

**In 1989, on one  
remarkable day in Cape  
Town, South Africa,  
the people and streets  
were painted purple.**

**Roberta Joy Rich**

**The Purple Shall Govern**

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts  
3 November – 31 December 2023

Free Exhibition  
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## The Purple Shall Govern: Solidarity in Resistance

by Dr Zayd Minty

What was South Africa's 1989 'Purple Rain' Protest and what is its importance then and now? How can we understand it in relation to *The Purple Shall Govern* at Footscray Community Arts in settler nation Australia, a project which has framed itself in response to this moment of resistance as a means to ask questions about public space? The 'Purple Rain' Protest which took place on 2nd September 1989 on Greenmarket Square in Cape Town, is a seminal moment in South Africa's Anti-Apartheid Liberation struggle—of resistance and solidarity at the cusp of change.

Apartheid was a state-led policy of racialised oppression, using an unequal separate development model which marginalised People of Colour (POC), and benefitted a minority regarded as 'White' in South Africa. Repression against POC started after the region was colonised in 1652 by Western explorers looking for a route to trade in the East. From 1948, centuries of oppression were painstakingly codified and South Africa's bureaucracy was deepened by a conservative government who used it to destroy whole communities based on racist ideologies. These included strategies of forced removals and other forms of active or passive brutalisation such as the inadequate provision of public services for broadly 'Black' communities<sup>1</sup> and prohibitions against freedoms of association. Apartheid denied access to a great deal of public space in South Africa to People of Colour, especially leisure, cultural and educational spaces.

Peaceful resistance against this abhorrent system was met with extreme violence by the State for the next five decades, leading eventually to armed resistance by some civilian quarters, and later by economic, cultural and sports boycotts from the international community. By 1989, it was clear to almost all that Apartheid was a failed project, even after four intensive years of heightened repression, imprisonment, bannings, and killings which attempted to turn back the inevitable. Through it all South African masses from all ethnicities gathered illegally to protest against the system, knowing they faced violence. The 'Purple Rain' event was

1 Broadly Black refers to a South African Black Consciousness understanding which recognises the common struggles of all POC in South Africa – African, so called 'Coloured' and Indian. See for example Steve Biko's writings in *I Write What I Like*.

one of those mass gatherings, and it ended up being the last where state violence was used against protestors.

The event started as any normal protest, with peaceful protestors expecting an attack, sitting down in the street next to Greenmarket Square. When ordered to disperse, unusually, police began spraying protestors from a water cannon, filled with a purple dye. As this continued and protestors were being beaten with whips, a lone protestor (and conscientious objector) Philip Ivey, climbed onto the armoured vehicle and turned the cannon onto the police and the ruling party's HQ on the square. Protestors ran away and were helped by shopkeepers all around the city as they sought to evade the police. All those who were found with dye were later arrested. The next day graffiti around the city declared, 'Forward to Purple People's Power,' and 'The Purple Shall Govern,' playing on the words of South Africa's Freedom Charter, 'The People Shall Govern.'

This was a rare moment of jubilation for the country locked in four years of a draconian State of Emergency. Despite strong media censorship by the State, the event got news coverage. Used to seeing ongoing state violence against protests, activists all over the country celebrated this audacious, flamboyant act of victory for the oppressed. It was an event rich in symbolism, not least because everyone at the multiracial event became one colour; the State itself obliterated race for a moment. This moment of unity in purpleness was a David and Goliath instance, the ultimate in peaceful collective resistance. A finger in the face of injustice, it offered the scent of possibility. In years since it remains powerfully symbolic, an event which invariably brings smiles to South African faces. It evokes a loving struggle from a place of integrity, it elicits positive emotions of solidarity and affirms the value of committed perseverance for justice.

By enticing her audience into the purple-hued celebration of humanity in public space, Roberta—drawing on her diasporic roots/routes with South Africa—deftly looks under the surface and raises difficult questions about struggle, about language and about solidarity. Questions of solidarity are especially raised between reckoners of South Africa's complex racist past with those in Australia. In adding complexity to the story of the 'Purple Rain' event she reminds us of the human costs of unjust policies and their ongoing impacts on the ways in which First Nations and People of Colour experience publics and public space.

Exhibited archival works, such as a pass book for an African POC to be in public spaces (*Aunty Thelma's ID* and a

*Dompas*), and painful memories shared by those interviewed, show the stark differences of recent histories of POC's sense of being in public space. These raise important questions about whether POC are in fact closer to freedom of movement despite protests wherein White people were also active. Even as we recollect such powerful moments of collective action like the 'Purple Rain' Protest, the realities of POC being truly free and present in public space, whether in South Africa or Australia, remains elusive. Unresolved issues of justice for POC, Roberta suggests, remain and the works accompanying the video *Purple Rain on September 2nd* seem to ask whether time can really heal when injustices, such as lack of treaties in Australia for First Nations people remain.

Drawing on voices from District Six through an intimate dinner party, *Lunch with the Family at Mignon Street, Cape Town*, Roberta records members of that area's 'mixed-race' (so called 'Coloured') community, invoking memories of the once vibrant neighbourhood located next to the city centre that was destroyed as a result of Apartheid forced removals. They remind us of the complexity of categorising and demonising by skin colour, and of belonging and deep loss of public place. As one elder crushingly offers, 'Just don't tell me to have amnesia... because I will remember the bad things, but I am moving on.' In this way Roberta speaks to the importance of celebrating resilience and strength of overcoming, while remembering hardship.

Roberta's choice of referencing the archive, linking it to justice and resistance, challenges us to remember that struggles are not short term. They need continued engagement to enable change. In *Though buried, They echo*, the voices of racist policy makers whose legacies still define both South African and Australia are situated within the floor of the gallery's architecture, and are silenced by making the audio mute.<sup>2</sup> The reframing asks us to question who we hear and what we act on. In *Pigs Might Fly Too*, Roberta raises questions around accountability and a continued global conversation regarding the nuances and specificities of Bla(c)k and Indigenous Rights.<sup>3</sup> The work raises questions

2 At PICA, *Though buried, They echo* is situated within the walls of the gallery, exposing its institutional structures.

3 It is important to acknowledge there are different understandings of Black identity and its relationship to First Nations communities in Southern Africa that differ to the context of settler nation Australia. In Australia, First Nations peoples are Black peoples, or Blak as first coined by artist Destiny Deacon. There are varying global and contextual understandings of Black identity, however it must be understood that Black and Indigenous are inseparable terms in the context of Australia.

about solidarity between First Nations and POC of the two countries after South Africa achieved its freedom. To what extent has post-Apartheid South Africa, and especially its global icon Nelson Mandela, honoured the support of others and acted from a position of solidarity around Indigenous rights in Australia? Struggles are not short-term, *The Purple Shall Govern* exhibition seems to suggest. They need continued engagement to enable change and all have responsibilities to continue to play principled roles.

The Purple Rain Protest as mobilised by Roberta in this exhibition is a challenge to viewers to consider activism and public space. The iconic historical event juxtaposed against significant archival material allows us to consider the complexity of struggle as well as the importance of solidarity, humour and tenacity.

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*Aunty Thelma's Identity Card*, issued March 1960  
plastic laminated identity card, perspex vitrine

*Dompas*, issued January 1959  
South African Government Reference Book,  
perspex vitrine

*Cousins gathering in Cape Town, South Africa, 2022*  
framed digital C-type print on lustre paper

*Foto geneem op tafelberg van Rhoda, Joy, Faith, Mummy en Daddy, 2022*  
framed digital C-type print on lustre paper

*Pigs might fly too, 2022*  
single channel SD video, scaffold pole  
5:45 mins  
Archival footage courtesy of the Foley Collection

*Though buried, They echo, 2022*  
video installation with single channel SD video, broadcast monitor, perspex  
3:59 mins

*Lunch with the family at  
Mignon Street, Cape Town, 2022*  
audio video installation with single channel HD video, flat screen monitor,  
headphones, fabricated seating  
36:33 mins

*And so, the mood was quite intense, 2022*  
sound installation with analogue radio, fabricated seating  
14:22 mins

*The Purple Shall Govern, 2022*  
windows with 797 'Deep Purple' lighting gel

*Purple Rain on September 2nd, 1989*  
single channel SD video  
8:47 mins  
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