

Tronkvoël: An exploration of the intersection of personal experiences and identities, concerning depression.

By

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University.

February 2021

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Declaration of originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

Brunn Kramer

Date

Abstract

My diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder in 2018 led to my experience of a terrible loneliness and a peculiar isolation that triggered a feeling of imprisonment. The work thus engages with the idea of prison as a metaphor for depression, and is influenced by earlier work that centred around prisons and ex-prisoners. I explore the intersection of gender-based issues, homophobia, racism and religious prejudice that is based on my experiences and identities, in an attempt to understand the depression and communicate the complex prejudices I face in my daily life. The work is based on my lived experience, through which depression can feel like a self-constructed prison. Thus, by visually communicating my lived experiences with depression as a coloured, queer body, I also aim to encourage dialogue and open up conversations around mental illness, as it is all too often seen as taboo, particularly in communities of colour.

I harness old family photographs as a departure point to investigate personal memory, as well as recently captured selfies to explore my narrative of self-imprisonment. I also integrate objects from childhood games such as glass marbles, with prison objects like paper mache dice and shivs all presented in the form of an installation. My invisible prison is visually communicated further through incorporating visual language of the prison – including tattoos, prison slang, and ‘shifts and shanks’ (makeshift weapons). I use a variety of mediums, including charcoal, photographic transfers, paint and linocuts, with a combination of burning and smoking techniques, made by using candle soot, as a primary feature throughout my work. In this mini-thesis I reflect on memories from my childhood and the way they have informed my experience of depression as a self-constructed prison. I position my practice in relation to the work of South African artist Tsoku Maela who navigates similar concerns in his own artworks.

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Acknowledgements

I thank God for the guidance and light that He has shone upon my path. I would also like to thank my twin sister Bridgette Kramer and Patronique Zana for their support, love, and understanding throughout the process of completing this submission.

A special thank you to Professor Ruth Simbao for giving me the opportunity to realise this Master of Fine Art submission. I am sincerely grateful for the guidance, care, and compassion that you have shown throughout this process. I would also like to thank you for enabling me to meet and work with a diverse group of creatives who later became my friends. I acknowledge the National Research Foundation (NRF), SARChI research programme in Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa, and the Andrew W. Mellon Arts of Africa and the Global South's programme for their financial support and for giving me the opportunity to be part of Rhodes University's diverse student culture.

Dr. Rachel Baasch, you played such a huge role in developing my confidence in academic writing and your sympathetic approach towards supervising students such as myself who struggle with mental illnesses is worth commemorating. Your drive and commitment in academics have inspired within me a new found love in academic writing. I will forever be grateful.

Professor Dominic Thorburn I am sincerely grateful for your input and advice concerning my practice. Thank you for pushing my creativity to its limits and inspiring a mixed media approach,

which is different from traditional norms, as a way to better express myself.

Mamma (Christine Kramer) you are my motive, my reason and you shall forever be my impetus. Your struggles as a single mother have never deterred you from taking care of us and raising me to be where I am today. You inspired within me a need to do more and be more just as you have done for all your children, grandchildren and youngsters in our community as a whole. My heart is filled with gratitude as I aspire to be the humble and caring person that you are.

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Introduction

In this mini-thesis, I argue that the visual language of imprisonment can be used to explore and express a personal experience of depression. In the chapters that follow, I unpack the signs, symbols, and techniques that I have adopted from the visual culture of prisons. The purpose of this practice as research submission is to explore my personal experiences with depression through the metaphorical idea of a self-constructed prison. I elaborate on how the process of my work and usage of different media references memories, experiences, and childhood trauma. I discuss my incorporation of prison visual language to express the feeling of imprisonment that I associate with depression.

I use my personal history and ongoing experiences as a coloured, queer, Christian body, who was raised in a rural, poverty-stricken town to analyse and critically reflect on how my background and identities converge, and the impact thereof on my mental well-being. Therefore, I use intersectionality as a theoretical framework to discuss the overlapping of my ‘oppressed’ identities and lived experiences to understand the complex prejudices I face in my daily life and how that relates to my lived experience of depression. Using intersectionality as a framework allows me to consider all the contributing factors of my identity and experiences to elucidate my narrative of depression feeling like a self-constructed prison. Therefore, this research explores the intersection of gender-related issues, homophobia, classism, racism and religious prejudice and my subjection to all these social factors and the impact thereof on my mental health.

Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 139) in her paper titled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, where she uses three legal cases as the forefront to her argument that the legal systems narrow view of discrimination creates “a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis”. The origin of the idea was based on race and gender issues, with a focus on black female experiences. According to Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Leslie McCall (2013, 787) “Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980’s as a

heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics”. They argue that the treatment of these intersecting categories as separate and unrelated, (described by the authors as “single-axis thinking”) actually weakens efforts towards social justice (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 787). It is important to examine the ways in which “power is used, misused and abused” by those who occupy positions of power (Edmonds 2017, 7). Analysing social norms and stereotypes such as those that are addressed within my own practice through an intersectional lens allows for the interrogation of these power dynamics. In a recent interview, Crenshaw (2017,np) expands on the use of intersectionality as a “heuristic” for looking at inequality and discrimination:

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.

As a concept intersectionality developed and travelled beyond legal studies and is now applied to analyse oppression across many disciplines, as Devon Carbado et al. argue, “Intersectionality moves not only in relation to shifting subjects, but it moves more broadly as a prism linking and engaging scholarly subfields, research methodologies, and topical inquiries” (2013, 306). Chapter one details my personal history and examines my experiences of prejudice and depression as they inform the choices I have made within my practice as research, using the concept of intersectionality put forward by Kimberle Crenshaw.

My aim is not to romanticise, idealise or appropriate prison culture. I reference prison visual language as a way to express my personal narrative of prison as a metaphoric representation of depression. The title of my exhibition *Tronkvoël* (Jailbird) derives from a term that convicted felons use in reference to their confinement; this alludes to the core theme of this research: prison as a metaphor for depression. According to Dorothy Rowe (2013,vii):

Depression is as old as the human race, and rare is the person who has not felt its touch. Sometimes, suddenly, without apparent reason, we feel unbearably sad. The world turns grey, and we taste a bitterness in our mouth. We hear an echo of the bell that tolls our passing, and we

reach out for a comforting hand, but find ourselves alone. For some of us this experience is no more than a fleeting moment, or something we can dispel with common sense, thoughts and practical actions. But for some of us this experience becomes a ghost whose unbidden presence mars every feast, or worse, a prison whose walls, though invisible, are quite impenetrable).

This quote relates to the core themes of this research and accurately conveys the way in which Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) can feel like an invisible and isolating self-constructed prison. In chapter two I explicate my concept of prison as a metaphor for depression by referencing the work of Heide Levit, Yifaht Korman and Lynn Angus, who in their paper investigate the usage of metaphors in relation to depression. I reference Dorothy Rowe's book, which is based on her experiences with depression and as a psychologist, to improve my understanding of depression feeling like a prison and inspire different ways of incorporating and expressing prison as a metaphor for depression. Furthermore, I analyse some of my artworks and discuss the incorporation of prison visual culture with my identity and experiences, as a way to communicate my self-made prison.

The core focus of my mini-thesis is an in-depth analysis of the conceptual threads that intersect throughout the artworks in *Tronkvoël*. In addition to unpacking the symbolism within my own work, I position it in relation to Tsoku Maela's photographic series *Abstract Peaces* (2014). Through my research, I have found that there is a lack of publicly visible work being made by black South African artists who explore mental health and depression in relation to identity within their artistic practice. Furthermore, there is a lack of academic literature that discusses their work in detail. The small body of literature that does consider the work of artists like Maela lacks in-depth visual analysis and positioning within the art histories emerging from Africa.

Maela explains that people are under the impression that certain problems do not affect black people; when you are mentally ill, you are seen as bewitched, if you are depressed, you must simply lighten up, and if you see a psychologist you are considered weak (Phala, 2016). Maela thus states that: "Mental illness is one of those issues [he] felt was completely misunderstood and needed to be re-addressed" (Phala, 2016, www.thedailyvox.co.za). In chapter three I focus

primarily on Tsoku Maela's work as it relates to my own practice, as a response to the aforementioned concerns. Here I explore Tsoku Maela's usage of self-portraits, and the symbolism thereof to convey his personal experiences as a black man struggling with depression. In his paper that addresses the stigma of mental illness particularly in ethnic minority groups Knifton (2012, 287) believes that stigma and discrimination threaten help-seeking, recovery and life changes. He states:

Mental illness prevalence is higher amongst communities that face multiple prejudices and disadvantages within society, including black and minority ethnic communities who may experience migration trauma, racism, acculturation and adverse social circumstances.

Adara Jensen (2018:12) notes in her thesis that Tsoku Maela's photographic series *Abstract Peaces* explores his personal experiences of depression and "raises awareness of how mental illness within black communities is often misdiagnosed or ignored". This desire to raise awareness about mental health within communities of colour and make certain intersecting struggles and their effect on one's mental health visible, is a point of commonality between both my own practice and that of Maela's.

Chapter 1: Ek is wat ek is: The intersecting narratives of my self-made prison

1.1 My story

My diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder in 2018 led to my experience of terrible loneliness and isolation that triggered a feeling of imprisonment. In an attempt to express this, my practice as research explores burning or smoking techniques and incorporates prison visual language such as tattoos, images, shivs¹, and shanks². The influence of prison as a metaphor for depression and the usage of prison visual language is informed by my undergraduate work at Nelson Mandela University. *Carte Blanche*, is a series of watercolour portraits of ex-prisoners that focus on their lives and circumstances on the outside, after being rehabilitated. In these works, I embossed the prisoners' tattoos into the background of each portrait with a combination of photographic transfers, and included bars of soap that I tattooed with each ex-prisoner's tattoos, using a makeshift tattoo machine, see (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Kramer, Brunn *Carte Blanche* (2017), Watercolour, embossing on Fabriano. Image courtesy of Basil Brady
(80 × 50 cm).

¹ Shiv is a slang term for a knife or razor that is used as a weapon in prison.

² Shank is a makeshift knife or sharpened object used in prison to stab someone.



Fig. 2: Kramer, Brunn. *Carte Blanche* (2017), Watercolour on Fabriano with tattooed bars of soap (100 × 70 cm).

I was born and raised in Steytleville along with my seven siblings, by a single mother. My father passed on when I was five years old. I have no recollection of my father and I only recognise him as a result of seeing him in photographs. My mother took on the fatherly role by providing for our family through the aid of her social grant. Sadly, these circumstances are a norm in my community and many other surrounding towns. Underdeveloped and impoverished: people live from hand to mouth and on some days with barely enough food to get by. In the rural areas, you are raised with an ‘iron fist’ and certain norms and values are engraved on you. Especially if you come from a very religious Christian family such as mine; my father was a priest and my mother a priestess at the Old Apostolic Church. As a family, we were judged harshly and expected to act and behave according to constructed ideals of what our community perceived as ‘normal’.

The family photograph thus references family roles and ideals of what and how a man or a woman should be, particularly in the eyes of society. I recall during my childhood that I was more in touch with my feminine side. I preferred playing and socialising with my twin sister,

nieces and their friends. I played *poppehuise*³, loved dolls and always styled their hair and loved playing dress up, prancing around in their clothes. I was the complete opposite of my male peers. I didn't play rugby and had no interest in playing video games or in making or playing with



Fig. 3. Kramer, Brunn *Familie portret*, (2021) Soot, Linocut on Fabriano (150 × 210 cm). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

*draadkarre*⁴. My voice was squeaky, I was ‘too soft’, I didn't sit right, I didn't stand right and I didn't walk right... I wasn't man enough to be a man. “Davidene!” a primary school teacher once called me, the rest of the school followed suit. Slurs of “*moffie*!”⁵ became the order of the day

³ *Poppehuise* translates as 'toy house', however it is also used to refer to makeshift houses where children in the rural areas re-enact scenarios and stories as a way to entertain themselves.

⁴ *Draadkarre* means wire-cars, toy cars made from wire, which boys in the rural areas commonly play with.

⁵ *Moffie* is a derogatory term used to refer to homosexual men. While my queer identity is a theme in my work I did not explore Queer theory as it was beyond the scope of this study. For further discussions from Queer theory see: Ahmed, S. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. New York: Duke University Press [or](#) Morland, I. and Willox, A. eds., 2004. *Queer theory*. New York: Red Globe Press.

and being bullied emotionally and physically became a normality.

Familie Portret (Fig. 3) focuses on gender roles, particularly within a rural setting that links the series of family portraits. The image revisits a photograph that was taken at my late brother's wedding: two families brought together in union of a male and female marriage. Theorists (Burke and Reitzes, 1981, 84) explain that patrimonial identities might include those of a parent or spouse and occupational identities might include those of lawyers or artists. In turn, these role identities are said to influence behaviour, which means that each role has a set of associated meanings and expectations for the self. Furthermore, Burke and Reitzes (1981, 84) are of the view that “identities are self meanings that are formed in particular situations and organized hierarchically to produce the self”.

Burke and Reitzes (1981, 84) explain that the construction of an identity is the result of the social situation and environmental circumstances in which the individual is contextualised. This construction of identity is “based on the similarities and differences of a role with related, complementary, or counter-roles” Burke and Reitzes (1981, 84). Looking at the effect of gender roles on adolescents in her paper Elizabeth Saewyc (2017, np) states that “among the social determinants that affect the health and well-being of young people throughout the world, gender is a pivotal influence, with both subtle and overt, immediate as well as longer term influences on adolescent and adult life”.

The perfect illusion of what society expects a man to be, would be: Find a woman, get married, have children and be happy. However, as a child I wasn't fazed by this fallacy. I knew I was different; everyone else knew it too. That is why I was abused, beaten, influenced to meet the norms and values of what a good, straight, Christian boy should be. I was held captive by society's gender norms and *Familie Portret* (Fig 3) expresses just that. My captivity is illustrated by my usage of linocuts that are symbolic of the “corrections” sign that is stamped all over prisoners' uniforms. However, the linocut reads “depression”, which is then stamped all over the background of the artwork. In some instances it is revealed or concealed, speaking of society's prejudices and my need to hide my sexual identity to avoid judgement.

In this context, individuals who suffer from any mental disorder are therefore faced with the

stereotypes and prejudice that result from misconceptions and a lack of knowledge. There is a misconception, particularly in the coloured communities, that someone with mental illness is *mal*⁶, *getoor*⁷ or *getik*⁸. Any mental disorder is not deemed as a real illness in many African cultures, as its physical symptoms cannot be seen and are considered not real and a figment of the imagination. The local health system fails to educate the community on issues related to mental health and does not offer psychological help to those in need; this is due to lack of funding and infrastructure. Therefore, most people in my community do not acknowledge mental health related issues and believe that this *vuiligheid*⁹ can be prayed away or – in extreme measures – be purged by a *toor-dokter*¹⁰. The educational system also fails to inform people about mental health, and depression is a taboo topic rarely discussed.

After years of suffering in silence, my experience with depression reached its peak when in 2018 I experienced severe panic attacks, blackouts, and engaged in several suicide attempts. I was on the verge of dropping out of the master's programme at Rhodes University when I decided to take action and seek assistance. I took the first step to my emotional emancipation and started therapy; this allowed me to free myself from the chains of the prejudice and stereotype that is associated with mental illnesses. I first had to break free from the prison of self-stigma and accept that I am depressed. This is why it is crucial to use prison as a metaphor for depression, as I investigate the imprisonment of my identity by revisiting photographs, memories, and experiences and creating a body of work that explores my identities and experiences in relation to depression.

⁶ *Mal* is an Afrikaans word meaning crazy or mad.

⁷ *Getoor* is an Afrikaans word meaning bewitched.

⁸ *Getik* is Afrikaans slang that means that someone is high on crystal meth, known colloquially as 'tik'.

⁹ *Vuiligheid* translates as dirt or garbage, but is used as a direct reference to the spirit being dirty, either due to sins or being bewitched.

¹⁰ *Toor-dokter* is used to refer to sangomas or witch doctors in a South African context.

The work in *Tronkvoël* is thus conceptualised around the impact of depression on the self and identity, and as explicated in Michael J. Carter's paper, *How self-perceptions of identity change in Person, Role and Social Identities relate to Depression*. According to Carter (2017, 283) "empirical studies have shown that both positive and negative outcomes can emerge when individuals experience a change in their self-concept". He is of the view that a greater sense of self can be developed when good things happen, for instance when one is promoted at work. However, negative emotions can also emerge when bad things happen, such as losing a loved one.

Past research shows that individuals who experience severe changes in their identities have less perceived continuity of who they are and have more difficulty accepting who they become ... and past research has shown that identity change specifically relates to depression (Carter, 2017, 283).

He goes on to explain how identity change relates to depression "by showing that individuals' identities change to become consistent with other's views, that when individuals experience depressive symptoms it causes them to view their identities negatively" (Carter 2017, 283). Explaining further, Carter is of the view that the basis of identity is represented by person, role and social identities. "Person or personal identities are meanings that define who one is as a unique individual; they are idiosyncratic characteristics of one's personality that are not shared with others" (Carter, 2017, 284).



Fig. 4. Kramer, Brunn *Matriek Afskeid* (2021) Soot, watercolour on Fabriano (210 × 150 cm). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

The practical component of this submission consists of work that engages with the idea of prison as a metaphor for depression and another theme is the imprisonment of one's identity due to depression. I use family photographs (such as the one referenced in Figure 4) to investigate personal memories, and selfies to explore my narrative of self-imprisonment. My invisible prison is then visually communicated through incorporating prison visual language such as tattoos, prison slang, shivs, and shanks with my memories and experiences by using old family photographs (as referred to in Figure 5).



Fig. 5: Kramer, Brunn *Toe ons nog kind was* (2021) Soot and white enamel paint on Fabriano (150 × 210 cm). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

The media and process of creating my work are crucial to the themes of this research as I am using different burning/smoking techniques that link to my childhood memories and experiences, because smoke and flames have been an ever-present reminder of my childhood. I am reminded of going into the forest with my mother and collecting firewood so we could prepare the night's meal. I am reminded of playing with fire and accidentally burning my twin sister on her arm, for which she retaliated and burned me back on the same spot. However, I am also reminded of accidentally falling into a *gerlie*¹¹ of coals and smelling my burnt skin. My wounds still bear witness to this traumatic event. I am also reminded of my older brother's drunken rants and threatening to burn our house down – with us in it. Therefore, using smoke and flames is

¹¹ *Gerlie* is a metal bucket with holes made through it for making fire and containing the coals inside it.

pertinent to my re-visualisation of memory and experiences in relation to depression. My choice of media thus references past, traumatic experiences that I endured in relation to depression.

1.2 Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality originated in 1989, when Kimberle Crenshaw, a legal scholar and civil rights activist, coined the term to describe “how black women are being marginalized in the interface between antidiscrimination law and race and gender hierarchies”(Crenshaw, 1989, 151). In a paper for the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, Crenshaw argued against the courts’ unjust tradition of analysing black female cases through the singular lens of either race or sex; rather than a combination of both. The law avoided the fact that black women face challenges and discrimination that is unique to them, because they are black women. In her paper, Crenshaw focuses on three cases: *De Graffenreid v General Motors*, *Moore v Hughes Helicopter* and *Payne v Travenol*, “to illustrate the difficulties inherent in judicial treatment of intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989, 143). Crenshaw uses these three cases as a basis to substantiate her claim that “black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by women and black men” (Crenshaw, 1989, 149). Explaining further she (1989, 150) argues that these three cases “are doctrinal manifestations of a common political and theoretical approach to discrimination which operates to marginalize black women”.

Crenshaw (1989, 150) believes that the feminist and civil rights advocates’ inability to understand black women’s intersectional experiences “has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas”. This failure to include black women “reflects an uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination”, which is “operative in antidiscrimination law” (Crenshaw, 1989, 150). According to the law, all people within a race or sex category are treated similarly; however, “any significant experiential or statistical variation within this group suggests either that the group is not being discriminated against or that conflicting interests exist which defeat any attempts to bring a common claim” (Crenshaw, 1989, 151). Crenshaw elaborates that the law’s narrow view on discrimination is what facilitates using singular analysis to determine the effects

of race or sex (Crenshaw, 1989, 151). She thus believes that the idea of what defines “race and sex discrimination are, as a result, narrowly tailored to embrace only a small set of circumstances, none of which include discrimination against black women” (1989, 151).

In her paper, Crenshaw touches on expanding feminist theory and antiracist politics by the adoption of intersectional theory in their praxis. Elaborating on this notion Crenshaw (1989, 166) states “If any real efforts are to be made to free black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the black community’s needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy”. Crenshaw (1989, 167) thus believes that the praxis for feminist theory and antiracist politics should be centralised around the life changes and life situations of people who are oppressed, “without regard to the source of their difficulties”. In this paper Crenshaw does not give a definite description of intersectionality; instead, ideas around intersectionality and the implementation thereof run fluidly throughout her discussion of race, sex, feminism and antiracist politics. She (1989, 167) states that “the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues”. In addition, Crenshaw addresses the law and its traditionalist views around discrimination, which inherently oppress disadvantaged people further, and she suggests the implementation of an intersectional approach, rather than the law’s singular frame of approach, when analysing black women’s lives. Making her views clear, Crenshaw (1989, 167) concludes:

It is somewhat ironic that those concerned with alleviating the ills of racism and sexism should adopt such a top-down approach to discrimination. If their efforts instead began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit.

In her *Stanford Law Review* article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, Violence Against Women of Colour”, Crenshaw builds on her previous observations by exploring the intersection of gender and race that aids in building “structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of colour” (Crenshaw, 1991, 1244). The

article is divided into three categories; in the first part Crenshaw focuses on structural intersectionality and how patterns of subordination intersect in women's experience of domestic violence, rape and remedial reform. She investigates the ways in which women of colour's race, gender and class intersect, making their experiences different from those of the average white woman. Crenshaw (1991, 1249) believes that "International subordination need not be intentionally produced...", consequently it is the enforcement of one disadvantage that converges with existing vulnerabilities that creates another dimension of disempowerment." She explains further that "the fact that minority women suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate non intersectional contexts" limits any opportunities that would be helpful on their behalf (1991, 1251).

Shifting the focus to political intersectionality in part two of the article, Crenshaw analyses the ways in which feminist and antiracist politics have helped to further marginalise issues of violence against women of colour. She (1991, 1252) explains that "the concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of colour are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas". Crenshaw (1991, 1252) goes on to outline her concerns by explaining that the political interests of women of colour are sidelined and threatened by political strategies that fail to consider, or actively repress, intersectional issues. In part three, the paper discusses representational intersectionality and elaborates on the cultural construction of women of colour and the intersectional disempowerment thereof. Finally, Crenshaw branches out into the ideologies of intersectionality and foregrounds some of the ways in which intersectional theory can be applied in the broader scope of contemporary identity politics (1991, 1245). She (1991, 1296) thus believes that "Intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics". Her views on the implementation of intersectionality in identity politics conclude as follows:

If, as this analysis asserts, history and context determine the utility of identity politics, how then do we understand identity politics today, especially in light of our recognition of multiple dimensions of identity? More specifically, what does it mean to argue that gender identities have been obscured in feminist discourses? Does that mean we cannot talk about identity? Or instead, that any discourse

about identity has to acknowledge how our identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions? A beginning response to those questions requires that we first recognize that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves in are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed (Crenshaw 1991, 1299).

Academics and activists adopted intersectionality as a theory to engage in a variety of issues that transcend disciplines, breaking boundaries and constructing a platform that engages with multiple identities and experiences of exclusion. The concept quickly made its way into other disciplines and contexts.

In their paper “Movement Intersectionality: The case of Race, Gender, Disability, and Genetic Technologies”, the authors Dorothy Roberts and Sujatha Jesudason (2013, 325) argue that by acknowledging our “multiple identities” and insisting on their inclusion in our perception of others “intersectionality in practice can be a powerful tool for grappling with differences and uncovering shared values and bridging frameworks”. Based on this premise, I look at the intersection of gender issues, homophobia, racism and religious prejudice based on my lived experiences and identities, which overlap and converge, creating complex disadvantages and discrimination that impact my mental health.

Chapter 2: *Ek is my eie gevangene*: Positioning my self-made prison.

2.1: Evaluating the use of prison as a metaphor for depression.

In this chapter I unpack my choice of the prison as a metaphor for depression using the work of Heidi Levitt, Yifaht Korman and Lynn Angus, who in their study ‘A metaphor analysis in treatments of depression: Metaphor as a marker of change’, examine the usage of “burden” metaphors in relation to the experiences of depression in a good and poor “outcome process-experiential short-term psychotherapy dyad” (Levitt, Korman & Angus, 2000, 2). I discuss the way in which visual symbolism and metaphor are useful tools for navigating difficult or sensitive subject matter. Levitt, Korman & Angus (2000, 2) explain that “burden-metaphors are meaningful as they appear to characterize the way these clients experience the course of their depression”.

In her book *Depression: The way out of your prison*, Dorothy Rowe (2003) draws from her life experiences, as well as her clinical work as a psychologist, to discuss ways in which one can cope with depression by using prison as a metaphor. I have found that metaphor allows me to navigate difficult subject matter without having to be explicit. It allows me to draw in the observer through the metaphor and allows them to make the connections and insert themselves into the narratives and visual symbolism I present to them. I explicate my techniques, processes and media that I implement to communicate my self-made prison. Furthermore, I examine the process of my work in relation to two artists, namely Steven Spazuk and Diane Victor, as elements of their work relates to my practice.

The elements of prison visual language that I selected to express the feeling of imprisonment due to depression include: prison tattoos, prison vernacular (*Sabela*¹²), makeshift weapons (shivs and shanks), handmade game pieces (dice) and improvised tattooing machines. The reason for using these elements in my work is to visually represent the peculiar isolation and feelings of loneliness and worthlessness that I endure when being depressed. Although I have never been

¹² *Sabela* is a South African prison language prisoners created so that they can communicate amongst each other and avoid detection from wardens when they engage in activities that are not allowed in prison.

incarcerated I have engaged in research on prison culture through conversations with ex-prisoners as well as in popular and academic literature. The art-making process and my lived experience with a mental illness aided me in imagining what it might be like to be physically imprisoned, as the process, time and effort that is attributed to creating prison makeshift 'artefacts' indicate prisoners' desperate need to entertain themselves with games, and to arm themselves with weapons, as their sense of security is compromised, or to express aspects of identity. Working with prison visual language and imagining myself in that space of being incarcerated, made me more empathetic to prisoners as well as towards myself. My invisible imprisonment was reinforced by my interaction with physical aspects of prison. I came to the realisation that I am not physically held captive behind bars, locks and chains, I am my own prisoner. So my emancipation came from accepting my mental illness and this inevitably freed me from self-stigmatisation. My work explores an authentic narrative that is based on my lived experience with mental illness, and the different modes that are cohesive with my expression will hopefully foster a feeling of empathy in the viewer towards people who suffer from mental illnesses and the challenges they may face, especially in poor, rural communities.

People do not go to prison voluntarily; they commit crimes that land them in jail. They are not locked up by choice, but by action. My action is being depressed and my punishment is despair. To get a general understanding of imprisonment, I begin by referencing a quote from Jonny Steinberg's (2004) paper that deals with the history and modernity of Western Cape prison gangs during and after apartheid.

Inmate experience is in essence one of infantilization. If normal adult life is made meaningful by the exercise of one's agency, this is precisely what is robbed from the inmate. Agency, here, refers not only to the overarching projects of adult life, such as raising children, developing a lifelong sexual partnership, forging a career, and so forth. Even the minutiae of adult agency – the simplest of things we do by ourselves, under our own control, like wash, use the telephone, decide to eat, and to rest – are taken away from the inmate. He is robbed of the very basics of the adult world (Steinberg, 2004, np).

In order to get a better sense of the meaning of being imprisoned, I expand on Clemmer's (1940:270) concept of "prisonization" a term coined to describe the action of "taking on in

greater or lesser degree the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary”.

Clemmer believed that the social and structural characteristics of prison life impact the psyches and behaviour of prisoners. Furthermore, I draw on (Goffman's, 1975:236) study on inmate experience as the “systematic mortification” of a prisoner's sense of self, as the inmate is robbed of his own agency due to “ritualized degradations”. Drawing on Sykes's views on the pains of imprisonment, Phillips (2007, 77) states that “the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security all contribute to this mortification process”. Phillips (2007, 77) explains further that prisoners' social roles that they adopted from the outside are disrupted by the effect of dehumanisation in prison institutions, thus challenging their self-concepts. It is thus crucial to note that the loss of self-worth is inherently affected by the imprisonment of one's agency.

In similar fashion Sykes (2007, 79) concurs that

The frustrations of captivity ... carry a more profound hurt as a set of threats or attacks which are directed against the very foundations of the prisoner's being. The individual's picture of himself as a person of value – as a morally acceptable, adult male who can present some claim to merit in his material achievements and his inner strength – begins to waver and grow dim.

Through understanding the impact of the pains of imprisonment on the self and the systematic dehumanisation that ultimately affects one's self-worth, I build on my argument whereby depression feels like a self-constructed prison, by expanding on the psychologist Dorothy Rowe's ideas on depression as prison:

Depression is like a dark mist lurking in the corners of the room, always there, always ready to come surging forward and rising to envelop you. It is blackness, it is emptiness, and it is meaninglessness and total inner despair. Others may think you are fortunate, but you know it is all an empty fraud, and that one day the hollow balloon will burst, you will be found out and your crimes exposed. What crime? You don't know; you only know you are guilty; and you can hear them coming down the corridor to get you. The penalty of

course, is Death and you might as well be your own executioner (Rowe, 2003, 06).

I am of the view that people who are depressed suffer similar self-degradation to that of prisoners, I substantiate this notion by drawing on my personal experiences whereby depression felt like a self-constructed prison. It is found that in psychotherapy clients are prone to use metaphors when referring to their experiences with mental illnesses explaining that “these expressions can function to facilitate insight, to provide new solutions and to enhance communication and working alliance” (Levitt, Korman and Angus, 2000, 03). Describing the usage of metaphoric language, Levitt, Korman and Angus (2000, 03) describe it as a tool we use to better express our experiences with ourselves and our world. It is thus an attempt to revisit and remember past traumatic experiences that may have triggered depression. The text provides insight to my feelings, irrationalised thoughts and ideas that I endure when I am in my self-constructed prison of depression.

I blamed myself for the death of my father, who died due to kidney failure, or my older brother who died of a heart attack. Appalled by this absurdity when I was enduring extreme depressive episodes, I presently try to make sense of my self-made prison. It was indeed a peculiar isolation. Rowe believes that when you feel depressed, you knowingly lock yourself away, even if the necessary support is there from a loved one “you not only refuse yourself the smallest ease and comfort but you also punish yourself by words and deeds” (Rowe, 2003, 01). Indeed, I was punishing myself with horrific thoughts, ideas and memories that pushed me further into my prison. This inherently added to further isolating myself, as I convinced myself that I am useless and worthless and deserved to be locked in despair. However, during the time I experienced these extreme depressive episodes, what I was enduring in my homemade cell became a normality.

The text is thus significant as it gives reference to my experiences with depression and interlinks with the visual narratives of my practice as I re-enact my past as a way of expressing prison as a metaphor for depression. My practice thus becomes significant, as I interlink prison visual language with visual art to express my self-made prison. The process and media of creating the work become crucial as they relate to prison culture and memories and experiences that may

have triggered depression.

Prison slang, as well as Afrikaans vernacular are part of the exhibition title and titles of the work. *Tronkvoël*, is an Afrikaans term used when referring to ex-prisoners or convicted felons. The title of the exhibition is critical, as it sets the tone for my expression of how depression feels like a self-constructed prison.

The overarching theme of this research is thus built on the metaphor embodied in psychologist Dorothy Rowe's assertion that "Depression is a prison which we build for ourselves. Just as we build it, so we can unlock the door and let ourselves out" (Rowe, 2003, 01). She continues, "Depression is a prison where you are both the suffering prisoner and the cruel jailer." She explains the feeling of being depressed as peculiar isolation, which is distinguished from common unhappiness: it is not just loneliness, although in the prison of depression you feel alone "it is isolation, which changes your perception of your environment" (Rowe, 2003, 01).

"How do you feel? Can you convey this feeling?" These are recurring questions that I receive from almost everyone who learns that I am depressed. In truth, these complex feelings cannot be explained in words, it is something that needs to be felt or experienced. During our session, a psychologist once instructed me to paint how I feel; this I found is a common practice amongst therapists and psychologists. "However the image is expressed, all the images have one thing in common, you are enduring a terrible isolation ... you are alone in a prison" (Rowe, 2003, 03).

Rowe (2003, 06) explains further that in most severe cases, when you feel depressed you long for death, hoping that it will bring you peace and you fear death not knowing if it will bring you something worse than life. I can relate to this sentiment as when I endured depression to this extent, this is exactly how I felt when I tried to commit suicide ... I did not want to feel. Rowe (2003, 06) explains that this grief might be from childhood when a parent died. The question is "How can you describe what that meant or still means?" (Rowe, 2003, 06). Explaining further, Rowe (2003, 06) states "How small and weak you were, how vast and dark and terrifying was the world. No one could understand or comfort you. People always tend to say, 'Children soon get over it' but you stopped crying and didn't get over it and at times you remember that terrible

day and wonder ‘Was it my fault?’” (Rowe, 2003, 07).

Rowe (2003, 07) explains that you can grieve over the loss of more than just people, you can grieve over the loss of childhood, the fear of growing up, the loss of youth or your fear of becoming independent and being responsible, not only for yourself but for others too. “Griefs like this bring hopelessness, thoughts rush through your head and you wonder ‘What is the use of hoping and thriving?’” (Rowe, 2003, 08). In her book, *Depression: The way out of your prison*, Rowe sums up depression as a terrible experience of self-isolation, where one is consumed by the feeling of being locked inside a prison, alone. Understanding how you locked yourself up, you as the prisoner can free yourself, allowing you to take charge of your life and learning to live with depression.

Through the process of producing this body of work I discovered that there are deep, underlying emotions that I have caged, not talked about, and allowed myself to feel that resurged when I was working on this series of portraits. At times, I would find myself breaking down after completion of a work. The process of creating the portraits thus allowed me to fully immerse myself in the memories and experiences that inherently triggered my depression.

My usage of smoke as a medium is partly influenced by prisoners using soot as a primary medium to make tattoo ink. Due to the lack of materials available, prisoners have to resort to drastic measures and somewhat creative ways to express themselves. They burn plastic materials and collect the soot using zinc or any type of flat metal, before mixing the soot with saliva or shampoo to create ink. The series of portraits titled *Hosh pagamiesa! Raak fokken wys* incorporates a lot of prison visual language. The scribbles are symbols and text that have direct linkages to myself, my past and some of the family members featured in the photographs.

The symbols and texts’ simplistic visuality are influenced by prisoners’ tattoos. Each portrait tells a story of its own, and the details in the background are pertinent, as they provide a narrative of the time the photographs were taken. I use the symbols as a means to remember and trace back to my experiences during that period. It is a way of trying to remember or trace triggers that might have influenced my self-imprisonment. It is a way of interrogating my past to provide

some sort of leverage in order to deal with depression or come to terms with it.

In the work titled *Die Kwaaikind moet uitgebrand word* (Fig. 6), I used linocuts in the background of the portraits (Fig. 3 and 6). One linocut in particular is informed by the corrections symbol that is stamped all over prisoners' uniforms. I recreated this with a linocut that reads 'depression' and printed this in the background of a portrait as a way of visualising depression as my mental prison.



Fig. 6: Kramer, Brunn *Die Kwaikind moet uitgebrand word* (2020) Soot, linocut prints and watercolour on Fabiano (210 × 150 cm).

Nicholas Royle's observations (2003:16) provide a context for my artworks in the *Hosh pagamiesa! Raak fokken wys* portrait series by engaging with the idea of the mysterious, the unknown to conclude validation of one's identity and sense of self. Royle (2003, 16) elaborates

on this notion by stating that “it is also impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of self”. After several suicide attempts and almost dropping out of university, I experienced a peculiar isolation when my depression was at its peak. I had a breakthrough when I started therapy and this allowed me to deal with past experiences that may have triggered depression. This led me on a self-exploratory path by using my practice to interrogate past traumatic experiences and memory, which would ultimately foster a sense of understanding and healing. The enlightenment I received from talking about my past encouraged me to explore and investigate my triggers through my practice. *Hosh pagamiesa! Raak fokken wys* is thus a series of portraits that investigates past traumatic experiences, by using historic family photographs as a way of visualising my narrative of prison as a metaphor for depression.

2.2 Processes, techniques and media

The choice of medium, which is primarily burning or smoking techniques, and the process of creating the work played a crucial role in communicating the concept of the work and providing a platform to deal with my internalised, bottled up emotions. The process of the work is thus in alignment with my emotional process with events and memories that may have triggered depression.

Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us – grandparents, parents, teachers, and older friends. Heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together. But history gives contradictory signals about the value of remembering in the much longer span of a collective history. There is simply too much injustice in the world. And too much remembering ... embitters. To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.

(Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003:103)

A visual thread that is apparent throughout the work in *Tronkvoël* is the usage of burning and smoking techniques. I primarily use the soot of candles as a mode to visualise my narrative of my experiences with depression. The series of portraits in *Die Kwaikind moet uitgebrand word* starts off by layering the background with scribbles, drawing and texts that are synonymous with the simplicity of prisoners' tattoos. However, the background of each painting is authentic to my portrayal of experiences, memories and feelings that the photograph evoked during the process of creating the work. The background is thus a layered recollection of memories and experiences, which is based on the timeframe that the photograph was taken with the particular family member that is portrayed.

My usage of fire and smoke (fumage) as a drawing technique is significant through my portrayal of memory and experiences in relation to depression and for my exploration of personal symbolism and visual metaphors. Using fumage as a predominant medium in my work is a metaphor for a traumatic event when I was young and my older brother (through his alcoholic rants) burned his shack down. He had no idea that I was inside the shack and I escaped just in time. Smoke and flames are thus a reminder of the trauma that caused me to have recurring nightmares of buildings in smoke, and to wet my bed. This event still haunts me to this day, as the inhalation of smoke caused me to have shortness of breath, therefore worsening my asthma.

The usage of fumage also recalls memories of my childhood. During the process of creating the portraits, I am reminded of times that I spent in the bush as a child. My mom and all of the 'aunties' in the neighbourhood would gather all the children to collect firewood. I recall that my mother used to say "*dit is vreedzaam hier*",¹³ indeed it was peaceful being in nature and free from the troubles of the outside world. After we collected wood and everyone had their *draggies*¹⁴ ready everyone would walk in a line home, each with a load of wood on their heads. When we got home, we would start a fire and my mom would start preparing *roosterkoek*¹⁵.

¹³ *Dit is vreedzaam hier*: it is peaceful here'.

¹⁴ *Draggies* refers to the bundles of firewood that people in the rural areas collect.

¹⁵ *Roosterkoek* refers to a specific bread that people in the rural areas make on hot coals and a grill.

My uncle from next door, “Oom Boesman” would join in as we circled around the fire, entertaining my friends and cousins with stories from his childhood. These are some of the fondest memories I have that relate to my application of fumage. It was during this time that we would start playing with fire, when all the adults had left. I recall, we were playing with a plastic pipe that we burned on one side and I accidentally burned my twin sister on her arm. She retaliated and burned me back on the same spot in revenge. We were children then; I look at the scar now and I am reminded of these fond memories and scars that bond us.

Fire in itself is such a peculiar substance, especially in its application to creating art. Invisible to the touch, and the only time you know it is there is when you hold your hand long enough to feel its burn. Therefore, my use of burning techniques is pivotal to the process of visualising narratives in association with depression. Much like depression, sometimes you are not aware of its existence, until you feel its burn. The artist Steven Spazuk, who uses smoke to talk about life’s fragility in his work (see Fig. 7), concurs with my sentiment by stating that “Fire consumes, warms, and illuminates, but can also bring pain and death: thus, its symbolic meaning varies wildly, depending upon the context of its use” (Scott, 2015) [Artist Steven Spazuk creates drawings using fumage, fire, and soot | Metro News](#).



Fig.7:Steven Spazuk, 2017.. Soot and acrylic paint on panel (91 × 91 cm) .

South African artist Diane Victor, who is known for her usage of fumage in her work, explores the medium to narrate issues of suffering and fragility of the psyche and human body (see Fig. 8). Victor's smoke drawings often depict prisoners awaiting trial, or missing children, capturing the vulnerability of her subject matter, an idea that Victor reinforces through the impermanent nature of the medium she uses.

Victor's work becomes a journey of introspection, inviting people to reflect on the negative psychological and physical impact of social interactions, to take into regard the pain of others and acknowledge that there is suffering in the world caused by human interactions.



Fig 8: Victor, Diane *Shepherd (Sheepish)* (2011), Candle and smoke charcoal on paper (151 × 114 cm).

<http://davidkrutprojects.com/artworks/25531/shepherd-sheepish>

A common theme in my choice of images is the inclusion and exclusion of loved ones: including them by revealing their figures and excluding them by concealing their identity. This interplay of

concealing and revealing speaks about my concealment of depression to relatives and friends. There are multiple layers to this as I have lost some of these loved ones and revisiting the past always opens old wounds, however for wounds to heal they need to be uncovered. A more apparent thread in my practice is a call for society to challenge its preconceived ideas around people suffering from mental health conditions.

I work with an interplay of revealing and concealing; certain aspects of the artwork are darkened or erased, including figures with blackened or ghostly faces. This interplay of concealing and revealing also references the camouflage of my mental condition from friends and family, due to the fear of judgment and the stigmatisation around people who suffer from depression.



Fig. 9: Kramer, Brunn *Diploma Plegtigheid*, (2020) Soot and charcoal on Fabriano (150 × 210 cm). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

The background of each artwork that forms part of the series *Hosh pagamiesa! Raak fokken wys* consists of childlike drawings that connote a traumatic experience or memory during the period

the photograph was taken. In South African prison cells, the walls are covered with drawings and quotes derived from prisoners' experiences. Prisoners' bodies are covered in tattoos and each tattoo has its meaning. Substantiating this notion A. Lozano et al. (2010, 510) state that "this is especially pertinent among inmates as they may select images or locations on the body that identify them as criminals, for instance, images may reflect prison life, such as clock faces, spider webs, or prison bars". It is believed that without even knowing a prisoner, another prisoner can read their whole life story, just by looking at their *tjappies*¹⁶. That is what I aspire to do with the background of each artwork in this series.

In *Diploma plegtigheid* (Fig. 9) three figures, standing side by side, glance at the viewer. The two figures on the left and right are smoke-darkened to conceal their identity – glimpses of their features are translucent and cause the figures to appear evanescent, like a memory. This invites the question: Why are they covered up? Do they resemble people? Or do they embody experiences throughout the high school of being bullied for being too soft, girly, and not playing rugby? This was a subtle approach towards revealing the impact of societal norms and peer pressure on my mental well-being throughout my high school years. The middle figure takes precedence, not only by his position but also by the amount of detail that is revealed in relation to the other figures. Nothing is concealed. The figure is seen holding trophies, dressed in school uniform. The background of the artwork is translucent and can be seen through the middle figure. This work alludes to societal norms of how a man should conduct himself, especially in communities of colour. It speaks about the impact of bullying based on one's sexual preference, but most importantly it highlights how that can affect one's mental well-being for years to come.

The artwork is thus based on my lived experiences throughout high school, exhibiting trophies and awards of a top achiever...everything seems 'fine'. I was a dedicated student, I stood steadfast in my beliefs as a Christian, I didn't smoke and unlike most of my peers I didn't drink alcohol or engage in indecent activities. I excelled in athletics and, like depression, everything seemed perfect on the surface. I was deprived of leadership positions, both in church and school, because I was too soft to be a head boy and too girly to be the conductor in church. It was during

¹⁶ "Tjappies" is an Afrikaans slang term for tattoos.

this time that bullying reached its peak. These experiences made me miss my deceased father and brother and I was left to wonder; would I have been more of a man if they were here? Would it have made me straight? One morning I couldn't take it anymore and drank cockroach poison. I walked to school and felt fine for an hour or so, until I started throwing up in class and was rushed to the nearest hospital in a town called Willowmore. I nearly died. *Diploma Plegtigheid* scratches on the surface of my identities and experiences and the overlapping thereof that resulted in the prejudices that I endured throughout my teenage years. This artwork aims to reveal events and experiences that tie into my experiences with depression. The foreground is thus a facade, a cover up of my experiences. The background details my experiences through the incorporation of prison visual language by creating symbols such as a poison symbol to convey my emotional prison. It is my life story, my *tjappies*.

Chapter Three: *Tjoekie*: Analysing my self-made prison

3.1: Analysing my practice.

In this chapter I focus on analysing conceptual threads that bind the artworks in my exhibition, *Tronkvoël*. I discuss the ways in which my identities and lived experiences overlap, creating a complex convergence of discriminations and disadvantages that I face on a daily basis. In addition to unpacking the interwoven prejudices I experience, I focus on the stigmatisation that coloured and black people endure in relation to depression. Finally, I critically analyse my work in relation to Tsoku Maela's photographic series *Broken Things* (2016) and *Abstract Peaces* (2016) discussing linkages and commonalities that are visible and sometimes invisible. I primarily focus on the series *Abstract Peaces* as the work visually and conceptually correlates with my practice. Our intersectional identities and experiences as coloured or black artists are the impetus for telling our stories through visual art.

A prominent thread that is interwoven throughout my work is the interplay of Afrikaans and prison vernacular which appears in the title of the exhibition *Tronkvoël* and the subsequent series of artworks that form part of it. Because most coloured people speak Afrikaans and are often marginalised as criminals or associated with gangsterism, the interplay with prison vernacular becomes pivotal in my attempt to express my imprisonment with depression.



Fig. 10: Kramer, Brunn *Die Mal Kind*, (2020) Soot, 'burned' Fabriano (210 × 150 cm). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

A common idea that pervades in the series of portraits titled *Hosh pagamisa! Raak fokken wys* is the inclusion and exclusion of family members and loved ones. There are multiple layers to this as I work around the idea of hiding their identity and exposing mine (See Fig. 10). This interplay of concealing and revealing relates to my struggles with my own identity, as I was forced to conceal my sexual identity and my struggles with depression, due to the social norms in my

community and misconceptions around people who suffer from mental illnesses. This inherently affected my mental health, as I felt emotionally caged and pretended to be someone that I was not. The interplay of concealing and revealing also references the camouflage of my mental condition from friends and family, due to the fear of judgment and the stigmatisation around people who suffer from depression. This is why it is critical for this research to call on society to challenge its preconceived ideas around people suffering from mental health conditions. Through my practice my intention is thus to influence and educate people around the issues of mental illness and advocate against the stigmatisation of people suffering from mental illness.

Before the worsening of my illness, I was far more social and always tried to look my best. Being the typical teenager I would take photographs of myself, select the best one, edit it, and post it on social media. However, it was a façade. I was layering my online appearance and my physical appearance, by pretending to be 'okay' when I was not. The worsening of my invisible disability presented itself in several symptoms such as a lack of care or pride in my appearance, addictive, and self-destructive behaviour, as well as a feeling of total and utter despair and helplessness. During these particularly bad periods, I would take a 'selfie' whenever I felt depressed. The photographs then formed part of the resource material I used in referencing the emotional state that I was in when I am experiencing depressive episodes.



Fig. 11: Kramer, Brunn *Bloed in Bloed uit*, (2020) Soot, document transfers on Fabriano attached to superwood (84 × 60 cm). Images courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

The title of the series of self-portraits *Bloed in Bloed uit* (Fig. 11) is derived from a South African prison term that translates as ‘blood in, blood out’, which means that if you are a prisoner and you decide to join a prison gang, you are part of that specific gang for life. The title is a crude reference to my realisation of being depressed and my acceptance of depression as always being a part of my life. *Bloed In Bloed uit* is derived from its prison context and plays with the idea that depression is the ‘numbers gang’ that I affiliate with and even though at times I am bailed out of my mental prison, I will always be under arrest and be detained by depression.



Fig 12: Kramer, Brunn *Bloed in Bloed uit*, (2021) Soot and linocut on painted superwood (60 × 42 cm). Images courtesy of Lifang Zang.

different levels of my endurance with depression and thus interplays with the idea of being inside and outside of my prison (refer to figure 11). People who suffer from depression aren't always depressed. The process of creating this series of artworks has allowed me to stop 'othering' depression, rather than embracing it as part of my flaws (see figure 12).

People who suffer from depression are not constantly depressed. The process of creating this series of artworks has also allowed me to stop ‘othering’ depression, and accept it as part of my multifaceted identity. . The artwork seen in figure 12 is related to a process of uncovering and accepting the aspects of myself that I have hidden from the world and arguably myself. These drawings are made from selfie photographs that I took of myself during the hard lockdown in 2020, these were ‘ugly’ photographs that show my face in distorted ways with poor lighting and no ‘filters’. The angles and composition of the portraits in *Bloed in, Bloed uit* also disrupt the viewers expectations from a portrait through the use of unusual viewpoints. The first half of the *Bloed in, Bloed Uit* series was started in 2019 and completed in 2020 with the second half of the series starting in 2020 and ending in 2021. These artworks can be read as a visual narrative of my journey through this masters process and the way that I have peeled back the layers of my own story in a slow process of trying to accept that depression is a part of my identity.

3.2: Installation-based artworks

The artworks that take the form of installation objects are inspired by my experiences of growing up in a low income rural area. The work is informed by games and objects that I used to play with when I was young. I incorporated these key prison elements as a way to communicate traumatic childhood experiences that influenced my mental prison. The artwork titled *Kaskar met n bietjie ‘luck’* (Fig. 13) references a traumatic event that transpired during my early childhood. The boys in my town would normally be seen playing with *draadkarre*, or they would commune in groups building *kaskarre*¹⁷, while the girls would play *poppehuise*¹⁸ and make *modderkoeke*¹⁹. I would normally be found amongst the girls, I made the best *modderkoeke* and

¹⁷ *Kaskarre* are box carts that boys in the rural areas build themselves from found objects.

¹⁸ *Poppehuise* is the Afrikaans term for a dolls house.

¹⁹ *Modderkoeke* are cakes that girls in the rural areas make out of mud or clay.

who else was going to run the *huiswinkel*²⁰? Nonetheless, my predicament came when I was dared by my cousins and friends to join them on the ultimate quest to prove that I was not a sissy. Their plan was to go to a very steep hill and all the boys must jump in a large *kaskar* that they constructed. According to them it was the ultimate test of being a man and I was convinced that I had to jump in to prove my ‘masculinity’.

What a stupid, foolish idea. The self-made cart travelled at such a high speed down a very, very steep hill and in the midst of it, the cart broke, sending myself and everyone else flying through the sky, plunging and rolling on a hard gravel road. Blood, bruises, tears and cries of help were the order of the day. We were extremely lucky that we crawled away with our lives. However, I limped away with much more than physical scratches, cuts and bruises – which would later heal – I hobbled away with deep psychological scars, as a result of the emotional trauma from bullying because of this event. It wasn't a quest to prove my manhood or how strong I was, on the contrary I proved just how much of a *moffie* I was. I wasn't ‘man’ enough to take the pain.

The artwork *Kaskar met n bietjie ‘luck’* takes the form of a box cart, with a built-in square that exhibits prison shivs and shanks adorned by *pittjies*.²¹ Glass marbles are common objects that can be found in bins and storage bottles in most rural homes that house boys. I too had a vast collection of marbles and enjoyed participating in games. The glass marbles are attached, glued on and in some cases burned onto or into the prison shivs and shanks. Constructing and deconstructing weapons and in some instances rendering them useless. There is an interplay of concealing and revealing, much like my experiences and triggering events with depression. I concealed negative, harmful emotions out of fear of being judged and not being man enough to deal with them. As I learned through experience, bottled up emotions can be extremely harmful in future and much like the prison shivs, the façade that people who are depressed display that everything is ‘fine’ out of fear of being judged, inflicts more harm. The shivs and shanks look pretty and harmless, but on closer inspection, one can see how threatening they are.

²⁰ *Huiswinkel* is an informal convenience shop, usually run from home. Also known as a “tuckshop”.

²¹



Fig. 13: Kramer, Brunn *Kaskar met n bietjie 'luck'* (2021) Shivs and shanks covered in marbles (mixed media installation)

The installation piece titled *Kom ons speel 'n 'game'* fluctuates in between themes and ideas of *Kaskar met n bietjie 'luck'*, referencing prison elements and incorporating them with childhood games as a way to visualise my psychological prison. Due to the lack of material and the time prisoners spend in prison, people who are incarcerated are well known for their creativity and ingenuity. Through the incorporation of dice that prisoners make out of paper mache with *tolle*²² that I grew up playing with in Steytlerville (and are as common as marbles in the rural areas) I conceptualise my self-made prison (see Fig. 14). The most mundane of objects – whether dice or spinning tops – are reimaged, strung together, burnt and damaged to converge with themes of escapism. Whether it is a prisoner's desperate need to create dice as a way to entertain themselves and escape time, boredom or the pains of imprisonment, or a child innocently playing with a spinning top to forget the crude reality of living with a mental illness in a rural setting, it is a symbolic reference to the most mundane of activities, such as thinking, eating and sleeping, which I manipulate and abuse when I am depressed, as a way to forget or escape my prison.

²² *Tolle* are toys known as spinning tops.



Fig. 14: Kramer, Brunn *Kom ons speel n 'game'* (2021) Paper mache dice and *tolle* (installation). Image courtesy of Lifang Zhang.

3.3: Stigmatisation of mental illnesses in coloured and black communities

Steytlerville is a town deeply hidden amongst the fynbos in the Karoo, surrounded by sky-blue mountains. Being coloured and being raised in a small, rural town such as Steytlerville, certain norms, values and beliefs are engraved in you. The town itself is mostly comprised of coloured and black people, with white people a minority; however it is a small town where lines between race and culture are blurred. There is an intermix of languages, traditions and cultures and in effect an intermix and interchange of norms, values and beliefs. These ideas and beliefs are mostly formed with a lack of knowledge, thus giving way to stereotypes and prejudices being a norm. Being raised in a rural setting where the community's preconceived ideas surrounding mental illness run rampant, it is a common practice not to acknowledge mental illnesses and

people who suffer from them are regarded as either crazy or bewitched. Sociologists Link and Phelan agree by stating “that stigma includes a combination of inaccurate or distorted beliefs, negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviour”. They describe stigma as “the co-occurrence of labelling of difference, stereotyping, separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’, followed by discrimination and status loss” (Knifton, 2012: 287). This describes the othering of people who suffer from mental illness in rural settings.

Coloured and black communities’ failure to acknowledge and understand mental illness inherently affects people who suffer from such illnesses, further disempowering them from seeking and participating in treatment. It also creates complex challenges, as a person who is depressed has to struggle with their disabilities concerning mental illness, while they are being stereotyped and pre-judged by their community and society as a whole. Knifton explains the impact of these prejudices by stating that “in contemporary societies, the intense stigma and discrimination that people with mental health problems continue to face results in a series of ‘social injuries’ that are profoundly damaging” (2012:287). Knifton (2012, 287) concurs by referencing Schameras and Angemeyer, 2006 stating that “the impact of stigma is profound, people with mental health problems frequently delay help-seeking for fear of the social consequences. Explaining further Knifton (2012, 288) cites Link and Phelan (2006), stating that “enduring stigma can lead to people living in states of constant stress, worsening the initial mental health problem”.

The othering of people who suffer from mental illness that results from misconceptions about mental illness also reinforces self-stigmatisation. As I grew up with the idea that I was crazy, weak and incompetent it affected my self-esteem and willingness to get help. Not only do misconceptions about mental illness disadvantage people who suffer from mental disorders but they also underlie the government’s failure to educate people, especially in rural settings, about mental illnesses. Knifton (2012:288) explains this by citing (Patel et al., 2010) “under-investment in health services from governmental institutions contributes towards a gap between mental health need, services and support, especially amongst disadvantaged social groups.”

People in places such as Steytlerville and neighbouring rural towns do not talk about mental

illness as extensively as they should. Rather they are bombarded by ideas of the mentally ill being crazy or bewitched and because of this people who suffer from mental illnesses most of the time don't realise that they are depressed, because they do not understand what that means. Schools do not educate students concerning mental illnesses and the clinics are structured to deal with illnesses that can be 'seen'. I didn't realise I was depressed, although I didn't quite feel right and it was only when I moved to the city (Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha) and went to university that I developed a better understanding of depression.

3.4: Situating my work alongside Tsoku Maela's practice.

Tsoku Maela is a South African artist who was born in Limpopo who obtained his BA in film studies from AFDA, the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance. Maela predominantly works with the medium of photography where he revisualises African narratives, culture, and aesthetics through a surrealist and Afrofuturistic approach. Focusing on portraiture as a way to explore his struggles and triumphs with manic depression, Maela is able to unpack themes relating to spiritual, political and mental health concerns. I focused on three of Maela's bodies of work that deal mainly with Maela's intersectional identities and experiences in relation to depression, culture and self-acceptance.

Broken Things (2016), as the name suggests, is a body of photographs in which Maela visualises a story about two lovers who are broken. Maela plays around the idea of both visible and invisible 'incompleteness' and this can be seen in the work titled *Family Portrait* (Fig. 15), where a woman is seated, gazing at the viewer with a cataract in one of her eyes. The male figure's 'imperfection' is bandaged around his face. The photograph itself is reminiscent of old family photos that one would find hanging on the walls at home. The woman's gaze and the clenching of her purse and the male figure's clenching of his fist evokes a feeling of discomfort; it feels as though something is missing...warmth maybe? There is a certain unsettledness that Maela so masterfully evokes through his interplay of visible and invisible imperfections. The story moves on as the two characters ultimately fall in love with each other, they get married (Fig. 16), they start caring for one another and they ultimately accept each other's flaws as well

as their own (Fig. 17).

Ultimately, through his work Maela plays with the idea of self-acceptance, with reference to the black body, because skin colour is at the forefront of being criminalised, ostracised and stigmatised. These ideas of self-hate thus become embedded in us. How can you love others if you don't love yourself first? Depression and self-esteem are intertwined and contribute to negative effect, many people who suffer from mental illness lack the ability to love themselves and embrace their imperfections. I explore this theme of self-hate and acceptance thoroughly in the series of portraits that is sourced from selfies titled *Bloed in Bloed uit*. Maela explores this theme extensively through his subtle visual suggestions about accepting one's flaws, which would hopefully aid the path to loving oneself and ultimately relieving the load when it comes to dealing with depression. Through Maela's visual approach of capturing black bodies, the act of self-love becomes some sort of rebellion towards institutionalised ideas of black bodies. Tsoku's work also subtly addresses the impact of colonization on black people. The past taught us to hate our skin color, to hate our hair and our culture. Tsoku highlights this by his use of black bodies in a contemporary setting teaching us to look at ourselves differently and to love ourselves.



Fig. 15: Maela, Tsoku *Family Portrait*, (2016) Photographic print (78 × 116 cm)



Fig. 16: Maela, Tsoku *Eye of the beholder*, (2016) Photographic print (115 × 115 cm)



Fig. 17: Maela Tsoku *Love is Blind*, (2016) Photographic print (115 × 115 cm)

Maela's *Abstract Peaces* (2016) is a visual diary of self-portraits that explore his personal struggles with manic depression and the prejudices he faced as a black man in this struggle. Through this body of work Maela communicates his journey with depression, exploring its different levels, the highs and lows, with a focus on combating self-stigmatisation and his journey to self-discovery (such as the one referred to in Figure 18). With this in mind the work aims to educate black communities around mental health issues in an attempt to destigmatise mental illness, particularly in those communities.



Fig. 18: Maela Tsoku *Auxin* (2016) Photograph



Fig. 19: Maela Tsoku *A brief reminder of solitude* (2016) Photograph.

The two photographs (see Fig. 18 and 19) are depicted in colour, unlike the larger body of work in *Abstract Peaces*. A figure can be seen seated next to a bed, with his face covered in a red cloth and holding the stem of a rose and its flower lying in the middle of the bed. *Auxin* (referred to in Fig. 18) refers to the growth or regrowth of a plant; perhaps the figure is waiting for the stem to regrow its flower? Or for the flower to regrow its stem? In one way or another growth needs to happen. Some form of development or rejuvenation is happening. Perhaps Maela is alluding to the reproduction of his identity that was once destroyed by depression, then regrowing his sense of self through his acceptance of depression. Maela's specific use of a rose is also symbolic of how people with mental illness tend to disguise their illness out of fear of being judged, pretending to be 'fine' when you are not, when in reality beneath those beautiful covers of blood-red pedals, lies stems covered in thorns. Maela also teaches us that this pretence is short-lived and much like a rose our cover will wilt and our loneliness and despair will reveal our true nature. A predominant idea that pervades in *Auxin* and *A brief reminder of solitude* (Fig. 18)

is the sense of desolation, a dominant thread that intersects throughout the photographs in *Abstract Peaces*.



Fig. 20: Maela Tsoku *Nest for Dreams* (2016) Photograph

In *Nest for Dreams* (Fig. 20), we see Maela lying naked on a bed, crouching, holding his body as though he is shielding himself from the darkness that surrounds him. Black and white, a lack of colour that is reminiscent of the many missing positive emotions he feels inside. Alone, lonely, as he finds solitude in the peculiar isolation of depression. He is asleep, always asleep...his dreams give him peace. *Nest for Dreams*, reminds me of the darkest times I experienced with depression. It is this peculiar isolation and feelings of utter despair that instigated the idea of using prison as a metaphor for depression. In this image, the figure is lying on the bed, alone and naked as birds fly away from the figure. One could argue that the choice of black and white photography reminds the viewer of how colourless the world can seem when one is suffering from depression. Naked and alone tormented by feelings of utter despair, birds fly away from the figure as though to suggest the need to escape the prison of depression. I recall when trying to commit suicide that I wanted this sense of relieve or escape from the emotional torment I

endured when I went through extreme phases of depression.



Fig. 21: Maela Tsoku, *Sehloga* (2016) Photograph

In the black-and-white self-portrait, *Sehloga* (Fig. 21), which means roost or nest- a place where birds regularly congregate to rest at night, Maela is resting on a table. His eyes appear to be blurred out, while small specks or particles float above his head into the air. As the title suggests Maela is congregating with himself and his experiences with depression, therefore with the blurring of the eyes, he is gazing inward. Referencing a state of contemplation, the blurring of the eyes tells us that the individual in the photograph may be struggling to see the world clearly as a result of their internal turmoil. When suffering from depression, it is very easy to lose perspective. Small things easily morph into monsters and one's perception of the world can be distorted. If one considers that term “vision” as referring not only to the realm of sight and seeing but to the areas



Fig. 22: Maela, Tsoku *Seriti* (2016) Photograph.

In the photograph titled *Seriti* (Fig. 22) in the same sequence, a figure is seated on a table, holding his hands in a prayer position, pointing downwards; the figure's head is completely absent, with dark smoke emitting from the neck. It is unclear who the person is, as the figure does not exhibit any facial features. There is no resemblance, it could be anyone. Maela references the feeling of depression, despair, black and white...with the same dark, toxic smoke that is prevalent throughout my work, using smoke as a symbol for depression. A theme that is prevalent throughout Maela's series of photographs in *Abstract Peaces* is depicting the figures in solitude and in a state of contemplation. These 'moments' that Maela recreates are reflective of my experiences whenever I am depressed. Throughout the series of photographs the figures always appear to be at peace, however Maela's creative intervention unveils that which cannot be seen: depression.



Fig. 23: Maela, Tsoku *Beleaguered* (2016) Photograph

As the name suggests *Beleaguered* (Fig. 23) means to be in a very difficult situation. Maela depicts himself in the ocean, standing and holding a staff while observing the forces of danger that circle him, waiting to force his surrender. Maela is surrounded and tormented by sharks, there truly are no means for escape. In reality, one can only look and observe how depression engulfs you with nothing substantial to shield you from danger. A glimmer of hope arises amidst the dark cloudy skies that covers the horizon, umbrellas can be seen floating in mid air. Is it Tsoku's salvation from the deep, dark dangers of his solitude? Maela's artistic implementation of strong visual aesthetics expresses his struggles with manic depression so poetically as though it is a beautiful nightmare. Maela immerses himself in character, embracing the storm and emotional torment allowing his triggers to consume him...that is his escape.



Fig. 24: Maela, Tsoku *Waiting* (2016) Photograph

Waiting (Fig. 24) depicts the artist standing in the middle of a field holding an umbrella, alone – a thread that is consistent throughout the works in *Abstract Peaces*. He is grounded by the pastureland with umbrellas floating above him, all over the sky. The image feels surreal and dreamy. The character appears to be waiting. He is waiting for the rain to come – a storm perhaps? It is suggested by the clouds. He is ready though, he seems ready through the gaze in his eyes and being physically prepared by holding the umbrella, to avoid getting wet, soaked in darkness and despair. Through this work Tsoku Maela alludes to depression being forever present like the forces of nature, like a stormy day. Some days the sky may clear and the sun might shine, but through experience he knows there will always be a storm to come.

Conclusion.

In this submission, I elaborate on the use of prison metaphors and visual language as a way to explore and express personal experiences of depression. In my practice as research I investigated my personal narrative of depression feeling like a self-constructed prison by using prison as a metaphor for depression. I analysed my primary usage of candle soot in relation to Diane Victor and Steven Spazuk's use of burning and smoking techniques, therefore creating my own distinct techniques to express my self-made prison. Furthermore, I discussed how the incorporation of prison visual language with family photographs, selfies and objects reminiscent of my childhood serves to express my feeling of being imprisoned by depression.

Using intersectionality as a theoretical framework, I looked at how my experiences and identities as a coloured, queer, Christian body overlap and converge and reflected on how these intersections created complex prejudices that I have endured throughout my life. I thus explored the intersection of gender-related issues, homophobia, classism, and religious practice to elucidate my narrative of depression feeling like a self-made prison. Furthermore, to ground my research and bring forth a compelling argument, I analysed the history of intersectionality with a focus on Kimberle Crenshaw's ideas..

Understanding the intersections of my experiences and identities and the combination thereof, creating overlapping systems of disadvantage and discrimination allowed me to have a better understanding of myself and how these complex prejudices impact my mental health. With this in mind, in my practice I was able to express depression feeling like self-imprisonment. In this submission I have focused on the conceptual threads that connect each artwork throughout *Tronkvoël* and analysed the work of Tsoku Maela in relation to my practice, exploring linkages to ground my work, such as gazing inward, drawing inspiration from our identities and personal experiences to communicate our personal struggles with depression. Another similarity throughout our work is the visual representation of depression that is characterised through our use of symbols, signs and the titles of our work. Hints of depression are also alluded to by incorporating themes of loneliness, solitude and isolation, although it is an idea that is more

prevalent throughout Maela's work than in mine. A more definite connection to Maela's work is the employment of our bodies, our own authentic selves to explore and express our experiences with depression. Lastly, another theme that relates with Maela's work is the uncanny, peculiar feelings that our work provokes, through my use of soot as a medium to draw and through Maela's surrealistic photographic approach. Although we are expressing dark, complex, uneasy issues that are hard to talk about in coloured and black communities, there is a subtleness in our approach to addressing these issues; there is beauty there. Casting a different light on mental illnesses, exploring different levels of depression (the ups and downs) and most importantly how our practice aided our road to self-acceptance and healing, our work thus aims to break the barriers of self-stigma and prejudices that are associated with people who suffer from mental illness.

Based on my identities as a South African, coloured, queer body, this research contributes towards the greater movement of intersectionality, adding to the growing literature by using an intersectional lens to investigate experiences and identities in relation to depression, coming from a rural setting. Furthermore, this work builds on the literature of using prison as a metaphor for depression or using 'burden' metaphors as a way to express mental illnesses. Lastly, this research contributes towards literature that focuses on coloured and black experiences of stigma and prejudices in relation to depression in rural settings.

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