



Apartheid Archive Project
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I speak as a white

Gillian Straker

Archives house the representations of the experiences and events that a society deems crucial to understanding its own history. Apartheid as an institution has fundamentally molded South African society in racially inflected ways. The Apartheid archives must of necessity therefore also be racially inflected. Whites largely occupied the position of perpetrators, bystanders, and/or beneficiaries in the apartheid state and stories from these positions need to be told. These stories need to be told not only as a matter of record, and to address questions of collective guilt and responsibility but in an attempt to understand the mechanisms by which ordinary whites came not only to internalize racism but to express it. Given that racism remains ubiquitous this endeavor has relevance not only for the past but for the present. This endeavor is painful and difficult as it requires taking on board unattractive and destructive aspects of the self. It requires going against an intuitive need to protect the integrity of the self and self esteem by disowning negatively judged aspects of the self through the deployment of various psychological defenses. This paper explores the difficulties involved in owning these aspects of the self and how this complicates the attempts of whites to come to terms with their pasts.