

Shame. Silence. Memory. Forgetting: Wilgenhof, belonging and unbelonging at Stellenbosch University

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FIRST DRAFT**

Prelude

When I was asked to provide a brief description of this presentation on recent revelations about the continuation of abusive initiation practices and other traditions at Wilgenhof men's residence at the University of Stellenbosch, I promised that my presentation would engage with broader questions about the exclusionary nature of the institutional culture in men's residences and the broader Stellenbosch University campus, and the reasons for its continued existence and the fierceness with which the practices are being defended. But as often happens in the writing process, the piece – a first draft – went in a slightly different direction. It turns out I could have saved myself a lot of trouble by sending no more than four words to the organisers: Shame. Silence. Memory. Forgetting.

In what follows I attempt to think through and with these concepts, to explore whether they might tell us something about Wilgenhof, men's residences more broadly, and the University of Stellenbosch by offering you three stories: The story of the Rector; The story of the students; and The story of Chancellor.

1. The story of the Rector

After I wrote about my experiences as a student at Wilgenhof earlier this year, I received several emails in response. One of these emails alerted me to a chapter entitled “The Stellenbosch Student, 1918-2018”, written by Prof Wessel Visser, and published in *Stellenbosch University 100: 1918-2018*, the official publication celebrating Stellenbosch University's centenary in 2018.

Reading through this chapter, I discover that initiation was practiced at Wilgenhof as early as 1909 (when it was still known as Victoria College). Visser writes: “The initiation rituals included blindfolding and tying students up and making them free-fall on a rope from the first floor into a mud bath on the ground. They also had to recite poems or sing songs and drink castor oil and aloin. This was followed by a brushing session with towel slings by seniors, who stood in a long row.” But these practices as well as other *koshuis tradisies* were not unique to Wilgenhof, having long been practiced in both men's and woman's residences at the University of Stellenbosch.

Prof Visser reports that these practices were “abolished for the first time by university authorities in 1922,” because the practices “were associated with brutality, bullying, exhaustion and danger”. But the practices “continued for many years under the guise of euphemistic terms such as ‘induction’, ‘incorporation’, ‘orientation’, ‘adaptation’, ‘welcoming’, ‘integration’, and ‘settling in’.”¹

The initiation practices were officially abolished for the second time in 1936.

In 1972, after a student was permanently paralysed in a mud-bath initiation ritual that, “an overall ban was placed on certain initiation practices, including mud baths, putting pillow cases or bags over students’ heads, applying or rubbing substances on bodies, physical exercise, the removal of students from residences during the night and depriving them of sleep.”

In the early 1980s students and lecturers complained about the continued initiation practices in the media. Jeremy Zipp, a former resident of Helshoogte, sent a detailed report to the University administration describing the abusive practices taking place in several residences. Stellenbosch University chief medical officer Dr JJ van Heerden also informed the authorities about “physical problems” associated with initiation practices, including “disturbed sleep, physical exertion and overexposure to unusual weather conditions, besides acute anxiety, depression and hysteria”. In response Vice Rector JWR (Roux) de Villiers “gave a clear warning that he would personally intervene to get rid of ‘first-year bullies’ in residences if HCs [house committees] did not take action”.²

As Prof Visser makes clear, the same pattern has continued over the past 30 years. Reports that initiation practices and abusive *koshuis* traditions were continuing, followed by stern statements by the University management that such practices and tradition had no place at Stellenbosch and that action will be taken against students who flouted the rules. And so, the end of abuses was again decreed in 2001 when the Stellenbosch University Council adopted a motion that external monitors would operate in residences from 2002 to prevent initiation malpractices after a student of Huis Visser had died during a voluntary initiation practice.³

¹ Prof Wessel Visser “The Stellenbosch Student, 1918-2018” 92-166 in Albert Grundling (ed) *Stellenbosch University 100: 1918-2018* (2018) at 96.

² Visser at 130.

³ Visser at 152.

Prof Visser lists a number of justifications advanced for these practices over the years. It was, according to one source, all about the “esprit de corps of Matieland”. Another argument was that without the discipline of initiation, organized student life would amount to a farce, confusion and chaos with no mutual bond between first years.⁴ It was an indispensable system to develop a “strong, positive but constructive character in first year students”.⁵ Others argued that orientation needed to be retained for the sake of the character of Matieland, while yet others argued that it was necessary to retain each residence’s identity and uniqueness.⁶ Lastly a student leader commented that: “[m]any first years like the initiation. They are masochists. As with rugby, it hurts, but it is nice.”⁷

What Visser’s chapter does not mention is that, until the end of last year, all residence heads of Wilgenhof *koshuis* had been former residents of the *koshuis*. As former residents they knew about its traditions and practices, knew about the Nagligte and what happened in the locked rooms of Hool 88. None of them blew the whistle. As far as I know, none of them have ever been disciplined.

A day after the piece I wrote about my experiences at Wilgenhof and what it might mean for the University was published on *Daily Maverick*,⁸ I received an email from a former Rector of Stellenbosch University, Prof Chris Brink, in which he drew my attention to a list of instances where he had criticised initiation practices and the toxic residence culture during his term as Rector, including a piece (with a link attached) in which he described initiation as a form of structural violence. I responded as follows:

*Thank you for your email and the links to various of your writings [on initiation practices and residence culture]. As you rightly noted in your 2022 speech, it is a Sisyphean task to undo the residence culture and corresponding abuses. Unfortunately, your (somewhat self-exculpatory) email does not explain why you did not take the necessary steps when you served as Rector to change the culture and eradicate the abuses.*⁹

⁴ Visser at 121,

⁵ Visser at 105.

⁶ Visser at 142

⁷ Visser at 130

⁸ Pierre de Vos “Maties must root out toxic and exclusionary culture exposed at Wilgenhof, but is it brave enough?”, *Daily Maverick*, 31 January 2024, accessed on 7 April at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-01-31-maties-must-root-out-toxic-and-exclusionary-culture-exposed-at-wilgenhof-but-is-it-brave-enough>.

⁹ This is a loose translation of an email I sent to Prof Brink on 1 February 2024. My full response in Afrikaans reads as follows:

“Dankie vir jou epos en die skakels na die jou verskeie geskrifte. Soos jy tereg opmerk in jou 2022 toespraak is dit ‘n “Sisyphean task” om die koshuiskultuur en die vergrype wat daarmee gepaardgaan ongedaan te maak. Ongelukkig verduidelik jou (effens selfveronskuldigende?) epos egter nie hoekom jy nie meer daadwerklik opgetree het tydens jou Rektorskap om daad by die woord te voeg om dit verander te kry nie.”

Prof Brink never responded to my email.

2. The story of the student

I was a resident at Wilgenhof in 1984 and 1985, in my first two years of study at Stellenbosch University. I have written about my experiences of Wilgenhof initiation and its other traditions like the Nagligte in my piece for *Daily Maverick*, so need not repeat it here. After publication of my piece, I took part in a News24 webinar¹⁰ on the revelations about the continuing abuses at Wilgenhof where I was asked why I had not written about this before, why I had not exposed these abuses. Thus, in effect, why I had remained silent, or perhaps why I had not actively campaigned against Wilgenhof. I pointed out that all these practices were well known, and, in fact that *Die Matie* newspaper had described all the practices that I myself had experienced accurately and in detail in 1985, at the time when I was a second-year student in Wilgenhof. Everything had already been revealed. In any event, I told the questioner, I had publicly distanced myself from Wilgenhof many years ago, and have never shied away from talking about the abuses when it came up in public and private conversations.

While this was all true, the question nevertheless troubled me for days after the event. Something, I thought, was missing from my answer. I want to suggest now that one thing that may have been missing from my answer is the role that shame and silence might play in keeping these practices alive.

During the News24 webinar much was said about initiation and other abusive *koshuis* practices being a form of trauma bonding, where the abused group of first year students develop an unhealthy attachment to their abusers, because of a misplaced sense of loyalty.

This may be so.

But I am more interested in the way in which initiation practices and other *koshuis* traditions discipline and control students by manufacturing their complicity in the abuses: by allowing themselves (ourselves) to be subjected to it, by staying silent during the practices and acquiescing in their (our) own humiliation, and by not intervening when others are picked on or bullied, and then, in some cases, by taking part in abuses when they are no longer first year students, and even enjoying the fleeting power this gives them. Complicity,

¹⁰ The recording of the webinar can be accessed here: https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/reader_hub/webinar-news24-panel-unpacks-stellenbosch-universitys-secret-shame-at-1230-this-thursday-20240131.

hopefully, causes shame. But shame, wrongly directed, often results in silence, reproducing the cycle of complicity.

It was while I was pondering all this, that a long-banished memory came back to me – an unwelcome visitor from 1979 when I was a grade 10 pupil at Pietersburg Hoërskool and was forced to attend a Veldskool – with boys from another school - at a camp near Pelgrim’s Rest in what today is called Mpumalanga. During the nineteen seventies and eighties it was compulsory for all white learners in the then Transvaal to attend a 10 day long Veldskool in their grade 7 and again in their grade 10 years. Veldskool – Hitler-Jugend light, my father called it – was a quasi-military camp, the aim being to instill in us a love of nature and how to live in harmony with nature, and to strengthen our faith in God. But also, to instill in us the kind of discipline and patriotism required to resist and counter the *rooi gevaar* and the *swart gevaar*, and – for boys – to prepare us for our military conscription and “fighting on the border”. There was a lot of shouting and military drills, running, doing push-ups, climbing ropes and scaling walls, culminating in a night march where groups of us were dropped off in a pine forest about 5 km from the camp, and required to navigate our way back relying on the stars. A quick Google search revealed that Veldkool is mentioned in the biography of Elon Musk, written by Walter Isaacson where it is called “a paramilitary Lord of the Flies”. This I know, because the criticism of Veldskool in the Musk biography elicited a defense of Veldskool by Ernts Roets of Afriforum. Part of Roets’ description reads as follows:¹¹

At night we had activities such as *lanternbekruip* (which means “lantern stalking”). It involved putting a lantern somewhere in the bush at night with someone guarding it, and then having the children stalk the lantern to see who could get the closest without being spotted. This was after being taught how to camouflage yourself and how to approach someone undetected. Sometimes children played capture the flag, where they were divided into groups and then “attacked” each other by stealing the other group’s flag. This usually happened in silence, because the point was not to be detected, but sometimes the kids would wrestle to capture each other.

The similarities between Veldskool and residence initiation practices that occurred for many decades at predominantly white Afrikaans Universities across South Africa must be evident. In grade 7 I attended Veldskool at a camp outside Ermelo. Apart from managing to sink my canoe in the dam during a canoe race, and my best friend wetting his bed every night, this experience – while scary and intimidating – was relatively uneventful. But in grade 10, things were different. When I have spoken about Veldskool in the past, I usually mentioned the thin-lipped, mustachioed, instructor – a former

¹¹ ERnts Roets “In Defence of Veldskool”, *Politicsweb*, 19 October 2023, accessed on 7 April 2024 at <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/opinion/in-defense-of-veldskool-a-response-to-elon-musk-an>.

Serjeant Major in the SA Defence Force – who shouted at me when I suggested that communist could also be patriotic and love their country, and the woman with the blond permed hair and plucked eyebrows who came to talk to us about to warn us about the satanic messages in rock music, which only became apparent if you played these records backwards, and how flustered she became when I told her that I had tried to play Queen’s “Night at the Opera” backward but had not been able to hear anything, and asked her if she could explain how to play records backward so that we could hear for ourselves how evil Satan was.

There is no doubt that in this version I am the hero of my own story.

What I never mentioned was the story of Helmut. Helmut, who attended another school, slept in the same 20-person bungalow that I slept in. Each morning at sunrise we had to walk into the veld, find a secluded spot, and read from the Bible and pray for half an hour. On the first morning Helmut and I walked into the veld together, chatted about what I cannot remember now, before finding our spots close to each other to read and pray in silence. That first morning I had chosen to read a passage from the Book of Job:

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”

While I struggled through this passage, I occasionally sneaked a look at Helmut who was not reading from the Bible but was seemingly intently studying the ants at his feet. I feared then that he would be discovered and disciplined for his insolence. Or perhaps I feared that God would punish him if not today, then on judgment day. But walking back to the camp I did not mention any of this to him. Helmut spoke Afrikaans with a difficult-to-place accent (his parents having emigrated from Germany a few years earlier), and his voice had not broken yet (neither had mine), and just like me he mostly spoke in a creaky falsetto. He was smaller and even skinnier than I was, with translucent, almost blue, skin. It turned out that he was even worse at the marching, and running, and climbing ropes than I was. The teachers and instructors picked on him and humiliated him whenever they could, as did some of the other boys. On that first afternoon, on the day we had walked into the veld together, some of the bigger boys in our bungalow cornered Helmut and ordered him to strip naked, before tying his arms to his penis with a piece of string and forcing him to stand under the cold shower while

mocking his scrawny body and the size of his penis, followed by the usual homophobic slurs. The air was thick with sexual tension. The rest of us watched in silence. What I felt then was this: relief (it was him, not me), horror and anger (at the violence, the cruelty) and – this is probably an after the fact construction, as I would never have admitted this at the time – excitement at his naked body and the suggestions of sex hanging in the air. After that afternoon, I avoided Helmut and did not acknowledge his existence or spoke to him again.

I want to suggest that by not doing or saying anything and by shunning Helmut, I had saved *and* implicated myself, and had thus effectively been co-opted into the group to which I would never really belong. It produced a complicated kind of shame in me – and thus also secured my silence. In a novel I published many years ago, I transformed this event into a humorous story about one of the boys in the bungalow suggesting that we all play a game called “soggy biscuit”, a game involving a circle-jerk, and a soggy Marie biscuit to be eaten by the loser of the game. This was the only way I could begin to write about what happened at the Veldskool without revealing my own silent complicity in, and shame about, the events.

I had not mentioned any of this to anyone before – not even in a private conversation.

Something similar happened in my second year at Wilgenhof when a male student who had shouted *Bekfluitjie* outside the *koshuis* had been caught (as was the *koshuis* tradition then), stripped naked, made to stand on a table in the quad and then painted with black paint while frenzied Wilgenhoffers shouted insults at the boy and commented on the size of his cock. Surprisingly most of these comments were complimentary about its size. (There is a thesis or a book to be written about masculinity and the homoerotic aggression of so many of the rituals and practices associated with residence culture and initiation, and the possible shame it may induce in participants.)

Perhaps we underestimate the staying power of the abusive bonding practices and rituals associated with the Stellenbosch *koshuis* culture, because we do not take full account of the role that complicity, and the “wrong” kind of shame,¹² play in the creation and perpetuation of silence around them.

¹² I find helpful here the distinction my colleague Jaco Barnard-Naudé draws in the context of a discussion in the TRC between ‘shaming that leads to stigmatization – to outcasting, to confirmation of a deviant master status’ and the shaming that ‘is reintegrative, that shames while maintaining bonds of respect or love, that sharply terminates disapproval with forgiveness’. See Jaco Barnard-Naudé. “On Apology and the Failure of Shame in the TRC.” *Unsettling Apologies*. 1st ed. Bristol University Press, 2022. 264 at 278.

3. The story of the Chancellor

There may be another way to frame the question of complicity and its consequences that might take us beyond the small town of Stellenbosch into the wider world, over the Eersterivier and beyond the Simonsberg mountain. Could the reason why these traditional practices and residence culture are so vehemently defended by some and to change more generally not also be explained as a kind of resistance to having to “rewrite” one’s own past, to have to insert in one’s own story also parts of that story one might have chosen to airbrush out? Is the story of Wilgenhof, of residences more broadly, of the University and fights about *die taal*, not also and always be a matter of memory, of remembering or misremembering (and thus forgetting) the past, and of the ability or willingness of white South Africans to confront the past honestly and squarely, and therefore also the continued impact of the past on the present? Put differently, does the ability of white students to continue to enjoy a sense of belonging to institutions like Wilgenhof or Stellenbosch University more broadly, institutions created in the image of, and largely still reflecting, the values, culture, and world view of white Afrikaners, perhaps require or depend on *not* remembering or not excavating aspects of the past – its traditions and culture – that would remind us of its tainted history and our direct or indirect complicity in it? And at what cost does such a sense of belonging come for those who feel they do not belong?

In my original *Daily Maverick* piece I wrote:

“To understand why institutions like Wilgenhof have been so resistant to, and so successful at resisting, change, and why an eminent jurist like justice Edwin Cameron would favour retention of some of the potentially harmful, alienating, and (inevitably) exclusionary practices rooted in its long (and for some current and old Wilgenhoffers, illustrious) history, one has to understand that some opposition to change is rooted in a belief that Stellenbosch University in general, and Wilgenhof in particular, belongs to white Afrikaners, or – at the very least – should provide a space where the culture and traditions rooted in Afrikaner culture can be upheld and such Afrikaners can feel they truly belong – as if nothing had changed.”

After I posted this extract (along with a link to the full article) on Facebook, a senior advocate who for many years served as the Chairperson of the Cape Bar Council (and who was a member of the prim committee at Wilgenhof when I was a second year student) responded as follows:

“I usually agree with you and I have admittedly not read your article, but I disagree profoundly with your introductory summary. I arrived at Wilgenhof with a smattering of Afrikaans and having largely been schooled and socialised with English speaking South Africans. I did not feel alienated in the least by the predominant

Afrikaans culture of Wilgenhof (which I expected since US was unashamedly an Afrikaans university which I had elected to attend) Indeed I found it far more accommodating of a wide spectrum of political and social views than I had typically encountered in the English speaking institutions and communities I'd grown up in.” After I pointed out that in 1995 Wilgenhof residents had attempted to disrupt a protest march when the march came past the residence, and suggested that how one experienced Wilgenhof back then might say something about ones politics at the time, he responded: “I was pro-democracy and quite vocal on matters political. I never once felt that I was as a result in an environment hostile to divergent political or social outlook. Exactly the opposite.”

To become or remain the hero of our own story requires, to some degree at least, a rewriting of that history, or of misremembering, even forgetting those parts of one’s past in which one is not the hero of one’s own story.

I had a similar thought when I read comments previously made by justice Edwin Cameron, a former *primarius* (head of the Residence Committee) of Wilgenhof who currently serves as Chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch. In [an interview with Beeld newspaper in 2003](#), Cameron suggested that there was nothing inherently wrong with the abusive practices at Wilgenhof, telling residents that he experienced Wilgenhof initiation as disciplined, effective, non-humiliating, constructive, and, above all, amusing. In the same interview he is quoted as saying that when discussing these practices, one should remember that adults who know what their human rights are and who are mindful of their human dignity, may consent to participation in practices and traditions that may come across as strange to others. Such unique practices could, in fact, enrich an institution and its culture, he said. In a 2020 interview he also said that even “Die Nagligte” could continue as long as it happened with the necessary informed consent of those involved.

(Because of how this story ends, I need to explain that I have known Edwin as an acquaintance for many years, and that after my HIV diagnosis, Edwin invited me to a dinner at his house where he showed me great kindness and care - although I found the dinner excruciatingly awkward, steeped as I then was in the shame associated with my diagnoses.)

When I read Edwin’s comments, I immediately thought of a dissenting judgment co-authored by Cameron in the Constitutional Court in the case of *City of Tshwane*

Metropolitan Municipality v Afriforum and Another,¹³ a case which turned on the question of whether the historically-rooted cultural tradition of white South Africans find any recognition in the Constitution. In effect, the case asked: to what extent is the Court permitted to consider the fact that the purpose of the litigation was to preserve cultural traditions rooted in a shameful racist past; and perhaps in a more oblique way, to what extent the use of such a culture to preserve existing privileges should be countenanced.

The case dealt with the emotive issue (at least emotive for some) of street name changes. Afriforum had obtained an urgent interdict in the High Court to stop the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality Council from implementing a decision to “replace old street names like Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, Louis Botha and Walker with new ones like President Nelson Mandela, Chief Justice Ismail Mohamed, Solomon Mahlangu and Steve Biko”.¹⁴ The Constitutional Court (in a judgment penned by Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng) set aside the interdict, taking a dim view of AfriForum’s claim that the name changes were an assault on the “treasured history and heritage” of the (white) “Afrikaners”,¹⁵ calling AfriForum’s position “highly insensitive”.¹⁶ In his judgment, justice Mogoeng, in his usual high-octane Pentecostal way, railed against AfriForum and the minority, emphasising the importance of recognising the injustices of the past, which “heralds an obligation to actively participate not in the perpetuation but, in the eradication of the injustices of the past”.¹⁷ In a concurring judgment, justice Chris Jafta took further issue with the dissenters, stating that “there can be no justification for recognition of cultural traditions or interests “based on a sense of belonging to the place where one lives” if those interests “are rooted in the shameful racist past”.¹⁸

Justice Cameron (writing with justice Johan Froneman), penned a dissenting judgment, in which the problem was framed in stark terms: whether “reliance by white South Africans, particularly white Afrikaner people, on a cultural tradition founded in history, finds no recognition in the Constitution, because that history is inevitably rooted in oppression”,¹⁹

¹³ (157/15) [2016] ZACC 19; 2016 (9) BCLR 1133 (CC); 2016 (6) SA 279 (CC) (21 July 2016).

¹⁴ Ibid at para 22.

¹⁵ The term “Afrikaner”, and the extent to which it is also a racial identity, is a contested one. Although I view “Afrikaner as inevitably having a racial identity, I add “white” in front of the term for the sake of clarity. do not believe Africa” (2001) *Daedalus* pp 19-44; and Yehonatan Alsheh & Florian Elliker “The Art of Becoming a Minority: Afrikaner Re-politicisation and Afrikaans Political Ethnicity” (2015) *African Studies* pp 429-448. The distinction between the political identity (“Afrikaner”) and the language spoken (by not exclusively spoken) by members of this group (“Afrikaans”), is one I associate with, embracing the latter but not the former. (Of course, if one can in fact “un-Afrikaner” oneself as I attempt to do here, is another matter.)

¹⁶ Ibid at para 58.

¹⁷ Ibid at para 14.

¹⁸ Ibid at para 169.

¹⁹ Ibid at para 81.

and thus in the “[h]istory of colonialism, racism and apartheid”.²⁰ The dissenters noted that the historical figures after which the streets were named benefited from the fact that they, unlike most black people at the time, could own property, and that “[t]hose benefits have not dissipated”. “To deny these realities,” they wrote, “or avert one’s eyes to them lays one open to a charge that what one seeks to protect is not culture, but a heritage rooted in racism. The Constitution protects culture, yes, but not racism”. Despite this acknowledgement, the minority expressed reservations about the majority judgment, describing it as being based on the assumption that “any reliance by white South Africans, particularly white “Afrikaner” people, on any historically-rooted cultural tradition finds no recognition in the Constitution, because that history is inevitably rooted in oppression”.²¹ The dissenters then asked: “Does it entail that, as a general proposition, white Afrikaner people and white South Africans have no cultural rights that pre-date 1994, unless they can be shown not to be rooted in oppression?”²² The minority’s concern here seems to be with what it views as the majority’s oversimplification of South Africa’s “rich and complex history”, and the failure to recognise the contested nature of some of this history, which, its claims “has meaning for each of us, in diverse ways, which the Constitution accommodates and respects”. In this regard, the dissent explicitly warned that “[t]he complexities of history cannot be wiped away, and the Constitution does not ask that we do so”, and suggested that this issue was not only relevant for white Afrikaans speakers but also for others whose historical heroes – King Shaka Zulu, Mahatma Gandhi – are also steeped in controversy.²³

The arguments in the dissenting judgment had never convinced me. But I have never been able to explain with sufficient precision why this was so. I had always thought that there was a fundamental contradiction in the dissenting judgment. On the one hand acknowledging the need to confront the past. On the other airbrushing parts of that past out of the picture. Elsewhere Froneman (in a judgment concurred in by Cameron), warned “that the past is not done with us; that it is not past; that it will not leave us in peace until we have reckoned with its claims to justice”; and that an inevitable reckoning must take place.²⁴ But if these are more than empty words, it must require a reckoning with the

²⁰ Ibid at para 118.

²¹ Ibid at para 130.

²² Ibid at para 131. The full quote reads as follows:

“What does that mean in practical terms? Does it entail that, as a general proposition, white Afrikaner people and white South Africans have no cultural rights that pre-date 1994, unless they can be shown not to be rooted in oppression? How must that be done? Must all organisations with white South Africans or Afrikaners as members now have to demonstrate that they have no historical roots in our oppressive past? Who decides that, and on what standard?”

²³ Ibid at para 132.

²⁴ *Daniels v Scribante* [2017] ZACC 13; 2017 (4) SA 341 (CC); 2017 (8) BCLR 949 (CC) at para 154, quoted in *AfriForum v University of the Free State* at para 87.

lingering symbolic and material impact of the past on the present. In the context of renaming of cities and streets this at the very least would have to recognize, in the words of Mogoeng, “the extent to which names of places and institutions of importance generally celebrate one-sidedness and at times resonate with the legacy of our oppressive past with unbelievable boldness and alacrity”.²⁵ When we talk about a sense of belonging – in the city of Tshwane, at Stellenbosch University, at Wilgenhof – we are not starting with a clean slate. The culture, traditions and practices of those institution reflect the history, values and sense of belonging of an overbearing, socially and economically powerful, minority who ruled the country for centuries. Moreover, some of these values, practices and traditions are rooted in the authoritarian apartheid culture which has formed these institution in its image. (Wilgenhof may have developed its traditions and initiation practices long before the National Party and its Transvaal Department of Education forced white learners to attend Veldskool, but the horrors of the Veldskool are rooted in the same culture, values and traditions than those practiced for many decades at Wilgenhof.)

Recently I have come to think that the reason why I have never found the dissenting judgment convincing had something to do with the inability of the dissenters to see that Afriforum was, in effect, claiming a right to continue misremembering the past and to have that misremembering officially recognised by the city of Tshwane. Afriforum and its members were upset about the name changes because it signaled that their version of history was premised on a kind of willful amnesia (thus on a lie), a lie that was necessary to maintain to make sure that it remained possible for Afrikaners who identified with the “heroes” after whom the streets of old Pretoria were once named, to continue to see themselves as the complete heroes of their own stories. While the dissenters in the Constitutional Court’s Tshwane judgment do not have much in common with the members of the constituency represented by Afriforum, what they do have in common is that they are white and Afrikaans, and that they are emotionally deeply invested in this identity. In this sense, to have to accept that “white Afrikaner people and white South Africans have no cultural rights that pre-date 1994, unless they can be shown not to be rooted in oppression”, would require a confrontation with their own misremembering of the past.

In the context of Stellenbosch, for those who do not share this particular history, or not this misremembered version of the particular history, these practices are by their very nature exclusionary. They foster, and are meant to foster, a “residence identity” rooted in the particular (apartheid-tainted) history of each residence, an identity that may give some white Afrikaans students a “sense of belonging”, but – as the 2022 report of the Khampepe Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Racism at Stellenbosch pointed out

²⁵ *City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality v Afriforum* at para 13.

– is experienced as toxic and exclusionary by many students whose parents and grandparents were prohibited from attending the University, let alone living in a residence like Wilgenhof. Some defenders of the traditions, practices and culture of Stellenbosch or of a particular residence might well experience the necessary dismantling of this culture as a profound and unbearable loss. But I would suggest it is an experience facilitated by amnesia about the past and by an inability to recognise the lingering effects of this past on the present. Such change may be painful for some at least partly *because* it serves as a reminder that our past is not untainted, that the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and have always been, may not reflect what we wish it to reflect. It may remind us of our own complicity or the complicity of our parents in creating and maintaining the dominance. Is the fight about Stellenbosch, about die taal, about Wilgenhof, not also, then, a fight about the past and about how to remember it, and thus also about our identities.

A year after this judgment was handed down, I attended a same-sex wedding officiated by justice Cameron. After the ceremony, Edwin came up to me to introduce me to his partner, before asking about a column I had written the previous week about a judgment which declared invalid several rules of the Mount Edgecombe Country Club Estate Management Association in KwaZulu-Natal, including rules that restricted the movement of “domestic employees” on the estate.²⁶ The tone of my column had been mocking. I had written that when neighbours fight about body corporate rules they are often fighting about something entirely different than those rules (in the same way that when suburbanites talk about crime they often also talk about racial fears and their prejudices). They fight, I wrote, in my article:

about who “belongs” in a community and on what basis those who look different, speak different, or act different from them, should be welcomed into the community; about whose values, world view, and sense of right and wrong ought to prevail; about racial identity and about how an upper-middle class person should look and behave and think.

Edwin objected to the tone of the article. He touched my arm, and with a hint of paternalistic kindness in his voice, he said: “You are always so nasty about white people. It’s a kind of blind spot. A prejudice.” I ummed and aahed, and mumbled that he may have a point, and that I would think about what he had said.

Of course, had I wanted to rewrite this episode to make myself look better, (who does not want to be the hero of their own story) to erase a moment of silence and (is this too neat?) a moment of shame, I might have told you that I had turned the whole thing into a joke, and that I had turned to Edwin then and had jokingly told him in the campest possible way

²⁶ Pierre de Vos “Imagining what happened: on gated communities and privatized privilege”, *Daily Maverick*, 21 November 2017, accessed at <https://constitutionallyspeaking.co.za/imagining-what-happened-on-gated-communities-and-privatised-privilege>.

“Oh Edwin, darling, fuck off.” But this would have been rather implausible – I would never dare call the Chancellor of Stellenbosch University “darling”.