

## **Apartheid Afterlives**

### **Imagining Freedom in the Aftermath of Racial Oppression in Cape Town, South Africa**

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#### **Abstract**

South Africa in 2018 finds itself at yet another crossroads with a changing of the presidential guard set against a backdrop of protests, state capture and a growing disenchantment afforded by the euphoria and promise of 1994, the year of the first democratic elections. This article considers the contemporary South African moment through the lens of the photographic archive of the racially oppressed who were subject to forced removals in Cape Town. It poses questions about the aftermath of racial oppression, representation and the nexus of history, the human and freedom.

Keywords: Siona O'Connell, South Africa, apartheid, forced removals, photography, freedom, repair, District Six, representation, restitution, trauma

History in the present is not about burden or mourning; it is about accounting for the population of the dead. But this dead population is not dead, because their actions leave traces that work to configure the world. In this sense, our present historical actions are dialogues between the living and the dead... To engage in this dialogue we remember wounds, but more importantly, we hear the cries produced by wounds.

Anthony Bogues, 2010<sup>1</sup>

#### **South Africa, 1994**

27 April 1994 is a significant day in South African history. Now a public holiday called 'Freedom Day', the holiday commemorates magical moments when countless people around the globe watched Nelson Mandela take the presidential oath of office at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Events critical to the official and public moment of transition – from white minority rule to multiracial democracy – included the unbanning of organisations like the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC); the return of political exiles; the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners; and the initiation of political negotiations in the country. Such a moment had seemed impossible, as South Africa had only just sidestepped a looming and probably vicious civil war and had gone through fraught processes of negotiation and transition. Mandela's inauguration seemed to leave the violence of the past behind us as we watched the old guard of the country's armed forces salute our new president. This day, and in the heady years that followed, saw South Africa – as the world's newest democracy – being figured in a very

particular way: the miracle of the 'Rainbow Nation' (a term coined by Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu).

### **South Africa, 2017**

As with that period, the past three years have signalled in South Africa a certain turning-point – a critical shift – charged by student-led protests aimed at forms of institutionalised racism and the slow pace of transformation in universities; the increasing proliferation of service-delivery protests across the country; and, in general, a growing disenchantment with the social imaginaries of the 'New South Africa'. In addition to this, charges of corruption, mismanagement and even state capture have brought government and the integrity of the ANC into disrepute. New lines are being drawn in a country that is still trying to attend to the ones that refuse to disappear. It is against this backdrop and in this climate that this article intervenes, acknowledging that new tools and approaches are central, not only to understanding histories and futures, but are also crucial in how these are imagined, performed and theorised. In so doing, the article engages with modes of ordinary life and the practices and possibilities of yet-to-be realised freedom, doing so through the work of the imagination, and asks the question: how does South Africa deal with the unfinished business of the past and what does reconciliation, transformation and freedom mean?

### **Apartheid Afterlives**

To investigate the notion of apartheid afterlives, I examine how an ordinary object – the family photograph – can be used to provide insight into the past and present lives of those oppressed by apartheid. The intellectual basis of this article situates creative scholarship as a response to a need to find tools and texts that speak to a South African moment, one that is marked by all kinds of levels of protest and the inability to navigate difference, transformation and belonging. As objects of cultural production in a regime of colonial and racial domination, photographs of the racially oppressed respond to a certain type of contestation, which itself is political. The use of the visual as the nexus of this article, and the family photograph in particular, is a deliberate strategy and an important one. The temporal gap – the distance in time and space between when the camera shutter is released and when the processed image is viewed – disrupts linearity and implicates the viewer in that time and space, blurring boundaries and breaking into the processes of the imagination.

Furthermore, the family album of the racially oppressed draws attention to the notion of subjugated knowledge as operating outside of mainstream and dominant frameworks. It speaks of a particular kind of knowledge, the subjugated knowledge of subjects who, despite being dominated, are able to speak of their lives, and it offers a glimpse of freedom in its struggle to break away from racial violence. These family photo albums offer illumination on the ethical questions posed by critical intellectual and curator Anthony Bogues in a lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2011, when he asked: 'What kind of human beings are we... And how therefore shall we live?'

## Cape Town

Cape Town sits on the south-west edge of the African continent and is commonly referred to as the 'Mother City'. Dutch colonial Jan van Riebeeck set up a station in 1652, and Cape Town became a halfway station for trade between the East and the West.<sup>2</sup> It is a city that has been shaped by waves of regulation, evacuation and displacement, especially around health scares such as the smallpox outbreak in the 1880s and the bubonic plague in 1901.<sup>3</sup> The same rhetoric of contamination and control was used to justify the apartheid legislated forced evictions of District Six and other parts of the city that began in the 1960s as a result of apartheid-enacted legislation, the Group Areas Act of 1950 that dictated who could live where contingent on their race.

The panoramic vista from the top of Table Mountain is awe-inspiring. One can easily see the harbour, Robben Island, infamous for the incarceration of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners during apartheid, and, closer to the foot of the mountain, the city centre with the Houses of Parliament. What is also clear from the mountain is the pentagonal structure of the Castle of Good Hope, the oldest colonial building in South Africa, the foundations of which were laid in 1665 and built with the labour of local men and women, slaves and Dutch East India Company workers.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to miss this imposing structure that is surrounded by a moat, as it sits resolutely in the city, oblivious and impervious to the thousands of 'black' and 'coloured' men and women who make their way to work in the city in the early hours, and then leave again at night. The castle is adjacent to the Cape Town railway station and taxi rank, and the Grand Parade, all of which have no small bearing on any conversation about the catastrophic realities of what it meant to be racially oppressed in a democratic country that is among the most unequal in the world.<sup>5</sup>

The imposing and ever-present structure of the castle sits on the edge of District Six, an area which saw sixty thousand people subjected to a series of forced removals that began in the late 1960s as a result of apartheid that was legislated in 1948, but which was born out of the preceding practices of colonialism and racial slavery.<sup>6</sup> The castle has outlasted thousands of homes decimated by bulldozers across the city and the suburbs and it continues to dwarf many of the surrounding structures, such as the District Six Museum and local churches and mosques. The view from the mountain also reveals the well-heeled, largely 'white' and upmarket Atlantic seaboard and the leafy green suburbs of Newlands, Harfield Village and Constantia, which are in sharp contrast to the rest of the vista, that is the Cape Flats, the flat, dusty stretch of land that has come to be seen and understood as the homes of 'black' and 'coloured' inhabitants, and was established largely as a result of forced removals. The lines of geographical division in Cape Town mirror racial ones, rendering visible, in a violent post-apartheid landscape, an ordered subliminal separateness that undermines any contrived notion of a multiracial South African 'whole'.

According to Laurine Platzky and Cherryl Walker, it is estimated that in the period 1960–1982, about three and a half million people experienced evictions under various race-based relocation policies in apartheid South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Evicted from places such as District Six, Constantia and Harfield Village, they were dumped in inhospitable and unfamiliar townships such as – named in cruel irony – Ocean View, Atlantis and Lavender Hill. The irony being that there are no hills, views, lavender or ocean vistas from these areas. The apartheid

government administered its dictum of division, ensuring that families were not relocated with their familiar neighbours but forced to join completely unknown people from different areas. Families who had previously occupied the same block now lived scattered, in any one of several council areas, including the bizarrely named 'Atlantis', a 'coloured' township on the west coast, to the north of Cape Town, which became a buzzword when it was sold to evictees as an exciting, brand-new lifestyle. What was not spelt out was that Atlantis bore some resemblance to the fabled lost city, situated as it was sixty kilometres from the city centre and built on a dusty and grey strip of land that had no public bus or rail routes.

The methods employed for forced removals and relocations ensured that any notion of a community was obliterated and the feasibility of these communities re-forming after their evictions was rendered impossible; taken together these policies contributed instead to creating brand-new neighbourhoods and communities so utterly fragile in their compositions as to render the monikers *neighbourhood* and *community* all but laughable. These settlements were often far from the city centre, with new communities having to contend with unfamiliar landscapes and neighbours. Cruelly, the process of evictions appeared haphazard; it was not done in any methodical street-by-street fashion and residents were left in a constant state of stress, waiting for the inevitable knock on their door.

The business of separateness and land in Cape Town is clearly illustrated by Van Riebeeck's Hedge, which, in the city's famed botanical gardens, Kirstenbosch, continues to grow. This bitter almond hedge, planted by Dutch colonial Jan van Riebeeck in 1660 to protect the Dutch settlement, cut the settlers off from the rest of the continent, as well as severing the indigenous population from land traditionally used for grazing.<sup>8</sup> The remnants of this hedge – much like the castle – serve as a powerful metaphorical and physical barrier – and signals the beginning of evictions – that situates those who are 'white' on one side of the city, and those who are 'other' on the other. Cape Town is a city of evictions and dispossession, leaving the forcibly removed and their descendants frozen in a past that continues to be irreconcilable with any sense of belonging. The struggles of District Six, renamed Zonnebloem (Sunflower) in 1970, are articulated through the unresolved, ugly, public and private arguments of the District Six land claims.

It is important to note that, according to Chrischené Julius of the District Six Museum, of the 60,000 evictees, only 2,400 have instituted land claims, leaving the overwhelming majority without any avenue to attend to their loss.<sup>9</sup> The question of land, return and justice illuminates the battles of the past and lays bare the violence that continues to resonate, like the lingering flash of a camera, refusing to subside in a country still divided by that past. Bogue uses the notion of the 'wound' to describe lingering, repeated trauma that results in 'an historical event of long duration'.<sup>10</sup> Like the flash that burns a transient retinal blind spot, its act of illumination causing certain erasures, the story of District Six is one of erasure made manifest in all its possible meanings.

### **Remembering and Forgetting**

*Postmemory*, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch, is characterised as: 'The experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own

belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated.<sup>11</sup> Hirsch's astute assertion commands attention when we consider that the surviving generation of homeowners evicted from District Six are now well into their seventies and eighties. Their narratives, along with those of ex-residents already deceased, are fading, no longer recalled in the absolute black or vivid white of a perfectly exposed photograph. But District Six continues to force itself into contemporary narratives performed by children, grandchildren and their extended families, however far removed they may be from the area both in time and space. These are not just 'flashbacks', because for 'black' families, the social and economic realities generated by the colour of their skins – as Fanon calls it, 'the epidermalisation of this inferiority' – continues to resonate.<sup>12</sup> Within a Foucauldian understanding, wherein the past is continually remoulded in the present, the place of their birth, where they went to school, the conversations they have at Christmas, who they marry, where they will die and be buried, all of these elements can in some way or another be traced back to this place, District Six.

### **Representation and Resolution**

The photograph as representation is important because it connects memories, histories and languages in a very real way. Photographs are never simple representations; on the contrary, they convey sets of meanings that are embedded in very palpable social, political and economic frames. The photographic album, particularly the autobiographical album, is considered by sociologists and psychologists to be particularly fluid: these albums 'encode memory, or camouflage them behind ritual or psychological screens'.<sup>13</sup> Photographs are more than the two-dimensional objects that they appear to be, for in their materiality and the place that they occupy – their multiple overt, opaque and covert representations – they offer a haven in which the imagination can take root.



Photograph of the wedding of Herbert and Driena O'Connell (1934), outside the Holy Cross Catholic Church in Nile Street, District Six

In my quest to address my own sense of unbelonging in South Africa, I turn to images from the family archives of one-time District Six residents, with my immediate attention being drawn to two indistinct images in that archive; the first of the wedding of my paternal grandparents, the second of the wedding of my parents. Standing outside Holy Cross Catholic Church in Nile Street, District Six, the first image, a 4-inch by 6-inch black-and-white snapshot, shows a family party posing outside a church after a marriage ceremony. There are no dates or details on the back of the print and the photographer is unknown. Two small children, looking somewhat lost and uneasy, struggle to find their place in the composition, jostling to be included in the photographer's framing of the image. The group features a tall and uncomfortable-looking groom, his beautiful wife and their wedding party. The two children are my father and his sister, at the wedding of their father to their new mother – their evident discomfort perhaps a result of the trepidation they felt at their soon-to-be new family arrangements.

In this grainy collection of figures, I note the resemblance of my son to my father, and to his father. I recognise my grandfather, who always appeared larger than life with his imposing bulk, acute wit and commanding voice, now posing somewhat awkwardly in a dark suit. Seeing this image, I am overwhelmed by the memory of Faros and Co, a District Six cold-supply store at which my grandfather and most of his children worked. It was with an uncanny ease that I conjured up the smell of the cold-room and the diesel stink of the trucks that always seemed to be idling outside. 'Pa' delivered supplies – fruit, vegetables and salt – to ships alongside Cape Town wharves in the early hours of the morning – a poignant reminder perhaps, that Cape Town was once used as a refreshment station by colonial trade ships on the spice route to and from the East.



Photograph of Herbert and Driena O'Connell signing the register on their wedding day (1934)

This gentle, remembered tableau speaks little or nothing of the trauma to come. There is no suggestion of a curt eviction notice, nor does the image prefigure the chaos of a home and a family torn apart by bulldozers. It certainly does not hint at the inevitable travails wrought by alcohol, nor the attendant violence that found safe harbour in a home under siege. It does not speak of the emasculation of a man unable to protect his family, a man who, despite having no tertiary education to speak of, was an autodidact who read Lord Macaulay's essays, studied Robert Clive and spoke passable Greek. And most pivotally it does not speak of the move itself, the trek to the Cape Flats and the small, grey, draughty third-floor apartment in Hanover Park, an unbelievable twenty-five kilometres from the city centre. In the second wedding image to catch my eye, my father appears as a gawky young man in an ill-fitting suit on the day of his wedding to my spectacularly dressed mother; they were married at the same church in which his father said his own wedding vows some thirty years earlier. These two faded images bind me to my father and to his father, and it is no coincidence, in fact it is perhaps fitting, that I find that my attempt at a metaphorical homecoming, a reimagined repatriation – a return to the father – is enacted through this and other photographs taken before I was born, in a land of others' memories and horizons.

In my quest to situate myself within this memory, one that I can clearly never fully inhabit, how can I engage with these grainy images, which show my mother as a beautiful young woman and my father as a gangly teacher, knowing that they are 'part of a much larger picture'? How can these family images speak to me now about freedom in the face of, as Derrida refers to apartheid, 'the first product of European exportation?'<sup>14</sup> Is it possible to restore a memory of what was never experienced? The question therefore remains: how does one live in the wake of catastrophe?

### **The Family Album of the Oppressed**

The photograph of the oppressed invites a series of questions that address ideologies of race, conflict, meanings of history, and public and private familial representation. Embedding family albums in comparative and theoretical discourse while crucially trying to see them through a 'new' lens offers us a chance to think about the lives of oppressed families and how this reading disrupts or disturbs current conventional tropes of repair, knowing and being. This seeing will depend on a re-reading of the narratives of the oppressed, which may necessitate a reimagination of specific historical and cultural contexts. It demands a journey into lives that demonstrate a way of living after historical catastrophe, and an understanding of the fact that silenced memories surface and testify to the trauma of the past and its continued existence in the present. This is an important point as it underscores the catastrophic nature of oppression; that there may never be closure and that repair must be shaped by an understanding that a return to what once was imagined is impossible. These photographs are powerful reminders that there is no possibility of remaking the past; they serve as relentless reminders that the past will never be 'off the hook'.

### **Speaking the Photograph**

Over several months in 2011, and later, for the making of a film, *An Impossible Return*, in 2015, I held a series of conversations with ex-residents of District Six, all of whom had been

adjoining neighbours to my father's family home on Roger Street and were later evicted. These three men and three women met on Sunday afternoons in my parents' home in nearby Walmer Estate. At their first meeting, and having not seen one another for about forty years, the initial moments of greeting were taken up with multiple sadnesses at the news of siblings, parents, friends and partners who had since died. They had last seen each other as young adults but, as they eloquently commented, their homes were 'shared homes' in spite of any religious differences. Their immediate common memories were of childhood pranks, celebrations and challenges. As residents of a low-income area they instinctively shared a fluency in the same highly localised language of survival.

After the reconnections had been made, I asked them all to present the photographs I had asked them to bring along. The silence that followed this request punctuated a rhythmical shift in the conversations as, one by one and without exception, they opened the plastic carrier bags that contained their few hoarded snapshots. None of the images were framed, nor were they in albums of any sort – they were all loosely gathered. Sixty-nine-year-old Archie Hussein, an ex-resident, moved away from the dining table and, taking out his collection, passed each photograph around one at a time in an almost ritualistic fashion, explaining, 'If I put them all out at once, everyone would be overwhelmed.' He impressed upon us all that we should take great care when handling these photographs.

Hussein's photographs were faded; they depicted children playing with discarded car tyres, and posed groups of the neighbourhood's informal cricket teams. The pictures were all small, grainy and unsaturated, speaking in subdued tones of a way of life in sharp contrast to the vivid and colourful recollections recounted. Hussein then laid out another series of photographs, this time of Roger Street. Placed with great care, and in panoramic spread on the carpet, the collection grew to resemble a poignantly metaphoric landscape, sliced apart by the edges of the prints themselves. It appeared almost as a parody of a jigsaw puzzle, one in which the edges cannot connect to form a coherent and cohesive image. Those too-brief moments of exposure from over forty years ago seemed at odds with the reality of the present; they seemed to contradict and disrupt the images. It was as if, for this group, the act of looking at these photographs marked a shift in their recollections of their lives in District Six. Where moments earlier we had been speaking about the progress of their District Six land-claims process, viewing these images spoke to denied possibilities and unimaginable and unmitigated loss. Paradoxically, these family images, which would conventionally constitute the celebration of a life's highlights, now acted instead as the documentation and affirmation of an unending trauma. Indeed, all the participants appeared to struggle to reconcile these images with the reality of their present lives: they appeared to view them almost as if they had been taken in an – and of an – altogether different life, which of course they were.

Despite the common conviction of post-apartheid South Africa as being free, the conversations on those Sunday afternoons around the boxes of photographs illustrated that much is yet to be spoken. We still fumble around the issue of race, for the most part defining ourselves in racial terms. 'Them' and 'us' remain, though the identity of 'them' seems to have changed, as it is no longer the white apartheid old guard who are the 'enemy'. As my father commented, 'I always seem to be looking over my shoulder, but I am not exactly sure what it is of which I am afraid.' It seems as if there has been no



acknowledgement of the demons who haunt us still but whose names we do not know. The question seems to be one of trying to understand how we have come to be who and what we are today.

Albie Sachs,<sup>15</sup> an anti-apartheid activist as well as a Constitutional Court judge, comments that:

There was in reality an enormous amount of knowledge about repression in South Africa, but hardly any acknowledgement of what the cost was in human terms. Acknowledgement involves an acceptance not only of the existence of a phenomenon, but of its emotional and social significance. It presupposes a sense of responsibility for the occurrence, an understanding of the meaning that it has for the persons involved and for society as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

### **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

It was surprising, given that many of my questions and conversations with ex-residents pivoted on restitution, forgiveness and restoration, that the subject of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did not come up. Unsurprisingly, the question of ‘damages’ did come up, however, and what was apparent was that the insignificant amount offered by the Land Restitution process was woefully out of proportion to the injury that apartheid had caused. It has become impossible to speak about this violence of apartheid, of District Six, without acknowledging what for the evictees has become the shadow of the TRC – it has come to be understood as the cornerstone of the then brand-new South Africa and has been bundled together with the winding crowds of the newly enfranchised at that first epoch-marking election.

As Heidi Grunebaum contends, truth commissions, particularly in the global South, have become standard tools of transitional justice for countries that emerge from protracted periods of oppression and atrocity.<sup>17</sup> The TRC was established by an act of the South African parliament and was tasked with the investigation and exposure of gross violations of human rights under the apartheid regime from 1 March 1960 until 10 May 1994. South Africa decided that the way forward after apartheid was through the work of a commission, rather than through Nuremberg-style trials.<sup>18</sup> The Commission, which has gone on to be a reproducible truth commission model, was constituted out of The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill of 1995 and was modelled on the Chilean model of truth commissions.<sup>19</sup> At the introduction of the Bill, the then minister of justice, Dullah Omar, stated that:

I have the privilege and responsibility to introduce today a Bill which provides a pathway, a stepping stone, towards the historic bridge of which the Constitution speaks, whereby our society can leave behind the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and commence the journey towards a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence, and development opportunities for all South Africans regardless of color, race, class, beliefs or sex. Its substance is the very essence of the constitutional commitment to reconciliation and the reconstruction of society. Its

purpose is to provide that secure foundation which the Constitution enjoins: ‘... for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross human rights violations... and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.’<sup>20</sup>

Omar’s contention was clear: to recognise that the future of the country depended on dealing with its past, but also that the Bill, which led the way for the TRC, was a ‘bridge’ over the injustices of the past as well as a ‘stepping stone’ to other restitutive programmes such as the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), the Land Claims Court, and a host of other human rights institutions including the Human Rights, Gender, Youth and Electoral commissions.<sup>21</sup> The Bill was promulgated with the intention of reconciliation, of bringing together a divided and fractured nation and providing therapeutic intervention for survivors of human rights abuse.<sup>22</sup> It established a seventeen-member commission and included the following objectives:

To establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of gross violations of human rights that occurred between 01 March 1960 and 10 May 1994... To assist in restoring... dignity... by affording them an opportunity to testify about the violation of their rights or the death of their loved ones.<sup>23</sup>

This act did not allow for a wider understanding of ‘violation of gross human rights’, as Section 1(1)(ix) of the TRC Act defined violations of this nature as ‘the violation of human rights through (a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill-treatment of any person’.<sup>24</sup>

The narrowness of this definition rendered a further disavowal of certain of apartheid’s abuses, including forced removals, pass laws, and racialised wealth and poverty, added to which there was no clarity and unanimity as to what precisely ‘reconciliation’ – an endeavour fraught with contradictions – actually meant. How was it exactly that the TRC provided the ‘unity and healing’ that the country so desperately needed? Perhaps the TRC’s greatest challenge was that the reconciliation that it sought to encourage was only attainable through the granting of an amnesty that undermined the restoration it aimed to achieve. Alex Boraine, the vice chairperson of the Commission, articulated the task of the TRC and the healing of South Africa as:

An honest assessment and diagnosis of the sickness within our society in an attempt to give people, both perpetrators and victims, an opportunity to face the past and its consequences and start afresh. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an opportunity to make a contribution in order to deal finally with the past without dwelling in it and to help to create the conditions for a truly new South Africa.<sup>25</sup>

The TRC is thus linked to the perceived realm of peace building, either through the lens of social or transitional justice. However, as newspaper headlines of ongoing battles rooted in the past clearly show, unresolved issues of violence, freedom and justice continue to dull South Africa’s fading lustre, despite, as Heidi Grunebaum puts it, ‘the domesticating accommodations of nation-building ideology and neoliberal forms of political democratization which characterise South Africa’s post-apartheid political landscape’.<sup>26</sup>

Through the narrow definition of gross human rights, as well as blanket forgiveness, what the TRC appears to have done is to silence all those *other* traumas, producing citizens who have not been given the space or the tools with which to understand their past, script their present and engage in the ongoing project of freedom, either personal or collective.

### **The Subject**

What kinds of subjects has apartheid produced? What has South African society become through this process? The power exerted by apartheid – itself one of the indirect offspring of slavery in Africa – not only shaped a subject who was considered to be not-human, but also sought to shape its future thoughts, dreams and nightmares. The idea of ‘looking over one’s shoulder’ speaks of an absolute terror, an imminent and ever-present dread, but more importantly it speaks of a further injury: the oppressed, today considered ‘free’, do not, even now, know what it is, exactly, that can harm them, but they still anticipate its return. Racial subjugation was not only marked on the body under apartheid, it was, and continues to be, marked on the mind. Real freedom needs to be imagined in such a way that suggests a radical understanding of just what it means to live as a human. The struggle to imagine what it means to be human will be relentless, for, as the past continues to walk in the present, we cannot allow, yet again, for domination and oppression to triumph.

### **Return, Transformation and Repair**

Several of the ex-residents expressed a desire to return to their homes in District Six, believing that, somehow, if they were given back their homes, the trauma and terror of their evictions would abate. A few, my father among them, would not consider returning, their reluctance suggesting, quite understandably, that they were uncertain as to what kind of District Six they would return. What their uncertainty articulated further was an acknowledgement that a return to District Six *as it was* would be a return to their inscription as racialised subjects; it was apparent that they had little confidence that a return would or could mean much else. The impossibility of their return to this place spoke of a profound and fundamental break with District Six – inasmuch as it was home, it was the home where, ultimately, apartheid, in enacting this traumatic separation, first defined them as ‘other’ most affectingly. Perhaps what can be learnt from the debacle of the land-claims process of District Six is that it should not be a place of closure and death: on the contrary, it must be recognised that nothing can attend to this injustice. As one evictee commented, ‘there is no going back’.

Many evictees have avoided the District Six reunions organised by various organisations and committees, preferring to continue the lives of separation imposed by apartheid. This dusty and littered space in the Mother City seems unable to settle, regardless of newspaper headlines proclaiming its development plans. The real value of District Six lies not in its value as an area of prime real estate, but as a focal point of grief; it opens up a space of bereavement akin to a graveyard. If post-apartheid South Africa recognises that the names of the metaphorical dead must be inscribed on the headstone of District Six, then the space will open up for the country to recognise its suffering and place it within the larger narrative of trauma and nation-building. It will be an indication that South Africa is taking responsibility for its past, recognising that exercises of restitution can never exhume and

rebury the dead, nor ameliorate all the pain and suffering of those subjected to apartheid. These ex-residents have become hostages to the memory of their past and are imprisoned by it. They are seen as obstructions to the process of selective forgetting emphasised by the post-apartheid government, museums and mainstream archives that advocate a nationally defined prerogative of remembering, forgetting and the attendant notions of reconciliation. The point bears repeating: the injustices of apartheid, the embodied and mental injuries, angers and hurts, are all immeasurable and ineffable.

In thinking through the evictees' inability to find their place in the new nation, it dawned on me that what apartheid did was to shatter their cognitive assumptions about their lives and their world. Their sense of bewilderment and their anticipation of further trauma speak of their inability to comprehend the suffering they endured and continue to endure. This suffering is a result of their encounter with apartheid and it has further fragmented who they are in the new South Africa. Further denial of lives and moments lived (and lost) exacerbates the original trauma, as the legacies, ghosts and questions of the past are rendered invisible, over and over again. The absence of metaphorical headstones, and the absence of names on those headstones in District Six, has created an ontological uncertainty among ex-residents, who must now come to terms with their dead on their own. Together with their dead, they occupy a liminal space of uncertainty – a part of the new South Africa, but also removed from it. They are perplexed and disorientated in an unfamiliar landscape stripped of the markers of their past. Their basic questions remain: how and why did we get here and can it, will it, happen again?

### **Imaginings after Apartheid**

To think about freedom therefore compels us to think about ways in which the gaze shifts with regard to the subject: it demands an absolute recognition of the impossibility of return; a recognition that what happened is irretrievable and unredeemable. As we are now, there is no past to which these ex-residents and I can return – a return to District Six, metaphorical or otherwise, is impossible without a re-constitution of what we consider to be human. These previously silenced, ordinary photographs speak of a particular kind of knowledge, a subjugated knowledge of subjects who, despite being dominated, spoke, more than forty years later, of a desire to break out of a struggle of violence. The images bring history into focus and speak now of a parallel history, of lives not lived, and in so doing compel us to argue for the reclamation of the subjects and their power, reclamation of disavowed margins and spaces in history. These family archives disrupt the notion of subjugated knowledge as that which operates outside the mainstream and dominant frameworks. Through the acknowledgement of struggles and the celebrations of day-to-day ordinary lives the subject is freed up to be anything he or she imagines themselves to be. In so doing, the question can finally be posed: what *can* freedom look like?

We need to think about the kind of ongoing suffering that racial subjugation produced and we need to think about the catastrophic reverberations of a racialised past. As Bogue suggests, thinking through these questions will not only aid in the process of recovery, but will also suggest how to live and how to be. triumph. Remembering, via the traces in photographs, is not a guarantee of redemption, liberation or freedom; trauma is an unfinished and open-ended business and grief and the *mourning* of irreparable loss is

elusive. These ordinary black-and-white photographs respond to the cries of the wounds of Fanon, who, in the final page of *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes:

The self takes its place by opposing itself; Yes and No. I said in my introduction that man is a yes, I will never stop reiterating that. *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity. But man is also a *no*. *No* to the scorn of man. *No* to the degradation of man. *No* to the exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Fanon's challenge is crucial when we think about how freedom might constitute itself now, how it might look and sound. He asks us to imagine freedom, without the crutches and confines of binaries, and asks us to bring invention into existence. For Fanon, it is in thinking about the meanings of being human that we must imagine, and must create lives of freedom. In between the grains of the photographs of the oppressed we find an urging to guard the past, to give it a presence in the 'here' and the 'now' and to emphasise the obligation that we have to remember. A duty such as this, then, can be seen in two ways: as an expression of justice and as a duty to recognise those *other* lives that were human *too*. Like the death inherent in every photograph, the futures imagined by two children on the edge of a blurry wedding photograph of their father are forever denied. The photographs of the racially oppressed draw our attention to the hopes and dreams crushed by the eviction notice, and by the arrival of the removal truck that lumbered up Hanover Street in District Six with its cargo of precariously balanced imbuia cabinets and wardrobes – which would have to be chopped up as they had no hope of fitting into cold, cramped sub-economic housing on the Cape Flats.

For the millions of South Africans who were forcibly removed, the realisation is that a return to that which once was is impossible; that notwithstanding any ameliorative exercise in terms of financial compensation, the futures of which they once dreamed remain out of reach. These ordinary photographs powerfully demonstrate that those who paid the price for being 'black' and 'coloured' decades ago continue to do so on account of events that began in 1652, when a man called Jan van Riebeeck sailed into Table Bay on a Dutch vessel, and denied them a future of infinite possibilities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, & Freedom*, University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, 2010, p 116

<sup>2</sup> See Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen, Vivien Bickford-Smith, eds, *Cape Town: The Making of a City: An Illustrated Social History*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum, Netherlands, 1998.

- <sup>3</sup> See Vivien Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, Cambridge University Press, London and New York, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> See <http://www.castleofgoodhope.co.za>.
- <sup>5</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/datablog/2017/apr/26/inequality-index-where-are-the-worlds-most-unequal-countries>.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.districtsix.co.za>.
- <sup>7</sup> Laurine Platzky and Cheryl Walker, *The Surplus People: Forced Removals in South Africa*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1984
- <sup>8</sup> Zubeida Jaffer, 'Van Riebeeck's Hedge', <http://www.zubeidajaffer.co.za/van-riebeecks-hedge/>
- <sup>9</sup> Siona O'Connell, 'An Impossible Return', O'Connell-Shepherd Academic Services, Cape Town, 2015
- <sup>10</sup> Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, op cit
- <sup>11</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997, p 22
- <sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p 11
- <sup>13</sup> Martha Langford, 'Speaking the Album: An Application of the Oral-Photographic Framework', in Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister, eds, *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts. Remapping Cultural History*, Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, 2006, pp 223–246
- <sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Racism's Last Word', *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1985
- <sup>15</sup> Sachs played a prominent role in the anti-apartheid struggle. He was detained, exiled and lost an arm and the sight in one eye in a car bomb, but returned to play a pivotal role in the drafting of a new constitution.
- <sup>16</sup> Albie Sachs, *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p 79
- <sup>17</sup> Heidi Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2011
- <sup>18</sup> See Dullah Omar, 'Building a New Future', in Alex Boraine and Janet Levy, eds, *The Healing of a Nation?*, Justice in Transition, Cape Town, 1995.
- <sup>19</sup> Steven Robins, 'Rights', in Steven Robins and Nick Shepherd, eds, *New South African Keywords*, Jacana, Johannesburg, 2008

<sup>20</sup> Debates of the National Assembly, 'F. P. Second Session', The Government Printer South Africa, Cape Town, 1995

<sup>21</sup> See the Reconstruction and Development Program (1994) and chapter 9 of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. See also Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'Individual and/or Social Justice after Apartheid? The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *The European Journal of Development Research* vol 11, no 2, 1999, pp 115–140.

<sup>22</sup> Reggie Raju, 'The Road to Unity and Social Justice: Gathering, Accessing and Preserving Truth and Reconciliation Commission Records', in *The World Library and Information Congress: 76th IFLA General Conference and Assembly*, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2010

<sup>23</sup> The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995 (hereafter the TRC Act), available online at <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>, accessed 1 January 2012

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Boraine, quoted in Aletta J Norval, 'Memory, Identity and the (Im)Possibility of Reconciliation: The Work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa', *Constellation* 5, no 2, 1998

<sup>26</sup> Heidi Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past*, op cit, p 2

<sup>27</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, op cit, p 225

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