

Streets, skollies and Coons in District Six

*On narratives and identity related to an area of forced removal in
Cape Town, South Africa*



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Abstract

In post-apartheid South Africa there has been an ongoing process of renegotiating history since the abolishment of the white minority rule. South Africans are coming to terms with who they were, are and are becoming. As a part of the nation-building project the Truth and Reconciliation Commission facilitated the narration of the gross violations of apartheid. Hence, former silenced voices could present their versions of the past. Critics, however, have called for a more positive shared history for the rainbow nation to build on.

In this thesis I focus on another set of memories - the memories of District Six. The multicultural urban area of inner city Cape Town was destroyed during apartheid and the residents were forcibly removed as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1966. Today the residents have the possibility to return following the land restitution process, and District Six has come to national fame as a symbol of hope.

I look into the narratives of the former residents as they are presented on various arenas. In narrating their lives people are positioning themselves in history and in the same time negotiating identity. My focal point of study has been the District Six Museum, where the different representations of the past, as told by the former residents, have been organized to make up a pattern of "district sixness". In scrutinizing these narratives I show that the stories are not merely nostalgic accounts of the past, but in them are also aspects of diaspora thinking, contestation of history, identity making, a critique of society today, and finally a vision for the future.

Treating the human mind as having common underlying properties (Lévi- Strauss 1966) makes it possible to say that these narratives can have resonance with other South Africans that were victims of apartheid.

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Prelude

SEVEN STEPS OF STONE

IT WAS HERE YOU MUST REMEMBER
OUR CHILDREN PLAYED THEIR GAMES
AND THE SKOLLIE GANGS SMOKED DAGGA
YOUNG LOVERS SCRATCHED THEIR
NAMES

THESE SEVEN STEPS BEAR WITNESS
CAN THESE STONE STEPS FORGIVE
THE PEOPLE WHO DESTROYED OUR
HOMES

AND TOLD US WHERE TO LIVE

THE CHILDREN'S VOICES SINGING
TO THE BEAT OF CLAPPING HANDS
THE SOUND OF CHRISTMAS CHOIRS
AND THE HAPPY MARCHING BANDS
THE HEARTBEAT OF THE MOPPIES
AND THE PEOPLE'S TAPPING TOES
THE JOY OF GHOEMMALIEDJIES
AND THE RHYTHM OF BANJOES

THESE STONE STEPS BEAR THE MEMORY
OF OUR PEOPLE SCATTERED WIDE
BEEN WORN AWAY BY THE SOUTH EAST
WIND

AND THE TEARS OUR CHILDREN CRIED
THEY'VE BEEN SMOOTHED BY MANY
FOOTSTEPS

OF THOSE WHO ONCE LIVED HERE
LET THEM NOT BE FORGOTTEN
EVEN THOUGH THEY DISAPPEAR

THE CHILDREN WILL REVENGE US
FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE
FOR THEY CAN CLEARLY HEAR THE STEPS
AND UNDERSTAND ITS CURSE
FOR THEY TOO HAVE BEEN BROKEN
AND SCATTERED LIKE THE BRICKS
THE STONES CEMENT AND CONCRETE
THAT ONCE WAS DISTRICT SIX

From *District Six – The Musical*, at The Baxter Theatre, Cape Town

Chapter 1: Introduction

South Africa has been through a formidable social and political transformation during the last two decades. The apartheid regime's use of history in legitimizing the social order was abolished. Today there is a greater political understanding that memory and history is positioned, negotiable and open for contestation. South Africans are coming to terms with their past.

In this thesis I shall focus on one of the ways people work with their history and memories, that is through making recollections of the past, by telling narratives. Memory is social in that way that much memory is attached to membership of social groups. Thus, in narrating their lives people are positioning themselves in history, they are negotiating their identities, and telling something of who they are, or want to be perceived.

The former residents of District Six, in Cape Town, still portray themselves as District Sixers. I focus on the narratives of these former residents in order to find what it is that constitute "district sixness". There are three virtues of District Six which seems possible to extract from a majority of the narratives. People seem to focus on: The heterogeneity of the district, the sharing spirit, and the extensive use of public space. I attempt to look past the obvious meanings of these narratives and interpret them in light of being 1) a homeland myth for a diaspora community, 2) contestation of history and society today, and 3) identity making.

The District Six Museum is giving voice to the dispossessed community, and fighting for the restitution of land. In the act of collecting and presenting the museum is selecting certain versions of the past. The narratives presented in the museum appear cohesive in a grand narrative of a harmonious community.

I regard the concept of nationhood, like the sense of community as a construct of mind; an imagined reality. The new South Africa is searching for a

national identity, and I think there are some facts which make the symbol of District Six possible to use in creating a national identity.

In this first chapter I will present a historical event which really made me aware of the position of District Six in South Africa for the first time. Then the aim and scope of the thesis is introduced, and in addition I will give a contextualisation of the research issue in terms of history and the ongoing process of defining a national identity. In "Theoretical framework" I offer an insight in the theories and concepts that are the framework for my analysis, and have shaped my way of thinking. Finally I will discuss the methodological aspects of consideration when conducting this study.

In chapter 2 the field is presented in terms of history and contemporary processes in South Africa. The focal point of the studies, the District Six Museum, is extensively described in chapter 3. In chapter 4 I discuss the narratives that were told in the museum context. In chapter 5 other arenas of interaction and narratives are investigated. Finally, in chapter 6, I attempt to pull things together and conclude. The concluding remarks of chapter 6 are brief recollections of the points made throughout this thesis.

The homecoming ceremony¹

On 26 November 2000 several hundreds gathered on the windswept slopes of District Six, in Cape Town, to witness a historic ceremony. The former vibrant inner-city area had been barren and uninhabited since the forced removals of the apartheid-era, and the following demolition in the late 1960`s, but this day it was to be filled with life again. The ceremony took place in an open space next to the Moravian Mission Church, one of the few buildings that were spared from being bulldozed to the ground.

People from all walks of life and with different connections to District Six

¹The following account of the homecoming ceremony is based on news articles on the web (BBC 27.11.2000, Cape Argus 27.11.2000), and a video recording of the District Six Museum (2000).

were there to watch what was labelled “The homecoming ceremony.” For most of the spectators District Six had been *home* since they were evicted from the area and it still was this day, although they had been living scattered across the Cape Flats for decades. Even the grandchildren of former residents, who had never lived in the area, were speaking of “returning” when discussing the topic of moving there.

Finally after years of struggle and negotiations the fight for land restitution had paid off. This day President Thabo Mbeki was there to address the crowd and preside over the signing ceremony, handing back land to former residents. Land Affairs Minister Thoko Didiza signed the document on behalf of the government. The other signatories included former residents. This was a symbolic act in a process that was meant to ensure that 17 000 tenant families, described under apartheid law as “African” or “coloured”, would return to District Six after successful land claims.

During the ceremony an enthusiastic crowd enjoyed the performance of various artists associated with the area; among these were the Cape Malay Board Choir and Cape Jazz All Stars. The nostalgia for District Six was finally enhanced even more by a performance of the cast from *District Six – The musical*. The stage was set for great speeches.

There was a sense that this was more than a local event, and that was an ever present topic in the speeches given that day. Anecdotes were given about the good community-feeling of the old District Six, and the role that it could play in the new South Africa. “District Six must once again show us the way about what we need to do to create our peaceful, prosperous and non-racial cities of the future,” said Mbeki (Cape Argus 27.11.2000). The statement from the chairperson of the District Six Beneficiary Trust, Anwah Nagia, sums up the immense value of District Six in people’s mind; “Let this victory teach us to share and shape a common destiny for a united people.” (Rassool 2001: xii).

For an anthropologist *in spe*, there seemed to be an intriguing prospect of

being able to witness the “construction” of a community, or rather a reconstruction. This triggered my curiosity. Is it possible to model a community on the basis of nostalgic memories? And how does one proceed? These were the issues with which I wanted to work. The homecoming ceremony preceded my fieldwork by almost two years, but was a catalyst for defining my thesis. The work of time, though, made sure the aim and scope of the thesis changed.

What is District Six? Aim and scope

“...you can take the people out of the heart of District Six, *ou pellie*, but you’ll never take District Six out of the heart of the people.” (Swanson and Harries, 2001: 63)

Today the narratives of District Six seems to “occupy a unique place in the nation’s consciousness and conscience” (de Kok 2002 [1998]: 64), acting as a memorial to all South Africans dispossessed by apartheid, and for them it is both a cognitive and physical landmark. District Six is a story of forced removals of ten thousands of people during the apartheid years. Today District Six has become a musical staged in London’s West End. The community museum has been visited by dignitaries like Al Gore and Mary Robinson. President Mbeki, representing ANC, refer to the good old days of District Six when addressing the nation. District Six is a big thing. Fascinated by the story, or rather stories, of a community that was about to rise again, the location of my fieldwork was given.

In short this thesis is an attempt to answer the seemingly simple, but multifaceted question; - *What is District Six?*

To provide an answer I will first subdivide this enquiry in four more fathomable questions, thereby operationalizing the research issue. In order to give an apprehensive description, I will focus on two different levels. On the first level I will concentrate on District Six as living memory and identity for the former residents, by carefully approaching the narratives. On another level I

intend to show that District Six has merged into the grand narrative of the nation. That it is a symbol of hope in a transforming country. The rainbow nation can utilize District Six as a unifying “myth”, which still holds the capability of allowing people to be different.

I attempt to answer the following questions:

I) What are the narratives of District Six? As memory, District Six is of course not a unitary text, it is told in a multiplicity of ways. Memory as well as history is positioned at the eye of the beholder. The community was one of the most heterogeneous in apartheid South-Africa², still some *leitmotifs* seem to be recurring in the narratives. They are of heterogeneity, harmony, sharing and belonging, and extensive use of public space. I have chosen to concentrate on three different themes of popular narratives, all accounts of the ordinary; street life, gangsters and leisure, all of whom is a celebration of the public sphere.

II) Who are telling the narratives, and in what way have the memories been kept alive? The narratives are foremost the life stories of former residents, that have been part of a living oral tradition, and have been passed on to the next generation as well. District Six has been part of conversations during “exile”; in church congregations, at the Friday prayer in the Mosque, in sports clubs at the Cape Flats or jazz nights in the shebeens³. Today one might also extend it, to say that the narratives of District Six belong to Cape Town, or even South Africa. Over the years the District Six museum, starting as a foundation, has been gathering oral testimonies, written texts, and “archaeological” artefacts of the previous community. Piecing together a selection of memories, the museum works as a purveyor of truth and a meeting point for District Sixers. It started as a community museum and today it is a national heritage centre.

III) How does District Six being a diaspora community affect the

² Along with Sophiatown in Johannesburg and the Warwick Triangle in Durban, among others.

³ An illicit bar where alcoholic beverage is sold without a licence.

narratives? Applying William Safran's (1991) criteria, I argue that the former residents are part of a diaspora. I will look into how the maintenance of a collective identity may have been helped by the formation of the District Six Foundation, and the oral testimonies told in the museum through numerous exhibitions. Thus, District Six emerge as *a* cohesive narrative. One might even apply the term "homeland myth". The possibility of returning home means the narratives could also be perceived as a manifesto of what should be. Returning home is also a political goal.

Having discussed the above three questions, it should be possible to answer the final one:

IV) Why has District Six resonance with the South African nation?

First of all; the significance of District Six beyond its immediate locality can be ascribed to the universality, and "ordinariness" of the narratives. The stories told is not so much about a community lost, or homes demolished during the forced removals, as is about a set of social relations. It is a narrative of a well working community where there is a front stage available on which to confirm your identity. It is about heterogeneity, harmony and belonging. In short it is a "package of meaning" ready to be adopted by the nation state at this time in history. The post-apartheid South Africa needs to recreate itself, and become a rainbow nation, and the District Six "package" fits well into this process.

Second, the uniqueness of District Six as compared to other areas of forced removals, I argue, stem from the fact that the area never was re-developed, and still is a barren landscape. As such the narratives have in them unlimited potentiality. It is a vision of the future.

In order to answer these questions one must address the issue of history as contextual, changing and utilized.

History in the making

“It is a very long way indeed from the days when as primary school pupils we were puzzled to read in a history of South Africa by a certain missionary that the colonists always *captured* cattle from the Xhosas who equally invariably *stole* cattle from the white farmers. And we were not as politicised as our successors in the 1970s turned out to be. History it seems is told from the perspective of the historian. Thus it was that the freedom fighter of the one was the terrorist of the other” (Tutu 2000: ix).

History does not only affect the identity of the nation at large but also the identity of groups or individuals, whom again may impact history. Above Desmond Tutu recapitulated how they were not as politicised when he was young as the people of the 1970s turned out to be. This work of history on society can be ascribed to how society *uses* history. Friedrich Nietzsche (1997) writes on the use and abuse of history:

“If the man who wants to do something great has need for the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history, he, on the other hand who likes to persist in the familiar and the revered of old, tends the past as an antiquarian historian, and only he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off his burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say a history that judges and condemns” (Nietzsche 1997: 72).

The National Party when coming to power in 1948 strongly focused on the role of history in Afrikaner identity. Canonizing Afrikaans, *Voortrekker* history and the traditional voortrekker outfit and portraying the other *races* as inferior was all part of creating *monumental history*, Mistri (2001) argues. This grand project was alienating from history the oppressed majority. From the 1960s and onwards protests, activism and confrontations against the apartheid government continued to grow. “In Nietzsche's definition it may be said that 1960⁴ - 1994 was history in the making, a time when the clash of ideologies and political aspirations were in constant battle. This dualism of "preservation-challenge" of apartheid meant being in the moment, in the present without being encumbered by the weight of history” (ibid: 11). The time of questioning

⁴ Using the internal combustion in South Africa represented by the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960 as a starting point.

history is not over, and history I would argue is always in the making, but maybe one can suggest that it is a bigger consensus today of what kind of history that should shape South African national identity?

In April 1994 people were queuing for hours all over South Africa, waiting to cast their vote in the first free elections. South Africa's abolition of *apartheid*⁵ and the following transition to democracy marked the birth of a new nation. The process has been accompanied by a quest for a new national identity; The Rainbow Nation.

The Rainbow Nation

"My appeal is ultimately directed to all of us, black and white together, to close the chapter of our past and to strive together for this beautiful and blessed land as the rainbow people of God" (Tutu 1998: VI)

A central person in the process of reconciliation and nation building is Archbishop and chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)⁶, Desmond Tutu. He is associated with the metaphor of the rainbow nation. Concluding the hearings of the TRC he was advocating the abolition of the "black and white"-thinking and in the same time trying to unite a multicultural nation; speaking of the "Rainbow People of God".

Baines (1998) give a thorough introduction to the symbolism of the *rainbow*;

"As a cleric, his image presumably draws on the Old Testament story of the flood where the rainbow symbolises God's promise not to pass further judgment on humankind. Perhaps this represents another chance to build a nation from which the evil of apartheid has been removed? For Tutu, the image probably also resonates with the symbolism of the rainbow in South African

⁵ "Apartheid" comes from the Afrikaans language meaning "apartness". The 1948 National Party victory formalized the term as a legislative practice. This meant separate development for all race groups and the restriction of living areas for blacks and whites. Rural reservations called bantustans, reserves and more commonly homelands were designated areas for black Africans. Prime Minister of South Africa Hendrik Verwoerd from 1958 until his assassination in 1966 was known as the "Architect of Apartheid".

⁶ The TRC will be given extensive attention in chapter 2.

indigenous cultures. For instance, in Xhosa cosmology the rainbow signifies hope and the assurance of a bright future. These positive and life-affirming images eclipse negative ones such as that suggested by the mythic narrative of the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The “rainbow nation” metaphor both informs and reinforces the vision of nation building.

The secondary metaphor of the rainbow with its spectrum of colours suggests that South Africa is a multicultural society. This image may have more obviously political derivations. Unlike the primary metaphor, the room for different cultural interpretations of the colour spectrum is slight. For whether the rainbow has Newton's seven colours or the five of the Nguni (i.e. Xhosa and Zulu) cosmology, the colours are not taken literally to represent particular cultural groups. Indeed, the rainbow nation rhetoric avoids direct reference to colour in the sense of race. Instead, the rainbow's colours are simply said to symbolise the diversity of South Africa's usually unspecified cultural/ethnic/racial groups” (Baines 1998).

In the wake of a new reality for South Africans the immediate response to the symbolism of the rainbow nation was embracing. Dickov, Møller and Harris (1999) explore the link between national pride and happiness using data from two independent national surveys conducted in 1995 and 1996. “The study found that the appeal of the rainbow as political symbol was inclusive of all groups in society and that feelings of national pride and support for the rainbow ideal were positively associated with subjective well-being.” (ibid: 245).

There has been recent criticism of the rainbow as national symbol. I will limit myself to two of the arguments. The first one is about *non-manceuvrable* society; one should be careful not to view the people as separate entities like the colours of a rainbow. Distinct and static ethnic groups that is most pleasing to the mind when not interfering with the other colours. This may prevent the idea of *fluidity* in social interaction. The colours of the rainbow are fixed in position, the separate colours always being in the same place. This does not allow for people to negotiate their identities. The second criticism is concerned with categorization; the rainbow metaphor, it is said, may be enhancing the differences between ethnic groups. The sharp distinction between the different colours in red, yellow and so on, can be interpreted as a South Africa

There is also a questioning of the need for a *new* nationalism in it self. Baines (1998) explains: "It has been asserted that identification with the nation is the dominant form of cultural identity in modern nation-states. But the South African state has embarked on the task of nation building at a critical historical conjuncture when the autonomy of the nation-state is being eroded by the forces of globalisation" (ibid). He opts for the symbol of a blurred rainbow, the colours being "...the co-existence of individual and collective identities" (ibid) from which the individuals can choose.

District Six with its former cosmopolitanism and urban qualities is thus an appropriate symbol. District Six being a metaphor of the global society, and District Sixers as a metonym of all South Africans.

Theoretical framework

"Any theoretical hunch that arises during fieldwork takes on meaning only because of a vast, complicated network of social metatheory in terms of which the researcher sees and interprets his world." (Pelto and Pelto 1996: 52).

As earlier mentioned in the context of the homecoming ceremony, my initial scope had to be revised. This needs some clarification. The envisaged approach to the study of District Six was at the outset to examine the relationship between spatial structures and social relations, and investigate how physical structures may influence the way people acts and think about *place*. The planned redevelopment of the area made for the intriguing prospect of being able to witness the project of "re-building" a community. Years prior to the fieldwork my mind was occupied with the thoughts of Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1989) among others. There is no direct reference to either in this thesis, but they should be mentioned as they have influenced the way I think. For District Six in particular Bezzoli, Marks and Kruger (2002: 122-125) give an interesting view on *urban texture* and memory, and discuss the concept of place-making. However, regardless of being high profile cases for ANC, land restitution and

the rebuilding of District Six was at the outset of my fieldwork in 2002 very much unsettled business, and still is in 2007. Discarding the study of space and place, I opted for a more open approach to the study of District Six; freeing me from the limitations of the initial scope, and henceforth extending the theoretical framework.

Multiple anthropological themes will be touched upon; 1) Memory and narratives, 2) Identity, 3) Nation and myth, 4) Anthropology of museums, and 5) Diaspora. Here I will briefly discuss these themes and they will be further elaborated upon in later chapters.

Memory and narratives

I use Tonkins definition of narratives: “Verbal representations (that) are chains of words, either spoken or written, ordered in patterns of discourse that represent events. (...) Meanings exist because people mean and others believe they understand what was meant” (Tonkin 1992: 2).

I urge that the narratives⁷ of former residents should be seen as social actions, positioned in a certain context which opens up for the negotiation of identity. To maintain this position one must avoid the dichotomisation of individual and society. I advocate Tonkin’s view that “to distinguish the individual from the social in any human being’s makeup is like trying to pull apart the two sides of a piece of paper.” (Tonkin 1992: 102). In the same way that the District Six Museum or other physical arenas of interaction and negotiation of identity are meeting grounds for individuals, so are the different “representations of pastness.” (Tonkin 1992: 98). The representation of pastness here being various recollections of history told through the narratives. Memory is the facilitator for the interconnection between individual and society.

There are several perspectives on the relation between the memories and

⁷ In this thesis both oral stories and written texts are termed *narratives*.

narratives of individuals and how these get positioned in a collective consciousness. I find Fentress and Wickham (1992) particularly useful in understanding how memory can be social:

"We have called this book "Social Memory" to counter pose its subject to that of the memory of individuals. Yet it is individuals who actually do the remembering; what is social about it? The essential answer is that much memory is attached to membership of social groups of one kind or another." (1992: 8).

In narrating the past we "try to shape our futures in the light of past experience – or what we understand to have been past experience- and, representing how things were, we draw a social portrait, a model which is a reference list of what to follow and what to avoid." (Tonkin 1992: 1)

There are also the official narratives of the nation. The rainbow nation is a new beginning for South Africa. Former apartheid narratives were discarded, and a "void" was left in the grand narrative of the nation. Connerton reminds us that "All beginnings contain an element of recollection. This is particularly so when a social group makes a concerted effort to begin with a wholly new start." (1999: 6). The memory of District Six is not something which suddenly arose as the task to build a new South Africa occurred. District Six is not just stories; it is *embodied* in the former residents, and transferred to the next generation through various occasions today. The gumba as analyzed in chapter 5 is an example of a commemorative ceremony in which "...a community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative." (Connerton 1999: 70)⁸.

Like Goffman (1992) my view is that the recollection of memories and events to some degree is influenced by "impression management". Thus it will be a pattern of selecting, more or less deliberate, the fragments that together constitute wholeness, providing a wanted understanding of the narrative. Ricoeur (1984) argues that a story isn't merely a chronological recollection of

⁸ See "How societies remember" (Connerton: 1989) for extensive discussion on incorporated practises and commemorative ceremonies.

memories, but that the act of narrating has a dimension to it where "...it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events." (ibid: 278).

Tonkin (1992) discusses the social dialectic of *action* and *recall*. She points out that not only is memory triggered by material objects or physical structures, but also by words, phrases and action. There are several catalysts for remembering District Six; the open wasteland in the city centre, the physical attributes of the museum, the audiotapes being played in the museum, or just the repetitive action of talking about the past. District Six is still part of the daily life of the former residents I claim, and being a District Sixer is part of what constitutes their identity.

Identity

Eriksen reminds us that "...every human being has a well of potential identities. Identification is relational, by virtue and in contrast to others, and situational, meaning that our collective identity changes from situation to situation." (1996 my translation).

In this thesis attention will be given predominantly to identity as an aspect of history, and as related to space. White (1991) notes that stories of the past are always discourses of identity, but in the same time telling these stories also constitute identity. In the case of the District Six Museum; the former residents visiting are engaging in the past through a rejection of the social life and organization associated with apartheid, and at the same time embracing the past of District Six community life. Positioning themselves is a way of reclaiming history as a part of their identity. In doing this they are also giving away their identity of the present.

The *self* as the ego sees it is not a subject of social sciences, I would argue, as it is not accessible to observation. What we are engaged in is the public person. Being a social person implies interaction. Goffman (1992) explores how "individual" identity, group relations and the environment acts together. He

argues that it is through the social interaction, and the communication of information, that the individual develops identity. Using a dramaturgical technique he divides between *front stage* and *back stage*. The front stage being the place of the performance; this is where we seek to produce a compelling impression for the audience to grasp. Norms and values, cloths, facial expressions, the way you move or definite objects may all be tools for the performer to use. On the front stage we want to assert a certain impression of our *selves*, to confirm an identity. The back stage can be understood as where we prepare the performance. It is in general separated from the front stage in space and time. The *front* is the “part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (ibid: 32). Part of this front is the *setting* “involving furniture, décor, physical layout and other background items which supply the scenery” (ibid: 32). In the front there is a constant negotiation of status and role.

When being removed to the Cape Flats the former residents were still District Sixers in the “back stage”, but as I see it they were parted from the *settings* they mastered. Thus, when all the physical references with which they were familiar were destroyed the *front* one wants to portray is disturbed. Irrespective of what went on back stage, the former residents no longer had the old settings of Hanover Street or their front porches on where to perform. Living scattered on the Cape Flats the arenas of interaction became the places of worship, the jazz venues, or lately the District Six Museum.

Rejecting people the possibility to choose their own actions, the right to use the physical public space, to confine their potential social relations is what the apartheid society did. The *self* was thereby limited mostly to the backstage sphere.

I assert the belief that the District Six Museum is working as a *setting* in where performers and audience can take part in the front stage negotiation of

identities. In writing on the potentials of reclaiming territory McEachern argues that "...the retrieval of a more desirable past provides a way into new identity for them in post-apartheid South Africa as they take back urban citizenship, their identity as Capetonians." (1998: 518).

Why is the identity of District Sixers not only of interest to the individuals that make up that community, but also in order to understand the nation building of South Africa?

Eriksen, in referring to Anderson states that identity of individuals can be adopted in nation building:

"What is it that makes it so powerful? What is the "identity" that (such) political movements can draw upon? Benedict Anderson proposes an answer in the Introduction to his seminal *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), where he points out that nationalism has more in common with phenomena such as religion and kinship than with ideologies like liberalism and socialism. He argues that nationalism (and, one might add, any form of identity politics) expropriates personal identity, transforming intimate experiences into the raw material of politics." Eriksen (2001).

District Six is important to the nation not only because the themes of harmony, heterogeneity, sharing and belonging are attached to the narratives, but because the physical and cognitive destruction of District Six' as a place for front stage acting resembles the work of apartheid on all oppressed South Africans. Thus the identities arriving from the "District Six" narratives give significance to the individual former residents, to the dispossessed community as a group, and are voiced as building bricks for the rainbow nation "myth".

Nation, nationalism and myth

Anderson refers to the nation as an *imagined community* (Anderson 1991). Tracing the creation of imagined communities back to the development of "print-capitalism", he shows that printing books in "local" languages rather than the official Latin script, and thereby reaching greater audiences meant the possibility that a bigger group of people could get hold of the same base of

knowledge. One might say that a common discourse emerged. The existence of a shared set of values or beliefs among an extended group, or rather the *idea* of it, could be used by the elite in building a *nation*⁹, as the postulate of nationalism is common culture. A successful nationalism in turn is dependent on instigating a connection between an idea of a common origin and unity, and a working apparatus in which to convey these beliefs. The monopoly of legitimate use of physical force is securing the nation state's power over the people.

The Afrikaner nationalism which was the basis for the apartheid nation of South Africa arose in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was facilitated by a group of educated Afrikaners planning to unite the *Volk* in an independent *Volkstaat*. After *the great trek*¹⁰ and the Battle of Blood River¹¹ where the Voortrekkers surprisingly escaped a defeat, the Boers shared a belief that they were a chosen people. An ideological position which was also utilized in nation building by the National Party;

Our history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We hold this nationhood as our due for it was given us by the Architect of the universe. [His] aim was the formation of a new nation among the nations of the world. (...) The last hundred years have witnessed a miracle behind which must lie a divine plan. Indeed the Afrikaner reveals a will and determination which make one feel that the Afrikanerdom is not the work of men but the creation of God." (cit. Pienaar, in Berge 1991: 71)

In discussing *Afrikanderdom* Trond Berge reflects on it as comprising

⁹ For the distinction between ethnic and civic nations see Smith (1991)

¹⁰ The great trek was a north-eastward migration of the Boer population in the Cape Province starting in 1834. The British rule of the Cape, and subsequently the laws that provided equal rights to people of all colours, thereby rejecting the Boers their right to slaves, initiated the escape. See Davenport and Saunders (2000) for a comprehensive reading.

¹¹ The battle of Blood River was fought between Zulus and the Voortrekkers at the bank of the Ncome River on 16 December 1838. Although the Zulus outnumbered the Voortrekkers, the battle saw more than three thousand Zulus die as contrasted to just three men being wounded on the other side. According to Boer history they made a vow to God the day before the battle, that if they were spared they would commemorate the day and build a church on the site. The fact that the Boers had access to rifles has probably been under communicated.

“...both the social institutions, the ritual practices and the cultural web of significance the Afrikaner Nation over time has developed its ethnic identity around.” (1991: 101-102, my translation). It was this ideology of the *Afrikanderdom* which materialised in the apartheid politics of South Africa, legitimizing the separation of races¹² and the particularistic shaping of society.

As the former minority¹³ now has become the majority in post-apartheid South Africa, and it consists of several ethnic groups, one is careful not to attach identity to any *one* group. South Africa is at a point of intersection. Discarding the nationalism of the Boers, they are striving to find a nationalism, or perhaps a national identity, which has in itself the capability of uniting the inhabitants irrespective of peoples colour, background or class.

Eriksen distinguishes between *ethnic* and *multiethnic* nationalisms (1998: 386-387). The European nationalisms traditionally have had a single ethnic basis, but in other places of the world this is of no use and can be potentially devastating. South Africa is no exception. For a multiethnic nationalism to work, some common denominators must be in the basis of a national identity. For South Africa the negotiation of history has been a deliberate attempt at creating a new platform.

Myths of origin play a significant part in the creation of a collective identity, or a national identity. South Africans lacking an obvious and symbolic myth of origin in common, I agree with Lévi-Strauss (1966) that in writing history one is producing the myth of our time. In selecting and excluding a set of events, and interpreting them in a contemporary context; writing history is a creation fulfilling the needs of its time. Through the Truth and Reconciliation process, the Healing of Memory workshop¹⁴ or the exhibition in the District Six

¹² The terms “colour” and “race” are still widely used in describing oneself or others in South Africa, and people were very much aware of the attribute of colour during the days of District Six. In the narratives people refer to these terms and I will use both terms in the text.

¹³ *Minority* in this case relating not to actual numbers, but to the limited access to legislative power.

¹⁴ Workshops that have been held all over South Africa in the post-apartheid period where the

Museum one is reclaiming history, making historical narratives capable of taking on the capacities of myths. In telling people where they come from and what life used to be like, the myths are tying together individuals in a group. Thus, the myths are placing people in a community, revealing the social relations.

To what extent is it possible for the “new” South Africa to extract a core of common denominators from history and create a “myth” of the Rainbow Nation? An answer may be found in *multiculturalism*. As ideology multiculturalism is not a unitary conceptualisation. Eriksen (2006) provides an insight in the “difference” and “diversity” aspects of multiculturalism. Recognizing the diversity as something positive and a quality that should be appreciated, the narratives of the new South African nation must be concerned with telling the stories of heterogeneity. The risk being that the differences is enhanced to become politically significant, and thus, divides more than unites. Here there is an issue of combining the idea of heterogeneity with the idea of shared space. Confined to designated areas during apartheid there was no public space in where to negotiate identities, and the “cultural exchange” may be said to have been limited. Introducing shared space as a virtue of the official narrative, South Africa can produce a “myth” for people to believe in. Where are the stories of the past that are *good to think with*? I intend to show that cosmopolitan District Six is a well working example, and that the District Six Museum among others is providing “packages of meaning”.

Anthropology of museums

Museums are first of all about collecting. The collection of material objects, and in this specific case; oral testimonies, are pieced together in an act of archaeology of memory. Both in collecting and presenting the artefacts there is

participants share their memories and experiences from apartheid using creative methods like poetry writing, ceramics etc.

a process of selecting. The shattered memories or objects are reconstructed to tell a story. First of all; the District Six Museum was arguably the main facilitator of narratives and provider of “facts” during my fieldwork. Second; the museum was also an actor in the land restitution process, and thus one can argue that it has a political agenda. Scrutinizing the role of museums should be in its place.

Historically the museum is an institutionalized idea of collecting that has its roots in medieval Europe, and parallels the growth of democratization of Western societies (Ames 1992). Providing evidence in the form of objects or narratives of the past, the museums represent a conscious project of recording one's history or even identity. The selective process of collecting and presenting these objects means that the museums are products of their society, and as such they are a product of history.

Museums are also “mirrors of power” (Davison 1998). “...Unlike personal memory, which is animated by an individual's lived experience, museums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory. In this way, museums anchor official memory.” (ibid: 145). The ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology of South Africa called for a national reconstruction and development program for the reshaping of the museums. The museums are slowly responding to the new national agenda. To my surprise there still was a “bushman diorama” present at The South African Museum in Cape Town when I was conducting my fieldwork. Segregated from the rest, depicting the black bushman as an object, describing him by his physiological traits, the exhibition was portraying an identity of the past. Museum exhibitions often go hand in hand with politics and have a great deal to do with processes of nation building (Anderson 1991). They are regarded as repositories of symbols. Albie Sachs, member of the South African Constitutional Court, and a well known leader in the struggle for human rights address the problem of representation in

The South African Museum and has a vision for the museums in future South Africa;

The problem is the way they (the bushmen) are segregated from all the other people. If you want to see our history, you will not see it in the museum but you will see it in the streets. Our history is in the faces of our people. And history has been our enemy up until now. We used history---our colours, the shape of our noses, our hair---to divide ourselves and to create different rights and duties. Now we reclaim our origins. We present them on a basis of visual and physical equality. Acknowledging the diversity of different people--- their background, their appearance, their cultures---that is what should be on display in the concentrated form of the diorama. This should include not just the original settlers or later settlers, but everyone---and reaffirming the dignity of the people and the cultures of our origins...How fine it would be for a South African to come into the S A Museum and see a depiction of South Africa in that way (Sachs 2006).

The District Six Museum I would say is fitting with the new national agenda. It has been directly concerned with reshaping memory. Founded in 1992, two years prior to the free elections, it was part of the ongoing political process, and reclaims the social histories of people who were forcibly removed from the area under Group Areas legislation¹⁵. The museums commitment was not only directed at nation building, or voicing the narratives of the dispossessed community, but also at the fight for land restitution of the ex-residents. Thus, the museum was, and still is, an official voice for the displaced community.

Diaspora

District Six can, as far as I believe, be said to constitute a diaspora community. Essential for this position is the stand chosen that it is the idea of a shared cultural relationship, a common destiny and a coherent group identity, more than a factual one that should be taken into consideration. As long as the former residents view themselves as a group and appear as cohesive, I find it useful to apply diaspora theory as a framework for understanding why District Six has

¹⁵ The Group Areas Legislation is explained in chapter 2 under the heading *Forced Removals*.

become a symbol of great importance.

Hall (1990) describes diaspora as an engine for production of identity. This fits well with the notion of District Sixers as key providers for a new South African identity. The collective dream of returning¹⁶ to District Six plays down former or temporary differences and unites.

In social sciences the use of the term diaspora¹⁷ is relatively recent. Historically it was used about the Jews as being dispersed throughout the world. The traditional utilization of the concept in social sciences has been; a group of an ethnic population forced or induced to leave their homeland, believed to have a common goal of returning and with an inherent collective identity. Diaspora studies and theorizing the concept became more frequent towards the end of the twentieth century. The upheaval of different nation states and ethnic conflicts saw the creation of millions of refugees on the move, making the ground for the study of displaced groups. "Diaspora" was used on numerous groups in a number of ways. In addition globalisation and transnationalism as aspects of human life have been added weight in social anthropology and social sciences in general. Diaspora as an analytical concept was assigned significantly different types of groups; contemporary diaspora can be "nation unbound", it can be "cultural diasporas" or "virtual diasporas" (Anteby-Yemini and Berthomiere 2005). Sheffer (1986, 2003) and Clifford (1994), among others called for more theorization about the concept.

In Sheffer's (ibid) point of view, three criteria could be proposed for a definition:

1. The maintenance and the development of an own collective identity in the "diasporised people".
2. The existence of an internal organisation distinct from those existing in

¹⁶ For most people there is a double meaning attached; 1) returning to the physical landscape, and 2) returning to the social structure/ the way of life.

¹⁷ From Greek: "a scattering of seeds".

the country of origin or in the host country.

3. Significant contacts with the *homeland* real contacts or symbolic contacts.

Rejecting the idea that “diaspora” only should be maintained as a concept for speaking of the Jewish population, Sheffer stuck with the conception that it was to be assigned for ethnic groups.

Safran (1991, 1999) opened up for understanding diaspora as a “metaphoric designation” that could be applied to various populations. In his essays, Safran defines the diasporas. Below I will use his definition as framework for stating that District Six is a diaspora community.

According to Safran (ibid) diasporas are expatriate minority communities:

1. That are dispersed from an original “centre” to at least two “peripheral” places: District Six is dispersed to different locations on the remote Cape Flats, like Mitchells Plain and Guguletu, thereby secluding the former residents of their original home, being metaphorical expatriates.

2. That maintain a “memory,” vision or myth about their original homeland: The District Six community has been working with the memory of the district since the forced removals. Through constant negotiations they are maintaining an image of a District Six identity. This I will argue through showing how the museum works.

3. That “believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country”: The community has until a decade ago been dispossessed of rights by the apartheid regime. They have still not been resettled in the district, and some believe financial restraints on behalf of the government will exclude them.

4. That see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return when the time is right: Some of the former residents have been waiting for more than 40 years, but are still dreaming of a return. This was proven by the land claims

meetings, where thousands gathered, and in the narratives I will analyze.

5. That are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland: The HODS and the District Six Museum are where the homeland is restored both in forms of memory, historically and on the physical map. They are also working with the planning of how District Six should be rebuild.

6. (...and) of which the group's consciousness and solidarity are "importantly defined" by this continuing relationships with the homeland: The former residents are a community of consciousness. They constitute their identity out of being District Sixers. When meeting fellow dispossessed they sometimes refer to the actual street name as where to invest their identity. In short they are District Sixers.

Vertovec (1999) deals with the concept as an analytical tool and looks into three different meanings of the concept diaspora, distinguishing 'diaspora' *as social form*, 'diaspora' *as type of consciousness*, and 'diaspora' *as mode of cultural production*. He discusses the methodological implications and the productivity of combining these three aspects. To quote Vertovec it is the "...specific kinds of *social relationships* cemented by special ties to history and geography" (ibid: 3) associated with diaspora which makes District Six narratives adoptable to the creation of a new national identity in South Africa.

Methodological aspects

Social anthropology is the study of people as social beings. It is the study of how we live together, how we interact and organize our societies. In social anthropological research we focus on the aspects of social life visible to the anthropologist, and produce data from the interpretation of our observations according to our individual cognitive framework, although being more or less placed in an anthropological tradition. The process of turning data into theoretical statements can be said to reveal the anthropologist theoretical

position, but one should also bear in mind that the initial scope of a given research study is rooted in a set of theories, and that this has implications for the methodology one pursues;

“Though [these] methods and techniques are important and though their use affects the character and validity of the data yielded, it has to be recognized that it is a specific theoretical interest which induces the fieldworker to adopt and develop certain kinds of technique. The adoption of specific techniques is thus merely one aspect of an overall methodological stance determined by theoretical ideas concerning the constitution of the phenomena investigated.”
(Holy 1995: 19)

In studying identities, narratives and how the singular of District Six is adopted as an ingredient in the nation building of the new South Africa, I could not limit my methods to mere observation, but had to adopt a methodology allowing for the “owners of the narratives” – the informants - to ascribe their meaning of social acts and stories. The analysis of culture as “...an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973: 5) and the notion of man as “...suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (ibid: 5) calls for *thick description* in order to shed light on the meaning of narratives. Attempting to give a thick description I am placing the narratives in a context of space and time; describing where it is told and who is telling it, thereby emphasising hermeneutical aspect.

I present the idea that the narrative of District Six is being used in the creation of a new national identity, an identity which can encompass the multiplicity of ethnic groups. First of all, I would like to make clear that this assumption is based on numerous speeches and written statements from members of the South African government that I read in the museum library during the fieldwork. What I am trying to do is to find out why District Six rose to this monumental position and what it is about District Six spellbinds so many. How to initiate a research strategy which can answer these questions?

“In the real world it is obvious that the conduct of social research is an organic process which cannot easily conform to simple positivistic models based on the experimental sciences, that is, procedures which follow the sequence: problem

definition, theory “construction”, operationalization, data collection, analysis and publication.” (Ellen 1995: 158)

The “circular dance” between theory, data and methodology, as discussed by Cato Wadel (1991: 121) was describing for my research project. Facing a different reality called for a revision of scope, subsequently hypotheses, the actual field and methodology. The art of fieldwork starts at home, and is tested when the anthropologist meets real life.

The anthropologist’s horizon - acts of reading and preparations

A person’s horizon¹⁸ is determined by his or her past, and the social position. Experiences, lived life, social background, sex and age are all aspects of what constitute us both as human beings and as anthropologists, and affect the way we observe and reflect on the world we see. Thus understanding and interpretation always occur from within this horizon. Being a white young man from the middle class in Norway gives me a certain set of possible or limited ways of perceiving society. An anthropologist’s horizon is also influenced by the acts of reading and preparing for fieldwork.

The first time I heard about District Six was in the spring of 2000. I was a student at the University of East Anglia, reading politics and preparing a piece on Benedict Andersons “Imagined Communities” to hand in. While I was finishing the text I was listening to BBC’s night program. A correspondent gave a story about a South African harmonious community which again could find its place in history after having been deprived of all rights during apartheid. District Six instantly caught my attention. In the temporary context of me being submerged in “imagined communities” District Six was nicely fitted into my mental landscape. This being more than two years in advance of the actual fieldwork, there was a substantial amount of time for District Six to develop as an entity of meaning to me. Planning for a degree in social anthropology meant

¹⁸ From the concept *Horizont* associated with the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer

gathering literature and references on District Six became essential.

The web was a good introduction to the subject of District Six; providing me with maps, photos, articles from different newspapers and a general notion of the meanings attached. Most of the articles were concerned with the return of the former residents. The old district was looked upon as a community on which to model the new District Six in Cape Town, but also, in a wider context, it was thought to give guiding principles for the development of urban areas in the new South Africa. Having recently read Andersen's "The quest for community" (2001) I was occupied with *place and identity* and *new urbanism* and constructed my thematic aim around this. However, as described above, the process of handing over land and reconstruct the district was postponed and made for a change in scope and hence reading of theory.

In preparing for the fieldwork I turned to the main source of information on District Six; The District Six Museum. Establishing contact with the museum staff not only helped me in getting hold of data, and later informants, but also simplified the process of getting a research visa to South Africa.

All of the above were parts of what defined me as a coming anthropologist before my arrival in the field.

The fieldwork

The actual fieldwork commenced in September 2002 and lasted two months into 2003. The beautiful scenery of Table Mountain and the endless ocean meeting the eye when descending to the Cape Town International Airport marked the end of a somewhat uncomfortable journey. Likewise leaving the autumn of Oslo behind for the extraordinary warm spring of the Southern Cape was a welcoming feature. The journey was uncomfortable in two ways; first, it was the idea of leaving behind the familiar in shape of my personal ties and second, it was the uncertainty on my role in the field. Although not totally agreeing with Goward that "the degree of personal commitment of the lone

anthropologist is likely to be much greater than that of an anthropologist who divides his love between family and informants, or who is the member of a large fieldwork team" (1995: 98), I appreciate that the fear of solitude results in extensive data production through interviews and other forms of interaction.

I had made no prior arrangements as to where to live during the stay. This was partially because the District Six community was more of a *diaspora of consciousness* than one localized in space, and also because I wanted to be as flexible as possible when it came to conducting fieldwork in different locations, be it on the Cape Flats or in the District Six Museum. After two weeks at The Longstreet Backpackers, familiarizing with the territory, I opted for a move to my own flat in Green Point, allowing for more privacy and securing the equipment and data from theft.

On the first day of my fieldwork I initiated contact with The District Six Museum in Buitenkant Street, getting a brief overview of the museum, their collections and the way forward in getting informants. On this very first day I came in contact with a few of my informants, some being museum staff, other being former residents visiting the museum. The museum became my focal point of study. From the stories told in the museum exhibition I selected other arenas of information and interaction; the al-azhar Mosque, the Methodist Church, the musical at The Baxter Theatre, the *gumba* in the CAP¹⁹ building. This was an attempt at *triangulating* data not only by using various informants, but also various arenas.

District Six was however a topic for conversation during the entire fieldwork, in pub nights, and among people I just crossed paths with.

¹⁹ Community Arts Project; their vision is to develop and promote the arts for community development.

Yielding data

“Although no distinction can be made between social anthropology and other social sciences either in terms of the substantive problems to which they address themselves or in terms of the theory to which they subscribe, both anthropologists themselves... as well as philosophers of science consider the unique method of yielding data through long-term “participant observation” as distinguishing anthropology from other social sciences” (Holy 1995: 14).

Participant observation is a qualitative tool of research and the “fieldworker is the principal research instrument” (Pelto and Pelto 1996: 67). The qualitative approach means that the outcome of the study is more easily affected by the researcher than in the quantitative approach. In the study of narratives I would argue that it is the very interaction between informant and scientist that is producing the meaning of a narrative. The “participating” aspect of this study is that in being told the stories of District Six, or attending the gumba celebrating the old community, I am also playing a part and thus I am not only an observer but also a participant. “Different kinds of research will obviously demand different levels and kinds of involvement with human beings” as Tonkin (1992: 218) phrases it. In the study of narratives, their meaning and how they translate to a national identity, one must proceed with a different approach than, let us say in the study of kinship among the Nuer. The narratives always parted in time from their origin, it is the retelling, the content and the presentation which gives meaning. Thus the study should focus on this limited field of social life. I was participating in their society through the collection of life histories, and observing the arenas of the narratives.

Conducting life story interviews allowed the informants more space to narrate their memories, and thus the outcome was a thicker description, containing a variety of different topics revealing the informants “as members of communities, families, organisations, teams and cultural groups (...) [and this] also helps the interviewer to contextualise and explore these specific

community or social themes in more detail" (Field 2001: 128). A few concerns may emerge to the anthropologist; first there is a question of representativeness, and secondly, life stories cannot be contrasted to observations of real life behaviour.

Addressing the second issue first the life story *data* is "more useful for examining the patterning of general values, foci of cultural interest, and perceptions of social and natural relationships than as true histories" (Pelto and Pelto 1996: 77). Thus, in this particular study the life stories reveal the virtues of District Six as a narrative that is used in negotiating identity of former residents and that also "speaks to the nation".

The question of representativeness is related to the belief of a multitude of anthropologists that informants who willingly narrate their life are *atypical* in their society. I do not necessarily agree with this, but in the case of District Six it is the stories of heterogeneity, harmony, sharing and belonging that make *resonance* in the Rainbow Nation, and the narrators' representativeness are thus reflected on a national level, the story tellers being atypical or not.

Limiting the data collection was my main concern, both with regard to the number of arenas of interaction and to the somewhat loosely formed research project. The open-ended question "What is District Six?" released a wealth of information to absorb. Liberating me from an overwhelming task, there seemed to be a few *leitmotifs*. Still, one can not help think that "many successful episodes in the field do come about through good luck as much as through sophisticated planning" (Goward 1995: 96-98).

I used the museum as the main base for acquiring informants. Although determined to systematically select a heterogeneous group of informants based on sex, age, their formal status and colour²⁰, there was also a random aspect

²⁰ The terms "colour" and "race" are still widely used in describing oneself or others in South Africa, and people were very much aware of the attribute of colour during the days of District Six. In the narratives people refer to these terms and I will use both terms in the text.

involved. Social visibility, accessibility and a question of being in the right place at the right time were all significant factors. The museum was the starting point, but through the network of the informants, and my participation in other arenas, I got an extensive and diverse group of informants. There were five key informants; Mr Davids and Cassiem whom I met at the al-azhar Mosque, Ma from the Methodist Mission Church, Linda and Noor who were both staff at the District Six Museum. They were naturally all former residents. In addition there were a number of other informants telling me their versions of District Six. They will be presented further in chapter 4.

Doing interviews and collecting life stories I used a tape recorder when allowed. The advantage was the unlimited attention I could give the informant, and better time to reflect on the physical context. This was important because most of the conversations and interviews were executed in environments filled with reference to District Six in shape of buildings, landscape or *memorabilia*, and the informants used this actively. The drawback of extensive use of tape recorder is the substantial task of writing their lives into text.

Ethical considerations

The life and identity of people is part of what I am concerned with in this thesis. The narratives are their stories; still they have lent them to me. This calls for a cautious treatment of the data. This text being in English means it is easily accessible to the informants and others in their society. Though most of the informants approved of their real names being used I chose to anonymize them, the only exception being the staff at the District Six Museum who had already given written accounts on District Six. At the time of my fieldwork and the presentation of this thesis, the content of these stories on District Six is not controversial to the majority of the South Africans. These stories are even more likely to be celebrated.

Map of Cape Town City Center



Map of Cape Town city centre. District Six is marked on the map.

Chapter 2: Presenting the field

To present the context of the informants and the history and present day status of District Six the presentation of the field starts out with a historical overview of South Africa and then some historical background of District Six. The forced removals from District Six under the apartheid period left many inhabitants of the community with no choice but moving to the Cape Flats and this is elaborated upon in this chapter as it is an important part of District Six history. The present situation of South Africa is also dealt with, including the many important tasks of the Rainbow Nation. The chapter is rounded off with a description of the barren area of present day District Six – combined with informants' stories of how it uses to be.

Historical overview of South Africa

This historical overview is a short version of “Short History of South Africa” from www.southafrica.info (2007).

South Africa's written history begins with the arrival of the Europeans. Before the Europeans arrived several groups of people, like among others the pastoral Khoekhoe, the hunter-gatherer San, Xhosa- and Bantu-speaking people, lived in the territory of what is now the country of South Africa. In 1652 people from the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope. Their initial mission was to construct a fort and gardens in order to grow supplies for ships on the Eastern trade route. Immigration was encouraged and independent farmers started to establish farms. Slaves were also imported at this point, both from other places in Africa and the East.

In the 18th century the colonists, both British, Dutch and French, started to lose their belonging to Europe, and hence the Afrikaner nation was born. In the 18th century slaves were emancipated in the Cape area, leading to many discontented Afrikaner farmers – Boers. They opposed the racial egalitarianism

and wanted to live independently without the imposing of colonial rule. 12000 Boer emigrated north and east in what is known as the Great Trek, an event still commemorated by some groups of Boers today.

In the middle of the 19th century the initial small fort and gardens of the Cape of Good Hope had expanded into a large area of white settlements. Native groups fought for their rights in many places, but mostly they lost to the white overpower, either British or Boer.

Two wars over land and power were fought between the British and the Boer in the 19th century. The British lost the first and won the second (1899-1902). The country was at this point divided into four different colonies. Many black South Africans hoped that more justice would come as a result of the British victory, their rights being severely neglected everywhere, but most of all in the ex-Boer colonies. However, on May 31st 1910 the Union of South Africa was established and blacks were barred from being members of parliament. The population was at that time 67 % black African. The 1913 Land Act reserved 90% of the country for white ownership.

The African National Congress (ANC) was established on January 8th 1912. Protests against injustice towards the black population increased, with many protesters arrested on several occasions. The other “minority” communities also dealt with a great deal of injustice. Gandhi was an important figure of Indian resistance in South Africa from 1892 to 1914 when he left the country.

South Africa entered World War I siding with Britain. ANC supported this hoping for support from the British government.

In 1934 South Africa became independent from Great Britain. The South African government increased their segregation of black Africans and whites. After the Second World War the Nationalist Party gained popularity and in 1948 they won the elections. With this apartheid became official government ideology. In the same period ANC was strengthened through its Youth League,

with Nelson Mandela as its secretary.

The 1950s saw increasingly oppressive laws against black South Africans and hence increasing resistance. The Group Areas Act and the Population Registration Act (registration of all citizens according to race) were passed in 1950, and in 1952 laws were passed to restrict black movement. In 1953 an act was passed to segregate buses, offices etc. As a reaction to all these restrictions and the segregation the Congress Alliance was formed. The alliance included black, coloured, Indian and white resistance organisations. In 1956 156 leaders of the ANC and its allies were charged with high treason, but all were acquitted in 1961. In 1960 however, a State of Emergency was declared after the killing of unarmed protesters and detention without trial was introduced. The resistance groups were declared illegal and subsequently went underground.

South Africa became a republic in 1961 and the rulers took the country out of the Commonwealth. The armed wing of the ANC started acts of sabotage against government installations the same year. Economic sanctions were instituted as called upon by the UN General Assembly. In 1962, on returning to the country from visits to other African countries, Mandela was arrested. A year later several of his colleagues in the ANC were also arrested and they were all sentenced to life imprisonment and later taken to the infamous Robben Island prison.

Over a decade later, in June 1976, the youth of Soweto demonstrated against being taught in Afrikaans. Police fired at the youth, and a flood of violence that overwhelmed the country started.

In 1978 PW Botha became Prime Minister and initiated cooperation with the coloured and Indian population when a new constitution established a Tricameral Parliament with separate houses for these two groups. The new constitution also ended the post of Prime Minister in favour of the post of State President. A coalition of anti-apartheid groups organised boycotts of the elections for the houses of the coloureds and the Indians in 1984. Violence

increased and international sanctions increased. The country was in a state of emergency.

In 1989 secret negotiations started between Mandela and Botha. Because of Botha's deteriorating health he was replaced by De Klerk who released Walter Sisulu and some other political prisoners that same year.

In February of 1990 De Klerk lifted restrictions on several opposition groups, among them was the ANC. Mandela was released after 27 years of imprisonment on February 11. Four years later the first democratic elections were held. In May, Mandela was sworn in as President of the Republic of South Africa, De Klerk and ANC's Thabo Mbeki as Deputy Presidents. The enormous tasks of addressing the results of apartheid and restructuring society began. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to investigate the crimes and wrongdoings in the apartheid period.

The ANC won the elections of 1999 and 2004 also, with Mbeki as President.

Important dates in the history of South Africa and District Six

1652: Trade station is founded close to Cape Town by Dutch colonists
1806: Cape colony under British rule
1834 onwards: The Great Trek; the Boer colonize the inland
1842: Province of Natal becomes British colony
1850s: Transvaal and Oranje freestate is established
1877-81: Transvaal is occupied by the British. The first war of liberation is lost by the British
1899-1902: The second war of liberation is won by the British
1910: The four republics are united and the South African Union is founded
1912: ANC is founded
1930s: Economical crisis unifies the white population
1948: The National Party wins the elections. The system of apartheid is slowly started
1950: The National Party comes into power, implementing state-sanctioned Apartheid, start of racial segregation under the Group Areas Act

1961: Republic of South Africa is founded

1964: Several ANC leaders, among them Govan Mbeki (father of the current president) and Nelson Mandela, are sentenced to prison for life

1966: On February 11, District Six is proclaimed a 'white' area

1968: First demolitions begin – over the next 12 years, 60 000 people are moved to various farflung settlements on the dusty Cape Flats

1970: District Six is renamed Zonnebloem by the Department of Community Development and Bloemhof Flats is refurbished. Built in the 1930s, it was the last effort at urban renewal by City Council

1970 – 1980: Informal settlements like Unibel (1972), Crossroads (1974) KTC and Modderdam are established on the Cape Flats. By 1980 Mitchells Plain emerges as the largest group areas dormitory locality in Cape Town

1976: Soweto uprisings

1977: The UN decides on a weapons embargo against South Africa

1982: Despite strong protest from both business and residential sectors in the city, the Cape Technikon, situated in the heart of the former District Six, is established for 'white' students

1983: New parliament with 3 chambers, white majority

1985: State of emergency is declared by the authorities

1986-1989: Various organizations are established for the preservation of what is left of District Six

1989: De Klerk starts a period of reforms

1989: The District Six Museum is created in a hall on Zonnebloem Estate (formerly District Six).

1990: The ANC is unbanned and Mandela is released from prison

1990-92: De Klerk and Mandela negotiate over political reforms and a new constitution

1993: De Klerk and Mandela receive the Nobel Peace Prize

1993: Mandela visits District Six and declares that “not another stone should be moved from Horstley Street”

1994: First free elections are won by the ANC and Mandela becomes president of the republic

1996: New democratic constitution

1997: The District Six Beneficiary and Development Trust is established to drive, coordinate and monitor land restitution and redevelopment

1996-1998: Truth and reconciliation committee led by Desmond Tutu starts its work

2000: In District Six land restitution begins in earnest and in a historic ceremony on November 26, the land was officially returned to the people when President Thabo Mbeki handed the certificate, signed by the Land Affairs Minister, to the District Six Trust

2002: Initial plans are shown to claimants, who give their input (interestingly, it was then pointed out that many new residents would be elderly, and plans were changed to accommodate this, with a ground floor bedroom and bathroom). Building on the first phase of development begins

2004: On February 11, the first new tenants are handed symbolic keys to the door of their new homes by former President Nelson Mandela. On Sunday, June 6, the first three families officially take up residence in Chapel Street

Overview of important dates in the history of South Africa and District Six (Henriksen 1998, my translation, Jordan 2004)

Historical background of District Six

District Six, situated at the foot of Table Mountain, near the harbour and the city bowl, was until the abolition of slavery in 1838 a largely uninhabited open expanse of land. At this time the freed slaves required housing, and the growth in the Cape's colonial economy and Cape Town's buzzing harbour subsequently led to the building of a "doorstep dormitory" (Hall 2001: 298).

Most of the people who lived in District Six were working class. They wanted to live close to the city, harbour and factories where they worked. The proximity to the harbour also meant that this became the initial area of settlement for immigrants from around the world. Jews from Tsarist Russia, Malay Muslims and Indians were among the biggest groups together with the freed slaves. In 1840 the first municipality of Cape Town was established and the area was designated District Twelve.

Among the inhabitants, the district was just known as Kanaladorp, from the Melayu-Portuguese word *kanala*, meaning "to do a favour" or neighbourliness. The area was thought of as a refuge or as "...a place where help would be found" (Rassool 2001: 99). In 1867 Cape Town was re-divided

into six districts and Kanaladorp officially became known under its present name, District Six.

District Six was overcrowded, poorly facilitated and beset with sanitation issues and the neglect of the municipality through years lead to an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1901. Still, despite the rough living conditions, the area was still filled with *kanala*:

There was a common awareness of being set apart from other residential areas of the city which lacked District Six's rough, independent, and communal character. Other suburbs lacked dimensions of colour, of noise, of neighbourhood security and solidarities, of the kind of rough-and ready street libertarianism which informed the cultural history of District Six. And inhabitants undoubtedly had many things in common. Things which went towards fashioning a broadly collective culture and a supportive community life. General poverty and oppression shaped an environment marked strongly by mutual needs and sharing between families and neighbours, whatever the divisions of income, occupation or religion. (Nasson 1990: 64)

With the plague, the area became a target for urban renewal projects. New health legislation was used as an excuse to remove Africans to designated locations, like the township²¹ of Ndabeni, far from the city centre. This was Cape Town's first forced removal.²² Over two thousand houses were demolished and rebuilt, still the population of District Six continued to grow. The general deterioration continued, streets were poorly maintained and nothing was done to improve the water facilities.

The dense population however, allowed for a variety of eateries, music clubs, shops and street hawkers. Poverty and the shared experiences of day-to-day struggle brought people together in many ways. Swanson and Harries (2001: 62-80) speak of the cosmopolitan character of the area; theatres, cinemas and clubs - the district was even internationally recognized as a jazz music capital - as well as the heterogeneity of the people living there offered a vast

²¹ Under apartheid township came to mean a residential development which confined "non-whites". Separate townships for blacks and coloureds. SOWETO (South-West Townships) is one example (wikipedia.org).

²² This was done under powers granted to the authorities not under a Group Areas Act (see page 40), which was then not on the statute books, but under the Public Health Act.

selection of cultural input. The diversity of the different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups made for a good “blending”. The “racial” composition of the district was dominated by the “coloureds”; a mix of ethnicities not fitting in the black and white categories, but many blacks and whites were also living in the area.

The official narrative of District Six by the apartheid government was one of self inflicted poverty, overcrowding, poor hygiene and violent crime. There is no doubt that the negative aspects of poverty and violence existed along with the positive aspect of community solidarity, but this did not prevent the inhabitants from seeing the district as a well working community, at least in retrospect.

The National Party came to power in 1948 and introduced the territorialisation of race. The area with its extraordinary cultural and social heterogeneity was a threat to the apartheid state, and emerged as “the political problem of a multicultural suburb on the doorstep of the city centre” (Field 2001: 13). In addition it was also a hive of activism. Political activists like the author Richard Rive, civil rights activist Cissy Gool and author Alex La Guma grew up in District Six, all of them posing a threat to apartheid ideology. Finally, the prime location of District Six was sought after by a wealthier white community. Under a veil of urban renewal the removals started.

Forced removals

The Group Areas Act - No. 43, 1966 - reads; “ Under the powers vested in me by section twenty of the Group Areas Act, 1957 (Act No.77 of 1957), I hereby declare that the area defined in the schedule hereto shall, as from the date of publication hereof, be an area for occupation and ownership by members of the White group. Given under my Hand and the Seal of the Republic of South Africa at Cape Town on this Second day of February, One thousand Nine

hundred and Sixty-six". The Act is signed by C.R Swart, State President.

The implementation of the Group Areas Act in 1966 was a turning point for the members of the District Six community. The district was officially declared a white group area. The decision was unaffected by numerous protests by the community and even the City Council²³. Some people left the district before the actual evictions in an attempt at holding their families together. The forced removals from the district started two years later in 1968, tearing apart both community ties, and in many instances families of mixed race. Evicting more than 60 000 of its residents and displacing them to segregated townships on the Cape Flats, the forced removals continued until 1982.

Material loss was significant for most people. Property investments were lost, and the cost of commuting became much higher from the Cape Flats. The architectural fabric; the actual streets, schools, shops, cinemas and people's homes were bulldozed to the ground, leaving almost nothing but a few places of worship left. These religious buildings continued to be used for worship both during the devastation and after, and coming here from afar was a means in sustaining community ties.

The area was renamed "Zonnestraat", in 1970, after a farm originally located here. This was part of a plan to attract new investment in the area. The area was to be seen as a *tabula rasa*, although a third of the original District Six population were still living there in 1976 (Bezzoli, Marks and Kruger 2002). The area continued to be a "hot potato" over the years and investors were reluctant due to all the negative publicity. Another important reason for the lack of redevelopment in the area was the opposition among black and coloured constructors and workers, refusing to work on "salted earth".

The first development project then became the Cape Technikon (a college), for white students, in the early 1980s. This massive construction came

²³ For further insight on the local government opposition see Western (1985)

to occupy nearly a fifth of the land, and was – and still is - a crude symbol of apartheid's violation of the District Six community.

Life on the Cape Flats

As the old homes of District Six were demolished, the District Sixers began their new lives scattered on the Cape Flats. The Flats as it is called by the residents is an expansive barren area situated to the southeast of central Cape Town. There the apartheid planners had spatially manifested the idea of racial segregation, separating the removed people in designated townships. Coloured people were removed to Bonteheuwel, Hanover Park or Mitchells Plain, and Africans to Langa, Guguletu or Khayelitsha. The design of these townships was based on the concept of Neighbourhood Unit (Bezzoli, Marks and Kruger 2002). "They were separated from each other by freeways, green belts, industrial estates and railways" (ibid: 48), thereby securing control of the areas for the apartheid authorities.

The housing structures in the townships were inadequate, regarding both construction and size, leaving people longing for what they once had. The townships were homogenous both in sense of the physical structure, and with respect to colour. This represented a discontinuity from the District Six community.

Novelist and political activist Richard Rive was born in District Six and in his novel "Buckingham Palace. District Six" (1996 [1986]) he wrote about everyday life in the old community. A way of life that was significantly disrupted with the move to the Cape Flats:

Many were forced to move to small matchbox houses in large matchbox townships which with brutal and tactless irony were given names by the authorities such as Hanover Park and Lavender Hill to remind us of the past they had taken away from us. There was one essential difference between the old places and the new ones. District Six had a soul. Its centre held together till it was torn apart. Stained and tarnished as it was, it had a soul that held together. The new matchbox conglomerates on the desolate Cape Flats had no

soul. The houses were soulless units piled together to form a disparate community that lacked cohesion (ibid: 127)

The community structure of the old community had in some way held control on the gangsterism, but on the Cape Flats a disintegrating community identity and alienation subsequently led to a rise in violence (Standing 2003). More than before the gang activity began to affect non-gang-members.

Life was not all bleak though. People make their lives meaningful wherever they live. Music continued to thrive on the Cape Flats, inspired by among others the world famous jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim, a former District Six resident. Sports clubs were founded, often with names celebrating District Six such as Hanover Bees Soccer Club and Bloemhof Cricket Club, and people were creating new personal ties in the shebeens. A common, shared identification with District Six provided people with a means to cope with a new reality. It allowed them to nurture the stories and symbols of the district, and to dream of a return. What was needed was a wind of change.

The new South Africa

P.W. Botha being a staunch nationalist he still realised the need for reforms. When he took power in 1978 he "...told a conference of businessmen at the Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg, in November that apartheid "was a recipe for permanent conflict"" (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 459).

Internal violence and the growing pressure from the international community were facts of consideration to the National Party. The 1980s was a turbulent decade in South Africa; trade unionism, school boycotts and black consciousness were all of growing significance. In 1983 after a referendum of white people the *tri-cameral parliament* was established; meaning the creation of two new houses of parliament; one for coloureds and one for Indians. Out of "the emotional distaste of millions of people at Botha's proposal to permanently exclude the entire African population from the central parliamentary

structures” (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 495) the UDF²⁴ arose, fighting for freedom together with the ANC.

In 1985 the government declared a state of emergency as a result of the constantly increasing riots. The media were censored and thousands of people were detained without being given a fair trial (Davenport and Saunders 2000). A series of minor reforms were introduced during the 1980s. Still this could not prevent the conflicts escalating, and the state of emergency lasted for years.

In 1989 the coming President De Klerk initiated an official contact between the National party and the ANC, and when he was sworn in he “stressed his intention to tackle discriminating legislation, release security prisoners and end the emergency as soon as possible and also work out constitutional proposals which would protect all people, including minorities” (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 514).

On 11 February 1990 Nelson Mandela walked out of prison as a free man. The winds had changed in South Africa. Apartheid legislation was gradually removed and in 1994 the first free elections were held. At this point South Africa could work towards a sharing of power and land.

Reconciliation and restitution - tasks of the Rainbow Nation

Two tasks were at hand for the new Rainbow Nation. First, there was a need for justice and reconciliation in the sphere of time; the history and histories of the past had to be told. Second, there was a question of justice in space; land needed to be redistributed and a new urban space had to emerge. Below I will first give a brief account of the work of the TRC, and then the process of land restitution.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is perhaps the most visible

²⁴ The non-racial anti-apartheid coalition of United Democratic Front.

manifestation of the role memory has come to play in creating a “new” post-apartheid South Africa. The TRC was a result of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, negotiated by politicians. The commission was to “provide as complete as possible picture of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights” (Holiday, 2002: 46). Through public and broadcasted hearings around South Africa both the victims and perpetrators of apartheid were telling their stories. These were the stories of extraordinary people in terms of sacrifice and suffering on one side, and in terms of cruelty and injustice on the other. The idea behind this was that in order to celebrate the “wonder of being the rainbow nation of God” (Tutu in Davenport and Saunders 2000: xx) there was a need to “learn the story of our nation, its horrors and injustices as well as its triumphs, if we are to experience genuine reconciliation” (ibid: xx). Providing amnesty to the former human rights abusers were symbolic acts of reconciliation.

To Robins (2002), among others, there seems to be a few shortcomings of the TRC. There is an issue of representation. He asks whether the “dramatic” stories of ANC activists and victims of brutal torture make resonance in the minds of the ordinary people of South Africa, those who suffered in a more “quiet” everyday way. The outcomes of the TRC were narratives of “heroics” (ibid), reminding the nation of a way of life that should never return. I would say the TRC is an engagement in the past and the present. It is the stories of what cannot be undone, and it is an attempt at *reparation* of victims. The need for positive memories and a vision of what can be is a necessity in nation building that was not facilitated by the TRC hearings. However, there are other settings and locations in South Africa who deal with the negotiation of memory.

The District Six Museum is one of the “places of engagement between past, present and future which characterise contemporary South Africa” (McEachern, 1998: 500). In contrast to the TRC hearings the museum is offering narratives of ordinary people doing ordinary things. The stories presented in

the museum is about playing in the streets, bringing dates to the bioscopes or shopping at the fish market. It is the positive memories of everyday life. In contrast to the TRC narratives it is the stories of what can be - pointing to a possible future. For this vision to materialize, South Africa needs to reconstruct space.

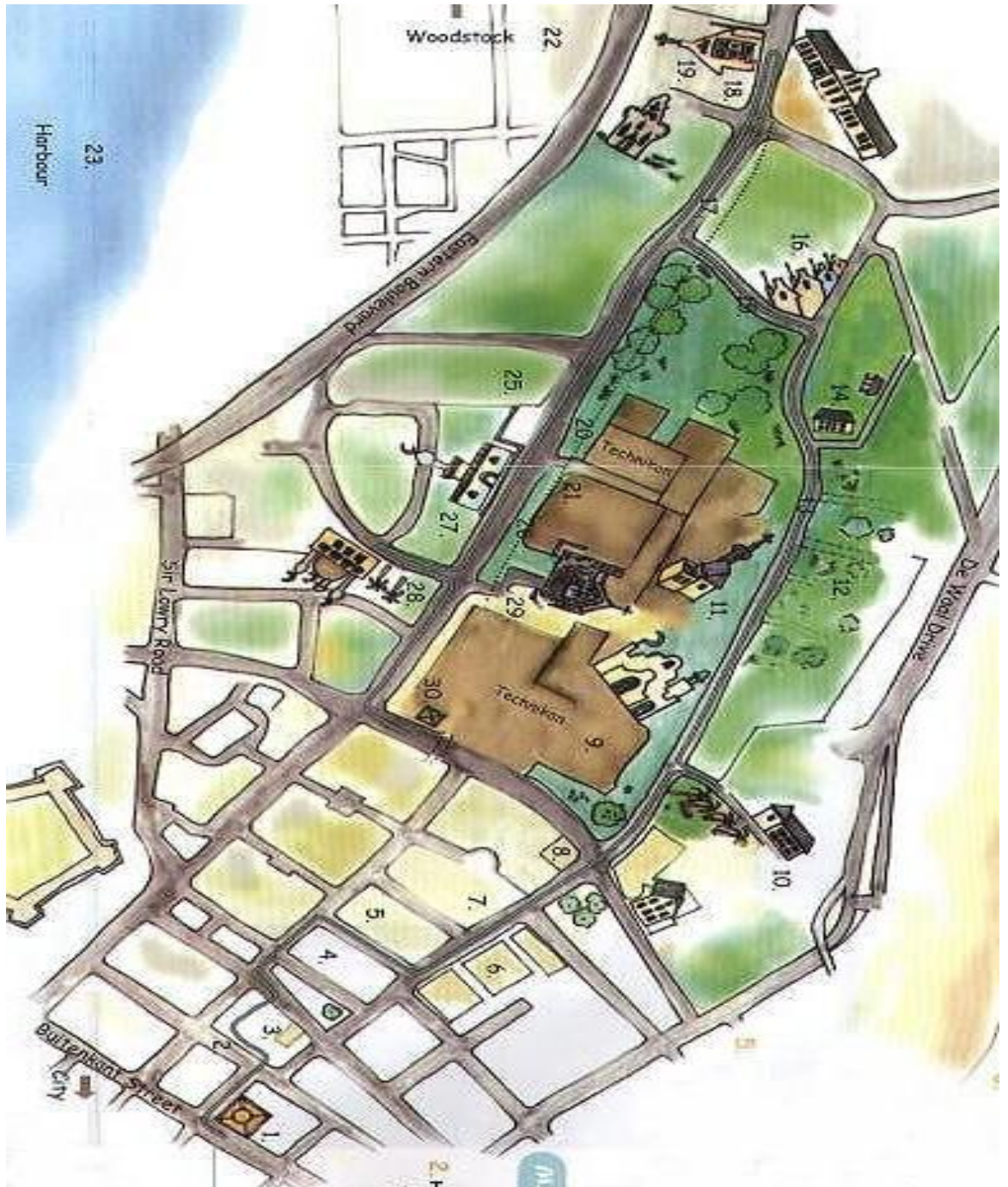
The land restitution process is an immensely important element in reconstructing South Africa. Apart from the obvious significance of the justice implied in returning land, there is further the aspect of restoring the cities.

One of the first legislations that were passed by the new government was the Restitution Act No 22 of 1994. This act led to the establishment of the Land Claims Commission and the Land Claims Court, which were to monitor the restoration claims of those who were dispossessed during apartheid. People who were forcibly removed during apartheid were allowed to claim restitution in form of land or economic compensation.

In 1997 the District Six Beneficiary Trust was formed on behalf of the former residents. This was in order to coordinate and manage the restitution process in consultation with those who had put in claims. Under this representation all the claimants of District Six presented themselves as a collective entity. Individual rights were substituted with the agreement to share a land pool, thereby making it easier to redevelop the district and integrating it in greater Cape Town.

District Six is seen as a model for urban land restitution in South Africa and is therefore important outside of Cape Town. It can be an example to be followed. The open urban community of the district is a long distance away from the *gated communities* that are a growing part of South Africa today. Robinson (1998) talks of the remapping of apartheid cities and concludes that "democracies are associated with different spatialities which facilitate contestation and representation." The potential of contestation should not be underestimated. District Six, I would claim, derives its unique position from the

fact that it is still not reconstructed. Thus, the “empty landscape” facilitates memory, and in the same time opens for a discussion of the urban future of Cape Town. This sets District Six apart from the other communities which have been destroyed *and* rebuild. The nostalgia from the good old days is allowed to live on, and the district is also a vision for the future.



Previous page: The District Six Walk, as printed on Museum leaflets.

The area today: the District Six Walk

Far from the heart beating cosmopolitan district of the 1960s, the area is now like an open scar on the inner city surface. Below I will try to give an account of what the area looked like and how it is today, and at the same time it is also an account of an anthropology student attempting to “walk the streets of the past”, and thereby familiarizing with the area.

The most thorough introduction to the physical landscape of the former District Six community is to follow the outlined walk, as printed on the museum leaflets. Two weeks into my fieldwork I brought the map and a camera²⁵, and took the walk. The following description of the area today is supported by all the stories that I have read and that have been told me by the informants. Hence this recollection is not merely my description, but shaped by the histories of others.

The walk starts at the District Six Museum (1), on Buitenkant Street. During the days of District Six this was the Methodist Mission church²⁶, a spiritual home and meeting place for many residents. Today the building marks the start of District Six, and from here you can let your eyes follow the barren slope towards the horizon where you can get a glimpse of the Victorian chimney pots of a few remaining houses in Upper Ashley Street. The Methodist church was just in the outskirts of the Jewish quarter (2) of the district. Still standing today, after three generations, is the Beikinstadt Book Sellers (3). The Beikinstadt family came to Cape Town from Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, like most of the Jews. Their descendents now working in the book store could supply me with anecdotes of the daily life of the community. This area used to be a buzzing multipurpose neighbourhood, now the only other

²⁵ For images of the district see the photos in front of the chapter.

²⁶ Also known as The Freedom Church because it opposed the injustices of Apartheid.

building here was a provisional liquor store.

Continuing further I passed the ground where the Peninsula Maternity Home (4) once was the first haven for District Six babies. Several of my informants had been born here. Even the original street grid was erased, and I would guess only an experienced eye could reconstruct the area cognitively. Turning right you see the large Bloemhof Flats (6) buildings; the last attempt by the City Council at any type of urban renewal.²⁷ One of my dearest informants, Menisha, used to live here as a kid, and told about a community inside a community. They even had their own Christmas choir performing through the streets of District Six. As I passed by, I noticed the security guard now watching the apartment entrance for the present (white) tenants.

Looking across the street you see a large vacant lot (7), scattered with rocks and foundations of front stoeps²⁸, revealing more than any other places in the terrain the physical attributes of the district. The stoep played a vital part in a District Six life. From here people watched both the daily life, and extraordinary activities like the carnival, pass by.

Walking further ahead there is an overwhelming physical structure which imposes on the area. This is the Cape Technikon (9). The massive concrete building was raised on top of bulldozed shops, homes and playgrounds in the early eighties, and was a final stamp by the apartheid government that the area was under its control. Today the Technikon is open to all students. Just above (12) the Technikon, towards the Devils Peak Mountain, the street hawkers were abundant; Selling sweets, vegetables and fish, on the cobbled streets, now overgrown. During my walk the only people I notice in this area are homeless people living in provisional shacks. Ironically they are soon to be the next evictees as the former residents move back.

Constitution Street (13) was one of the veins that connected the district to

²⁷ As a part of the Housing Improvements programme, 1930- 1938.

²⁸ Stoep meaning porch or veranda.

the city centre. Buses were driving through, bringing the working class to and from the factories. In the evening when their parents returned, the children would be out in the streets, playing and waiting for them. On the day of my initial walk not even a car was to be seen. Walking further and turning left I had ended up next to the Victorian chimney pots that I caught a glimpse of in the horizon at the outset of the walk. The neat row of houses (16) was the only one to be spared of this type through the entire district. The people who lived there were removed like everyone else, but the houses were spared from destruction due to the panoramic view and the architecture and white people moved in. White people still live there today, and the former residents of these houses are offered economic compensation as they can not return to their former properties.

A hundred metres along I arrived at a broad road leading all the way down to the Cape Castle. The street named Keizergracht (17) was built to obliterate the history and memory of the legendary Hanover Street. Bulldozing even the actual streets, and renaming them was a conscious political act of the apartheid authorities.

Hanover Street (20), no longer visible but stipulated on the map, was the main artery of District Six life. It has been called the heart, life and soul of the district. It was the busiest street, filled with all the qualities one could ask for from an urban place. Sights, smells, people and sounds. Restaurants, cinemas and the big fish market lured people from all over the city to the district. Mondays were fish days for a lot of people after the heavier roast meat-Sundays²⁹. The landmark now exists only in the memories of those who knew it.

Although the district didn't extend all the way to the shoreline, the beach and sea (23) were very much part of the District Six identity. By watching the

²⁹ As told by one of my informants; Noor Ebrahim.

whiteness of the waves one could find out whether or not it was a good day for swimming and fishing. The children would also spend time watching the ships from all around the world come to harbour in the bay. As I tried to get a glimpse of the distant sea on my walk, all I could see was the new shopping centre on the Eastern Boulevard and a wall of concrete from different buildings leading the way to Woodstock.

Walking slowly towards the Cape Technikon again, I passed by the sites for the public wash house (25) and the public bath (26). There were no visible traces of the two often mentioned buildings, but at the District Six Museum one can read about the importance of both buildings used by everyone from gangsters to business men.

On the right side of Keizergracht an intimate, bright white Mosque came to my attention. The Aspeling Street Mosque has been used for prayer by ex-residents also after the forced removals. As I was taking a few photos, the District Six faithful had just finished their prayer, and I approached a few and sat down for a chat on the bench outside. They told me a story of how everyone in the old community irrespective of religious beliefs would celebrate each others festive days, and painted a picture of *eid-al-fitr* outside the Aspeling Street Mosque, in the "good old days". It was so crowded people couldn't even walk by. I got a few names on the book and arranged for some interviews the following weeks.

I left the district on a positive note, having scrambled together a few sheets of notes, taken photos and got hold of some informants. To grasp District Six, though, I was in need of more than the landscape and the remaining physical structures. The search for narratives was on.



Pictures from District Six. The bottom picture is from the Al-Azhar Mosque where I conducted life story recordings.



The facade of the District Six Museum.



The museum interior with the large map of District Six on the floor and the street signs visible in the back.

Chapter 3: The District Six Museum – my focal point

This chapter deals with the District Six Museum. A brief account of the museum's history is given as well as a thorough look at the most important exhibition. At the end of the chapter it is explored how the museum is an important negotiator of the "truth" about District Six, and the exhibitions work as catalysts for remembering District Six in specific ways to the former residents and thereby offering a cohesive picture of the district to the general public.

An anthropologist arrives - a tough experience

My approach to the study of narratives and identity related to District Six was to visit the museum on the first day of my fieldwork. The museum is located on the outskirts of District Six, in a colourful building which formerly was the Methodist Mission Church. There is a brass plaque on the front of the building which reads:

ALL WHO PASS BY

Remember with shame the many thousands
of people who lived for generations
in District Six and other parts of this city, and
were forced by law to leave their homes
because of the colour of their skins
Father forgive us

On entering through the door I'm being asked if I want to join a guided tour of the museum. He presents himself as Noor Ebrahim, former resident, now an education officer at the museum. In order to set myself apart from the usual visitors, I explain my project in (what I think is) an interesting way,

although choking a bit on my own words when trying to explain that the thesis will lead to a Master's degree, and say that "Yes, I would love to join the tour!" He then directs me to a group of American tourists surrounding a large painted map of the district on the floor. The map is inscribed with names and comments from former residents. Mr Ebrahim explain how many still see District Six as their home, although the physical structures, the people and even the street grid are gone. Very much an anthropologist in the field, with a sense of doing something original and anxious to make a good impression, I keep asking while taking notes. The guided tour lasts for about 20 minutes, with Ebrahim telling us about both the daily life in what was a good community, and the tragedies of the forced removals. After the American tourists had uttered their final "Oh, my God!" they left for the bus taking them to the next stop on the *Cultural Tour*-the townships, leaving me alone in "my" museum. Or was it "my" museum?

Browsing through the vast selection of books on District Six in the museum shop a few minutes later, while noticing a new group of 30-40 people arriving, I suddenly realize that my fieldwork perhaps is not as "exotic" as I had thought. District Six seemed like big business. The very first day of fieldwork ended when Noor Ebrahim approached me for the second time, presented himself and asked if I would like to join a tour of the museum.

So much for making a good first impression...

The District Six Museum – Beginnings

Today the museum is a research institution, an actor in political debate and one of the most visited sights in Cape Town. They have come a long way since the modest exhibition that opened the museum in 1994. Where did it all start?

The District Six Museum Foundation was established in 1989 as a result of the Hands Off District Six (HODS) campaign. The HODS campaign was an alliance consisting of religious organizations, schools and civic groups, fighting

the proposed redevelopment of District Six³⁰. According to the HODS activists these plans would not benefit the former residents, and in addition to that it would erase the memory of District Six. The majority of former residents preferred the wasteland to the proposed redevelopment. At least then the open landscape would be a reminder of the injustice done under the apartheid government. A large public meeting, attended by more than a thousand people, was organized in order to debate the question of how to preserve the memory of the area. The outcome was the establishment of the District Six Museum Foundation, consisting of a handful of former residents from all walks of life. Their tasks at hand was at first to secure a living memory of District Six, apartheid and the forced removals, and then later to play a part in the struggle for the restitution of land rights.

As described above the official narrative of District Six during apartheid had been one of crime and violence in an overcrowded slum, serving the political agenda at that time. The political climate changed, giving previously silenced voices an opportunity to contest “official history” and enhance their self-esteem. Reconstructing the social history of the community became *the* major task for the museum foundation. In this way they could help people to come to terms with who they were and at the same time contribute to the production of positive memories for a post-apartheid South Africa. The approach was to gather objects and stories which could be used in an exhibition. Thus the first job was to find a home in where the exhibition could be held.

Several options were considered when searching for a potential site. The building had to fulfil different criteria; it should serve as a place for public contact where people could interact, it should be a space with symbolic power, and finally it had to be in, or close to, District Six. A number of small exhibitions

30 Planned and financed by British Petroleum.

were held in other parts of the city to raise funds for the foundation. Finding a place turned out to be harder than expected, but finally in 1993, after talks with the Buitenkant Street Methodist Church and Pastor Stan Abrahams, the foundation reached an agreement for the use of their building. By that time they had acquired a considerable collection of photographs and artworks. In 1994 the Streets exhibition marked the opening of a museum and community centre on the boundary of District Six. Today it has become a symbolic space for challenging the ideologies that supported apartheid.

Symbolic aesthetics and popular narratives – a framework for remembering

In an analysis of the display of objects, Anna Bohlin (1998) draws attention to the fact that “archaeological” objects of ordinary life evoke the full social and cultural setting of which they used to be part. Thus, the objects can be regarded as material aspects of a myth which evokes the narrative of District Six. (ibid: 175-176). The objects make up an exhibition, which being situated in the sacred space of a church, “can be seen as a ritualistic text, with its iconography the iconography of memory” as De Kok (2002: 65) so accurately describes it.

The spacious old building now housing the museum is symbolically important for two reasons. First it was a place of resistance during the 1970s and 80s, when the Methodist mission church provided a meeting place for dissidents, regardless of their religion. The church was called the «freedom church» because of the stand taken against the injustices of racism. Second, this building was also a spiritual home for a large congregation of District Sixers. Doing interviews among the «old congregation» I learned that to some of them a visit to the museum was so much more than just a walk through an exhibition. It was a place of remembering. A few of my informants were baptized, confirmed and married here, and spent most Sundays in this very

building. This is part of the contextual framework which influences the process of remembering the past for the former residents who visit the museum. To them a visit to the museum was also a possible way of passing on family history, as well as it was a continuously reaffirmation of identity.

Inside the building, the aesthetic features of the exhibition, that is to say «the museum lay-out», provides further aspects which influence the interpretation of the museums narratives of District Six. A point should be made about the impact of the aesthetic form of museums on the interpretation of the exhibition. Tonkin (1992: 94-96) sees how our sense of identity can be bound up with objects. The museum is constantly working with the capacity of memory when providing a physical framework for interpretation; thereby creating contexts in where to generate meanings of the objects, and in a larger scale: the museum narrative. The District Six Museum is using different spatial approaches in order to generate a process of active remembrance. For a community deprived of the physical space they called home, the aesthetics of space is an important aspect of the museum attributes in order to communicate the story of the community.

Situating an exhibition in the sacred space of a former church turns the material objects almost into icons. A central feature of the Methodist Mission Church, the pulpit, has become part of the museum. Today the pulpit is facing one of the main artefacts of the museum, the sculpture constructed out of old District Six street signs³¹, thereby giving one of the symbols of the area a sacred touch. Likewise the illuminated «larger than life»-portraits of former residents, hanging upstairs in the gallery, can be seen from every corner of the museum and have become icons of the past.

In the narratives of the past as told on boards on the walls and on hanging clothes there are a handful of themes such as the carnival, the

³¹ The signs were retrieved from the private collection of one of the apartheid servants that bulldozed the area. See picture page 54.

community aspects and the music, that are repeated over and over. One of these themes which is central in the District Six identity narrative, the phenomenon of the street, was the basis for the opening exhibition *Streets*. According to the introductory panels in the museum the street “was the place where people’s identities were confirmed and where they affirmed their belonging. It was the place where they showed themselves as members of the community (...) The street was a medium through which meaning was offered and negotiated.”

For a community deprived of such an amount of physical remains of the past there was a need for a framework, or perhaps skeleton is a better word, on where to put bits and pieces of memory together. The intention of the people involved in the museum was to create a symbolic District Six. A large street map covering 12 square metres of the ground floor was one of the main elements of the installation, inviting visitors (in this case former residents or their family) to write down their names and comments in the street they used to live in. Perhaps this can be interpreted as a way of rewriting their lives into history or even as a way of returning *home*?

Other aesthetic features contributing to the creation of an arena for working with memory was the street sign- sculpture, as mentioned above, and photos of street life in the district. The street as a public arena and a place to meet, is contrasted on information boards with the more closed spaces of social interaction associated with apartheid, or the gated communities that exists in urban South Africa today. Hanover Street, the artery of District Six, is given special attention in the exhibition in an attempt to show the diversity, cosmopolitanism and friendliness of the area. Photos of the biscofes, the eateries and the bustling street celebrate the urbanity and cosmopolitanism of the district. Thus the museum is maybe offering a «thing of the past» which can serve as a hope for a diverse *Rainbow Nation*.

Recordings of life histories of District Sixers were meant to support the

visual installations. These audiotapes are played in different sound-domes placed all around the museum. Here one can listen to residents telling their stories accompanied by jazz, music from the minstrel carnival or street buzz, leading the mind back to the days of the district. Several of the stories were taken from the life of people involved in the establishment of the museum. Later, an oral history project conducted through the museum foundation added a considerable number of life stories to the audio collection.

Quite a few of my informants had a clear cognitive picture of the area before destruction; the street grid, shops and which families that were living in such and such streets. To them the map and street signs became a reminder of their childhood or the daily life in their old community, a catalyst for remembering, often leading to nostalgic moments. Still, today, *home* was District Six. In the discussion of the museum as *generative space* I will elaborate further that the museum has contributed to the strengthening of certain aspects of what constitutes District Six.

Engagement in the Streets exhibition

Tonkin (1992) describes the appeal of heritage museums to “their evocatory power” making for multiple versions of the past to be told, and shows that our sense of identity is bound up in objects.

The central feature of the Streets exhibition is as described above the large street map covering the ground floor of the museum. This is more than a physical outline of the district as it allows former residents to interact. There is a large inscribed banner of cloth hanging from the balcony towards the street map, welcoming the former residents to reclaim history through writing their names back into history and space. The banner reads:

In 1966
District Six
Was declared
A "White" Group Area
Shortly afterward
The first bulldozers
Moved in and set about
Destroying homes in which
Generations of families had
Lived. Intent on erasing
District Six from the map
Of Cape Town the Apartheid
State attempted to Redesign
The Space of District Six
Renaming it Zonnebloem
Today, only the scars of the
Removals remain. In this
Exhibition we do not wish to
Recreate District Six as much
As to repossess the history of
The area as a place where people
Lived, loved and struggled. It is
An attempt to take back our right
To signpost our lives with those
Things we hold dear. At one
Level the exhibition is about signs of
Our past. We would like to invite you
To write your names and addresses and
Make comments in the spaces around the
Exhibits and in our visitors book. This is
Important in helping us to trace our past. At
Another level, the exhibition is also about
Pointers to our future. We, all of us, need to decide,
How as individuals and as people we wish to Re-
Trace and re-signpost the lines of our future. Such a process
Is neither easy nor straightforward. It is not predictable either.

Putting the past, present and the future in the hands of the former residents may be said to be the museums intention. The map works as McEachern describes it as “a mnemonic, which both allows the recall of the place but also puts the rememberer back into it.” (1998: 508). Thus the object of the map is not only associated with space, but also place. The spacious building in itself in addition to the large street map on the floor allows people not only to think of District Six as an empty space, as the scar it is on Cape Towns surface today, but also to fill the space with own recollections and, thus, rewrite themselves once again into the landscape of the past.

The street map is clearly distinguishing between the visitors in degree of participation and engagement. The nostalgic former residents who come to the museum to engage with their pasts might be considered the *deep players* (Geertz 1973) in the street map performance, while the ordinary tourists can be said to be the *shallow players* (ibid). In between there is a continuity in degree of attachment. The spectator, in this instance being the anthropologist, is having a special semi-detached position from where to reflect on the “rituals” and personal engagement on the map, as in this situation:

It is a few days in advance of the National Heritage day on 24 September. The museum staff is busy preparing for the special occasion. I am alone on the ground floor, sitting on a bench on the left side of the map, reading through some of my field notes. There is an old couple in the secluded coffee shop behind the pulpit. Entering through the front door comes an old man, and what I assume is his grandchild. The weather on this particular day being humid, they decide to sit down on the bench next to me. The old man wipes his forehead and breathes heavily, while getting a large envelope out of his pocket. I would guess he is about eighty years old, and the boy who now searches through the map for a particular street name is about ten. He takes old press clips and photos from the past out of

the envelope. "Here it is! Tyne Street. I have found it." The boy gets the attention of the old man by pointing onto the map. He gets on his feet, turns towards me and explains that he used to live there. Using the map as a reference he tells the younger one of where he used to play, where he grew up, and he finds the names of some of the neighbours written on to the map. They are both sitting on the map looking at his private photos, matching them with the streets, walking the map.

The old couple from the coffee shop comes back into the front hall and walk over the map. The old man's photos have caught their attention. It turns out they are former residents too. Looking at the pictures he has brought, the female recognizes him as a clerk in one of the small shops of District Six. At this point the old man starts crying.

Not every account of visits to the museum is as "dramatic" as this. People use the map in different ways. Some use it as a way of starting a conversation, others are looking for specific sites. They are writing their own names or the names of shops or neighbours, or just looking for a familiar name. As a tourist you are perhaps only trying to get a grasp of the size of the area. Some come alone, others with kin or even a group. I find McEachern's use of de Certeau illuminating; "Michel de Certeau argues that walking in the city can operate as resistance to official, authoritative constructions of the city – construct it as place in which meanings slip authorized versions as walkers find new ways through, attach place to memory – turning space into place" (1998: 506). This is how *deep players* engage with history in the museum. On one side reasserting their own identities, and on the other laying bricks in the building of a new national identity. Tonkin states: "Insofar as their memorisations create the sense of a past - even where there is no coherent stream of narrative but only of disparate individual recollections – they contribute to the experience of group identity *now*." (1992: 111). This must be said to be true about the District Sixers in the District Six Museum.

Generative space

The museum “is not a place where you just come to view artefacts. It is something that you become involved in.” (Rasool 2001: ix). Ciraj Rasool further describes the ambivalence about being a museum among the trustees of the District Six Museum. The museum came into being as a community-based initiative, and although it aspired to be of national significance its main task was enabling the negotiation of identity of the former residents. The solidity and permanence associated with museums were to be avoided and instead it should work as a place for public contact. As McEachern stresses; “the presence of District Sixers as visitors also contributes to this “coming alive” in the museum” (1998: 503).

The museum has become a *setting* where the diaspora can enter front stage- life. There has been a discontinuity in the life of the District Sixers at the Cape Flats, where the collective understanding was harder to come by, and thus limited the potential of establishing ones social identity. The museum is thereby allowing for a contestation of history and place again.

It is definitely a place of contested memories. The emptiness of the map, the mnemonic objects of the museum, the sounds, photos and the people one might meet are all assets of the museum which can generate multiple narratives of the district. Obviously people have different versions of the past, but as De Kok correctly states “It is overtly a museum of a diaspora community intent on reassembling, and asserting, its public memory” (2002: 63).

Being in the first instance a community museum, the material base of knowledge and the supply of life stories were dependant on former residents of District Six. During the first few years the same segment of the society was also the main audience for the museum. In that way the official story told in the museum was sanctioned by the same people that had provided “the facts”, thus the narrative was self enhanced in this process of negotiation, and became more cohesive. The narrative of District Six as presented in the museum can be read

as an authoritative truth, but one should be aware that every exhibition, as well as artefacts, is open for imagination and interpretation; “Museums hold and shape memories but they cannot contain them.” (Davison 1998: 160).

Collecting artefacts, doing oral history recordings and presenting them to the public are all different aspects of museum work where a selection process is involved. Selecting which life stories to use and how to present them is, of course, affecting the “greater story” to be told in an exhibition. Certain ideas or *truths* about District Six are communicated through this very process. Aiming to construct a meaningful totality the curators have to put together matching pieces of scattered comments and artefacts and by doing this they are creating a grand narrative of District Six. It is important to be aware of the danger not only of compromising the facts, but also of neglecting certain memories or personal narratives of the area.

In the process of selecting and presenting the “artefacts” the museum is facilitating certain ways of remembering and thinking about District Six, thereby creating a setting that is open but guiding. As former residents continue to speak of District Six in terms defined by the museum, they continue to generate a pattern in the narratives. In this way the museum is a location for the construction of a collective meaning and becomes a purveyor of “truth”. The striking similarity in the narratives, though, cannot hide the fact that there is a great variety in the way people identify themselves with various places and virtues of the district.

The next chapters will shed some light on the contents of the narratives and the arenas on which they are told. I will provide possible interpretations as to why these narratives are important to the former residents, and suggests why they can be adopted into a grand narrative of the new South Africa.

Chapter 4: Narratives from the museum arena

Spending at least two or three days a week in the District Six Museum during the entire fieldwork provided me with enough stories to make an extensive web of identities and meanings attached to the district. In this chapter I will pick up just a few threads from this web. These narratives are all concerned with issues of sharing and belonging, the extensive use of public space and the heterogeneity associated with the district. Although these stories are recollections from an apartheid era, there seem to be a harmony and nostalgia which characterize these stories of more or less ordinary lives. This may indicate that these stories are constructed as oppositions to the apartheid era, or to the contemporary situation. I attempt to look past the obvious meanings of the narratives and interpret them as being 1) a homeland myth for a diaspora community, 2) contestation of history and society today, and 3) identity making.

The arena of interaction for these narratives being the museum, I have chosen to focus the stories around three themes facilitated by various relics and parts of the exhibition. These are narratives circling around *street life*, *the gangs* and *leisure life*. In the same time they are highlighting the positive aspects of "district sixness", the above mentioned sharing and belonging, use of public space and heterogeneity. For analytical reasons I am relating the discussion of the diasporic aspects to the *street life* narratives, the issue of contestation to *the gangs* and identity making to the *leisure life*. This is a somewhat arbitrary division, and one must have in mind that all the narratives are discourses on identity, contestation of history and related to being in diaspora.

The streets and stoeps - Home

The street as we recollect is a main theme in working with memory in the museum. Hence, a large part of the narratives I was told circled around the street life of District Six. All of the informants talk of the street as the major public space. As the museum director Terrence Fredericks told me, the street “was a space for the reproduction of social relations. It was the physical orientation of its inhabitants, and as such the place in which residents’ identity was confirmed and where they could speak of a sense of belonging.” This was where children were playing, people were crooning at the corners and shopping at the street hawkers.

Prior to the analysis of the narratives I will briefly describe an important aspect of the museum setting which often triggered the narratives; the portraits of the area written by District Sixers. In addition to the large street map and the street sign- sculpture, the extensive use of photos and sound clips, described in the previous chapter, the introductory panels bring the visitors back in time:

From Castle Bridge to Shepperd Street, Hanover Street runs through the heart of District Six, and along it one can feel the pulse beats of the society. It is the main artery of the local worlds of haves and have nots, the prosperous and the poor, the struggling and the idle, the weak and the strong. Its colour is in bright enamel signs, the neon lights, the shop fronts, the littered gutters and draped washing. Pepsi Cola. Commando Cigarettes. Sale now on. Its lifeblood is the hawkers bawling their wares above the jazz from the music shops: “Aartappels,ja. Uiwe,ja” : ragged youngsters leaping on and off the speeding trackless trams with the agility of monkeys: harassed mothers getting in the groceries: shop assistants: the Durango kids of 1956: and the knots of loungers under the balconies and in the doorways leading up to the dim and mysterious rooms above the rows of shops and cafes (Alex La Guma, former resident: on a board in the museum).

In the curatorial landscape of the District Six Museum, the written word has come to great attention. The poems, the extracts of life stories, the old newspaper articles and testimonies are all part of the visible objects, and shape the museum. Both as aesthetic features of the exhibition and as catalysts for an

identity discourse. Some of the written pieces are from the apartheid era, and some from the South Africa of today. The narratives are "...not only socially produced, but also socially productive, and writing as well as reading are always historically and socially situated events" (Montrose 1989: 23). Alex La Guma's poetic description of District Six above helped people to remember. One of the first days at the museum I was sitting in front of the La Guma board taking notes when an old lady approached me. She introduced herself as Mrs Broew. She was widowed five years ago, and often came to the museum to have a chat. She was hoping for a return through the land restitution process, because she wanted to die on "District Six soil", as she put it. Reflecting on the Guma board she talked about street life:

"There were people everywhere. Not in parks or in recreation grounds. There were no such facilities, not in District Six. People had to be outside, because the homes were very small. Maybe just one room for four kids... There was not much place in there. Since they did not have much space in their homes, they went outside. Playing and meeting each others at the corners, in front of shops, and in the street. We socialised outside... Sometimes if someone was short of savings we would eat on the neighbours' stoeps. The next time it could be them. That was how it was."

Mrs Broew talks about two aspects of living in a crowded urban setting. First, the lack of space at home and the scarcity of recreation grounds meant that people used the public space - the street - when socialising. Second, she speaks of the sharing aspect, introducing the district as a community. It seems that even the negative effects of the dense urban community, like overcrowding and poverty, facilitated a form of social relationship, and a sense of sharing that is longed for. Menisha, a former resident working in the coffee shop share that view, when referring to the heterogeneity in the area which followed from the multiethnic composition and the various religious groups she thinks of it as a community:

“District Six was too cosmopolitan. That was why they declared the area white. We had blacks, Chinese, Europeans, Indians, Christians and Jews living here. In the same streets, in the same tenements blocks... Festival days of the various religious groups were not only respected by everyone, we also participated. Just think, with all the people in the streets, there was no escaping. Parading from the mosques on the end of Ramadan, the Christmas choirs marching through the narrow streets, we were mixing and sharing in each other’s lives. Celebrating in the streets. I think it was a good community. They didn’t like it, so we were removed.”

Community life revitalized

The museum is in itself perhaps a manifestation of the community life of District Six, as the following episode indicates:

The Cape Doctor³² is gusty, and I am on my walk back to town from an interview session at the Beikinstadt Book Sellers. As I pass the museum I am tempted to go in for a coffee, while I organize my notes. The streets outside are empty, but in front of the museum there is a school class waiting to go in. I sneak in front of them and walk straight to the coffee shop. The seating area of the coffee shop is arranged almost like a public square, surrounded by photos of buildings and streets of the district. There are benches along the walls, and in the windows there are posters giving an image of being in the district. Tourists, former residents and staff alike frequent this zone quite a lot, and next to the street map, this is possibly the best place for interaction, allowing for former residents to reclaim their history and identity. The coffee shop is packed with people in all ages. I fit into one of the sides of an already occupied table after being offered a chair by an middle aged couple, and Menisha, “the coffee lady” is already pouring me a mug. Three kids are

³² The local name for a strong south-easterly wind which in the old days cleared the air of smog and dust.

running through the seating area and knock down one of the tables. Someone is playing a flute for a few seconds. A fellow research student nods at me and says that it is a "bad timing" for studies, hinting to the crowded museum. On the contrary I would say. This is a day for observations. People are really using the space of the museum as a place and turning it into a living museum. Menisha comes over to give me the change and says; "This is District Six! Noisy, but calming...[she is waiving her arms and smiling at the same time]This was what it was like outside you know. Before, not now. In my street. I used to live just up there [pointing]. Bloemhof Flats it was called." This starts a conversation on the table. The woman sitting next to me tells Menisha that her brother used to play cricket and then sometimes they would meet a team from Bloemhof Flats. "We would bring food, and sit along the street to watch. The passing children, and the occasional adult would join the spectators." She told that the street hawkers would often enter the stage in the middle of a player's innings³³ to sell their fruit. "No, no. The hawkers had a sense of the game. They wouldn't disturb," Menisha replied. The two of them continued chatting.

I agree with the view of Fentress and Wickham (1992) that the communication of "personal memory" is a process where stories obtain a social content. The narratives of the former residents of District Six are predominantly about being part of a community and the life in public space. Not only is its faculty being communal in itself, but the narrative is given meaning when shared. Thus, in the conversation above the image of the buzzing street is working as a catalyst for remembering social life, and placing the narrators in a society. The narrative of the buzzing street life is typical. The following is an extract of a story told me in the Hanover Street section of the museum, on the national heritage day. Yusuf had come to see his granddaughter dance, and had a few minutes before the performance to have a look at the exhibition and talk

³³ The play of one particular player in cricket.

with me:

"It was a river of people, barrows, racks of goods, children playing... There were people and there was the washing hanging from the buildings. It was a hive of activity, really... Some times we would hide from the police, in the barber shops, in the babbie shops.³⁴ They never found us. The street was our home."

Another younger female guest Thuta, who was forcibly removed to the Flats at the age of 10, told me the following:

"We used to sit on the stoep and talk to people going past. It was never shortage of children to play with, all you had to do was go outside and join any group of children. We lived on the street."

The street has become a standardized image to the community. As Fentress and Wickham observe, "Social memory is not stable as information; it is stable, rather, at the level of shared meanings and remembered images." (1992: 59). By sharing the recollection of the same images, the community remains a community. The narrative of the street is repeated over and over again, and make up a "common meaning" (White, 1991: 6). Through stories of the street the narrators are projecting District Six as a community. Bozzoli is informative in understanding the often nostalgic touch on stories. "The good connotations of *community* rest in its ability to conjure up images of supportiveness; of a place of kinship ties, of rest and rejuvenation; of cross class cooperation." (1987: 5).

District Six is still home

In the very beginning of this chapter I cited Terrence Fredericks, the museum director in saying the street was "where they could speak of a sense of

³⁴ Small cafes

belonging.” To a lot of people like Yusuf above it was more than that. To him “the street was our home.”

The museum staffs are not only guides through other people’s memories, but as former residents they are themselves narrators. Noor Ebrahim could provide me with a story which signifies the meaning of *home*. An early afternoon, just a few weeks after my initial approach to the museum, I popped by just to have a coffee in the museum shop. To my satisfaction there was a jam session in the hall, and a relaxed atmosphere with nearly no visitors. I sat down with Noor, this time he was familiar with my face, and he told me the story of his pigeons:

“As I told you, it was a very sad day when we were forced to move out. You see, it wasn’t just leaving the house or the neighbours. It was my entire life being turned upside down! You can say that I accepted what was inevitable the day we finally left our house, but I was angry and so sad. I knew there would be no more Coons³⁵, no more Sunday walks, no more... [Mac McKenzie starts playing the guitar as a part of a jam session in the museum. Noor nods the head in his direction...] No more of that. Actually I was fortunate. I had sufficient money to buy a house for my family in Athlone, so we didn’t need to move to one of the designated areas. But it wasn’t the same. Not like Caledon Street. Not like District Six.... When we moved to our new home in 1975 I had to take along my racing pigeons. And, as you can imagine it is important that they have a sense of home. Of course, what you want are for them to return. [Noor laughing.] So I used the same wood that had made up the loft in District Six when I built the new one in Athlone. Then I waited for the pigeons to settle, but after three months I thought it was about time to let the pigeons out. To see if they would come back to our new home. So I let them all out one Sunday morning and went out for the day. When I came home that evening they still hadn’t returned. I was really worried. I couldn’t sleep all

³⁵ The Cape Town Carnivale

night! The next morning I decided to drive down Caledon Street. My home, remember? And there, where my house used to be, all the pigeons had come home. When I got out of my car they turned around as if they wanted to ask "Where is our home?" You know, I cried that day."

As Noor's story suggests the street, and the district became an integral part of the memories of the displaced residents. The district was still home after the removals. As le Grange puts it; "public history, and indeed memory, is influenced by both the aesthetics of experiencing places in the area before its destruction and the politics of experiencing the place today as contested territory" (2001: 112).

Sørensen (1997) introduces the concept of *home-out-home*, in a discussion on how people relate to displacement. *Home* is the harmonic centre from where the diaspora origins. A home is a place which constitutes the identity and integrity of the person, and the place to where one wants to return. Home is real, and the social relations of the past are given special value. The place of "exile", or *out*, in this case the Cape Flats, is more like a place of temporariness.

In the far right corner of the museum there is a corner devoted to the theme of land restitution. Here I met with Ezekiel, a married man with "lots of grandchildren", who grew up in Windsor Street :

"District Six, that was living. I would meet friends and we would go to the bioscope or just hang out. Even the beach occasionally... Or just enjoy ourselves. My house was nice, but the city I loved. Now, on the Flats I have a comfortable home, but no real life."

To use Sørensen's concept it seems like living *out* to Ezekiel is a life where the "real" social relations of the *home* are put on hold, and the displaced way of living is just an attempt at coping with something different. In living *out* one is a social non-being. This I would argue is reflected in several of the stories

I was told by the displaced District Sixers. The following comments were made by Vincent an acquaintance of Menisha, during a informal interview in the coffee shop one early morning. We were talking about the Cape Flats:

“Today we rarely go to a movie...It is not like we don't feel like. But there are no bioscopes. Sure you could go to the NU Metro, then you need a car. In District Six it was there, right on the street, left or right...and the children, the parents didn't worry when they played outside. Not as much, at least. This place, you see, it is not who we are.”

“The ways in which people define a sense of home and community are deeply connected to their sense of self and the areas in which they played and worked, and where they turned certain spaces into their ‘turf,’ ‘stomping ground’ or ‘neighbourhood’” (Field 2001a: 118). To Vincent above, exchanging his personal District Six ‘turf’ for the bleak Cape Flats caused profound longings for earlier times. The new locality, the Cape Flats, is not real. In a sense it is not *home*.

Home to the District Six community is both in space and in time. Home is the physical barren area associated with District Six, close to the city centre. The remains of the cobbled streets, the mosques and the churches, the view from a given place in the landscape or as we recollect from Noors story about the pigeons; the spot where the house once was. Home is also a place in time. It is before the forced removals. It is the way of life people came to know as residents in central Cape Town. Irrespective of the angles chosen to define home in the narratives, *Home* is where one wants to return.

“I just can't wait to move back because District Six was my home. I would consider myself lucky, I moved to Athlone, a coloured area, but it was never my home.” (Noor on returning)

Diaspora

It seems natural to relate the narratives of District Six to the concept of diaspora. Ien Ang (1993) defines diasporas “as spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original “homeland”.” This *homeland* is the object of the diaspora’s collective memory in a “homeland myth” (Safran 1991, 1993).

Mr Colin, I met twice in the museum. He was born at the Peninsula Maternity Home in District Six in 1938, and grew up in a big family. On both of the occasions for our meetings he was walking the street map on the ground floor, talking to others, and to me:

“Sometimes you come back to places you remember. You think, ja so was it! There was Aspeling Street, Waynik’s shop...playing hide and seek with friends, staying on the stoep watching girls pass by. Suddenly you are taken back to your home, the happy days, your street... That is why I keep coming (to the museum)”

To Mr Colin the museum is presenting both in a mnemonic way and in the stories of street life a homeland myth, and as he states: that is why he keep coming. The narrative of District Six can be understood as escapism. As Safran has put it:

“diaspora consciousness (...) is a defense mechanism against slights committed by the host country against the minority, but it does not - and is not intended to - lead its members to prepare for the actual departure for the homeland. The 'return' of most diasporas (...) can thus be seen as largely eschatological concept: it is used to make life more tolerable by holding out a utopia - or eutopia - that stands in contrast to the perceived dystopia in which actual life is lived” (Safran 1991:94).

When there was a discontinuity in the community feeling or the extensive use of public space as a result of being removed to the Cape Flats, the image of the street and of their home – the district - was glorified, thereby working as a homeland myth to the dispossessed.

The street is a symbol of District Six in the museum, and in the narratives. It seems that to the narrators the streets of the district is where community life unfolded, and as such it is *home*

When the narrators above are portraying District Six street life as chaotic, as a variety of everything undefined and defined in the same time, as a place for playing, shopping, socialising, one is constructing an oppositional narrative to the rigid classification of the apartheid ideology. The spatiality of apartheid, and to some extent South African cities today, is being contested through remembering the past. Contestation of history and society is an important aspect of the narratives and I will shed light to this by using the narratives of the gangsters.

The gangsters - Seven Steps and skollies

Another popular narrative in the museum exhibition as well as in the minds of people are the stories about the gangs and gangsters of District Six. In the exhibition there is a substantial space on the first floor which is dedicated to the Seven Steps. The Seven Steps were a notorious meeting place in Hanover Street in the old days. This was a hang-out for gamblers and dagga-smoking³⁶ men. In the exhibition there is a full-size poster of the steps, and in front of it is a part of one of the actual steps that were rescued.

In the stories of the street, public space was not only regarded as a place of interaction, but as a *safe* place. This seems to contradict the fact that there was quite a high rate of violence and crime in the former days of the district (Bickford-Smith, 1999). Still the portrait being drawn up through various accounts of gangsterism in District Six is nostalgic in form.

³⁶ *Dagga* is slang for marihuana.

The good gangs of District Six

Mr Davids was 55 years old, single and living in the township of Mitchells Plain. He characterized himself as poor. He came to the museum on a “community based initiative” which provided economically challenged and elderly people with the chance to get a free ride to the museum. He spent a long time in front of the Seven Steps poster:

“Seven Steps! Now, I am telling you, that was the gang. The boys used to hang around the steps. There was this line and then there were seven steps up and then you walk this line and then you come to the other side of the Caledon Street. You see, Hanover Street is here, and on the other end is Caledon Street. There was an Indian shop on the corner, where they smoked dagga outside. They all had hats. Up the Seven Steps there is a cobbled path. Along the path they were singing. Hits by the Aime Brothers or the American crooners. I enjoyed their singing.”

Above Mr Davids is mentioning two other aspects of the street life: the gangsters and music. He is referring to the gangs as singing boys, thereby he is portraying them rather as a heterogenic aspect of the community than as elements of crime. There is another episode which illustrates this:

Just before closing time of the museum I am taking notes from the part of the exhibition which focuses on the legendary Seven Steps. From the other side of the balcony there is a tiny old man approaching me. He has been watching me for some time. “You are interested in District Six?” he asks me. I am telling him about the research project and that instantly gets his attention. He introduces himself as Goliem. Former resident, and living in Mitchells Plain on the Cape Flats. “I am gangster, you know.” He smiles and shoots at me with his right finger. I ask him if he can tell me something about his life in District Six. Triggered by the gang theme to the left of us he speaks of gang life; “I was not too bad. But a bit. I have been fighting, but nothing serious. Those were other times you see. It was tough

then, but it was not like the killings today. If someone got really in trouble people would help him out. People looked after the gangsters and they looked after you. You would be in trouble as a gangster if you did not respect your family, your community. One couldn't exceed. Then you loose respect even as a skollie... The fighting was supposed to be among the different gangs. The Seven Steps, The Starlight Gang, The Jesters, The Red Cats and The Globe Gang. I had my own gang. When we were fighting people would watch us from their stoeps, and come down to the street if we were moving up or down. We would offer a show!"

Golien describes the gangsters almost like an asset of the community in saying that they "would offer a show!" In his narrative by including the gangsters in community life, he is speaking of a set of social relations. The skollies or gangsters were not just bad seeds, put part of families, neighbourhoods and society. Thereby he is contesting the official story (Field 2001, Rasool 2001) at that time of District Six as a crime ridden area.

Mr Edgar, a long time dock-worker whom I met in the Little Wonder Store - the museum bookshop - had this to say:

"To me District Six seemed surprisingly non-violent. I mean if you consider the poverty and the number of people living in such a small area. I was never robbed. Not one single time... And I used to walk past the Seven Steps between twelve and one o'clock every night"

Another visitor, Ms Mqela- a former midwife from the district, now living in Grassy Park on the Cape Flats, conveniently interrupted us, supplying the anthropologist with more data:

"The gangs did not interfere with people from Hanover Street. They fight on each other. But not with decent people, no. They drank and smoked dagga, but they didn't interfere with good people."

Contestation

One way in which community forms, is according to Bozzoli (1987), in terms of opposition to something. Irrespective of the “imaginedness” of a community, the actual rate of crime, the difficulties and so on, this oppositional construction is what we find in narratives like the ones above. In narrating stories of harmony, gentleman gangsters and the gangs as crooners, the former residents are negotiating history, reclaiming it. The negotiation of the past is of utmost importance to the forcibly removed community of District Six, as the identity ascribed by others may obstruct the picture of *self* that one wants to present. Our identities are both personal and social, thus “Individuals may [therefore] be supported or threatened by public representations of pastness that seem either too guarantee their identity or deny its significance” (Tonkin 1992: 10), thus contestation becomes important.

I would also argue that the narratives are constructed not only as contestation of history, but could also be seen as a critique of society today, contesting space.

Ms Mqela continued her story:

“Skollies would just hang out on street corners. They did not go out to rob you. We knew them... They lived next door... Occasionally when they were drunk they would interfere, but not like on the Flats. Today they shoot you, rob you... it is the way we live nowadays. We don't mix.”

McEachern (1998) traces these types of narratives to the need for contesting society and space today. The narratives “seem to deny a place in District Six for the level of violence they experience today, for its randomness and the possibility of being murdered which meant that not for the townships but the life on the stoep or the streets.” (ibid: 512). The life on the Flats has become more individualized, the communal ties of the old community seized to exist, at least on a regular basis. The heterogeneity and the extensive use of

public space are lacking. In the narratives they construct a sense of *safety* opposing the level of crime today³⁷. Standing claims that

“in inner-city areas of Cape Town prior to apartheid, such as District Six, youth crime was largely kept in check by parents, neighbours and extended family networks. In other words, there was a strong degree of informal social control. Forced removals meant the inhabitants of the city were dispersed over the Cape Flats and many extended family networks were broken. Life on the Cape Flats became far more impersonal and distrustful – it lacked the “cement which held the working class culture together”. (2003: 12)

In contesting history through opposing the apartheid narrative of District Six as a crime ridden slum (Schoeman 1994) and narrate in contrast to the social relations of society as perceived today, they are constituting a “district sixness.”

What is it that marks people as District Sixers, and what set the individuals apart from others in that community? The following stories of leisure life I intend to analyze as discourses on identity.

Leisure life

In one of the alcoves upstairs in the museum there is a separate installation named “Bioscopes and carnival”. My impression was that apart from the street map on the ground floor, this is where the visiting former residents spent most time. Going to the cinema and enjoying the music, like in the Coons carnival, were two of the most popular forms of entertainment in District Six (Rasool and Prosalendis 2001, Nasson 1990).

Music

The fusion and intermingling of different music styles was a stamp of the cosmopolitan community. Goema, klopse, jazz, vastrap, langarm, kwela, mbaqanga, Khoisan and Boere music were all played in District Six clubs. In the

³⁷ “The figures for violent as well as white collar crimes are shocking: in a populace of 40 million, 18 000 murders, 20 000 attempted murders, 44 000 drug related offences, 55 000 cases of fraud, 95 000 vehicle thefts, 96 000 robberies, 276 000 housebreaks, 7000 cases of arson and 157 000 serious assaults were reported in 1994 alone” (Venter 1998: 17)

“Bioscope and Carnival” installation there is an introductory board which reads:

“And I tell you something, when eventually we got to the stage and we started playing jazz and so, even the audience was from all sectors of the community. And it really brought people from all walks of life together. That is why it became a victim. Because when the regime started passing laws like no mixed dancing, no mixed dining, no mixed bands, how the hell do you run a jazz club? So that made it impossible for the culture to flourish.” (Vincent Kolbe).

The narrative above is a written account of lived life. I consider the value of written narratives as more than the recollection of a certain time in history, and agree when Gullestad states that the authors of narratives “are actively engaged in *reconstructing* the world and their identities within it” (Gullestad 1994: 126). In the account given by jazz musician Vincent Kolbe he is reconstructing District Six as a place where music was a binding factor, bringing the diverse community together, and at the same time he is placing himself as a musician in that community. Hence he is constructing an identity for himself inside the District Six identity.

During my fieldwork people often referred to music when speaking of the past. On the National Heritage Day I sat next to Rafael, who were of the very first to be removed from the district in 1968. We were enjoying a music session in the museum:

“I could play the piano. Now I am old, my fingers are stiff, they don’t work. The times of District Six, that’s music. I tell you. Music, you know. All over the place.”

Coons

It was probably when the music took to the streets that was the ultimate day of “district sixness”. This happened at New Year. The event was one of immense popularity on the calendar of working-class District Sixers (Jeppie 1990), and was known as the Coons, the New Year’s Carnival. Then troupes would be

singing all along Hanover Street, through the city centre and end up in Green Point. The different troupes were associated with streets, neighbourhoods, sports clubs or even gangsters.

The Coons was celebrated by men and women, young and old. Although controlled remotely by the police and possibly acting as a way to deflect attention away from the social reality there are a few characteristics which “bear testimony to the momentary anarchic character of the festival, to the symbolic inversion of the dominant social and moral order” (Jeppie 1990: 70). Jeppie points to:

“the occupation of public space by the dispossessed, the control of movement in this commercially hallowed space by the crowd, the shift of focus from the powerful onto the powerless, the motley garb and bright colours of troupers, the overt presence of the transvestite, known locally as the “moffie”, at the head of nearly every “coon” troupe, the uncontrolled mixing of the sexes, generations and also colours, the near absence and powerlessness of the police, the throng of proletarian music, and the happy but cynical lyrics of the carnival songs.” (ibid: 70)

Running through the streets of District Six it became a community happening. Mixing different music traditions, writing texts and performing in the street towards the city centre, was a way of showing who you were. It was about identification (Jeppie 1990). The Coons had elements of the District Six virtues. It was extensive use of public space, bringing people to the streets and stoeps either as *deep players* acting in the Coons as or as spectators viewing as *shallow players* (Geertz 1993 [1973]). It was reflecting the heterogeneity of the district, and it was a communal affair. It was not only in participating in the actual Coons that one claims “district sixness”, but also in narrating the carnival.

Stan was at the museum for the first time when I met him. I asked him what kind of memories that was facilitated most when visiting the museum. To him it was the Coons:

“Ah, ah, those were magnificent days. I never forget, because that was when we

had a lot of pleasure, man. We were so happy. It was in Hanover Street from the start at Castle Bridge right up to the Catholic Church. Now this night, old year's eve, then my auntie would make all ready, food and everything, then she would say we must go down and keep our places. On the stoep. On the pavement."

His wife Sue, who lived next to him in Aspeling Street as a little girl, added:

"Ja! Even two days before! Then the people place their benches in order. Grandma would make bread and tart. Or everything. It was picnic really, every street."

The married couple shared an identity as District Sixers in sharing this memory. Tonkin speaks of collective memory as "the multiplicity of subjects" (1992: 131-132). The collective memory of District Sixers can be said to constitute an identity of the diaspora, but how does this "collectiveness" come about? I agree with Tonkin that "the practices of discussion and recall over time lead to preferred versions" (ibid: 131). The narrators are not only portraying a District Six identity, they are also positioning themselves inside, making an identity on their own.

On the first floor of the museum, on the balcony there is a collection of photos from the carnival and a few uniforms in bright colours. I was standing underneath the sound dome listening to Coon songs, when Noor approached me to tell me a story about him wanting to play a part in the carnival:

"At the end of 1961, I said to my friends "Come, let us join the Coons." The next year, without our parents' knowledge, we joined the "Young Stars" Coon troupe. Sunday afternoons were practices in the Cane store in Martin Street. The day before New Year I fetched my specially designed uniform from the clubhouse in Ellesmere Street. It was magnificent, I tell you. I put it in a brown carrier bag and asked our neighbour to keep it for me until next morning. My father was a strict man. The Coons were out of question. I only told my sister, as I knew she could

keep my secret. The very next day was the New Year. I told my mother that I was spending the day with some friends. I collected the uniform and ran to the clubhouse to change. My face was black and white with paint. It is tradition. On my head was a yellow hat. The outfit was in red, white and blue satin, and with a yellow tie. Then, when everyone was ready we went to my friend Boeta's house in Aspeling Street. On the way we sang and played our music, right past my house! I was laughing, knowing that nobody would recognize me. Then we sang all the way to Green Point. Here we took part in the singing competition. We won second prize for "best dressed". I think maybe the yellow bow-ties ruined our chance. Then after the prize giving we once again paraded through the streets. I was carrying the trophy. The crowds cheered, making me proud. We ended our parade with singing Exodus, together with Joey Gabriels. We called him the Mario Lanza of South Africa. You don't know[laughing]. But he was big. Joey went on to sing at La Scala later! We once again changed in the clubhouse, and I put my outfit in a small bundle to hide it from my father. Then I walked up Hanover Street. People made fun of me. Laughing. I didn't know why. I went through the backyard and entered the kitchen. "You bloody! So you have been with the Coons!" He was so angry. I wondered who had told him. Not my sister, not. "Look at that stupid face!" I had forgotten to wash off the paint!"

In telling the story above Noor is not merely giving a chronological recollection of events or episodes, his narrative is imitating and reconstructing lived life, revealing his identity. Ricoeur (1984) discusses the concept of narrative identity. His focus of study is written text, but I would argue that it is transferable to a discussion on oral narration. As I understand Ricoeur it is in telling these individual stories that - over time - a durable character becomes recognizable. The narrator comes forward as belonging to a certain family, making decisions and acting in a series of events. The plot of the story is portraying an identity of the narrator because "characters, we will say, are

themselves plots" (Ricoeur 1984: 143). Noor, above, is locating himself in the District Six identity by focusing on the Coons, and through the story he develops a personal identity as an acting character.

In the narratives the "I" in the story often had certain preferences, favourites and dislikes, thereby distinguishing themselves from others although they shared the same topic of discourse. Mary, whom I met in front of the Coons alcove, had brought lots of photos from her childhood in the district. Some of them were from the Coons:

"Everyone had their favourite troupes. We would recognize them by the colours from afar. The Atchers, dressed up like devils, the Pennsylvanians, the Harlem Darkies, the Starlights, the Hollywoods. My favourite troupe was the Philadelphians. Quite a lot of the boys in school joined the Philadelphians that is why I liked them."

The Coons carnival can be said to have been unity in diversity. The singularities of the individuals, grouped into troupes that different streets or neighbourhoods may associate with, constitute a common identity at a higher level as District Sixers, or *Capetonians*.

Through telling about allegiance to specific troupes the District Sixers can between them offer a story of who they were. In the narratives of leisure life the former residents seem to have a common understanding of the value of cinemas, but swear loyalty to different bioscopes.

Bioscopes

Many of the people I spoke to recollected going to cinema as one of the most important leisure activities. This is reflected in the museum exhibition. On the wall there are pictures of the cinemas and its patrons: The Star, The National, The British, Avalon and Banana Rama. The bioscopes were also used to host musicals and talentshows. On the large street map, the bioscopes was what

people often looked for, signifying that going to the movies was part of the “district sixness”. The loyalty to the different bioscopes seemed to signal difference within the district.

Mrs. Digba used to live with her aunt in Clifton Street. They used to have a hard time making ends meet, and she told me she still had. She came to the museum as a participant on the aforementioned community initiative, and she talked about her memories from the bioscopes:

“The Star was where we mostly went, because it was close to home and cheap. There we had some good times. Sometimes we would even sneak in! It wasn’t that organized, and when one of us paid, there would always be someone rushing in together without a ticket. The Star was dreams. It was our bioscope.”

Ezekiel, introduced earlier, accompanied me around the museum and the pictures of the cinemas introduced this comment:

“You could take anything into the Star you know, they just had wooden seats downstairs, so it was all right for fish and chips and other hoot food. But not at the Avalon, no never at the Avalon. They had ushers there to check you and make you stand outside to eat food. The Avalon, you see was a more respectable kind of bioscope, it was mostly the better class of person who went there.”

Linda, a former resident and now a member of the museum staff, remembered:

“My dad did not allow us to go to the British Bioscope. It was in Caledon Street, just around the corner from the National theatre. I think it was considered too rough by most parents. There was a lot of gambling going on, on the steps.”

The personal identities of District Sixers come as a result of contrasting oneself to others. Tonkin informs: “That which makes me individually recognisable includes features understood by comparison with others...and

which also identify me as coming from a period, class or place" (1992:102).

Chapter 5: Other places of remembering

I have shown in the last two chapters that the museum worked as an arena for remembering District Six to the former residents visiting. The narrations of the past seemed to cluster around certain topics and were, when put together, constituting a cohesive myth of “district sixness”. In this respect the museum represents a place for concentration of narratives.

In this chapter I investigate other arenas which represent places of continuity in terms of narrating District Six. This chapter is an attempt at triangulating the content of the narratives from the museum with the ones outside. I will concentrate on two separate places of worship: the Al-Azhar Mosque and the Methodist Church. The District Six faithful have continued to visit the district on a regular basis during the Cape Flats “exile”, using these places as meeting grounds for keeping District Six alive.

The past is also remembered and presented in other ways than through the regular activity of oral recollection of memories. In the final two arenas for storytelling that are presented the grand narrative of District Six is being re-enacted in the commemorative ceremony of the gumba, and staged as a West End-style musical. The former was an in-group way of remembering, and the latter a narrative told on the national level. However, District Six as I will show appeared remarkably as a unitary story.

The Al-Azhar Mosque

The Al-Azhar mosque is on the Keizergracht Street as described in the District Six Walk. It is a white brick building and as a mosque it is small of size. From the benches outside you can see nearly the entire district. Just across the street is the somewhat more imposing building of the Cape Technikon. Pre-apartheid you would just see a row of two storey buildings housing shops and tenants.

Then the street was called Aspeling Street. A majority of the people coming here are former residents, and their children, who have fond childhood memories from this very place.

The first time I met Cassiem was on the District Six Walk. We agreed to meet again the day before Eid- al-fitr. Cassiem is a man of coloured origin as he himself puts it, he is married and they have two kids. They all live in Mitchells Plain on the Cape Flats. He is 60 years old, and was forcibly removed at the age of 30. As I wait on the bench outside in the blistering sun, he comes driving up to me. He wants me to enter the car, which I do, and escape the sun. He insists on not using the tape recorder, so the following recollection is based on memory:

He told me that most of the al-azhar faithful had actually been removed to Mitchells Plain, and that his sporting buddies and neighbours are friends from childhood. "The community used to be so tight-knit" he showed me with his hands filtrated in each other. There were other points of social interaction now.

He longed back to the time of the bioscopes, where particular persons identified with particular cinemas. "On the Avalon a man could proudly bring his girlfriend. The British Bioscope on the other hand was the hangout of the gangsters." At this point he started naming more than twenty gangs. "They were gentleman gangs, many of them had higher education but couldn't find a job. They had some incidents with the police. Or each other. But the rest of us they would respect." He says the museum gives a very accurate picture and that he has been there several times. On the future of District Six, though, he is negative. "This is a cursed place you know!" His father was one of many who died from a stressed out heart during the forced removals. He continues with saying the society is worse today. "With all the criminals, the politicians are doing nothing". It was not like the old days when people helped each other out, Jews, Muslims or Christians. "Then we didn't even need the police. We had a good community".

When Cassiem mentions that on the Flats he still lives with his childhood friends and interacts with them on different social arenas, and in the same time tells us that the community of the past used to be “so tight-knit”, it signals that in order to have a feeling of community one needs more than the people. He points to the availability of leisure in form of cinemas and the heterogeneous composition of the population as what constitutes “a good community”. To adopt Sørensen’s (1997) thinking he is also criticising social reality today by contrasting it to the *real* social relations of the past when “people helped each other out”. Thus he is adding to the narratives of District Six as told in the museum. What is different at the mosque is the framework for remembering. Here it is not the streets which works as a mnemonic, but the setting in terms of attending prayers. The following episode indicates this.

Mr Davids, that I also met in the museum on a few occasions and who talked about gangs in the previous chapter, was one of the informants who agreed to meet me in the Al-Azhar Mosque at the end of Ramadan:

It is Eid-ul-fitr, the day which marks the end of the Ramadan. I have made an appointment with a few people of the Al-Azhar Mosque faithful. I am walking from the Cape Town City Hall up the Keizergracht, past the Technikon and towards the Mosque. The streets are filled with cars and there are a few food stalls selling schawarma and koeksisters³⁸. There is not enough space for everyone inside the building so people are praying on the pavements as well. I would think more than 400 persons were present. I spend some time looking for my informants. The prayers are ending and people start greeting each other “Eid Mubarrak”. Then someone touch my shoulder. There is Mr Davids. He is 55 years old, single, and living on Mitchells Plain. I am telling him about having trouble in finding him, because of the crowded street. This triggers his memory:

³⁸ Deep-fried piece of dough which is soaked in syrup.

“This is nothing. You should have seen it years back. Then the streets were crowded. Everyone came to witness the end of Ramadan. It was like the Coons, people were all over the street” [we sit down in the shadow of the trees. I urge him to tell more about the past]”. Between 8.30 and 9.30 am we would dress in our new clothes and stroll down to the mosque for the prayers. Afterwards we would be greeted by our class mates, often presenting us with gifts from their families. Then we would walk along the streets of the district saying “slamat”. Wishing one and all a happy Eid... District Six was really a cosmopolitan place. We all stayed together. Blacks, whites, coloureds, Malay people, Jews. All those stayed together, needless of colour. We mixed. My sister got engaged with a black man. His family celebrated Eid with us”.

Mr. Davids’ story came about as an association derived from Eid and the crowded street, bringing forward a narrative of the former street life during Ramadan. He touches onto the familiar themes of the Coons, the street and the heterogeneous community. Although lacking the same richness in objects as we find in the museum framework, the narrators from the mosque have the landscape outside, and the continued relationship to the actual building working as a catalyst for remembering.

The Methodist Church

In the Greenmarket Square I visited the new place of worship for the Methodist congregation. As we remember from the chapter on the museum, the Methodist church in Buitenkant Street became the venue for the streets exhibition in 1992, thus they had to find a new church in where to worship. For some of the residents the new place became this church in central Cape Town:

Inside there is only one person; an old lady of more than eighty years, presenting herself as Ma. Being unsure about her being a former resident of District Six I ask

her. She smiles with her entire body. "Yes! You know about District Six!" I tell her about my project and she agrees to share her District Six life with me and a tape recorder.

As I sit down and prepare, she goes into the church office. A few minutes later she is returning with tea and cookies. I tell her she didn't have to make anything, but she just answer that she "enjoys company", and explain that people in general should be friendlier to each other. As it is a Sunday I ask her to start telling about Sundays in the old district, and she shares her memories:

"The Sundays were for families. It was day off. On Sunday afternoons people would sit outside their houses. We lived up in Constitution Street. It is hilly you must understand. It was hilly. [She explains by using her hands] Now as you can imagine it's going up hill. If you sit in one spot you can see others sitting up the hill. People would sit on the stoeps or on the pavement outside having tea and whoever comes around sits and just enjoys themselves. People would have watermelons sliced up. [At this point she is leaning forward] What is the biggest watermelon you have seen? [I hold my hands separated at a distance of 40 centimetres] No, no! In District Six the melons were much bigger, and everyone could afford. As I told you, the watermelon, sliced up, would pass from one side of the road and to whoever is sitting up there. And they would say: send to those people up there and give to them across the road. They were friendly at that time. Hospitable. They would shout over there and have conversations with people about three or four houses away. Everyone would just chime in."

The arena where this narrative was told did not have any visible symbols of the district, but as Tonkin (1992) shows action and recall often is triggered by words. In this case it was the words "District Six" which triggered a set of connotations in Ma. From this she narrated a story of Sundays in the district which fits with the grand narrative of District Six as told in the museum. Now I

will proceed to other ways of projecting District Six.

The gumba

“If there is such a thing as social memory, [...], we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies” (Connerton 1999: 4-5).

On 9 December 2002 I was invited to a *gumba* by the museum staff. The *gumba* was a party often held around political events in the 1980s. A traditional *gumba* would consist of a variety of events including music, dance and poetry, and people would be eating and drinking all night. A significant number of these parties would take place in the Community Arts Project’s building on the outskirts of District Six. The occasion for the *gumba*, and my invitation to participate, was the 25th anniversary of the Community Arts Project (CAP).

CAP was established as an attempt at bringing creative people of all “races” and economical backgrounds together in the 1970s. In the organization’s founding documents we can read:

“(...) there is an urgent need in Cape Town for accommodation and facilities for use by artists and potential artists, writers, actors, musicians etc. many of whom live in conditions of overcrowding in inadequate houses on the Cape Flats and in areas where community facilities are minimal. Several of the organisations and groups with which the founders of the Project were associated were faced with the same problem when they attempted to run workshops and provide opportunities for creative expression - a total lack of suitable accommodation and facilities. At the same time there appeared to be a spontaneous growth of the arts, much of it related to the burning social and political issues of our time. There was a demand from many individuals and groups for suitable accommodation” (CAP 2004)

Among the founding members were several former residents of District Six. The organization was fighting apartheid through staging plays and playing the cosmopolitan music of the district. Some of the people of CAP are also engaged in District Six in particular as museum trustees. The *gumba* that I was attending was arranged in cooperation between CAP and the museum, commemorating District Six. Handwritten on my invitation it said: “Do you

want to see D6?" I did.

Walking through a fairly run-down neighbourhood I approach a welcoming looking two storey building in Chapel Street. There is a white brick-wall with a large colourful mural on it. There is a crowd outside, waiting to fill the building. People are meeting up with each other. There are old couples, musicians, a few persons I have seen in the museum and a group of young people who have already had a lot to drink. The mingling starts outside, where a jazz band is playing. There are coloureds, blacks, white, Malay, and from what I can see people from quite different income groups are represented. We are slowly moving into the building, being served finger food on the stoep on the way in. Ending up in a big hall we are facing the stage where one of the organizers is speaking. As is custom on a gumba there is a topic, a message for the night. Today it is for us to be absorbed of the good old community feeling: "Remember the spirit of District Six," he says. People are mingling to the music of a few notorious musicians associated with District Six: the Goema Captains with Mac Mckenzie, and Valmont Layne of the Raakwys. At the food stall in the backyard they serve samosas and koeksisters. People are comparing them to samosas of the babbie in the district's Constitution Street, or the koeksisters to their mom's homemade. The younger part of the crowd listens to their stories, and has stories of their parents to tell the others. The music is getting louder. People are dancing everywhere: in front of and on the stage, in the backyard and on the balcony of the first floor. The atmosphere is vibrant. One of the senior staff at the museum greets me: "What do you think about District Six?" indicating that it is re-enacted today.

In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton (1999) demonstrates that commemorative ceremonies and other rituals share two characteristics, "formalism and performativity." This, Connerton asserts, allows them to "function effectively as mnemonic devices." I would argue the gumba was a commemorative ceremony where the familiarity of the house in Chapel Street,

the traditional elements of poetry, the specific songs and lyrics of District Six musicians, dance, and traditional District Six food being served was the framework, the *formalism*. The *performativity* was the dancing, the way of chatting, the joyous mingling, in short "acting" like District Sixers. Thus the gumba ceremony served as a "ritual reenactment". For Connerton, what is remembered in commemorative ceremonies memorializes an image of the past in which a "community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative . . . a making sense of the past as a kind of collective autobiography" (1999: 70).

Hence, the social memory is being enhanced in the communal celebration of what people think and mean is the content and virtues of District Six. The former residents' embodied "district sixness" makes for solidity in the "preferred versions" (Tonkin 1992: 131) of the past.

The grand narrative of District Six as it is performed in a commemorative ceremony, or as the package of meaning that is being "constructed" in the selection and presentation of narratives in the museum, is offered to other South Africans in other arenas. "District sixness" is presented also on the national level through a hit musical.

District Six - the musical

David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's³⁹ "District Six – the musical" was staged at the Baxter Theatre during my entire stay. Petersen was himself born in the district and started his musical career as a kid in the Coons carnival. It was a restaging of the musical that was a part of the changing political climate in the end of the 1980s. Although a hit at that time, seen by more than 350 000 people, several of the songs were banned on the SABC. It was also staged in Johannesburg and in London's West End and some of District Six's national

³⁹ Taliep Petersen was murdered in his Cape Town home 16 December 2006.

and international fame should be credited the musical. Thus, it was of relevance to the study of District Six narratives to see the famous musical version of the past.

I leave the apartment early on a Saturday afternoon to go to the Baxter Theatre in Rondebosch. It is an hour's walk from Cape Town city centre. Arriving two hours in advance of the show I am hoping to conduct a few interviews before it starts. Reading through the programme bought in the ticket stall I learn that "District Six – the musical" is:

"a love story set against the forced removals of a community by the apartheid regime in the 1960's. Mary, a young songwriter and her boyfriend Cassiem audition for Mr Goldman, who owns Star Tone Records. Sandy, Mr Goldman's grand-daughter who is visiting from London catches Cassiem's eye. Mr Goldman would like to contract Mary, but Sandy persuades him that Cassiem would be a better bet. When Sandy's camera is stolen by a street child, Cassiem offers to escort her around the District. District Six is declared for "whites only" and people start receiving letters from "The Board" offering them alternative accommodation on the Cape Flats.

Nines, a local gangster, is apolitical to begin with, but he slowly starts to understand the implications of the apartheid laws through the mentoring of Damaka, a blind herbalist. Nines has a crush on Mary and when he discovers that Cassiem and Sandy are having an affair he betrays them to "the Law".
(From the synopsis in the program).

The tables at the Baxter Bar are already packed with people having a pre-drink. Addressing the issue of accessibility of the potential informants I try my luck with two middle-aged white women sitting in the far end. I present myself and the project and ask "Why have you come to see this musical?" Nancy and Penny are colleagues at the University of Cape Town and sisters in law. They both saw the show in the 1980s. "Then there was less whites." Penny it turns out was born in the district, and lived there during primary school. I ask her to tell of the childhood:

"We lived in a semi-detached house in Tennant Street. My father was a teacher and mom was a midwife. As a little girl I went to the primary school in William

Street. It was just a few minutes away. The classrooms were really very nice. In that time we were fed at school. That is no more. That's for sure. The pupils would get pieces of fruit, slices of brown bread and spread with peanut butter. My brother and I never helped ourselves to the bread. It was intended for those children who could not afford to bring sandwiches to school. There were a lot of poor people in District Six. But we stuck together. In winter the children who could afford it were asked to bring a vegetable for the soup, or even pieces of fish or meat. My best friend Shirley's family was poor. I remember every Friday afternoon she was sent to fetch fruit and vegetables. I accompanied her and when we got to the market we would find the bags ready for us to take home. Not a single penny was spent! They got the leftovers from all the stalls. On the way back along Hanover Street we would visit Mr Goodman's shop, selling the best peanuts in town... My favourite magazine was the "School Friend". On Fridays I bought it at Mr Johnson's shop. We could be there for hours, gazing at the magazines. The entire Hanover Street was amazing" [at this time there is an announcement on the speakers, that we are to take ours seats]

The initial scene is Hanover Street. Then the scenes of act one follows in this order: The Seven Steps, Cassiem's stoep, The Seven Steps, Star Tone Records, A street, Blue Moon Nightclub, Tailor shop, Star Tone Records, Seven Steps again. In act two: A street, The seven Steps, Star Tone Records, A stoep, The Star Bioscope, Blue Moon Nightclub, The Jet Set Salon, The Seven Steps, Star Tone Records and finally Afrika's house. The different settings on the stage and the actual scenes of the musical can like the museum aesthetics be said to be guiding principles for defining ways of speaking about District Six. The musical centred on familiar themes like the Coons, the vibrant street, the harmonious community and the dramatic impact of the forced removals in telling the love story.

Fentress and Wickham state that "Images can be transmitted socially only

if they are conventionalized and simplified: conventionalized, because the image has to be meaningful for an entire group; simplified, because in order to be generally meaningful and capable of transmission, the complexity of the image must be reduced as far as possible." (1992: 59). District Six – The Musical can be seen as an example of such a “conventionalized and simplified image” and is thereby meaningful to a greater audience of South Africans – and others. In a way the musical provides a package of meaning in the same way as the museum.

Chapter 6: Concluding remarks

In this chapter I will conclude on the initial research questions by offering a brief recollection of the points made throughout the thesis.

To answer the question “**What is District Six?**” I have in this thesis contextualised the negotiation of history and identity among District Sixers in the contemporary process of South Africans “coming to terms with who they were – and who they are becoming” (Nuttall and Coetzee (eds) 2002 [1998]: cover page).

I have attempted to find what it is that constitute “district sixness” through investigating the District Six Museum exhibition, the narratives of the former residents and the picture painted of the district in other arenas than the museum. Narrating is seen as social action (Tonkin 1992, Fentress and Wickham 1992, Ricoeur 1984), revealing the position of the narrator. In analyzing the arenas and narratives I have engaged in the discussion of District Six as place, as collective memory, as contested history and as identity to the District Six diaspora community.

The narratives of District Six have come to fame in South Africa through the museum, today a national heritage centre, through the musical which became a hit and through numerous best-seller novels. Treating the human mind as having common underlying properties (Lévi- Strauss 1966), makes it possible to say something about why the narratives can have resonance with other South Africans. I regard the concept of nationhood, like the sense of community as a construct of mind - an imagined reality (Anderson 1991). The new South Africa is searching for a national identity, and in the following I sum up the “facts” which make the symbol of District Six possible to use in creating a national identity.

Questions answered

I) What are the narratives of District Six?

In the narratives that I was told there were a few recurring elements. They seemed to focus specifically on three themes: 1) the street as the main meeting place, 2) the gangsters of the district, and 3) the leisure life represented by the Coons carnival and the bioscopes. In narrating their District Six past the former residents gave a picture of the district as heterogeneous in terms of the different religious beliefs and people of different ethnic groups living there. They communicated a sharing spirit among the residents, thereby signifying a community feeling. Finally, the stories were about an extensive use of public space, which seems to point to an urban identity. To be a District Sixer is to share these “representations of pastness” (Tonkin 1992) in picturing a well working, harmonious and multicultural community.

The narratives are nostalgic in form, although they are of the apartheid period, leaving us to think that they are subject to different ways of treating and structure memory. I have looked past the obvious meanings of the narratives and have shown that they can be said to be constructed as oppositional, thereby one is opposing the former apartheid narrative of District Six, and reclaiming history. They also represent an opposition to a present social life which is not seen as fulfilling. Thus it is an idea of how society should be.

The narratives are also a discourse on identity. If one is to speak of a District Six identity it is because “the practices of discussion and recall over time lead to preferred versions” (Tonkin 1992:131). I have also shed light on the relational aspect of identification (Eriksen 1996) in the stories. A resident could be black, Muslim, well off, be a patron at the Star Bioscope and a performer in the Coons carnival, and in having a wide range of potential identities he is a District Sixer.

II) Who are telling the narratives, and in what way have the memories been kept alive?

The narratives are foremost the recollection of memories among former residents of the district. It appears to have been a common shared identification with District Six among the dispossessed and narrating the past was a means to cope with a new reality following the forced removal. Hence, the storytellers are the ordinary people of the old community.

The street as a social arena was lacking on the Cape Flats, and as a result people found other appropriate arenas for keeping the memory alive. The different places of worship were spared under the destruction of the area and these became meeting grounds for representations of pastness for the former residents continuing to come here. People have continued to tell stories about the district in mosques and churches.

Later the District Six Museum has stepped forward both as an archive of oral histories and a generator of memory. In selecting and presenting specific narratives and objects the museum is making a framework which facilitates certain ways of thinking about the past. The museum has in this respect become a narrator on its own (McEachern 1998). Thus it is a purveyor of multiple truths, which put together makes for a Grand narrative of the district.

The narrative of District Six has also been kept alive at a national level through District Six – the musical, and best selling novels like Richard Rive's (1986) "Buckingham Palace", leading to a national fame of the area and its stories.

III) How does District Six being a diaspora community affect the narratives?

I have argued that it was a discontinuity in the community feeling of the former residents as a result of being moved to the Cape Flats. Living in diaspora, removed from their *homeland*, meant a glorification of the narratives of District Six. To quote Bozzoli: "The good connotations of *community* rest in its ability to

conjure up images of supportiveness; of a place of kinship ties, of rest and rejuvenation; of cross class cooperation.” (1987: 5).

In the collective memory of the District Six diaspora community the narratives are celebrating a diverse, sharing, secure and urban *homeland*. I have argued that the narratives can be seen as a “homeland myth” (Safran 1991, 1993), and a cohesive identity.

I have used Sørensen’s (1997) concept of *home-out-home*, in a discussion on how District Sixers relate to displacement in their narratives. *Home* is the harmonic centre from where the diaspora origins. A home is a place which constitutes the identity and integrity of the person, and the place to where one wants to return. Home is real, and the social relations of the past are given special value. The place of “exile” or *out*, the Cape Flats, is more like a place of temporariness. This is reflected in the narratives.

Finally, the possibility of returning to the homeland – District Six - has as I have pointed out implications for how to interpret the narratives. The empty space of District Six can be filled with a set of social relations again; hence the narratives can be understood as a vision of what can be in the future.

IV) Why has District Six resonance with the South African nation?

District Six has risen to national fame as a part of the ongoing process of rebuilding South Africa after apartheid. What are the qualities of the narratives which make them capable of speaking to a greater audience?

I have shown that District Six has got its position, and makes resonance in the nation due to a few “facts”:

- The narratives are of ordinary lives, told by ordinary people. Thus, its values which can be appreciated by many.
- The narratives are of a set of social relations which are sought after in South Africa. They are of a working multicultural society.
- It is intrinsically about urbanity and the aspects of a cosmopolitan

community, allowing for multiple identities. In this we find the notion “Unity in diversity”.

- Finally, District Six is unique due to the fact that it still is a diaspora community with a view to return. Thus District Six is a story of what can become of South Africa.

Elaborating briefly upon these points one can say that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was part of coming to grips with a new South Africa, but the narratives of the TRC are the narratives of martyrs or heroes, of extraordinary events. This does not necessarily facilitate the building of a new national identity. The narratives of District Six offer something different something recognizable.

The connection between a past, the present and a vision for the future is of great importance in order to shape a common national identity, or rather consensus.

District Six is about a set of social relations, it is about the possibility of having multiple identities and it is about having the spatial setting that makes this possible.

Large proportions of the South African inhabitants were dispossessed during the minority apartheid rule, and are still experiencing “segregated” cities today. Hence, the narratives are unifying history to the nation and a vision of what might be in the rainbow nation.

District Six – Heterotopia?

“First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” (Foucault 1967).

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