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Research Project

The Formation of a Victims' Subject Position in Today's South Africa: Embodiment and Juridification of Apartheid-Era Violence (Dissertation Rita Kesselring)

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Project title The Formation of a Victims' Subject Position in Today's South Africa: Embodiment and Juridification of Apartheid-Era Violence (Dissertation Rita Kesselring)

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The thesis looks at the emergence and the formation of a victim subject position in the works of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s and its aftermath. While the Commission focused on the most extreme dimensions of decades-long discrimination, deprivation and episodic violence, it neglected the everyday occurrence of violence. In effect, the prominent role victims had had in the Commission's project subsequently generated a persistent and narrow notion of victimhood with which the government and courts have operated ever since. Victims' support and lobby groups, on the other hand, insist on a broader understanding of apartheid-era victimhood. They also demand damages from European and US companies in US Courts that had allegedly aided and abetted the perpetuation of apartheid-era crimes.

It is in this context of both legalistic, politicized and exclusive notion of victimhood in today's South Africa that the thesis focuses on lived victim subjectivity. It asks for the social conditions for (and limits to) change of injured subjectivities in a post-conflict setting. Arguing for the importance of understanding the embodiment of experiences, the thesis shows the effects of routinized forms of violence on the conditions for the possibility of emancipating from past experiences of harm. It thereby not only gives an account of apartheid-era history through the experiences of victims but also of the enduring effects of that history.

The thesis offers an urgently needed evaluation of the effects of transitional justice mechanisms (such as truth commissions) that seek to install new forms of sociality by ascribing new social and legal status within a post-conflict society. A closer look at victims' lives in the official aftermath of such a transition gives insights into the difficulties of overcoming a cruel system but also into the dangers of creating new lines of exclusion.

The empirical data comes from long-term ethnographic fieldwork among victims of apartheid-era crimes.

Keywords gross human rights violations, law, victims, post-conflict societies

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Add publication

Published results

1659957, Kesselring, Rita, Corporate apartheid-era human rights violations before U.S. courts : political and legal controversies around victimhood in today's South Africa, 1992-8610, Stichproben : Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien, Publication: JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

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Specify cooperation partners

ID	Kreditinhaber	Kooperationspartner	Institution	Laufzeit - von	Laufzeit - bis
1541274	Förster, Till	Ross, Fiona, Professor	University of Cape Town	01.11.2008	31.12.2012