FRAMING THE DEBATE ON RACE: GLOBAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND LOCAL FLAVOUR IN BERNI SEARLE'S *COLOUR ME* SERIES

Kirk Sides

Abstract

Critiques of racial ideas, and their production and dissemination, often perpetuate a comparativist model, thereby re-inscribing the category of the nation; histories of various racial identities become entangled almost exclusively with narratives of national spaces. As part of a larger project that attempts to shift this nationalist focus in race studies towards a more 'outer-national' (Gilroy 1993:16, 17; Nuttall 2009:24) perspective, in this article, I focus on a series of installation works by South African artist Berni Searle. Searle's *Colour Me* series, when read through this paradigm of the 'outer-national', productively interrogates the categorical boundaries of the nation in the historical production and subsequent life of racial identity. In my discussion, I read Searle's work as an example of how race might be approached, not only as an identitarian category, but also as a global phenomenon.

To do so, I suggest that Searle's use of spice powders places her work within the historical trajectories of the spice trade, and that this placement locates her work within a larger nexus that frames her performance of South African racial identities. I consider spices as compounded signifiers, simultaneously indexing the quotidian and the extraordinary, the local and the global, and the ritualistic and the historiographic. Furthermore, by reading the metaphorical relationship between race and spices in these works, I argue that the aim of Searle's critique of race is to reveal how race as a concept can be used to deconstruct the very categorical and binary thinking that produces it in the first place. This allows for a discussion of the liminality of race and its existence at the boundaries of categories and spaces. Lastly, this territorial "in-betweenness" has certain historiographical implications. Searle's spices construct an archive that simultaneously complicates the specifically South African inflections of coloured racial identity and de-privileges apartheid historiographical models in the post-apartheid interrogation of such categories. In other words, by not projecting a post-apartheid present into the past, Searle renders visible a multiplicity of archives through which to interrogate contemporary racial identities in South Africa. I propose that Searle's historiographical and methodological shifts toward the 'outer-national' offer new ways to read local inflections and global trajectories of race.

In this article, I talk about spices. Not simply spices as domestic foodstuffs, but as globally circulating commodities whose movements chart the geographies of racial identity negotiation. I suggest that Cape Town-based artist Berni Searle's use of spices in her *Colour Me* series (1999), opens up a semiotic space for thinking about the multivalence of these domestic commodities. Already in this description there is something of the tension that Searle stages, and which I elaborate on in this article: that is, in thinking of the foodstuff as a domestic commodity; as that which, in its practical function, resides in the intimate and quotidian places of

domestic economy; is consumed for its qualitative characteristics; valued for its role in enhancing food and measured in pinches, dashes and the right amount of "heat".

However, outside of its ordinary presence in the home, spice – like any other commodity – lives and has historically lived another life: a quantitative and worldly existence in which it is desired, hunted, and traded for. The trajectories of this desire map valuation systems that in turn shape global networks of exchange. By reading the metaphorical relationship between spices and race in Searle's work, as well as the pragmatic and symbolic uses of spices in quotidian culinary practices, I argue that race – like the spice by which it is signified here – resides (is produced, experienced, and worked on) in the liminal spaces between the local and the global; between the ritualistic and historical. Searle's critique of race, then, reveals how race as a concept can be used to deconstruct the very categorical and binary thinking that produces it in the first place.

I look at the ways in which spice – as far as it is largely read as an index for the interrogation of racial identity in Searle's work – creates a global framework for exploring questions of racial identity and the traveling of racial discourses. Searle exposes race and race discourse as operating in much the same way as the spice powder described above. That is, race – both discursively and as a lived reality – is experienced as a quotidian phenomenon, linked in specific ways to local and national contextual forces. Nevertheless, I propose that much of contemporary race discourse, largely provincial in its focus, privileges these more national tectonics and misses the global shifting of race ideas. A racial critique of South Africa, detached from the myopic influence of a strictly national paradigm, not only references a 'global circulation of racial ideas', but also undermines the dominance of previously national(-lising) narratives such as the "apartheid paradigm" ubiquitous in South African historiography (Goldberg 2009a:272). In other words, often, the narrative engine of apartheid drives South African historiography; as if all preceding events, from European contact to Anglo-Boer conflicts were irrevocably destined to culminate in the politicised racial segregation of apartheid. Within this paradigm, it becomes difficult to read contemporary, "post-apartheid" examples of cultural production as participating in anything other than a critique of South African realities overdetermined by the apartheid narrative. By staging spice powders as an index for the interrogation of racial identities in South Africa, Searle accesses longer and more expansive histories of the entangled travel of commodities and race across the globe – histories whose heterogeneity subverts the hegemony of apartheid narrative paradigms for telling South African history.[1]

To approach race from a global perspective means viewing it from the standpoint that ideas of race, processes of racialisation, racisms and race discourse are not just globally circulating constructs, but that they are globally *constructed* notions, formed in the crucible of world circulation. This, in turn, not only calls attention to the diminishing power of the national category in such analyses but, and perhaps more importantly, goes a long way in deconstructing the fictive impulse within collective imaginaries to forge correlations between national spaces and racial identities. David Theo Goldberg (2009b:271) comments that,

> [r]acial arrangements and their implications are overwhelmingly considered a response to and product of local arrangements, relations of power and historical legacies. They seem to acquire meaning and take on significance only as a function of the specific contexts contained and constrained by the fabric of life, meaning-making and administrative arrangements indexed to a specific society, a state configuration, at a given place and time.

Figure 1: Berni Searle, *Untitled*, 1998, handprinted colour photograph, one of a set of 4 untitled photographs from the *Colour Me* series, 42 x 50 cm. Edition 10 + 1 AP. Photograph by Jean Brundrit. ©Berni Searle. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Goldberg (2009b:1272) attributes the dominance of this methodology to a post-war era rise in area studies that developed a 'comparativist frame, resting … on a presumptive model of geographic discreteness, on incontrovertible and reductive cultural, socio-political and legal uniqueness'. Goldberg (2009b) contends that by re-inscribing the discreteness and sanctity of its instances of comparison, this comparativist model creates methodological blind spots to seeing ways in which race and racisms function 'relationally'. That is, the comparativist method 'fails to account for the interactive relation between repressive racial ideas and exclusionary or humiliating racist practices across place and time, unbounded by the presumptive divides of state boundaries' (Goldberg 2009b:1273). Goldberg (2009b:1273) further maps race as a relational complex of various discourses, a cartography that precipitates an understanding of race as the result of dynamics between the global and the local. He writes that,

> racial ideas and arrangements circulate, cross borders, shore up existing or prompt new ones as they move between established political institutions. Ideas and practices emanating from elsewhere are made local; local practices that appear home-grown more often than not have a genealogy at least in part not simply limited to the local (Goldberg 2009b:1273).

Searle's use of spice powders in the *Colour Me* series (Figure 1), places her work within the historical trajectories of the spice trade and locates the latter as the larger nexus that frames her performance of South African racial identities. These spice powders, which Searle uses to "dis-colour" her body, map an economy of transnational or global exchange of commodities and people. As such, Searle's work constructs an archive that both complicates the specifically South African inflections of coloured racial identity, and de-privileges apartheid historiographic models in the post-apartheid interrogation of these categories. By not projecting a post-apartheid present into the past, Searle renders visible a multiplicity of archives through which to interrogate contemporary racial identities in South Africa. Through a deconstruction of apartheid's hegemonic grasp on historical frameworks for interrogating race, Searle gestures towards how racial identities, even when considered to be intrinsically linked to the national narrative, can be read as produced by myriad forces operating both in, and beyond, the national space. Searle makes a historiographical and methodological shift toward what both Paul Gilroy and Sarah Nuttall term an 'outer-national' perspective: a dynamic in which national imaginaries appropriate and integrate elements of global semiotics in the grafting of a "national" narrative (Gilroy 1993:16, 17; Nuttall 2009:24). This perspectival shift offers new ways of reading both local and global inflections of race.

Although Gilroy (1993:16) is reluctant to specifically define the term, his use of 'outer-national' is meant to register a geo-cultural phenomenon in which ostensibly disparate places are drawn together through what he terms 'diasporic intimacy'. Not only do these 'transnational' and 'transcultural' relationships reveal 'new topograph[ies] of loyalty and identity', but by reading for 'outer-national' trajectories, 'the structures and presuppositions of the nation state [are] left behind because they seem to be outmoded' (Gilroy 1993:16, 17). I believe Gilroy's term is resonant here as it attempts to make both a geographically as well as a historiographical critical move. That is, 'outer-national' expressions are ones that register 'hemispheric if not global phenomenon' (Gilroy 1993:17). It is in this gesture to de-privilege the geographical hegemony of the nation state that Gilroy articulates his larger historiographical critique, decentering the master-trope of modernity. Furthermore, it is precisely in these newly revealed topographies – regional, hemispheric, and global – that Gilroy (1993:1) locates a 'counterculture' as well as a "counterhistory" of modernity. If race and racism are inextricably entangled with the narratives of modernity grounded in the nation-state, then by extending the critical purview beyond these boundaries, one is confronted not only with new 'intimacies' (Gilroy 1993:16), but with histories of these counter-hegemonic positions.

Nuttall's (2009:24) critical impetus is largely similar to Gilroy's, though she is somewhat clearer in her definition of the term 'outer-national'. For Nuttall (2009:23), reading 'outer-national[ly]' is a paradigmatic refocusing towards 'geograph[ies] of worldliness', which, in turn, precipitates a shift in critical cultural models. For example, in speaking of how creolisation might function in South Africa, Nuttall (2009) provides a cartographic-like perspective through which to view this space, its histories, and the way in which it finds itself entangled in multiple lived and discursive contexts. Nuttall (2009:24) writes that, 'given its tri-centric location between the Indian and Atlantic worlds as well as the land mass of the African interior, further readings of this space [South Africa] from an outer-national vantage point is likely to reinforce a creolité hypothesis'. I believe this 'outer-national vantage point' (Nuttall 2009:24) not only resonates with Goldberg's idea of the 'relationality' of race, but also offers a productive – and perhaps geographically liminal – frame within which to read the racial negotiations presented in certain of

Searle's works. Goldberg, Gilroy, and Nuttall's arguments, as well as my reading of Searle's work in this article, propose that this geographic shift – that is, looking at race 'outer-national[ly]' – precipitates commensurate shifts in historiographical perspectives and methodologies.

If Gilroy's valence of 'outer-national' is cultural and Nuttall's geographic, they both register an important historiographical critique against the hegemony of national narratives. In my reading of Searle's work, I utilise both critics' sense of the 'outer-national.' However, I also refer to Searle's gesture to frame or highlight the liminal space where the national and global imaginaries meet as 'outer-national', thus calling attention to that which comes from a global aesthetic register. More importantly, 'outer-national' does not privilege solely what comes from outside the national space. Rather, the emphasis should not be placed on the "outer" portion of the term itself, but rather on the space between this and the "national" signifier of the concept. As a hyphenated conjunction, the term performs the work of representing the complex dialectic process of where and when the global meets, interacts with, and mutually informs the national imaginary as it constructs racial identities within its borders. Another register of the term also resonates with a South African racial history that was invested in the production of internally "exiled" citizens; that is, in making the majority of its population exist politically and economically outside the nation, or 'outer-national[ly]' through indexes of race.[2]

When looking at Searle's *Colour Me* series, it becomes evident that the artist's use of spice creates a dialectics of space: that is, the work uses spice to conjure both a lived/imagined reality of the (gendered) domestic space, as well as an imagined, and possibly even lived, space of the elsewhere, the far away – places where these spices may have originated. I explore this space, this liminal territory between the imagined and the lived, between the local and the global, in order to understand where the production and circulation of racial ideas and identities takes place. Searle's use of spices registers an ingestion of the cosmopolitan; wherein, through the everyday acts of the local and the domestic, cooking and eating, people take in, or become part of, the global. It is this idea of the global, itself a historical and geographical nexus, which accompanies the pragmatic and functional (and local) symbol of spice in Searle's work. This act of ingestion can be read as a metaphor for how race functions and circulates, both at the level of racial self-identification as well as more systemic forms of racism: these racial processes mediate the liminal territory between the local and the global, accessing nexuses of related images and ideas surrounding the ascription and grouping of bodies. In other words, the sensory experience of race happens – is created, experienced, or "tasted" – at the level of the domestic or local, while being constituted by an economy of globally circulating elements.

In terms of geographic significance, the material Searle uses in this intervention prompts me to read her work in a framework that lies beyond the national context of South Africa. Although I agree for the most part with Liese Van der Watt's (2003, 2004) readings of Searle's work, I suggest that her analysis can be pushed further. Van der Watt (2004:124) says,

> I have argued that too often [Searle's] works are insistently read in terms of racial identity, an interpretation certainly invited by titles such as *Discoloured*, *Colour me*, *Colour matters*, *A darker shade of light*, *Off-White* and *Snow White*, but one that also seems to arrest her work in a certain place and time, specifically that of apartheid South Africa where she grew up categorised as "coloured". Here I … argue that Searle in fact questions the very basis of identity by asserting

> the self as endlessly fluid, indeterminate and complex, always involved in a never-ending process of becoming. Read this way Searle's art is less about identity politics such as race for instance, than about 'the lifelong process of coming to terms with the estrangement that is the soul of identity'.

Van der Watt's reading proposes a laudable move away from the historiographic master trope of apartheid for interrogating South African identities (I return below to this question of historiographical method, especially as it relates to racial identity), but Searle's work does more than what Van der Watt suggests. Her analysis not only moves Searle's work away from readings of race and racialisation towards a metaphysics of identity, but also gestures towards certain universal forms of subjectivity. I suggest rather, that Searle's work be read from an 'outer-national' (Gilroy 1993:16, 17; Nuttall 2009:24) perspective. From this perspective, works such as *Colour Me*, *Discoloured* (1999-2000), and S*now White* (2001), amongst others, read not only as inextricably entangled with race discourses, but offer a more panoramic paradigmatic focus that exceeds the horizons of South African identity politics. This is what an 'outer-national' reading means in the context of this article: in terms of both the production and subsequent analysis of racial identity and discourse, it is necessary to be attentive to the non-discrete category of the nation.

Reading 'outer-nationally,' necessitates paying attention to the ways in which geographies are always the entangled apex of myriad trajectories of exchange and movement; the danger always being that critics make cumulative moves by proposing that these nexuses add up to a cohesive or coherent national discourse. Many of the arguments for cultural and racial hybridity and diaspora often unconsciously reinforce the national category whilst they attempt to deconstruct it. Even as her reading gestures away from the hegemony of apartheid metanarratives, Van der Watt potentially re-inscribes a South African racial paradigm for viewing the racial dimensions of Searle's works. For instance, in her reading of Searle's use of spice, the domestic powders become an index of the interrogation of personal identity or subjectivity, and the latter reads as a cumulative embodiment of various national culinary influences. Van der Watt (2004:124) writes,

> [t]he spices are a reference to Searle's ancestry with whom she feels a tentative connection primarily through the kind of foods her family eats. Her maternal great-grandfathers came from Mauritius (a cook) and Saudi Arabia, bringing with them distinct culinary traditions. Food, as in many families, becomes a site of communion and continuation with her family.

Whilst the influence of family heritage in Searle's work is clearly significant, what Van der Watt's reading denies is the how this particular or personal interrogation resonates with the larger and longer history of the spice trade. Not only does her reading engage only the local reverberations of what was historically a globally impactful economy, but in its genealogical gestures towards Mauritius and Saudi Arabia, it also inscribes these countries as discrete geographies with uncomplicated and homogenous histories; as if, for instance, Mauritius could only be presumed to contribute one distinct, recognisably "Mauritian" culinary tradition.

Searle's choices of spices, and perhaps by extension, cooking, seem like particularly apt metaphors for deconstructing the categorical thinking surrounding race and race criticism. Spices not only denote a somewhat obvious connection between goods, commodification and race, but also suggest more implicit associations between culinary and ritual processes and ways in which these processes play a role in cultural meaning making. This, again, points towards the entangled nature of

racial identity, a highlighting of the crucible in which the extraordinary and the quotidian (or the place of the exotic and that of the local) form the liminal space of racial identity production. In the following section, I gesture towards the ways in which Searle's work "thinks" race through two related concepts: the culinary and the ritual, and briefly examine the role of symbols in each.

I begin with the ritualistic qualities of cooking, or the way in which culinary practices form a body of daily and domestic ritual that is unique for its cultivation, production and consumption of foodstuffs; goods whose trajectories are nothing less than global. In other words, in cooking there is a transformative ritualism that alters the goods (or symbols) of the historical and global into the quotidian and intimate. Searle's spices can thus be read as ritual symbols whose meaning resides in the liminal space between these divisions. Through spices and their use in "colouring" the body, Searle's critique of race engages a set of symbolic markers whose primary resonance lies in articulating the historical relationship between capitalism's commodification of goods and the categorisation of peoples.

But, more profoundly, the set of symbolic markers found in Searle's work resonates with how these economical and taxonomical systems create meaning, particularly in relation to the construction of identities. The work prompts questions such as: what is the meaning of race? How is race constructed to produce meaning? In her work, Searle seems to find the latter process an aggregative or constituent one. That is, like the final product of a kitchen, what is on the table is not only what it is, but also what it is made up of. Meaning resides not only in the liminal space between a definitive moniker and its constitutive elements but also between the elements themselves, in relation to one another. To extend the metaphor, the cooked dish is identified as such because of the transformative culinary process it has undergone. Nevertheless, it is also a dish, rather than a loose collection of ingredients on a plate, because in the assembled intimacy of these ingredients, in that liminal space where they meet, a new set of relations is produced. Searle's work therefore engages the liminal both at the level of the transformative, as well as the spatial or in-between. In both cases, however, her work's significance lies in its ability to undo the categorical rigidity constitutive of both these two registers, namely the ritually and the spatially liminal.

Victor Turner (1967:45) outlines two entangled forms, or 'classes' of ritual. The first denotes those practices 'situated near the apex of a whole hierarchy of redressive and regulative institutions'; the second 'anticipates deviations and conflicts … includ[ing] periodic rituals and life-crisis rituals'. In other words, according to Turner, there are those rituals that form infrastructures of control, and those that represent transgression; the same signs and symbols function in both of these types of ritual. The abstracting movement from the specific ritual to its broader sociological import is accompanied by the shared symbols that persist across 'classes' and types of rituals. Turner (1967:45) continues that, '[e]ach kind of ritual is a patterned process in time, the units of which are symbolic objects and serialized items of symbolic behavior'. For Turner, the ritual symbol does not necessarily perform a mediating role, bridging interpretive or analytic chasms between the specifics of the ritual itself and its potential larger societal "meaning". Rather, potentially inherent contradictions resonate in Turner's view of the ritual symbol as inherently pulled apart by the divergent signifying roles it performs.

That the same object, ritually symbolised, can, on one interpretive level, indicate unity, and on another, celebrate social divisions, exclusions and solidarities, means

that the symbolic object can signify a spectrum of potential cultural meanings. Indeed, following Turner's (1967:28) thinking about the properties of ritual symbols, the symbol not only performs acts of condensation, but is also involved in 'a *unification of disparate significata*'. The ritual symbol is not only unbounded contextually, 'a force in a *field* of social action', but also operates across temporal strictures (Turner 1967:44; emphasis added). The same symbol can function as the centre of the 'periodic, life-crisis ritual' as well as those "timeless", integral ceremonies, which form centrifugal patterns on the social fabric of a given group (Turner 1967:45).

If Turner's observations are applied to this discussion of spices and race, they highlight how Searle's work destabilises the categorical impulses in identitarian practices. By engaging with the symbolic economy of spices to signify race, Searle shows that racial identity – like Turner's ritual symbol – is a complex nexus of disparate histories and often-divergent systems of meaning making. That is, the category of race, like the symbol of spice, is made to perform a corralling motion on the myriad signifiers of human difference. This multiplicity is not restricted to, nor determined by, national boundaries. Rather the racial signifiers of any given national space may carry symbolic elements of a globally circulating semiotic system. Likewise, following Turner (1967: 44), spices – as the dominant symbolic element in Searle's work – explode the boundaries of the 'field of social action', marking a global contextual field and a multiplicity of potential meanings. Not only does this further underline the fictive qualities of racial categorisation as a national(-ising) function, but also shows the ways in which epistemologies of difference are engrained into cultural practices – even those so seemingly benign as cooking.

What does the ritualised symbol mean for a discussion of spices in Searle's work? Can spices be considered as objects of ritual action? If so, how might they shed critical light on the ritual actions in which they are (symbolic or culinary) elements? Given the historically global trajectories of spice, what constitutes the 'field of social action' that forms the broader interpretive context of individual ritual actions (Turner 1967:44)? A common feature of many foodstuffs is that they can be made to perform ritually symbolic roles. This duality in their nature, existing somewhere between the nutritional and the spiritual, is especially inherent to spices and their derivative powders. It is not possible to list all of the mystical and spiritually symbolic qualities attributed to spices in this context, but suffice to say, many religious systems associate spices with the realm of the sacred or the spiritual. A cursory glance reveals spices as integral to Buddhist meditative and prayer practices, where they are used as spiritual purgatives ridding spaces of evil forces. Spices burn in the censers of the Catholic Church, symbolising the ascension of the congregation's prayers towards heaven. In the Judaic practice of *Havdalah* – translated from Hebrew as 'separation' – spices are symbolic markers of the end of the Sabbath and the start of the new week. In each of these examples, spices are used in religious rituals that, like Turner's discussion of ritual symbolism above, simultaneously mark division and incorporation. In these religious imaginaries, spices trace movements from the realm of the profane or the temporal, to that of the sacred or spiritual; marking sacred time from the secular or temporal; constructing boundaries between these realms by the act of symbolic transgression.

Furthermore, spices are integral to rituals that have aggregative functions. For instance, in Catholicism, incense smoke signifies the congregation's prayers moving towards God. The consciousness of that congregation is incorporated in the incense, which performs the

symbolic task of uniting deeply individual sentiments and enquiries, and collectively re-signifies them as the amorphous, but (newly) integrated body of smoke rising from the censer. This process of aggregation is repeated at a level of abstraction, as this practice is part of the litany of rituals that form the overall body of Catholic worship. As such, the smoke from the burning spices is symbolic of the larger denominational body of Catholicism. There is an individuation produced by the intimate sensory experience affected through this ritual use of spices, while simultaneously there is, in the shared knowledge of a common practice, the production of a community. Users of spices become a community based on their particular use thereof. Spices also function as liminal interlocutors between the body and the world of goods, the individual and the community, the secular and the spiritual, and between the sacred and the temporal. Using them in a religious or ritualistic context means not only being aware of boundaries, but indeed, of constituting those borders, while simultaneously engaging in transgression and incorporation of those divisions.

Returning to Searle's work, I now consider the *Snow White* video installation that was commissioned by Forum for African Arts for the exhibition *Authentic/ Ex-centric* during the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001 (Figure 2a and b). In the opening scene, the artist's naked body is set against a dark background. The work is shot on dual cameras; one positioned facing the artist, the other directly above. In the initial moments of the video, the viewer struggles to find discreteness: overhead lighting gives the body some definitional relief, but the stage – the frame to the act – is indistinct; it seems to perpetuate beyond the artist into infinity. Thus, what might be read as the *mise-en-scène* of this performance takes on aspects of what might more appropriately be termed a *mise-en-abyme* – read in the etymological sense of the word, which places the object into an infinite space. This prompts several questions, such as: what is the framing logic of this body? How is it to be read? What does it signify if there is no given framing logic? Suddenly, a white powder, which the viewer might recognise as flour, begins to fall down from above (beyond view), collecting on and around the artist's body. She kneels passively as this white powder rains down on and over her body, until it has collected atop her head and created a circle around her on the floor. A frame of reference suddenly emerges, whereby viewers can attempt to make sense of what is happening. This frame of reference provides viewers with a fleeting sense of narrative comfort; the mollification of a *mise-en-scène* through which to make sense and judgments.

However, just as quickly, one might feel pangs of guilt at finding solace in a diegetic frame that structures the symbolic narrative of European colonisation and the erasure of indigenous peoples. As Van der Watt (2004: 126), borrowing from Jane Blocker (1999) notes, Searle's works perform certain 'aesthetics of disappearance'. In interrogating the elements involved in this *disappearing act*, it seems that this 'aesthetics of disappearance' precipitates a politics of the present (in both the physical and temporal sense). That is, the relief, or that which provides contrast to the variously appeared or disappeared aesthetic object, is a political frame of the present. The viewer is implicated in a drama of judgment – how he/she reacts in the present moment of viewing to the framing element of the flour, or rather, how he/she reads and makes judgment on his/her moral associations – is a result of what is present, ultimately determining the various ethical and political interpretations of the performance. This awkward (and perhaps liminal) space, where the meaning of the work is alternately made or unmade, is dependent on the flour itself, for, the flour is both the element of the frame in which meaning is made, as well as sign, or material,

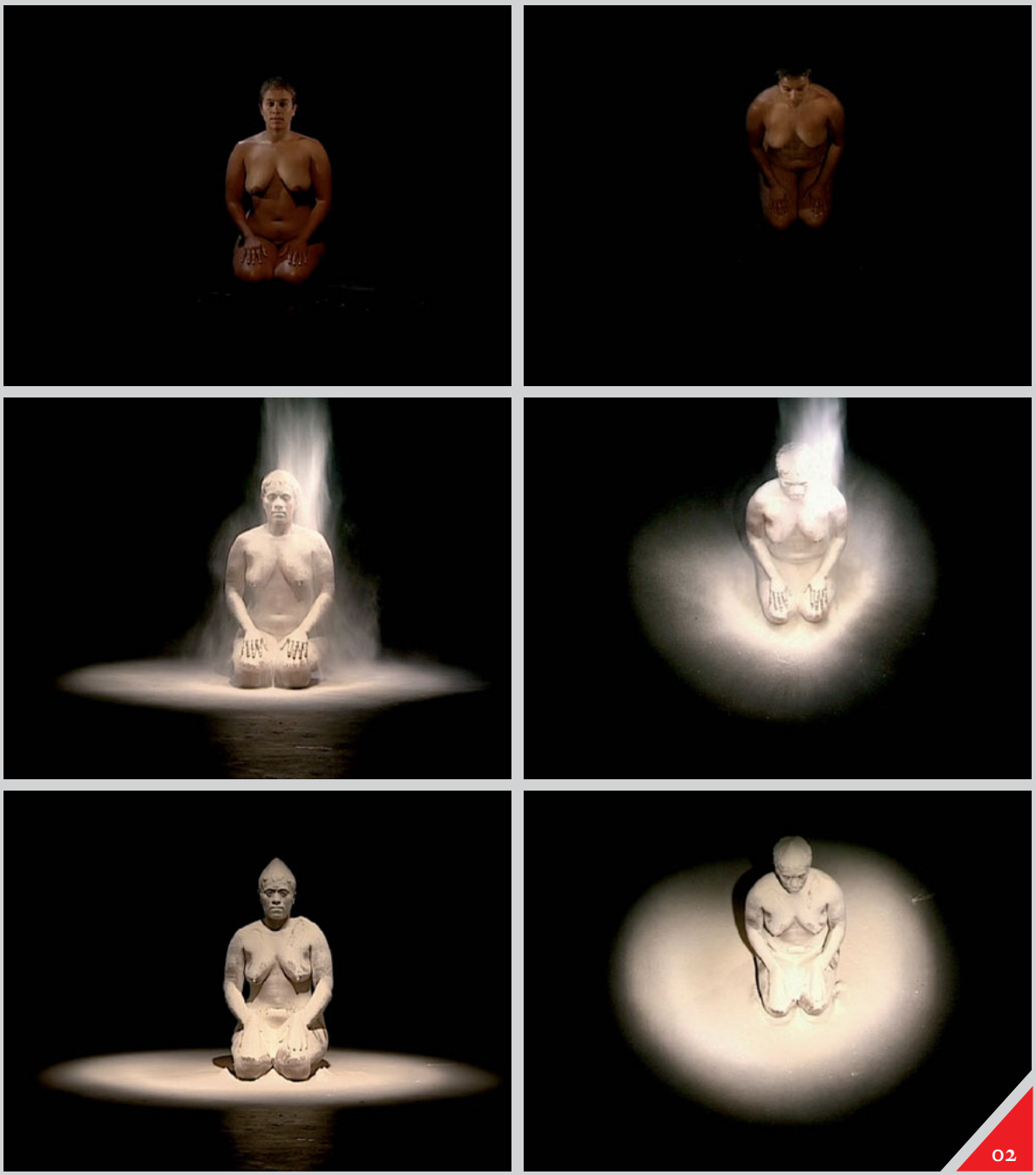

Figure 2a: Berni Searle, video stills from *Snow White* installation, 2001, two projector video installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

within that frame. Like the spices of the *Colour Me* series, the flour operates as object of the domestic, local space – an object of the quotidian and the ritualistic – as well as the extra-ordinary and the global. Read in racial terms, the whiteness of the flour, like the colour of the spice, resonates (again with attention to the oscillation between structures, between body and discourse, between frame and symbol, between national and global) in ways that include both phenotypic variations and phenomenological realities experienced locally, as well as the epistemologies of race and classification that have historically interred themselves

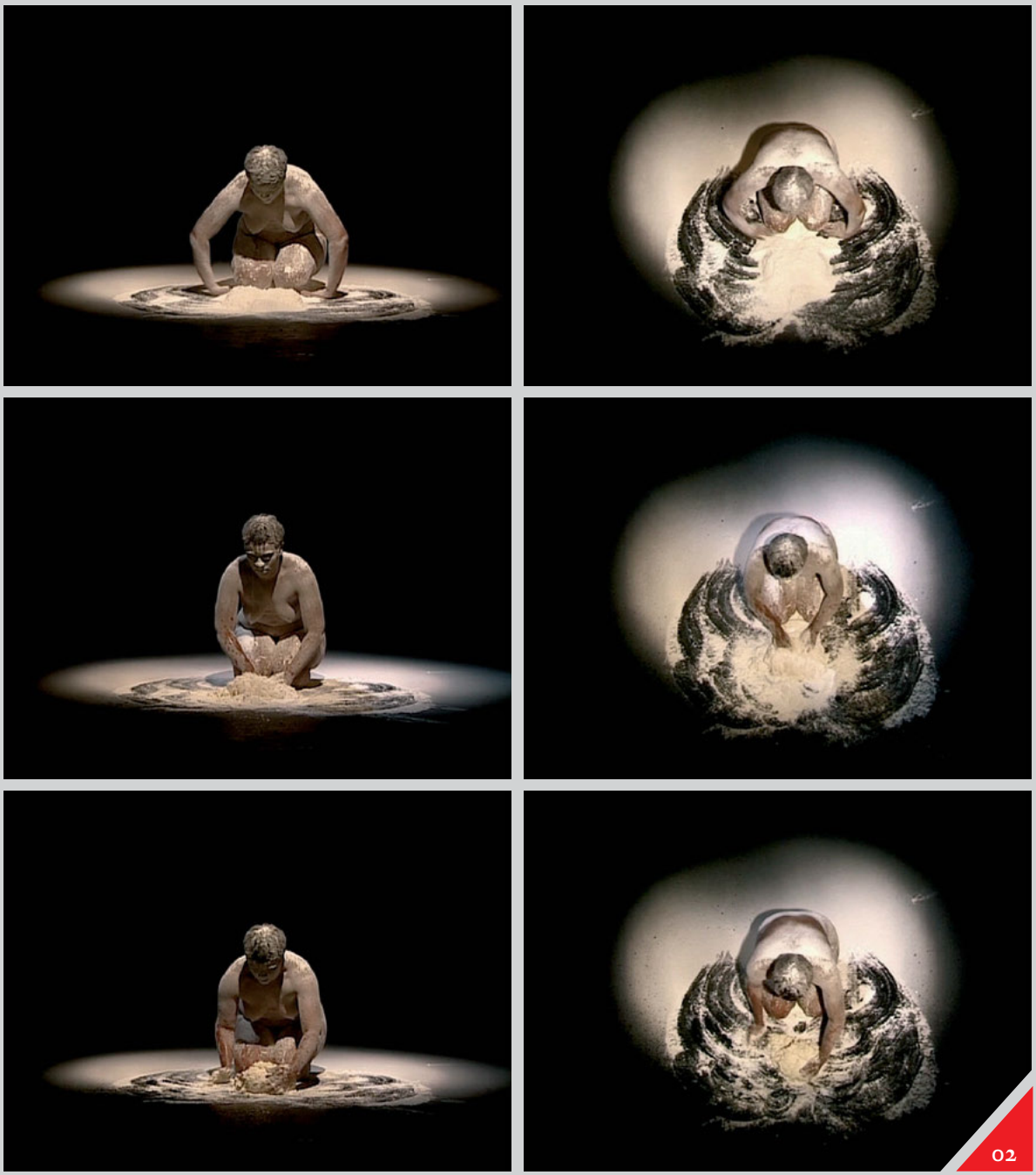

Figure 2b: Berni Searle, video stills from *Snow White* installation, 2001, two projector video installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

globally following the expansion of certain economic flows.

If one considers spices as a form of the archive, it is possible to say that they operate in Searle's work along a similar dialectical divide inherent to the archive, proposed by Achille Mbembe (2002). On the one hand, Mbembe (2002:19) explains that the archive is the building, the housing, or domestic (-ated) space of historical knowledge. The archive is also the document, the record of what has, or what might be imagined, to have happened. It is both the monument and the material that composes that monument. One is meant to recognise the structure as cohesive, as a totality. Just

Figure 3: Berni Searle, *Untitled* from the *Colour Me* series, 1998, handprinted colour photographs, 42 x 50 each. Edition of 10 + 1 AP. Photographs by Jean Brundrit. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

as memorials and monuments variegate the historical topography of a nation, the statue or the archive (the building) imposes an aesthetic and semiotic wholeness onto the fragmented narratives that are bound up in the bronze or concrete. This architectural integration is meant to structure one's apprehension of the documents collected inside. The aesthetics of architectural comprehensiveness are read as temporal wholeness in constructing the narrative of nations. On the other hand, Mbembe (2002:21) observes that the 'status' of the archive 'is also an imaginary one':

> [n]o archive can be the depository of the entire history of a society, of all that has happened in that society. Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after another, 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. … just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition.

Searle's work prompts the viewer to consider the status of the body in similar ways to Mbembe's archive – in other words, to consider its status as 'imaginary'. In contrast to conceptions of the body as a cohesive unit, Searle stages the body as fundamentally fragmentary, giving image to the multivalent narratives, or fragments of stories, carried on and in each person. This deconstruction of the body's fictive wholeness reveals the crucible of local and global forces by which bodily

images are formed. In each frame of the *Untitled* prints from the *Colour Me* series (Figure 3), Searle's body is rendered un-whole by the canvassing of spice powders. The alternate coverage and exposure of skin creates a newly revealed topography, only rendered visible by bridging the narrative gap between the body and the spice. As with the "architecture-archive" that holds the "document-archive", the viewer can make sense of the spiced body only in that space where this image creates a new, imaginary narrative wholeness; the space between where the body exists and how the spice came to it. The multiple frames, as well as the varied spices each with distinct coloration, makes it clear that any sense of wholeness garnered from this visual experience comes from what Mbembe (2002:21) terms 'craft[ed] links'. The viewer is thus prompted to make sense of Searle's body only in relation to the multiple colours and types of spices – a perception that is compounded by the fact that these powders come from equally varied places.

Thinking about this newly revealed archive historically, it is possible to see how, in placing the contemporary South African body beyond the sole purview of apartheid's historiographical hegemony, Searle does not privilege the spice trade as a cohesive paradigm. Rather, in my reading of her work, her critique – seen through a multiplicity of perspectives – on colour, on the body, and on wholeness and fragmentation, destabilises presumptions made about the narratological solidity of history in general. As another of Searle's more recent titles (*Looking back* (2008)), suggests, "looking back" precipitates a kaleidoscopic vision of history, one in which constructing clarity in the present requires acts of narrative construction and contrivance. In her work, Searle provides reminders not to privilege one historiographical trope in this narrative act. The national imagination provides historical, narrative (and fictional) wholeness; in much the same way as the bricks and mortar housing the documents of the archive impose a (fictional) wholeness on the fragments they protect. What Searle accomplishes is not merely the deconstruction of the apartheid archive as a coherent master narrative; she also exposes the global historical economies which authored/authorised the very space of possibility for the apartheid system.

Another, and possibly more productive way to think about Searle's work as an interrogation of archives, is through Michel Foucault's use of the term "archive" to articulate a system of enunciability. Foucault (1972: 128, 129) conceptualises the archive as neither 'the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person … nor … the institution that is responsible for their preservation'. Foucault (1972:128, 129) imagines the relational travel of discourses, accumulating to form a 'system of statements'. This discursive system, Foucault (1972:128, 129) continues, means that statements (textual and visual) have 'appeared by virtue of a whole set of relations that are peculiar to the discursive level'; indeed, 'instead of being adventitious figures grafted as it were, in a rather haphazard way, on to silent processes, they are born in accordance with specific regularities'. Reading Searle's work in Foucauldian terms, one may deduce that the spices Searle uses are an archive of global trafficking; an economy that transmitted and cultivated ideas, on race, culture, history, and the categorisation of peoples. Searle's spices, not inherent or indigenous – but rather, to use Foucault's term 'adventitious' – index an episteme that authorised various articulations of power, oppression, categorisation, and racisms – a discourse of which apartheid is a particular South African inflection. Again, Goldberg (2009b: 1273) notes that,

> [t]he local may provide a particular timbre and colour to the ideas' reference or application, their sound and style. It gives voice to racial expression and racist arrangement in specific

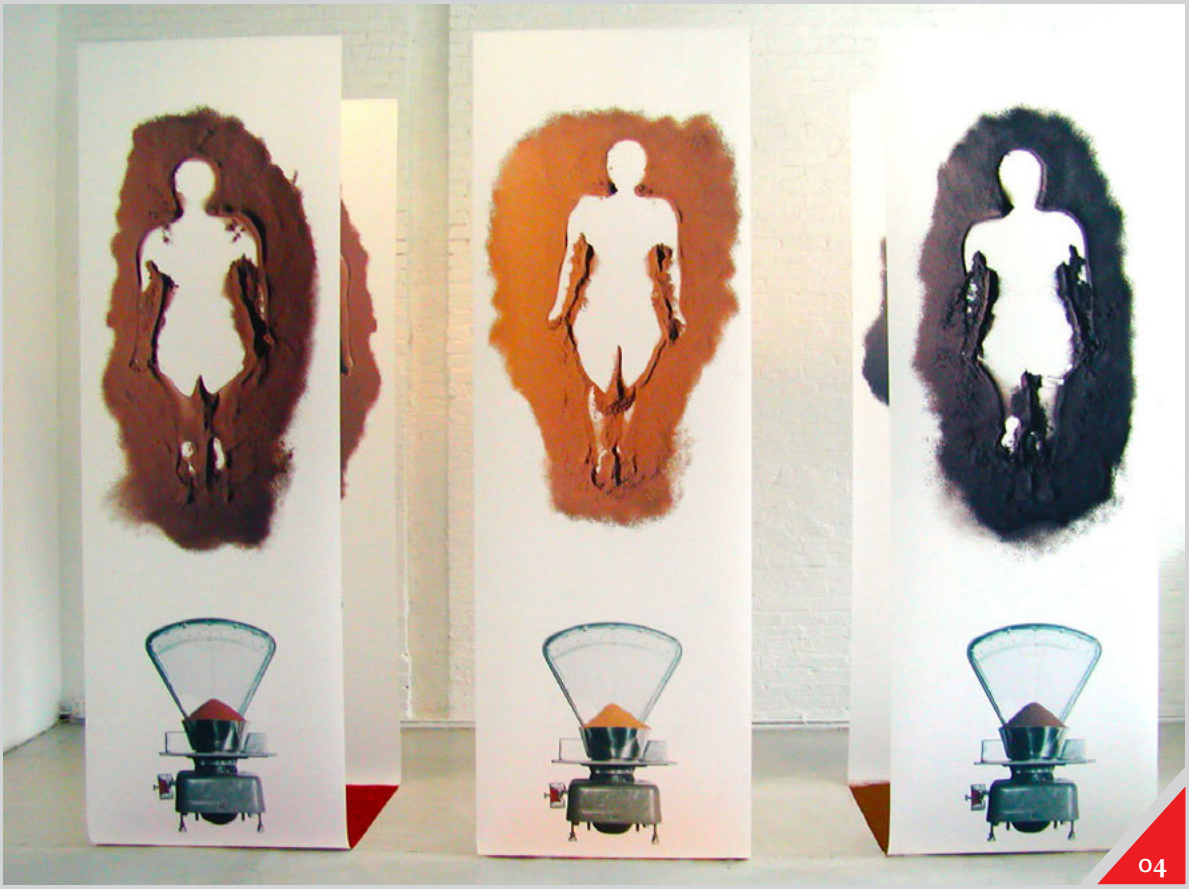

Figure 4: Berni Searle, *Traces* from the *Colour Me* series, installation, digital prints on architect's tracing paper/vellum, spices, 6 prints, 300 x 91 cm each. Edition of 3 + 1 AP. Photographs by Jean Brundrit. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

> ways. But, while the accent may be unique, as too the semantic content and even the syntax, their influences and implications most often are not.

Thus, Searle's work does indeed "look back" to the global attenuations of a historical system of race/racialisation, exploring the particular inflections of its South African articulation.

In this discussion of archives, discourse and ritualised symbols, I am not de-privileging the importance of materiality in Searle's works. The viewer cannot deny that he/she is seeing a woman's body; a woman classified as "coloured" under apartheid racialist logics. However, in my view, in her works, Searle un-writes apartheid as the penultimate sign under which the semiotics of identity must be given significance. Apartheid, with its pseudo-scientific mythology of racial origins and discreteness, is seen as part of a discursive history that has global reverberations. Searle prompts viewers to look at Foucault's (1972) 'system of enunciation' – that authorising episteme within which the South African articulation of race under apartheid was formulated.

In *Traces*, from the *Colour Me* series (Figure 4), Searle productively stages these negotiations between the material and immaterial (or perhaps the discursive frame), and between the present and the absent. The work is presented as two series of photographic installations, which hang in rows. In the series hanging at the

Figures 5 & 6: Berni Searle, detail from Traces in the *Colour Me* series, 1999. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

back of the installation, Searle's body is present, masked by a heap of spice powders that have accumulated over her. In the set of prints hanging nearest to the viewer, the body is removed; its trace is discernable only through the accumulated powders that form an uncanny outline of the absent body. Underneath each print is an image of a weighing scale carrying an amount of spice. In the more distant set of prints, the viewer is confronted with the intense materiality of race as it has been violently applied to bodies, whilst in the front series, he/she is forced to make sense of these racial discourses without the particularities that might be offered by the image of a body. Rory Bester (2003) notes that there is an ethnographic resonance in *Traces*, and whilst I agree, I offer that there are potentially multiple statements on ethnography made in this work. With reference to the set of prints hanging in front, I ask: what does ethnography without a body look like – a haunting of the very discourse of ethnography itself perhaps?

In the rear set of prints, the critique is clearer: economies of race in South Africa – which are fueled by ethnographic knowledge production themselves – have produced systems of valuation according to colouration. However, the "ethnographies of the trace" presented in the prints in front, represent materiality in another

way: as suggestion – again as both an 'aesthetics of disappearance' (Van der Watt 2004:126), and as a politics of the present, or the conspicuously *not present*. Notice the way in which the spice seems to have penetrated the outline of the body, particularly near the shoulder – implying an in-corporation, a trace left on the inside (Figure 5, detail). This work is, arguably, about the unmistakable materiality of the discourse itself. Unlike other works in the series, what is in this first set is all "frame". While the back series comments on how bodies have been measured by the scales of racism's economies, the front series presents a direct indictment against the logic of race, the very epistemological conditions in which valuations of people can be made; the latter is more of a global critique than a specifically South African one.

Searle's work thus offers an interrogation of the global positioning of South Africa *vis-à-vis* the histories of the spice trade as well as the unique inflections of the valence of so-called "coloured identity" in South Africa. However, as I have shown, the scope of her work is more expansive than this interrogation. The body of criticism that surrounds her work tends to focus solely on the racial and gender resonances within a South African context, and thereby re-inscribes a hegemonic apartheid historiography. By extension, I argue that Searle's work is an intervention into race studies that thinks beyond the national (whilst not erasing the latter); in these works, the local development, application, experience of race is always involved in a dialogic production between the local and the global.

By using spices as subject matter of her work, Searle succeeds in opening up the South African fields of both race discourse and aesthetic practices. In other words, Searle's works, and particularly the *Colour Me* series, stages the productive potential of an aesthetics that does not plumb the depths of a strictly national genealogy in search of a contemporary critique of race. Instead, Searle's work explodes the semiotic and historiographical horizons of such inquiries, registering the myriad southern hemispheric experiences of the Spice Trade just as relevant for articulating race histories of South Africa as, say, the origins of National Party ascension in the first half of the twentieth-century. In this way, liminality becomes not only an important way to think about transition, but also a spatial-historiographical paradigm for thinking about encounters and, perhaps less intuitively, about intimacies. In her work, Searle stages the liminal as not only the transformative space of becoming – in the sense of becoming "the New South Africa" – but also, as the space of contact between a narrative of national emergence and global histories of influence and encounter. In so doing, Searle's work makes a significant contribution towards moving South African visual art in a post-apartheid context beyond that very designate – that is, beyond the spatial and historical constrictions of a post-apartheid South African context and into the realm of global histories of relation and exchange.

Notes

1 Note, for example, the abundance of this "apartheid paradigm" evident in the following works: Clark (2011); Welsh (2010); Worden (2007). It is important to note that I am not making a specific critique of any one of the above titles for their merits or shortcomings. Rather, I choose these titles only to demonstrate the way in which an "apartheid narrative paradigm" displays a particular hegemony over historical writings about South Africa.

2 Although there is not space to do so here, I believe there is a conversation to be had about liminality *vis-à-vis* South African economic and political citizenship – both currently and historically. Such a discussion would ask questions about systemic forms of exiling and existence both nationally and globally. Indeed, one might ask how South Africans in a post-apartheid moment conceive of themselves within the global imagination? Likewise, what are the genealogies of this identity formulation and how has it (inter)-acted with more exclusionary conceptions of "national" identities? Perhaps a discussion of the ways in which apartheid, far from being an exceptional (-ised) instance of institutionalised racism, would be better approached from a perspective of its global relationality to other forms of race thinking and racisms.

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