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University of Cape Town

THE FARM

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Declaration:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date:

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Gerhardus Robert, George Robert (junior), George Robert and Gerhardus Robert Stewart. (c. 1931: album)



Gerhardus Robert, Andries Hendrik, George Robert, Langley Charles and Victor Lesley Stewart. (c. 1967: album)



Gerhardus, Helena, George, Peter, Joyce and Mercia Stewart. (c. 1960: album)

INTRODUCTION

During the late 1880s Gerhardus Robert Stewart and his wife Alida Johanna Maria Stewart, second generation settlers from the Great Trek, bought a 250-hectare farm 20 kilometres southwest of Pretoria. During the next 100 years the farm became a working farm, and supported a chalk quarry.

The family grew and flourished and the land was passed down from generation to generation; from Gerhardus Robert Stewart, to his only son George Robert Stewart, to his five sons including my grandfather (the eldest) also Gerhardus Robert Stewart, and his brothers Andries Hendrik, George Robert, Langley Charles and Victor Lesley Stewart. The 250-hectare farm remained undivided in the testament of Gerhardus Robert Stewart, leading to a family dispute that resulted in portions of the farm being sold to a neighbour by three of the five Stewart brothers.

The remaining 99 hectares of land continued to be the home of my grandfather, his wife and my grandmother Helena Isabella Martha Elizabeth Stewart, and their five children, including my mother Mercia and her siblings Joyce, Pieter, George and Yolinda, the third and final generation to grow up on the farm. The lingering friction resulting from the sale of 151 hectares of the farm, however, finally led the two brothers (Gerhardus Robert and Victor Lesley) to sell their remaining land in 1979.

The sale of this land and the use to which the new owners put it changed the farm forever. While the buildings and the fields, the hills and

the river, the peach blossoms and the willows remain almost unchanged in appearance from the days when my mother lived there, the place has become invisibly, yet palpably and irrevocably transformed. The small graveyard, eternal resting place for my forefathers and mothers, is now no longer the only site to testify to those who lived and died on the land, and the Stewart family, their ties to the land still strong, can barely speak of the place they once loved.

This MFA project has been my attempt to represent this land and the meaning it holds and once held for my mother, her parents and grandparents. My strategy has been to act as curator, assembling 'the archive' the farm represents, and then finding a way of ordering the meaning that has flowed therefrom. In doing this I have had to, and wanted to, confront both an irrepressible attachment to an ancestral home and the ways in which land itself can appear changed, not by any physical alteration, but by the events that occur on it. In creating this project, I have attempted to resolve an irresolvable paradox – how to represent the past before the present. That this has proved, in this case in particular, to be impossible, has not rendered the attempt meaningless. Indeed, I believe and hope, it will raise in the viewer's mind the question of just how much we are able to see of what is before us that we do not already know, and how much the present can change the past.

Note: Photographs not taken by me have been attributed to their source. 'Album' indicates that they come from my family album of photographs. All images are photographs with the exception of the etching on pages 76 - 77.

CHAPTER 1 - THE FARM

Geboortegrond

O Boereplaas, geboortegrond! Jou het ek lief bo alles.
(Oh, farmland, cradle of my birth! You I love above all).
C.F. Visser

These opening lines of a famous Afrikaans song, probably best describe the emotional ties that some people, historically, have with their land. The Afrikaans notion of *geboortegrond* not only refers to a site as a place of birth, but also to land which is inherited and earned through the blood, sweat and tears of the forefathers. This idea represents a conflation of the notions of identity and the farm - reflected throughout the Afrikaners' history in literature, poetry, music and painting. No other country in world, for instance, dedicated an entire national anthem to the land – the subject of CJ Langenhoven's *Die Stem* (Nuttall & Darion-Smith 1996:150).

Antjie Krog gave the character (also her mother) Dot Serfontein the following words:

We all want to be buried on the farm, even if it is no longer ours. We are of it. That farm, that werf, that's what made us. I want to be back there when I die. I will give myself back to it – by secret means if needs be. We have no face without that farm. (Krog 2003:360)

Krog may just as well have been speaking my late grandfather's desire. Up until his death (6 April 2011) his mind, ravaged by Alzheimer's disease, nevertheless returned again and again to his family farm and his *geboortegrond*. No longer remembering the details of the sale and fate of the farm, he nonetheless realized that things had changed, and though he wished to return, he feared for his life. He would frequently murmur; 'ek gaan terug plaas toe, maar hul gaan my keelaf sny' (I'm going back to the farm, but they will slit my throat). At other times he declared as his final wish that his first (still) born child be exhumed from the farm

graveyard and reburied in Pretoria West Cemetery. In his final year, weakened by cancer and Alzheimer's disease, he twice attempted to find his farm. Only on his second attempt did he reach it. After an arduous journey of which some hours were spent on foot, my grandfather arrived on the farm and settled down on the farm stoep contemplating the two pine trees that he planted with his father on his fifth birthday. He had been driven to return himself to the land on which he was born and linger there one last time.

It is important to note, however, that my grandfather did not as much want to return to the farm as it is now, but as it was before he sold it. His was a 'reflective nostalgia'¹; a particular kind of memory that is characterized by a longing for a home that no longer exists, nor has, perhaps, ever existed (Dora 2006:11). Svetlana Boym identifies two types of 'performative nostalgia' based on the word's double roots. One, reflective nostalgia derived from 'algia', refers to the bitter sweet pain of loss and longing; and the other, restorative nostalgia, signified by 'nostos', refers to the desire to return to the original state of affairs (Boym 2001:41). Van Zyl states:

Reflective nostalgia lingers on remains of the past, in the reminiscences and silences of time and history as an intimate phenomenon. Especially in the reflective sense, nostalgia has always been characterised by its strong emotional attachment to place, affection for the homeland, or topophilia. (Van Zyl 2008:133)

My mother's memories reflect the same sense of attachment, love and longing for the family farm. Her memories are focused on the beauty of the landscape and are descriptive of the ruffling long grasses of the Highveld, the gentle swaying of the willows, the skies at dawn, the peach blossoms during spring, the peacocks in the poplar trees, the making of butter and buttermilk with her grandmother in the outside 'butter

¹ Nostalgia was coined as a medical term in 1688 by Johannes Hofer to describe a potentially fatal case of homesickness (Lowenthal 1985:11).

room, and the many family braais on the banks of the Hennops River. These memories cherish a child-like innocence that focus almost exclusively on the natural surroundings of the farm and are ignorant of all else. Through these selective memories that have been passed down to me, a subjective vision of the farm is represented. It is a vision of the farm as a paradise, sanctuary and haven, a place of belonging, unburdened by the troubles of the world.

The end of the family farm

In 1979 my grandfather sold his farm and it passed out of my family's hands. Even though the farm no longer belonged to my family, they nevertheless considered it their *geboortegrond* and their ties to the farm remained strong. That is, until they learned to which use the new owners of their farm had put it.

The name of my family's farm was Vlakplaas (Shallow farm). On 17 November 1989 the newspaper *Die Vrye Weekblad* published an article in which the C1 Unit² at Vlakplaas was exposed for operating a 'death squad'. From this moment on the name 'Vlakplaas', once conjuring the flat plains of the Highveld, with the willow leaves sweeping the flowing Hennops, became inescapably linked to horror, torture and the suffering of an untold number of victims. Only in 1996 however, was the full extent of damage inflicted by the C1 Unit revealed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Where my childhood was wrought with the remembered longing of my mother and grandfather for their family farm, in my adult life, and with the revelations of the TRC hearings and testimonies, my family and I have had to come to terms with the horror of what the farm became. The glorified vision of the farm that I had grown up with had become indescribably soiled.

Adams, in her inquiry on the selective use of memory of ex-residents of District Six argues that memory, trauma, and identity share a complex relationship. The forced removals exaggerated and intensified ex-residents' memories of District Six as an utopia (Adams 2002:4). In my family's case,

the news that their beloved farm had become a 'death camp', caused much distress to my mother and grandfather, and similarly (perhaps), intensified their sense of nostalgia and longing for the place they remembered.

During my first trip to the farm, with my mother clutching childhood photographs in her hand to ensure our access, Louisa Smit, wife of the caretaker of the farm, accompanied us. As she pointed out the place described as a 'Torture Room', my mother recounted her childhood memory of making butter with Ouma Poppie in what my family used to call the 'Butter Room'. It became apparent to me that it was no longer possible to preserve the warm tenderness of childhood memories, because the memories became horribly contaminated by images of torture that occurred in the same room.

This has become the challenge of my project: is it possible to represent the farm and the meaning that it once held for my family, with the knowledge of the suffering that subsequently occurred on this land?

Vlakplaas

In 1979 my grandfather sold his farm Vlakplaas - the name of which had for years been associated with the flat, peaceful plains of the Highveld - to the State Security Department. He did not know that it would become the headquarters of the C1 Unit from 1979 to 1991. Operating as a parliamentary hit squad, the C1 Unit captured political opponents of the government, tortured them and then either turned them, making them askaris³, or executed them.

Ten years later, when the progressive anti-apartheid newspaper *Die Vrye Weekblad*⁴ published the article (based on Dirk Coetzee's revelations) about the covert security unit operating from Vlakplaas (C1), the floodgates were opened. The story about Section C1 prompted more revelations from other policemen and army officials regarding the clandestine and often gruesome activities at Vlakplaas and other government institutions⁵. As a result of public pressure, the new state president, F.W. De Klerk, appointed a

³ The name 'Askari' was used for black (unofficial) police officers that worked as informers with the C1 Unit.

⁴ Jacques Pauw and Max du Preez, based on the revelations of ex-Vlakplaas commander Dirk Coetzee, exposed the covert activities of the C1 Unit in the newspaper, *Die Vrye Weekblad* in November 1989.

⁵ Alfred Nofomela, an askari based at Vlakplaas, was on death row for murder when he corroborated Dirk Coetzee and *Die Vrye Weekblad*'s claims. This also prompted the establishment of the Harms Commission.

commission of inquiry led by Judge Louis Harms in 1990, to investigate these allegations and the operations of the Security Police (C1) and the Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB).

After *Die Vrye Weekblad* revelations, an immediate chain of events was set into place by the commander of Vlakplaas, Eugene de Kock, and Police General Krappies Engelbrecht. All the ammunition stored at Vlakplaas had to be removed to a nearby police farm and all the evidence pertaining to underground activities were to be destroyed. As investigative journalist Jacques Pauw states:

It would be years before the truth came out regarding the panic and chaos that had reigned at Vlakplaas that morning. The Askaris were sent to Swaziland to hide. Thirty steel cases of weapons and ammunition were hastily trucked to the other nearby police farm, Daisy, and hidden. Incriminating documents and false identity books and passports were burnt in a 210-litre drum. By the time the press⁶ arrived, the farm was a haven of peace and tranquillity. (Pauw 2006:36)

During the Harmse Commission⁷ Trial, Dirk Coetzee's accusations of corruption, murder and torture were vehemently denied; the Security Police closed ranks to lie and denounced Coetzee's revelations as fantasies. The result was that Judge Harms accepted their testimony - Vlakplaas was found to be a perfectly legitimate safe house for defected African National Congress (ANC) members and Dirk Coetzee was regarded as an unreliable witness. Vlakplaas remained operational, and in fact, the C1 Unit's task in combating ANC forces, intensified. Pauw states: 'Vlakplaas was busy murdering while the Commission was in session' (Pauw 2006: 51). Even after it was disbanded in 1991, the C1 Unit remained functional and covertly supplied ammunition to the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) in KwaZulu-Natal, in an effort to combat ANC militants⁸.

⁶ On the SABC News that evening, Vlakplaas was represented as a tranquil rehabilitation centre for defected ANC members.

⁷ After information leaked that revealed the existence and activities of the C1 Unit at Vlakplaas, the National Party government appointed a judicial commission of enquiry, led by Judge L.T.C Harms (Lötter 1997: 57).

⁸ The Goldstone Commission confirmed that Vlakplaas had become involved in building a 'third force', and supplying weapons to the IFP to eliminate ANC members.

It was only in 1996 when the TRC was established, that the activities of the C1 Unit came under public scrutiny and that my family realised the extent to which their family farm had been transformed⁹. Through the TRC testimonies and the accompanying media that it generated, Vlakplaas generally became associated with Afrikaans police officers, with names like 'Chappies' (chewing gum), 'Snor' (moustache), 'Krappies' (scratchy), 'Duiwel' (devil) and 'Brille' (glasses) who operated above the law and deployed the most inhumane and gruesome torture methods. The TRC testimonies of the Vlakplaas operatives especially reflect the callousness with which victims were treated. Former Vlakplaas officer, Chappies Klopper, testified about the preferred method for the 'Vlakplaas guys' to dispose of a body. The 'Buddha' involves a body seated in the Buddha position, with explosives placed in the lap of the deceased (TRC 1996a). Dirk Coetzee, the first commander of the C1 Unit testified how he and his men enjoyed a braaivleis next to a fire where Siswe Kondile's body was being burnt (Pauw 2006: 151).

The most pivotal figure in the Vlakplaas testimonies was Eugene de Kock, 5th and final commander of Vlakplaas, dubbed by his own men as 'Prime Evil'¹⁰ and currently serving a 212-year jail sentence for murder, torture, fraud and arms smuggling. De Kock's testimonies unearthed a wealth of information regarding the operation of Vlakplaas. During a trip to the farm in 1999 with the TRC, De Kock pointed out where prisoners were detained and tortured, where ammunition was stored in various rooms fitted with metal doors in the farmhouse, where murdered askaris lay buried in unmarked graves and lastly, the braai and canteen area, where generals and operatives would get together to celebrate successful covert operations such as the bombing of the ANC offices in London in 1982 or Cosatu House in Johannesburg in 1987 (Payne 2008: 253).

De Kock became the scapegoat of the C1 Unit's activities and, in

The Commission, formally known as the *Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation*, was appointed to investigate political violence and intimidation that occurred between July 1991 and the 1994 general election that ended apartheid in South Africa (Human Rights Institute of South Africa: online).

⁹ De Kock's 18 month long trial in 1994 exposed some of the C1 Unit's activities, but it was only during the TRC hearing's testimonies that Vlakplaas and the C1 Unit came into the public sphere.

¹⁰ *Prime Evil* is also the title of Jacques Pauw's documentary about the C1 Unit.



Jillian Edelstein, *Untitled (Truth and Lies)*, 2001, black and white photograph.



Merryn Singer, *Vlakplaas*, 2000, blood and water on paper.



Merryn Singer, *Vlakplaas*, 2000, blood and water on paper.

an attempt to shift blame to the higher powers at play, adopted a tell all policy¹¹. Clear and confident in his testimonies and with nothing to lose¹², De Kock offered information on all the operational aspects of Vlakplaas as well as the involvement of various generals and ministers. It was through his testimonies that Vlakplaas became entrenched in the minds of the South African public¹³. These testimonies, as well as the continual naming and thus personification¹⁴ of the C1 Unit as ‘Vlakplaas’ in the TRC testimonies, have contributed to popular perceptions of the farm as a place of evil almost above all others in South African history.

Representations of the farm

The general association of Vlakplaas with callousness and lawlessness that was produced during the TRC testimonies was embedded in South African memory and is reflected in media and artists’ representations of the farm.

Truth and Lies (2001), Jillian Edelstein’s photographic publication and exhibition of photographs taken during the TRC hearings and testimonies, show victims, perpetrators, ANC activists, apartheid police officers, government officials and family members of those tortured and killed, at the hearings and at their homes across South Africa. Edelstein’s photograph of Vlakplaas is one of the few circulated images of the farm, and also features on the back cover of the publication. Taken before an exhumation, the photograph shows the undertaker, Dawie Botha, head bowed down with a spade in his hand, on his way to perform this grim task. Behind him is the hilltop overlooking the Hennops River where askari Brian Ngqulunga’s¹⁵ body was buried in 1987 after he was murdered by his

¹¹ Pauw describes the betrayal of Eugene de Kock, ‘as one of the most despicable acts of betrayal in the history of South Africa. The politicians and generals who had pinned medals to his chest and gorged themselves on *potjiekos* and Chivas Regal at Vlakplaas suddenly sprouted wings and sang *Hallelujah I am saved!*’ (Pauw 2006:148).

¹² De Kock had already been sentenced 212 years imprisonment during his state trial, his wife and children had left him, and his once proud generals had shunned him as a rogue criminal.

¹³ De Kock’s 4000-page amnesty application revealed the gruesome murders of various ANC activists, askaris and various cross border raids and bombings. De Kock was one of the first to submit an application for amnesty to the Amnesty Committee, leading to a stream of applications from co-perpetrators. The number of applicants in De Kock-related incidents accounts for 48% of all Security Branch applications (TRC Final Report, Section 3, Chapter 1, page 184).

¹⁴ The unit that operated from a nearby farm called ‘Daisy’ was not similarly personified as ‘Daisy’ during the TRC hearings and testimonies.

¹⁵ Ngqulunga was part of a team from the C1 Unit that murdered civil rights lawyer Griffiths Mxenge. He could not live with the knowledge of what he had done and started to unravel emotionally. He was later tortured and killed by his own team members in 1987 when he became a ‘security risk’ to them (Bell 2003:15).

Vlakplaas team members. In this black and white photograph Edelstein’s central focus point is the undertaker and the horror of the task that awaits him.

Investigative journalist Jacques Pauw refers to Vlakplaas as ‘the death farm’, (Pauw 2006:29) whilst Louis Smit, the farm’s current caretaker, says he felt a ‘darkness about this place’ after settling there with his family in 1998 (*Dispatch* 1999:online). Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, in her book about Eugene de Kock, *A human being died that night*, writes of her visit to the farm: ‘Vlakplaas may no longer be the playground of the politicians and generals taking pleasure in hatching new ways to dismember the human body and soul, but there was still something haunting about the farmhouse and the three little buildings next to it’ (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:107).

Journalist Paul Ash notes the lack of signs of horror in Vlakplaas’ landscape:

Perhaps, if you didn’t know better, Vlakplaas would look no different to any other of the thousands of similar farmsteads that dot this country, red tin roof, faded white walls, a braai area, various scattered outbuildings and willow trees along the river banks. It’s lovely country, wind blowing through the long grass, and ruffling the surface of the Hennops River. (Ash 2010:online)

Ash notices not only the lack of signs of trauma in the landscape, but also the unexpected beauty of it.

Merryn Singer’s treatment of Vlakplaas in her watercolour paintings reflects an attempt to give visuality to the horror suffered on this land. In these two small monotone landscape paintings one is first struck by the intricate detail, accuracy and beauty of the landscape, but on closer inspection the viewer realizes that this dark brown tone is blood. The artist used her own blood in an effort to signify the blood lost on this land (Kurgan 2010: online). In these works, the banality and beauty of the Vlakplaas landscape becomes a problem in its representation, and to give visuality to the trauma suffered, Singer used her blood.

A place can never be evil, and land is seldom affected by the deeds that occurred there. It is only its name that attributes meaning to the site. Jo Ractliffe’s representation of Vlakplaas, titled *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-*

by-shooting), presents a composite photographic image of the exterior landscape of Vlakplaas. One sees the gates, some dogs, a telephone pole; and the work offers no insight into the history or significance of this place. Ractliffe has written: ‘I was utterly unprepared for what I saw – or rather, didn’t see – that the “Vlakplaas” I was looking for was nowhere to be found’ (O’Toole 2010: online). It was the banality of the landscape and the lack of signs of its horrific past that struck Ractliffe most. Through the photographic processes of double exposure, blurring, cropping and framing, Ractliffe suggests to the viewer the horror of Vlakplaas. She therefore gives visuality to the trauma that occurred there through her treatment of the photograph. It is the mythology of Vlakplaas, accumulated through the TRC testimonies and related news reports, which created her expectation of ‘seeing’ evil.

In this sense, Hanna Arendt’s term ‘banality of evil’ can be attributed to the Vlakplaas landscape. Arendt coined the term and incorporated it in the title of her 1963 work *Eichman in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Here she argued that the great evils in history, particularly the Holocaust, were not executed by fanatics or sociopaths but by ordinary people who accepted the position of their government and therefore participated with the view that their actions were acceptable. When Arendt attended the trial of Eichman in Jerusalem she was struck most by Eichman as an ordinary and frail man, a family man who spoke of serving his country and executing his orders (Arendt in Huang 2005:2). In *Country of my Skull*, Antjie Krog similarly notes how former Commissioner of Police, General Johan van der Merwe, ‘sits collapsed in the front row. *Ineengedoke*’. Krog notices his yellowish hair colour, ‘how his mouth nibbles at times like a geriatric and when he touches the bandage around is finger, his hand trembles’ (Krog 1998:3). Krog is describing the normality and vulnerability of a man who claims to have only served his country and his government. It is this same ‘disappointment’ of not seeing ‘evil’ or any traces in the landscape of the horror that occurred there, that Ractliffe experiences when she states: ‘...the “Vlakplaas” I was looking for was nowhere to be found’ (O’Toole 2010: online).

Santu Mofokeng’s *Chasing shadows* series displays the same search of signs of trauma in landscapes. He writes: ‘In 1997 I started to visit

the shadow grounds in Europe, like Ravensbruck and Auschwitz. I was looking for answers, but all I found were shadows’ (Mofokeng 2010: online). In his black and white landscape photograph of a beautiful tree-lined lake, only the work’s title reveals the significance of the lake. The title is: *Birkenau – KZ2. Poland: The lake where the ashes of cremated inmates were thrown* (1997). No signs of trauma in the landscape are visible, and it is only through his treatment of the landscape photograph and through association of the title, that its history and therefore its meaning is attributed to it.



Jo Ractliffe, *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive by Shooting)*, pigment print on cotton paper (detail).



Santu Mofokeng, *Birkenau – KZ2. Poland: The lake where the ashes of cremated inmates were thrown*, 1997 (*Chasing shadows*), black and white photograph.

CHAPTER 2 – THE FAMILY ARCHIVE

Artists and archives

In Okwui Enwezor's publication and exhibition *Archive Fever: uses of the document in contemporary art* (Enwezor 1998), he presents contemporary artists who all use archival documents in one way or another in order to reconsider the meaning of identity, memory, history and loss. Using a wide range of methodologies, artists including Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Eyal Sivan and Fazal Sheikh draw attention to notions of truth and fiction, inclusion and exclusion, the personal and anonymous within the archive.

Christian Boltanski's *Reserve detective III* (1987), an installation of taped boxes stacked to the ceiling, denies access to the promise of archival documents within. Along the top, from a row of desk lamps, dangle Boltanski's characteristic light cords. A single image of an anonymous person is roughly taped to the outside of each box. (These images have been taken from two crime magazines.) Without further context, however, there is no way of knowing anything about the people in the photographs. In this work, the images are disorderly and lose their meaning without the support of text. Boltanski puts into question photography as well as archives' inability to convey sufficient information as well as their claims of 'truth' (Michals 2008: online).

In a video called *The specialist: Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1999), the Israeli artist Eyal Sivan reordered scenes from footage of the 1961 trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann to create new sequences and, perhaps, a less damning portrait of him. In this work, Sivan draws attention to the subjectivity of editing and selecting, much like the process of the archivist of inclusion and exclusion, and attempts to show how a specific selection or edit, can portray something in a very different light.

Fazal Sheikh's *Victor weeps: Afghanistan series* (1997), each of the photographic prints shows a hand holding a passport-size photographic male portrait. Statements by the family members who hold the photos tell us that they are portraits of Afghan mujahedeen fighters who had died or disappeared during battles with occupying Russian forces in the 1980s (Cotter 2008: online). In this work, Sheikh makes evident the personal narratives within archives that often remain buried when writing 'official' histories. Tacita Dean's artist book *Floh* presents the artist as curator of

found personal photographs discarded by their owners and omitted from their family albums (Cotter 2008: online).

In *Questions of legacy*, Charles Merewether describes some artists' use of archival documents as 'counter-archival' in the way that it works against the grain of archives by drawing out and focusing on the 'silences and omissions' within them (Merewether 1998:157). The artworks mentioned above can be described as 'counter archival' as they are focused on making visible the (silenced) role of the archivist as curator (Boltanski and Sivan), buried personal narratives (Sheikh) and that which is excluded from archives (Dean) by offering a re-elaboration and re-figuration. It is in this context of re-elaboration and re-figuration that the family archive that I have assembled operates.

Assembling a family archive

Through archive documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity. (Hamilton & Harris 2002: 21)

Over the past few years, I have collected and inherited various domestic objects that once inhabited the family farmhouse at Vlakplaas. I have assembled these alongside documents and family photographs as an archive that also includes oral accounts and my own photographs. This constitution and composition of an archive with its obvious inclusions and omissions has in part, been a response to the value my mother's family has placed on the farm and, in part, a response to what the farm later became — a paradoxical attempt (perhaps irresolvable) to reclaim something of what was lost but which can never be regained.

Retrieving information from the Stewart family regarding Vlakplaas has been a challenging task. My grandfather, up until his death, continually expressed his desire to return and to be laid to rest in his family's cemetery

on the farm. The lingering tension between my grandfather and his four brothers regarding the sale of the remaining land in 1979 has closed the avenue of my questioning his brothers further. My grandmother, on the other hand, is unwilling to talk about the farm because, according to her, it has caused her too much pain. My mother and her siblings remember Vlakplaas as their childhood paradise, and their accounts are marked by a subjective experience of the beauty of the farm visualized through the filter of childhood innocence. The memories that form part of my family archive are thus based on the oral accounts of my grandfather, who suffered from Alzheimer's for the last 10 years, and my mother, who lived on the farm as a child.

My grandmother's hand is seen in the construction and composition of the family album. Every photograph that I have managed to retrieve, (and this has also been a challenging task involving some acts of thievery), has been carefully handled, the corners rounded with text on the back noting the particularities of the photograph. The life of this photograph album, which represents four generations and a century of the Stewarts' life at Vlakplaas, will end with her¹⁶.

The family photographs that I have managed to retrieve are: landscape photographs, photographs that document the workings of the farm and, perhaps most significant, family photographs. These show various generations of Stewart family members posing either within the Vlakplaas landscape or in front of the changing and expanding stoep and farmhouse over the course of a century. The Stewarts' personal photographs are not only interesting because of the power of their lingering pathos but also because they provide insight into the personal, familial, social, and political position of the Stewart family. 'They are restless images,' says Hirsch of family photographs, 'changing meaning and moving onward, asking us to pay attention to the stories, both declarative and secretive, that they tell' (Hirsch 1999:194). This family archive is thus composed from fragmented and selective memories, personal photographs depicting isolated moments, discarded and inherited objects, and my own photographs of the farm.

Delving into the TRC archives in order to retrieve information about

¹⁶ My grandmother feels great shame for the events that occurred on the farm between 1980 and 1994. She does not want to be associated with the farm in any way and has threatened to destroy the Stewart family album on many occasions.

Vlakplaas has also been a daunting task. The information (about the farm specifically) is mostly supplied in the testimonies of Dirk Coetzee, Eugene de Kock, and Wilhelm Schoon (all previous commanders) who describe the day-to-day functionality of the C1 Unit at Vlakplaas. The extent of damage inflicted by the C1 Unit is insurmountable, yet few of the testimonies relate to incidents on the farm itself. The ones that do include the interrogation of Japie Maponya at the picnic area by the river, the murder of Phemelo Nthelang in the canteen and the burial of Brian Ngqulunga¹⁷. Much about the C1 Unit remains unknown as a result of the nature of the TRC: the information of those who did not apply for amnesty remains unknown¹⁸.

In this sense, I am working from two contrasting archives made at different times, the TRC archives that contain the 'official' and public history of Vlakplaas and my own family archive that represents the personal memories of my family members. Added to this is my own developing archives of photographs I have taken between 2005 and 2011. These archives are repositories of personal memory through which particular and differing histories and understandings of Vlakplaas are revealed. They are marked by the inadequacies and partiality of memory and selection that brings fragmented traces of information together, creating an illusion of a coherent narrative.

Curating the family archive

My role has been that of an investigator, collector, photographer and archivist, endlessly sourcing information in the form of text, images and objects from two disparate archives in order to understand the complexity of what Vlakplaas means and to represent it as the place of my family's memories. The result is a section of this book entitled: *Vlakplaas (Shallow farm)*. It traces the history of Vlakplaas from my family's occupation to its current state as a site of trauma and mourning. It attempts to visualise the identity of the farm as a beloved family home and *geboortegrond* in the presence of its other identity as a site of trauma

¹⁷ This was confirmed by Nicky Rousseau who is a lecturer in History at the University of the Western Cape. For six years, she was a senior research analyst for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and was one of the team of authors of the Commission's official Report (UWC: online)

¹⁸ Thirty-five of the forty-seven Vlakplaas members applied for amnesty (TRC Final Report, Vol 6, Section 3, Chapter 1, page 217).



Christian Boltanski, *Reserve detective III*, 1987, installation (detail).



Eyal Sivan, *The specialist: Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1999, video still.



Fazal Sheikh, *Victor weeps* (Afghanistan series), 1997, colour photograph.



Tacita Dean, *Floh*, 2001, spread.



Tacita Dean, *Floh*, 2001, spread.



Tacita Dean, *Floh*, 2001, spread.



Peach peeler (belonged to Alida Stewart), 2010, 40 x 40 cm.



Wedding headband (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2010, 40 x 40 cm.



Shaving bowl (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2010, 40 x 40 cm.

and mourning. It includes various remembrances of the farm, including my mother and grandfather's memories of life on the farm. Interspersed are various references to (in the form of testimonies and news articles) the murders of Phemelo Moses Nthelang, Brian Ngqulunga, and the interrogation of Japie Maponya.

This section of the book (pages 18-81) progresses through various sites on the farm of both personal and public significance including the farmhouse, the canteen, Hennops River, the braai area, the butter room and Aalwynkoppe (the hilltop behind the farmhouse). It presents a series of montages, crafting links between various memories, and represented by landscape, object and personal photographs from various times and contexts. The book format, with its sensibility, tangibility and chronology, enables continuity, disjunction, juxtaposition, layering, text and stark contrasts between what the farm was and what it became, allowing the narratives to unfold powerfully.

Exhibition

The exhibition presentation for this MFA presents a series of large, high definition, panoramic landscape photographs; an attempt to represent the past before the present. Some of these photographs are presented as a series of montages and include photographs of inherited objects and family photographs. Four inherited objects appear on thin tall white pedestals and on a table in a separate room lies the book.

My strategy for photographing the farm has been to show Vlakplaas unadorned, with detail and clarity and from a dispassionate position. This strategy was inspired by the Dusseldorf School and Hilda and Bernd Becher's *New objectivity*, described as "a documentary-like unadorned language, without any sentimentalisms, defined by a great precision of focus and by frontal, impersonal framings, which immortalise objects in a timeless dimension..." (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina online). These panoramic landscapes photographs were shot in segments and in multiple exposures and then photo-stitched together in Photoshop. Once completed the multiple exposures were then layered over each other to create a high dynamic, and apparently more 'accurate', range¹⁹. By using

¹⁹ In image processing and photography, high dynamic range imaging (HDR) is a set of techniques that allow a greater dynamic range of luminance between the lightest and darkest areas of an photograph than current photographic methods. This wide dynamic

this technique I attempted to represent Vlakplaas as 'precisely', 'truthfully' and 'impersonally' as possible²⁰.

Focusing on various sites of both public and personal significance, including the view from where Brian Ngqulunga was buried (Aalwynkoppe), the torture room (Butter Room), the farmhouse (where ammunition was stored), the Hennops River, the various braai facilities (where bodies were disposed of), the canteen where Phemelo Ntelang was murdered and the Vlakplaas Cemetery (where my ancestors remain), I aim to show the photograph and landscape's inability to retain the history of what occurred there. Nothing in the landscape, however much detail is used to capture it, can communicate the trauma of the events that occurred there, nor the meaning that the farm once held for my family. It is only with the support of the titles of the works, this document and the public life of the farm, that the history, and therefore the meaning, is attributed. Ironically, my viewpoint as the photographer is anything but impersonal and objective, as I am in the unique position of knowing both the public and personal history of the farm. My entanglement with the history of Vlakplaas is undeniable, as I am the heir of three generations of memories, however fragmented they are, and the only willing and active keeper of this family history.

range allows images to more accurately represent the range of intensity levels found in real scenes (Reinhard & Ward 2006:7).

²⁰ Such words remain in inverted commas, given that I understand such objectivity to be impossible. Nevertheless I record the attempt to achieve it.

CHAPTER 3 – REPRESENTING THE PAST BEFORE THE PRESENT

The works

The farmhouse

The title image of this exhibition and the first photograph visible on entering the gallery is titled: *The farmhouse* (2010). It is a large frontal high-definition panoramic photograph of the farmhouse and it shows the old farmhouse almost unchanged since the time my mother lived there. It looks like any farmhouse, red tin roof, faded white walls, a big front stoep and the title conveys nothing about the significance of the farmhouse or the farm on which it is situated. The monumentalisation of the farmhouse through the large scale of the photograph, the framing of the composition and the high quality of detail, suggests to the viewer that this farmhouse holds significance.

The family

This is a diptych titled: *The family: Gerhardus Robert Stewart and George, Yolinda, Peter Stewart (Aalwynkoppe)*. In this work two family photographs are placed next to each other. They represent, on the left, my grandfather as a young boy with his dog, and on the right three children, my aunt and two uncles, between the ages of 8 and 13, posing with their dog in front of the hilltop overlooking the farmhouse and the Hennops River. These photographs were taken almost 40 years apart at the same location: the grass field in front of the hilltops that my family calls "Aalwynkoppe". The photograph of my mother's siblings is dated 1971 and portrays the last generation of Stewarts who grew up on the farm before it was sold in 1979. Both of these photographs represent the family farm of my mother's memories in the way that it shows the beauty of the Highveld plains and the innocence of a childhood lived. These aged photographs, with their rounded corners and faded colour, resonate nostalgic remembrance and act as reminders of 'time's relentless melt' (Sontag 1977:18). The photograph of my mother's siblings is particularly nostalgic because it signals the end of an era, or, in a Barthesian sense, the death of a moment, the 'noeme' – the 'that which once was', which is in this case the last generation of Stewarts to

grow up on the farm (Barthes 1981:85). Barthes describes the 'studium' of the photograph as that which provides the context in terms of 'period, clothes, photogeny' and the 'punctum' as the 'wound' that pierces the viewer (Barthes 1981:88). Knowing the history of the C1 Unit, and the exact location on the farm where these photographs were taken, I am able to add to these photographs their 'wound'; this is the fact that Brian Ngqulunga's body was buried at the top of this hill (Aalwynkoppe) after his murder in 1987 and exhumed in 1998 during the TRC exhumations, at the request of his bereaved family.

Geboortegrond

In this work two landscape photographs are framed in two oval wooden frames, typically used to contain family portraits and traditionally seen at the entrance of a farmhouse. In these two stereoscopic frames, ancestors are replaced with photographs of the land signifying the attachment and love that my family once felt for their farm but also the personal and subjective way in which they came to view it. The photographs that the frames contain are views of the Vlakplaas cemetery, now overgrown and almost impossible to detect. In this work I attempted to represent the conflation of the notions of identity and the farm that I have experienced throughout my project in the memories and oral accounts of my mother and grandfather.

*Cracked heirlooms*²¹

This work comprises a series of eight photographs of various inherited objects that once inhabited the family farm. They include: a peach peeler, a ceramic kitchen bowl, a shaving bowl, a wedding headband, a fox coat, a pair of glasses, a pair of gloves and three bridesmaids' headbands. The objects were photographed from a direct frontal position on a white backdrop with natural light. They are interesting as survivors from a period of remembered domestic happiness as well as for the things they allude to outside the farm. They are the evidentiary

²¹ Also the title of Ingrid de Kock's essay featured in *Negotiating the past* (Nutall & Coetzee 1998).



The farmhouse, 2010, 60 x 118 cm.



The family: Gerhardus Robert Stewart (c. 1937: album) and George, Yolinda and Peter Stewart (Aalwynkoppe) (c. 1971), 40 x 110 cm.



Geboortegrond, 2010, 40 x 50 cm.



View from Aalwynkoppe, 2010, 50 x 182 cm, solar lithograph.



Aalwynkoppe, 2011, 60 x 171 cm.



The river and braai area, 2010, 60 x 152 cm.



The willows, 2010, 60 x 192 cm.

remains of my family's century on Vlakplaas and are mnemonics of 'the archive' of memories that I have inherited. These objects resonate loss and pathos. They are not only marked by their obsolescence but by their varying degrees of corrosion. They are what Stephen Greenblatt calls 'wounded artefacts'. No matter how banal they are, they are witnesses to the 'violence of history' as well as to a history of use, to be passed down from generation to generation to me, their current keeper (Greenblatt 1990: 22).

View from Aalwynkoppe (Solar lithograph)

In this work three fragmented landscape solar lithographs create a disjointed triptych. Through experimentation with solar lithography I attempted to create an effect that represents the farm of my grandfather's memories. Through the process of under-exposure, in certain parts, the emulsion/coating of the aluminium plate washed away, preventing attraction of the ink to the surface. The landscape appears aged, and in certain parts, the ink is washed away completely. This work suggests my grandfather's ailing memory and the way in which he came to view the land in his final years.

Aalwynkoppe, The river and braai area and The willows

These works are all large panoramic high-definition landscapes. They show the Hennops River with its sweeping willows (*The river and braai area*), a distant view of the braai area on the bank of the river (*The willows*) and the hilltop behind this area (*Aalwynkoppe*). With the use of high-definition rendering, panoramic formatting and subdued lighting and colouring, these photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the land as bearing witness to an unfolding narrative. The photographs are presented together and are the same heights creating a sense of continuity. The sites photographed are bound by the events that they witnessed. It was here under the willows, on the bank of the river, that Japie Maponya, an innocent victim²², was brutally interrogated by Eugene de Kock and his men in September 1985.

²² Japie Maponya was abducted in Krugersdorp by security members and taken to Vlakplaas, where he was interrogated about the whereabouts of his brother, Oderile Maponya. (Oderile Maponya was a former commander of the African National Congress' armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*.) Japie was apolitical and died a brutal death for no reason.

Hennops river, The cemetery, The butter room (torture room) and The view from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas

The series of four montages each contain (in the same order) a panoramic high quality landscape photograph (left), a photograph of an inherited object (centre) and a family photograph from my grandmother's photo album (right). These montages present three views/narratives of the particular site photographed. The panoramic photograph shows the landscape in the 'present' and how I have come to view it, while the family photograph represents the past and the meaning that the site once held for my family. The inherited object in the centre represents the passing of time and stands as metonymy for the violence, loss and pathos associated with these sites.

Butter room (torture room)

In this work three photographs are placed together. The first image is a high-definition photograph of the 'torture room' where ANC activists were tortured and 'turned' into askaris. On this site, however, once stood the 'butter room' where butter and buttermilk was made and where biltong was cured from metal hooks hanging from the roof. There are still metal hooks hanging from this roof, but these were utilized for different purposes. The next image is a photograph of an inherited object representing a floral cake tray. However useless and cracked this cake tray might seem it was once actively used in the Vlakplaas family kitchen. The third image is a family photograph showing Alida Stewart, sitting in close view of the 'torture room' (next to the farmhouse's kitchen stoep) on her birthday. Next to her on a small table appears a big white birthday cake. Where cake or confectionary is generally associated with celebration and happy family events, the 'wounded' object in the centre stands between the present (left) and the past (right) signifying a sense of foreboding and perhaps also a particular kind of violence. In this montage the title: *Butter room (torture room)* overpowers the seemingly 'sweet' family memory/narrative and offers the viewer the context in which to view the work.

The view from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas

The view from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas is a montage consisting of three (consecutive) photographs. The first image is a panoramic landscape,

photographed from the hilltop (Aalwynkoppe) behind the Vlakplaas farmhouse. This hilltop is the site where askari Brian Ngqulunga was buried after his murder in 1987. It is also the site where Malabog (surname unknown), my grandfather's childhood friend and the son of one of Vlakplaas' farm workers, is buried in an unmarked grave. Currently, a large cross is planted on this very site, an attempt of the caretaker, Louis Smit, to protect the land from 'evil'.²³

The next photograph represents an inherited object, a cracked porcelain bowl depicting the Voortrekker Monument and on either side, nestled between burning candles and encircled by a chain, two dates, 1838 and 1938. The large scale of the photograph enables the viewer to inspect the detail of this small bowl. The bowl was bought by my great grandfather, George Robert Stewart, during the commemoration of the centenary of the day 16 December 1838, the Day of the Vow and the Battle of Blood River²⁴. The 16 December 1938 celebrations, which ended with laying the foundations of the Voortrekker Monument, were a central reference point in what Grundlingh and Sapire describe as 'an important populist phase in the development of Afrikaner nationalism with all the rhetoric of populist movements including: 'struggle',

²³ Smit is a born-again Christian who believes that the land needs protection from evil forces.

²⁴ This was the historical day on which the Voortrekkers, under Sarel Cilliers' leadership, made a covenant with God: if the Voortrekkers won the battle against the Zulu soldiers they would build a church in God's name, and for generations be loyal servants.



The View from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas, 2011, 50 x 226 cm.

'survival' and 'salvation' (in Ehlers 2003:6). This object references my family's complicity and support of a system, broadly contextualised around the idea of the Afrikaner's imagined status as God's chosen people, their political rise, fall and their persistent and coinciding sense of entitlement and attachment to the land. To me it is also representative of my grandfather's dream to be reunited with the land.

The final image is a personal photograph from my grandmother's family album. It shows Petrus (surname unknown) father of Malabog, transporting chalk by means of ox wagon at the bottom of the hill where his son, and Brian Ngqulunga, would later be buried. According to my grandfather, the very chalk quarried from Vlakplaas was used to build the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The chalk that Petrus was responsible for quarrying and transporting was used to build the foundations from where apartheid legislation would be passed. And this legislation would in turn enable the C1 Unit's murderous campaign. Petrus's and Malabog's house, where my mother learned as a child to eat 'stywe pap', would later become the site of the helipad, where generals would land at Vlakplaas to come and celebrate the successes of various covert operations. When placed together these photographs present a narrative that speaks of Vlakplaas as a complex site of trauma, mourning and longing. Through interweaving narratives, this work attempts to present a micro-history of the complexities of *geboortegrond*, farms, family archives and the legacies of apartheid.



Hennops river, Vlakplaas, 2011, 50 x 243 cm.



The cemetery, Vlakplaas, 2011, 50 x 175 cm.



The butter room (torture room), Vlakplaas, 2011, 50 x 203 cm.

During the late 1880s Gerhardus Robert Stewart and his wife Alida Johanna Maria Stewart, second generation settlers from the Great Trek, bought a 250-hectare farm 20 kilometres southwest of Pretoria. During the next 100 years the farm became a working farm, and supported a chalk quarry.



Die Voortrekkers, Voortrekker diorama, Voortrekker Monument, 2010

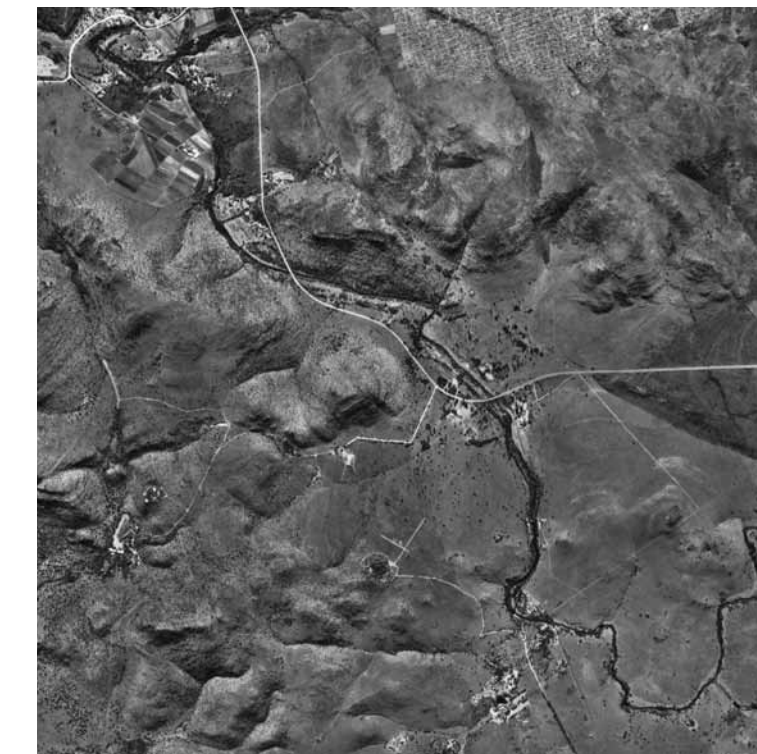


From left to right: Gerhardus Robert Stewart, Alida Johanna Catharina Stewart, George Robert Stewart, George Robert Stewart, Andries Hendrik Stewart, Johanna Susarra Maria Stewart, Johanna Petronella Stewart, Johanna Stewart and Gerhardus Robert Stewart. (c. 1936: album)



Gerhardus Robert Stewart, George Robert Stewart, Gerhardus Robert Stewart and George Robert Stewart. (c. 1931: album)

The family grew and flourished and the farm was passed down from generation to generation; from Gerhardus Robert Stewart, to his only son George Robert Stewart, to his five sons including my grandfather (the eldest) also Gerhardus Robert Stewart, and his brothers Andries Hendrik, George Robert, Langley Charles and Victor Lesley Stewart. The 250-hectare farm remained undivided in the testament of Gerhardus Robert Stewart, leading to a family dispute that resulted in portions of the farm being sold to a neighbour by three of the five Stewart brothers. The remaining 99 hectares of land continued to be the home of my grandfather, his wife and my grandmother Helena Isabella Martha Elizabeth Stewart, and their five children, including my mother Mercia and her siblings Joyce, Pieter, George and Yolinda, the third and final generation to grow up on the farm. The lingering friction resulting from the sale of 151 hectares of the farm, however, finally led the two brothers (Gerhardus Robert and Victor Lesley) to sell their remaining land in 1979.



Aerial photographs of Vlakplaats (its original name) 354 JR taken in 1925 and 2005 (Map and Trigonometrical Survey Office, Mowbray, Cape Town)

Vir my as kind, die reuk van die grond na reën, was so fantasties. As die donderweer gekom het, het my ouma altyd al die spieëls in die huis toegegooi met komberse.

Ons het altyd met stokke deur die lang grasse begrafnis toe gestap om vars blomme op die grafte te gaan sit. Ek het as 'n kind die grasse altyd met my stok oopgeslaan, en ek was natuurlik ook baie bang vir slange.

Ek moes gereeld "O Boereplaas" op die ou traporrel speel. Poenie, Oupa se suster, kon pragtig sing en almal in die familie was baie musikaal.



(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 12 April 2010)

Vlakplaas grass I & II, 2010



*O boereplaas, geboortegrond!
Jou het ek lief bo alles.
Al dwaal ek heel die wêreld rond,
waar so gelukkig, so gesond?
O boereplaas, geboortegrond!
Jou het ek lief bo alles.*

*O moederhuis, waar ooit so tuis?
Jou het ek lief bo alles.
Die wêreld, rykdom, prag en praal
kan jou verlies my nooit betaal.
O moederhuis, waar ooit so tuis?
Jou het ek lief bo alles.*

A.G. Visser. *O Boereplaas, Geboortegrond*. (In) Visser, A.G. 1932. Gedigte. Pretoria: Van Schaik.





View, 2011

Ek onthou altyd die geluide van die watervore. Die vore het al die lande water gegee. Ek onthou die kleiner kabbelende watervoortjies en die brúe wat oor hul geloop het.

Die perskebloeisels was altyd die mooiste ding vir my op die plaas. Elke lente het hulle stadig begin verskyn en dan ewe skielik was mens oorweldig deur die reuk en skoonheid daarvan.

Ek onthou die populierbome en al die tarentale. Ek onthou die jakkalse se getjank in die veld. Ek onthou die perskebome en hoe my ouma altyd vir my perskes geskil het met haar sakmessie.

In die laan oppad na die ou plaashuis, was granaatbome. Ons het as kinders daai granaat pitte een vir een geëet.

Naby die huis by die voor was perskebome en turksvybome. Van hierdie vrugte het ouma altyd konfyt en ingelegde vrugte gemaak. Dit het sy in die spens gebêre. As kinders wou ons altyd in die spens kom.

Naby die huis was 'n fontein en ek's seker dis nogsteeds daar. Die werkers moes elke dag emmers vol fonteinwater gaan haal vir huisgebruik. Die water is in die regterkantste hoek in die spens gebêre.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 20 September 2010)





The earliest photographs of the Stewart family show the workings of the farm, including ox wagons transporting chalk across the landscape, the fencing of the borders of the farm and various members of the Stewart family posing either within the landscape, or in front of the recently built farmhouse, situated on the willow-lined Hennops River.

University of Cape Town



At night, the walls of the house offered some sense of protection from the darkness surrounding it. The worst thing that could possibly happen was if you had to visit the outhouse during night time.

There have been a few sightings on the front stoep of the house of the ghost of Alida Stewart. It was her money that bought the original 250 hectare farm. She is buried in the farm cemetery.

In the 'office room' the chalk quarried from the farm was accounted and noted. This chalk was used to build the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The office room no longer exists.

The bedroom of Gerhardus Robert Stewart is situated at the entrance of the house on the left. It is here where he died. I remember next to his bed was the family 'wakus' and on top of it, his whip.

"I shall refer to the property as Vlakplaas, although it became clear on our visit there, that it is merely one of the sub-divisions of the farm Vlakplaas. It lies to the south east of Pretoria in the Erasmia area and is situated in a farming district. To reach Vlakplaas one travels approximately 10 kilometres along a dirt road and arrives at the property which is situated alongside a river. There are hills to three sides of the property, overlooking the property, which is, I am told, some 99 hectares in extent. Part of this Vlakplaas extends over one of the hills. The property leads off the dirt road through a gate which can be locked and we were informed by Mr de Kock that when the property was in use there was an armed guard at the gate and that the guard now working in the district, the area of the gate, was also armed. One travels along the driveway through another gate to reach the old farmhouse which is situated among a number of trees.

"We visited the farmhouse. I regret I didn't draw a plan detailing the number of rooms, but there are a number of rooms and a stoep which leads onto the driveway. Mr de Kock pointed out three of the rooms to us which had been fitted out with metal doors, which were used to store arms and ammunition which had been obtained from various sources. We were also informed that there had previously been two metal containers situated across the driveway in front of the house. They had been used for the same purpose. Other rooms in the house were used for office purposes for people carrying out their official duties and there was an end room which, as I recollect, was used as a gymnasium. There must have been some sleeping arrangement in the house, which I don't recollect seeing, in light of the fact that Nofomela

said that he slept in the main house when he first arrived there. It may of course mean that some temporary sleeping arrangement was made in one of the rooms used for other purposes. Behind the house there was a large covered braai area and it was obvious from our inspection that it could cater for a great many guests. Adjoining this there was a large room, which we were told by one of the members present, had been used as a bar, but the bar has now been removed as have the counter's shelves behind it, which had been used to stock the bar supplies. There were still a number of comfortable looking easy-chairs and couches in the room and it is clear it must have been a pleasant relaxation area for those people at Vlakplaas.

"Outside and away from the old main house there were a number of concrete slabs and we were told that they had been used for the buildings in the past, these buildings being used for various purposes. One, in the same area as the bar room, had been further office space where a great deal of paperwork had been done. In the vicinity of that now non-existent room there was an accommodation building still standing which appeared to comprise five separate rooms, each with their own entrance. Further along there were other slabs which had been used for accommodation purposes with prefab buildings erected on them. There were others which had been the scene of showers and toilet facilities and matters of that nature. Below them and in the vicinity of the showers, there was a large garage which had four doors and this was used for vehicles whose identity was to be kept secret. We were also informed by Mr de Kock that there was further parking behind the garage under the trees where cars would not be seen from the road or from helicopters or aircraft flying overhead."





Reeds, Hennops River, 2010



Braai area, Hennops River, 2010
Overleaf: Willows, Hennops River (detail), 2010





The Hennops river, 2010
Overleaf: The willows, 2010



We used to swing from the willow branches into the river. We would have picnics and braais and the best memories of my childhood were on the banks of the Hennops River. My grandmother used to send me to the river with her blue watercan and bowl, some soap and my favourite doll. I would play for hours on the riverbank, washing my doll and all her clothes. We often washed in the river. Ouma Pökkie used to send us with Lifebuoy soap just before dark, to get ready for supper. Sometimes we would lose track of time, and we'd have to run for our lives to get back before dark.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 20 September 2010)



MR HATTINGH : Yes, there was a shooting range near the river, where there was also some form of a picnic area?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes.

MR HATTINGH : You said that you went there directly when you arrived at the farm?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes.

MR HATTINGH : Are you convinced of that?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes.

MR HATTINGH : You heard Mr Fourie's evidence that he and Mr Nortje spent three quarters of an hour having drinks in the canteen?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes, I heard him say that.

MR HATTINGH : You say that you went down there and that Mr Nortje, according to your version, go [*sic*] there with you, so Mr Fourie could be making a mistake?

MR VAN DER WALT : That is his statement Mr Hattingh, I could not say whether he is wrong or not, because that is his recollection. My recollection is that I went directly to the river.

CHAIRPERSON : With Nortje?

MR VAN DER WALT : With Nortje, sir.

CHAIRPERSON : When you say you went directly to the river, with a motor vehicle?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes sir.

CHAIRPERSON : You drove there and parked at the shooting range?

MR VAN DER WALT : We drove there, yes.

CHAIRPERSON : You didn't park at the canteen and walk?

MR VAN DER WALT : No, no, we drove there.

MR HATTINGH : Very well, and that is where you observed the assault on Mr Maponya?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes.

MR HATTINGH : Without going into too much detail, where was Mr Maponya, was he inside a vehicle or outside a vehicle when you saw him?

MR VAN DER WALT : When I saw him, he was outside a vehicle.

MR HATTINGH : Was he laying on the ground?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes.

MR HATTINGH : Was he disguised or covered with a blanket as Mr Fourie said?

MR VAN DER WALT : I cannot recall the blanket, I think he wore a balaclava over his head.

MR HATTINGH : Yes, and did you see that Mr Nortje assaulted him?

MR VAN DER WALT : I don't think so Mr Hattingh.

MR HATTINGH : Are you saying that you didn't see it or are you saying that you don't think that he assaulted him?

MR VAN DER WALT : My recollection was also vague during the court case, I cannot tell you, I didn't see him assault him.

MR HATTINGH : Did you see Mr De Kock assault him?

MR VAN DER WALT : Also not, I also don't think that I saw him assaulting him, that is the same as my initial statement.

CHAIRPERSON : What time of the day was it at that stage, was it dark or was it still light?

MR VAN DER WALT : It was about quarter past five, half past five in the evening. It was still light, Mr Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH : Did any person give an order for the interrogation and the accompanying assault to be ceased?

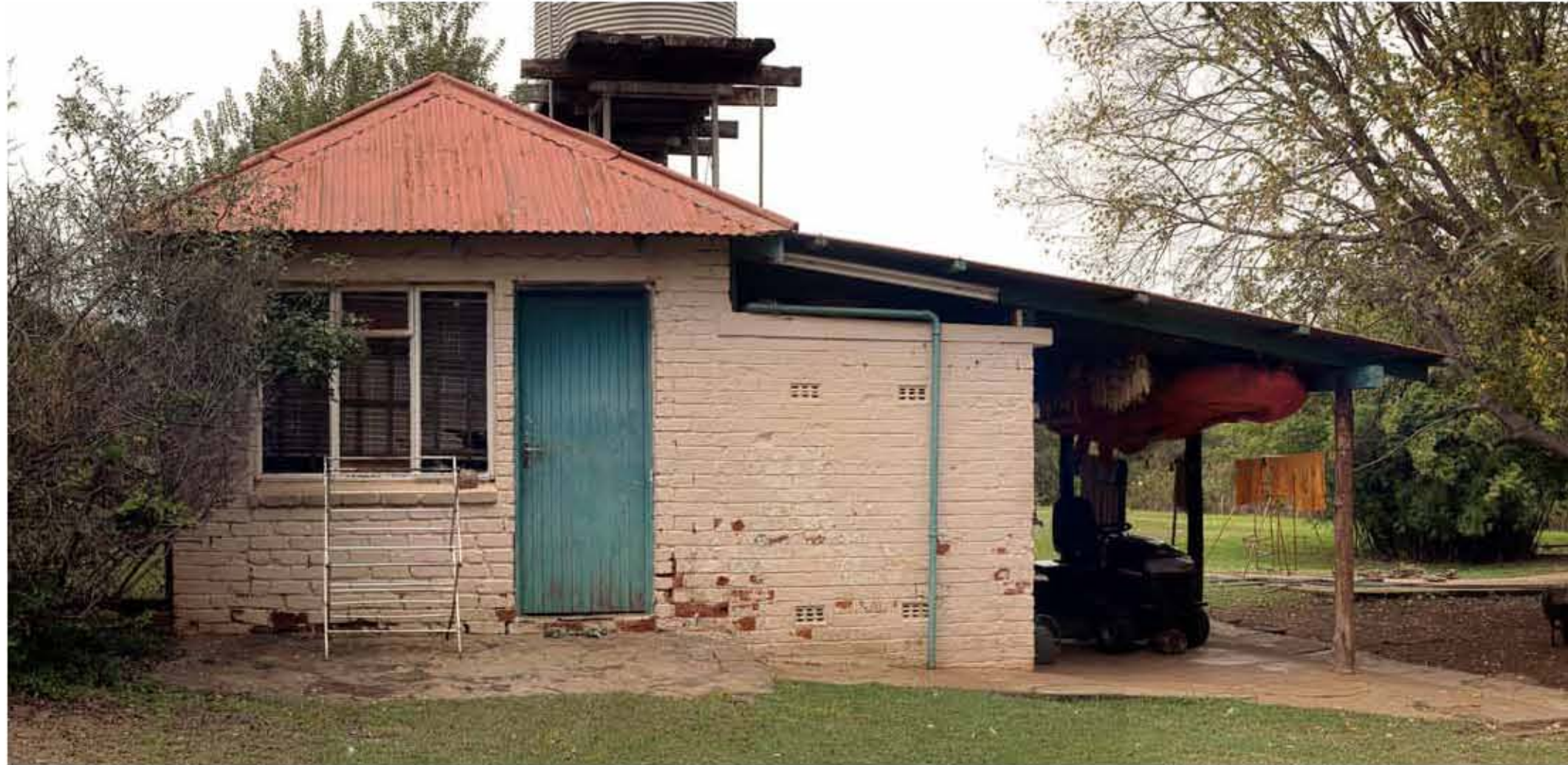
MR VAN DER WALT : That is correct, Mr De Kock said that it had to stop.

MR HATTINGH : Did he say words to the effect that it wasn't serving any purpose, that it was clear that the man wasn't going to talk?

MR VAN DER WALT : Yes, I could imagine that, I think he said that.



There were two little outhouses next to each other. One was the ironing room where all the washing was ironed. The iron was heated using an old Primus stove. This room was always very hot and claustrophobic. I used to go in there just to smell the freshly washed washing. I can still remember the smell. The other room we used to call the 'butter room'. Here Ouma Pokie used to make butter. There used to be big silver jugs on a wooden table filled with fresh cow's milk. I remember the smell vividly. This room was always freezing, especially the cold cement floor on bare feet. From hooks in the ceiling we used to dry our meat to make biltong.



The butter room (torture room), Vlakplaas, 2010



(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 12 March 2011)



The cemetery, Vlakplaas, 2010



The cemetery was a very important place for the family. It was cared for, regularly cleaned, and the children had to take flowers weekly to put on all the graves. When someone died, the tradition was that the spouse had to mourn for months, and this was symbolised by wearing a black band around the upper arm. Before the burial, we would gather at the farmhouse for the ceremony. We always sang Gesang 12.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 13 July 2011)

My mother (centre) at the grave of her grandfather, George Robert Stewart. (c. 1958: album)



The graves of Gerhardus Robert Stewart and Alida Johanna Catharina Stewart, Vlakplaas cemetery. (dates unknown: album)

“I can still remember that we had a lot to drink,” he said. “Upon our arrival at the farm we proceeded to the canteen and had more drinks. While we were busy playing snooker, two members of the unit approached me and said Mr Nthelang had been found by other askaris (ANC members who defected to the apartheid police) at a shebeen,” De Kock testified. “They brought him to the canteen where I questioned him about his whereabouts.” When Nthelang failed to answer his questions and said that he had lost his service pistol at the shebeen, ‘I hit him three times with a snooker cue,’ De Kock said. ‘I left the canteen to calm down. It was clear that we had a latent defection on our hands.’ He said other security police members descended upon Nthelang when he left the canteen. De Kock was called in later and saw Nthelang’s body. He ordered that it be wrapped in a blanket and loaded in the boot of a vehicle. The body was taken to a farm in Zeerust where it was buried in an enlarged warthog hole. Other former Vlakplaas operatives - Douw Willemse, Piet Snyders, Leon Flores and Andries ‘Brood’ van Heerden - also testified about their roles in the killing. Van Heerden said Nthelang was nonchalant and had an ‘I don’t care’ attitude. He said that after De Kock left the canteen, Nthelang was assaulted and ‘tubed’ (a tube placed over a person’s head to suffocate him). Snyders denied taking part in the ‘tubing.’”

The canteen, Vlakplaas, 2010



ANC daily news briefing. *Askari killed for going awol, says de Kock.* 7 September 1999 [Online] Available at: <http://www.google.co.za/search?q=anc+news+briefing+phemelo+nthelang&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a> [07/10/11].



Braai area, canteen, Vlakplaas, 2010



View from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas, 2010





The helipad, Vlakplaas, 2011



Petrus leading the ox wagon. (date unknown: album)



The helipad, Vlakplaas, 2007
(photograph by Peter Stewart)



Close view of the cross erected at the top of
Aalwynkoppe, 2007 (photograph by Peter Stewart)



Glasses (belonged to Alida Stewart), 2010



Peach peeler (belonged to Alida Stewart), 2010

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Bridesmaid's headbands (from Helena and Gert Stewart's wedding day), 2010



Praise books (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2011



Shaving bowl (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2010



Ceramic birds (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2010

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Wedding headband (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2011



Wedding gloves (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2011



Shaving box (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2010



Camera (belonged to George Robert Stewart), 2011

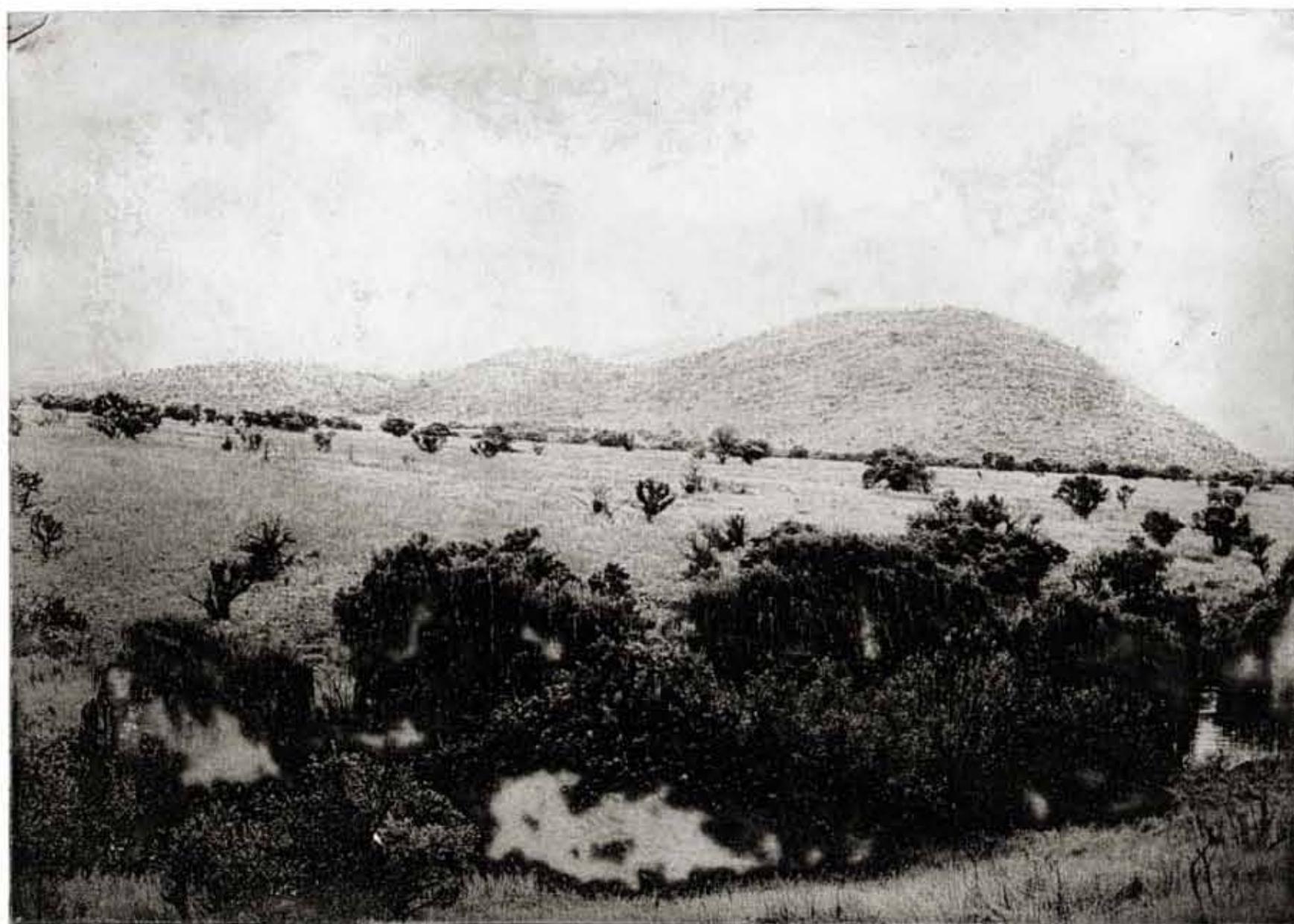
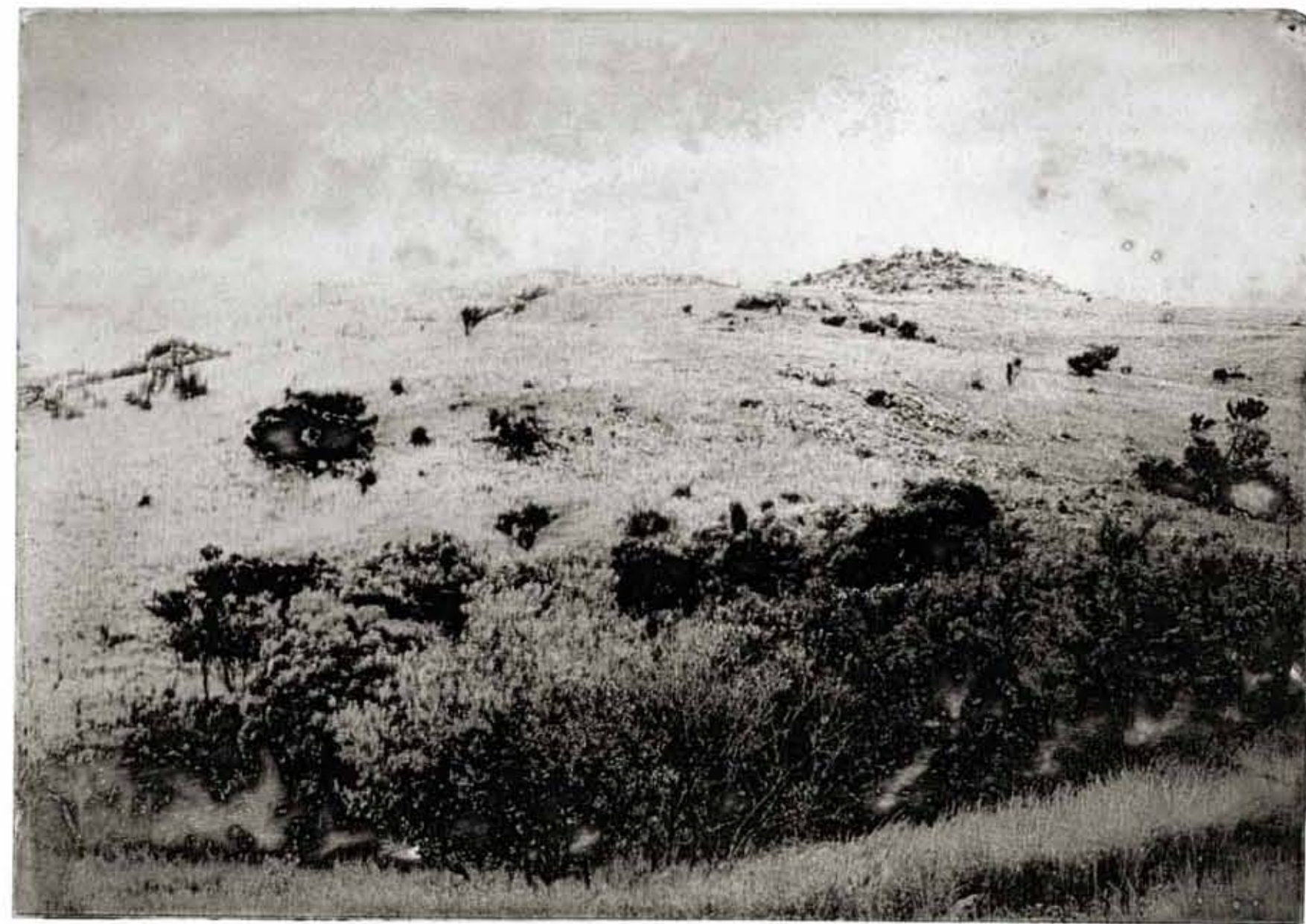
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Baby net (belonged to Mercia Stewart), 2011



Jackal fur coat (belonged to Johanna Stewart), 2011



View from Aalwynkoppe, Vlakplaas, 2010 (Solar lithograph)
Overleaf: Aalwynkoppe 2011





The farmhouse, 2005



The gate, 2005



Eugene de Kock's office, 2005



The torture room, 2005



The kitchen stoep, 2005



Swing, 2005

During my first trip to Vlakplaas (2005), I was determined to photograph both the macabre Vlakplaas of public memory and the beautiful family farm of the Stewart family. The disparity of public and personal knowledge of Vlakplaas, and how to represent a site which is simultaneously remembered and represented in conflicting ways, was at the heart of my enquiry. The resulting photographs can be separated into two series: a black and white one and a colour one. The black and white series is focused on specific sites of trauma, such as the torture room, the canteen where Phemelo Nthelang was murdered with a snooker cue, the farmhouse where the ammunition was stored in various rooms fitted with metal doors and the office of Eugene de Kock, the most notorious and final commander of Vlakplaas. This series attempted to represent

the Vlakplaas of the public imagination and corresponds with the TRC press representations of the farm as a site of horrors and nightmares. In this series the viewer is directly confronted with the sites where atrocities occurred. The use of black and white film references documentary and news photography and its disposition to focus on the grim and sensational aspects of events¹. The referent is central in these images and confronts the viewer directly as if to say: 'this is where it happened'.

¹ Documentary and news photography is often accepted as 'truthful' representations, this is not the case however, as these photographs are mediated and often presented to evoke political and social responses from the viewer.

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Track to dam I, 2005



Fence, 2005



Braai area, 2005



Grass, 2005



Track to dam II, 2005

The photographs that form part of the colour series (taken in 2005 and then later for this project in 2010), on the other hand, are focused on the beauty of the farm and reflect the sites inspired by the oral accounts that have been passed down to me by my mother. My mother's memories reflect a sense of attachment, love and longing for the family farm. Her memories are focused on the beauty of the landscape and are descriptive of the ruffling long grasses of the Highveld, the gentle swaying of the willows, the skies at dawn, the peach blossoms during spring, the peacocks in the poplar trees, the making of butter and buttermilk with her grandmother in the outside 'butter room', and the many family braais on the banks of the Hennops River.

While I have focussed on the colour series for this MFA project, all these photographs have become part of the archive of Vlakplaas. This particular archive is my own, reflecting my own subjectivities. It will, on the conclusion of this project, be accessible as an archive as part of the collections of The Centre for Curating the Archive at UCT (www.cca.uct.ac.za).

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Offices, 2010



Swing, 2010



The pond, 2010



The road, 2010

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Joyce and Peter Stewart. (c. 1958)



Peter and Gerhardus Stewart. (c. 1965)



The Stewart women. (c. 1971)

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ENDNOTE

In 2005, family members of those who disappeared during the apartheid regime, gathered at Vlakplaas ‘to mourn their loss at the hands of state security agents and to commit themselves to the ongoing struggle to protect all persons from the fate of an enforced disappearance’ (Khulumani 2005: online). In addition to this it was proposed in 2007 by The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) that Vlakplaas would be declared a national heritage site and that a centre for traditional healing as well as a museum would be established. This announcement was followed by a three-day traditional healing ceremony at the farm, which concluded on 16 December, an important date in South African history²⁵. During this event 700 traditional healers from all nine provinces each slaughtered a goat and a chicken in an effort to cleanse the land of the evil that occurred there, and to set the spirits free of those who died there (Serote 2007: online). Since Vlakplaas has become the residence of Louis Smit (in 1998), the farm’s caretaker, he has erected wooden crosses on every unmarked grave, and with his church members regularly prays for all those who died there, as well as for the land to heal from its horrific past. Over the course of the last century, Vlakplaas has thus transformed from a beloved family

farm and ancestral home, to a site of immeasurable trauma and horror, to a site of mourning. The establishment of a centre for traditional healing on the farm will perhaps mark a new phase and more positive transformation in Vlakplaas’s life history, even while the events that occurred on the farm between 1980 to 1993, will forever haunt Vlakplaas and those who visit it.

In my project I have attempted to resolve what I have come to understand as an irresolvable paradox: how to present the past before the present. The impossibility of this task, however, has not rendered it meaningless. Instead it has raised many issues of the difficulties of representation, of the opacity of images and the power of the words that describe or precede them. Furthermore, through this process, I have realised that in trying to understand the complexity of what Vlakplaas is, I have come to see my project not only as an act of representation but as a process of pathos and mourning. Mourning for the suffering that occurred on the land and pathos for my grandfather’s desperate attempts to return to it, and for the impossibility of achieving this desire. What would have been his legacy is now a site transformed by violence and trauma: a legacy of apartheid.

²⁵ Currently celebrated as Reconciliation Day, 16 December was previously commemorated as the Day of the Vow (also known as Day of the Covenant or Dingaan’s Day). It is also this day in 1961 that *Umkhonto we Sizwe* was established.

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The first George Robert Stewart. (c. 1935: album)



George Robert Stewart (third) and his son, the latest named George Robert Stewart. (2011)

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