswa, where were you then? And you were* fat*, yoh!? What was going on here?"* Excuse me, wena. He opened his phone- her phone. Then I said, "Oh, that's VOD there." "*What was going on?*" Ndithi [I said], "I will tell you another day." "*Hahhh but…!*" "Serious, it's simply because I forgot – I will tell you another day. Another…I will tell you, 'This and that and that and that and that was happening.'….But ah, it's just because she was like, "*I want to know. I want to know*." Then I told her. 'Hayi, this was that…like this started '96…' and all that and all that…up until now.
>
> I'm surprised this goes viral now. I…I have that clip here.

While she related this story, Neliswa had taken out her phone to search something, and at this point she turned it to show me as a video started playing,

> "'*I am Stefaans Coetzee. I accept responsibility for the Worcester Bombings of '96. I accept the blame for the pain, the suffering, and losses that you, the survivors of the*

> *bombing, had to endure because of my actions.*' This admission of guilt and apology opened up old wounds for victims of the Christmas Eve bombing…"[3]

The clip was an eNCA news report of the Victim-Offender Dialogue held in September 2013 that had been published to YouTube shortly after.[4] Just two minutes and four seconds long, the video opens with this recording of Stefaans reading an apology statement, after which a narrator briefly sketches the background of the bombing over footage of Coetzee – clad in his orange prison uniform and accompanied by Correctional Services officials – visiting the site of the bombing,

> *Coetzee, his adopted father, and two other men… planted two bombs at this shopping centre, in the hopes of killing as many black and coloured people as possible. Four died, and about sixty others were injured. 17 years later, Coetzee returns to the scene. At the time, he was disappointed that so few people had died. Now, he says, he sees the error of his ways.*

The clip then cuts to a tearful Neliswa, as she addresses Stefaans at the VOD,

> *But some refuse to accept his apology*.
>
> > "You have victimised my family so, so bad – I have no words to describe what you did, man. And for that I hate you. I hate you."

[3] Neliswa Busakwe, interview by Elizabeth Visser, 1 July, 2022, Zwelethemba Public Library, Worcester (South Africa). [01:13:25]
[4] The clip in question can be accessed at, "Convicted Worcester Bomber Says Sorry," (YouTube: eNCA, 2013). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QG6FGKbcf0

Finally, it cuts to footage of the audience singing, and an interview with another bomb victim, Belinda Ameterra,

> *Others felt differently.*
>
> > "I've decided to forgive Stefaans, in order for me to go on with my life, in order for me to get healing."

The moment in our interview when Neliswa played this clip struck a chord in my mind because I suddenly remembered that in my interview with this second woman, Belinda, a few months earlier, something similar had happened. Speaking about the VOD with Stefaans, Belinda said,

> We really forgave him. There is one, Neliswa……who said that she can't forgive him, she hates him.[5]

But when Stefaans was up for parole a few years later, Belinda highlighted how something must have changed for Neliswa, because she agreed to support his case. Belinda said,

> Neliswa…she changed like a hen with a golden egg towards him. She opened her heart towards him, where she had said……I don't know if you've seen that short clip? That video clip? Just now, I'll play it for you.[6]

She then paused to pull up and play a clip on her phone – that same newsreel of the Victim-Offender Dialogue. Looking back through other interviews with victims of the

[5] Belinda Ameterra, interview by Elizabeth Visser, 30 March, 2022, Hex Park, Worcester (South Africa). [00:46:53]
[6] Ibid. [00:55:45]

bombing and members of the Worcester community, it became quite remarkable that Neliswa's words at the public VOD figured in several accounts of the town's reconciliation process, serving as a kind of entry point or framing for others' own memories of, involvement with, or reflections on the experience. The way that the clip constructed Neliswa as an antagonist of the process – in contrast with Stefaans's "transformation" and the other victim, Belinda's, magnanimous response – was also echoed across the interviews and reporting around the event, which really got me thinking about the clip. References to Neliswa's public grappling with her sister's death were puzzlingly common, and uniform in the way they appeared in others' narratives – why? Was it solely to do with the horrific nature of her sister's death, or with the forceful emotion behind her response at the VOD? Or is there also a possibility that, as digital and audio-visual media on YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook etc. become so ingrained in our daily lives, the construction and circulation of media forms would impact on memory patterns, and ultimately on the construction and narration of life histories?

I found this question to be quite generative, for the fact that both Neliswa and Belinda not only referenced the eNCA clip itself in their accounts of the event, but insisted on playing it to me as well, and that several survivors and other stakeholders in the process could – and did – directly quote Neliswa's words from the VOD, points to an entanglement of individual and collective memory with representations in public history and digital media. This, in turn, suggests that the content and circulation of media forms may be shaping, dislodging, and restructuring memory patterns and, consequently, life history narratives as well.

The spectre of digital media

Since the origins of oral history as a discipline, technology has developed rapidly, and there have been vast changes in its functions and capabilities. Oral history literature has kept in step with these developments, engaging extensively over the last few decades with the impact of the digital turn on oral history methodology – on the ways in which the introduction of things like tape recorders, cameras, AI, etc. have transformed (and continue to transform) how interviews are conducted, transcribed, analysed, archived, disseminated, and so on.[7] Digital technology has thus radically changed how oral history can be recorded, saved, and shared, but it has *also* radically changed the landscape of making, storing, organising, and accessing memories.[8] As humans, we have long stored memories outside of our own individual bodies, but as more and more of our daily lives take place online, digital technologies can make memory public – social, even – in a whole new way.[9] Writing in 2005, Michael Warner observed that our lives are, "minutely administered and recorded, to a degree unprecedented in history" – how much more would this statement be true today?[10] And how might this development impact both on the construction and narration of life histories? In his seminal article from 2007, reflecting on the state of the oral history discipline, Alistair Thomson mused about the ways in which the digital turn was beginning to affect the field:

> I do think that…digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians – and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives – that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and

[7] See, for example, Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007); Michael Frisch, "Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006)., and Steve Cohen, "Shifting Questions: New Paradigms for Oral History in a Digital World," *The Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013).
[8] Pippa Virdee, "Histories and Memories in the Digital Age of Partition Studies," ibid.49, no. 2 (2022).
[9] Reflecting on the nature of memory in the digital age, Wang and Hoskins observe that, "Memory has become more externalized, dialogical, and transactive, yet at the same time, unwieldy, opaque, and inaccessible." Qi Wang and Andrew Hoskins, *The Remaking of Memory in the Age of the Internet and Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Alice Bell, "Memory in the Digital Age," *The Guardian*, 14 January 2012.
[10] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2005), 69.

> personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories.[11]

Since the publication of the article, digital technologies have worked their way into nearly every aspect of life – and, by extension, of oral history practice. However, the discussion within the discipline has primarily revolved around the logistics and utilities of the digital revolution, while, "what is still marginal in these discussions, and within the field more generally," as Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki point out, "is a reflection on…how this embrace of technology changes 'the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives,' as well as everything that comes afterwards."[12] Oral history concerns itself with both the *act of recording* as well as the *record* that is eventually produced. How can we account for the impact of technology and audio-visual mediations on the latter, for how the widespread incorporation of digital practices and audio-visual media forms into everyday life could transform how people remember and relate to the past, and how they narrate their life stories?

This article is an attempt to grapple with this interface between digital practices and audio-visual media and 'the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives'. Using the case study of the Worcester bombing, and the video clip of the VOD that features in numerous and variable ways across the interviews I conducted in Worcester, I argue in this article that the proliferation of digital media and audio-visual forms into so many aspects of daily life and social interaction changes both the texture of oral history testimony as a source, and the nature and demands of the analysis of testimony. The article reflects an early attempt to grapple with these issues and observations, in which I try to account for these changes using the metaphor of a 'spectre', suggesting that memories of past events can subsequently

[11] Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," 70.
[12] Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age: How New Technology Is Changing Oral History Practice," *The Oral history review* (2019): 95.

be conjured up, permeated, and haunted by their preservation and circulation in digital and audio-visual forms.

(1) conjuring

In Worcester, a phrase that popped up often during exchanges with victims and survivors of the bombing was the adage of, "forgive and forget", but Neliswa's anecdote of how a friend sent her the eNCA clip on WhatsApp – recognising her in it, and insisting on an explanation of what it was about – points to an almost *spectral* quality of digital media that may resist this 'forgetting'.[13] In this case, it is possible to imagine that the clip of the VOD hovers online like an apparition; a spectral presence in the ephemeral realm of the Internet, always ready to be conjured up by the right confluence of digital circumstances – whether that be a Facebook memory, a viral WhatsApp text-chain, or even just the mysterious workings of 'the algorithm'. When it comes to moments of publication and circulation, the Internet and other new media carry a different form of temporality to conventional texts – increasingly continuous, rather than punctual. The digital form, therefore, allows an audio-visual text (and the ideas it contains) to circulate and persist, "to continue quietly pulsing in the public domain, refusing to evaporate" until conditions align to conjure it into view.[14] Consequently, in the same way that a buried memory might ordinarily be triggered for a person by specific smells, sounds, questions, or places, the memory of the VOD could be conjured for Neliswa by a recording of her own face and voice – published to YouTube in 2013, but forwarded by a friend in 2022, asking, "Is this you? What is going on here?" Preserved within the digital sphere through this YouTube clip, the event – and all the sedimented layers of experience, memory, affect, and meaning that are attached to it – is not permanently archived away, but

[13] In terms of etymology. '*spectre'* comes from the root '*spek'* which means 'to look at, observe; view'.
[14] Carolyn Hamilton, Litheko Modisane, and Rory Bester, "Tracing Public Engagements in Visual Forms," in *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton and Lesley Cowling (Wits University Press, 2020), 55.

can be called in and out of view, forcing, as it does here for Neliswa, a reluctant revisiting of an incident she tried to forget.[15] Consequently, the widespread immersion of digital tools and the Internet into everyday actions (and interactions) could be said to make the past more noticeably *present* in the present than ever before.[16]

(2) permeating

Approaching the body of interviews that cite Neliswa's declaration of, "*I hate you,*" at the VOD – whether experienced or appropriated – through the metaphor of a spectre is also useful because it draws attention to the porousness of media and memory as they interact. The digital and audio-visual representation of the event (in the form of the YouTube clip) moves in and through the interviewees' own memories of it, speaking with – or over – them. In the Worcester case, extensive reportage and memory work has been engaged around the Worcester bombings – in various forms and mediums – and disseminated widely online. Thus, as accounts of the event have grown in number and variety, it is likely that by the time survivors were interviewed for my project, they would have incorporated other accounts in some way into their own understanding and experience of this event.[17] Not only that, but as my fieldwork in Worcester progressed, interviewees often knew coming into the interview that my research specifically revolved around their community's reconciliation process, and so it is not only possible but likely that however much my questions tried to avoid it, the content and framing of the narrator's life stories were calibrated to attend to those issues.

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[15] Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, "Cultural Memory in the Digital Age," in *Transnationalizing Radio Research: New Approaches to an Old Medium*, ed. Golo Föllmer and Alexander Badenoch (2018), 184; Carolyn Hamilton, "Archive and Public Life," in *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton and Lesley Cowling (Wits University Press, 2020), 125; Muff Andersson, *Intertextuality, Violence and Memory in Yizo Yizo: Youth Tv Drama* (Unisa Press, 2010), 71.

[16] David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, "Introduction," in *Mass Violence and Memory in the Digital Age: Memorialization Unmoored*, ed. David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 2.

[17] Jeffrey Shandler confronts many of these same questions in his research on working with Holocaust testimonies in the digital age. Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices* (Stanford University Press, 2017), 50.

Within this context, there was also perhaps an assumption that the personal narratives – as part of a collective undertaking – somehow bore the onus of offering more than an account of the interviewee's own life, and that it should include recollections of various people, and discussions of events beyond the survivor's own direct experience, in order to better represent the process as a whole.[18] In such a collective process, I would argue that the video has become a kind of gravitational centre – its framing has determined who the key characters are, and its form has kept the event alive in both the collective and individual imagination. The content and circulation of the clip has also mediated how the event is remembered. In each instance that it resurfaces over time, the video reactivates the interaction between Neliswa and Stefaans, recalibrating the significance of this moment in the broader narrative of the bombing and reconciliation process. For example, when it was first filmed, edited, and published, the moment was identified as significant for its deviation from the general sentiment of generosity and forgiveness that abounded around the VOD sessions, and so perhaps reflected an anxiety that Neliswa's attitude towards Stefaans would undermine the gains the community had made towards healing and reconciliation. But in the interviews years later, the moment in the video was often identified as significant because of its contrast with the present, in which Neliswa *has* ultimately decided to forgive Stefaans, and perhaps, in so doing, vindicated the reconciliation process?

Most of my interviews were recorded in early 2022, so it is worth considering – although it would be impossible to determine – how the narratives might have been constructed differently *before* the Victim-Offender Dialogue took place in 2013. What was the meaning of this moment when it first occurred? What were the vocabularies through which survivors

[18] Ibid., 47.

were making sense of their memories and experiences of, and roles in the bombing and reconciliation process, before the video clip was published and shared online? How, as oral historians, can we peel apart these "palimpsests of memory", developing approaches to testimony that render the accumulating layers of meaning and mediation visible?[19]

(3) haunting

In the Worcester case, these questions highlight the need to think about the role that the content and circulation of media forms like the YouTube clip play in "haunting" how the process should be understood and narrated by members of the broader community, to think about how the media framings of the event structure – and perhaps even dictate – the ways in which people speak about it. Here, I want to turn to a phrase that came up several times in my interview with Deon Snyman, who had been a key figure in conceptualising and driving the early work of the reconciliation process in Worcester. He said,

> I knew that there is a story here [in Worcester] that can catch the imagination, because it represents so many aspects of our South African history…and it could serve as a metaphor that people could see themselves in the story.[20]

[19] Ibid., 65.
On the struggle to dissect the constituent parts of an intertext, Muff Andersson – in an incisive study of intertextuality in the South African TV series, *Yizo Yizo* – laments that, "[t]rying to conclusively map intertextuality is rather like trying to capture samples from a huge, changing body like the sea." Andersson, *Intertextuality, Violence and Memory in Yizo Yizo: Youth Tv Drama*, 13. Here it is helpful to think of Michael Warner's suggestion that, "every sentence is populated with the voices of others…and is carried to whatever destination it has…by the channels laid down in discourse," which echoes the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, and which provides a productive framework to draw on here: for helping to see the oral history narrative as "tissue" – rich in the opacity of its absorption, quotation, and revision of other narratives. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 128; Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice A. Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 46.
[20] Deon Snyman, interview by Elizabeth Visser, 5 June, 2023, Goedgedacht Farm, Malmesbury (South Africa). [00:02:40]

The bombing in Worcester occurred in 1996, at a time in South African history when, through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the country had just begun to grapple with its violent history. But by the late-2000s, disappointment in the promises of the TRC and the post-apartheid political dispensation was strong and so perhaps this was why the Worcester story "caught the imagination" of the nation. The bombings, and the subsequent promise – and proof? – of the possibility of genuine reconciliation positioned the case perfectly as a *new* staging ground for the tropes of forgiveness and reconciliation in South Africa. It is possible that within this discursive framework, narratives related to the bombing have come to be grounded in and ordered around the outworking of "forgiveness". It is thus important to approach the oral history testimonies of the Worcester bombings alert to these dynamics. Did the force of forgiveness – framed in the video of the VOD as a yardstick for how victims were coming to terms with the impact of the bombing on their lives – inadvertently provide a specific grammar, with a "set of rules of formation" for speaking about the bombing?[21] I raise this question because there was an official insistence that the process was *not* centred around forgiveness, which was ultimately at odds with the prominence of forgiveness as a guiding principle around which the various oral history narratives cohered. Thus, it is worth reflecting on the role that the content, framing, and circulation of media forms like the YouTube clip may have played in "haunting" (or implicitly disseminating rules for) how the process should be understood, participated in, and spoken about.

Concluding thoughts

[21] Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Colin Gordon, Graham Burchell, and Peter Miller (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 54; Harry Garuba, "A Second Life: Museums, Mimesis, and the Narratives of the Tour Guides of Robben Island," in *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City*, ed. Noëleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, and Martin Hall (Routledge, 2007), 140.

In the oral history exchange, so much is contingent on who remembers, when, with whom, to whom, and how – a fact which highlights the significance of narrated life histories as *works* of remembrance (and of remembrance as a subjective and conditional practice), in which narrators are constantly revising their understanding of their lives, incorporating other narratives, and mediating external influences.[22] Ultimately, the interviewees' appropriations of Neliswa Busakwe's words to the Worcester Bomber at the Victim-Offender Dialogue into their own recollections, complicate afresh the notion that interviews might offer straightforward presentations of recalled experience. The multiple and variable citations of the eNCA clip demonstrate the extent to which memory is never "pure" or "unmediated". Rather, narrators are constantly revising their understanding of their lives, incorporating other narratives and mediating external influences – in the digital age perhaps more than ever before. With that in mind, when it comes to doing oral history, how can we approach testimony alert to these many and minute mediations? For me, in terms of thinking about the way forward – of "how do we do oral history" in the shape-shifting digital world – I certainly have more questions than answers. But this concept of a "spectre" is my early attempt to apprehend how media (re)shapes and (re)structures memory patterns – to offer a conceptual framework for rendering these accumulating layers in a narrative visible, by trying to account for the ways in which memories of past events can subsequently be conjured up, permeated, and haunted by their preservation and circulation in digital and audio-visual forms.

[22] Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices*, 84, 174.

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