

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

1. Introduction

In this study I used the palimpsest as methodology in my writing and research, as well as my practice-based work. This has involved inscription, re-inscription, construction and deconstruction. Derrida's (2001) philosophy of deconstruction engendered an "archaeological" approach of "excavation and discovery" in order to remove sedimentary layers of thinking and meaning in "past experience and present consciousness" (Jackson & Mazzie 2008:180).

Therefore, the concepts of "erasure" and "trace" in Derrida's writing set up the notion of the palimpsest. Intertextuality, as part of postmodern writing, "provide[s] a model for the function of writing" as "the palimpsest foregrounds the fact that all writing takes place in the presence of other writings: palimpsests subvert the concept of the author as the sole originary source of her work, and thus defer the 'meaning' of a work down an endless chain of signification" (Ferreira-Meyers 2008:204-214). Thus, it provides a means of 'reading' palimpsests and peeling back layers of meaning. This has been the process and experience of my research and methodology in exploring the Waterberg, Namibia, and my selected sand sites.

In this study on sand sites in the Waterberg, Namibia, the concept of the palimpsest was used as the creative methodology for multi-disciplinary research and collaboration. Through practice-based research, I explored the aesthetic possibilities of sand as a signifier of meaning and identity in contemporary Namibian art. Therefore, the concept of the palimpsest was used as a methodology in both theory and artistic practice.

Focussing on 'sand' as material and metaphor for identity, culture and land, the study was undertaken within the context of Elizabeth Grosz's theories published in *Chaos, territory and art* (2008). In this publication, the "conceptual origins of art ... are linked to the evolutionary and material forces ... the historical elaboration of life but ... metaphysically ontologically separable from them" (Gross 2008:1-2).

Dan Hicks (2010) refers to such an approach as "cultural geography" and "anthropological archaeology" and this indicates the intersection between archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology, which served as a space-maker for this study. The concept of the anthropological archaeologist excavating new meaning is not unlike that of the artist working with new material. In this respect, "the interdisciplinary study of material things in the social

sciences” supported the artist’s concept of exploring “the relationships between the ‘social/cultural’ and the ‘material’” and “the idea of relating human and non-human worlds” (Hicks 2010:25-29).

Therefore, through the identification of specific sand sites in the Waterberg, these areas were explored in terms of their eco-geo-cultural and historical backgrounds. This engendered a multi-disciplinary approach, the reading of disciplines through one another, in fieldwork and in theory, in interviews and in artworks – resulting in a qualitative analysis that brought together all the aforementioned via the model of the palimpsest.

2. Aims and objectives of the study

The approach to this study was twofold: to engage in primary as well as secondary research culminating in the writing of a thesis; and to create a body of works that investigate sand creatively. This body of works culminated in the exhibition titled “**EHI**” **WATERBERG, NAMIBIA** ‘Ehi’ – *Sand/Land Rites/Rights*, which comprised of the artist’s *Book of the Waterberg*, sand palimpsests, and the installation “Ehi”. By using this Herero word (which means both land and sand) to encapsulate my study of the material nature of sand, I further enhanced the metaphor of sand/land as a place of identity. The visual impressions and experiences of these were captured through sound and videos as well as an exhibition catalogue. Chapter 5 on Studio Work and Exhibition documents this process.

Through the exploration of sand as material from ten identified sites in the Waterberg, Namibia, the ecological, geological, historical and cultural backgrounds of these places were investigated for purposes of contextualisation, and the meaning of the material was determined culturally. The methodology involved exploratory practice-based research in the form of the collection of sand samples, creative diaries, the artist’s *Book of the Waterberg*, visual impressions, images, stories, songs, sounds, words, interviews, and information from each identified sand site.

Therefore, the concept of the palimpsest has provided both a theoretical and aesthetic model for a multi-disciplinary approach. Sand as matter, is matter which is not fixed – making the palimpsest an innovative and relevant application which provided a metaphor for the changeable, transient character of orally-transmitted knowledge.

3. Reading through the chapters

The chapters themselves form a palimpsest of information, namely: the story of palimpsests (Chapter 2); the story of sand (Chapter 3); the story of the Waterberg (Chapter 4) and the story of the artistic exploration of sand (Chapter 5). Reading through the chapters creates a palimpsest of layers of information – layers of ecology, geology, cultural history and identity. Each of the sites explored – both academically and artistically – comprises of layers of these elements, and took on an individual ‘personality’, or identity, with which I became intimately connected.

I have taken the reader on a journey from the top of the mountain, via my sand sites, to the bottom savannah plains. We started close to the sky and on top of the mountain, with its bleached pink sandstone chimneys emerging from red sand, circled by eagles and kites, where there is no water. This is where the Herero people were trapped by the Germans during the Battle of the Waterberg in 1904. Moving down through the steep mountain slopes of sub-tropical woodlands, one encounters an abundance of trees, plants, birds and animals, including wild fig trees, hundreds of years old, all growing abundantly from purple red loam. Ecologically, these first two sites remain untouched.

The slopes then level out into the purple-red soil of the old colonial citrus and apple orchards and irrigation channels. Although warthogs, bushbuck and baboons abound, it is nevertheless a layer where the impact of humanity and history on the environment cannot be missed. Across the way are the Waterberg Resort’s chalets. We then move down to the dry brown sand of the rest camp and restaurant, which was previously the old German police station and jail. This is built from quarried red sandstone from the mountain. This site has the highest impact of human intervention and colonial history. Elizabeth Grosz’s (2008) concept of colonialism inscribing itself upon the land culturally, is evident here. Co-incidentally, it is also the site of the Omumborombongo Tree, the ancestral tree of the Herero people which forms part of their creation myth. These myths create layers of identity and ‘ownership’ with, and of the land.

Moving away from this into the bush, we find the rich black loamy soil from the water streams which emerge from the mountain, as an aquifer, at this level. The air is moist and smells of water, and there is an abundance of reeds and tall bamboo, nested by many weavers, indigenous birds, and a host of insect life. We hear the sounds of water trickling down. This is where the water emerges from the mountain, hence the name Waterberg, and

this is which creates the oasis, previously making it a point of contention for survival in the desert. Once again, this site carries little human impact on the environment.

Emerging from the bush and streams, we come across the old Rhenish mission station ruins, comprised of crumbling, eroding pink and grey bricks. The faded powdery grey sand is from the wood-fired bricks and the faded crumbly pink sand is from the sun-dried bricks, both made from sand from the area. The mission station was built before the German police station, in an effort to convert the Herero people to Christianity. Was this a spiritual vanguard of colonisation?

Emerging at the bottom of the mountain, we find the dry granular orange sand of the Graveyard Road. The graveyard was the burial ground for the German soldiers who died in the Battle of the Waterberg. Since Namibian Independence, this remains a point of contention, as there is no site or burial ground to commemorate the Herero people who lost their lives in the same struggle.

The Graveyard Road borders the savannah plains of acacia trees and termite hills. The sand from the termite hills and the C22 road speckle the savannah surrounding the Waterberg with a vibrant red and orange, respectively.

These sand sites form the layers of the Waterberg, creating a unique palimpsest of ecology, geology and cultural history and identity.

As mentioned above, the creative methodology for this study explores these sites through the materiality of sand. The resultant exhibition titled “**EHI**” WATERBERG, NAMIBIA ‘Ehi’ – *Sand/Land Rites/Rights*, comprised of the *Book of the Waterberg*, palimpsest sand scrolls, and the performative installation “Ehi”. The exhibition is palimpsestic in methodology, construction and documentation. The artist’s *Book of the Waterberg* was deconstructed, reconstructed, inscribed and re-inscribed with visual and written information, incorporating materials found and sand collected from the sites while exploring the eco-geo-cultural history, and therefore the identity, of sand in the Waterberg.

The sand scroll palimpsests explore the geology and mapping of the mountain with sand and bamboo pertinent to the sites. These material components, *The Book of the Waterberg* and the palimpsest sand scrolls, weave throughout the study and culminate in the construction of the installation “Ehi” – *Sand/Land Rites/Rights*. It is 3 x 3 metres in size and reconstructs in

three dimensions the geological strata of each sand site on the mountain, through sand people created with the layers of the sand from each site. This became performative with my spoken artist's statement in the form of a poem about the Waterberg, and the Herero term *Ehi* as alias for land-sand-earth-as-our-mother. From an eco-feminist point of view, Donna Haraway (2015) inspired me. Apart from exposing the damage done, her approach also presents optimism in that, what seems to be rupture, may perhaps just be an interconnected and interdisciplinary approach to symbiosis with our planet-earth-land-sand that will save us.

My artist's statement, Prince's political poem on land rights and Gotti's cultural chant of the Waterberg, together with the installation, create a palimpsest of sand and sound. The video "*Ehi*" as a visual and audial exploration of the installation becomes a palimpsest of ecological rights/rites, land rights and cultural rites when overlaid with these palimpsests of sound. The different voices gave palimpsests of interpretations of our oral 'ownership' and identity of and with the land.

4. Constraints of multi-disciplinary study

Although my study was focussed on one place, the Waterberg, with ten identified sand sites, the approach was a multidisciplinary one. I researched the ecology, geology, cultural history and identity of the Waterberg. Each discipline is an entire field of research on its own, and therefore had to be dealt with broadly, instead of through in-depth specialisation. For example, the main association with the Waterberg is the fact that the German-inflicted Herero genocide took place there. While acknowledging the a vast literature dedicated specifically to the Genocide, I looked at it as a constitutive element of the study, not wanting one single discourse to flatten a nuanced picture of a very long history of the place.

5. New directions for future research

In this section, I provide avenues for future research. Firstly, using the model of the palimpsest to explore artistically the Waterberg's ecology and geology, cultural history and identity through the medium of sand led me to understand the Waterberg in breadth and depth from a multitude of perspectives. It would be interesting to apply this model of inquiry through the metaphor of the palimpsest and the materiality of sand to other places, such as the Kalahari Desert, which borders on Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. This, for example, could raise new questions on man-made borders, through the history of regional events and episodes, in relation to sensitive ecological sites.

Secondly, by working with the concepts of water and sand together, I would also like artistically and verbally to explore the different words for the “sand that holds the water” in Namibia’s different languages. Being a desert country, there are specific words that describe this. I could explore sand sites and the personal experiences of people in relation to the “sand that holds the water”, connecting people and regions. This could also be explored as a metaphor for climate change.

6. Conclusion

There is no previous artistic engagement with the Waterberg that has explored sand in the way proposed in this thesis. Through practice-based research, using the palimpsest as creative methodology, I enacted certain ideas, such as the overlap between environmental concerns, ecological preservation, political and cultural perspectives of land ‘ownership’. Although this had not been my intention, the political and cultural dimensions come to the fore when a layer of voice is added, and we ‘hear’ the landscape orally.