

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1986*

Article 2

4-15-1986

The Authorship of Places: Reflections on Fieldwork in South Africa

John Western

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Anthropology Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Western, John (1986) "The Authorship of Places: Reflections on Fieldwork in South Africa," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol7/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

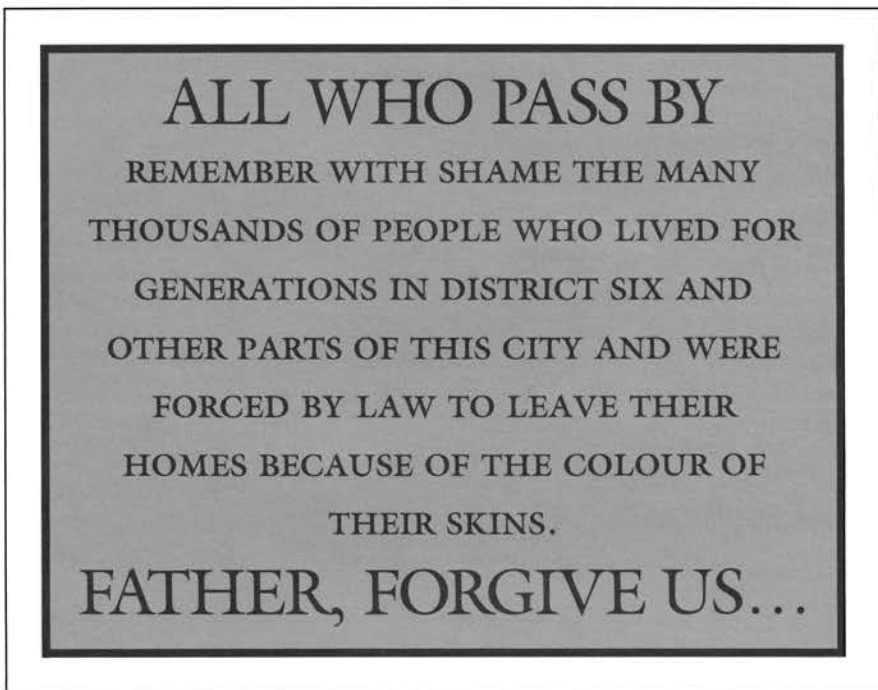


Figure 1. A plaque on the wall of a Methodist church near District Six in what is today a whites-only area of town.

The Authorship of Places:

Reflections on Fieldwork in South Africa



PHOTO: CRAIG MASSOTH/DAILY ORANGE

JOHN WESTERN

IN 1974 I WENT TO CAPE TOWN to do fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on the replanning of the city by successive Afrikaner Nationalist governments since 1948. A racial law entitled the Group Areas Act had painstakingly gerrymandered the metropolis along the watertight racial lines of apartheid (literally, “apart-ness” in Afrikaans), thereby replacing in large measure the haphazardly semi-segregated colonial city of the departed British Empire. Not only did the city get replanned, so did its citizens. The particular focus of my research was what happened to the more than 200,000 people—the majority being so-called Cape colored (mixed-race) persons—whose lives were disrupted as a result of this vast exercise in social engineering as they were forced to leave their homes in neighborhoods now proclaimed to be for whites only. I concentrated on Mowbray, an inner suburb of Cape Town: the people living there who weren’t white had to go elsewhere, mainly to new, custom-built “colored” ghettos on the periphery of the city. This zone of mostly public housing is known as the Cape Flats. It is here that rioting against apartheid occurred in 1976, 1980, and again recently.

John Western is an associate professor of geography at Syracuse University. He graduated from Oxford University, took an M.A. at the University of Western Ontario, and then obtained his Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles. His teaching experience includes two years in Burundi, Central Africa. In 1974–76 he held a research scholarship at the Centre for Intergroup Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. He has also held posts at Ohio State University and Temple University. He has a number of publications on the colored population in Cape Town, most notably *Outcast Cape Town* (1981).

How does one attempt to gain purchase on the nature of a city if one has never set foot there before? How does one start out, especially in a city whose very form (it rapidly became apparent to me) so clearly expressed conflict and societal stress? One of the ways I started doing my research was by the unremarkable but well-tried method of acquiring basic socioeconomic census material and then by plotting and cross-tabulating factual survey data from a self-administered 130-item questionnaire (with questions like, “How far were you from your job before you were moved? How far are you now? Did your job change as a result?”). I sought out information in the time-honored geographical manner of studying maps of the city at various periods. I read through the text of the Group Areas and other acts in the University

6—SYRACUSE SCHOLAR

of Cape Town library. I went into archives and searched for records of property transactions in gloomy deeds offices of Dickensian dustiness. All this gave me “hard” data whereby I might try to understand the changing geography of Cape Town.

Something else was important in Cape Town, however. I gradually came to sense it was overwhelmingly important. It sullied the glory of the Cape Peninsula, this magnificent, mountainous accident of land separating Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the fingertip of the great African continent. This ubiquitous “something else” was fear.

It appeared in a number of guises. Among the colored people I interviewed—all of whom had already been removed once from their homes—were some who were fearful of being removed again, the Group Areas Act explicitly possessing such rights of eminent domain: “As soon as the houses of the White people appear on the horizon we wonder if we shall have to shift once more.”¹ All of the colored people I met talked of the immediate, short-term fear of criminal physical violence—assault and housebreaking perpetrated by young thugs (*skollies*) who had been raised in the Cape Flats ghettos into which they and their families were dumped among strangers, all removed from their previous city neighborhoods. Colored people, especially the older “respectable” ones, had a long-term fear too: “What will become of us?” Although representing sixty percent of Cape Town’s population, within South Africa as a whole they are outnumbered both by whites in the ratio of something under 2 to 1 and by black Africans about 8 to 1. Formerly the slaves of the whites, they have historically formed, or perhaps I should say been used by whites as, an uneasy buffer between the two contenders for power in the country. Whoever wins, they will lose: “‘Well, the Africans may feel that time is on their side,’ observed a Coloured of moderate views, ‘but we don’t feel that way. We think time is running against us, and something must be done soon.’”² However, younger coloreds in particular do not accept a labeling as “colored” and prefer to call themselves “black,” a black being defined as any person suffering under the apartheid laws owing to the color of his or her skin. Thus young coloreds are making common cause with the black African majority, something nearly all their parents were afraid of doing.

Then there is white fear. Whites make up the second-largest population group in Cape Town. Only fifty years ago their number slightly exceeded those of the coloreds in the metropolis; now coloreds outnumber whites 2 to 1. Add to this the ever-burgeoning numbers of black Africans in Cape Town, and one comes up against a fundamental white insecurity: in the country that they perceive as theirs, and in the city of Cape Town that they founded in 1652, whites are increasingly outnumbered by those whom they see as their potential enemies. Such fear is one of the profound underpinnings of the system of apartheid, a system that can be seen as an attempt to stem and to channel the “non-white” tide. Afrikaner Nationalist politicians and planners have carefully composed apartheid’s system of social, economic, and political control to this end. They are its authors. As put into practice in Cape Town, the apartheid system has caused untold

1. Sheila T. Van der Horst, ed., *The Theron Commission Report* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1976), p. 64.

2. Quoted in Sanford J. Ungar, *Africa: The People and Politics of an Emerging Continent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 215–16.

human distress—distress, let me insist, wittingly and sometimes callously imposed. Today a scent of fear and suffering pervades the “sense of place” of Cape Town, is the very *genius loci* of the city.

In my work I wanted to pry out this authored “sense of place” of the city, and so I employed some additional research methods. For example, I added three open-ended, affective questions to the end of my conventionally structured questionnaire. These last questions were not aimed at eliciting more facts but instead basically asked, “Tell me how you feel about Cape Town.” If rapport had been generated between myself and those with whom I was talking, by the time we got to the end of the fact-finding interview, they frequently had subjects on which they wished forcefully to express themselves. These questions gave them the opportunity. So I listened and jotted it down as they spoke.

Another way to gain a feel for the sense of place in Cape Town was to scrutinize such relatively unorthodox sources as Gamtaal poetry, written in the lower-class colored Capetonian patois (I needed some help with its translation).³ Add to this interviews with public figures, occasional attendance at public meetings, a daily scanning of local newspapers for news items, news photographs, or advertisements that might reveal more than they knew, plus simply walking through neighborhoods observing the social currents and meeting people fortuitously, and one has a serendipitous, eclectic mix of activities, all of which aided my gradual apprehension of the “sense of place” of Cape Town. I could never replicate this mix, it was not preplanned, and I can justify it only by pointing to the eventual result: an interpretative social geography, *Outcast Cape Town*.⁴ Somebody else would have doubtless achieved a different yet still credible approximation of Cape Town’s reality at that time. An investigator with a different personality, or with a different set of basic beliefs, or of a different gender would have come up with an alternative depiction.

SOME WIDER IMPLICATIONS: *objective vs. subjective modes of inquiry*

THE ABOVE DISCUSSION of the varied methods of research pursued in Cape Town can also be considered in a more general light. That is, social scientists have long disputed the value of “objective” versus “subjective” modes of enquiry. Certainly it must be evident that the world of other people, in which we live and move and have our being, is not a laboratory affording objectivity: isolable components of society cannot be coolly held still, vivisected, and analyzed. Yet to throw up our hands and sigh “It’s all subjective, it’s all in the eye of the beholder” (each beholder free to differ) seemingly won’t get us very far either. We might instead try to measure as rigorously as we can, trying to stay aware of the shortcomings of our methods. The trouble is, among “positivist” researchers, there have been those so committed to methodical exactitude of measurement that they have impatiently dismissed the critique offered by their more “humanistic” colleagues as unconstructive verbiage or unscientific

3. Adam Small, *Oos Wes This Bes: Distrik Ses* (East west home’s best: district six) (Cape Town and Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1973).

4. John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

sophistry. In turn, humanistic social scientists have not infrequently discounted the efforts of the positivists, claiming that they treat people as numbers or at best as ants, and that they shortsightedly abstract pallid caricatures such as “economic man” from the real world of flesh and blood, of values and intent, of error, chance, and irrationality—a world that in contrast *they* (the humanists) truly appreciate.

As is evident, in studying Cape Town I was unwilling to launch out totally from reliance on hard, empirical data gained in the conventional fashion. But I did want to try to enrich these data with more qualitative “humanistic” materials. These even came to include a handful of short accounts of my own experiences in pursuing the fieldwork. That such accounts were now deemed “admissible evidence” was becoming clear to me from wider readings, such as Alan Dawe’s 1973 essay “The Role of Experience in the Construction of Social Theory: An Essay in Reflexive Sociology.”⁵ Another source I came across (in an anthropology journal, where one might prima facie have expected it most, given the social anthropologist’s need to be reflectively, observantly self-aware) was a 1972 piece entitled “The Emergence of Self-Consciousness in Ethnography.”⁶ Or, as the anthropologist Jay Ruby was later to put it: “We seem to be moving away from the positivist notion that meaning resides in the world and that human beings should strive to discover the inherent, immutable, and objectively true reality. We are beginning to assume that human beings construct and impose meaning on the world. We create order. We don’t discover it. Reflexivity is becoming an almost taken-for-granted concept.”⁷

Although there are certain problems associated with this viewpoint (as we shall see below), let us choose for the moment to look at its considerable implications. History, for example, does not exist independently “out there.” All history is in a sense myth—filtered, molded, manipulated. Even “tradition” can be invented.⁸ As soon as we pick up history and turn it slowly in our hand we see that it depends on who is writing it, for whom, and with what end in view. George Orwell has told us this. Too many white people have told us this too, as when we are informed that South African history began in 1652 (in fact people have been living there continuously for thousands of years). Milan Kundera has fiercely told us this in his characterization of Czech Communist Party leader Gustav Husak as “the President of Forgetting”; unwanted former comrades, now “disgraced” or “liquidated,” are literally airbrushed from photos and texts in the history books.⁹ Or as another Czech dissident, Milan Simecka, has recently written, “Like Winston [Smith, Orwell’s hero in 1984], I had grown up in a totalitarian system, had never been anywhere else, and lacked all certain knowledge of the past, the present, not to speak of the future. In a way, too, I was an employee of the Ministry of Truth and lived in the thrall of its ideology.”¹⁰

As with history, so with society and social groups. Who invented “race” or “ethnicity,” and with what end in view? Who—to be less oratorical and to take a more manageable example with which I am more familiar—who invented “Cape Colored” people in South Africa,

5. Alan Dawe, “The Role of Experience in the Construction of Social Theory: An Essay in Reflexive Sociology,” *Sociological Review*, n.s., 21 (1973): 25–54.

6. Dennison Nash and Ronald Wintrob, “The Emergence of Self-Consciousness in Ethnography,” *Current Anthropology* 13 (1972): 527–42.

7. Jay Ruby, “Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology, and Film,” *Semiotica* 30 (1980): 153–79. Quotation on p. 155.

8. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

9. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 158.

10. *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 November 1984.

and with what end in view? Are they a category of persons who have voluntarily defined themselves? No. Is this a name they gave themselves? No. Who defines? Who makes up words for South Africa, such as “non-white” or “homeland,” with which we have to go along, so often not even thinking through their insinuations or implications? In the discussion of these matters in the first chapter of *Outcast Cape Town* I somewhat gingerly asked why indeed I should have accepted and used in my own work, albeit with reservations, the designation and grouping of certain Capetonians as “colored,” which of course is a white-fabricated appellation. In doing this I was inescapably talking in and perhaps on the white rulers’ terms.

WHO CREATES GEOGRAPHY?: *authorship of place*

IF HISTORY AND SOCIETY (through “social groups”) are both created, invented, reinvented, negotiated, may not one of the central concerns of human geography, that is, “place,” be created too? In one sense the idea of the creation of place is straightforward and self-evident. A writer with a large audience creates imaginary loci with a graphic force that commends them to readers as real: every year scores of individuals come walking down Baker Street in London looking for a never-existent 221B, the address of Sherlock Holmes.

Or loci that *are* real, that we have visited in the flesh, become changed subsequently for us when some writer powerfully impresses new associations on us. The associations can be factual—one simply did not know them before. I caught a slow train at a damp, unremarkably drab secondary railway station named Płaszów in Kraków in 1979. The young women in the Polish Tourist Bureau did not tell—of course not—what I subsequently learned from *Schindler’s List*: that Płaszów was the site of a Nazi slave-labor camp during World War II, the site of the murder of countless Jews and others.¹¹ If I ever go back to that train station again, it will feel, indeed for me it will *be*, different.

Or loci that are real can have totally fictitious associations that are implanted in our minds, no less powerfully for their fictitiousness, by a skillful writer. Before I read David Bradley’s PEN/Faulkner-award-winning novel, *The Chaneyville Incident*, I had passed through the area around Bedford, Pennsylvania a number of times.¹² But now when I see the wooded hogbacks of Tussey Mountain and Warrior Ridge, running southwest to the Mason-Dixon line, to the Maryland border, I also cannot but see slaves fleeing north in snow, whatever the season of the year. Bradley has even changed the sense of place that I get from, of all humdrum things, driving the twin concrete strands of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, twisting through the hills west of Carlisle. That for me is a now-new place, “negotiated” as it were between him and me.

Not every place in the world, however, has been depicted by a writer one has read. There are plenty of places no one has written about (or made a movie of, or whatever). But the personalities of these places too, in a much wider sense, have been created and negotiated.

11. Thomas Keneally, *Schindler’s List* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

12. David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

That is—and not just in the sense that they have been written about—all places have *authors*. People or groups of people, sometimes cooperating, sometimes contending, have always been creating places, have been their authors. Is it not the geographer's role to delve into that authorship, to search out its aim, overt or covert? And as time has passed, so one authorship and its works are overlain by another, meanings and monuments are changed, a particular mixed *genius loci* emerges, and is not the geographer enthralled thereby?¹³

“Enthralled” does not necessarily connote approval or delight; one way of looking at the enthralling human geography of Cape Town is to see it as a harsh, wrenching, hegemonic dispute over authorship of the city. There are those who exercise *authority*—that is, those who exert the *author's* power, these words being from the same etymon—and there are those who in varying manner and with varying degrees of resistance must submit to authority. Whose city, indeed, has Cape Town been, and whose will it be? Colonial Dutch, then Imperial British? Now, Afrikaner hegemony claims the colonial Dutch city for its cultural roots, while by the selfsame act of creating itself as “Afrikaner” and “white” it creates also out of the centuries-old continuum of color and phenotype at the Cape of Good Hope a “different” group, the so-called Cape coloreds. People at the Cape, then, representing a blending of indigenous peoples, immigrant whites, and imported slaves, have the same ancestors; it is their shades of skin color that differ. But out of this one mingling, apartheid separates two groups: “whites” and (Cape) “coloreds.”

Some of those who resist it—who resist their designation as a separate group with a separate set of spaces around the metropolis—will have been those segregated into the superordinate category: these resisters are renegade Afrikaners and are relatively few. Those who resist their separation and exclusion into the subordinate category are the Cape coloreds, and they are many. The coloreds' definition of the city (in which they are by far the majority population) runs counter to the official one, the Afrikaner one with its welcoming of the racial orderliness achieved via Group Areas apartheid and with its quest for white minority security in the whites' beautiful “Mother City,” so named because it was here that Europeans first settled in South Africa. The colored definition of the city is in contrast one of insecurity, of dispossession, of removal to the periphery of one's selfsame “Mother City” (for it was here too that the proto-Cape-colored people first emerged), of resentment, or frustration, of put-down, of a bleak crime-ridden existence on (for many) the windswept sand dunes of the distant Cape Flats—but perhaps, finally now, of angry determination, at least among some of the young, to wrest back authorship of the city.

PART OF WHAT I WAS TRYING TO CONVEY in *Outcast Cape Town*, by presenting the words themselves of those who talked with me, was this alternative view of the city. These persons had rarely had the opportunity to speak of *their* city, of what authorship they had invested in places like District Six or Mowbray, and of what it

13. See, e.g., John Western, “Undoing the Colonial City?” *Geographical Review* 75 (July 1985): 335–57, in which the symbolism that inheres in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial cityscapes is contrasted for Tianjin (People's Republic of China) and Cape Town.

meant to have an adversarial authorship wrest those places away.

District Six, for example, was an inner-city, working-class neighborhood extensive portions of which were slum properties owned by absentee white landlords. The area was mixed in racial composition but had always been predominantly colored and traced its original settlement six or seven generations back to the emancipation of the slaves from adjoining Cape Town proper in 1838. The district had come to possess an unmistakably original if somewhat unruly personality. In particular, it was for colored people a resonant symbol, beneath Table Mountain, of whatever particular identity they might feel themselves to have, almost as Harlem has been for black Americans. Apartheid has now flattened the district totally: Its approximately 60,000 inhabitants have been expelled to the city's periphery; it stands mainly empty, rubble strewn. It looks like a hole in the heart of the city; it has been declared to be for white residence; and even its name has been deleted, the site being officially renamed Zonnebloem. However, there is and will remain a refusal to give it up (fig. 1). "Gone but not forgotten" takes on a less clichéd, more particular meaning in this light—as for those who for so long refused to forget Jerusalem, or who refuse to abandon Ararat to the lost-property drawer.

If one is not careful a strain of crusading romanticism can insinuate itself here, or even the agreeable notion of oneself as proxy for the silenced, for the oppressed majority, for those whose authorship of place has been roughly denied.¹⁴ This would be a crass error, a distasteful and posing condescension. Capetonians know most about Cape Town. They will write their own geographies. My own work represents no more than an imperfect attempt, now becoming outdated, to pursue hints vouchsafed to an inquisitive outsider.

Despite this rather predictable disclaimer, I hope that my work's attention to alternative Capetonian "authors" can stand as a useful antidote to the large volume of public relations-type material that official sources put out from South Africa. Those who talked with me in Cape Town do not have the millions of dollars to spend that the South African government and related agencies do. One such quasi-governmental author is the South African Tourist Corporation, offering us a sexy package, "The World in One Country": from game parks to friendly natives to spectacular scenery to the credit-card, high consumption life-style of modern cities. On a number of occasions over the past few years another contending author, of Cape Town in particular, has been one of the largest insurance companies there. Their quarter-page advertisement, with five line drawings, appeared in one instance in London's *Daily Telegraph* on 29 October 1981.

LIVING IN CAPE TOWN. YES, IT'S A DREAM, BUT NOT A FANTASY.

Just think what a difference it could make for you and your family to be living in an economy that really is buoyant.

In fact, "booming" is the one word most often used to describe the South African way of life, to sum up the country's remarkable achievement, its exceptionally high standard of living and extremely low levels of

14. In a recent article, Elizabeth Hardwick skewers this pretension very deftly, alluding to its "philanthropic aura." See "The Teller and the Tape," *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985, pp. 3-6.

personal taxation.

And just possibly there's another echo in the word: the thunder of surf onto some of the most beautiful beaches on earth. . . .

. . . career prospects that simply can't be compared with the uncertain future facing parts of the [computer programming] industry in Britain.

Thanks to our broad experience, we know exactly what makes an emigration package work, and can ensure a smooth and successful transition into your new life. We've spared no effort in coming up with a handsome spread of benefits that will certainly live up to your expectations—if not easily surpass them—such as an immediate 100% mortgage at 4% and a low-interest car loan.

There seems little need to point out the lack of congruence between this definition of Cape Town and the definition by the coloreds removed from their Mowbray homes: at the time of this advertisement and until December 1984 they couldn't even bathe at those "most beautiful beaches on earth."

The above blandishments, however, are aimed only at prospective tourists or white immigrants. A much more comprehensive "official authorship" offensive is that which attempts to convince the ever more numerous inquiring outsiders that all is not only well but improving within South Africa and its cities. I have one such glossy large-format production in my office now: *Community Development: The South African Scene*, it is entitled. On page 10 I am reassured that, concerning "the Group Areas Act . . . all population groups . . . where resettlement is unavoidable, are settled in circumstances far superior to those they were accustomed to before"; and on page 87 I learn that "the proclamation of group areas and the resettlement of the various population groups in their own areas have been of particular benefit to the Indian and Coloured communities."¹⁵

Neither of these statements holds up in the light of the experience of the people I met who had been expelled from Mowbray. The skeptical social scientist should have a commitment to explode such falsehoods, which try to disguise the violence done to the lives of peaceable citizens through the Group Areas Act. This violence, let me reiterate, is capable of incontrovertible documentation. What is more, the particular organ of the white government that has imposed "resettlement" on an unwilling populace is entitled "The Department of Community Development"—an authentic Orwellian touch. The eventual purpose of such government propaganda is to contribute to the circumscription of the freedoms of most of the country's citizens.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST

IF WE ARE ABLE EFFECTIVELY TO RESIST and to counterattack such "apartheidspeak,"¹⁶ then we have, I submit, a socially constructive role. If our work can also reach some South Africans of all colors and reveal to them how geography is being used

15. South Africa, *Community Development: The South African Scene* (Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg, 1979).

16. So widespread is the use of the misleading euphemism among South African government spokespersons that *The Economist* (London, 21 June 1980) chose to concoct the term "apartheidspeak." Offered as an example was the Minister of Community Development's characterization of the Group Areas Act as a "friend of the people"—because it aids in slum clearance.

17. Andries Lategan, "The Distance between Peoples," *The Friend* (Bloemfontein), 28 April 1982.

18. Joe Podbrey, "City of Upheaval," *Financial Mail* (Johannesburg), 2 April 1982.

19. James North, *Freedom Rising* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

20. Heribert Adam, "The Vocation of a Sociologist in South Africa," *Apartheid and Social Research*, ed. J. Rex (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), pp. 115-27. Quotation on p. 123.

by the present regime to orchestrate cleavages between them and their fellow citizens, then we have a socially constructive role. If our work can reveal to some of those currently "on top" in South Africa the degree of distress that the apartheid laws are inflicting in their name on their fellow citizens—one review of *Outcast Cape Town* in a South African newspaper said that "through it Western has removed the future excuse 'But we did not know'"¹⁷ (a phrase with a certain historical chill to it)—then perhaps we have a socially constructive role. Unfortunately, the view of another South African newspaper reviewer may be equally valid: "This book will, alas, be read only by the converted."¹⁸

What of this alleged "socially constructive role" for my research, however? I find that there are at least two larger reservations, indeed dangers, to beware of here. The first is that responsibly pursued, insightful research may in fact serve to fill gaps in the knowledge of the controllers of the system of domination, enabling them to dominate more efficiently . . . the very converse of the constructive role one is claiming for one's work. But I do not find this really convincing. Surely the South African government, with its long-established network of informers and collaborators, has little to learn in the politically sensitive areas of its "internal security" from any newly arrived white student of social geography? (Note in this regard that "James North," the pseudonymous young American author of the recent observation of South African society *Freedom Rising*, chose to represent himself as a college student of geography because it seemed so politically innocuous an occupation.)¹⁹ The government of South Africa surely knows a lot better than I what its untermenschen are thinking. Depiction of contexts, causes, and results of the Group Areas Act in *Outcast Cape Town* does not make it a revelatory, cloak-and-dagger work. And if anyone ever told me information that might have in some small way impinged on the ability of the government to maintain internal security (as for example in discussions of student boycotts in the colored high schools on the Cape Flats, where I had many close contacts), I never revealed it in conversation or in published work.

The second danger—and the reader may have sensed it looming in that rhetorical threefold "then we have a socially constructive role" flourished above—seems to my mind to be a more present one. It is that we must be wary of moral self-satisfaction, of being content with the progressive gesture, with having risen to our hind legs to say our piece on the evils of apartheid in noble cadences . . . and then sitting down. As a well-known scholar of South African society, Heribert Adam, has written, "The problem with this dominant perspective of writers about South Africa seems to be that it is more concerned with personal confessions at the expense of effect. Frequently, the declaration becomes an end in itself."²⁰

Adam's admonition is touched on in a related way by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*. There is a section in which Williams, an acute critic of both literature and society, writes about the poetry of George Crabbe. Williams shows how Crabbe's poems set out to reveal the falsehood of the arcadian image of a secure, little-

changing Merrie England, of the pastoral joys of lads and lasses on the green, and of soberly responsible landowners valuing and looking out for the well-being of their laborers. Instead, Crabbe writes vividly of the human physical destruction brought about by unrelenting labor. Williams then comments on Crabbe's

*eighteenth-century humanitarianism, with its passionate insistence on care and sympathy. . . . What Crabbe asks is self-respect and charity: that the rich should learn these virtues; that the poor should benefit from them. It is a moving appeal, within a social vision . . . which is [however] finally static: a moral as opposed to a social contrast of poverty and wealth. . . . This cause and this protest are of course honorable. . . . Yet in the end the morality is separated from the social relationships which breed poverty and indifference. It is the cause of paupers, not the creation of pauperism, which holds the attention and the feeling.*²¹ (Emphasis added.)

21. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1975), pp. 117–18.

I found this last an arresting sentence. If we are worth our salt as academics, as geographers of the city, it may be that description and human sympathy and moral outrage are not in themselves enough. If they were, we would be wordsmiths, quality journalists, or protagonists of the correct cause—but not necessarily scholars. As academicians, surely, what we must do is (to continue Williams's thought) delve down to find what has created pauperism—in the case of my field research, the reasons for the colored ghetto, public housing “townships” on the Cape Flats. We must see if we can reveal the causation.

SUCH A QUEST, however, brings us up against a problem lurking in much of what has heretofore been said in the discussion of authorship of place, a problem especially evident when the word “falsehood” was used. How dare I have said above that a certain author's—in this case the Department of Community Development's—depiction of the city is “false” or (less heatedly) “misleading”? Who is to judge for veracity among the contending authorships and views of the city, be they those of the mayor of Cape Town (necessarily a white person), of the Department of Community Development, of a colored person removed from Mowbray, of another from District Six, of an Afrikaner housewife, of a migrant worker in the segregated black African males-only barracks in Langa “location,” of a colored female domestic servant,²² or mine? But if such judgment is not to be attempted, we are all trapped in a morass, a sort of solipsistic anarchy in which we can't really communicate with each other on any item of mutual interest whatsoever. Everyone's city is unique, untellable, a whole world unto itself, and to itself alone.

This is not the way most of us operate, however. May I assume that if you and I use a word, we are talking about something that is recognizably similar to both of us? And that if that stone is black and I point at it and say “that stone is red,” you will be able to perceive the falsehood and correct the error; the stone *really* is black. Let us pursue this line of thinking, as regards the metropolis of Cape Town. The

22. A fine insight into the experience and constraints of being a domestic servant in the city is provided by Eleanor Preston-Whyte, “Segregation and Interpersonal Relationships: A Case Study of Domestic Service in Durban,” in *Living under Apartheid*, ed. David M. Smith (London and Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), pp. 164–82. The account is all the more telling for being presented in the measured academic tones of a social anthropologist, without any journalistic or novelistic embellishment.

social scientist goes and listens to various Capetonians who say that the city is red, blue, green, whatever. He or she observes it as well and, in part influenced by those with whom he is talking, chooses his or her color for the city. The scientist then publishes that such is the city's color. Persons then respond that, yes, to us that does seem to be pretty much its color. The scientist's basis for judgment and the reviewers'/readers' bases for judgment are their perceptions of what they take "the real" Cape Town to be; they have faith that there *is* a real Cape Town.

That commonsensical belief is why I as a humanistic geographer did not eschew the use of "objective," conventional social-survey data in my attempt to portray the city. They helped me (to continue the metaphor) to home in on a limited range of colors apt to a depiction of the city. The "subjective" data from talking with Capetonian "authors" were useful in searching for the precise shade of color eventually chosen. The process was not really as logical or as sequential as that; "subjective" and "objective" interpenetrate and mold each other simultaneously. "Objectively," there really is, I take it, a system molding Cape Town called apartheid, and this system has real, bruising, sometimes bloody effects on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. "Subjectively," a hundred or more of these people told me about it. Although the mode may have been "subjective," apartheid is not thereby some figment of their collective imaginations. It exists. We are therefore as scholars not misled in attempting to search out its causation.

This chosen mix of "objective" and "subjective" modes brings us back to a consideration of Ruby's assertion, which I quoted earlier with some implicit approval: "We create order. We don't discover it." I am not really sure how far down that road I am prepared to edge. Ruby's attribution to mind of real-world manipulative power seems very idealistic. It perhaps conceals within itself a discounting or even a denial of any sociopolitical forces external to the individual that can impinge on and constrain that individual. Such denial is naive, and some would even claim oriented to the status quo, in that the utility or aptness of attempting to grapple with those external forces is questioned. As a humanistic geographer I find this question opening up around me. Yes, I consider that the creation of order, through authorship, inheres in the city and in landscapes, and that (almost?) everyone is an author. But then, persons possess wildly differing degrees of power of impress. How is it that different persons have such different powers of impress? And are such differing powers randomly distributed or do they vary systematically, in response to some societal structure(s)?

HUMAN AGENCY VS. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

IF THE LATTER IS SO—which is how I tend to see it—then here is another issue which has been looming large in social science. The issue concerns the relative force of "human agency" versus

“structure,” or of “authors” versus “context.” It is an issue that has greatly exercised academic geography over the past few years. In “The Biography of Landscape,” Marwyn Samuels has written instructively on these matters and homed in on a fundamental issue, best expressed, Samuels evidently felt, by a quotation from Isaiah Berlin: “Anxious to avoid all personal (and) above all, moral judgments, . . . [the modern world view tends] to emphasize the immense predominance of impersonal factors in history, of the physical media in which life is lived, the power of geographical, psychological, social factors which are not, at any rate consciously, man-made, and are often beyond human control.”²³

And yet as one looks at the way life is experienced in today’s Cape Town, it is impossible not to perceive in it, for example, the hand of Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd. No historical necessity mandated the appearance of his apartheid. Although one can certainly posit that the various segregation policies before 1948 were its precursors, and although one can also posit that various economic, political, social, and historical factors concatenated to provide a context in which apartheid was one of a number of logical outcomes, these do not to my mind constitute sufficient causation of the system of apartheid as it has been seen to be operating over the past thirty-eight years. South African society would not have been the same without Prime Minister Verwoerd. Human agency—and human responsibility—are implicated here.²⁴

Although less celebrated and powerful only on a more restricted scale, another hand might be that of Louis Fouché, until May 1982 Director-General of Community Development. He stated publicly, “I’m not ashamed to say I was responsible for District Six being wiped out—in fact, I’m proud of it. Those poor people who lived in squalor in District Six—a slum of slums—are now far better off.” The *Cape Times* (31 March 1982) went on to say that the controversial Fouché was credited with many of the hard-line apartheid decisions on Group Areas removals and housing. Clearly it makes good “copy” for a newspaper to attribute to a high-ranking civil servant a controversial personality, and it is probably more journalistically satisfying to point to a visible individual as “responsible” for the destruction of a neighborhood than to talk of impersonal political, demographic, or economic factors, but what difference did Fouché’s zeal to see the job through with expedition really make? One could argue none—would it not have happened anyway (although more lingeringly) had some other functionary been in charge? Or, did Fouché’s eagerness to make the flattening of District Six an irreversible *fait accompli* actually outflank attempts at resistance—either perhaps by dispiriting them or because, by the time they had gathered momentum, there was nothing left to save? My suspicion is that Fouché had some measure of discretion in his task, and therefore, by choosing to act in the way he did, he altered in some measure the course of events. He thus had some independent effect on the look of Cape Town today: an author.

However, Fouché did not operate in a vacuum, nor did Verwoerd. For all his power, Verwoerd was not free to conjure up out of his

23. Marwyn Samuels, “The Biography of Landscape: Cause and Culpability,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D. W. Meinig (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 59. He is quoting from Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. H. Myeroff (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 255.

24. Of this, writer Bloke Modisane had no doubts as he pondered the ruins of the Western Areas, an area where black freehold tenure had previously been permitted near Johannesburg: “My Sophiatown was a blitzed area which had suffered the vengeance of political conquest, a living memorial to the vandalism of Dr. Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd.” *Blame Me on History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1963), p. 7.

formidable intellect and imagination a totally utopian system of segregation. Clearly apartheid was conceived in some degree to “fit the facts” of the South African society. If there were no fit then it surely wouldn’t have lasted, or as some would claim “worked,” for thirty-eight years? Thus one is left rather limply offering what looks suspiciously like a truism: the answer may lie neither in “author” nor in “context” alone, that is, neither in “agency” nor in “structure” alone, but in some unspecified mix of the two. The various “structuration” hypotheses—addressing such facets as the matter of the unintentional societal consequences of human manipulative actions (of which apartheid is full, for example, riots)—represent current attempts by social scientists, including geographers, to be more specific about this hitherto rather embarrassingly nebulous mix.²⁵

Dichotomies can mislead, they can come too pat, be they “nature versus nurture,” “determinism versus free will,” or, as in the case of this piece, “objective versus subjective” and “social structure versus human agency.” Nevertheless, they provide us with a framework or a workbench on which we can lay out for discussion ideas we consider of importance. The discussion here of the two dichotomies addressed has been slotted into the context of extended fieldwork I pursued with inhabitants of Cape Town, South Africa. The act of observing that city, however, not only brought me up against these basic social science dichotomies. The particularly inclement nature of that society also inevitably engendered in me a sense of “geographer[’s] . . . outrage that governments could behave so badly in a place so beautiful” (fig. 2).²⁶

25. See, e.g., Anthony Giddens, *A Critique of Contemporary Historical Materialism* (London: Macmillan, 1981); and Derek Gregory, “Human Agency and Human Geography,” *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 6 (1981): 1–18.

26. Alan Ryan, “Apartheid and Its Coloured Underclass,” a review of *Outcast Cape Town* in *The Sunday Times* (London), 18 April 1982.



Figure 2. “Here is a place of disaffection . . .” The “Mother City” and Table Mountain, from the harbor.