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Mapping the Memories: Politics, Place and Identity in the District Six Museum, Cape Town

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Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa, `the new South Africa' is the most obvious way in which people in all kinds of locations and structural positions confront and seek to give some name to both the obvious and massive political changes which have occurred and the hopes for cultural and social change which have accompanied them. That the label `the new South Africa' is perhaps the dominant form of an overall identity for this national polity obscures the uncertainty, and precariousness, of this act of confrontation. Just what is `new' in post-apartheid South Africa? And what does it mean to be South African in the `new' South Africa? How can this identity achieve some kind of stability, some form of integrity? Can the past be used to establish not just the fact of `newness', but also to think about what it is, or can be, by reference to what it is not. In the past and its struggles lies the impetus for the nation conceived as unity in diversity, the principle for knowing or interpreting the past thus being embedded in the present (Boyarin, 1994, p. x). Thus also emerges the enormous significance of memory in South Africa today.

Memory is central in social theorising and critique in contemporary South Africa today (one could compare this with the relationship between nation and memory in Israel; Young, 1993, p. 210, Huyssen, 1994). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is probably the most obvious and visible manifestation, publicly engaging the apartheid regime in terms of its oppressive strategies and human rights violations. Here, one is mindful of Boyarin’s close link between the role of memory and identity as nation-state (1994, p. ix). In South Africa this process must be contextualised through other attempts to provide reconciliation and ‘truth’ to mark the end of oppressive regimes and signal new beginnings. Post-war Germany (see for example Geyer, 1996; Young, 1993, Chapter 1) and Argentina’s return to democracy after military rule come immediately to mind. South Africa’s own particular Truth and Reconciliation process certainly drew on other attempts to heal shattered nations, the public consultation and fact gathering process including input from South American and East European countries (see Boraine and Levy, 1995). Ultimately, some forms such as El Salvador’s internationally organised commission were rejected and, as Andre du Toit put it, South Africa’s Truth Commission became a ‘project of the state’ (1995, p. 95), a decision which suited the fact that here remembering and accounting for the past are also encompassed and circum-
scribed within the negotiated political settlement which put an end to the apartheid regime.

Yet, at the same time that the harrowing tales of personal suffering told to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings are being given public form through daily media publicity and commentary, in myriad other locations apartheid is also being engaged through memory, always partial and certainly from the perspective of the present. Numerous exhibitions, seminars and conferences testify to and provide critiques of the plethora of ways in which apartheid operated as a comprehensive system of rule, reaching down into the very minutiae of social life. As an exercise of remembering, the new South Africa’s act of self-construction is more than the willed action and rhetoric of a new government and state. It also exists in these many accounts, all of which, though partial and often competing (Young, 1993, p. xi), have something to say about the present, the ‘new South Africa’, through their acts of remembering the past.

These themes of remembering for the understanding of both the present and the future emerge as a central problematic in all kinds of representation generally but also in the lives of ordinary South Africans striving to come to terms with what was done to them or in their name. They demonstrate the profound ways in which all kinds of macro-processes take form and power in the lives of people at the most micro-levels (Abu-Lughod, 1993). To appreciate the significance of this situatedness of historical processes of transformation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992), this paper considers a case study of one of the places of engagement between past, present and future which characterise contemporary South Africa. The focus of the study is the District Six Museum in Cape Town, which was established in December 1994. The study is based on two periods of participant observation in 1996 and 1997. Observation was supplemented by and interrogated through interviews and informal talks with museum staff and visitors.

The museum is a powerful engagement with South Africa’s past, partly because its remembering is located in the very heart of apartheid philosophy and social engineering, the construction of the apartheid city. Not just an historical account of the harm done through this vision to people and places, the museum also provides for the active construction and performance of memory which is at the same time a critique of apartheid itself. The paper’s study of this constellation of city construction, memory and critique is facilitated using the work of Michel de Certeau (1988). The insights of his work on walking the city are particularly useful for a critical understanding of the relationship between past and present within this constellation as it is manifest in the museum. In particular de Certeau provides a way of thinking about the relationship between place, people and politics in remembering. In turn, we can open up a little more the symbolic terrain of the ‘new South Africa’ in these very transitional times.

From District Six to the District Six Museum

District Six was the sixth District of Cape Town, an inner city area which from
the nineteenth century had housed people from the working and artisanal classes, many of whom worked in the city and at the nearby docks. The District extended from the harbour up into the lower reaches of the Devil’s Peak and from the commercial centre of the city to the edge of the suburbs. As one would expect of such an area, District Six had been very heterogeneous for a very long time, an integrated area in which white, coloured and African working class people all lived (Bickford-Smith, 1992), though actual ownership of property was largely concentrated in the hands of white landlords (Western, 1981, p. 155). There are clear indications that such heterogeneity was seen as problematic well before apartheid. As early as 1901 African people were removed from District Six to a new township, Ndabeni, ostensibly because of the outbreak of plague (Goldin, 1987, p. 162). In the twentieth century, rapid population expansion (particularly under the influence of rural in-migration) and the general disinclination of landlords and the Cape Town City Council to maintain and improve housing and general amenities produced what all researchers identify as a grossly overcrowded and rundown area — a ‘slum’

In 1948 the National Party came to power in South Africa, having run on a platform which promised to deal with overcrowded urban areas which resulted from massive and uncontrolled migration into the cities from the country. As Mabin says, ‘In some respects apartheid was a (racist) response to previous failure to develop coherent urbanisation policy’ (1992, p. 19). Population control thus became a cornerstone of apartheid policy as it sought to organise and channel capitalist development in South Africa for the benefit of one sector of the population, white South Africans, through what Mamdani calls ‘artificial deurbanisation’ (1996, pp. 28, 9). This meant that the colour segregation which was already a feature of pre-apartheid South Africa (Pechey, 1994, Mamdani, 1996) was systematised and legally enforced as race became the factor in the distribution of rights (Christopher, 1994, p. 1). Central to the system of enforcement of racially based rights which followed was the Population Registration Act with its classifications of racial identity and the Group Areas Act which sought comprehensively to enforce racial difference by controlling non-white populations in terms of residence. Apartheid was thus a spatial system, which as Christopher notes, worked very much at the local level. In particular, the city, the urban, was central to policy. The city was seen as white, built by whites for whites, so that access to the cities by non-whites for whatever purpose, residential or employment, had to be strictly controlled through the Group Areas Act in order to maintain this correct relationship between whiteness and urbanisation. Non-whites were to live and work in the urban areas only on white terms. The consequences Marks and Trapido record:

Over the next 25 years nearly 4 million people were uprooted, many of them several times over, in pursuit of the policies of apartheid. (1987, p. 22)

In 1948, Cape Town was the most integrated city in South Africa (Christopher, 1994). The Cape’s liberal tradition (Bickford-Smith, 1992, Ross, 1992, Mamdani, 1996, p. 69) and the relatively high coloured population all meant
that, though economics produced segregation of a kind, namely, ‘civil inequality’ (Mamdani, 1996, p. 69), when it came to working class areas in particular residential patterns were characteristically integrated. It was these areas which were torn apart as proclamation after proclamation declared areas white or coloured (mostly the former) forcing all other classifications of people out.

District Six was one such area. It has been eulogised as an integrated area of workers and small traders where people of all races and religions and cultures mixed, lived together and shared the hardships of poverty and neglect. There was also a significant degree of intermarriage between groups, which prompted precisely the fear of both miscegenation and the blunting of European ‘colour feelings’ which Goldin (1987, p. 170) argues fuelled the National Party’s determination to regularise and codify the ad hoc and often economically derived forms of segregation which were already in place in 1948. District Six thus exemplified the articulation of ideological principle and spatial organisation which underpinned the apartheid vision of the city lodged at the very heart of its regime and its way of seeing South Africa as a whole. Under the National Party, space itself was to be racialised and transformed, in turn transforming people.

Though the Group Areas Act was legislated in 1950, District Six itself was not proclaimed white until 1966. Over the next 15 years the District was physically destroyed, bulldozed street by street, to make way for white residents. All in all between 55,000 and 65,000 people were moved from District Six, usually relocated in the townships out on the Cape Flats, often separated from closest kin and friends.

In many ways District Six and this history of forced removal has come to overshadow the many, many other areas of forced removal from the urban area of Cape Town, like Mowbray and Claremont. It has become the symbol of the dislocation and harm caused by the Group Areas Act. In part this must be because Zonnebloem (as the apartheid authorities renamed the area) or District Six today was never effectively redeveloped. Indeed, in terms of occupation it was the state which took it over, building houses for state employees and a Technikon, originally for whites only. Hart reports that by 1985 ‘Zonnebloem comprised some 3000–4000 people, predominantly lower-middle class Afrikaans speakers and overwhelmingly state employees’ (1990, p. 133). The white residential development dreamed of by apartheid authorities never came to fruition. This visibility of the state maintained District Six as a pathological symptom of apartheid and its cities, making visible the relationship between force and dislocation. The rest is emptiness and ruin, in sharp contrast to the overcrowded, urban past. It is a wasteland, marked only by the isolated, untouched churches and mosques of District Six and traces of the old cobbled streets among the weeds and rubbish.

As a wasteland, District Six did not just stand as a ‘blot on the conscience of the entire nation’ (Hart, 1990, p. 134). The space could still be defended by those who waited for the inevitable demise of the apartheid system. In the late 1980s the Hands Off District Six campaign formed out of the Friends of District Six in order to protect the area from British Petroleum’s (BP) intended redev-
development using the private sector (see also Western, 1981, p. 158). Although BP’s development plans specified that the area was to be open to people of all races and indeed stated that ex-residents would be given preference, there was strong community opposition. Hart argues of the campaign, ‘Their guiding intention is that District Six be declared ‘salted earth’ and left undeveloped until the demise of apartheid’ (1990, p. 136). As Young observes of the death camps left by the Holocaust, such ruins cannot on their own remember, it is people’s ‘will to remember’ which endows them with meanings and significance (1993, p. 120). Still, left undeveloped, the wasteland could operate as a space on which such meanings could be inscribed in the imagination and produced as memory. The District Six Museum has become one place where the sense of absence can be linked to the District’s presence in people’s lives and popular memory.

The District Six Museum is housed in the Buitenkant Methodist Church on the central business district edge of the old District Six. The exhibition covers the ground floor centre space of the church. Down one side are carrels of photographs grouped around streets and areas of District Six. At the altar end, high up, hang representations of the four main religions of District Six people; Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, religious polyphony being part of the message of heterogeneity about the district that the museum seeks to convey, despite its housing in a Christian church. Below this, dramatically, a photograph of the skyline of District Six extends across the church, standing for and helping people to envisage the whole District which once stood behind the church. At the other Buitenkant Street end is a display of street signs from the old District and press clippings and information about individuals and events in District Six (and the museum) fill the other wall. Visitors are welcomed at the museum by officers who are themselves District Sixers (the name given to ex-residents) and who willingly talk about their experiences. This makes this museum reminiscent of the Pan Pacific Park Holocaust Museum in the United States described by Young (see also Mithlo, 1995, p. 50) in these terms:

In fact, as instructive and powerful as the photographic panels were, students and teachers agreed that the exhibition’s principal resource was the survivors who led them through the museum. In their presence, the photo montages came alive. (1993, p. 304)

In fact, the presence of District Sixers as visitors also contributes to this ‘coming alive’ in the museum.

The Buitenkant Church had been a struggle church during the era of apartheid, a site in the political protest history of the Western Cape. Various trustees of the museum recalled services and meetings to protest the apartheid regime, mentioning names like those of Alan Boesak and Trevor Manuel, in 1996 a government minister. They talked of marches from the church and of deliberately courted arrests. Part of the symbolic power of this particular church is that it is also directly across the road from the security forces’ headquarters in the Caledon Square Police Station. Through displayed materials about the church’s struggle history, the history of struggle in the Western
Cape is made physically to encompass the museum’s exhibition in the form of the church, providing one very powerful reading or identification, perhaps a preferred reading (Hall, 1980), for the exhibition and its visitors. This creates a space for a possible continuity being drawn between the demise of District Six, remembering that demise and the struggle itself, which enables the recasting of the relationship between the demise and the struggle.

The museum itself emerged out of the Hands Off District Six campaign of the late 1980s. The possibility of a museum to keep alive the memory of the District Six which the campaign was defending was discussed at the very inception of the campaign (Soudien, 1990). But the museum, when it came, took form in 1994, when apartheid had ended and democracy instated. It was established within the ‘new South Africa’ and bears the marks of this moment in time. This is clear from the words of a central banner which hangs from the rails of the upper floor of the church which reads:

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

Here we see the museum’s envisaging of the possible connections between past, present and future, the connection of apartheid South Africa to the new South Africa at a time when memory is still palpable, ‘still almost visceral’, providing for it a social power and authority which the passing of time erodes or transforms (Young, 1993, pp. 169–75). The paper will show that the way these themes and connections are played out and given form is very much in the hands of the visitors, many of whom experienced the destruction. And, very much in keeping with the state rhetorics of empowerment, representation and reconciliation, this is how the museum staff want it to be. At this level, the museum is taking on board agendas which coincide with those of the new South African state. But the outcome is not at all assured in these terms. This is precisely because the actual playing out of those processes of empowerment is through the performances of the people. As visitors and new South Africans, the people begin to take over and engage the rhetorics in their own terms. This has never been the kind of museum which seeks to do all of the memory-work and serve it up to the people. Museum staff comment on how they began with a two week exhibition in 1994 but are still there because ‘the people wouldn’t let us close’. People came to look at the photographs and the old street signs which had been saved from the destruction of the District and retrieved to be put on exhibition here. They came to write their names and old addresses on the long calico cloths hung up for this purpose. They made the exhibition into a space of what Pratt calls ‘autoethnography’, representations ‘in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them’ (1994, p. 28). For the rest of this paper I consider just one of the features of the museum as it facilitates this autoethnography.

The Mapping of Memory

In the centre of the church, covering much of the floor space is a huge map of the District. The map is decorated with poems to the life of the District as well as linocuts by the artist, Lionel Davis, himself a District Sixer and a political activist who had been jailed on Robben Island. Davis helped put together the exhibition with the map at its centre.

Visibly dominant, the map is used by the museum’s education officers to talk about the history and development of the District, to explain different areas, where particular landmarks were and so on. There is some ambivalence about the map, with some trustees and others arguing that it has become reified, setting District Six in stone (or paper and plastic). Certainly in some tours, it is pointed out that the map’s impression of boundedness was negated by people, events and relationships spilling out into surrounding districts (the harbour, the commercial area of central Cape Town, nearby districts like
Walmer Estate and Woodstock, where some moved after 1966). Few of the District Sixers who come express the same ambivalence.

The director of the museum stresses that their first priority are District Sixers, people whose history they are showing. And for these people the map is very powerful indeed. It is one site in the exhibition where people took over and turned it into something else, something living. Not just content to sign their names and put their old addresses on the cloths, the ex-residents of District Six also wrote their names on the map. They marked in their houses, their family names, shops, bioscopes (cinemas), markets, bus stops and so on. In so doing they wrote themselves into the map; they rendered social the map’s physical representation. The map is thus implicated in the declared intentions of the museum to resist apartheid’s history by providing the opportunity for people to ‘re-possess the history of the area as a place where people lived, loved and struggled’ and to ‘attempt to take back our right to signpost our lives with those things we hold dear’. Through the map, District Sixers make visible the histories which they have carried with them but which were rendered invisible in the destruction of the area.

In his most famous chapter of The Practice of Everyday Life, ‘Walking in the City’, Michel de Certeau argues that walking in the city can operate as resistance to official, authoritative constructions of the city — construct it as place in which meanings slip authorised versions as walkers find new ways through, attach place to memory — turning space into place. This is exactly what District Sixers walking over the map do. The map has a peculiar efficacy in engaging with apartheid. It can be seen as a core symbol of apartheid given the centrality of urban planning to apartheid’s particular version of social engineering (Smith, 1994, Western, 1981). As Christopher (1994) has demonstrated, maps are particularly suitable for analysing the transformative and destructive impact of the apartheid regime’s policies and practices. As such, the map in District Six Museum is a particularly powerful ground on which District Sixers can engage with apartheid’s interventions into their lives. The map representation is a physical thing, an official text which baldly lays down the basic topographical features of the district. It is empty, devoid of life, able to be manipulated in the interests of those in authority. On the basis of such a representation and armed with the official narrative of District Six which stated that it was a slum, degenerate, crime and poverty ridden, ‘a blight on the social landscape’ requiring redemption (Soudien and Meltzer, 1995, p. 8), the authorities could organise the systematic destruction of District Six, street by street (see Fortune, 1996). The walkers use exactly the same representation, which on the floor of the museum also began as an ‘empty’ representation, but their articulation of memory and walking provide for it a totally different meaning, one which resists the apartheid regime’s judgement, while at the same time criticising its acts of destruction.

People obviously use the map in different ways. Some just stand and stare, often with tears in their eyes, others are looking for specific sites, trying to remember who lived and worked there. They look for old haunts, locate the homes of friends and kin, where they went to school, the swimming baths, places of fun, places of work. Where they come in with others, usually kin,
conversation is intense as they exchange memories of who lived where, maybe even disagreeing with each other about places and people. They may meet others on the map and talk about their District Six, trying to find connections in people and places and often finding them in shared shop keepers or school teachers and principals. They may look to see from the marks on the map who of their old neighbourhood has also been here. In the summer of 1996–97 the museum saw a lot of District Sixers visit from new homes overseas in Canada, the United States and Australia. Many of these used the map to show their children who had never seen District Six where they had lived and what it was like. Many come to the museum officers who are always interested, always encourage them to tell of their relationship to District Six, to narrate their District Six. They swap stories, remember different aspects of the same event or person’s history. There is a constant movement here; between differentiated histories and memories which signify many District Sixes and the more homogenised District Six, the symbol of a history greater than the District itself. Both are present in the map walking and the narratives, so that Soudien and Meltzer are right to call these popular narratives, the assertion of ‘humanity, dignity and creativity’ (1995, p.10), but they also seem to be particular narratives of identity.

Obviously walking on the map in these ways is a different exercise at many levels from de Certeau’s walking in the city. He speaks of ‘walking rhetorics’ (1988, p.100) whereby ‘pedestrian speech acts’ like taking shortcuts or detours or refusing to take particular routes are appropriations of urban space, at the same time bringing this space into being — as place. Such an act of appropriation and begetting is no longer given to ex-District Six residents. Though they do visit and attend churches and mosques in the District still, there is little left to ‘walk in’ the way de Certeau speaks of. There are no houses, shops, parks, just rank weeds, the odd group of squatters with little fires and the ubiquitous lines of washing, rubbish, a huge Technikon complex and some housing on the fringes. What the ex-residents do have is the spatial representation of the district, in the form of the map.

It is the map that allows the walkers to bring ‘District Six’ into being again as physical space; but this time it is not so much in relation to the intentions of builders, architects and urban designers as de Certeau has it. Rather than the creators of this urban space, the map allows them to engage with its destroyers. Here the map fulfills both of the roles of the modern museum which Huyssen (1994, p.15) notes make museums the paradigmatic institution of modernisation; collecting that which modernisation has destroyed but also serving as a site of possible resurrections. Certainly the discourse of apartheid when it decreed the destruction of District Six was that of modernisation, progress whatever its politics, so the museum ‘collects, salvages’ that which apartheid as modernisation destroyed. But, as Huyssen also notes, museums like memory itself, ‘construct the past in the light of the discourses of the present and in terms of present-day interest’, and in the light of this we see that the walkers turn the museum into a site of resurrection in an act which directly counters apartheid meanings with post-apartheid, regardless of the political persuasion of the walkers themselves. The walkers’ practices of appropriation and enunci-
ation (de Certeau, 1988, p. 97) bring District Six into being as something morally greater than space — place. Rather than speaking the possibilities of the space, the map works as a mnemonic, which both allows the recall of the place but also puts the rememberer back into it, as they literally have put their names back into District Six by writing them on the map. It produces a re-identification.

The map also works through and enables the play of synecdoche and asyndeton and the movement between them, for de Certeau, primary expressive forms operating to provide the walked through city with its texture and form — its reality. The map of course does stand for the whole, but just what that whole is, is provided by the walkers (and the other exhibits of course). For each, District Six starts from the epicentre of their home, their street, their place. It is this that they always write in first and then move out from their own place in District Six to the whole. If synecdoche ‘replaces totalities by fragments’ (de Certeau, 1988, p. 101), then this too is the tropic process to construct District Six as a reality that the walkers go through. As they walk over the map, pausing here or there, passing over whole blocks or retracing their steps to stop again, they speak life and form back into the destroyed District of the map. The map is transformed from a graphic representation on two planes into the repository of experiences, relationships, life; another layer is laid down over the lines and shapes by the walking feet and the spoken memories/stories which accompany them. But the life that this represents is in fragments, a mosaic of specific parts — this shop, this bioscope, this street, places and relationships which come within the direct orbit of ex-residents, so that the collective remembered whole is constructed out of overlapping mosaics. Then there are other fragments which all used to speak the special character of the District — places like the Seven Steps and the Fish Market which everyone relates to and remembers. Proper names, like Hanover Street especially, also have this power of synecdoche to be far more than simply the name of a topographical feature. Even for non-ex-resident Capetonians visiting the museum, Hanover Street seems to connote District Six as an identity, a place. de Certeau argues that ‘Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail and miniaturises the whole’ (1984, p. 101). This is exactly what happens to the District Six of the walkers. Their strategies exactly make District Six more dense, which is probably why they are accused at times of sentimentality and nostalgia. These processes which operate as synecdoche make the whole district accessible while focusing its identity powerfully through significant parts to stand for that whole. And in this process the foreshortening, the breaking of continuity and selecting of parts that is asyndeton, enlarge and make the chosen parts even more significant and powerful. The power of asyndeton, even when District Six was in existence, meant that certain parts of it, like the Seven Steps, were broken up and taken by people who could then take District Six with them. This is how the Museum was able to acquire the small piece of one step which is in its display.

These are then all strategies to construct the metaphorical city out of the reimagining and re-membering of this particular use of the represented city — the map. In a sense they become central devices in ex-residents’ performance of their popular narratives of District Six on the map. Through the operation of
synecdoche and asyndeton on the map, events and relationships in the memory merge into places as they are identified or re-found cartographically, to be re-created in the vocalisation of those memories as parts of the narratives of the people who lived in these places in the past. Such tellings make District Six exist, not again or as it was, but within a larger encompassing narrative about identity and South Africa in the 1990s post-apartheid society; that is in metaphorical form which is politically inflected in particular ways.

A significant part of this metaphorical form of District Six is in the characterising of this place as lost community. Though in a sense we do get different District Sixes in the mosaics of the visitors, there are striking similarities in the kinds of things that people say about life in District Six, life making District Six a particular kind of place.

‘You knew everybody in District Six; it was like one big family, we knew whites and blacks, everyone.
‘You were safe in District Six — girls could walk in the streets at night, the kids could play on the street.
‘People respected each other, you could discipline someone else’s child if you saw it misbehave’ (this also was often linked to being able to leave doors unlocked).
‘Street life was important — we used to sit on the stoep and talk to people going past.

These are just a few of the kinds of comments made over and over in some form, constituting the museum as a location for the construction of ‘common meaning’ (White, 1991, p. 6). What they seem to be doing is clearly drawing District Six as community. They are projecting from their remembered lives there out into the entire district, characterising it as a community. And, they are certainly constructing this as a favourable form of social organisation, which as Bozoli (1987, p. 5) notes, using Raymond Williams’ work, is always the case with the concept of ‘community’. Further, her insights about this positive valorisation also seem applicable to the above kinds of comments:

The good connotations of ‘community’ rest in its ability to conjure up images of supportiveness; of a place of kinship ties, of rest and rejuvenation; of cross-class cooperation.

People also used particular places and experiences to evoke a sense of community as shared place. Stories around the Fish Market abounded; first remembered as a place where you could meet everyone else and which everyone shared in common, but second, articulating value and synecdoche by recounting it as a place where the supportiveness of the District was made manifest by the Market making scraps available to the poor at the end of the day. The bioscopes also seemed to feature in many people’s narratives, often being the sites that were looked for on the map. While this gave the bioscopes too a synecdochal quality, at the same time loyalty to different bioscopes also seemed to signal difference within the District.

These evocations of community are in fact often accused of nostalgia or sentimentality and certainly it is hard to see anything culturally specific in the
comments above. They might be heard in a multitude of places around the world, especially where the impact of modernisation and the more recent fragmentations of postmodern society are seen as destroying meaningful collectivities, producing alienation and dislocation. In a way, the cultural specificity is offered in the kinds of explanations which follow from criticisms of such evocations of community. Many people have argued that such evocations ignore the negative aspects of living in the District. One of the few critical comments on the cloths accused the museum of turning District Six into a 'myth' because of this. Critics point out the existence of gangs, of crime and violence; they stress the poverty, the overcrowding; they demonstrate the divisions, the prejudices and the inequalities; they question whether or not there was community in District Six. Dullah Omar, Minister of Justice and himself a District Sixer, has taken up this issue in a variety of contexts, one of which was a television talk programme, Felicia, about District Six which was recorded in the museum itself during its first week. In another place Omar puts his objection like this:

There has been a tendency to isolate District Six from its social milieu. To regard it as a special case and to mystify its history ... There appeared to be some degree of 'racial harmony'. Families lived closer together within reach of each other. A community spirit built up over generations lived on. There was the life in Hanover Street, the fish market and the many shops and hawkers. Landmarks such as the Star cinema, the Avalon, the National and the British. But there has been a tendency to romanticize [the] life of that period. Even the gangsterism — the Globe gang, the Jesters and the Killers, etc are portrayed in a romantic light together with 'The Seven Steps' and the characters who graced District Six during its lifetime. And so history will want to record District Six and its people as having been a people who enjoyed life and who were carefree — 'until the Nats came along and destroyed it all'. (Jeppei and Soudien, 1990, p. 192)

This too is the kind of scepticism with which some people greet the narratives which emerge in walking the map or looking at the photographs. They will ask questions about elements of disharmony, usually crime or violence as Omar suggests, but maybe also collaboration with the apartheid state.

Bozoli argues that one way in which community forms is in terms of opposition to something — and it seems clear that, however illusory community is, however much one can point to serious rifts, differences, evidence of non-harmony and so on, this oppositional construction is exactly what is happening. In a sense this is community post-facto (Western, 1981, pp. 163–201), community retrospectively ascribed to ways of living in District Six in opposition to what came after. As it is evoked at the museum (Western, 1981) this may be far less community as the form of remembered social organisation and far more a moral community brought into being as critique of apartheid or at least some of the planning consequences of apartheid, given the divided political affiliations of those dislocated. Clearly people were asserting their subjectivity and experience in contrast to a time in which such assertions were
devalued, even impossible, making identity itself problematic (White, 1991). And here I will ultimately argue that people are talking about their identity and forms of sociality in relation to city as much as they are talking about community (Bickford-Smith, 1990, p. 35).

The Cosmopolitan Community: a Politics of Memory

The memories on the map and the stories which people tell aren’t just stories of some past, perfect place. Rather they are stories of a people transformed, turned into somebody else — from the critical perspective of who they feel they have become. The past recounted from the standpoint of the present is then a strategy of identity construction (White, 1991, p. 8) which here provides a way of criticising that transformation, narratives becoming morality tales as much as they are history. Regardless of how romanticised it has become, District Six seems most certainly to have been a place of generational depth; Western claims seven generations. The history which was sedimented into the District as place, in part lived in the people as the map walking reveals. Then too, most accounts suggest that people did not live as isolated nuclear units. Rather they all had kin, as well as friends, living close-by. This is certainly borne out by the stories and map commentaries where people will also point out where their aunts, uncles and grandparents lived, with their children or others of the family and how they could as readily and freely walk into these homes, sit down and talk or eat as in their own. This takes on very particular significance when one considers that poverty also characterised the people of District Six. Kinship links were critical in coping with this poverty at a day to day level (Pinnock, 1987, p. 426; see also Western, 1981). Again this is embedded in the help, support, redistribution and care which features in many of the stories and it is also in part the context for the integrated nature of the District. As many observers note, integration in urban Cape Town was a feature of poor, working class areas more than any other (Goldin, 1987, Bickford-Smith, 1992). So the negative urban features many note, poverty, overcrowding, poor facilities and so on are exactly those things which seem to have generated the forms of sociality, the social relationships, which people today are representing as community. Then in memory, it is the sociality which dominates rather than the structural conditions which produced it.

In keeping with Bozzoli, the remembered community which people then build on these social accommodations of poverty and self help is also opposition. It is community as a kind of critique — a remembered community based on stories of the sociality which is brought into being from the perspective of where they are now, in order to criticise the transformations of their lives under apartheid. Two examples help make the point. First, it is clear that, for many of the coloured population, particularly those moved early, the standard of housing into which they were moved was superior in many ways to their District Six accommodation (Western, 1981). Though small and very basic, the houses were clean, had full facilities, small plots of land and people were able to have modern conveniences. At the same time, they remained poor, and now they had to spend more money on commuting to work, as well as the often
higher prices that shops and services with monopolies in the townships could charge. But, because of the way in which the Group Areas Board (often called ‘the Board’, see also Rive, 1989, pp. 93–104) allocated new housing, more often than not people were now living far away from kin and neighbours with whom they had built up long-term networks of support and cooperation. Now they were isolated in their poverty, made to feel it much more, and despair (see for example Adams and Suttner, 1988, Chapters 15–18; Western, 1981, Chapters 7–9). This was particularly hard on women left isolated and some women talked of walks of several miles that they made across townships to visit mothers and sisters similarly isolated. So forms of sociality changed; as they recount it, to their impoverishment.

The second example concerns the most contentious claim of the map walkers, that District Six was safe. This, as indicated, is the thing that people most often pick up. It is a question often asked of the education officers when they are conducting tours of the museum. What of violence and crime? What of the gangs? This is hardly a surprising question given the amount of media attention to this feature of the new South Africa, but it is very valid as an historical question also (Pinnock, 1987). The position that District Sixers seem to take is that, yes there were gangs, but they were mostly a problem for each other or outsiders, not the people of the District who could mostly keep out of their way. Further, they fought with knives and fists rather than today’s full arsenals. Now part of the context for this must be the activities of the organisation People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) which had greatly heightened people’s awareness of these things in 1996 and 1997. But, as Pinnock reports, this also seems to be the perception of gangsters themselves at the time. He quotes Stone, the leader of the Mongrels gang in Grassy Park:

It was tough then. But you knew where you stood. You were never short of kroon (money) or people who would pull in to help you. Ja, we had our fights, but there wasn’t all the killing. The families were big, you know, and you knew everybody. They would all help you when you fell in the shit. (1987, p. 427)

Here gangs and community (or communal families as Pinnock argues) go together rather than being incompatible. There seem to be two kinds of things being brought out in these accounts. First the narratives seem to deny a place in District Six for the level of violence they experience today (Hanover Park was one township often used to exemplify this), for its randomness and the possibility of being murdered which meant that not for the townships but the life on the stoep or the streets. People stayed inside and kept their children inside almost from the moment of moving out into the Cape Flats, testimony I think to their fears of a place where they did not know the people they were living among, an alien residential experience for them (Fortune, 1996, p. 105). Their memories of street life then are not just expressions of community which was symbolically constituted on the street (Soudien and Meltzer, 1995) but also seem to be constructed with the intention of testifying to changing social patterns of violence. And this is as much directed at today’s post-democratic rule as it is at apartheid, particularly where the speaker is anti-ANC. Yester-
day’s violence had a kind of social meaning which for them is denied in the experiences of contemporary violence and crime in the townships. Implicated in this, echoed in Stone’s comments in a way too, are the changing forms of sociality which ultimately changed coloured subjectivity and identity. Life, and people, became more individualised. Instead of living in large communal families, they turned inwards, into the nuclear family, into the house, not going out, not knowing their neighbours, isolated as many walkers said, ‘out on the Cape Flats’. Comments echo the words of a Mowbray coloured resident forcibly removed to the Cape Flats under the Group Areas, to whom Western spoke:

I was really living then, now I’m not sure I am. I mean, I live for my job. That is the money I can make so we can make the home comfortable for the family and to invite people in and be proud of it. But it’s very rarely we can get up a party and go out dancing or to a movie. In Mowbray there was too much to be done outside — people would participate with you — here we live too much in our houses. (1981, p. 239)

This comment has the diasporic structure of feeling which Small (1986, p. 11) argues characterised District Sixers removed to the townships of the Cape Flats.

These big questions of who people feel they became under apartheid, are the crux to both the narratives of memory and the critical engagement with apartheid that the map encourages. And here the relationship between map and city is crucial. The map walkers demonstrate that, for them, both identity and history are space. This is very much as one would expect, given that space was central to apartheid, its ideology and its transformations of South Africa in terms of this ideology and the interests it served. The map on the floor symbolises the social emptiness of District Six as inner city which was necessary to make Cape Town into a quintessentially apartheid city, the city which Christopher (1994) argues was most transformed under apartheid’s social engineering. And the people walking the map respond to this, criticising apartheid’s policies and actions in making Cape Town an apartheid city, by repeopling, resocialising, the inner city with their stories, their presence as coloured people, however momentarily.

Living in District Six gave coloured people an identity located in two things; the inner city and Cape Town itself, the Mother City. It is the first of these that Western’s informant seems to be engaging. He was living then, on the Cape Flats he’s not so sure ... What people lost by being shipped out to mono-race spaces was the experience of city living itself, an experience which had become part of their very identity. They lost the heterogeneity, the openness, what Hannerz (1992, Chapter 1 and p. 173) calls the ‘cultural complexity’ of the city and city living, which had shaped who they were, as people. We need only to think of the short story ‘Moon over District Six’, by Richard Rive (1989), a writer who did talk about District Six as a ‘slum’, in which the same New Year moon shines on ‘the teaser-man’, the ‘young buck and his girlfriend’, the ‘early celebrator’ drinking from a paper cup reading KISS ME SWEETIE who is chastised by the ‘prim, light-brown lady who lived in Walmer Estate and only spoke English at home’, the ‘dandy in pink socks’
at the cinema, the ‘housewife’ out on the town, the ‘Cheeky, yellow youth’ playing dice, a guitar-playing ‘cuuuuuulid’ serenader, the full cast of a fight including the white policeman armed with revolver who came to break it up and the ‘street-corner Jesus-jumper’ preaching to the drunks. No wonder the Cape Flats seemed so alien. They didn’t necessarily like their co-residents in the District and the map walkers show that they carved out their own spaces within the whole, but these other lives, these other spaces and times (Pechey, 1994) of District Six were also part of their District Six and part of them as District Sixers, an identity which became all the poignant when they lost it. These people were cosmopolitans, forced into a racialised kind of suburbia, a mode of living and an identity which was not of their own choosing. And in doing so they lost a significant element of their identity as South Africans. They lost their right to determine their own identities. And they lost their place in Cape Town itself. As Small says, from now on they lived in the diaspora, the Cape Flats. There is such a strong sense of this in many of the stories visitors and officials tell, as they recount their lives in District Six as city, cosmopolitan lives. They talk about how they used to use the whole city, the harbour, Canal Gardens, the Mountain, the sea. All of these places were theirs, part of their space, who they were. As they talk, it is clear that difference was also important in the city, that structural and category differences, around religion and class for example, constituted part of the knowledge about people which they negotiated in their social relationships with them (see Hannerz, 1980, p. 149). They also talk of life around the harbour and the people from overseas who came into the District from the ships. Some speak of their ‘colouredness’ as a result of this as seamen and adventurers landed and established relationships with local women. Their whole ‘differentness’ is bound up in Cape Town the seaport, the cosmopolitan city connected to the other side of the Atlantic by sea and ship.

Cape Town is called the Mother City, the city of origin for both whites and coloured people, both of whom made it, despite apartheid’s claims to the contrary when it annexed the cities for whites. The location of District Six close-by the original city centre with its monuments to colonialism, the Art Gallery, the House of Parliament, the Natural History Museum and so on elided its identity with that of Cape Town proper, while Table Mountain also drew the two into one, by encompassing them both as horizon. As Western notes:

By removing Coloureds from District Six, the Whites are doing more than clearing slums or underpinning their exclusive claim to central Cape Town’s sacred space. They are also destroying one of the symbols of whatever Coloured identity may exist, a space in parts at least seven generations deep and one with associations with the emancipation of the slaves. (1981, p. 150, italics in the original)

In so doing the apartheid authorities transformed Cape Town as they had always intended, but at the same time they diminished it historically, since they destroyed Cape Town, the coloured city. They removed part of the sedimentation of history which was Cape Town. And museum people want to
argue that they were an important part. One of the trustees expressed this through architecture. Using also the photographs on the museum walls, he talked of how his home, an old nineteenth century two storey house, had been destroyed and of how an important part of Cape Town’s history disappeared in this and other such demolitions. Obviously, its early establishment gave District Six a deep sedimentation of historical material culture. As coloured people were diminished then, so too was their city. This they are also saying in their stories of the lost jazz clubs, dance halls and cinemas, the lost street life, the colour, the noise, the vibrancy. They lost their cosmopolitan identity, but so in a way did Cape Town, since white society did not replace these things, these forms of sociality, these kinds of relations and practices.

This transformation of city and coloured identity has also to be seen as betrayal, something reflected in the stories of how people felt in their interactions with ‘the Board’ (see also Rive, 1989, Fortune, 1996, Adams and Suttner, 1988). People talk about shame in being told that they had to go, of being told where to live. In part this is shame at the interference of authority into the lives of people who deeply valued ‘respectability’. Many analysts (see Western, 1981, Ross, 1992, Goldin, 1987 for example) have noted the importance of respectability in coloured culture, and it is possible that this had its roots in a mimetic response to dominant white, particularly English, culture, where in Taussig’s terms (1993) mimesis is part of an appropriation of dominant culture which is all about coping with domination (see also Ross, 1992). Within a deep need for respectability, apartheid’s residential control was shaming, diminishing. Several people told with enormous satisfaction how they had got together enough money to resist such control by buying a house of their own choosing. Further, the townships were places of control and surveillance, built in such a way that they could be sealed off and scrutinised in times of unrest (Christopher, 1994). The self-determination which accompanies respectability was undermined by the Group Areas Act. At the same time, the home and family seems to have been a crucial site of respectability so that the assault on respectability featured particularly in women’s stories and the distinctions they made between themselves and others. Apartheid’s Group Areas thus attacked coloured people at the very site of respectability — their residence, their home.

Another context of perceptions of betrayal is the privileging of the coloured population over the African population, particularly in the Western Cape, where coloureds were seen both as being more like the whites, and also useful as a buffer between whites and Africans. Afrikaans speaking in the main, coloured people were cultivated by those who in the 1950s appeared to turn on them and cast them out. Thus we find things like coloured people never having to carry passes as Africans did and in the Cape jobs were reserved for coloured people under the Coloured Employment Protection Act (Goldin, 1987, Humphries, 1992). Yet at the same time that a special relationship between white and coloured was being encoded in law, urban coloured people were decreed a threat and forcibly removed to the Cape Flats, as Africans had been before them.

Apartheid’s betrayal provides a reconciliation function for the museum, which criticises apartheid at a collective and structural level through its focus
And interestingly here, we find a final engagement with the state rhetorics of the new South Africa.

At one level the museum does provide a site in which people may express a relationship of identity between themselves and a new South Africa. They often assert that District Six already was what ideologues in the 'new dispensation' argue South Africa should strive to be today — a unity in diversity. Here they stress heterogeneity and respect for differences in culture, religion and race. For them the state rhetorics and narratives of nation are given concrete form, reality through memory and District Six somehow stands for 'the new South Africa'.

To understand walkers in the museum as playing out state rhetorics though is problematic if it implies necessary intention. For, even in the museum, but certainly outside, there is real ambivalence, are real divisions among coloured people, about the new South Africa and particularly the ANC government. Particularly in the Western Cape, there are also very real differences of opinion about and support for the National Party and its role in the apartheid past. Even among a group of people who share the experience of dispossession and dislocation under apartheid, people have different histories of response to the apartheid regime (James et al., 1996). So it is also people with these different political histories who walk the map, constituting their pasts through similar processes.

In many ways, it is the encompassment of the walking within the museum with its overarching critique of apartheid which constitutes these acts as political acts of resistance. It is this encompassment in a post-apartheid South Africa which refigures the remembering of disruption and dispossession from within a variety of orientations towards apartheid as an act of protest. Within the overarching critical narrative suggested through the museum, apartheid is interrogated through one of its policies which was central to its entire ideological project. Yet this does not necessarily accompany or indeed constitute a full, overt or radical political critique on the part of the walkers. It certainly does not entail automatic approval of the regime today. And here again, it is the Cape Town identification which emerges as having potential in an identity politics which is characterised through such uncertainty, ambivalence and differentiation.

Imagining a South African identity for themselves is radical, though not necessarily thought of as such, in the context of a past in which a South African identity was denied to non-whites who were expected to develop an identity in terms of their racial category and 'South African' was reserved for whites (again coloureds were somewhat ambiguous in this regard, harder to see as a separate nation, since they had no separate space which was not also claimed by whites).

What is also radical in the context of apartheid’s declaration of the city as white is the way in which some visitors and staff also saw themselves as Capetonian, occasionally even privileging this over South African. Here identity involved a reappropriation of the city which was taken from them. But this is only one side of such an appropriation. It can certainly be made radical in the context of the exclusions of the past, but if one shifts the context to the
present and the building of a national identity, post-apartheid, this embracing of a Capetonian identity may also involve something different, more troubling and precarious. First, Capetonian may obscure the very real differences and conflicts among coloured people, particularly around current political allegiances. But second, and related to this, people seemed to be suggesting that, within South Africa, the content of ‘South African’ seemed to be uncertain and that ‘Capetonian’ was somehow clearer, less uncertain, easier. Given the massive obstacles in the way of delivering the ‘brave new world’, of overturning the inequalities of apartheid, just what is really ‘new’ is still problematic. And the TRC itself has contributed to this, demonstrating clearly the different worlds and realities inhabited by those today who would be South African.

It is not clear from the comments of the District Six walkers whether all South African people can yet imagine sharing history and memory to the point where they can embrace a clear new South African identity. This leaves something lesser (or different) available as identity. Because of the exclusions of apartheid, to embrace the identity of Capetonian is new, is engaging with present and future in a new polity, so it is also attractive, and attainable, as a position. It is radical, precisely because it is a re-appropriation, a demand for inclusion and the claiming of an identity taken away by apartheid as a fundamental principle of that regime. Maybe here too we have ‘Capetonian’ synthesising the work of reconciliation which many feel is necessary before South Africa can become a single nation. Here, as Boyarin (1994, p. 2, see also Geyer, 1996) suggests, is a politics of memory in which memory actually constitutes the politics of national identity, rather than only the process of mobilising the past for political purposes, though of course this is also happening in South Africa today.

Conclusion

Geoffrey White (1991) notes that stories of the past are always discourses of identity. We see this in the stories which people recount prompted by the map in District Six Museum, but we also see operating White’s corollary, that stories of the past actually constitute identity. This is a political process, producing a politics of memory which is fundamentally a construction of the present through an engagement with the apartheid regime. Post-apartheid is a substantial dimension of the politics of South Africa today.

Operating as one location in which South Africans contemporarily can make their own meanings and their own accommodations to state rhetorics about country and nation, the District Six Museum suggests that what the ‘new South Africa’ is constituted out of a variety of identities, a variety of engagements with the past, a variety of pasts (Pechev, 1994). In the politics of memory enabled, generated by the map, South Africans who were ex-residents of District Six seem to be first asserting the social constitution of this area that apartheid managed to define in asocial terms, either as a problem, a desirable position for whites or simply a physical space to be managed and redeployed. Second they criticise, through recollection and comparison, the forms of collectivity and sociality which apartheid policies and administrators thought desir-
able for non-white people. Third, the retrieval of a more desirable past provides a way into new identity for them in post-apartheid South Africa as they take back urban citizenship, their identity as Capetonians. What is new is imagined in terms of, in engagement with, how they recollect the past.

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Notes

1. This article is based on a 10 week period spent in Cape Town in the first half of 1996 and a follow up visit in December 1996 and January 1997. I wish to thank the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town for hosting my visit. I would especially like to thank the staff at the District Six Museum for their friendship, their generosity, kindness and enthusiasm. Without them this study could not have been done. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewer whose comments on an earlier version of the paper have proved invaluable in rewriting it.

2. Mamdani argues that the focus on territorial segregation in South Africa can be traced back to Smuts and that the way in which such policies were first and foremost political, generated by what was seen as ‘the native question’ which was a question of minority control over a majority population, links South Africa under apartheid to colonialism in Africa generally, rather than differentiating South Africa from the rest of the continent.

3. Interestingly, in the case of a much earlier Cape Town, 1894, whites taking advantage of their generally greater wealth and moving into the suburbs had prompted some speculation that Cape Town’s city could be left for coloureds, so producing the residential separation of white and coloured (Bickford-Smith, 1992, p. 48).

4. As many writers have stressed (see for example Smith, 1992, Lemon, 1995, Marks and Trapido, 1987), this enforcement was only ever imprecise, as non-white people resisted and evaded the controls, ultimately causing the breakdown of strict influx controls and residential segregation which was so central to apartheid’s conception of the city.

5. People classified as coloured made up the largest grouping, but there were smaller populations of whites and Africans living in the area.

6. The museum from time to time mounts exhibitions which require the modification of this first layout. This initial format is important for the way in which it made clear the assumptions and aims of the museum creators.

7. When in January 1997 Robben Island was opened to tourists, as a one-time prisoner, Lionel Davis was one of the tour guides appointed.

8. Another visitor expressed great anger at the exhibition, seeing it as romanticism and declaring that this was not what the struggle was for. He gave the poverty, overcrowding and lack of life chances for the children as factors to counter what he saw as an overly romantic view.
9. The similarities in the comments of Western’s (1981) informants a short time after coloured people were moved from Mowbray seem to confirm this identification of critique as much as described past.

10. A Cape Town movement of mainly the Islamic coloured population, PAGAD set itself up to oppose the gangs and drug pushers in the townships. Its activities have been highly visible in the media and full of controversy as gun related deaths have marked various demonstrations. Despite this, there has been approval that some action is being taken, the perception being that the police are unable to control violence and the possession of guns and drugs in the townships. In January 1997, a PAGAD demonstration which ended at the Caledon Square Police Station, outside the Museum created enormous interest and sympathy among visitors to the Museum.

11. One woman expressed this perfectly when she said that she had not really realised what was happening until the day they had to move and then she cried and cried.

12. Architecture was very topical at this time, since the Museum was mounting an exhibition of a photographic record made of District Six architecture as it was being destroyed. This exhibition actually straddled the map and was a source of some contention, since for some it undermined the power of the map. Certainly people had to crawl under the exhibited photographs to find their streets on the map.

13. Here it speaks to another dimension of apartheid not much covered by the Truth Commission with its focus on human rights violations to individuals.

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