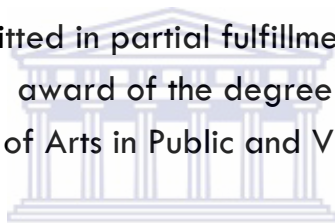


# **Oral history in the exhibitionary strategy of the District Six Museum, Cape Town**

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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Colleagues and Trustees at the District Six Museum have provided an inordinate amount of support, both in terms of allowing me study leave, as well being daily reminders of the need for critical thought and the need to 'speak truth to power' in its many forms. This is not an easy thing, and they have been excellent examples of this tenet.

My sister, Hayley, and the extended family of friends I have acquired over the years, who are indeed my family, have been an almost monolithic source of encouragement and faith.

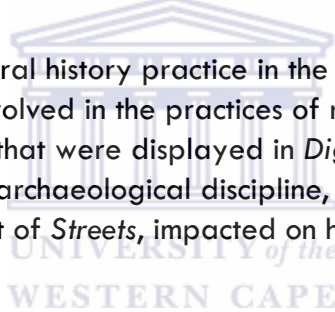
It would not be possible to critique the museum's use of oral testimonies without acknowledging those who provided the *Digging Deeper* researchers and curators with the material which forms the very basis of its exhibitions. Ex-residents of District Six, whether in the museum or outside its confines, have eloquently and persistently illustrated the power of story-telling and the human voice in how we understand and conceive of forced removals and its impact on our lives today.

## Abstract

### Oral history in the exhibitionary strategy of the District Six Museum, Cape Town

District Six was a community that was forcibly removed from the centre of Cape Town after its demarcation as a white group area in 1966. In 1989, the District Six Museum Foundation was established in order to form a project that worked with the memory of District Six. Out of these origins, the District Six Museum emerged and was officially opened in 1994 with the *Streets: Retracing District Six* exhibition. The origin moments of the museum in the 1980s occurred at the same moment that the social history movement assumed prominence within a progressive South African historiography. With the success of *Streets*, the decision to 'dig deeper' into the social history of District Six culminated in the opening of the exhibition, *Digging Deeper*, in a renovated museum space in 2000. Oral history practice, as means of bringing to light the hidden and erased histories of the area, was embraced by the museum as an empowering methodology which would facilitate memory work around District Six.

In tracing the evolution of an oral history practice in the museum, this study aims to understand how the poetics involved in the practices of representation and display impacted on the oral histories that were displayed in *Digging Deeper*. It also considers how the engagement with the archaeological discipline, during the curation of the Horstley Street display as part of *Streets*, impacted on how oral histories were displayed in the museum.



## List of Illustrations

- Figure 1: Digging Deeper: Main Hall floorplan
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## Introduction

*“(T)he ‘non-innocence’ of oral history in South Africa needs to be unraveled , its silences evoked, its reliabilities questioned and its dominant authority ‘denatured’. ”<sup>1</sup>*

The emphasis on oral history as a gateway to uncovering the voice of the people, as the means by which a history of the experiences of those ignored and repressed by society due might be recovered has particular resonance for those who found themselves part of the social history and popular history movements of the 1980s in South Africa. Oral history spoke to the potential to empower individuals and communities and to deepen staid archival historical research which focused on the document as factual evidence.



The body of work available on oral history - how to conduct interviews, how it may be used, the construction of meaning from interviews - is vast, and the following work has relied on an interplay between texts that speak to a context in which history, archaeology and the aesthetic considerations of exhibition-making comes to the fore. However, key to this work is a reading of oral histories as a constituent part of oral, literary and performative contexts – contexts which ultimately shape the orality of spoken traditions and storytelling. The work of Isabel Hofmeyr, in particular has been most helpful in understanding how oral and literate worlds meet, and how oral narratives in themselves may be shaped by a range of socio-political factors.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions”, paper delivered at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town , 22 March 1995, pp.1-14, p.11

Hofmeyr's work in collecting oral historical narratives around the siege of Makapansgat has been useful for thinking through how oral narrative and the telling of oral historical tradition have not been 'pure' renditions of the siege, but which have drawn from the interplay between oral, literary and performative accounts of the event.<sup>2</sup> In identifying how elements of the oral and literary representations of the forced removals were used in exhibitionary form, and taking into consideration the performance of interviews within the exhibition space, Hofmeyr's position that oral historical tradition cannot be divorced from the socio-political contexts that have shaped it, provides a foothold into thinking of oral history practice as a context-specific practice, particularly in relation to how its products are disseminated and consumed within an exhibitionary strategy.

The following work is not that of a dedicated oral historian in the conventional sense and research undertaken for this work did not involve conducting oral history interviews. My initial research interest was on how the Afrikaans language - something which is spoken, intimated, performed - took on a physical and almost concrete presence in those museums and cultural institutions which spoke to an Afrikaner identity and history in the apartheid era. Whether in written form, used in the language of display or embodied in the metaphorical structure of the monument, language, as a marker of one's place in and understanding of the world - was indicative of how one *constructed* meaning out of the everyday. In the case of Afrikaans, the construction of the Taal Monument in Paarl became indicative of how language could be manifested

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<sup>2</sup> See I. Hofmeyr, *"We spend our years as a tale that is told": Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press), 1994.

in physical form, and how it could be elevated as one particular group's *tangible* marker of language, history and identity. Key to making language representative of a particular group identity was the act of *representation* itself, and ultimately the construction of signs and symbols to *enable* language to occupy this symbolic space. The aim of this work is to begin to understand how the language of one particular group - ex-residents who experienced the culture of, as well as the forced removals from District Six - was *enabled* to occupy (encode) the symbolic space of the District Six Museum. It looks particularly at the exhibitionary concerns that arose in using their oral testimonies as part of the *Digging Deeper* exhibition which opened in 2000.

A key focus of this work is on how oral histories were adapted within this framework of representation, and therefore how the poetics of exhibiting oral histories may be brought to the fore. As noted by Henrietta Lidchi, the poetics of exhibiting may be defined as the “practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition.”<sup>3</sup> It is the interplay between oral history extracts in relation to visual representations found in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition itself, as well as to each other, which this work seeks to decode. In the process, it attempts to sketch how the *Digging Deeper* exhibition, in attempts to provide meanings to the forced removals which affected District Six, took on the practice of social history and in certain moments embodied the critique thereof posed by historians in the 1990s. The process of decoding, however, is not a practice which provides an objective, unbiased telling of what the meaning of an exhibition

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<sup>3</sup> H. Lidchi, “The poetics and the politics of exhibiting other cultures”, in S. Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications), 1997, pp. 153 -208, p.168



represents. As Lidchi notes, in order to decode meaning, a simultaneous process of encoding inevitably takes place. Therefore, as one decodes meaning and translates this into interpretive text for a range of audiences, these processes of selection, translation and interpretation encode a new set of meanings.<sup>4</sup> With an exhibition such as *Digging Deeper*, the poetics of exhibiting are of a complex nature - if only in relation to the myriad of texts dedicated, by those involved in its genesis, to decoding the exhibition and its processes.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, interrogating the poetics of *Digging Deeper* lies in the attempt to understand how, in the process of laying bare (and decoding) its curatorial and methodological processes, the museum continues to encode meanings, and sometimes myths about its representations.

Two seminal exhibitions have been crucial for thinking about how oral histories have been used in the exhibitionary strategy of the District Six Museum. These are *Streets: Retracing District Six*, which opened in 1994, and the main focus of this work, *Digging Deeper*, which opened in 2000.

### **Streets: Retracing District Six (1994)**

The first exhibitionary use of the Central Methodist Mission church building in Buitenkant Street was for a photographic exhibition held for two weeks in 1992, and was hosted by the District Six Museum Foundation. At this time, the mandate for the establishment of the foundation – to work with and to ensure that the memory of

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<sup>4</sup> Lidchi, "The poetics and the politics of exhibiting other cultures", p.166

<sup>5</sup> The guide to the *Digging Deeper* exhibition begins this process with a "Curator's Note" which explains the rationale of the exhibition, but the exposition of the museum's processes is comprehensively recorded in C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum*, (Cape Town: District Six Museum Foundation), 2000

District Six remained a *living* memory, was still considered a 'project'. The exhibition which marked the official opening and use of the building as a museum space was that of *Streets: Retracing District Six*, an exhibition which looked at the people and streets that made up the District. Its aim was "not to recreate District Six as much as repossess the history of the area as a place where people lived, worked, loved and struggled."<sup>6</sup> Central to the exhibition were three curatorial features, namely the street/floor map of District Six, the 75 original blue and white street signs salvaged from the area by the foreman of the demolition team tasked to raze the area, and a length of calico on which ex-residents could write remembrances and messages about District Six.

The floor map was an artistic rendering of the geographical boundaries of District Six. It was hand-painted and was covered with a transparent plastic layer. Situated along the edges of the map were artists' and poets' prints, poems and paintings depicting life and experiences of the District. The names of streets were printed by hand (in the same blue of the original street signs) and ex-residents were encouraged to inscribe the names of streets, institutions, as well as family names onto the surface of the map.<sup>7</sup> Leading up to the exhibition and after its opening, architectural students' models of buildings in District Six were placed on the map according to their original location in the District. The map was centrally located in the centre of the church building.

The pulpit of the church was located at the southern end of the street map. Above it hung four banners denoting the four religions prevalent in the District, namely

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<sup>6</sup> [www.districtsix.co.za](http://www.districtsix.co.za) , accessed 20 September 2006

<sup>7</sup> P. Delpont, "Signposts for retrieval: a visual framework for enabling memory of place and time" in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp. 31 – 46, p.34

Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The four banners were symbolic of the “religious harmony and tolerance” that characterised the area.<sup>8</sup> At the northern end of the map, and as one entered the building from Buitenkant Street hung three columns of street signs in ladder like formation. At the base each column was an ‘archaeology box’ made of perspex. These boxes contained soil and fragments from the Horstley Street archaeological excavation conducted in 1993. In addition street signs were signposted along balustrades in the museums and hung in clusters from the gallery railings above. The length of calico on which ex-residents and visitors to the museum wrote their messages and memories was situated just alongside the pulpit. This length of the calico became known as the memory-cloth.

Along the map, alongside the western wall of the church, were five alcoves depicting the interiors of five streets in District Six, namely Hanover, Horstley, Tyne, Vernon Terrace and Constitution streets. The alcoves displayed

[e]xterior facades of Westminster Café, a house on Horstley Street, Vernon Terrace, a house on Tyne Street, and a shop in Hanover Street [that] allow[ed] viewers to look through tiny windows to explore the interior spaces of a typical kitchen area, lounge, shop/café, and a workshop.<sup>9</sup>

A number of portraits of community leaders and public figures from District Six were printed onto transparent architectural paper and hung in the gallery space, between the balustrades, looking down onto the central area of the church. The eastern wall of the exhibition was populated with historical information and photographs, as well as

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<sup>8</sup> [www.districtsix.co.za](http://www.districtsix.co.za) , accessed 20 September 2006

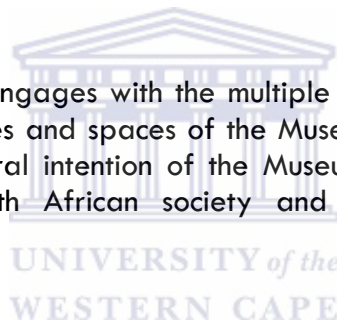
<sup>9</sup> [www.districtsix.co.za](http://www.districtsix.co.za), accessed 20 September 2006

artistic representations of District Six. *Streets* is considered the curatorial framework for all other exhibitions held in the museum space since 1994.

### **Digging Deeper (2000)**

*Digging Deeper* - the exhibition that marked the opening of the newly renovated museum space - is considered one of many exhibitions that have added to the core *Streets* exhibition. While the role of *Streets* was to speak to the lives of individuals in District Six, *Digging Deeper's* focus began to include the value of its history for a broader South African society. As noted in the exhibition guide:

“Digging Deeper engages with the multiple ways in which the collections, resources and spaces of the Museum are used, and expresses the central intention of the Museum to enquire into the pasts of South African society and the workings of memory.”<sup>10</sup>



There are three interlinking exhibitionary spaces in the Methodist Church which house the exhibition. The core of the exhibition is contained within the main hall of the church, while temporary exhibitions and displays are found in the interleading passage space and the Memorial Hall space, which is a hall located at the back of the main hall.

The main hall of the church is a double volume space that contains the ground floor and gallery area. The street map of the District created for *Streets* retains its foothold in the centre of the church. The original District Six street signs are now constructed into a single, four sided pillar that rises to the ceiling of the church. At the centre of the

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<sup>10</sup> A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition

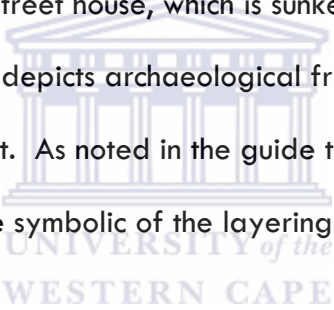
pillar is a mound of earth, symbolising the earth of the District Six site. An embroidered memory cloth can be found near the entrance of the museum, and is mounted as part of the exhibition. Two lengths of calico – one for visitors and the other for ex-residents, are located near the pulpit, and continue to capture messages of ex-residents and visitors to the space. (See Figure 1)

The ground floor of the main hall is dedicated to the broader socio-political narrative of District Six. Four themed exhibition panels – the Timeline panels - form the spine of this narrative namely: Arrivals/Formation (1800s - 1930); Resistance (1930 -1970); Restitution and Demolition (1970s to the present day). These are located along the walls of the hall. A theme that focuses on the ‘interior’ spaces of the District is reflected in the construction of “Nomvuyo’s Room” alongside the map on the ground floor, and is a reconstruction of a room occupied by Nomvuyo Ngcelwane and her family while they lived in District Six. Nomvuyo’s Room contains a soundscape, as does another ‘interior’ located on the upper floor, Rod’s Room.

The upper floor of *Digging Deeper* is divided into six alcoves and act as representations of different social spaces in District Six. They are the Bloemhof Flats; Barbershop/ Hairdresser; Langarm bands; Places of Work; Public Washhouse; Hanover Street and the Bioscopes and Carnival alcoves. In the Barbershop/ Hairdresser alcove a soundscape comprising the voices of District Six barbers and hairdressers may be heard. In the Langarm alcove, one hears a recording of music.

The portrait gallery, a series of portraits from a “wide cross-section of District Six inhabitants” – is suspended along the balustrades of the upper floor. <sup>11</sup>(See Figure 2)

At present, there are two features of the Memorial Hall. Firstly, an exhibition entitled *Memory Traces* - a redesigned and reformulated version of the first Horstley Street exhibition that formed part of the *Streets* exhibition occupies this space. *Memory Traces* speaks to the museum’s shift towards working with and on the site of a redeveloped District Six. The proposed memorial park at Horstley Street has become the focus of the exhibition. A permanent feature of the hall is an artistic rendition of the foundations of a Horstley Street house, which is sunken into the Memorial Hall floor. Brightly lit, this “sunken cavity” depicts archaeological fragments and shards excavated from Horstley Street. As noted in the guide to *Digging Deeper*, the foundations represent a “space symbolic of the layering of lives that accrued within those simple boundaries.”<sup>12</sup>



The second and more permanent feature of the Memorial Hall is that of the *Writer’s Floor*. It consists of painted tiles of poetry and prose embedded in the floor. These tiles reflect writers’ experiences of District Six and Cape Town. At the centre of the floor is a mosaic of the Cape Peninsula and extending from it are cobbled ‘rays’. These rays and the mosaic of the peninsula signify the broader role of the museum in highlighting stories of forced removals in those areas “beyond District Six”. The hall is

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<sup>11</sup> A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition

<sup>12</sup> A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition

seen as a space where temporary exhibitions are held which reflect the theme of “beyond District Six”. (See Figure 3)

A range of components make up the *Digging Deeper* exhibition. Enlarged, hand tinted photocopies of images from the area, as well as enlarged historical maps form the backdrop to the displays. Photographs are an important part of the display and take on the arrangement of family photographs from family albums, echoing their source of origin. Their significance, as noted by one of the curators of *Digging Deeper* and a museum trustee, lies in their value as the “records of lives and identities, forming elements of a recovered public history.”<sup>13</sup> Artefacts may also be found on display. The use of text - as interpretive exhibition text or extracts from oral history interviews is a key feature of the exhibition.



### **Oral history practice in an international context**

In order to think through oral histories and their use in the specific context of the exhibition in the District Six Museum, we must first consider its use internationally, and its place within the broader social history movement. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the concern that the voice of the unheralded, ordinary person of society was not being documented in history, took root in both academic and activist circles in North America and in Britain. A growing focus on social history brought about a range of scholarly works that documented the poor, the working class and women - groups who were seen to exist on the margins of society and consequently had not been

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<sup>13</sup> T. Smith and C. Rassool, “History in photographs at the District Six Museum” in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town*, pp.131 – 145. p.132

perceived as historical actors.<sup>14</sup> The histories that fore-grounded these groups were deemed part of the corpus of work known as 'history-from-below'. History-from-below sought to "restore the individual human subject to history" and to break the dominating trend of history as textual, document based history.<sup>15</sup> Oral history, as an accompaniment to social history and broader historical practice<sup>16</sup>, would transform the role and content of history and foreground new areas of research. Importantly, it would accord a central place to those situated on the margins of historical inquiry, rendering them as active participants in and creators of history.<sup>17</sup> Encapsulated in the move away from textual documentary evidence towards oral sources, oral history was perceived as a means to make history more democratic, where the process of writing and the content of history would take on more nuanced forms and subjects.<sup>18</sup> Communities would be empowered to write their own, local histories, ones that would challenge established accounts and the "authoritarian judgement inherent" in the discipline.<sup>19</sup> Besides fulfilling the purpose of "restoring the individual human subject to history", previously marginalised communities would be able to fashion collective histories.<sup>20</sup>

Critiques of oral history emanated from both staunch documentary historians and oral historians themselves. For those concerned with the viability of oral sources, the

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<sup>14</sup> see J. Sangster, "Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history", in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge), 1998, pp.87-100

<sup>15</sup> M. Marshall Clark, "Oral history: art and praxis", in D. Adams and A. Goldbard (eds), *Community, Culture and Globalisation*, (New York: Rockefeller Foundation), 2002, pp.88-105, p.89

<sup>16</sup> R. J. Grele, "Movement without aim: methodological and theoretical problems in oral history", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, pp.38-52, p.38

<sup>17</sup> P. Thompson, "The voice of the past: oral history", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, pp.21-28, p.22

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, "The voice of the past", p.26

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, "The voice of the past", pp. 26,28

<sup>20</sup> Marshall Clark, "Oral history: art and praxis", p.92



unreliability of memory as evidence was stressed.<sup>21</sup> Alessandro Portelli confronted those concerns regarding oral sources as viable evidence and advocated a critical use and dissemination of oral history sources.<sup>22</sup> On these critical terms, oral sources were defined as being inherently oral and necessitating a critique that acknowledged their *form*; their function as a *narrative* source as well as their relation of the *meanings* surrounding events.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, oral sources were seen as credible sources, precisely because their deviations from fact and the implications thereof were acknowledged. Thus the subjectivity of oral sources allowed an analysis of the context and relationships which led to the creation of the oral source.<sup>24</sup>

The creation of the oral source and the dissemination thereof was crucial to the practice of oral history and has become key in fulfilling the social purpose of history as espoused by social historians. While initial dissemination of oral sources focused on the transcript as a product of the interview,<sup>25</sup> increasing attention was placed on radio and multimedia packages to distribute community and local histories. While the limitations on the use of the radio has been described by Read,<sup>26</sup> the benefits thereof - namely a wider audience and the ability to use the source in its oral form - is important.<sup>27</sup> Flick and Goodall provided a thoughtful deliberation on the meanings of

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<sup>21</sup> W. Cutler, "Accuracy in oral history interviewing", in D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum (eds), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, (California: Alta Mira Press), 1996, pp.99-106, p.100

<sup>22</sup> A. Portelli, "What makes oral history different", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, pp. 63-74

<sup>23</sup> Portelli, "What makes oral history different", pp.64-67

<sup>24</sup> Portelli, "What makes oral history different", pp.68-71

<sup>25</sup> see R. Samuel, "Perils of the transcript", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, pp.389-392

<sup>26</sup> see P. Read, "Presenting voices in different media: print, radio and CD-Rom", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, pp.414-419, pp.414-417

<sup>27</sup> D.K. Dunaway, "Radio and the public use of oral history", in Dunaway and Baum (eds), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, pp.306-320, pp.308-310

orality and oral sources in relation to Aboriginal culture, and its use of technology – in this instance an interactive CD-ROM - that could address both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences.<sup>28</sup> They believed that in the creation of interactive multi-media, a synthesis between documentary and oral evidence could take place, emulating the process of analysis and synthesis undertaken by historians.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the moving image or film presented opportunities for synchronicity with and the reflexivity of oral history.<sup>30</sup> As Sipe advocated, the videotaped interview allowed the interviewer to examine non-verbal indicators inherent in the dialogic encounter with the interviewee.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the different types of narratives invoked by a filmed oral history interview which deals simultaneously with the written, spoken and filmed word, allowed for a more deepened historical analysis.<sup>32</sup> In the case of museums and the use of oral histories in their visual strategy, Green's description of the considerations taken into account when curating an exhibition solely from oral histories is important, but highlights the lack of theoretical engagement around the implications for meaning and orality that occurs once oral histories are deployed in an exhibitionary context.<sup>33</sup> Her attempts to create an exhibition composed of audio installations of oral history interviews (and not extracts from interview transcripts ) raises a number of questions that relate to the District Six Museum's permanent installation, *Digging Deeper*, where the transformation of the spoken word into text is a key characteristic of that exhibition. As Green notes, the accompaniment of sound with a "busy visual

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<sup>28</sup> K. Flick and H. Goodall, "Angledool stories: Aboriginal history in hypermedia", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, pp. 421-431, p.428-429

<sup>29</sup> Flick and Goodall, "Angledool stories", p.427

<sup>30</sup> see D. Sipe, "The future of oral histories and moving images", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, pp.379-388, p.379

<sup>31</sup> Sipe, "The future of oral histories and moving images", p.383

<sup>32</sup> Sipe, "The future of oral histories and moving images", pp.383-384,

<sup>33</sup> A. Green, "The exhibition that speaks for itself", in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 448- 456

panorama” would result in the dominance of the visual and not the audio installation. Therefore, a suitable context for audio installations was a sparse visual background which would allow the sounds of oral narration to dominate.<sup>34</sup>

Oral history practice also became increasingly community orientated, specifically serving as a tool to develop community awareness around social issues and histories. Marshall Clark highlights the importance of oral history as a methodology in community cultural development and its potential as a dialogical encounter between members of a community, lending itself to artistic practice in the form of theatre and re-enactments of interview and resulting in a liberatory and transformative practice as it restores the subject to history.<sup>35</sup>

The first chapter of the work expands upon the critique of popular history and oral history practice, but particularly in relation to the emergence of community museums after 1994. It begins to trace the trajectory of oral history in the shaping of a ‘new’, public history in South Africa. To a large extent, this ‘new’ history has its antecedents in the social history movement that characterised the historical discipline in the 1980s. After democracy, museums sought to represent those communities disenfranchised under apartheid through changes in their collections policies and in the manner in which these communities were displayed. Museums thus became key vehicles for broadening the reach of historical research and other research and state narratives regarding cultural diversity and nation-building. Within these museums, and within community

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<sup>34</sup> Green, “The exhibition that speaks for itself”, p.449

<sup>35</sup> see Marshall Clark, “Oral history: art and praxis”, pp. 91,94, 95,103

museums that were established in the transition period to democracy, oral history was utilised to convey those historical ‘truths’ perceived to be previously disallowed by the apartheid state.

Chapter Two explores a singular moment in the display history of the District Six Museum – the curation of the Horstley Street installation (as part of the *Streets* exhibition) – and aims to show how the language of archaeology provided one of the stimuli for thinking through the value of oral history as a means to access and portray a fragmented historical narrative of District Six. At the same time it presented a challenge to move beyond conventional documentary based history towards viewing historical evidence as a visual, oral and ultimately an aesthetic form.

The aim of Chapter Three is to identify the processes that enabled the shift towards a formalised oral history practice within the District Six Museum. It is argued that with the progressive success of the museum, and the decision to dig deeper into the social history of District Six with *Digging Deeper*, the exhibitionary principles envisioned by *Streets* gave way to a productive tension between the museum’s impulse to systematically collect memory in the form of oral histories, and its desire to incorporate the spontaneous, oral acts of remembrances which characterised *Streets*. The chapter will examine the oral history practices of the museum during the preparation for *Digging Deeper*. By examining the processes of selection which informed the interviewing, transcribing and editing practices of researchers and curators, the chapter will attempt to identify how curatorial interventions sought to relieve the above tension. It is argued that in contrast to *Streets*, *Digging Deeper* rendered the

museum space a contained one, one in which oral history took an aesthetic and curatorial form, yet one which emphasised multiple ways of reading oral texts. It will attempt to portray how understandings of orality and oral history, historical methodologies and concerns around memory work, may transform the way oral histories are used in museums.

This introduction has attempted to sketch a broader context for the emergence and the role of oral history as a methodology in the social history movement in general. The following section elaborates on how the critique of social history emerged within South Africa, the implications for oral history as practice and the role of oral history in the emergence of community museums after 1994.



## Chapter One

### Oral history in South African historiography

This chapter will provide a brief overview of questions that have emerged around the emergence of oral history practice within South African historiography. In particular it will focus on the critique of oral history in relation to the development of social and later public history. This chapter will further consider the relationship between emerging community museums in a post-apartheid setting and the role oral history has been accorded in being able to convey those historical 'truths' perceived to be previously disallowed by the apartheid state.

#### Oral history practice and South African historiography

A definition of oral history as a methodology, as well as a movement within historiography, cannot be seen in isolation to the value placed on oral tradition and literature within disciplines such as anthropology and literary studies. In particular, with African oral traditions – the method by which these traditions were collected, transcribed and used as sources for Africanist history is important.<sup>1</sup> Oral history practice, as used in this study refers to the practice of conducting interviews with informants regarding historical events that have directly affected them. Oral tradition, together with accompanying forms of oral historical narrative may be seen as a broader set of oral practices and customs which relay historical and socio-cultural information about those

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<sup>1</sup> P. la Hausse, "Oral history and South African historians", in *Radical History Review*, 46 (7), 1990, pp.346-356, p.346. Here la Hausse notes the central role of Jan Vansina in developing the methodology that allowed the use of African oral traditions as sources for Africanist history. See J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago, 1965)

communities in which they are found. Oral tradition is thus characterised by sets of conventions that relate to the performance and the transmission of the collective memory of these groups. In defining how oral history and oral tradition relate to each other, the task group of the South African National Oral History and Indigenous Music Programme defined the focus of their work:

as the recording of oral memories by way of various means, which include[s] identifying, documenting, protecting and promoting oral traditions (history handed down from generation to generation) and oral testimonies (history which occurred during the informant's lifetime) of communities.<sup>2</sup>

The above definitions of oral history and oral tradition do not begin to consider the debates around oral forms and the role of literary studies in understanding and unraveling their meaning. While the 'fusion of literature and history' as Isabel Hofmeyr terms it, has been most beneficial in the study of oral testimonies and life histories – the danger still exists that historians will regard

oral texts either as raw material, which, subject to a certain amount of processing, will yield historical information; or as the unmediated voices of an alien past.<sup>3</sup>

Central to an understanding of oral history practice within the academy is distinguishing it from other oral sources such as oral tradition and the manner in which they intertwine in the historiography of social history. Bozzoli and Delius, in their overview of the

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<sup>2</sup> Task group of the South African National Oral History and Indigenous Music Programme, cited in H.J. Bredekamp, "Oral history, museums and communities: a view from the Cape of Good Hope", keynote presentation delivered at the conference "Can oral history make objects speak?", Nafplion, Greece, 18-21 October, 2005, pp. 1- 12, pp.6-7.

<sup>3</sup> K. Barber cited in I. Hofmeyr, "Introduction" in I. Hofmeyr, *"We spend our years as a tale that is told": Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press), 1993, pp. 1-22, p.1

emergence of radical thought within South African historiography in 1991, provide tentative clues as to how oral history practice was conceived and employed by a range of historians and intellectuals from the early half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> They trace the roots of radicalism in four movements, namely the work of black writers in the latter decades of the nineteenth century; in the influence of eastern European socialism on thinking about the form of colonialism in South Africa; the development of a “materialist and combative” historical tradition associated with the Non European Unity Movement, and lastly the roots laid down within the university by liberal historians who undertook the task of detailing the “economic interaction and interdependence between black and white” in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as in pre-colonial and colonial times.<sup>5</sup> The use of oral sources within these movements is specifically identified by Bozzoli and Delius within the first and last strand. Thus, in their reading, the recovery of oral tradition was undertaken by black intellectuals who did so as a means of documenting resistance and uncovering the pre-colonial and *non-* colonial histories of their communities. This recovery of oral tradition is identified with the fostering of African nationalism and is specifically noted as having been created outside the parameters of university history departments.<sup>6</sup> Within this

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<sup>4</sup> B. Bozzoli and P. Delius, “Radical history and South African history” in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro, J. Wiener; B. Bozzoli and P. Delius (eds), *History From South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1991, pp. 4-25

<sup>5</sup> Bozzoli and Delius, “Radical history and South African history”, pp. 5-7

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.5. As Bozzoli and Delius note, the authors of these texts were drawn from the Christian and educated African elite at the time. In noting that these histories were crafted outside of university history departments, it is also worth noting that the African elite at the time were largely schooled within mission stations. Their work in recovering pre-colonial oral traditions thus rests within a sphere where African nationalism and agency is advocated (as a means of resistance), but which simultaneously contends with an educational framework where ‘indigenous’ knowledge is produced within a colonial setting. The sets of tensions produced within this context as they relate to the production of histories within university departments are important. As noted by Bhekisizwe Peterson, the development of African theatre practice and the writing of plays (which drew on African folklore and oral tradition) resulted in its own contestations in relation to colonial and missionary influences. It should therefore be noted that the recovery of oral tradition in the first half of the twentieth



latter setting, it is the historian who ventures outside of the university to gather oral testimony to document the “everyday life of people”.<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that in ascribing the use of oral sources to these particular strands of radical thought, and rationalising their uses in relation to the institution of the university, a continuum is naturalised within the academy whereby oral sources are relegated to a dichotomy of oral history (the practice of interviewing and gathering personal testimony) and oral tradition. Within this continuum oral tradition, (though it may be recovered in the form of personal testimony), is constructed as an organic occurrence which moulds itself to the project of African nationalism undertaken by an underclass, while personal testimony and life histories lend themselves to the active shaping and interpretation by historians located within the academy. It is the historiographic construction of this continuum that informs the debates that emerged between structuralists, those vested in studies which could best theorise the relationship between capital accumulation, class formation and the role of the state, and the ‘new’ social historians in the 1980s - whose focus on history from below sought to understand the role of the “subordinate classes in the construction of capitalism.”<sup>8</sup>

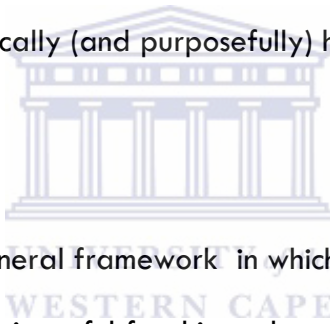
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century was *not* an organic process i.e. the sourcing of inherent local knowledge – but a practice which was held in constant tension with colonial institutions and their ways of producing and enforcing knowledge. See B. Peterson, “Introduction: Staging the (Alien) nation” in *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals: African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality*. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press). 2000, pp.1-20. Also, see Nicky Rousseau’s critique of Bozzoli and Delius’ article for how it enables the Wits History Workshop to stake a hegemonic claim to the development of radical historiography in South Africa, and how through the collapsing of Africanist and localist strands of radical historiography, they are able to claim their historiography as both radical and indigenous. See N. Rousseau, “*Popular History in South Africa in the 1980s: the Politics of Production*”, unpublished Masters manuscript, University of the Western Cape, April 1994, pp. 116-119.

<sup>7</sup> Bozzoli and Delius, “Radical history and South African history”, pp. 5,6

<sup>8</sup> Bozzoli and Delius, “Radical history and South African history”, p.15

The entrenchment of a dichotomy between oral history and oral tradition is as much a historiographic function, as it was the result of protracted struggles between the coloniser and the colonised regarding the ways in which knowledge of the self was created and legitimated. As noted by Peterson, the false binary between “active enlightened colonisers and the passive othered Africans” reflected a concern with the binaries of primitive/modern, oral/written and traditional/progressive that occupied black intellectuals at the time.<sup>9</sup> In seeking a forward looking trajectory from one to the other, black intellectuals occupied an intermediate space in colonial society – where the promise of a modern, written and progressive future cultivated within the missionary education system was paradoxically (and purposefully) held hostage by legislative acts of segregation.<sup>10</sup>



While the above provides a general framework in which to locate broader debates regarding oral history practice it is useful for this study to limit its scope to three overlapping political and historiographical contexts - apartheid South Africa in the 1980's, the transitional period to democracy (which includes the years after the 1994 democratic election), and contemporary South Africa. During all three contexts, despite attempts to wrest the means of knowledge production away from the academy, the writing of oral histories and their uses, remained firmly located within its spheres.<sup>11</sup>

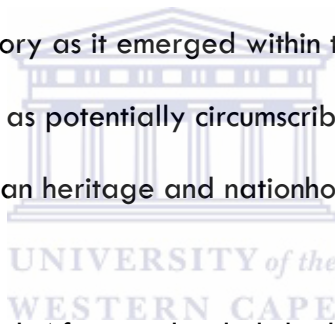
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<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals*, p.11

<sup>10</sup> For more on the intermediate space between the ‘false binaries’ produced by colonialism see Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, pp.4-5 cited by Peterson on p. 11-12. Interestingly, Peterson’s interpretation of the intermediate space occupied by the African elite reflects the structuralist’s concern regarding the relations between race, capitalism and the state. See Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals*, pp. 10 – 12 and footnotes 36-41.

<sup>11</sup> see A. Odendaal, “Developments in popular history in the Western Cape in the 1980s” in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro, J. Wiener, B. Bozzoli and P. Delius (eds), *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1991, pp.361- 367, p. 364-365

During the latter half of the 1990s, in recognition of the role in uncovering hidden histories during a tumultuous period in the country's history and perhaps as a reward for its historiographic dilemma in the early years of transition to a post-apartheid society - oral history was wholly transplanted into state definitions of best practice for the preservation and uncovering of a collective South African memory.<sup>12</sup> Crucial to a critique of oral history practice since the 1990's is therefore tracing the manner in which oral histories are conducted, mobilised, archived and disseminated. In charting these practices, in particular its dissemination in exhibitionary form, it is hoped to reflect the nuances involved in not only the transition from the oral source to exhibitionary form, but also the implications for oral history as it emerged within the context of people's history and where it finds itself today – as potentially circumscribed by state sanctioned narratives regarding South African heritage and nationhood.<sup>13</sup>



The critique of oral history in South Africa is closely linked to the rise of social history and its practice.<sup>14</sup> With the inception of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), inspired by the British History Workshop's aim of voicing "people's history",<sup>15</sup> the call to document South Africa's hidden voices was taken up. Using oral history as its chosen methodology, social historians undertook the practice and dissemination of oral histories of those people, groups and organisations perceived to

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<sup>12</sup> G. Minkley and C. Rassool. "Orality, memory and social history in South Africa" in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press), 1997, pp.89- 99, pp.89-90. Also see the *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*, Department of Arts, Culture, Science And Technology, June 1996, Chapter 5, no.2 and the National Heritage Resources Act, 1999, p.9

<sup>13</sup> See Minkley and Rassool, "Orality, memory, and social history in South Africa", p. 99

<sup>14</sup> see G. Minkley and C. Rassool, "Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions", paper delivered at the Centre for African Studies Africa Seminar, University of Cape Town, March 1995, pp.1-14

<sup>15</sup> V. Bickford-Smith, S. Field and C. Glaser, "The Western Cape Oral History Project", *African Studies*, 2001, vol.60, no.1, pp.5-23, p.10

be written out of history by an apartheid and capitalist state. The products of this practice included written articles, a slide-tape production as well as a documentary, and were seen as contributing to the development of an accessible and popular people's history. <sup>16</sup>

In the 1980s, particularly centred around the Wits History Workshop, a series of histories-from-below emerged, focused on the agrarian classes (sharecroppers, peasantry), miners and the working classes situated on the Witwatersrand and in the South African countryside. <sup>17</sup> The metamorphosis of social history, and the value it began to place on ordinary people and their micro histories in the 1980's was however, characterised by an angst regarding the implications of this practice for *Marxist* analyses of South African society, which had been prevalent in the 1970's. <sup>18</sup> The 'new grouping' of social historians, who were conducting micro-level studies of those 'from below' were accused of treading a conceptually under-theorised path - not taking into account the implications of macro-level processes such as class formation and capital accumulation on the daily experiences of individuals and communities.

Notably, the gauntlet was laid at the feet of the 'person on the street' whose everyday experiences, it was argued, warranted their own "conceptual terrain" and should not be used as explanations for, but should inform understandings of macro processes of

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<sup>16</sup> Minkley and Rassool, "Oral History in South Africa", p.3

<sup>17</sup> See T. Keegan, *Facing the storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa*, (Cape Town: David Philip), 1988. The History Workshop Series titles included, *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular Responses* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand), 1981; and B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Raven Press), 1987

<sup>18</sup> See M. Morris, "Social history and the transition to capitalism in the South African countryside", *Africa Perspective New Series*, 1(5&6), 1987, pp. 7-24

class struggle – which the dominant and oppressed classes were equally part of.<sup>19</sup>

This conceptual terrain entailed recognition, as Mike Morris argued, that “the source of the socialised experience and the particular process whereby this becomes the experience of a particular individual (own emphasis)” were two different movements.<sup>20</sup>

It is in Morris’ critique, amongst others, of a blind reliance on individual experiences in the shaping of micro-histories, and the subsequent response by Tim Keegan that the familiar tug of war between the theories that govern the use of documentary evidence and oral testimony emerges.<sup>21</sup> Oral testimony, as argued by Keegan, was a rich and under-explored source of evidence and therefore a methodological and political tool that deepened the project of ‘people’s history’, namely the creation of a “useful history” which was popular, easily communicable to the masses and which consequently aided aims of democratic transformation.<sup>22</sup> According to Keegan, oral histories – explicitly the collection of life stories – served a political purpose in “restoring to people a sense of self realisation and of solidarity built through common historical experiences.”<sup>23</sup> These common historical experiences were forged by individuals in their community, and these communities defined in terms of their cultural identity, gender, ethnicity and their labour and political relation to the apartheid state as an underclass.<sup>24</sup> As a tool with which to circumvent the bias of colonial written records and state ideology, oral histories were thus conducted, transcribed, interpreted and archived – available as (albeit mitigated)

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<sup>19</sup> Morris, “Social history and the transition to capitalism”, pp. 10-11

<sup>20</sup> Morris, “Social history and the transition to capitalism”, p.11

<sup>21</sup> See Morris, “Social history and the transition to capitalism”, and Tim Keegan’s response, “Mike Morris and the social historians: a response and a critique”, *Africa Perspective*, 1(7&8), 1989, pp. 1-14, p.3

<sup>22</sup> Keegan, “Mike Morris and the social historians”, pp.3,6

<sup>23</sup> Keegan, “Mike Morris and the social historians”, pp.6-7

<sup>24</sup> P. la Hausse, “Oral history and South African historians”, *Radical History Review*, 46(7), 1990, pp.346-356  
La Hausse provides an overview of the use of oral history practice by South African historians where oral history projects centered largely on the working classes and their political organisation - using class as a lens through which ethnicity, culture, urban history and gender could be studied.

primary resources for future generations of researchers.<sup>25</sup> Oral histories and testimonies revealed the possibility of an inclusive, popular and accessible historiographic future beyond apartheid.

However, despite the considerable opinions aroused by the use of oral history – both Keegan and Morris’ engagement with oral history reflects a concern with its nature as a source of evidence, and consequently its ability to substantiate theoretical arguments regarding the relationship between capitalism, class and the state. Debates between structuralists and social historians thus continued, particularly centred on the rejection of structuralists’ “idealist methodology”, which was seen as using “static” conceptualisations of modes of production that did not account for human agency and the interplay of race, gender and other cultural forms in processes of proletarianisation. The work of oral historians was thus seen as enabling, and helping to forge new categories through which the relations between a capitalist state and its working class could be understood.<sup>26</sup>

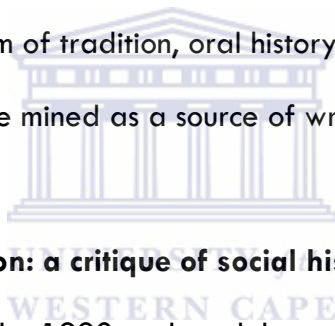
Notably, in the 1980s, in a context of renewed mass political organisation in response to the states of emergencies and increased repression, another radical strand of social history emerged, namely that of popular history – which sought to engage with a broader populace, and which sought to represent the histories and structures which affected them. Within popular history two approaches emerged which focused on firstly, the histories of the labour movement and its emphasis on shop floor and “class struggles”

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<sup>25</sup> la Hausse, “Oral history and South African historians”, pp.350-351

<sup>26</sup> Bozzoli and Delius, “Radical history and South African history”, pp.20-21

and secondly, a focus on “organised nationalist struggles” and leaders of these movements.<sup>27</sup> The rise of popular history was however, contested by some historians in ways that led to the channeling of oral history as a source for factual information.<sup>28</sup> This channeling found its way into the 1990s, and later understandings of the role of oral testimony and tradition in the shaping of radical thought in South Africa. History was a means of tracing the inner lives of workers and the masses but, as noted above, it was in the *writing* and *archiving* of history that people could retrieve historical legitimacy.<sup>29</sup> Despite the growing recognition of oral history as an historical practice with its own distinctive features, practices and critiques and except for the work of a few scholars, oral sources - whether in the form of tradition, oral history practice and the personal testimonies it engendered – were mined as a source of written history.



### **Oral history practice in transition: a critique of social history**

Whether intentionally or not, in the 1990s, a key debate that emerged in the Western Cape around oral history methodology took its form around two tertiary institutions - the Universities Cape Town (UCT) and the Western Cape (UWC), and scholars from their respective History departments. For these institutions and departments, the origin stories, their growth and development and the intellectual traditions that sustain them are fundamentally different. Their focus on oral history, whether as method or movement, is helpful in consolidating the critique of social history in South Africa and how the

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<sup>27</sup> L. Callinicos, “Popular history in the eighties” in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro, J. Wiene, B. Bozzoli and P. Delius (eds), in *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1991, pp.258 -267, pp.258-259

<sup>28</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa, p.10”

<sup>29</sup> see S. Jeppie, “Local history and oral history in Cape Town: some reflections”, paper delivered at the History Workshop’s Popular History Workshop, 8-9 February 1990, pp.1-4, p.2

emergence of oral history in Cape Town bears the marks of its own particular political and historiographic landscape.

Based at the University of the Western Cape, Minkley and Rassool's critique of social history in 1995 argues that social history entrenched categories of marginalisation on its interview subjects and that the consequent production of a uniform narrative of resistance to the apartheid state belied other means of exchange and negotiation of the political, economic and intellectual climate at the time.<sup>30</sup> Their critique notes that oral and social history practice in South Africa has elided the complexities of language which is framed in oral history interviews and the narratives they produce. Hofmeyr, in particular locates importance in a critique of oral sources that acknowledges these sources' narrative structure and their relation to memory. In addition, she notes that the codes and conventions of oral historical narratives do not merely govern the transcript and corresponding historical documents, but govern the *telling* of stories as well.<sup>31</sup> Thus, an analysis of those relationships that guide dialogue between individual and collective memory as well as the relations between orality and literacy in South Africa requires sustained attention.<sup>32</sup> As noted by Minkley and Rassool, the substantive examination

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<sup>30</sup> Minkley and Rassool, "Oral History in South Africa", pp.6-8 For a response to this critique see Vivian Bickford-Smith, Sean Field, Clive Glaser, "The Western Cape Oral History Project: the 1990s" in *African Studies*, 60 (1), July 2001, pp.5-24, pp.13-16

<sup>31</sup> I. Hofmeyr, "Reading oral texts: new methodological directions", paper delivered at the Department of History Seminar, University of the Western Cape, 1995, pp.1-11, p.6; Also see I. Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told": *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom*, (London: James Currey), 1993, pp.8-9;

<sup>32</sup> Minkley and Rassool, "Oral History in South Africa", pp.9-10 ; see E. Tonkin, *Narrating the Past: The Social Construction of Oral History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1992, pp.13-15



and “authoring and translation of oral text into history” in South Africa has yet to be fully undertaken.<sup>33</sup>

The role of oral history in South Africa after 1994 has had to deal with two aspects, namely its role in a “post-authoritarian transitional period” and its relation to memory as a reconciliatory tool in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>34</sup> Field advocates the use of oral history as a research method that will help to “identify, interpret and combat the rise of new forms of political and cultural authoritarianism.”<sup>35</sup> In a more subtle call for the unearthing of history-from-below, oral history and memory is introduced as a pedagogical tool in the relation of traumatic memories endured in an apartheid state.<sup>36</sup> Thus the memory of traumatic episodes in South Africa’s past and its narrative construction through oral history becomes crucial in the *refiguring* of the narrative of resistance into one of healing and reconciliation. The Western Cape Oral History Project (WCOHP), now the Centre for Popular Memory at UCT, continues to frame its work in terms of rendering the voice of the ‘ordinary’ person from below and from the margins, also focusing on the dissemination of these oral histories to “many public audiences”.<sup>37</sup> In this context, the use of oral history and memory as a pedagogical tool needs to be analysed. This analysis is particularly important in relation to shifts in the practice and dissemination of oral history and the presentation of public history.

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<sup>33</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.1

<sup>34</sup> S. Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history in post-apartheid South Africa”, paper delivered at the History Workshop, The TRC: Commissioning the Past, University of the Witwatersrand, June 1999, pp.1-18, p.3

<sup>35</sup> Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history”, p.3

<sup>36</sup> Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history”, p.4

<sup>37</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al.*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”, p.19; S. Field, “Preface”, in S. Field (ed), *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced removals in Cape Town*, (Cape Town: David Philip), 2001, pp.8-9, p.8; S. Field, “Oral histories of forced removals”, S. Field (ed), in *Lost Communities, Living Memories*, pp. 11-14, p.12

The three broad areas of the critique of social history and its use of oral history methodology identified by Minkley and Rassool, span the categorizations of time and the narrativisation of voices in oral history; the development of a “domination versus resistance” historical model within social historical narratives and the presence of “uneasy silences” regarding the ways in which oral text is authored and translated into history.<sup>38</sup> Building on the acknowledgment by others of the “hegemonic project” of history-from-below’ and its need to authenticate and inscribe the agency of ‘ordinary people’ into a (written) historical record,<sup>39</sup> Minkley and Rassool’s critique fixes on the conceptual and theoretical challenges of oral history as a methodology and sub-discipline in South African historiography. In challenging the way that history has come to be written and was ordained into a post-apartheid South Africa their critique challenges, in essence, the credibility of oral history as practised by South African historians. It is in this challenge to the role of oral history as evidence and as a contextual device, as well as a marker of transformatory political change that Bickford-Smith *et al* respond.<sup>40</sup>

Bickford-Smith *et al* trace the introduction of oral history methodology at the Cape primarily through the archive of UCT, in addition to those History Workshops held at the institution between 1978 -1991.<sup>41</sup> In their categorisation of the evolution of the first usage of oral evidence in the 1980s in the social sciences and the historical discipline’s ‘borrowings’ from social anthropology of the methods of interviewing and witnessing of

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<sup>38</sup> G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions”, paper delivered at Centre for African Studies , Africa Seminar, University of Cape Town, 22 March 1995, pp. 1-14, p1

<sup>39</sup> La Hausse, 1991 in Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.1

<sup>40</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, pp.4,

<sup>41</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”, p.5

conversations, the careful assertion of the informant can be found - and is inserted into the study through the “words of informants themselves”. The use of oral interviews as illustrative text and case studies is staged through the disciplinary practices of sociologists, social anthropologists and geographers.<sup>42</sup> However, as a support mechanism the evidentiary power of oral history at UCT’s History Department in the 1960s and 1970s, was limited by a lack of oral history training, theoretical and methodological objections to oral non-documentary sources and the perceived physical danger of fieldwork in Cape Town’s townships. Notably, an outlet for oral evidence and sources was situated in the Economic History Department.<sup>43</sup> The growth of social history and an oral history methodology within the historical tradition at UCT is furthermore traced through the development of modern urban history - which in the 1960s and 1970s chose to move beyond the municipal pale of Cape Town (and the use of pre-1910 Cape Government archival records), towards the city’s townships. Thus state myths around intermittent African residency were negated in attempts to uncover the “urban origins of apartheid”.<sup>44</sup> The disciplinary influences of sociology and anthropology and the development of urban history in the department thus edged some UCT-based historians towards the realm of oral history methodology and living memory.<sup>45</sup>

A telling way in which to read the critique by Minkley and Rassool and Bickford-Smith *et al*’s response is in the comparison of the ‘origin’ myth of the introduction of oral history methodology at the Cape. While both groups attribute the growth of social history and

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<sup>42</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”, pp.6-7

<sup>43</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”, p.9. Here Josette Cole’s work on Crossroads in Cape Town included oral history methodology and fieldwork.

<sup>44</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”p.8

<sup>45</sup> Bickford-Smith *et al*, “The Western Cape Oral History Project”, pp.7-8

oral history to the History Workshops held at the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1970s and 1980s and the broader development of the movement at London universities, the projects through which they primarily situate their critiques are located in and around their respective institutions – the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, while Minkley and Rassool assert the “Cape’s historiographic margin” in relation to South Africa, this state of marginality was sustained not merely through disciplinary movements, but on a local level saw the establishment of tertiary institutions in Cape Town along racial lines, enforced by the geographic/spatial restrictions of the Group Areas Act.

As a means to authenticate resistance as an inevitable, linear historical process and expression of collective political and economic will, social history, according to Minkley and Rassool, surfaced political narratives which traced the emergence of a (collective) African working class and streamlined different nationalist movements into a singular narrative of ‘struggle’ by ‘the people’.<sup>47</sup> These narratives ensured the accountability of the discipline to its social and political context and in the writing of hidden histories, a historical model which relied on the narrative of ‘domination versus resistance’ took firmer hold.<sup>48</sup> The voices of ordinary people found different forms of dissemination that sought to evoke their experiences as real, authentic and which were consequently reproduced as historical truth. These reproduced forms – be it visual or written, had as a

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<sup>46</sup> Vivian Bickford-Smith, Sean Field, Clive Glaser, “The Western Cape Oral History Project: The 1990s” in *African Studies*, 60 (1), July 2001, pp.5-24, p.9; Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.1

<sup>47</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.2

<sup>48</sup> In particular the People’s History Programme of the History Department of the University of the Western Cape where the Department saw the role of the University as “beginning to interact with and service the community in a much more accountable way.” See Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.2, cited from Odendaal, 1990, p.373-4

primary source the oral history interview.<sup>49</sup> Oral history served as the link between historians and the “voice of community” and between knowledge and power.<sup>50</sup>

### **The restoration of the self and nation**

The question then lies with how the work of popular and social history projects at the Universities Cape Town, Western Cape and Witwatersrand took the form it did in the years of transition to democracy in the 1990s and after 1994. While there were historians who dealt with the limits and possibilities of oral history in a transitioning society, how could oral history act as the envisioned tool for empowering individuals and communities to produce their own history? The limits of people’s history and the way oral histories were “sourced’ into histories of communities in resistance” provide a basis for thinking through museums as sites of oral history engagement and representation.<sup>51</sup>

One of the concerns that faced a practice of people’s history within a university setting was the attempt to reconcile the need for critical historical practice, with the needs of interviewees to make sense of their experiences. As Minkley and Rousseau note, the 1985 state of emergency had “effectively closed the space for individual and social trauma to be publicly articulated and organised as resistance”.<sup>52</sup>

In the Western Cape the emergence of oral history practice is associated with the organisation of mass movements against apartheid in the 1980’s and a proliferation in popular history writing as a means of providing alternative ideas about the past ,

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<sup>49</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.3

<sup>50</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral History in South Africa”, p.4

<sup>51</sup> G. Minkley and N. Rousseau, “ ‘This narrow language’: people’s history and the university - reflections from the University of the Western Cape ” in *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (May 1996), pp.175 – 195, pp.189-190

<sup>52</sup> Minkley and Rousseau, “ ‘This Narrow Language’ ”, pp.189-190

and to further make these alternate versions accessible to the masses.<sup>53</sup> Providing an overview of popular history in the region, Odendaal sketches a picture of popular history as it emerged from community-based organisations, educational institutions and those groups associated with trade unions.<sup>54</sup> While his reading of popular history mainly concerns those structures present in the Western Cape for disseminating alternative histories and the many guises which these took, namely workshops, resource packages, booklets and community newspapers, Odendaal's lack of reference to oral sources in the creation of the content of these forms is revealing (though inferred from his language, which highlights the link between the project of social history and the political function of oral testimonies of building solidarity).<sup>55</sup> While he explicitly notes that "the oppressed have for centuries passed down historical knowledge from one generation to the next, mainly through oral tradition"<sup>56</sup>, a focus on oral history as a methodology, is held in perspective to an institution, namely an oral history workshop held at the University of the Western Cape's (UWC) History department's "People's History Open Day" in 1987. Notably these workshops occurred in a multidisciplinary context – with films, exhibitions and stalls, music, poetry readings and a play used to conclude the implementation of a People's History Programme at the university.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Odendaal, "Developments in popular history", p. 362

<sup>54</sup> Odendaal, "Developments in popular history", pp.362-363

<sup>55</sup> See Keegan, "Mike Morris and the social historians", pp.6-7

<sup>56</sup> Odendaal, "Developments in popular history", p.364. Here Odendaal refers to the work of Achmat Davids on the Muslim community of the Cape; religious and community groups' publications, and a booklet produced for a campaign against Group Areas forced removals in Claremont, a suburb in Cape Town

<sup>57</sup> Odendaal, "Developments in popular history", p.366

Reflections on the implementation of the People's History Programme (PHP) at UWC are marked by a decisive engagement with the role of popular history within a broader social history historiography. As Minkley and Rousseau noted in 1996, the development of people's history was centred on the need to challenge a critique of popular history as "static, pre-defined [and] unchanging" and which reflected, in their words, "a silencing of the politics of the academy into one of 'objectivity' and 'real history' ".<sup>58</sup> The role of oral history in challenging the critique of popular history as static, and empowering students to "re-possess the past for themselves", was thus felt within the curriculum of the People's History Programme.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, Minkley and Rousseau note the decline in the place of oral history (and in general people's history) within the UWC history department curriculum between the 1980s and the 1990s. At its peak the focus of the PHP engendered collective projects, where oral history interviews were key in establishing the content for students to write their own history and that of their communities. However, towards the early 1990s, the curriculum featured a "much-reduced oral history component", and a reduction of the scale of the PHP within the department's offered courses was accompanied by a more direct focus on a life history approach for senior classes.<sup>60</sup> Minkley and Rousseau note the difficulties experienced in nurturing a critical historical practice that was simultaneously able to act as a political tool for transformation. At Wits, the publication of the "Write Your Own History" book in 1988, which was part of the Write Your Own History Project initiated by the History Workshop, attempted to address the above concern. Oral history became a technique

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<sup>58</sup> Minkley and Rousseau, " 'This narrow language' ", p.181. For a description of the framework and challenges of the implementation of the People's History Programme at UWC see M. Fullard, G. Minkley, C. Rassool and N. Rousseau, "Transforming the cutting edge: report on the People's History Programme, University of the Western Cape, 1987-1989", in *Perspectives in Education*, 12 (1), 1990/1, pp.103-108

<sup>59</sup> Minkley and Rousseau, " 'This Narrow Language' ", p.181

<sup>60</sup> Minkley and Rousseau, " 'This Narrow Language' ", pp.181-185

explicitly placed within broader methods of historical research and writing, which would empower participants to produce their own history, and not necessarily within the halls of the academy.<sup>61</sup> As part of the “process of researching and writing” their own history, participants made contact with oral history projects situated in Swaziland, Grahamstown and the Transvaal.<sup>62</sup> As with the popular history open day held at UWC, so too the products of the process of historical research undertaken by participants, were disseminated at a Popular History Day held at Wits during a History Workshop conference.<sup>63</sup>

The outputs of oral history at the height of apartheid can be seen as laying a tentative foundation for its deployment within visual strategies of exhibitions which occurred post-1994. As can be seen at the popular history days of universities, oral history in the 1980s took the form of exhibitions and served as the basis for films and performances of music and poetry.<sup>64</sup> In the History Workshop/South African College of Higher Education (SACHED) publication, *Write your Own History*, Witz encouraged students to disseminate their historical research through a "talk, stage a play, make a tape for people to listen to, put on an exhibition, write a column in a newspaper, make a slide

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<sup>61</sup> L. Witz, “The Write Your Own History Project”, in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro, J. Wiener, Bozzoli, P. Delius (eds), *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 1991, pp. 368 -378, p.372. This approach to developing critical historical skills, where oral history was a central methodology, was shared by the Khanya College Oral History project. See C. Rassool and L. Witz, “Creators and shapers of the past: some reflections on the experiences of the Khanya College Oral History Projects ” in *Perspectives in Education*, 12 (1), 1990/1, pp.97 -102, p.98-99

<sup>62</sup> Witz, “The Write Your Own History Project”, p.374. The Transvaal, as it was known then, comprised areas of present day Northwest province, Gauteng and Mpumalanga.

<sup>63</sup> Witz, “The Write Your Own History Project”, pp.374-375.

<sup>64</sup> In some cases praise poetry performed in the context of the trade union movements was seen as a form of popular history, with poets being called popular historians. See L. Callinicos, “Popular history in the eighties” in Brown *et al* (eds), *History from South Africa*, pp.258- 267, p.260



show or even a movie.”<sup>65</sup> Other oral history projects benefited from their proximity to audio-visual departments. In Cape Town, the Khanya College Oral History Project collaborated with SACHED’s audio-visual department at their campus in an effort to “integrate history and media”.<sup>66</sup> As noted by Rassool and Witz the fostering of “visual and media literacy” was central to providing history which was accessible and students furthermore undertook workshops on the practice of photography in a bid to develop a “conscious and critical media practice in relation to history”.<sup>67</sup> The integration of text and image through a critical historical practice at the Cape Town campus of Khanya College occurred in the form of exhibitions and photographic essays - lending itself to a program of creating accessibility to and the popularisation of history.<sup>68</sup> The above examples provide some basis for identifying how oral history and its outputs were central to visual strategies for disseminating historical research. And whereas these outputs were distributed to a variety of structures that were academically, politically and culturally resistant to dominant historical narratives of the state, they were largely excluded from the ‘museum’ as a cultural institution. The dissemination of popular history forms to institutions such as schools and museums was not only curtailed by a lack of access to these institutions, but was also limited because of the manner in which popular history inscribed marginality and constructed audiences within this margin – thus creating material for which there was no ‘real’ audience.<sup>69</sup> The boundaries of who was

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<sup>65</sup> Witz, “The Write Your Own History Project”, p. 377

<sup>66</sup> Rassool and Witz, “Creators and shapers of the past”, p. 99

<sup>67</sup> Rassool and Witz, “Creators and shapers of the past”, p. 99-100. For the importance placed on the image for the dissemination of oral history outputs see L. Callinicos, “Popular history in the eighties” pp.264-265

<sup>68</sup> Rassool and Witz, “Creators and shapers of the past”, p. 100-101

<sup>69</sup> See N. Rousseau, “Popular History”, cited in G. Minkley, C. Rassool and L. Witz, “Thresholds, gateways and spectacles: journeying through South African hidden pasts and histories in the last decade of the twentieth century”, paper delivered at the Future of the Past conference, University of the Western Cape, 1996, pp. 1- 32, p.6

perceived as the audience for popular history, as noted by Rousseau, shifted post-1985, to include, more broadly, the public sphere. Thus, in the 1990s the challenge lay in how radical historians would be able to shift between disciplinary boundaries and “seek hegemony” in the public history sphere.<sup>70</sup>

### **The rise of community museums**

Post-1994, in a context of nation-building and reconciliation, museums in general became key sites for the “visual management of the past”, and for bringing into alignment people’s experiences of the past, with the vision for South Africa’s future.<sup>71</sup> As spaces where lessons in “public education and citizenship” could be forged, the deployment of the museum as a key site for facilitating access to national narratives and for developing citizens and ‘new’ audiences is a key framework through which oral history itself was mobilised.<sup>72</sup>



The rise of community museums in South Africa is staged through a number of debates around museology and historiography both within the country and in those ‘centres’ from which the idea of the museum originates. In South Africa, where the institution of the museum had its origins in colonial undertakings and was appropriated within state ideologies, the need to redefine their function within a post-authoritarian society became a key focus of the new government that was elected in 1994. However, the assistance provided for the transformation of the museum sector lay mainly with the establishment

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<sup>70</sup> Rousseau, *Popular History in South Africa*, p.126

<sup>71</sup> L. Witz, “Transforming museums on post apartheid tourist routes” in I. Karp, C. Kratz, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarro-Frausto, with G. Buntix, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and C. Rassool (eds), *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2006, pp.107 -134, p.107, 108

<sup>72</sup> Witz, “Transforming museums”, p.108

of new national museums such as the Robben Island Museum and the Nelson Mandela National Museum.<sup>73</sup> Other ways in which the museum sector transformed itself was through the re-conceptualisation of the display and collecting practices of local, provincial museums (in order to reflect the ordinary person found within its particular boundaries)<sup>74</sup>; the establishment of “well resourced” independent museums that did not rely on government funding; the establishment of independent, community based museums that were tied to particular spaces and histories, and which were dependent on external funding; and the amalgamation of regional museums into flagship institutions.<sup>75</sup> Post 1994, museums therefore fell within the purview of the state – as new or transforming museums - or could be characterised by their independence from the state, and a reliance on limited and/or unlimited sources of funding. In the case of the new or transforming museums, state narratives around “repression and resistance” as well as the hidden histories of the ordinary person, who had been written out of history by a repressive state, took precedence. As Witz notes, however, independent museums, particular those with strong links with community groupings and with particular political affiliations, brought to the fore narratives which did not “conform to the national narratives”.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Witz, “Transforming museums”, p.108

<sup>74</sup> In one example, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport in the Western Cape supported an oral history project at the Caledon Museum. The project formed part of a broader focus on the gathering of oral histories in the Western Cape that was launched on Heritage Day, 24 September 2005. The mission was to “...transform museums so that they collectively reflect the diversity of the origins and history of all the people of the Western Cape.” Areas where oral histories would be collected included Khayelitsha, Mitchell’s Plain and Beaufort West. The link between oral histories and transforming museums was clearly laid out by the department who sought to “implement oral history research and to integrate this into the themes and collections of museums”. See *The Oral History Project*, pamphlet produced by the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, c.2005

<sup>75</sup> Witz, “Transforming museums”, p.108

<sup>76</sup> Witz, “Transforming museums”, p.108

The White Paper on Arts and Culture drafted in 1996, and the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) of 1999 has attempted to model an environment in which cultural institutions reflect the emerging democracy in its cultural and heritage practice. Within the need to reflect this democracy as a diverse, multicultural society, oral history and more centrally oral traditions and literature, were accorded a central place as a means of democratising and creating a shared culture.<sup>77</sup> This could be seen in state definitions of living heritage<sup>78</sup> which included oral history and material objects and places “to which oral traditions are attached”.<sup>79</sup> Living heritage in particular was cited as crucial to achieving the aims of nation-building and promoting diversity espoused by a new government and thus a

(m)ean must be found to enable song, dance, story-telling and oral history to be permanently recorded and conserved in the formal heritage structure.<sup>80</sup>

As the White Paper further noted

Our art forms, oratory, praise poetry, storytelling, dance and rituals live on in the collective memory. They are waiting in the wings to be reclaimed and proclaimed as part of the heritage of us all.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture , Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Pretoria, 4 June 1996, p.6 [own pagination], accessed on [www.dac.gov.za/white\\_paper.htm](http://www.dac.gov.za/white_paper.htm) accessed 11 May 2007

<sup>78</sup> Also included under living heritage, which is broadly defined as “those intangible aspects of inherited culture” , are cultural tradition, performance, ritual, popular memory, skills and techniques, indigenous knowledge systems and a “holistic approach to nature, society and social relationships”, see section 2 (xxi), p.9, of the National Heritage Resources Act , published in the *Government Gazette of South Africa*, vol.406 (1997), 28 April 1999, pp.1-88

<sup>79</sup> See section 2i(ii) and 2(b), pp.13,14 in National Heritage Resources Act , 1999 and the White Paper on Arts and Culture, pp.6-7

<sup>80</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture, p.26.

<sup>81</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture, p.7

As envisioned by the White Paper, living heritage would become a key focus of the newly established National Heritage Council, and thus by definition, an emphasis on oral tradition and oral history was assured. While the task was that of redefining and transforming the mission and structures of existing national museums to become more business and “commercially oriented”, the emphasis was placed on the link between communities, and their initiative in developing projects around *living heritage* was foregrounded.<sup>82</sup> These projects included the development of “multifunctional, multi-disciplinary community arts centres”, which would include “music, dance, film and theatre, [a] gallery [...], house a library and Internet access, as well as a museum”.<sup>83</sup>

The inclusion of oral history under definitions of ‘living heritage’ and the placement of living heritage in relation to community initiated projects - and not necessarily as part of the transforming national museum system - highlights the uneasy transition of oral history, as practised and disseminated within the university, to those cultural *institutions* which were historically fashioned as public spaces where access to state narratives were nurtured.<sup>84</sup> This uneasy transition also attests to social history’s intentional use of oral history as a tool with which to combat the officially sanctioned history of the apartheid state and the role of the ‘museum’ as a cultural institution which served as its institutional mouthpiece. It is perhaps this uneasy fit with the institution of the museum, together with categories of living heritage, mediated through ‘the community’, that created a social context amenable to the growth of community-oriented projects which sought to weave a collective remembrance of the past. In their support of these

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<sup>82</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture, pp. 22, 26-27

<sup>83</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture, p.19

<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that as part of their transformation, South African museums were expected to disseminate and display the products of living heritage and to include these in their collection.

initiatives the National Heritage Council mirrored a 1980s discourse around oral history and popular history projects, where the urgency to document, reveal and empower marginalised sections of South African society was crucial. The Council's focus, in a democratic society, was to support those projects which

- record living heritage practices
- develop an inventory of living heritage resources
- encourage awareness programmes amongst communities whose heritage has been neglected and marginalised
- encourage museums to conserve living heritage through audio-visual media.<sup>85</sup>

However, while the White Paper and the NHRA framed museum, arts and culture discourse in post-apartheid South Africa, the origin of the debate regarding museums and their role in South African society had its origins in the 1980s.<sup>86</sup> It is within these continuing debates about how the 'museum' would transform and how history could be publicly represented that the origins of community museums and public history – as a “successor” to that of a people's history took root. The envisioned role of public history lay in its potential to transform existing cultural institutions and museums. Thus the 1992 Wits History Workshop conference on “Myths, Monuments and Museums: New Premises” is cited as one of the key interventions enabling the movement beyond “informal forums” for representing revisionist history, to “mainstream projects for high-profile public consumption”.<sup>87</sup> This transition was marked by the “increasingly close abuttal of commercialised productions of history on museums and monuments.” In this reading the

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<sup>85</sup> White Paper on Arts and Culture, pp.26-27

<sup>86</sup> See P. Davison, “Museums and the re-shaping of memory” in G. Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, (London: Routledge), 2005, pp.184 – 194, p.188, footnote 6; Notably, the Wits History Workshop held a conference entitled, “Myths, Monuments and Museums: New Premises” in 1992 at the University of the Witwatersrand

<sup>87</sup> C. Hamilton, “Against the museum as chameleon”, *South African Historical Journal* 31, November 1994, pp.184 – 190, pp.184-185

boundary between progressive historical research and their informal means of circulating information and that of the “formal arenas of the production of history”, for example museums, were dissolved.<sup>88</sup> The *limits* of dissolving this boundary, however, lay in the choice of the formal arena over the *informal* as the site to display and produce ‘new’ historical knowledge.

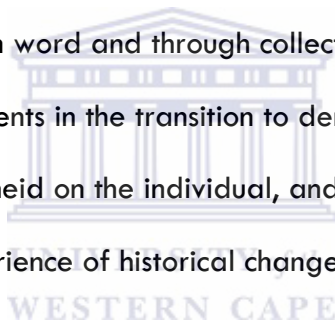
The break between an apartheid and a post-apartheid state embodied by the 1994 general election, in general, brought about a shift away from the representation of a dominant discourse within the country’s cultural institutions towards the representation of the hidden voices of South African history. However, this shift away from the dominant discourse and how it affected museums mirrored a broader trend and debate internationally which was largely spurred on by the influence of social history and history from below. As noted by Harrison, since the 1970s the identity crisis experienced by museums internationally manifested itself as an “anti-intellectualism” that took two forms – firstly, a form of anti-empiricism that rejected the dominant ideology of the West, and in which the histories and ideologies of those on the margin society were subsumed and ignored. Secondly, this anti-intellectualism manifested in the form of the “voice of the Philistines” where the re-interpretation of history was seen as the betrayal of the dominant ideology and efforts were made to prevent this re-interpretation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Hamilton, “Against the museum as chameleon”, p.185. Hamilton provides a reading of the origin moments and exhibitionary elements of MuseumAfrica in the early 1990s and their attempts to represent history from below.

<sup>89</sup> J. D. Harrison, “Ideas of museums in the 1990s”, in Corsane (ed), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries*, pp. 38-53, pp.39-40. Harrison provides a comprehensive discussion of the trends in museums from the 1970s onwards, and in so doing highlights the extent to which museology and the institution of the museum itself is theorised in ‘Western’ countries.

As noted by Minkley *et al*, *visuality* became a key sense through which the history of those seen to be at the margin of apartheid's narratives was expressed after 1994. Thus the excess of imagery that accompanied the broadcasting of those moments of 'history making' such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996 and the release of Nelson Mandela earlier in 1991, engendered a shift to a 'new' South African history that "was seen to be made" (own emphasis).<sup>90</sup> This emphasis on *visuality* in a context where histories were perceived as waiting to be unearthed, and thus validated, carried with it a shift in *viewing* evidence as at once visual and oral. With the TRC acts of testimony were literally seen as acts of agency - opportunities to reclaim senses of self through the spoken word and through collective consumption of these images. As one of the key moments in the transition to democracy, the work of the TRC emphasized the effect of apartheid on the individual, and the value of the individual's contribution to a collective experience of historical change.



One of the museums that was refigured in the early 1990s as a museum that responded to the climate of political change at the time was that of the *Africana Museum* in Johannesburg. Relunched as *MuseumAfrica* in 1994, a few months before the opening of the *District Six Museum* in Cape Town, the project arose out of the perceived need to represent the hidden histories of Johannesburg in ways that were responsive to the climate of political transformation, and which used the museum as a tool to represent hidden histories. Broadly, the objectives of *Museum Africa* at the time reflected the aims of the *District Six Museum* in its intention to represent the "lives of ordinary people" and

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<sup>90</sup> See Minkley *et al*, "Thresholds, gateways and spectacles" p.2



in the conceptualisation of the content of its exhibitions as “social history”.<sup>91</sup> Where the two museums differed, however, was in the ways in which the concept of “community” was deployed and used in the making of the new exhibitions, and in effect the institution itself. The presence of ex-residents in the conceptualisation of the museum space through interaction between curators and community members is a key feature of the District Six Museum. While it is not clear from Hamilton’s account of MuseumAfrica’s transformation of the role of community members in developing the exhibition, she does identify three groups which informed the direction of the museum, namely social historians, “militant ‘community’ organisations” and the Johannesburg city council.<sup>92</sup> However, in terms of who was envisioned as gaining access to the museum, Hamilton notes that the community/audience sought by the museum was ‘accessed’ through a marketing firm who conducted “community consultations”.<sup>93</sup> The definition of community – as it relates to the museum’s target audience, as well as the community which was represented in the exhibitions, represents an important feature of the debate around transforming museums, as well as those which came into being in post-apartheid South Africa. At the cusp of the transition to a democratic government, the District Six Museum arose as a ‘new’ space in which the particular narrative of the forced removals, and consequently one of the suppressed narratives of apartheid, was foregrounded at the *conception* of its exhibitions, and not necessarily the institution of the ‘museum’ itself.

Hamilton’s concerns about the transformation of MuseumAfrica echoes a concern with how the nuances of history are to be displayed and the how power relations are

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<sup>91</sup> Hamilton, “Against the museum as chameleon”, p.185

<sup>92</sup> Hamilton, “Against the museum as chameleon”, p. 189

<sup>93</sup> Hamilton, “Against the museum as chameleon”, p. 186

mediated, even dulled, within the institution of the museum for public consumption. As she notes of the transformed displays located in Museum Africa, "The incompleteness of the story told, the emphasis on popular culture, the use of the picturesque in evocative ways, is open to a reading which suggests that 'people's history' is a pastiche of experiences which is not driven by the same logic of cause and effect in powerful sequence, as are the histories of the powerful..."<sup>94</sup> Hamilton argues for a more thorough approach to transforming the displays in MuseumAfrica and so sets up a number of criteria for museum practice post-1994, namely that museums should be critical institutions which reflect a history from below whilst at the same time mediating claims to authority, authorship and therefore historical 'truth' in its exhibitions and work.<sup>95</sup> In some instances, the form of museum that responds most aptly to this critique is that of the community museum.



The topic for discussion at the Wits History Workshop held in 1992, namely the transformation of cultural institutions which were firmly located within the grand narrative of apartheid, appears as a logical progression within a society undergoing a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic government. However, the need to transform these institutions and the particular interest taken by the academy in the institution of the museum raises questions as to what then constituted the 'informal' sectors of historical production and how they were accommodated in an emerging democracy. It is argued that the community museum, particularly in the form of the District Six Museum, grew out of this informal sector where the urge to produce history in a variety of forms was an organic one - emanating from a much broader base of communities and

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<sup>94</sup> Hamilton, "Against the museum as chameleon", pp. 187 -188

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton, "Against the museum as chameleon", pp. 188-189

individuals with a range of skills and ideologies, who did not abandon, but rather de-emphasised the central role of the academy in formulating responses to democratic change and authoring historical representation/interpretation. However, the notion of an organic beginning to the District Six Museum is not an unproblematic one, and does not fully explore how the representation of its own history – and that of its exhibitions are also deeply rooted in disciplines and individuals rooted in the academy. As noted by Rassool, the form that the memorial project to District Six took – namely that of a museum – in itself meant the drawing upon of a range of practices that could be attributed to the “organisational genre” of the museum as well the academy. Thus areas of work identified with collecting and curatorial practice in themselves were not wholly organic processes, and the influence of museum trustees, some of whom were “educators, historians, artists [and] architects” was felt in the displays and conceptual framework of the museum.<sup>96</sup> In addition to the influence exerted by museum trustees, it is precisely through their interaction (both conflictual and beneficial), with disciplines such as archaeology and ethnomusicology, which were located within the academy, that the claims to an organic beginning (as essentially resting with the District Six community) may be contested.

Rassool ventures a number of reasons as to why the role of the academy in the establishment of the museum has been problematic, and this may be linked with Hamilton’s concern for museums to become spaces where notions of authority and

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<sup>96</sup> C. Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics, and social transformation in South Africa: histories, possibilities, and limits” in I. Karp, C. Kratz, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarra-Frausto with G. Buntix, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and C. Rassool (eds), *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2006, pp. 286- 321, p.294

authorship are critically mediated. As Rassool notes, it is the role of the academy and its “histories of appropriation and hierarchies of knowledge” , combined with the effect of the “racialised order” through which universities were established, that the District Six Museum sought to counter.<sup>97</sup> Central to this was the creation of an “alternative knowledge domains in the public sphere” - in response to a racialised university system and intellectual traditions that were largely paternalistic in nature. The alternative knowledge domains identified by Rassool highlight the space that independent museums occupied post-1994, particularly those who did not subscribe to national narratives in traditional ways.

National and provincial museums in South Africa, especially those latter museums which often told the story of provincial colonial life – the struggle for the land by the settler - have found insistent and renewed vigour under a Heritage Act that promotes an understanding of South African heritage as heterogeneous and united in its diversity. However, as seen earlier, an emphasis is placed on foregrounding suppressed histories and promoting living heritage i.e. the oral and living traditions of different cultural groups in South African society. As with the TRC – where the site of representation was both the physical location of the hearing and the corporeal site of oral testimony, community museums emerged as a creature of the oral, spoken testimony of ‘victims’ of apartheid, and the ‘locatedness’ of sites of memory recalled in their testimony. <sup>98</sup> Their

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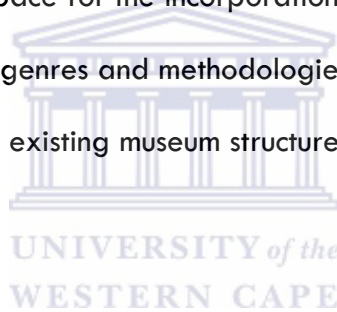
<sup>97</sup> C. Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics”, p.295

<sup>98</sup> The South End Museum, a community museum in Port Elizabeth, describes its genesis as out of the sorrow of those affected by the forced removal of the community during apartheid. Together with photographs, a reconstruction of a “typical South End house” in the museum space, one is able to view “newspaper clippings reliving the horrors of [a]partheid.” See <http://www.mandelametro.gov.za/default.aspx?page=30121> , accessed 18 May 2007. Whereas the TRC attempted to reconcile political crimes experienced under apartheid, it is worth thinking through how the spaces of community museums originate as independent spaces

emergence was rooted in a political and creative response to the limitations of both the conceptual and physical parameters of state museums.

It is in the almost incongruent aims of foregrounding the history of those affected materially under the conditions of apartheid, and the need to build an inclusive heritage framework (that includes those complicit in the making of those conditions), where history from below is seen as a legitimate framework through which to display history.

However, where state museums took history from below, and (seemingly) seamlessly incorporated oral history into existing museum structures, spaces such as the District Six Museum acted as a receptive space for the incorporation of oral histories – where oral histories neither reproduced the genres and methodologies of the academy, nor functioned as ‘added content’ to existing museum structures.



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particularly because of traumatic and damaged relations with the state and state institutions during apartheid, and the need therefore to seek cultural restitution in ways that circumvent these relations, even post 1994.

## Chapter Two

### Representation through fragmentation: Horstley Street, District Six

*“ There was a time, and really not so long ago, when a history of the material conditions of life in District Six could have been recorded very largely by tramping its streets with a tape recorder and notebook.”<sup>1</sup>*

The aim of the following chapter is to explore the role of oral historical practice as it relates to exhibitionary and curatorial practice in the District Six Museum. It will focus on the exhibition which signaled the opening of the museum in 1994, *Streets*, as well as the *Digging Deeper* exhibition, which signaled the opening of the renovated museum space in 2000, in order to examine the precedents for how oral histories were actively translated, managed and staged within the museum. Constructed as a space where one is able to articulate a sense of the razed spaces of District Six and its communal life, as well as a space where that community is mobilised towards the objective of land restitution, oral history has been a key methodological feature of the museum.

However, since the inception of the Hands Off District Six campaign in the 1980s, a central feature of the District Six memorial project has been the debate around the form such a project would take. The multiple ‘formation’ myths which drive these debates have roots in a broad range of activist intellectual, community and academic readings of an appropriate form through which to remember District Six.<sup>2</sup> While the institutional character and organisational structure reflects on a superficial level, the features of a

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<sup>1</sup> B. Nasson, “Oral history and the reconstruction of District Six” in S. Jeppie and C. Soudien (eds), *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*, (Cape Town: Buchu Books), 1990, pp. 44- 66, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> See S. Prosalendis, “Foreword” in C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum*, (Cape Town: District Six Museum Foundation), 2000, p.v. A chapter in *Recalling Community* is dedicated to museum trustees’ various readings of the ‘beginnings’ of the museum project.

museum, it is in the contestation of these that spaces are created where the role of oral history - as a dynamic methodological element - is foregrounded as a curatorial and research practice.<sup>3</sup>

### **Locating oral history practice within the District Six Museum**

While Bill Nasson's remark at the beginning of this chapter bears an uncanny resemblance to the visions of "barefoot historians" envisaged by the People's History Project at the University of the Western Cape in the 1980's, it best highlights the relationship between popular and social historians and their grappling with the methodological integrity inherent in the testimony of ordinary people and in the value of a written history. Armed with the tools of her trade, the "labour historian", as noted by Nasson, was at the forefront of gathering oral testimony about the material and social conditions of life in District Six. With her focus on "local kinship and community patterns" – or on the "complex mosaic of small-scale subcontracting and independent homeworking" in the area, it was possible to reconstruct the history of District Six both culturally and economically.<sup>4</sup> While maybe not barefoot, historians nevertheless, as Nasson remarks, *could've* tramped the streets of District Six in search of its history.

The nostalgic longing which marks the beginning of Nasson's account of District Six is important, as it seems to mourn not only the disappearance of the community, but also the loss of the more tangible evidence and characteristics able to illustrate working conditions, or leisure moments in the District. The evidence of its material conditions, as it

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<sup>3</sup> V. Layne and C. Rassool, "Memory rooms: Oral history in the District Six Museum", in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp. 146 – 153

<sup>4</sup> Nasson, "Oral history", p.44

would've been optimally collected by social historians, appears to be lodged in the gathering of residents' oral testimonies, which were underscored by the physical (and hence visual) characteristics that defined the area.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore with the physical destruction of District Six (and the loss of its visual presence) that a more nuanced approach to the history of the area is facilitated, resulting in a "material history" of the area that is lodged in the "perceptions and experiences of those who once lived there."

<sup>6</sup> Nasson's enthusiasm for the voices of District Six is coupled with the recognition that although the "visual consciousness" of the area may fade, it is precisely this sense which is able to "support and direct memory". Notably, the history of District Six is a "history of the mind", which will have to draw on the "residues of popular memory".<sup>7</sup> The above recount of Nasson's thinking is important as it provides a tentative start for thinking through how oral histories of District Six are conducted, used and staged as historical recovery within a museum and exhibitionary context. While these articulations are formulated within a framework of social and popular history – it is the tentative recognition of visibility, memory and forms of orality as inherent to a project of recovery that confronts, albeit subtly, social history's need for clearly defined sources of evidence.

For Nasson oral sources and the memories of residents are only viable when the evidence provided by the *literary* sources of dominant groups are bound by the

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<sup>5</sup> Nasson, "Oral history", p.44. Nasson's paper was delivered as a public lecture at the 'District Six in Retrospect' exhibition held in Cape Town in April 1986. The notion that oral history practice within the museum can be linked to a strong focus on the visibility and a formation of a historical imaginary (where the representation of the 'image' is key), will be taken up later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Nasson, "Oral history", p.46

<sup>7</sup> Nasson, "Oral history", p.46



disciplinary language of social investigation and characterised by the marked absence of a working class in their records.<sup>8</sup> To recover a historical narrative for District Six, namely one which circumvents the mythologies invoked by a stereotypical stock of “popular imagery” that was contained in popular accounts and newspapers at the time, as well as the official archive, required that the archive be treated as a hostile source. This archive had rendered District Sixers “partially, through the prism of intermediaries.”<sup>9</sup> If history was to reflect a complexity that arises from the agency of residents themselves, the oral testimony by District Sixers was constructed as a more authentic and less hostile source for depicting this complexity.

The significance of Nasson’s use of oral history lies in the complexity it recognises of oral history as a source and as a possible terrain for interrogation. However, within the above text and another relating popular leisure in District Six, this complexity is only deciphered through the interpretive power of the *historian* who uses oral testimony for the “imaginative reconstruction” of the area, and who is then able to empathise with, interpret and portray the inner life of the resident.<sup>10</sup> Oral history comes to represent the *feelings* of those who have fallen victim to history – and who therefore require the historian’s skills and intervention to narrate their many experiences and selves into a factual, yet nuanced historical account.<sup>11</sup> Of interest is Nasson’s personification that, of District Six, “History has left next to nothing by way of physical landscape.” In addition

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<sup>8</sup> Nasson, “Oral history”, p.46

<sup>9</sup> Nasson, “Oral history”, pp. 48-49

<sup>10</sup> See B. Nasson, “ ‘She preferred living in cave with Harry the snake-catcher’: Towards an oral history of popular leisure and class expression in District Six, Cape Town, c.1920s -1950s” in P. Bonner, I. Hofmeyr, D. James and T. Lodge (eds), *Holding their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press), 1989, pp.285 -309

<sup>11</sup> Nasson, “Oral history”, pp. 47, 49 See Williams, *The Welsh in their History*, p.149 quoted on p.49

the metaphor used to describe the historian's use of oral testimony as a source of evidence is the 'body'. Thus memories of District Six are the sinews, veins and muscles which enable a "history of the mind" of District Six. Whether intentionally or not, the metaphor evokes social history's intention of restoring the 'self' to history.<sup>12</sup> Nasson further reiterates a fellow historian's call that they act as "people's remembrancers". Notably, it is the content of the archive which defines its hostility and not the organising principle in itself.<sup>13</sup> Nasson's weaving of oral sources into an earlier account of popular leisure in District Six is notable for a more conservative approach to the use of oral history as a source of evidence. The dual contexts in which these papers are published – one in a History Workshop publication and another as a paper delivered at an opening of an exhibition (and later included in a seminal popular publication in support of the Hands Off District Six campaign) is significant. In writing for the Wits History Workshop publication, oral evidence becomes a tightly woven source – embedded in text as proof and evidence. Footnotes reveal an oral source identified by their (working class) profession, the initials of their names and their date of birth. As noted by Nasson in this context, the interviews form part of a larger documenting project where oral testimony, in the form of recordings and transcripts, are "being preserved as an archive."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nasson, "Oral history", pp.46, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *The Welsh in their History*, p.149 cited in Nasson, "Oral history", p. 49

<sup>14</sup> Nasson, "She preferred living in a cave", p.306. The archive mentioned by Nasson was that of the Western Cape Oral History Project (WCOHP), which had been launched in 1984 and was based at the University of Cape Town. The history of District Six, gathered in the form of life history interviews with ex-residents, was a research focus of the project, which provided information on the inner city of Cape Town and which sought to 'democratise the historical record.' see S. Jeppie, "Local history and oral history in Cape Town: some reflections", paper delivered at the Popular History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 8-9 February 1990, (Johannesburg: History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand), p.1-4, p.2

Oral history, as a means of knowing about District Six, was subject to the disciplinary movements within social and popular history. However, other ways of knowing about the District did not rest simply within written texts or methodologies associated with the historical discipline, but were rooted in attempts to popularise the 'struggle for District Six' through political, cultural and community centred approaches. The programme for the *Hands Off District Six* conference held in 1988 presented a range of mediums through which information on the area was presented. Panel discussions on the literature, cultural, political, religious and sporting life of the District were chaired by historians, activists, educationists and writers. Significantly, the programme included sessions and efforts to visualise and 'perform' District Six. Thus panel discussions were interspersed with options of participating in "walks through District Six", and included slide presentations narrated by Naz Ebrahim and Fr. Basil van Rensburg, videos, poetry readings and an exhibition of photographs.<sup>15</sup> The multi faceted approach to commemorating District Six continued in a District Six commemoration week which took place four years later in 1992.<sup>16</sup> The photographic exhibition which launched this week also served as the launch of the museum project. The exhibition included the work of six photographers and furthermore included "material from personal records and archival sources."<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein to that of the *Hands Off* conference, processions to the

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<sup>15</sup> *Hands Off District Six* conference programme, Saturday, 9 July 1988, Hands Off District Six Committee.

<sup>16</sup> District Six Commemoration Week programme, 31 October - 7 November 1992, District Six Museum Foundation

<sup>17</sup> District Six Commemoration Week programme, 31 October - 7 November 1992. The six photographers were George Hallett, Jimmy Matthews, Rashid Lombard, Willie de Klerk, Geoff Grundlingh and Jansje Wissema. The opening of the exhibition was accompanied by an audiovisual presentation, music performances, poetry and a short story readings, as well as performances of two scenes from a play, "Avalon Court". Bill Nasson spoke about the mission statement and the aims of the District Six Museum Foundation and on the last day led a panel discussion on "Film and Memory".

District Six site, poetry, plays, music and audio-visual presentations comprised the remaining week's events.

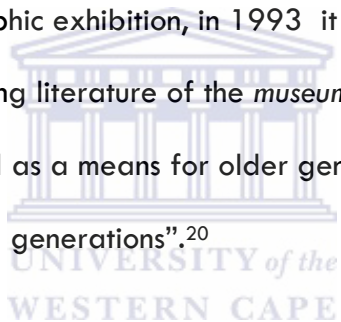
The programme components of the *Hands Off* conference and commemorative week underscore a broad acknowledgement of performance and visibility in sustaining and evoking meanings around District Six. The launch of the museum project with a photographic exhibition, and the accompanying performances of poetry, music, scenes from a play, as well as the narrated audio-visual presentation is significant for the context it provided for the testimonies of ex-residents, the performative depictions of the area by cultural activists and the space it provided historians, and practitioners of disciplines located within the institution of the university - to establish and engage with aesthetic and academic forms available for commemorating District Six.<sup>18</sup> The subsequent success of the 1992 exhibition sanctioned the use of the Methodist church building as the site of the future museum of District Six.

With the impetus of needing to establish the foundations of a memorial project, promotional material for the museum relied on the language of popular history to frame the role of the museum project in “documenting and interpreting the history of common people”, which would take the form of “scholarly studies” and the “popularisation and dissemination” of these to foster historical memory of the forced removals and to

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<sup>18</sup> In a more controversial use of photographic portraiture and ex-resident testimony, in 1988 British Petroleum South Africa (BPSA), amidst pressures to cease their proposed redevelopment of District Six, commissioned a photo-journalist, Ingrid Hudson, to conduct a photographic essay as part of an informal survey and as part of their annual report. Entitled *Voices from the Street*, she “spent four days wandering around, taking photographs, knocking on doors, talking to people.” Eleven portraits of former District Six residents and current residents from Woodstock, “Zonnebloem” (District Six); Surrey Estate and Athlone were accompanied by quotations illustrating either remembrances of District Six or opinions on the proposed redevelopment.

preserve District Six in “historical consciousness”. Through its explicit link with the departments of history at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town, and the latter institution’s archaeology department, an outcome of these partnerships would be to train “young black researchers in archival methodologies.”<sup>19</sup> As the museum project directed its work towards a post-apartheid future of “restitution and reconciliation”, the museum as a conventional, dead space was countered by the idea of a living museum which served as a public space for films, exhibitions, lectures and poetry readings. While oral testimony (of ex-residents) was integrated into ways of remembering District Six at the *Hands Off* conference and the 1992 District Six commemorative week photographic exhibition, in 1993 it was explicitly acknowledged as a methodology in the emerging literature of the *museum* project. Thus, as reminiscence therapy, oral history was valued as a means for older generations to place their “life experiences on record for future generations”.<sup>20</sup>



The two exhibitions which mark the formal transition between a museum project and the establishment of a museum is that of *Streets: Re-tracing District Six* (1994) and *Digging Deeper* (2000). Both exhibitions surfaced a range of curatorial practices which are key to the exploration of how the museum uses oral histories in its exhibitionary strategy.

The *Streets* exhibition introduced a number of characteristics which became the foundations for the future display practice of the museum. The exhibition, which opened 10 December 1994, was located in the Methodist church in Buitenkant Street, and

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<sup>19</sup> *District Six Museum Project proposal*, District Six Museum Foundation, 1993

<sup>20</sup> *District Six Museum Project proposal*, District Six Museum Foundation, 1993

served as a commemorative space where ex-residents could participate and inform the visual construction of District Six within the space of the museum. In its tangible form, the exhibition contents comprised materials and “residues” from the site of District Six as well as artefacts, documents and memorabilia. Also included were “contemporary cues and reconstructions of historical remembrance.”<sup>21</sup> Particular elements of the exhibition which made up its visual framework were the large, hand-painted street map of District Six occupying the floor space, three columns of old District Six street signs and portraits of ex-residents which hung from the gallery space of the old church. At the base of the three columns of street signs were placed three perspex boxes containing archaeological fragments excavated from the Horstley Street site in District Six. While these elements comprised the main exhibition space, other elements included screens and alcoves which contained documentation on District Six as well as photographic albums and oral histories of families who lived in the area. The provision of surfaces on which ex-residents were able to inscribe their remembrances of the area was provided in the form of the large map painting and lengths of calico cloth. In creating a space where ex-residents could participate in the visual construction of the area, an emphasis was placed on oral history and the interaction it generated. Ex-residents became narrators who actively engaged with the exhibition, “assembling and interpreting their own materials within the museum space”. As noted by Delpont, oral history was given *form* through these interactions and interventions.<sup>22</sup> *Streets* garnered a range of attention from those who sought to map and trace South Africa’s transformation into a democratic, non-racial society. Within this context of a changing society, and in

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<sup>21</sup> P. Delpont, “Signposts for retrieval: A visual framework for enabling memory of place and time” in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town*, pp.31 – 46, p.34

<sup>22</sup> Delpont, “Signposts for retrieval”, pp.34-36

particular the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in facilitating this change, the museum floor map in particular was seen to speak to the fashioning of a 'new' South African identity which worked with concepts of place, memory and orality in the fashioning of an apartheid past and democratic future.<sup>23</sup>

The following section of the chapter briefly seeks to identify how archaeology, as a discipline of technique (excavation) and interpretation, has engaged with and has been appropriated by the museum's exhibitionary strategy. In 1998, the language of archaeology was a vital part of the way in which the museum contextualised *Streets*: "Like sediment concealing artefacts in the rubble of the old District, the exhibition unearthed a layer of collective memory. We have only begun to excavate this layered past."<sup>24</sup> Words such as 'sediment', 'unearthed', 'excavate' and the notions of layering complemented descriptions of the museum as a space that facilitated an archaeology of memory. Thus the map with its inscriptions came to represent a "carefully excavated and labeled archaeological site."<sup>25</sup> The museum's first engagement with the discipline of archaeology had emerged out of a series of public meetings held in 1992 and 1993 with ex-residents, who were consulted regarding the proposed site of a Memorial Park to District Six. These meetings resulted in a public commitment to the development of such a park, located around the site of Horstley Street on the upper slopes of Devil's Peak.

This particular street gained prominence through the documentary film *Last Supper in*

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<sup>23</sup> See A. Bohlin, "The politics of locality: Memories of District Six in Cape Town" in N. Lovell (ed), *Locality and Belonging*, (London: Routledge), 1998, pp.168-187; C. McEachern, "Working with memory: The District Six Museum in the new South Africa, *Social Analysis* 42(2), July 1998, pp.48 – 72; A. Coombes, "The archaeology of memory" in A. E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press), 2004, pp.116 - 148

<sup>24</sup> T. Smith, "What's up at the museum", *District Six Museum Newsletter*, 3(1) August 1998, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> T. Morphet, "An archaeology of memory", *Weekly Mail*, 3 February 1995

*Horstley Street*, which depicted a family's removal from their home in the 1980s, and was furthermore the focus of earlier research and artistic interventions on the District Six site.<sup>26</sup> Museum trustee and architect Lucien le Grange, who designed the Memorial Park, recommended that excavations take place to reveal the foundations of houses in preparation for the site. On this basis the University of Cape Town's archaeology department was approached to conduct excavations at Horstley Street.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, Ciraj Rassool has highlighted the complex relations that arose through the museum's engagement with public archaeology. Whereas Malan and Soudien provide an almost clinical account leading up to the excavation of Horstley Street and the development of the display for *Digging Deeper*, Rassool highlights how, in the making of the Horstley Street display, archaeologists' concern regarding the "ownership of archaeological knowledge" and how it was mediated and authorised to a broader public, particularly in the space of the museum was deeply entrenched. As he notes, their claims to ownership limited the attempt of public archaeology to mediate how (archaeo-logical) pasts could be reclaimed and restored for a broader public.<sup>28</sup>

The excavation of a site in upper Horstley Street and the subsequent display of its material remains within *Streets* rendered in visual form the debates around what

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<sup>26</sup> *Last Supper in Horstley Street* depicted the Hendricks' family removal from 75 Horstley Street and their relocation to Belhar, on the Cape Flats. The same family was featured in Peggy Delpport's mural *Res Clamant*, painted onto the wall of the Holy Cross church hall in District Six in the last years of the removal.

<sup>27</sup> A. Malan and C. Soudien, "Managing heritage in District Six, Cape Town: Conflicts past and present" in J. Schofield, W.G. Johnson and C.M. Beck (eds), *Matériel Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflict*, (London: Routledge), 2002, pp.249 -265, pp.253- 254. Also see letter from Peggy Delpport, Secretary of the District Six Museum Foundation to Martin Hall, Archaeology Department, University of Cape Town, 12 March 1993

<sup>28</sup> C. Rassool, "Community museums, memory politics, and social transformation in South Africa: Histories, possibilities, and limits" in I. Karp, C. Kratz, L. Szwajca and T. Ybarra-Frausto (eds), *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2006, pp. 286- 321, pp.306 -307



constituted sources of evidence from which a people's history of District Six could be reconstructed. Public archaeology pursued similar aims to that of social history, namely to reclaim senses of and rights to history for a broader public through "evidence and interpretations" and - through the interpretations of the archaeologist - mediated the material world to those whose hidden histories were uncovered on the archaeological site.<sup>29</sup> Horstley Street, seen as an opportunity for the practice of a public archaeology in 1993<sup>30</sup>, challenged the extent to which this form of archaeology was able to move beyond an empiricism that sought to excavate and interpret artefacts as sources of evidence within a site-bound archaeological narrative. As noted by Malan and van Heyningen, the archaeological record unearthed at Horstley Street proved to be sparse, merely relinquishing fragments of a household whose material traces had been irrevocably altered by the demolition of the area.<sup>31</sup> In discussing the shifts that emerged from the Horstley Street excavation two instances of representing the results of the excavation will be discussed below, the first being the inclusion of three archaeological display cases in the *Streets* exhibition in 1994, and later the incorporation of the Horstley Street narrative into the Memorial Hall of the museum and within the *Digging Deeper* exhibition in 2000.

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<sup>29</sup> Hall, "District Six March", nd. cited in Rassool, "Community museums, memory politics", p.305. Public archaeology at the time also reflected a concern with working class housing - and thus the focus on uncovering the foundations of houses and tracing patterns of ownership through the documentary archive. See "Archaeology in District Six" in the *District Six Museum Foundation Newsletter*, January 1996 and A. Malan and E. van Heyningen, "Twice removed: Horstley Street in Cape Town's District Six, 1865-1982" in A. Mayne and T. Murray (eds), *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes: Explorations in Urban Slumland*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press), 2001, pp. 39- 56

<sup>30</sup> See Rassool, "Community museums, memory politics" pp. 305 - 306

<sup>31</sup> Malan and van Heyningen, "Twice removed". As noted by Malan and van Heyningen, the fragments excavated consisted of household debris which had accumulated under the floorboards of No. 75 Horstley Street. and represented "things that were broken or lost in the house." , p. 43

The discussion of the Horstley Street exhibition below has made use of interpretations of the site by archaeologists, historians and museum staff and trustees, some of which were authored a number of years after the initial excavation of 1993 - in preparation for *Digging Deeper* and in response to the anticipated return to District Six by ex-residents via the land restitution process. Writing about the Horstley Street excavation in 2001, a historical archaeologist and historian working with the archival sources and archaeological remains of the Horstley Street site, embedded documentation and material remains within the discourses of history and archaeology.<sup>32</sup> In a celebration of their respective disciplines, Malan and van Heyningen's in-depth research attempted to explore the historical development of Horstley Street in a context where they claimed "detailed, critical research by historians" was lacking and where the "detailed, site-specific approach of the historical archaeologist" complemented the historian's use of records.<sup>33</sup> Their collaboration was perceived as beneficial to their respective disciplines and to 'uncovering' the history of the site, but can also be seen in part, to be a response to a site which yielded a fragmented archaeological context after the initial excavation – and therefore the limits of that discipline.

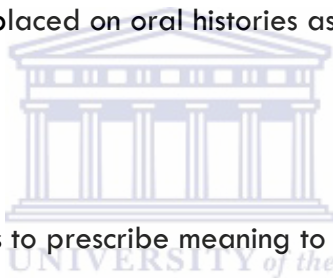
Other interpretations of the Horstley Street excavation placed oral histories alongside archaeology as sources for the discipline. Recalling the excavation in 2002, Malan and Soudien, the latter a trustee of the museum noted that at the time of the 1993 excavation, the museum was the receiver of "mementoes, visual and remembered", and played the role of deepening the historical and archaeological record through oral

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<sup>32</sup> See Malan and van Heyningen, "Twice removed", p.43

<sup>33</sup> Malan and van Heyningen, "Twice removed", p.39

testimonies – thereby validating the aims of a public archaeology.<sup>34</sup> As noted earlier, Horstley Street artefacts were significant for being found in “an archaeological context that defies interpretation.”<sup>35</sup> Within this context, Malan and Soudien’s identification of archaeological and oral evidence as complementary sources is important. Oral testimonies, as the source of interpretation, transformed fragmented material remains into material *culture*, giving voice to what were identified as “mundane” artefacts excavated from the Horstley Street site.<sup>36</sup> However, some of the oral testimonies used to interpret material found in Horstley Street, related to another street in District Six, namely Eckard Street, affirming the symbolic and representative nature of the fragments found on the site and the value placed on oral histories as sources of evidence within the *museum*.<sup>37</sup>



The reluctance by archaeologists to prescribe meaning to the fragments can be seen to stem from the discipline’s need for empirical sources of evidence which were not *wholly* subject to the workings of ex-resident memory as expressed within the museum. When oral sources were used, these were located within archives based at the University of Cape Town and duly footnoted.<sup>38</sup> The inability to derive an archaeological context and therefore an interpretation for the Horstley Street fragments, in retrospect reveals the fault lines within public archaeology in the years leading up to and immediately after the transition to democracy, particularly in the way it sought to disseminate its processes. In later calls for a ‘archaeology from below’, the role of community participation as

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<sup>34</sup> Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.255

<sup>35</sup> Malan and van Heyningen, “Twice removed”, p.43

<sup>36</sup> Malan and van Heyningen, “Twice removed”, p.43

<sup>37</sup> Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.256

<sup>38</sup> See Footnotes 46 and 48 in Malan and van Heyningen, “Twice removed”, p.55

rooted within the process of excavation itself was noted as important for the future management of the heritage of the District Six site.<sup>39</sup> This call for an ‘archaeology from below’ expanded on the intentions echoed by the Research Unit for the Archaeology of Cape Town (RESUNACT) in 1995 to communicate their results of their research to “both the academic community and the public”, and who furthermore cited public archaeology at the core of the RESUNACT programme.<sup>40</sup> However, while later forms recognised the role of communities in the actual techniques of the discipline, earlier attempts at public archaeology focused on dissemination. Thus, as it related to the District Six site, further excavations in the mid 1990’s saw RESUNACT establish a “laboratory” – a future resource for school children - in the museum where visitors could read about the latest research, “handle some of the artefacts...and find out how archaeologists work”.<sup>41</sup>



This emphasis on the dissemination of processes occurred to the detriment of producing a critical and self-reflexive engagement between the archaeological discipline and its publics; and the dynamic of negotiating forms of ownership of a District Six public situated outside the museum structure.<sup>42</sup> It further revealed the limitation of public archaeology in articulating a critical role within an emerging community museum – one which moved beyond the conventional museological framework of the display of culture through objects, and the role of archaeology in ‘providing’ these objects. However,

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<sup>39</sup> See Faulkner “Archaeology from below” in Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.263

<sup>40</sup> [www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/about.html/](http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/about.html/); [www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/arch.html/](http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/arch.html/), accessed 18 October 2006

<sup>41</sup> [www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/arch.html/](http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/arch.html/), accessed 18 October 2006

<sup>42</sup> see Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics”, p. 305, 306

within a circumstance where the archaeological context did not allow for an adequate interpretation of the material remains, the interpretive value of the fragments were appropriated by museum practitioners for their representational value and their ability to speak of the possibilities for how a history of District Six could be constructed. Thus the three perspex boxes represented the

ground before digging (or the past and memory before sorting), the middle box is the process of beginning to sort, and the left-hand box shows where different artefacts were found according to the plan of the house.<sup>43</sup>

Elements of the Horstley Street excavation were thus a key visual element in the *Streets* exhibition<sup>44</sup> Poised below the column of blue and white street names, which were suspended at one end of the street map of District Six, perspex boxes filled with clay soil, stones and archaeological fragments of cutlery, crockery and bottles and of a child's doll formed part of an exhibition that, as argued by Peggy Delport, worked with principles of accessibility and which was a "generative arena for historical retrieval and interpretation and the interrelationship of historical method and aesthetics."<sup>45</sup>

The significance of the archaeological artefact as a visual, aesthetic form, as opposed to merely being a source of evidence or proof relates to a double visuality which the fragments were made to invoke. Notably, the perspex boxes, in their transparency contained the artefacts while shelves were constructed within the exhibition's alcoves for

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<sup>43</sup> *The District Six Museum*, information pamphlet, n.d, District Six Museum Foundation

<sup>44</sup> Undertaken by the RESUNACT project based in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town

<sup>45</sup> Delport, " Signposts for retrieval" pp.34,36

the reception of ex-residents' artefacts and memorabilia.<sup>46</sup> This visual presence (as it related to other elements in the exhibition) conjured not only the physical landscape of District Six in *evidentiary* form, but was a means to transcend history, and history-from-below, as a written experience. Rather, to 'be seen' within history as it was being conceived within a post-apartheid present, the memory associated with the artefact – related in oral, performative and visual terms – became key. The visual strategy and methodology of the museum thus included the use of artefact that relies on its form as an object of evidence, but also as a dialectical object that derived meaning from its aesthetic and interpretational value within a visual strategy. Parallel to the visual sense evoked by the 'artefact' was the visual sense of District Six evoked by textual elements in both the *Streets* and *Digging Deeper* installations. In the provision of inscriptive surfaces through the map painting on the church floor, the calico name-cloth and other spaces for inscription, an aesthetic relation was created between artefacts as signs and text as artefact. Thus the ultramarine blue and white coloured street signs from District Six were echoed aesthetically in the colour of lines of *Streets* and in the street names themselves.<sup>47</sup> In order to re-write District Sixers back into history (within the context of an emerging museum, and where exhibitions were a primary form of depicting this presence), archaeology lent itself to the language of representation and display, while oral testimonies were tasked with the ability to uncover hidden histories.

For archaeologists the lack of more substantial material remains in Horstley Street allowed for the mining, in collaboration with historians, of the documentary archive, as

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<sup>46</sup> Delpont, "Signposts for retrieval", p.36

<sup>47</sup> Delpont, "Signposts for retrieval", p.34

well as oral archives, for the purpose of broadening the archaeological context of the excavated artefacts.<sup>48</sup> This resulted in a paper which was to become the basis for a reworked installation about Horstley Street in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition in 2000. As Malan and Soudien note, the process leading up to the installation incorporated museum staff, archaeologists and ex-residents from Horstley Street, who were invited to critique the exhibition and to provide additional information on the street.<sup>49</sup> There was an attempt to develop the exhibition in accordance with the style of *Digging Deeper*, a key feature of which, as noted by Malan and Soudien, was the presence of the stories and voices of ex-residents which ran “both literally and figuratively through the images”. As they further note, the closely packed written and graphic information of the Horstley Street installation was trimmed to “create more visual immediacy and impact.”<sup>50</sup> There was an attempt to create an interactive exhibition which raised questions regarding the critical use of documents, which depicted an earlier time frame for forced removals in District Six and which sought to illustrate District Six outside the historical boundaries of the 1960s removal.<sup>51</sup> As noted earlier however, Rassool’s account of this process differs from Malan and Soudien, and emphasises the limits placed by archaeologists on who could claim ownership of knowledge produced during the Horstley Street excavation.

Thus, the Horstley Street display, which formed part of *Digging Deeper*, succeeded in providing a deeper and contested narrative in its display panels and the artefacts

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<sup>48</sup> Malan and van Heyningen produced a collaborative research paper that incorporated extensive archival research on Horstley Street in 2001, eight years after the initial excavation. This was part of the dissemination process for the Research Unit for the Archaeology of Cape Town (RESUNACT), which sought to make archaeology more accessible to the public. See Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.256-257

<sup>49</sup> Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.257

<sup>50</sup> Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.258

<sup>51</sup> Malan and Soudien, “Managing heritage in District Six”, p.258

found on the site became objects which spoke, and told of the “layered history of life” in Horstley Street in symbolic form. Cast in resin and sunk into the floor of the memorial hall, away from the main exhibition hall, the artefacts occupied an ambiguous role. As fragments they were unable to provide a narrative for District Six relatively independent of the documentary archive, and thus, in their fragmentary state (and in a critique of the documentary archive) were curated as part of a “dense, brightly-lit space symbolic of the layering of lives” on the Horstley Street site.<sup>52</sup>

The shift of the Horstley Street artefacts to the Memorial Hall, which is located behind the main exhibition hall, speaks to two shifts within the research and curatorial methodology of the museum. In the first instance, the shift was in keeping with the overall conceptual framework of the room. The Memorial Hall depicted, through floor tiles containing extracts of prose and poetry, the many interpretations of the District by writers and artists. The mosaic in the centre of the floor furthermore depicted the Cape Peninsula and in particular District Six as the “eye of the city”, with rays of mosaic tiles symbolically emanating from the centre, towards other sites of forced removal in Cape Town and South Africa.<sup>53</sup> This theme of “Beyond District Six” was in keeping with the narrative of Horstley Street, which began to speak to the connections between District Six, Ndabeni and Langa on the Cape Flats, and consequently to a broader narrative around the shaping of Cape Town. The second shift in the research and curatorial strategy was that of the emphasis placed on oral sources as part of a museum exhibitionary strategy. The shift of the archaeology display to the Memorial

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<sup>52</sup> *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*

<sup>53</sup> *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*



Hall whether intentionally or not, signaled an increasing emphasis on an oral history practice for providing sources of evidence for a District Six history. This oral history practice arose out of the various forms of remembering District Six which emerged out of the forced removal and social movements around the site, but also speaks to a deeper strategic approach to 'writing' and the visual representation of history in the museum.

Linked to the theme of "Beyond District Six", the shift of the archaeology display to the Memorial Hall also signaled a shift in the way archaeologists began to read the material remains of the District Six site. For archaeologists, the fragmentary results of the Horstley Street excavation shepherded their research towards the documentary archive, but also enabled a shift that focused on District Six as a landscape, particularly one in which its fragments (debris) could acquire meaning through symbolic value and use in the present day.<sup>54</sup> Hall's particular interest in the District Six Public Sculpture Project<sup>55</sup> reflects this focus on the landscape, using a social archaeology to discuss the various ways in which meanings, stories and performative practices associated with the broader District Six site made history "tangible" and to a large extent visual.<sup>56</sup>

In trying to make archaeology speak for the present and the past in a tangible way, Hall re-oriented the medium of material culture, (as a means of constructing a history for

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<sup>54</sup> See M. Hall, "Social archaeology and the theatres of memory", *Journal of Social Archaeology* (1)1, 2001, pp. 50- 61.

<sup>55</sup> The District Six Public Sculpture Project was held on 24 September 1997. A number of artists were invited to participate in a public sculpture festival which sought to challenge conventions around public art. The process for participating artists included work shopping ideas and approaches, accessing material from the museum archive, and interacting with District Six ex-residents. See R. Meyer, "Introduction" in C. Soudien and R. Meyer (eds), *The District Six Public Sculpture Project*, (Cape Town: District Six Museum Foundation), 1997, p.1

<sup>56</sup> Hall, "Social archaeology", p.59

District Six) away from the coherent narrative sought by archaeologists during the 1993 Horstley Street excavation, and towards a medium and narrative denoted by its fragmentary nature. This re-orientation is significant where, as noted by Ouzman in a different context, at the heart of archaeology lies a concern with context and materiality<sup>57</sup> – and therefore the interplay of both to provide a coherent archaeological narrative for a particular site. Hall’s reading of District Six’s archaeological landscape foregrounds an attempt to maintain a conversation between those material remains *found* on the landscape, as well as material remains *excavated* from it. This conversation is made to speak of a fragmented landscape where meaning is rendered *visually* through performative attempts by artists, musicians and sculptors who, in drawing on oral and written forms of remembering by District Six residents, come to *speak for* the symbolic and cultural value attached to the landscape, and not merely the Horstley Street site.<sup>58</sup> The performance of memory, that speaks through and of the site, is indicative of a social archeology which as Hall advocates, is the search for the ways “we express ourselves through the things that we make and use, collect and discard, value or take for granted, and seek to be remembered by.”<sup>59</sup> For Hall the mnemonic value of the site is key and helps to foreground the forms of remembering and ownership of the District Six site that took precedence in the years after the area’s demolition and leading up to the post-apartheid present of the Public Sculpture Project

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<sup>57</sup> S. Ouzman, “The beauty of letting go: Fragmentary museums and the archaeologies of archive” in (eds) E. Edwards, C. Gosden and R.B. Phillips, *Sensible objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, (Oxford: Berg), 2006, pp.269 – 301, p. 269

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.53, Linda Fortune’s written account of the New Year carnival - contained in an autobiographical account entitled *The House in Tyne Street: childhood memories of District Six*, (1996), is made to speak for the curatorial intention of Roderick Sauls’ installation for the Public Sculpture Project.

<sup>59</sup> Hall, “Social archaeology”, p.52

in 1997.<sup>60</sup> Thus ex-resident literature (Alex la Guma's *A Walk in the Night*), oral sources (those cited by Bill Nasson), autobiographies (Linda Fortune's *The House in Tyne Street*), together with artists' and musicians' interpretations of the District Six community and place shaped this social archaeology where the re-orientation of the medium of material culture towards a more performative and representational format led to a subsequent re-orientation of the value of archaeological *fragments* as evidence for the construction of a District Six history.<sup>61</sup>

The dangers of over-interpreting the Horstley Street fragments became a key concern – and resulted in divergent responses by both archaeologists and museum staff in how they interpreted and disseminated the material traces of Horstley Street. As it related to archaeology, challenges were felt and engaged with in relation to three areas namely - the role of the 'public' or community; the role of the museum (as a site of historical truth), and the discipline itself as one that was amenable to cross-disciplinary ventures.<sup>62</sup> For museum staff and practitioners, the opportunity to interpret the Horstley Street fragments enabled a visual and conceptual framework that sought to critique conventional sources of evidence - providing an opportunity to legitimate memory work and oral history practice as a strategy for historical recovery. It was in the conscious effort to provide alternative forms of *mediation* outside of the disciplinary, archival and institutional terms of archaeology which, although complex in its relations with the

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<sup>60</sup> Hall, "Social archaeology", p.52

<sup>61</sup> Hall, "Social archaeology", pp. 59-60

<sup>62</sup> One of the aims of the RESUNACT was an interdisciplinary focus on the history of Cape Town. Members of the group included researchers with interests in historical archaeology, the theory of material culture, English literature and industrial archaeology. The many and diverse disciplines which were sought by archaeology for cross-disciplinary work underscores a search for an appropriate mode through which to engage a post-apartheid present. See [www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/about.html/](http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/about.html/); [www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/group.html/](http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/archaeology/group.html/) (accessed 18 October 2006)

museum, nevertheless allowed an appropriation of aspects of its language and forms for the depiction and representation of District Six history. <sup>63</sup>

With the installation of the *Streets* and later *Digging Deeper* exhibition, archaeology – particular in its form as public or social archaeology became a key site of interaction between an emerging museum methodology which entailed being an “independent site of engagement, a space of questioning and interrogation of the terms of a post-apartheid present” and a “hybrid space of research , representation and pedagogy” and what was still an institution (university) bound discipline. <sup>64</sup> Despite Nasson’s belief that the history of District Six, as transmitted through oral testimony, would provide “a more intimate frame of reference for historical inquiry”,<sup>65</sup> the disciplinary language of archaeology also became a prism through which the historian’s role as interpreter and intermediary was deepened within an exhibitionary strategy. This appropriation arose through the contestation between museum efforts to reclaim and interpret history in all its guises, and archaeologists’ sense of disciplinary ownership of the material “produced” through excavation. It is especially evident in the making of the Horstley Street exhibition - which has represented a key interpretive shift in both the *Streets* and *Digging Deeper* exhibition. <sup>66</sup>

While in the *Streets* exhibition the focus was on the *language* of archaeology to describe the process for the exhibition, *Digging Deeper* emerged as the central concept

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<sup>63</sup> Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics”, p.29

<sup>64</sup> C. Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics”, p.290

<sup>65</sup> Editorial, “Urban history and local history” *History Workshop Journal* 8, 1979, p. v cited in Nasson, “Oral History”, p. 49

<sup>66</sup> Rassool, “Community museums, memory politics”, pp.305-307

underpinning the new permanent installation. With the aim of ‘*Digging Deeper*’, the museum’s site of excavation was that of its “collections, processes and meanings.”<sup>67</sup> As noted in the exhibition guide, its collections and spaces were central to the way in which the museum sought to work with memory, and thus the “documentary material, oral histories and themes” of *Digging Deeper* surfaced from the *collections* of the museum.<sup>68</sup>

*Digging Deeper* became a framework:

a visual and spatial one made of the evidence of experience and expressive elements woven together into an interrelated whole. The aesthetic form of the museum and its displays are rooted in the visual, verbal and *material* contributions, interventions and rituals, of visitors to the museum (own emphasis).<sup>69</sup>

Of significance in the curatorial intention of *Digging Deeper* above is the concept of materiality that is invoked above that of ‘objects’ – and which in museum discourse, normally constitutes an institution’s collections. Importantly, objects – as the basic component of the museum’s collection - were recognised as such in the period leading up to and after *Streets*.<sup>70</sup> The photographic collections of ex-residents especially became key components of these collections – and were recognised as the cornerstone of the museum’s function. Through the mediation of the ex-resident – photographs and objects were brought “alive” in the museum.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Introductory note, *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*

<sup>68</sup> Introductory note, *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*

<sup>69</sup> Introductory note, *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*

<sup>70</sup> *District Six Museum Foundation Newsletter*, January 1996, p.1. Donors were thanked for donating their objects to the museum, and the exhibition was noted as containing “photographs, personal objects, paintings and news clippings.”

<sup>71</sup> “Staff profiles”, *District Six Museum Foundation Newsletter*, January 1996

As with Hall and the re-orientation of material remains (and the narrative wholeness invoked by the archaeological artefact) towards working with material remains that are inherently fragmentary (and which invoke a fragmented narrative), the museum mirrored an alternate shift with *Digging Deeper*, where objects, whether donated or found on the site – invoked a sense of materiality. This materiality however – is used in fragmentary terms to speak for the wholeness of District Six – the “interrelated whole” noted above. The visuality of this practice is expressed particularly in the Memorial Hall through the Horstley Street archaeological fragments and the motif of the ceramic shard invoked by the mosaic tiles on the hall’s Writer’s Floor. On the Writer’s Floor, the mosaic rays intersect with and are interspersed with whole ceramic tiles which contain stylised, textual depictions of District Six and Cape Town by local writers, artists and poets. A visual reading of this intersection is that of material fragments embracing and bringing about ‘whole’ remembrances of District Six through text and narrative. As noted in the exhibition guide, as a form of narrative symbolism, the museum and its surfaces continues “to gather layers of text”.<sup>72</sup> It is this narrative symbolism, as it is practised through the motif of the fragment, which begins to locate material remains, together with oral and textual sources (as sources of materiality) within a broader curatorial strategy.

The concern with archaeology here as one of the framing languages for the representation of District Six relates to early desires to reconstruct its materiality through oral testimony and social history. As with the *Streets* exhibition, where the aim was to conduct a “archaeology of memory”, it is the language of layering (of sound, oral

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<sup>72</sup> “Staff profiles” , *District Six Museum Foundation Newsletter*, January 1996

histories, imagery etc), the notion of the object that 'speaks' and the process of interpreting a physical and social landscape for the cultural remains of a community that may be linked with Nasson's earlier attempts to recognise visibility, memory and forms of orality as central to a historical recovery of District Six.



## Chapter Three

### “Digging [D]eeper than the eye approves”<sup>1</sup>:

#### Oral histories and their use in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition.

The following chapter will entail looking at processes that enabled the shift towards a formalised oral history practice within the museum. The previous chapter sought to illustrate the shift in how sources of evidence were legitimated as representational sources – with their value firmly rooted in notions of the aesthetic and emphasis placed on their ability to speak for materiality – in the form of both fragmented and whole (historical) narratives. With the re-curation of the Horstley Street archaeological displays into the Memorial Hall, a key approach to oral histories in the museum began to take shape. Key to this was the notion of ‘collecting’ oral histories in accordance with archival practices, yet attempting to transcend the limits of this practice by speaking of the collecting of memory.

As noted in the previous chapter, in the years preceding the establishment of the museum, oral testimony occurred in contexts where the performance of memory and the narration accompanying visual sources (slides and photographs) provided a supportive and politicised context for the recall of memory. The documentary record of and writings about the museum in the early nineties reveal a concern for the practice of collecting oral testimonies - initially through exhibitionary practices and later, through a purposeful research strategy adopted in preparation for the *Digging Deeper* exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> V. Woolf, “Street haunting: A London Adventure”, in *Street Haunting*, (London: Penguin), 2005, pp.1- 15, p.3. The full quotation reads, “We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities.”



This strategy encouraged a practice of oral history that actively generated voices for the content of the exhibition and within the research framework of an *archive*. This stood in contrast to a practice where artefacts and visual stimuli (the exhibition) acted as the generative framework for oral acts of reminiscence and was regarded as the documentary and archival record in itself. The above distinction in how voices were generated within the exhibition signaled a methodological shift in the museum which allowed for the *containment* and channeling of voice. This containment was literal and metaphorical - evidenced in the different formats on which oral history interviews could be stored and was further contained within the memory rooms of the museum, which were curated as spaces for "oral history and the narration of lives."<sup>2</sup> The following chapter will examine the antecedents of an oral history practice in the museum, with particular focus on *Digging Deeper* and the uses of oral history in the exhibition. In order to do this, however, the development of the museum into an organisation which collects, archives and displays will be discussed briefly.

The resolve to focus on collecting objects and material remains of District Six is evident in the early documentary record of the museum. From an early stage, the museum's desire (and mandate) to work with the memory of District Six was translated into a concern with its material remains and to preserve the hidden history uncovered as people entered the space and donated their objects to the museum. An indication of this concern with material remains – and what to do with it- became apparent when, after the 1992 District Six Commemoration Week, the museum was approached by the Mayibuye Centre, an archive based at the University of the Western Cape, to enter into a

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<sup>2</sup> V. Layne and C. Rassool, "Memory rooms: oral history in the District Six Museum" in C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum*, (Cape Town: District Six Museum Foundation), 2000, pp. 146- 153, p.146

partnership.<sup>3</sup> The Centre offered to become the repository of documents and artefacts of the museum as well to provide supportive services with the fledgling organisation's research, exhibition and production activities. Mayibuye offered its skills, infrastructure, as well as partnerships and opportunities for oral history and research projects.<sup>4</sup> The proposal by the Mayibuye Centre stimulated a series of reactions and questions, and the initial response of museum trustees to the proposed partnership reveals a concern with the practical aspects of collecting material as early as 1992 – but also marks the emphasis they placed on the urgency of growing the collection.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion regarding the possibilities of a formal partnership with the Mayibuye Centre acted as a spur for thinking through the practicalities of collecting materials. Amongst the deliberations of trustees was consideration for the cost of storing and cataloguing materials on District Six; the possibilities of acting as a public interface for the archive through exhibitions, as well as a role as an information centre. Mayibuye's role in the partnership would be of an archival nature - safeguarding material and assisting in its duplication. The stated assumption by some trustees that there should be a separation between the uses of the museum building as a public interface as opposed to a space of archival preservation is significant. While the museum did not overtly

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<sup>3</sup> The Mayibuye archive was first established through the acquisition of the collection of the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), which became the core collection of what was then the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa. The centre was based at the University of the Western Cape. It later became the repository of the collections of the Robben Island Museum (RIM), which was presented as the "first official heritage institution" of the new South Africa. In partnership with UWC, the Centre was renamed the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives in June 2001. Mayibuye describes itself as the "official collections management unit of RIM" and is situated on the campus of the University of the Western Cape. See <http://www.robben-island.org.za/departments/heritage/mayibuye/mayibuyeasp>, accessed 14 November 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from André Odendaal, coordinator of Mayibuye Centre, addressed to the District Six Museum Foundation, 28 September 1992

<sup>5</sup> *Minutes of meeting of Trustees*, District Six Museum Foundation, 10 October 1992. The documentary record of the museum does not reveal the outcome of the proposed partnership between the Mayibuye Centre and the museum.

perceive its role as archival<sup>6</sup> it nonetheless focused on the collection of historical material and material regarding newer developments relating to District Six.<sup>7</sup> The request for a partnership between the museum and Mayibuye took place two years before the opening of *Streets*, broadly considered as the official opening of the museum.<sup>8</sup> Archival records relating specifically to the period before and after the opening of *Streets* could not be located and the outcome and further discussions regarding the proposed partnership between Mayibuye and the museum could not be found. The discussion between the two emerging institutions is significant as it reveals the museum's concern with its potential role as an archive and a collector of material. The feeling in 1992 – that the museum project was an institution that worked with the memories of District Six and District Sixers, and not an archive, provided the basis for a museum narrative of its space as a living one, generated through the voices of ex-residents.<sup>9</sup> However, with the progressive success of *Streets*, and the decision to dig deeper into the social history of District Six, it will be argued that basic tenets of archival practice became a cornerstone for the growing museum – rendering the space a contained one, one in which oral history took an aesthetic and curatorial form.

### **The museum as voice: institutional narratives, oral histories and the archive**

The role of an emerging oral history practice in the museum, as a means of preserving the memory of District Six, cannot be disassociated from the organisation's founding

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<sup>6</sup> "First steps in the planning of the Museum : An overview", Draft proposal to the Methodist Church (for the use of the Buitenkant Street building as the site of the proposed museum), District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

<sup>7</sup> Minutes of workshop meeting of Trustees, District Six Museum Foundation, 20 March 1993. Museum Foundation trustees requested that Mayibuye assist in documenting the proposed expansion of the Cape Technikon at the time.

<sup>8</sup> *Streets* was intended to be open for two weeks, but the unexpected popularity of the exhibition resulted in the museum keeping its doors open permanently. *District Six Museum Foundation Newsletter*, January 1996, p.1

<sup>9</sup> "First steps", Draft proposal to the Methodist Church, District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

moments within the *Hands Off District Six* campaign. The organisation that emerged from the mandate of the HODS conference sought to work with the memory of the area, acknowledging the stories and voices of District Six, but at the same time seeking to establish an institutional voice. This institutional voice sought to entrench the struggle for District Six (through an anticipated restitution and redevelopment process) and to speak of the historical shaping of the Cape Town – acting as the city’s historical conscience.<sup>10</sup> Through this role, the museum undertook to negotiate the historical and dynamic links between Cape Town's apartheid past, its post-apartheid present and future.<sup>11</sup> As a space and institution which spoke for the broader symbolic role of District Six in highlighting forced removals, it is primarily through its interpretive displays and research drawn from family, institutional and documentary archives, that the museum as the voice of ‘the people’ was created. The manner in which this intention was sustained was primarily through its displays - which stimulated the articulation of voice, but also took on the embodiment thereof. The creation of the museum as voice or as a voice in itself is linked to ways narration and memory has been stimulated and visibility has been deployed in the museum. As noted by Charmaine McEachern in her observations of ex-resident interactions with the exhibitionary elements of *Streets* - in particular the street map – the institutional narrative of the museum is entrenched with how people remember and verbalise their remembrances.<sup>12</sup> In the act of walking over the map and remembering - the performance of memory, as McEachern put forward, was "on behalf" of the museum itself - part of its display - and entrenched in the "narrative of itself."<sup>13</sup> With *Streets*, orality took precedence over the written word, and as McEachern notes the

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<sup>10</sup> “*First steps*”, Draft proposal to the Methodist Church, District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

<sup>11</sup> “*First steps*”, Draft proposal to the Methodist Church, District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

<sup>12</sup> C. McEachern, “Working with memory: the District Six Museum in the new South Africa, *Social Analysis* 42(2), July 1998, pp.48 – 72,p.61

<sup>13</sup> McEachern, “Working with memory”, p.61

"graphic minimalism", namely the lack of written texts to depict factual information and experiences of District Six, provided a space for this orality to take form.<sup>14</sup> The role of oral forms of communicating and remembering – in a context of perceived graphic minimalism raises questions in relation to *Digging Deeper* - itself a densely textual and graphic intervention in the museum space – and the forms of orality which took precedence in after *Streets*. McEachern's observations rest on the notion of oral acts of remembrance as "oral cultural representation"<sup>15</sup> – a representation enabled by the aesthetic framework of *Streets* and its ability to evoke memory and narrative through fragments. As she notes, ex-resident (verbal) narratives are anchored around these fragments, namely the spaces and places in District Six depicted through the street map and street signs. That ex-resident narratives – as told in the space of the museum - contributed to the layering and filling out of the graphic representations of District Six further helps to provide a basis for looking at the role oral history representations play within *Digging Deeper*. It is argued in the previous chapter, that through the notion of fragments – in the form of archaeological evidence from the Horstley Street site – an alternative and more representational way of interrogating historical evidence for the narrative of District Six was enabled. This ties into McEachern's observations around how narrative fragments (accompanied by visual stimulus) become central to the ways in which narratives of the area were constructed, and forged ways of speaking about the past within a post-apartheid context.<sup>16</sup> The link between oral acts of remembering and the role of the museum's visual strategies in stimulating these as they shaped the notion of a living museum remains key to understanding how oral history practice and the emergence of the sound archive informed its institutional identity in

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<sup>14</sup> McEachern, "Working with memory", p.62

<sup>15</sup> McEachern, "Working with memory", p.62

<sup>16</sup> McEachern, "Working with memory", p.61

later years, where the museum progressed away from the 'graphic minimalism' of *Streets* to the intense graphic layering of *Digging Deeper*.<sup>17</sup>

### **Towards a museum sound archive**

In its draft proposal for the use of the Buitenkant Street building as the site of the proposed museum, an emphasis was placed on the museum as a receptive space – a space which was determined by responses to its activities, its potential role as a museum, and the needs and desire of visitors.<sup>18</sup> While it derived authority for this voice from the active voicing and inscription of ex-residents within the exhibition space, and therefore their shaping of the exhibition<sup>19</sup>, this voice also functioned in ways that became increasingly institutional and archival – expressed by its own need to collect and oversee the safeguarding of those objects and documents collected from donors in the early years of the museum.<sup>20</sup> Early tendencies towards collecting and archiving were seen to exist as separate from the function of the museum.<sup>21</sup> The museum envisioned its role as *not* being archival and saw its role as a generative space for working with and interpreting memory – using creative forms for the recovery and reconstruction of a history perceived as hidden and in danger of being forgotten. Oral history became part of the reconstruction of this history that sought to reanimate the historical record as it related to individuals, families and communities.<sup>22</sup> The establishment of the sound archive in 1997 and the fundamental role it played in oral history research for *Digging*

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<sup>17</sup> Where oral histories are to a large extent the *result* of the design process with *Streets*, with *Digging Deeper* oral histories are designed into the layers of representation, in a more formal and organised way.

<sup>18</sup> "First steps", Draft proposal to the Methodist Church, District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

<sup>19</sup> See McEachern, "Working with memory", p.62

<sup>20</sup> Early foundation members sought to create lists of material that belonged to the museum project, and which potentially could be housed in the museum. *Minutes of meeting of District Six Museum Foundation Trustees*, 21 July 1993

<sup>21</sup> Notably, the museum sound archive was first located off-site from the Buitenkant Street location, in Church Street, in Cape Town's city centre. The opening of *Digging Deeper* marked the strategic inclusion of the sound archive and its memory room in the gallery space of the museum.

<sup>22</sup> "First steps", Draft proposal to the Methodist Church, District Six Museum Foundation, May 1993

Deeper brought about a productive tension where the relatively spontaneous oral acts of reminiscence which would accompany visiting ex-residents in the museum's early years – and which marked it as a living museum - became part of a proactive research approach where voices were recorded, transcribed, archived and displayed. The productive tension lay in the use of these recordings and transcripts as extracts, captions and audio installations, and the challenges it brought for the museum as it changed shape towards a more formal, systematically engaged space where memory was both facilitated and collected.

The inauguration of a museum sound archive was premised on that of a living archive – one with a focus on performance, music and enhancing the quality of *Streets* through the integration of life histories and sounds into the museum space.<sup>23</sup> Alongside its main function of being a “memory booth” for ex-residents which sought alternative ways to document their historical presence, lay an emphasis on traditional archival practices of identifying what was “collectible”, the introduction of professional standards to ensure the safekeeping of material and accessibility for students and researchers. Collectible materials included interviews with ex-residents, video material and music recordings.<sup>24</sup> This focus on memory, visibility, sound and performance reflected an approach sought by the museum in its exhibitionary strategy as a whole.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship between the sound archive and the exhibitions strategy of the museum is a closely knit one, and both areas claim a defining and interdependent role in the public

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<sup>23</sup> V. Layne, “District Six Museum starts a sound archive”, *District Six Museum Newsletter*, 3(1), August 1998, p.4

<sup>24</sup> Layne, “District Six Museum starts a sound archive”, p.4

<sup>25</sup> See S. Prosalendis, “A museum within a museum”, *District Six Museum Newsletter*, 3(1), August 1998 p.15. And further echoed Bill Nasson's emphasis on visibility and memory in earlier historical accounts of District Six. See B. Nasson, “Oral history and the reconstruction of District Six” in S. Jeppie and C. Soudien (eds), *The Struggle for District Six, Past and Present*, (Cape Town: Buchu Books), 1990, pp. 44-66

and visual history of the organisation. The basis of this interdependency can be seen in both conceptual and practical ways. Both areas of work rely on the value and primacy of memory for the historical reconstruction (and construction) of District Six. Peggy Delpont notes that it is through the "oral and material contributions" of ex-residents, that the basis of a research strategy is formed.<sup>26</sup> It is useful to present Delpont's articulation of the four principles that underpin a research strategy for the recovery of historical memory, namely:

- that acknowledgement of the whole past needs to be a principle entrenched within the collective consciousness of all communities.
- that making this recollection of the past visible, accessible and shared will contribute to the process of social healing and reconciliation;
- that applied aesthetics can be a productive means to integrate and enhance different methods of bringing this about
- that there is a need to be open to many and varied vehicles for historical retrieval outside of the official commissions of enquiry...<sup>27</sup>

The above principles, particularly the second one, reflect to a large degree the vision that the sound archive saw itself working towards, a vision which it took its cue from the *Streets* exhibition. As noted by Valmont Layne, at the time a sound archivist with the museum, *Streets* illustrated the challenges of working with memory and in particular, the "creation of a public memory" about District Six.<sup>28</sup> The influx of memorabilia and objects provoked questions as to the role of the museum as an institution that collects, and as noted by Layne, memory and the processes accompanying it were a key principle according to which the collection of objects and the display thereof was

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<sup>26</sup> P. Delpont, "Signposts for retrieval: a visual framework enabling memory of place and time" in C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp.31- 46, p.37

<sup>27</sup> Delpont, "Signposts for retrieval", p.37

<sup>28</sup> V. Layne, "The Sound Archives at the District Six Museum: a work in progress" in A. Seeger and S. Chaudhuri (eds), *Archives for the Future: Global Perspectives on Audiovisual Archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books), 2004, pp.183-195, p.186



approached.<sup>29</sup> While curators of the museum placed an emphasis on an "applied aesthetics" to stimulate remembering and ways of telling – a dynamic means of capturing stories and accounts of District Six for posterity<sup>30</sup>, a firm emphasis was placed by the emerging sound archive on the creation of a space which addressed the question of what happened to these dynamic ways once they were remembered and told. The idea of the sound archive as a memory booth, as a "space in which to render and capture memory in electronic form" underpinned a shared concern of the curators of the exhibition, namely that of giving form to the experiences and memories of ex-residents.<sup>31</sup>

In the late 1990's the vision for the sound archive focused on its ability to serve as a "holding point" for the various forms of remembering which were taking place in the museum – acting as a space where, as Layne notes, the "reconstructions of Streets (could) be arrested until we decide what to do next".<sup>32</sup> The vision of the sound archive further sought to situate it as the "generator of knowledge" and establishing documentation projects that would inform a new public history.<sup>33</sup> The potential role of academic institutions was considered important for influencing the forms that this documentation would take. In particular academic field recordings were seen as a viable form for documentation and producing knowledge, but this acknowledgement was tempered with attempts to counter the legacies of "cultural imperialism" enforced by disciplines such as ethnography and anthropology.<sup>34</sup> The forms of recording – be it electronic or field recordings - envisioned by the sound archive represent an almost

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<sup>29</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.186

<sup>30</sup> See Prosalendis in Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.188

<sup>31</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.188

<sup>32</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.188

<sup>33</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.188

<sup>34</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.188-189

ironic and technocratic moment in the museum's approach to sources of evidence and how the history of District Six was to be constructed. The vision of the archive was steeped with a popular and activist discourse - seeking to bring about a community's empowerment through the creation of a "memory bank", one which would be at their service as a cultural resource. However, this was offset by questions of technology and the format through which the collection and the preservation of memory would be possible.<sup>35</sup> Emerging as it did within a digital age, and with the success of the *Streets* exhibition, a museum concern with collecting and documentation espoused by foundation members as early as 1992, found a conceptual and practical home in the sound archive. The vision of the sound archive as laid out by Layne raises however, the subtle separation between the respective roles of the exhibitionary strategy and the sound archive as driving forces in the work of the museum. For the archive, its role was one that was indebted to the exhibition for the principle of community based interventions in producing knowledge and a history of District Six.<sup>36</sup> As noted by Layne, *Streets* was a creative, yet simple exhibition, but that the question for an emerging sound archive was "how, in the digital age, does such a humble museum intend to harness a high-tech operation such as a sound archives?"<sup>37</sup> While the *Streets* exhibition focused on how people came to remember and sought aesthetic and creative forms of documenting – the sound archive saw a lack of a systematic approach to collecting and consequently an opportunity to rectify this through its future work, a mandate which it saw congruent with the development of the museum project into an institution.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in addition to collecting,

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<sup>35</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.189,191-192

<sup>36</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.192

<sup>37</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.192

<sup>38</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.193

the accessioning of objects and the application of "professional standards of description", would be a strong feature of the work of the archive.<sup>39</sup>

To an extent, the above focus on developing a system for the archive, and the concern with a format which would enable the preservation of memory, counteracts the museum's accounts of the archive's organic beginnings with popular District Six figures. These beginnings are embedded in the role of non-academic, public intellectuals who have been placed at the forefront of the museum's work and the narrative of itself.<sup>40</sup> With the sound archive, it is the formative role of District Six ex-resident Vincent Kolbe, as noted by Layne and Rassool, which grounds the archive within a community-based research methodology and its interest in researching musical traditions in Cape Town.<sup>41</sup> As community based intellectuals, these ordinary people were lauded as literally being able to "speak themselves" within a public, post-apartheid construction of their history – to tell of their history and experiences. However, with the opening of *Digging Deeper* the forms and the approaches undertaken by the sound archive - and its very existence - suggests that to a large degree, and at later stages of the museum's development as a 'voice' in the city, – people were *made* to speak for themselves and a District Six history.

The origins of the museum's sound archive have largely been attributed to three influences on oral history practice within the museum, namely that of social history; secondly, a "radical historical practice that is both committed and engaged" and lastly,

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<sup>39</sup> Layne, "The Sound Archives", p.193

<sup>40</sup> See V. Layne and C. Rassool, "Memory rooms: oral history in the District Six Museum" in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp.146 -153

<sup>41</sup> Layne and Rassool, "Memory rooms", p.147

the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's framework of "telling, confessing, healing and catharsis" which emerged in the years after the first democratic election in 1994.<sup>42</sup> However, influences were localised within partnerships and resources identified by the museum and a range of practitioners were consulted as the archive began to take root.<sup>43</sup> As the documentary record of the museum reveals, the vision for the sound archives project was not wholly defined from the outset, and a deliberate move towards self-reflexivity in its processes was perceived as part of its growth – with its methodology developing through practice itself.<sup>44</sup> The sound archive, in its initial 'project' form became a platform from which to begin to articulate an oral history practice in the museum and attempted to define this practice in relation to the museum's growing needs.<sup>45</sup> In taking into account the potential value of including audio/sound components within the exhibition that could comprise 'voices', a self-reflexive methodology was nevertheless challenged by the need to establish clear parameters for defining its role and the practice of the methodology itself.<sup>46</sup> Additional concerns focused on practical needs e.g. the need for full time staff that would be present in the museum space, and importantly, a need to clarify the administrative tools needed to manage material collected by the sound archive.<sup>47</sup> In keeping with the aims of

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<sup>42</sup> Layne and Rassool, "Memory rooms", p. 146

<sup>43</sup> *Minutes of Projects Committee meeting*, 10 June 1997. Museum staff consulted Sean Field, of the Western Cape Oral History Project (WCOHP) based at the University of Cape Town (now the Centre for Popular Memory). In 1997, a staff member visited four African countries to investigate regional methods in sound and music recordings. Another staff member also undertook a Western Cape Oral History Project internship. See M. Nixon, "Archiving African Style", in *District Six Museum Newsletter*, 3 (1), August 1998, p.7 and S. Field, "Oral history for District Six and beyond", p.13. Other sites visited were the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana. See Layne, "The Sound Archives".

<sup>44</sup> *Minutes of Projects Committee meeting*, 2 June 1997

<sup>45</sup> With the success of the *Streets* and the *Digging Deeper* exhibitions, the role of the museum expanded to include acting as model for community museums. It consciously sought to promote the sector by identifying and presenting the forms and strategies of *Digging Deeper* as a tool for emerging community museums. *Minutes of Curatorial Committee meeting*, 27 August 2001

<sup>46</sup> *Minutes of Projects Committee meeting*, 10 June 1997

<sup>47</sup> *Minutes of Projects Committee meeting*, 2 June 1997. Administrative tools, in the form of an acquisitions policy, and the provision for release forms for recordings, donation forms, copyright requirements etc. were considered.

collecting and recording interviews pertaining to District Six, the monthly report of the sound archive in February 1998 reflects the concerns of an archive attempting to establish both the practical and the organising principles of its work by conducting pre-interviews with musicians prominent in District Six and locating and collecting material for the sound archives from music libraries and documentary material from libraries. Establishing the copyright of material entering the archive and the possibilities of outsourcing the videotaping and editing of interviews were presented as part of the work of the archive.<sup>48</sup> Through the exhibitions and collections report for the same period, it becomes clear that a more collaborative working relationship between the sound archive and these areas of the museum were advocated. In particular the Buckingham Palace installation (1998) was identified as an opportunity to investigate the technical possibilities of including audio-visual components in the displays, and plans were made to visit other museums to investigate how they incorporated audio-visual elements into their exhibitions.<sup>49</sup> Other means of disseminating interviews recorded by the sound archive took the form of articles in the museum's newsletter.<sup>50</sup>

The following section of this chapter looks specifically at how oral histories were used within the *Digging Deeper* exhibition, and the implications of their use for the practice of oral history itself.

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<sup>48</sup> *District Six Sound Archives Monthly Report*, 20 February 1998

<sup>49</sup> *Exhibitions Monthly Report*, February 1998; *Collections Monthly Report*, February 1998. The Exhibitions and Collections functions were not formal departments at this point, and reports reflected defined working areas of the museum e.g. reports from staff who worked as narrators on the 'floor' of the museum were also tabled.

<sup>50</sup> C. Miller, "Music interviews from the sound archives", *District Six Museum Newsletter*, 3 (1), August 1998, p.13

## Location of oral histories in *Digging Deeper*

Oral histories are located throughout *Digging Deeper* and they take on various forms or functions, depending on the way that they are utilised in the space. *Digging Deeper* itself is divided into three main exhibiting areas namely the Ground Floor; Upper Floor (gallery space) and Lower Floor (Memorial Hall). Oral histories – in the form of written extracts and audio excerpts are located on both the ground floor and gallery space. The gallery space consists of a series of alcoves which represent recreations of actual spaces in District Six (the Hairdresser/Barbershop; Bloemhof Flats; Hanover Street and Seven Steps ; Public Wash-house alcoves ) or depict the working, social and recreational habits of District Sixers (the Langarm; Places of Work alcoves ) In addition, the gallery space houses Rod's Room<sup>51</sup> and the west wall of the space depicts Peggy Delport's mural, "No matter where we are, we are here."<sup>52</sup> The ground floor consists of three major panels that provide a historical and political timeline for District Six. These panels are the *Formation; Resistance* and *Demolition* panels. Nomvuyo's Room is also located on the ground floor. The Memorial Hall is traditionally the location used for temporary exhibitions that relate to the theme of "Beyond *District Six*". It currently hosts a reworked version of the first Horstley Street exhibition, renamed *Memory Traces*. The

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<sup>51</sup> Rod's Room was created by the artist Roderick Sauls, who grew up in District Six. Like Nomvuyo's Room on the ground floor of the museum, it explores the theme of the interior, private spaces of those who lived in District Six. A key feature of the room is the protrusion of fragments of everyday objects in the plastered walls of the room. See *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*.

<sup>52</sup> The wetting of the mural wall took place on March 16, 2006. It is the most recent addition to the *Digging Deeper* installation. The wall corresponds with the audio extracts from museum's oral history and sound collection, as well as its photographic collection. As Delport motivates - the mural is the result of consultation with the overall museum collection, but interviewee and ex-resident voices drive the meanings behind the mural. The title itself is that of a message written by an ex-resident on the name-cloth in the early years of the museum. It echoes the process of Delport's *Res Clamant* mural (on the wall of the Holy Cross Catholic church in District Six), with its emphasis on voices and narrative in the shaping of the content of the mural. See Commemorative leaflet, *Dedication of Fresco Wall, "No matter where we are, we are here"*, 21 March 2006; and P. Delport, *'Res Clamant' – The Earth Cries Out: Background and Pictorial Guide to the Holy Cross Mural*, (Cape Town: district Six Museum Foundation), May 1991

discussion regarding the uses of oral histories in *Digging Deeper* will encompass the gallery and ground floor spaces of the museum.

### **Forms of oral histories in *Digging Deeper***

The research strategy for *Digging Deeper* included a varied and large number of oral history interviews, but only 25 interviews were used for the exhibition. Interviews took place from 1998 – 2000, with the large majority of interviews occurring in 1999, a year before *Digging Deeper* opened. With some areas of display, individual interviews tend to make up the majority of extracts displayed (e.g. Joe Schaffers interview, 1999: Bloemhof Flats alcove), some interviews are a point of reference throughout the exhibition (e.g. Vincent Kolbe interviews, 1998, 1999: Demolition panel, Seven Steps and Langarm alcoves). With the exception of the audio components found in the Barbershop/Hairdresser and Langarm alcoves; Nomvuyo and Rod's Room and Peggy Delpont's mural, oral histories take the form of written extracts in *Digging Deeper* and they are primarily in English, with some interviews retaining the original Afrikaans phrasing and colloquialisms used by interviewees.<sup>53</sup> One of the ways that viewers experience the oral histories is through their sense of sight – and the ways in which they are seen and made visible within the exhibition, impacts on the orality of the texts. Extracts from oral histories have been displayed in *Digging Deeper* in three ways. The most common form is that of a **printed, extended caption** of extracts, which situates viewers in relation to the display and photographs depicted in them. These are found throughout the exhibition. The captions provide a first person narrative for the story being told in the display. Secondly, **enlarged extracts/quotes** are transferred onto perspex sections, and printed onto panels e.g. the Demolition and Resistance panels. The

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<sup>53</sup> See Amina Gool extract (interview 1999), below.

transparent, perspex material onto which extracts are printed reinforce the role of oral histories as primary source through which history is seen and verified (literally and figuratively), but being displayed in a larger format, and separately onto the panels, emphasises an "apartness" in the way it is read by the viewer. Thirdly, oral history extracts are displayed through a **lettering transfer process**, directly onto the display, where they are made to appear as seamless interventions into the display.

Other instances where oral or verbal extracts form part of the exhibitionary elements of *Digging Deeper* include the street map and memory cloth (also known as the name-cloth). These two elements, in relation to the rest of the *Digging Deeper* exhibition represent an earlier approach to the collection of oral histories which was both curatorial and research driven. However, the collection of ex-resident names, street addresses, and related memories in the form of an anecdote or quote on the map or the name-cloth, while systematic in its intention, nevertheless did not attain the same level of systematic collection of ex-resident narratives that occurred for *Digging Deeper*. The presence of the name-cloth and the street map reflect the iconic status accorded certain exhibitionary elements first introduced during *Streets* and speaks to the problems which have arisen in the way oral histories are displayed and 'frozen' within a curatorial framework. Despite efforts to have narratives, images and texts that act as catalysts for personal interpretations and processes of history-making, and thus moving away from their "iconographic fixedness", the oral history extracts in *Digging Deeper*, in the act of becoming what Delport notes as the "word image"<sup>54</sup>, reveal a research and curatorial practice that in the pursuit to provide entry points for making meaning, modified,

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<sup>54</sup> See P. Delport, "Digging Deeper in District Six: features and interfaces in a curatorial landscape" in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp. 154 -164, p.158



fragmented and curated the meaning of oral histories into a broader, cohesive exhibitionary framework that entrenched visual fragments of oral histories as whole representations of history.

As with the ability of archaeological fragments to speak to the broader value of a District Six history in visual terms, so too oral history extracts in their fragmentary form (as extracts) took on a representative, visual importance within *Digging Deeper*. This visuality was ocular-centric, overloading the visitor's sight with many, dense texts which affirmed a history which was written and documented. The density of texts took the form of both oral history extracts and exhibition text. It is the extensive amount of text on view that greets a visitor to the District Six Museum.<sup>55</sup> A result of the process of “digging deeper” into the history of District Six<sup>56</sup> this visual and textual presence allows visitors the comfort of identifying with a documentary form of history. On closer inspection however, it is the type of text – that of the oral history extract - which reveals a process through which the voice of the ex-residents was visually mediated and circumscribed. The process that marks the transition from the oral history interview, to the transcript and eventually to the oral history extract used in the exhibition is important. Coupled with the visual and audio deployment of oral histories within *Digging Deeper*, it reveals a concern with layering voices, and the building of a composite, yet fixed narrative around District Six.

Audio components of oral histories occur within two rooms in *Digging Deeper* (Rod's Room and Nomvuyo's Room), two alcoves (the Langarm and Hairdresser alcove) and

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<sup>55</sup> In particular, the Timeline: Resistance panel.

<sup>56</sup> The research project that underpinned *Digging Deeper* was funded by the National Research Foundation.

the area in front of the mural, "No matter where we are, we are here", as well as the Games display directly below it. Within these spaces, oral history extracts are interwoven with audio snippets of music, old radio programmes, audio extracts of oral history interviews as well as ambient sounds of the District such as children playing. The result is a soundscape meant to evoke memories of District Six, and at the same time to "integrate the testimony of voices with the interior spaces".<sup>57</sup>

### **Ways in which oral history transcripts are modified:**

Much consideration has been given to the process that accompanies the transformation of oral recordings into textual form namely the process of transcribing oral interviews and the implications for the making of meaning by those who speak and those who transcribe. This acute sense of the 'peril of the transcript'<sup>58</sup> is a key factor when examining transcripts of oral histories and how they've been employed in *Digging Deeper* and the discussion below is tempered by the incongruencies apparent in *writing* about oral histories and their use in textual form. For those who have devoted a large amount of research and discussion to this form of analysis, it is in making their referencing systems or language conventions explicit as they traverse the terrain of oral texts that the subjective presence of the researcher is always known and felt – albeit in ways that seek to reveal a standardised objectivity.<sup>59</sup> The analysis of oral histories used in *Digging Deeper* reveals a concern with engaging oral material with this standardised objectivity and the challenges to this brought about by visual, aural and

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<sup>57</sup> J. Thorne, *The Choreography of Display: Experiential Exhibitions in the Context of Museum Practice and Theory*, see Chapter 3, unpublished Masters manuscript, University of Cape Town, 2003, p.113

<sup>58</sup> See R. Samuel, "Perils of the transcript", in R. Perks and P. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge), 1998, pp.389-392

<sup>59</sup> See I. Hofmeyr, "Preface and a note on the text" in "We spend our years as a tale that is told": *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press). pp. xi-xiii, p. xii

aesthetic emphasis on the oral source. The nature of an analysis of the way oral histories have been deployed in *Digging Deeper* therefore builds on, yet at the same time relies on moving beyond textual and literary readings of oral merely as text. It is further useful to locate oral history interviews in relation to oral historical narratives and oral traditions – and how, within *Digging Deeper*, the influence of a visual and aesthetic form marks a transition from life history recordings about District Six towards broader oral historical narratives about the area (and the museum).

The method used here to distil oral history extracts from the exhibition largely centered on:

- i. identifying the oral history extracts used in *Digging Deeper* and locating their form in the display
- ii. listening to the oral history recording and reading the transcript of the interviews
- iii. locating the extract used in the display in the interview transcript
- iv. Identifying those elements that have been modified and
- v. comparing the audio, transcribed and visual representations of texts in relation to these modifications.

For the purpose of highlighting other forms of transcription that pay close attention to the human voice, oral history extracts are accompanied by an ethno poetic transcription made from the oral history recording. Where examples of modified oral history extracts are used, three textual versions of the oral source appear: the oral history extract as found in the display, the extract as it appears in the oral history transcript

and a new ethnopoetic transcription of the extract.<sup>60</sup> In discussing the ways that oral history extracts have been modified in the exhibition-making process, the purpose of the discussion is not only to identify how the museum recognises and uses the oral source and its transcript, but also to consider the implications of using oral history extracts as a visual form in the making of meaning.

An examination of the oral history extracts used in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition reveals three types of modification to the original transcript. These are:

1. Omission through the editing process
2. Changes to grammar
3. Rearrangement of extracts to form narratives

Below are examples of the above modifications.



### **1. Omission through the editing process.**

The following is an extract from an oral history interview with Amina Gool (1999). It is found on the Resistance panel in *Digging Deeper* and is placed on perspex sections and then onto the larger display panel.

#### **1.1. Original caption used in *Digging Deeper*:**

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<sup>60</sup> An ethnopoetic approach to transcription involves the use of lines, not sentences as the basic units of speech. They allow the transcriber to acknowledge pauses and interruptions i.e. the 'grammar of the human voice' as the interviewee speaks. It mediates in part the subjective placing of grammatical conventions (commas, full stops etc.) onto the voice of the interviewee, by the transcriber. See D. Hymes "Ethnopoetics and sociolinguistics: three stories by African-American children", in *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice*, (London: Taylor and Francis). 1996, pp.165-183, pp.165-167. It should be noted that this method was discovered in the course of my employment at the museum, which currently transcribes oral history interviews in this manner.

So there on the picnic is Ray Alexander, Eli Weinberg, Gomas, Leepile and another two or three people. Now they're all discussing. Now what are they discussing? The Republic. Die meer is ek 'n esel, die meer weet ek nie wat gaan aan nie. I mean, let's now just face facts. Hulle se vir my 'and comrade, what do you think.' So comrade replies, 'it's so lovely to be out in the open air.

*Amina Gool, interview 1999*

### 1.2. Extract from interview transcription. Text omitted is indicated in bold:

"So there on the picnic is Ray Alexander, Eli Weinberg, **Dora Alexander**, Gomas, Leepile and another two or three people. **Don't ask me whom hey. Kagan, I think. He became the Distributed Worker's Union and he was a bus driver. He became secretary to the Distributor's Worker's Union. Right.** Now they're all discussing. Now what are they discussing? The Republic. Die meer is ek 'n esel, die meer weet ek nie wat gaan aan nie. I mean, let's now just face facts. Hulle se vir my 'and comrade, what do you think.' So comrade replies, 'it's so lovely to be out in the open air.' **But just sitting there and eating dry bread and sprats. You know sprats is in a tin which they open. And that was going to be our lunch. And I'm using picnics where we have pots and food – pots and food and cake and bread. And here they come near the sea... Here they only want to talk. And talking something that I don't know. I became completely disgruntled and moerin and everything that you shouldn't be when you come out. And Hans is happy. He's talking and they're all talking. And before I know Hans has got blisters on his face. And he's moaning and groaning and saying we must go home. And we leave everybody – he's haeliophile, get blisters, he burns.**" (...)

*Amina Gool, interview 1999*

### 1.3 Ethnopoetic transcription

...so there on the picnic is Ray Alexander  
Eli Weinberg  
Dora Alexander  
Gomas  
Leepile  
and another two or three people  
don't ask me whom hey  
Kagan I think  
he became uh  
the Distributive Worker's Union he was a bus driver  
he became secretary to the  
Distributor's Workers Union

right  
now they're all discussing  
and what are they discussing the black republic  
die meer  
ek  
is  
esel  
die meer weet ek nie wat gaan aan nie I mean let's now just face facts  
hulle se vir my en comrade what do you think?  
so comrade replied  
it's so lovely to be out  
in the open and the fresh air  
but just sitting here and eating rye dry rye bread and sprats you know  
sprats is in a tin  
which they open  
and that was going to be our lunch  
and I'm used to picnics where uhm  
where we have pots of food  
pots of food and cake  
and bread  
and swimming  
and here they come near the sea  
and here they only want to talk  
and they're talking something that I don't know  
and I became completely disgruntled  
and moerin  
and everything you shouldn't be when you come out  
and Hans is happy  
he's talking  
they're all talking  
and before I know Hans has got blisters  
blisters on his face  
and he's moaning  
and groaning  
and saying we must go home  
and we leave everybody  
he's a haeliophile  
he gets blisters he burns  
(...)

*Amina Gool, interview 1999*

## **2. Modifications to grammar (tense, plural, colloquialisms)**

The following caption is taken from an interview with Menisha Collins (2000). In terms of grammar, not content, the caption has been significantly modified. The interviewee's

manner of talking has been adapted into point form and indicated as such in the exhibition. In listening to the original recording however, it is the caption used in the exhibition, and not the first interview transcript that reflects the interviewee's staccato like listing of the activities in the Bloemhof Flats Community Centre.

### **2.1. Original caption used in *Digging Deeper*:**

The Bloemhof Community Centre had the following activities:

- Table tennis and badminton were run by Johnny Schaffers
- Ballet was run by Pauline, Gwen Michaels, Elise Barlow, Mr. Herbert, Mrs. February, Cecil Jacobs and David Poole.
- The nursery school was run by Mrs. Feder, Sister Berry and Mrs. Kolbe.
- Gymnastic was run by Mr. Stoffels, Mr. Floris, Mr. Johannes, Moira, Maureen Ford, Sylvia, Lorraine and Mr. Claasen.
- The cooking classes were run by Mrs. Solomons
- Sewing classes were run by Auntie Maudie and Mrs. Swartz. Auntie Maudie used to make all the outfits for our fashion shows, modeling, costumes for our fancy dress and things like that.
- Weightlifting was run by Alex Thomas. They used to call him Boere.
- The library was run by Willy Mullins and Mrs. Mussen.
- Boxing was run by Percy Wilkinson and Mrs. Solomons.
- First aid classes

Most people who were involved in the Bloemhof Community Centre are doing community work today. I am involved in Community work through the District Six (Museum). People are doing community work in Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plain, Heideveld and Manenberg. So you can say Bloemhof Flats people are involved.

*Menisha Collins, adapted from interview, 2000*

### **2.2. Extract from interview transcript. Text omitted is indicated in bold:**

That was we had table tennis. That was run by Johnny Schaeffers. Badminton, Johnny Schaffers. We had ballet. People involved was in charge of the ballet was Pauline, Gwen Michaels, Elise Barlow, Mr. Herbert, Mrs. February, Cecil Jacobs and David Poole. We had a nursery school. Mrs. Feder was assisting. Sister Berry was our principal and Mrs. Kolbe was also assistant. We had gymnastics. It was girls and boys. It was run by Mr. Stoffels, Mr. Floris, Mr. Johannes, Moira, Maureen Ford, Sylvia and Lorraine and Mr. Claasen. The cooking classes was Mrs. Solomons. Sewing was Auntie Maudie and Mrs. Swartz. Auntie Maudie used to make all the outfits for our fashion shows, modeling, costumes for our fancy dress and things like that. Our weightlifting, Alex Thomas. They used to call him Boere. Our library was

run by Willy Mullins and Mr. Mussen. Boxing was run by Percy Wilkinson and Mr. Solomons. We had First Aid. The Red Cross was below the caretaker's house. Mrs. Botha and Mrs. Carelse. I must actually get the age of Mrs. Swartz. She is still alive and very and she is very, very old. At our housing office, Mrs. Daniels, we had kerrim, Mr. Johannes and we had scouts community, second Cape Town. Vera Taylor and Lionel Harding. Today Lionel Harding is still in the community. He is youth leader at St. Paul's church. Most of our people that was involved in the Bloemhof Community Centre are doing community work today. So I am involved in community work with the District Six. People that danced with me in the community centre are doing community gymnastics and ballet in Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plain, Heideveld, Manenberg, all over. So you can say Bloemhof Flats people are involved. We always found something to do. **We could relate to our children today if the communities have community centres, the example would be the Bloemhof Flats if the communities was run in our communities today, and more children could be involved because what we had in District Six was very much treasured and we can have a history, and that is children history, if we could call back the past. And our streets along Bloemhof Flats.**

*Menisha Collins, interview, 2000*

### 2.3. Ethnopoetic transcription:

...that was we had  
 uhm  
 table tennis  
 that was run by Johnny Schaffers  
 badminton  
 Johnny Schaffers  
 we had ballet  
 people involved  
 was in charge of the ballet was Pauline  
 Gwen Michaels  
 Elise  
 Barlow  
 Mrs. Herbert  
 Mrs. February  
 Cecil Jacobs and David Poole.  
 we had a nursery school  
 Mrs. Feder was assisting  
 Sister Berry was our principal  
 and Mrs. Kolbe was also an assistant  
 we had gymnastics  
 it was girls and boys  
 it was run by Mr. Stoffels  
 Mr. Floris  
 Mr. Johannes  
 Moira  
 Maureen Ford  
 Sylvia





and Lorraine  
and Mr. Claasen  
those were the people in charge of us  
the cooking classes was Mrs. Solomons  
sewing was Auntie Maudie and Mrs. Swartz  
Auntie Maudie used to make all the  
outfits for our  
fashion shows modeling costumes for our  
uhm fancy dress and  
things like that  
our weightlifting  
Alex Thomas they used to call him Boere  
our library was run by Willy Mullins and Mr. Mussen  
boxing was run by Percy Wilkinson and Mr. Solomons  
we had First Aid the Red Cross was below Mr.  
the caretaker's  
house  
Mrs. Botha and Mrs. Carelse  
I must actually get the age of Mrs. Swartz she's still alive and she's very very old  
at our housing office Mrs. Daniels we had kerrim  
Mr. Johannes  
and we had scouts  
in the community  
second Cape Town  
was run...  
Vera Taylor and Lionel Harding  
today Lionel Harding is still in the community he is the youth leader at St. Paul's  
church  
and uh  
most of our people  
that was involved in the Bloemhof Community Centre are doing community work  
today  
so I am involved in community work with the District Six  
people that danced with me in the community centre are doing community  
gymnastics and ballet  
in  
Tafelsig  
Mitchell's Plain  
Heideveld  
Manenberg  
all over  
so you can say Bloemhof Flats people  
are  
involved  
we always found something to do  
we could relate to our children  
today  
if the communities have community centres

example would be the Bloemhof Flats  
if the communities was run in our communities today  
and more children could be involved  
because  
what we had in District Six  
was  
very  
much treasured and we can have a history  
and that is children history  
if we could call back the past  
and uhm  
our streets  
our streets around Bloemhof Flats  
(...)

### 3. Rearrangement of extracts to form narratives

The extract below is from an interview conducted with Molly Herman (1999) and is found on the *Timeline: Formation panel*. The extract is introduced as a biographical narrative of the interviewee. It was knitted together from three separate responses to three distinct questions asked during the interview process. These three separate responses are seen here as three extracts, and for this purpose numbered (i) – (iii) below. Extract (ii) occurs as the first response in the original transcript, extract (i) as the second response and extract (iii) as the third response in the original transcript.<sup>61</sup>

#### 3.1. Original caption used in *Digging Deeper*

**Molly Herman** lived with her family at **Eaton Place** in District Six, she recalls:

"Yes, they (my mother and father) came from Russia (and) he was a corporal in the Russian Army. I don't really know if he wasn't happy there. But things got difficult. Times were difficult. He decided to emigrate. He had a cousin...by the same name Bailen and he got her to come out with him to South Africa and he married her. And she never changed her name... (i)

Yes, my parents owned two bioscopes. And one was called the Union and that was run by my mother who was a very active woman. As you can see she, had a family of 10... And my father had another bioscope which was

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<sup>61</sup> Also see Lionel Davis extract, interview 1999, Demolition panel

called the Empire and he charges 6 or 7 pence. But my mother said that she felt that the children didn't get so much spending money and she'd like them to enjoy the shows as well. So she charged one penny per person. (ii)

Although their business was still in District Six ... my father decided to turn the Empire bioscope into a shop that was linked to Katz Furnishers. (iii)

*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

### 3.2. Extracts from interview transcripts. Extracts used in the caption is indicated in bold:

*Extract (i) occurs on page 3 of the original transcript:*

I Beautiful. Can I ask you about where our dad and your mom are from?

M **Yes they came from – I'm not certain if it was ... or Russia but he was a corporal in the Russian army. And if he wasn't happy there, I don't really know. But things got difficult. Times were difficult. He decided to emigrate. And then he got a cousin of his by the same name and...Bailen and he got her to come out with him to South Africa and he married her. And that ... she never changed her name**

*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

*Extract (ii) occurs on page 1 of the original transcript:*

I I guess your popularity or your relationship was that your mom or your parents owned a bioscope

M **Yes my parents owned two bioscopes. And one was called the Union and that was run by my mother who was a very active woman. As you can see she had a family of 10. So she was very active – in between wars. And my father had another bioscope which was called the Empire and he charged 6 or 7 cents a week. But my mother said that she felt the children didn't get so much spending money and she'd like them to enjoy the shows as well. So she charged one penny per session. And the place was absolutely teeming with people. I think she had to turn some of the children away which was very sad for her because she loved children**

*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

*Extract (iii) occurs on page 4 of the original transcript*

I Very powerful. You have memories of District Six after you left

M Only what my family were able to tell me because I was only a year old when the family decided to move out of the district. **Although their**

**business was still in District Six, their bioscopes. When the talkie bioscopes were in vogue, my father decided to turn one of the bioscopes that was the Empire into a shop. And it was linked to Katz furnishers.** And by strange co-incidence there was a exhibition at the – is it the Muir Street – the one in the National Gallery, that's right. I'm thinking of a National Gallery. Not a museum. There was a combined effort of National Gallery with the District Six museum. And so, picked people who had pictures taken of District Six were able to display those pictures in the museum. Not museum, art gallery

*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

#### 4.3. Ethnopoetic transcriptions

*Extract (i)*

...yes they came from  
uhm  
I'm not certain if it was Tomsk or  
Russia  
but he was a corporal in the Russian army  
and  
uh  
if he wasn't happy there I don't really know  
but  
uh  
things got  
into  
difficult  
times were difficult he decided to emigrate  
and then  
he got  
a cousin of his  
by the same name  
Anastasia Bailen  
and he got her to come out with him  
to South Africa and he married her  
and that's where the ten children come from  
she never changed her name



*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

*Extract (ii)*

...my parents owned two bioscopes  
the one was called the Union  
and uh  
that was  
run by my mother who was a very active woman

as you can see she had a family of ten  
so she was very active  
in between worlds  
uhm  
and  
my father had another bioscope  
which was called  
the Empire  
and he charged  
six or seven cents a week  
but my mother said  
that she felt the children didn't get so much spending money  
and she'd like them to enjoy the shows as well  
so she charged  
one penny  
per session  
and the place was absolutely teeming with people  
I think she had to turn some of the children away  
which was very sad for her  
because she loved children



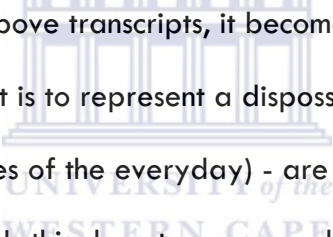
*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*

*Extract (iii)*

...uh  
only what  
uh  
my family were able to tell me  
because I  
I was only a year old  
when  
the family decided to  
move out of the District  
although their business was still in District Six  
their bioscopes  
uh  
when the uh talkie  
bioscopes  
were in vogue  
uh  
my father decided to turn one of the bioscopes that was the Empire  
into a shop  
and it was linked to Katz  
K-a-t-z  
furnishers  
and by strange coincidence there was a exhibition at the  
uh  
not is it a museum

one in the in the in the uhm  
Nat  
National Gallery  
I'm thinking of the National Gallery  
it's not a museum  
uhm  
there was a combined effort of National Gallery  
with the District Six Museum  
and so  
picked people who had  
pictures  
uh  
taken of District Six  
were able to display those pictures in the museum  
not the museum art gallery  
the art gallery

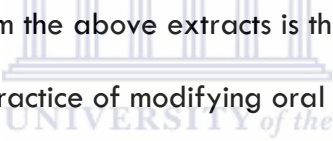
*Molly Herman, interview, 1999*



From the changes made to the above transcripts, it becomes clear that a key question to consider is why - when the pursuit is to represent a dispossessed community through what appears as *their* voices (the voices of the everyday) - are these voices then edited, knitted together and translated? Is this done to accommodate the viewer/visitor by curators who seek balance between design and content? And what then is the relationship between the sound of the oral source and the oral source in written form? In *Digging Deeper*, there is an important interplay between sound and the spaces they inhabit, but the written text – whether exhibition text or oral history extracts – remains a key visual element throughout the exhibition. How text is then modified to suit a visual, design context should then be considered.

In relation to *Digging Deeper*, oral history transcripts may be seen to have been modified for the following purposes:

1. *To have them make narrative sense* e.g. in the case of the Molly Herman extract where fragments of oral history extracts have been rearranged and knit together to provide a biography of the interviewee that is contained and 'whole'.
2. *To make reading easier* - in a conventional sense, but also in terms of a visual reading (framework) for the particular display/installation concerned. This can be seen with the Amina Gool extract, which is transferred on perspex and then placed onto the *Resistance* panel.
3. *To give authority* to the exhibition. This is denoted by the presence of the extract alone, which affirms the role of the museum as a community museum 'for' and 'of' the everyday person.



A key question that emerges from the above extracts is the extent to which an aesthetic or narrative process drove the practice of modifying oral history extracts in the exhibition. To a large extent, in any exhibition, the need for a coherent narrative that illustrates the visual content of an exhibition, and vice versa is a norm. In the case of *Digging Deeper*, with its emphasis on defining the exhibition (and the museum space) as one driven by ex-resident interventions and voices – the complicity between visual and narrative interventions and the modification of ex-resident transcripts raises questions about the social history project in South Africa and the ways in which the voices of those marginalised in an oppressive society are *made to speak* and are represented in the public domain.

The phenomenon of how the marginalisation of these groups became entrenched by the methodologies of oral history practice is noted in a critique by Minkley and Rassool of

oral history practice in the Western Cape which was produced in the early 1990s.<sup>62</sup> In this critique Minkley and Rassool identify the hegemonic role of oral history in the practices of social history and a people's history, which resulted in a history from below which restricted those designated as 'below' from any agency in the way their narratives were used within the historical discipline and consequently within a broader public sphere. While Minkley and Rassool addressed how people were 'made to speak', another critique which is useful for looking at *Digging Deeper* is that presented by Minkley, Rassool and Witz, during the same period, and which speaks to how the category of *hidden voices* in itself was a construction. Through the process of identifying and naming categories as hidden and marginalised, Minkley *et al* argue that the "construction of subject positions as ready made unities" within social and popular history became a key feature of its practice. The complicity of an oral history methodology in this construction lay in its perceived value in uncovering and restoring silent voices to history.<sup>63</sup>

Within *Digging Deeper* categories of marginalisation are present in the category of the "ex-resident" itself. As the source of stories about District Six, and as the victim of the forced removal, the ex-resident is perceived as someone who has been denied the opportunity to voice their trauma and experiences of the removal. A key way in which this trauma – the loss of the self/identity- is mediated is through the floor map and the memory-cloth, and other opportunities for inscribing their names.<sup>64</sup> Ex-residents are encouraged to relate stories as they inscribe themselves back into the District and back

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<sup>62</sup> G. Minkley and C. Rassool, "Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions", paper delivered at the Africa Seminar, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1995, pp.1-14

<sup>63</sup> G. Minkley, C. Rassool and L. Witz, "Thresholds, gateways and spectacles: journeying through South African hidden pasts and histories in the last decade of the twentieth century", paper delivered at the Future of the Past conference, University of the Western Cape, 1996, pp. 1-32, pp.3-4

<sup>64</sup> See the "Curator's Note", *A Guide to the District Six Museum and Digging Deeper exhibition*



into history. The act of inscription that ex-residents undertake does not necessarily entrench marginalisation. Rather, it is the agency that the museum assumes in mediating and facilitating this process that raises questions as to who tells the story and how it is “captured” then mediated to a broader public. While perhaps not using the conventional tool of the academic article, the aesthetic framework of the museum nevertheless provides a lens through which former residents of District Six are understood as part of the seamless category of the “ex-resident”. Notably, the seamlessness of this category is defined by the multiple voices *allowed* to come to the fore at different points of the exhibition. This multiplicity is evident in the different opinions expressed by ex-residents on their experience of District Six, but also in how extracts from individual interviewees are used to show the nuances of their narratives.

In the following extracts from an interview with Amina Gool, the nuances of her individual narrative can be seen on display on the Resistance and Demolition panel:

#### **RESISTANCE PANEL**

So there on the picnic is Ray Alexander, Eli Weinberg,...Gomas, Leepile and another two or three people...Now they're all discussing. Now what are they discussing? The Republic. Die meer is ek 'n esel, die meer weet ek nie wat gaan aan nie. I mean, let's now just face facts. Hulle se vir my 'and comrade, what do you think.' So comrade replies, 'it's so lovely to be out in the open air.'

*Amina Gool, interview 1999*

#### **DEMOLITION PANEL**

I was apolitical. I wasn't the political person. But one thing I know there was something wrong in District Six, the way we lived at home, the way people lived in District Six. There was poverty there. Children died like flies in summer and in winter it was bronchial pneumonia because we write out the death certificates... That's winter and in summer it's gastro enteritis ... But...on our death certificates my brother would say 'Marasmus' which is almost malnutrition...First it was gastro enteritis, then it was Marasmus. You know the combination of the two was a quick killer and there was

none of this giving the children the drip, no Red Cross hospital at that time. And a child dying...It has been murdered by starvation.

*Amina Gool, interviewed in 1999*

In both extracts Amina Gool is seen to be fashioning an almost apolitical role for herself in resistance politics. Yet the placement of these extracts renders her meanings as politicised for two contexts. In a context not of her own making, the placement of the extract on the Resistance panel, illustrates the agency of the *museum* in acknowledging that ‘resistance’ amongst District Sixers to apartheid was not a given, and in displaying that sentiment, makes a political statement about a District Six narrative that does not exclude this group. In the second extract, which was placed on the Demolition panel – the voice of Amina Gool that is seen is political, albeit around the underlying connection between the effects of racism and the prevalence of poverty in District Six. The presence of both extracts illustrate the museum’s “apparent access to the consciousness of experience”<sup>65</sup> and the representation of this consciousness as history, no longer ‘from below’, but out in the open.

The features of a people’s or popular history project in the Western Cape become a key point through which to interrogate the use of voices present in the museum’s displays. As noted by Minkley and Rassool, one of the features of popular history was the narrative link made between “the object of ‘the community’ as metaphor for ‘everyday experience’”.<sup>66</sup> Themes around everyday, community life in District Six recur throughout the upper gallery of *Digging Deeper*, while broader historical narratives of the area are

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<sup>65</sup> Minkley *et al*, “Thresholds and gateways”, p.4

<sup>66</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa”, p.3

situated on the ground floor and are underpinned by a timeline that runs through the *Formation, Resistance and Restitution* panels.<sup>67</sup>

On the *Resistance* panel it is the biographical presence of four District Six residents: Lionel Davis, Amina Gool, Phyllis Fuku and Vincent Kolbe, which dominates the display. The four personal narratives are clustered on the *Resistance* panel of *Digging Deeper* as a metaphorical anchor through which the broader history of District Six was told.<sup>68</sup> It is noted in the guide to *Digging Deeper*, under the description of the *Resistance* panel, that “[o]ral histories provide the basis of the memory work, exhibitions and research of the museum” and that the four life histories “reflect a facet of this process.”<sup>69</sup> In looking at the role of the displays on the ground floor in foregrounding the “political, historical and social developments relating to District Six”<sup>70</sup>, the four life histories used in the *Resistance* panel therefore become representative of particular experiences of District Six that illustrate broader historical processes. The question to consider here then is what were the curatorial and design elements that attempted to assert the value of the oral history extract – the voice of the interviewee – in relation to these broader processes? As mentioned earlier, it is in the *form* the extract took with these four particular interviews, namely that of enlarged text printed onto perspex, that the primacy of the oral history extract is asserted through its *visual* prominence in the display area. Notably, on the ground floor, the only other space where this technique is

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<sup>67</sup> Significantly, as noted by Jos Thorne, one of the conceptual frameworks for the exhibition was “life histories”. The *Formation, Resistance and Restitution* panels were divided along three bands: firstly, historical maps and aerial photographs were used as a backdrop; secondly, the timeline ran along the panels; and lastly, a middle band displayed photographs and texts relating to the timeline. See Thorne, *The Choreography of Display* pp.96-7. This point is important when thinking through how oral history extracts do not act ‘alone’ in the exhibition space, but are anchored curatorially and aesthetically to visual and documentary forms in the exhibition space.

<sup>68</sup> This point came to light in a discussion with Tina Smith, one of the curators of *Digging Deeper*.

<sup>69</sup> *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*.

<sup>70</sup> *A Guide to the District Six Museum and the Digging Deeper exhibition*

used is with the Demolition panel, where extracts from nine interviews are clustered onto one sheet of perspex.<sup>71</sup>

The attempt to foreground the four life histories, through the form the oral history extract takes, as well as through the presence of four biographical panels highlights Minkley and Rassool's critique of oral histories as contextual devices for historical narratives. A core cluster of names, in essence, became the 'voices' of the museum and the representative faces of District Six, instead of providing a platform where a layer of voices became representative of a broader community. 'History from below' was largely told through the personal narratives of a few. Minkley and Rasool's argument in respect to social history - that the voices of nationalist leaders became representative of a broader political movement echoes how the voices of a few become representative of a District Six history as told by the museum. The effect of placing extracts on perspex is twofold. As noted earlier, these extracts take on a life of their own, standing apart from the panels onto which they are mounted and enforcing their primacy in the exhibition. The function of an oral source in written form - in a particularly *transparent* form – reflects to a large degree the notion that the voices 'from below' are transparent, obvious and thus unquestioningly representative of a suppressed history. As noted by Minkley and Rassool, this ignores the function of "words, and their framing into oral historical narratives, and language and discourse [which] are not transparent".<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Notably, on the ground floor, the only other space where this technique is used is with the Demolition panel, where extracts from nine interviews are clustered onto one sheet of perspex. Although the text is not enlarged to the extent of that text found on the Resistance panel. Extracts from the following interviewees are found here, namely Vincent Kolbe (1998); Thandi Makhupula (1998); Lionel Davis, (1999); Amina Gool (1999); Joe Schaffers (1999); Armien Majiet (1999); Ismail Bufkins (1999);Zelda Benjamin (1998); Phyllis Fuku (1999).

<sup>72</sup> Minkley and Rassool, "Oral history in South Africa", p.8

Another critique raised by Rassool and Minkley and the uses of oral history within social history relates to an assumption that relies on the notion that

“the historical method of collecting individual life histories through oral histories [and] ... their assembled quantity, matching and sequencing as well as their individual ‘representivity’ will constitute and correlate collective memory”<sup>73</sup>

The notion of representivity and collective memory as it relates to *Digging Deeper* and District Six history in general is significant for the discussion of how oral histories in their exhibitionary form embody a collective memory and a form of oral historical tradition.

Minkley and Rassool’s argument relates to the insertion of oral histories into a historiography that sees it as “supplementary evidence” - where the author of the modified oral history is not visible, but constructs a narrative and a chronology around a set of quantified oral history interviews, and who devises “lifelike and detailed descriptions of ‘how it really was’”.<sup>74</sup> Following these characteristics, *Digging Deeper*, particularly in how life histories are constructed around the different social spaces of District Six in the gallery space, begins to emulate Minkley and Rassool’s critique. Thus, oral history extracts of working life in District Six found in the Places of Work alcove are detailed and lifelike, not only in terms of their content, but also in how the interviewee is referenced. In the Places of Work alcove the following extract is found:

I used to (clean) with my hand and a mop. I used to take a hard broom and then I put a cloth over (it) and I would rub and rub. And I had a beautiful shiny place.

**Cornelia Moses (adapted from interview, 1999)**

**Cornelia Moses worked for the City council as a toilet cleaner. She worked at the Farmer’s Market toilets in Cape Town and Salt River as well as at the public toilets on the Parade at Kloofnek.**

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<sup>73</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa”, p.8

<sup>74</sup> Minkley and Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa”, p.8

Another aspect of how oral history extracts are used in the exhibition is the non-translation of colloquial phrases that appear in the oral history interview. The majority of interviews conducted for the exhibition were conducted in English, and consequently, instances of translation (from isiXhosa to English or Afrikaans to English) are minimal. Furthermore both exhibition text and oral history extracts on display are in English. The function of colloquial, mostly Afrikaans, phrases that were allowed to remain in the oral history extract on display raises a number of questions. Do they remain as a means of illustrating a District Six dialect, or do they reinforce the presence of the voice of the 'everyday person' who lived in District Six? In many of the extracts, these phrases are idiomatic in nature e.g. with Amina Gool (interview 1999): "*Die meer is ek 'n esel...*" [The more I am a donkey/ass] or as found in an extract from an interview with Joe Schaffers (interview 1999): "*Die man van die Group was hier*" [The man from the Group (Areas) was here]. In the latter case, the experience of receiving a notice of removal is denoted through signification in the text, and becomes idiomatic for the experience of the removals. Other instances of non-translation appear in the use of words such as "*slootjie*" (ditch); *kennetjie*; *drie blikkies*, *bok-bok*<sup>75</sup> (the names of games played in District Six).

In historiography, the dominance of the English language in the translation of oral texts raises questions around how historians write history in monolingual ways.<sup>76</sup> As noted by Marijke du Toit, one of the dangers of the translation process lies in how the subjects of interviews are translated into a discourse which is English-centred and which therefore

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<sup>75</sup> Joe Schaffers, Bloemhof Reunion, interview 2000, Bloemhof Flats alcove

<sup>76</sup> M. du Toit, "Telling tales: the politics of language in oral historiography", *South African Historical Journal*, 42, May 2000, pp.89 -120, p.98

elides the role of other languages in the making of meaning.<sup>77</sup> As she notes, the danger of not problematising how oral texts are translated into English includes, amongst others, the silencing of the agency of the translator who ‘speaks’ the interviewees “into English”; the concealment of the power relations between the researcher and the translator in relation to how meaning is both produced and disseminated; as well as disregarding the agency of the interviewee as framed in the language he or she speaks.<sup>78</sup> While these dangers govern the translation of oral texts *into* English, the danger of including phrases in the language of the interviewee in a historical analysis lies in how it enacts a “process of authentication performed by shards of indigenous language”.<sup>79</sup>

While the scattered prevalence of colloquial phrases throughout Digging Deeper may not warrant a deeper analysis of the role of translation in the exhibition, their presence raises tentative questions around the site of (non) translation as a site of power relations between the interviewee and the interviewer, and how the interviewee is presented to an audience. The site/act of non-translation in the museum highlights two aspects of how oral histories are used in its space. Firstly, it balances the museum’s identification with an audience of District Six ex-residents - who are seen to understand the colloquialisms found in the exhibition, and who have been participants in its making. Secondly, the colloquial phrases authenticate the voices that are being read in the display – they create a sense that the interviewee is a ‘real’ person, someone the visitor can identify with.

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<sup>77</sup> du Toit, “Telling tales”, p. 93

<sup>78</sup> du Toit, “Telling tales”, p. 93, 95,96

<sup>79</sup> du Toit, “Telling tales”, p. 96

As noted by Thorne, one of the curatorial intentions for *Digging Deeper* was that the aesthetic framework of the museum should be “rooted in oral testimony and expression”.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the routes one could follow as a visitor, were not fixed, but encouraged “multiple readings” which could enable the viewer to be “guided by their own interests”.<sup>81</sup> The notion of multiple readings are important for a discussion of the way orality is sourced into the museum and its exhibition space. As Hofmeyr reveals about the oral historical narratives around the siege of Makapansgat, oral sources around the siege are not wholly oral – and are often the results of interactions with literate worlds and literate accounts of the event i.e. written accounts by newspapers, travelers and popular historians.<sup>82</sup> Along a similar line, within the exhibition space itself, a reading of oral sources around District Six is tempered by the layering of a number of exhibition elements. In addition to being subject to processes of being transformed into written texts, oral sources are subject to a reading that relies on their spatial arrangement in relation to photographs and objects, as well as other texts. With the Bloemhof Flats panel, oral history extracts are read in relation to a historian’s account of housing in the District Six.<sup>83</sup> With the public washhouse display, archival records documenting how washerwomen interacted with the city council form part of the aesthetic framework of the display, and is to be read in relation to the extracts found on the washhouse as well as exhibition text. In the Hanover Street, it is a written account by Vincent Kolbe from a museum newsletter, which can be read in relation to oral history extracts from interviews conducted with him.

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<sup>80</sup> Thorne, *The Choreography of Display*, p.74

<sup>81</sup> Thorne, *The Choreography of Display*, p. 81

<sup>82</sup> Hofmeyr, “*We spend our years as a tale that is told*”, pp.143-144, 150. The popular historian in this case was Gustav Preller who also gathered life histories and oral testimonies around the siege.

<sup>83</sup> The exhibition text for the Bloemhof Flats alcove is an adaptation from an article by Shamiel Jeppie on housing in District Six in the 1940s. See S. Jeppie, “Modern housing for the District: the Canterbury and Bloemhof flats” in Rassool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp. 113-130



The role of photographs in the museum in the making of orality also cannot be discounted. In talking about the value of photographs in another exhibitions context Lidchi identifies the function of photographs as firstly, enhancing the presentation of the exhibition; secondly, acting as a substitute for the physical presence of objects; and thirdly, facilitating the work of representation by providing a 'real' context for what is being represented.<sup>84</sup> Oral history extracts in *Digging Deeper*, in the primacy they assume in the exhibition space reflect to a large degree the function of photographs in exhibitions. Thus they enhance the presentation of the exhibition in the form of their display – as enlarged extracts transferred onto perspex. On a broader scale, their presence (whether in textual or audio form) also substitutes for the actual site and spaces of District Six – through evocations stimulated by the extracts and the acts of inscription encouraged by the museum. Lastly, through their use in clearly defined /themed display areas such as the upper floor alcoves, they facilitate a reading of the display that relates to its content but which also draws attention to the details of the display e.g. with the hairdresser/barbershop alcove, the visitor's eyes are drawn around the shape of the hairdresser's mirror by the placement of extracts along the outline of the mirror.

An important cue to take from Hofmeyr's work around oral historical narratives is whether the combined reading of the exhibitionary elements of *Digging Deeper* (oral history extracts, photographs, and other visual displays) can be understood as an oral historical tradition in itself. The creation and transmission of oral historical narratives, as

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<sup>84</sup> H. Lidchi, "The poetics and politics of exhibiting other cultures", in S. Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications), 1997, pp. 153 – 208, p.177

shown by Hofmeyr, is dependent on a number of factors. Amongst these is the identification of core-cliché's, around which the telling of the oral narrative turns.<sup>85</sup> In exploring how oral historical traditions were affected by interactions brought about by encroaching settlement by Voortrekkers and later, the impingements of Group Areas and the homeland system, Hofmeyr notes how storytellers were able to bring together a number of techniques, ideas, themes and resources to ensure the transmission of the tradition, albeit in an altered form.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the "context of transmission" was central to the telling of the oral tradition, and changes in these contexts often brought about the telling of a fragmented narrative.<sup>87</sup> An understanding of the District Six narrative as an oral historical tradition requires a deeper exploration of how and when ex-residents tell their stories, and how the themes, identified by the museum and supported through the fragments extracted from oral history interviews - as well as the context it provides as a receptive space for these stories - echoes a practice of oral historical tradition where the museum is the narrator. One of the ways in which to deepen this understanding is identifying the "mnemonic outline" that the museum has (and continues) to develop for the District Six story.<sup>88</sup> As noted in Hofmeyr, within oral historical narrative the occurrence of a crisis often provides the core image around which a narrative dwells.<sup>89</sup> Notably, one of these outlines for the museum is the crisis precipitated by the Group Areas declaration of 1966, which is the key 'event' towards which the exhibition narrative and oral history extracts progress.

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<sup>85</sup> Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told", p.163

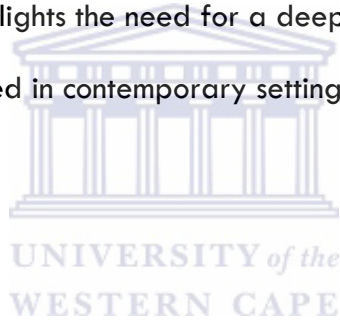
<sup>86</sup> Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told", p.167, pp.171-172

<sup>87</sup> Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told" pp.165-167

<sup>88</sup> Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told" p.149

<sup>89</sup> Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told", p.164

This chapter has attempted to unpack the various ways in which oral histories have been used in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition. While not a detailed account that tracks the evolution of one oral history interview and its deployment in the exhibition space, it has provided a broad and varied look at the way oral histories are changed once transcribed into textual form, and has attempted to understand the implications of these changes for the oral source. This it has done very much within the bounds of thinking through how *history* is produced and transmitted. In particular, the critique of how social historians utilise the oral source, posed by scholars in the 1990s, has been key to the peeling away of how meaning is constructed through the oral source in the exhibition, and furthermore highlights the need for a deeper analysis of how oral historical narratives are produced in contemporary settings.

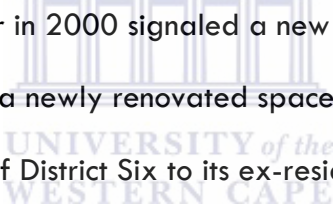


## Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to sketch some antecedents for oral history practice within a museum setting and within an exhibitionary strategy, and to decipher how a critical approach to this practice can be structured. It has traced how oral histories have been used in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition, which opened in the District Six Museum in 2000. Furthermore, it has attempted to understand why oral sources are transcribed and edited when placed on display and considers the impact of exhibitionary and design interventions on the language and visual presence of oral texts. This impact can be seen in how a new meaning is forged that moves beyond the meaning intended by the interviewee. In essence, in the act of representation, oral history extracts embody new meanings which do not merely reflect District Six as it was or the results of 'digging deeper' into its history. In the act of display, and in relation to a number of exhibitionary elements, the extracts also relate a set of arguments around the role of the museum in the construction of a public history around District Six. The questions that remain after examining the above antecedents in the District Six Museum, (with the organisation's own emphasis on a critical museum practice), therefore revolve around what an *uncritical* practice of oral history in a museum context might be.

The origin moments of the District Six Museum in the 1980s, and later its official opening in the year of the first democratic election in 1994, has both directly and indirectly framed the museum's approach to uncovering the history of District Six. The 1980s, a period during which social and popular history became key frameworks

through which to write a progressive South African history, strongly influenced the early 'institutional' language of the museum. Thus the focus of its displays was to render the hidden voices of a District Six story in a public forum where they could be acknowledged. This rendering was often identified as an organic process, one which sprung from the ex-resident's need to narrate and share their stories about District Six. The museum, in its tentative phase of becoming a more formalised institution, provided a receptive space where these stories were told, *heard*, and cooperatively incorporated into its displays. Its agency, however, in ensuring that these voices were heard by others and made visible, became a key role that defined its own institutional narrative.



The opening of *Digging Deeper* in 2000 signaled a new phase in the organisational life of the museum. Situated in a newly renovated space, the new exhibition no longer only signified the importance of District Six to its ex-residents, but also to a broader Cape Town and national public. One of the ways to signify this importance was through the voices of ex-residents themselves. Within a framework where “expressive elements [were] woven together in an interrelated whole”<sup>1</sup>, oral histories, particularly life histories, became the basis through which the story of forced removals and experiences of District Six were narrated.

When oral history is introduced into a museum setting, a number of concerns arise as whether it is introduced as a methodology, or whether as engaged content for an exhibition. Presenting at an International Council Of Museums (ICOM) conference

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<sup>1</sup> “Curator’s Note”, *A Guide to the District Six Museum and Digging Deeper exhibition*

entitled “Can oral history make objects speak” in 2005, Henry Bredekamp cites the *Democracy X* exhibition, held in celebration of ten years of democracy in South Africa in 2004, as well as the use of oral history methodologies at the Bo-Kaap museum in Cape Town, as two moments which exemplify the use of oral histories in making objects speak.<sup>2</sup> As he notes, with *Democracy X*, the work of social historian Luli Callinicos provided a crucial accompaniment to exhibits dealing with mining and migrancy, and allowed Iziko museums, a flagship institution, to acknowledge the role of the social history movement in “transforming the false consciousness of the oppressed”.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Callinicos’ work, itself a *written* interpretation of individual/group experiences of mining and migrancy was used as supporting and supplementary evidence for the exhibition. The citing of this particular instance as an introduction of the precepts of social history and an oral history methodology into the national museum framework, calls into being a number of questions regarding how those considered to have existed on the margins of South Africa’s historical narratives, are *empowered* to tell their own story. Bredekamp’s belief, furthermore, that oral history exists as a resource “in the construction of a culturally sensitive understanding of the life history of a museum’s source community in relation to class and ethnic formations, gender, youth and family” is important for locating uncritical oral history practice within museums.<sup>4</sup> In naming the community that a museum serves as a ‘source community’, a very specific notion regarding the relationship between a community and a museum is engendered that owes much to the anthropological leanings and

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<sup>2</sup> H.J. Bredekamp, “Oral history, museums and communities: a view from the Cape of Good Hope”, keynote presentation delivered at the International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference “Can oral history make objects speak?”, Nafplion, Greece, 18-21 October, 2005, pp. 1- 12, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Bredekamp, “Oral histories, museums and communities”, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Bredekamp, “Oral histories, museums and communities”, p. 8

methodologies that gave rise to the South African Museum (also part of Iziko), and which did much to solidify visual representations of non-white communities as the passive 'other'. Notably, Bredekamp's assertion of the value of oral history within the national museum structure is contradictory - attempting to reconcile the academy's role of being able to provide these sources in mitigated form for *Democracy X*, whilst at the same time asserting local ways of knowledge production that are restricted to local museums situated within identified communities.<sup>5</sup>

The second context in which Bredekamp locates oral history practice is in the Bo-Kaap museum. Here, the 'source community' of the museum, the residents of the Bo-Kaap, was invited to the museum to identify people in photographs of the area from the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The language used to frame this "dialogue" with the community reflects a concern with being able to restore the identity of the 'other', in this case residents of Bo-Kaap who are the subjects of the photographs.<sup>7</sup> However, Minkley and Rasool's critique that social history practice entrenched a 'domination vs. resistance' framework, where the marginality of the voices from below was entrenched, holds true here and raises questions regarding oral history practice within museum spaces. Bredekamp's assertion that community members of the Bo-Kaap are able to reinsert their stories in a broader historical narrative by naming members of their community identified in the photograph, draws on the very processes of othering, as what is remembered is assessed according to notions of reliability and

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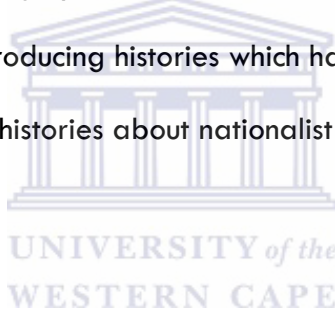
<sup>5</sup> Bredekamp, "Oral history, museums and communities", pp.8-9

<sup>6</sup> Bredekamp, "Oral history, museums and communities", pp. 9-11

<sup>7</sup> Bredekamp, "Oral history, museums and communities", p. 9

evidentiary power and not the *ongoing processes* inherent in acts of remembrance, and how this may be translated and reconstituted into an oral form.<sup>8</sup>

Oral history practice, as it emerged within a South African context has close ties with social history, itself a strand of radical historiography. The notion that the histories of those marginalised by a repressive state - histories from below - could be *written* using the life history as a source, had implications not only for *how* that history was written, but also for the orality of the source itself. The critique of social history has largely centred on the former implication. As Minkley and Rassool have argued, oral sources (and their communities) have largely been mined for their “literate facts” (as seen with the Bo-Kaap museum)<sup>9</sup>, producing histories which have reduced subjects to “representative allegories” of histories about nationalist movements and class struggles in South Africa.



The above critique, which emerged in the 1990s, has been important for understanding how the District Six Museum, in its attempt to create an exhibition about District Six that took into account multiple voices, presented the oral source as a contextual device for other oral history sources, whilst simultaneously asserting its primacy in both visual and textual forms. While its primacy was meant to negate an over-reliance on archival and documentary history, the act of transcription, which rendered the oral source as written – curtailed the creation of an exhibition which was entirely driven the voices of ex-residents.

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<sup>8</sup> Bredekamp, “Oral history, museums and communities”, pp. 11-12

<sup>9</sup> G. Minkley and Rassool, “Oral history in South Africa: some critical questions”, paper delivered at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 22 March 1995, pp.1-14, p.10



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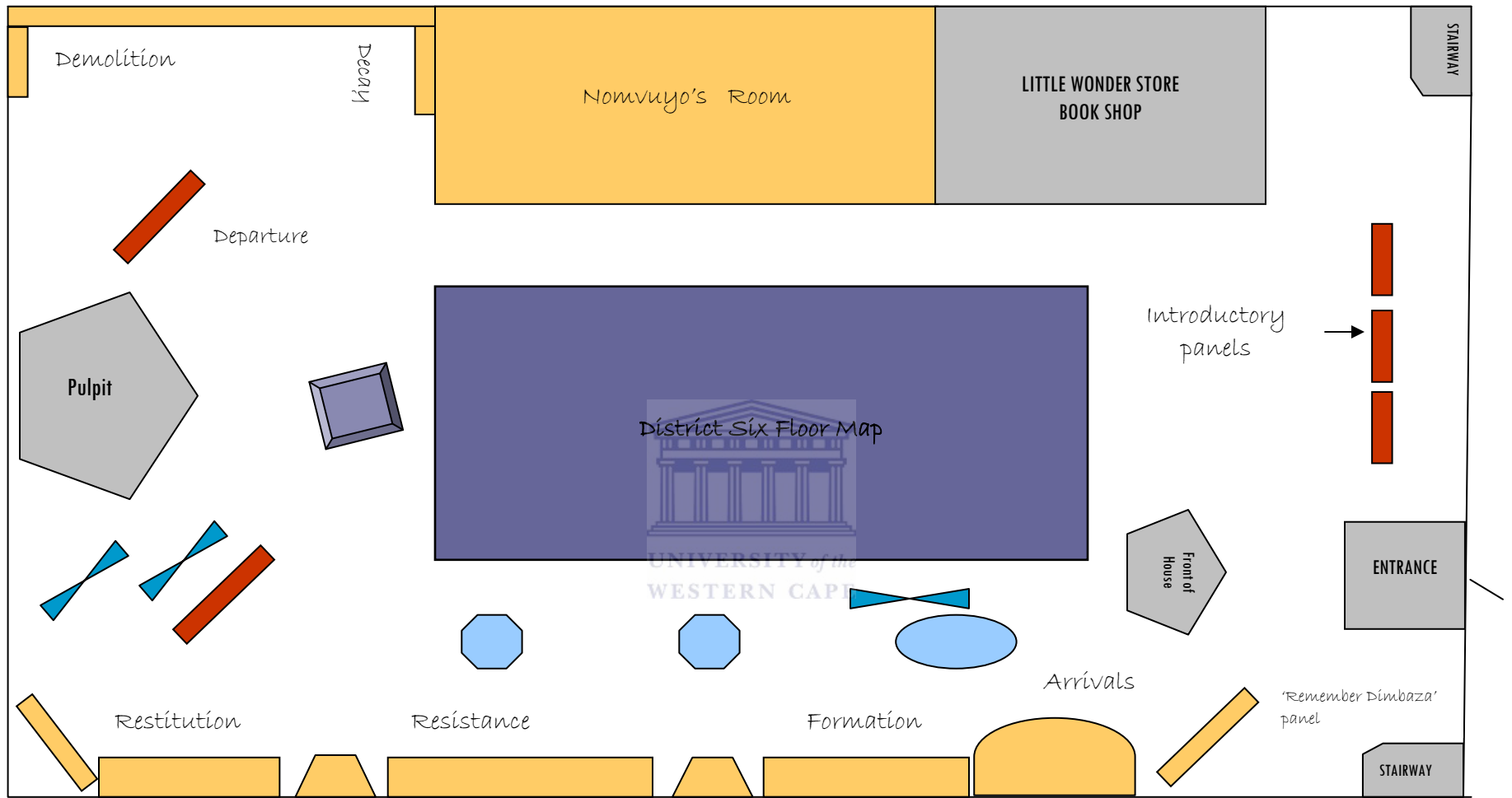
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
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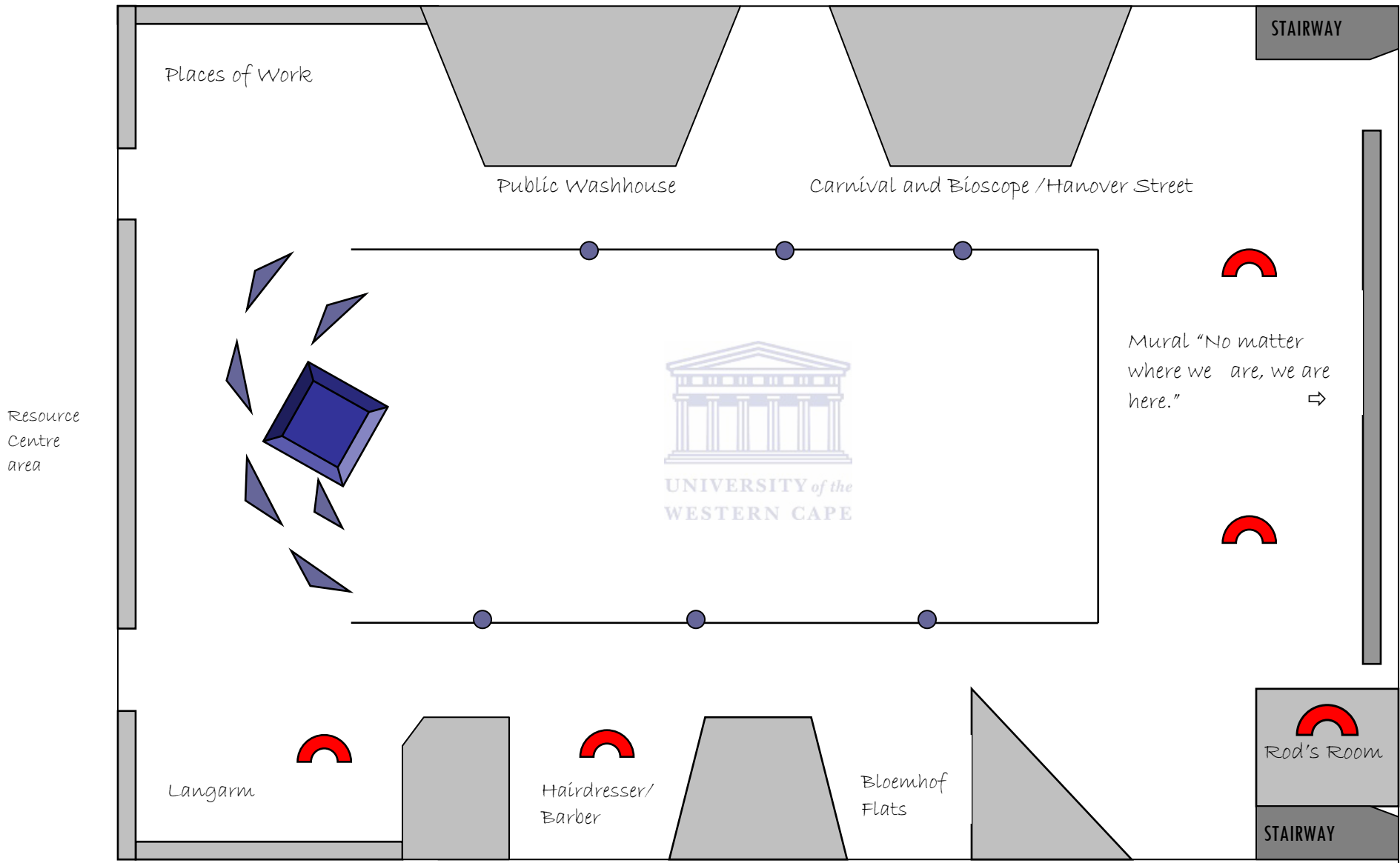
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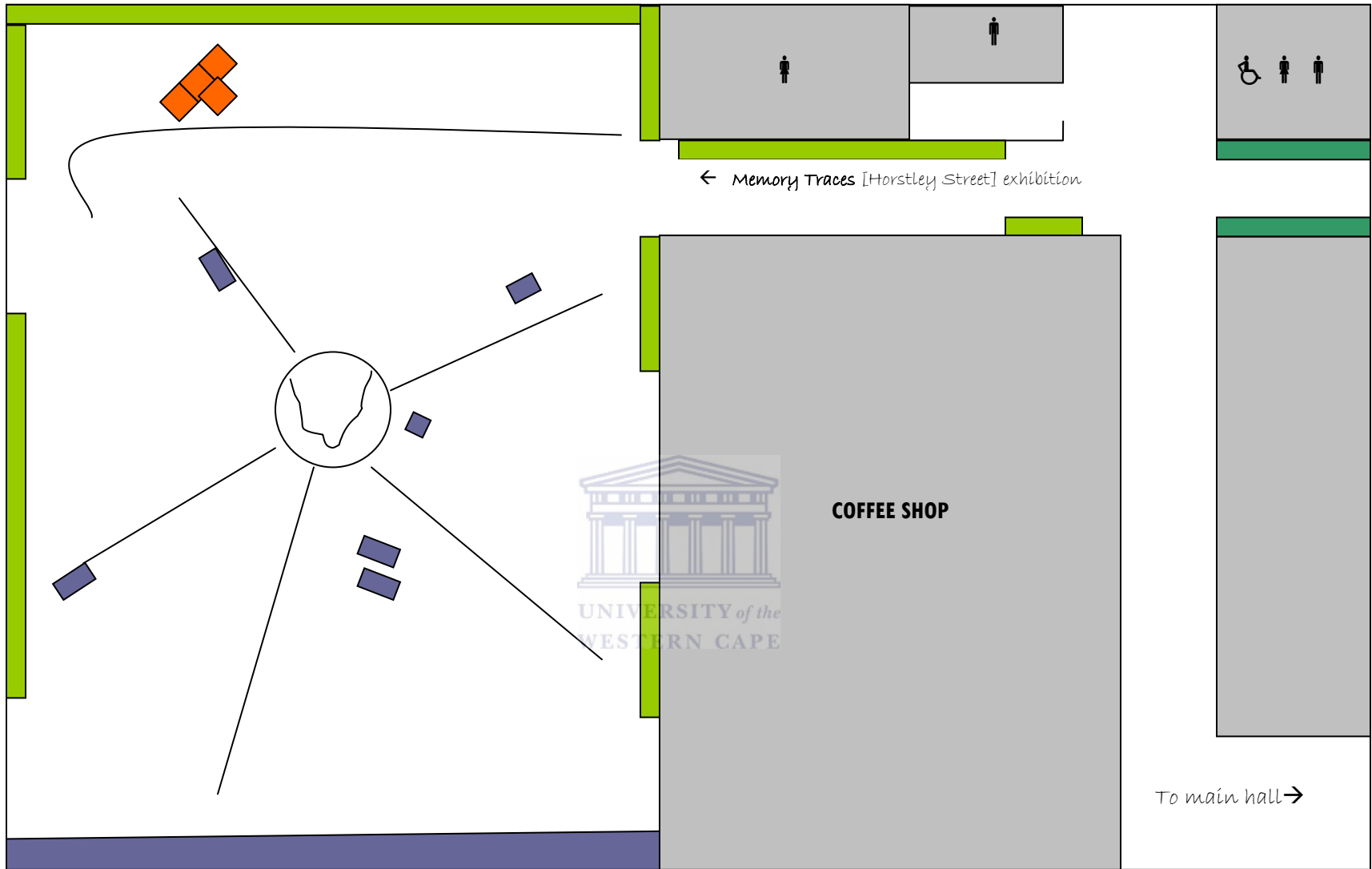
**FIGURE 1:**  
Digging Deeper: Ground Floor

- |   |                   |   |                        |
|---|-------------------|---|------------------------|
|  | Name cloth        |  | Pillar of street signs |
|  | Slave tree & bell |  | Newspaper drums        |



**FIGURE 2:**  
Digging Deeper: Upper Gallery

-  Pillar of street signs
-  Community banners
-  Sound domes
-  Portrait gallery



**FIGURE 3:**  
*Digging Deeper: Memorial Hall*



Horstley Street archaeology display