

“A triumph of the new South Africa over the old:” heritage and nation-building in post-apartheid  
South Africa, 1994-1999

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August 2007

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts

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### Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous input of Estelle Pretorius, researcher at the Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria; Bonita, research at the District Six Museum, who provided me with insight into the museum's present direction and also with documents that have yet to be published; Anthea Garman who provided unpublished documents on the media in South Africa; and Harriet Deacon who provided published and unpublished material that I would not have otherwise been able to consult. If not for my constant presence at the Inter-library loans desk and the constant patience of the librarians who were my suppliers, I would have had nothing to read in the last year. I wish to thank Professor Gwyn Campbell for allowing me to change my thesis topic when it might have already been too late and then guiding me through it expertly; Professor Maureen Malowany who challenged me to be a better researcher and writer; and Professor John Hellman who gave me the devilish idea for this dissertation in the first place. To my mom, brother and sister who have teased me since I started this thesis to let me know they were proud; and to all of my friends who have presided over my transformation into a pompous graduate student and who continue to love me anyway. To Andrée-Anne who has been kind enough to push and edit and encourage and translate and edit again, *je t'aime*.

### **Abstract**

Nelson Mandela's presidency, marked especially by the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, fostered a context in which the South African heritage industry was encouraged to promote the core values of reconciliation, unity and diversity, the underpinning of the president's nation-building project. District Six and Robben Island Museums are assessed as two of the most prominent heritage sites for the commemoration of apartheid in South Africa. Despite their differences--District Six began as a local museum with little government funding, while Robben Island was destined to be South Africa's most recognised heritage site and its largest recipient of government monies—both institutions were transformed into sites that promoted the government's vision of the new South Africa. Ultimately, the needs of the nation-building project marginalised the problems of nostalgia, romanticisation, omission and silencing that occurred at both institutions between 1994 and 1999.

### **Résumé**

Marquée surtout par les démarches de la Commission de la vérité et de la réconciliation, la présidence de Nelson Mandela a aussi établi un contexte dans lequel l'industrie du patrimoine sud-africain était fortement encouragée à promouvoir les valeurs centrales du projet d'édification de la nation du président, soit la réconciliation, l'unité et la diversité. Les Musées District Six et Robben Island sont les deux plus importants sites dédiés à la commémoration de l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud. District Six est à l'origine un petit musée local recevant très peu d'aide gouvernementale, tandis que Robben Island était destiné, de par ses origines, à devenir le plus important site du patrimoine sud-africain et bénéficie depuis ses débuts d'un niveau important de financement. Malgré leurs différences, chaque musée s'est peu à peu mis à promouvoir la vision du gouvernement pour une nouvelle Afrique du Sud. En fait, son projet d'édification de la nation pris rapidement le dessus, au détriment de la manifestation de la nostalgie, la romance, l'omission de faits et le désir de faire taire une partie de l'histoire sud-africaine qui se manifestèrent tous au sein des deux sites du patrimoine entre 1994 et 1999.

## **State of the Nation: An Introduction to Heritage and Memory in South Africa**

### **Context**

In post-conflict societies, the question of how to address a divided history while attempting to forge a shared future is a thorny one. Societies emerging from a period of civil unrest are forced to address the conflicting memories of that unrest to the satisfaction of all parties. In South Africa this task was especially difficult as the apartheid era was marked by the deliberate separation and division of the country's population along racial lines. What was euphemistically called "separate development" was informed by apartheid-era apprehensions about race and race-mixing. A series of laws in the 1950s institutionalised race-based categories in the country and provided the foundation for both grand and petty apartheid schemes designed to keep the races separate. The concept of "race," as outlined in the Population Registration Act (1950) became the most salient marker of identity in apartheid South Africa. Ultimately arbitrary distinctions based on stereotypical classification of physical traits by apartheid bureaucrats divided South Africans accordingly. Those, mostly the descendants of mixed marriages that occurred especially during the Dutch occupation of the Cape, who were considered neither Black, nor White, nor Indian, were categorised as Coloured; while there are other smaller Coloured populations in South Africa, most of the country's Coloureds continue to live in the Western Cape Province.

In 1948 when official apartheid was first unveiled, South Africa became a country of disparate peoples; with the passing of the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act (1970) black Africans were divested even of their South African citizenship and repatriated to one of ten specified "homelands" depending on their ethnic categorisation. This piece of legislation epitomised the apartheid government's attempt to remove black Africans from South Africa, and

extinguish both the memory of them having ever existed as South Africans and their contributions to South African heritage. The abolition of the homelands on 27 April 1994 did not mark the disappearance of the political, socio-economic and cultural divisions that they had for so many years symbolised. Although the legal barriers that had kept South Africa's ethnicities separate had been torn down, South Africans remained wary of one another. In May 1994, Nelson Mandela and his government, having been elected in the country's first free and fair elections, were faced with the daunting task of unifying a diverse people that had been intentionally divided for almost five decades.

Despite this apartheid-induced racial categorisation, South Africa does possess a rich mixture of ethnic groups, each with its own cultural heritage that had before 1994 never been actively incorporated into a national one. Indeed, apartheid policy manipulated these heritages in order to divide rather than unify the diverse populations of the country. The apartheid government's policy of separate development encouraged people in South Africa to identify along ethnic lines as Xhosa, Zulu and Afrikaner, rather than as South African. After 1948, the ruling Afrikaner minority glorified its own heritage to the exclusion of others. Afrikaners celebrated a heritage in which their subjugation of the rest of South Africa's peoples was the direct result of their covenant with God; and their right to rule South Africa was a direct result of their status as God's chosen people. The most recognisable physical manifestation of this heritage was the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. Commissioned in 1938 for the centenary celebrations of what is known as the Great Trek<sup>1</sup>, the monument was not opened for a decade. At

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Trek began in the 1830s when much of the Afrikaner population trekked out of the Cape in protest to British policy and practice. The year 1838 is marked as the most important year of the trek as Afrikaner farmers successfully defended their position against Zulu warriors and established themselves as the rightful rulers over what would become the Transvaal and Orange Free State.

the official inauguration of the monument on 16 December 1949, Daniel Francis Malan, the first National Party (NP) prime minister of South Africa, claimed that the Boer Trekkers

had to be children of South Africa. Further there was the realisation that as bearers and propagators of Christian civilisation, they had a national calling which had set them and their descendants the inexorable demand on the one hand to act as guardians over the non-European races, but on the other hand to see the maintenance of their own white paramountcy [sic] and of their white race purity.<sup>2</sup>

Here Malan identifies the core principles of the NP's justification of apartheid. The Voortrekker Monument was supposed to be the symbol of these principles, the physical space in which Afrikaners could come and experience their heritage. It is this type of rhetoric that would characterise South Africa's heritage sector for much of the apartheid period.

Monuments in celebration of the Afrikaner people, such as the Voortrekker Monument, but also the Taal Monument to the Afrikaans language in Cape Town, and the many statues to apartheid politicians dotting the cities and towns of South Africa, were erected as a celebration of an exclusive Afrikaner heritage. The cultural heritage of the rest of South Africans was ignored by the ruling government. It was not until 1987, when the South African Museums Association (SAMA) released a statement recognising the importance of all of South Africa's heritages that the dominance of an Afrikaner interpretation of heritage began to be dismantled. SAMA's declaration, in its first four articles, proclaimed:

- 1) that South African museums in their various programs purposefully direct their efforts to promote the dissemination of information to and enjoyment of museums by all South Africans;
- 2) that South African museums actively assist all of our nation's communities better to understand the circumstances of both their separate and common history so as to give them a clearer view of their present relationships and thereby how they can be more harmoniously involved one with the other in the future;
- 3) that South African museums sincerely strive to be seen to belong to all South Africans irrespective of color [sic], creed, or gender; and

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<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Coombes, History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 26.

- 4) that all South Africans be encouraged to express openly their views as to how the country's museums may better serve the interests of all in South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

SAMA's declaration did not immediately change the composition and direction of many of South Africa's museums. Even after 1994, the country's museums and heritage sites were dominated by apartheid-era images and narratives of Afrikaner supremacy; however, the SAMA declaration was important in highlighting the role that museums should play in fostering national feeling in a disparate population. Mandela built on SAMA's 1987 declaration during his presidency to make explicit the significance of celebrating South Africa's diverse cultural heritage. In a speech he made on Heritage Day in 1996, marking the unveiling of a monument to Enoch Sontonga, the composer of *Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika*,<sup>4</sup> Mandela cited the importance of South Africa's "rich and varied cultural heritage."<sup>5</sup> In the same speech, moreover, Mandela revealed his purpose in promoting heritage and in insisting on the observance of an annual Heritage Day. According to Mandela, "cultural heritage has a profound power to help build our new nation."<sup>6</sup>

My purpose in this dissertation is, through an exploration of two major heritage sites-- District Six Museum in the heart of Cape Town and Robben Island Museum in Table Bay--to assess the importance of museums and heritage sites in Mandela's nation-building project. Indeed, the initial premise of this work is that the context provided by Nelson Mandela's term as president, an important feature of which was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), fostered the creation of an official public memory that was underpinned by the values of

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<sup>3</sup> Gerard Corsane, "Transforming Museums and Heritage in Post-Colonial and Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Impact of Processes of Policy Formulation and New Legislation," *Social Analysis* 48 (2004): 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Written in 1897 as a church hymn, Sontonga's *Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika* or God Bless Africa was appropriated by the anti-apartheid movement as a protest song. In 1997 parts of it, along with parts of *Die Stem*, became the new South African national anthem.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson Mandela, "Speech by President Nelson Mandela at the Unveiling of the Monument to Enoch Sontonga on Heritage Day," (<http://www.anc.za.org/ancdocs/history/mandela/1996/sp0923/html> retrieved 12 January 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.



reconciliation, unity and diversity. Ultimately this marginalised the reality of the apartheid past in favour of a vision of a united people and heritage for the present and future. I will be returning to this point throughout this work.

Through an exploration of the three main issues underlying the creation of the District Six Museum--the importance of trauma in the formation of nostalgic memory, the significance of the museum's reliance on the memories of former residents for its narrative, and District Six's relevance to the wider history of pre- and apartheid multicultural living--I will argue that District Six Museum forms an important marker of South Africa's past. Indeed, the museum's representation of the history of District Six reflects Mandela's concerns and vision for a new South Africa. Robben Island Museum, as the most recognisable heritage site in the country, one that cultivated a successful heritage brand closely associated with the figure of Mandela, most reflected his vision for the new South Africa. In promoting that vision, however, memories that might have been divisive were eschewed in favour of ones that would unite. Although this dissertation is less a comparison of District Six and Robben Island Museums than an assessment of how these two institutions fit into Mandela's nation-building project, I will inevitably draw parallels between the two. Robben Island Museum will be examined as first and foremost a national museum while District Six Museum will be assessed as a local museum that ultimately has national significance.

This dissertation thus comprises three parts: the first addresses the importance and role of Nelson Mandela in post-apartheid South Africa and discusses his government's commitment to, as well as analysing the aims of, the TRC. The second section assesses the District Six Museum, and the way in which the reconstituted memories of its former residents have significantly influenced the narrative of its exhibitions. I will assess the role in such narratives of selective

individual memory, historical trauma, the influence of current events on recollections of the past, and finally the significance of nostalgia. In essence, I explore the institution's nation-building potential; and how, despite its local focus, it ultimately became an important national space for remembering. The third and final section of this dissertation examines the significance of Robben Island Museum, notably the close identification of its heritage brand with Nelson Mandela and the "triumph narrative" that was written there between 1994 and 1999. It will emphasise the role of Robben Island Museum as both the showcase of the new South African democracy and the birthplace of the "rainbow nation." The declaration of the museum as a World Heritage Site in 1999 reflects the success of this rhetoric and ultimately the Robben Island Museum "brand."

The underlying premise of this dissertation, that Mandela's presidency provided a context in which a white-washing of the past was deemed acceptable, is informed by Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph who, in "Re-placing Pasts, Forgetting Presents: Narrative, Place and Memory in the Time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," argues convincingly that the atmosphere created by the TRC profoundly affected the heritage industry in South Africa. She writes:

Contemporaneous to the unfolding processes of the TRC, the official consecration of cultural and political heritage sites such as Robben Island resonates with a new commemorative ethos on the basis of which the remembrance and celebration of a past projecting values of an inclusive and polyphonic 'multiculturalism' is promoted as an underpinning to new public histories.<sup>7</sup>

Building on this argument, I examine the ways in which both the rhetoric surrounding the TRC and Mandela's presidency have impacted the heritage industry. My thinking is further informed by Ciraj Rassool, Leslie Witz and Gary Minkley, who argue in "Burying and Memorialising the

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<sup>7</sup> Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph, "Re-placing Pasts, Forgetting Presents: Narrative, Place and Memory in the Time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Research in African Literatures* 32 (2001): 199.

Body of Truth: The TRC and National Heritage” that the “discourse of reconciliation and the Rainbow Nation weighs heavily on the capacity of heritage to contest the past.”<sup>8</sup>

In order to have a meaningful discussion of the South African heritage industry, however, it is imperative first to explore the nature and purpose of heritage in general, its connection to collective memory and its value in the cause of nation-building. For the purposes of this study, I will follow closely David Lowenthal’s definitions of heritage and pursue his suggestion that heritage is not true history, but “exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error.”<sup>9</sup> Thus if heritage is the fictive history of a people, then collective memory is the place where it resides. Stuart Allan and Andrew Thompson argue that shared national memories “have the effect of reaffirming the existence of the nation beyond the time of the present,”<sup>10</sup> an important strategy in keeping nations united. This is particularly important in countries where truly national memories have not previously existed. In South Africa from 1948 the Afrikaners’ collective memory effectively suppressed the memories of the majority of the country’s population. Building an inclusive collective memory was therefore critically important to keeping South Africa’s diverse peoples spiritually united and committed to the country’s future success. The governments of such countries, as David Gross suggests, are heavily invested in husbanding a collective memory among their citizens. He argues that “society...wants each of its members to recall certain supra-individual things, and it often goes to great lengths not only to encourage but to compel such memories for the sake of social or

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<sup>8</sup> Ciraj Rassool et.al., “Burying and Memorialising the Body of Truth: The TRC and National Heritage,” in After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, eds. W. James & L. Vijver, (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>9</sup> David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” History and Memory 10 (1998): 7.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Allan and Andrew Thompson, “The Time-Space of National Memory,” in Nationalisms New and Old, eds. K.J Brehony & N. Rassool, (New York: St-Martin’s Press, 1999), 40.

cultural cohesion.”<sup>11</sup> Governments, including that of Mandela between 1994 and 1999, use both education and heritage as a way in which to introduce and propagate these collective memories.

Despite the importance of education in nation-building, this dissertation focuses on the role of heritage. Museums and monuments, the most important physical expressions of a collective memory and a national heritage, have an advantage over education because they reach a wider portion of a country’s people. Only children go to school; and while they might return home and preach what they learned to their parents, heritage places are directed at entire families. Education reform in South Africa has taken time, especially in the aftermath of a long history of segregated schools. The heritage industry had the advantage of being able to start anew. In the immediate post-apartheid era, new museums and monuments devoted to the values and vision of the government were established with relative ease. Heritage space was used to guard the official public memory of apartheid; during Mandela’s presidency, this involved an inclusive memory of the country’s victimisation, its triumph over that victimisation and its commitment to the values of reconciliation, unity and diversity. In the post-apartheid context, the heritage industry was far better suited than education, at least under Mandela, to combat the alternate visions of apartheid that continued to survive in the living memory of South Africans.

The heritage industry, having the ability to become the physical embodiment of the collective memory of South Africans, thus had an important role to play in the project of nation-building. Mandela recognised that heritage places take on an “essential role in husbanding community, identity [and] continuity.”<sup>12</sup> Because they are publicly-funded, these institutions very often reflect in some form the visions and values of the government. That is not to say,

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<sup>11</sup> David Gross, Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>12</sup> David Lowenthal, The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xv.

however, that government funding predicates the promotion of such a vision. Indeed, as this study will suggest through an exploration of the District Six Museum, which received a one-time government grant, institutions that can project an independent vision for the nation often remain within the confines of the dominant narrative anyway.

Even museums and heritage sites that have far more local than national relevance sometimes choose to remain within the dominant national narrative. According to J.E Tunbridge and G.J Ashworth, “[n]ational heritage...must subsume the micro-heritage of localities, social and racial minorities within an over-arching macro-heritage of the nation.”<sup>13</sup> This absorption into the dominant narrative is not always contested by the local museums that are its victims. Indeed, the District Six Museum, an interactive space in which the memories of former residents made up its most important collection, remained within the narrative of reconciliation, unity and diversity that marked Mandela’s vision of “social nationalism.”<sup>14</sup> The directors of the museum repeatedly tried and failed to be recognised by Mandela’s government as a national institution, a designation that would have confirmed the museum’s place as part of the official national heritage. This desired recognition is an example of how macro incorporation of micro-heritages can actually operate in reverse.

This alignment of micro-heritages with the overarching macro vision of a “national” story confirms the importance of protecting heritage narratives from contradiction in order to preserve their success. “To tamper,” Lowenthal argues, “with the received story of any people’s past is dangerous...because it disturbs the sanctified version that makes the present bearable.”<sup>15</sup> Tunbridge and Ashworth suggest further that heritage requires “nothing less than the abolition of

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<sup>13</sup> J.E Tunbridge & G.J Ashworth, Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict, (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Lodge, Mandela: A Critical Life, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 207.

<sup>15</sup> Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 9.

all contradiction in the name of national culture.”<sup>16</sup> The heritage sector is thus concerned with creating and monopolising the nation’s collective memory. Local memory, while not eradicated, is assimilated into the dominant narrative and contradictory memories are marginalised or discredited. A common memory of a collective past is one of the most important ways in which to foster a collective unity of purpose in a group whose members would otherwise have no loyalty to one another. In post-conflict societies such as post-apartheid South Africa, harnessing the influence of memory spaces over collective remembering is an important step toward creating a heritage and building a national identity.

Herein lies the importance of the study of heritage in post-apartheid South Africa. It is hoped that this study will contribute to an understanding of the significance of heritage in building a truly national feeling among ethnically and culturally divided groups within the same political boundaries. Indeed, studying memory and heritage in South Africa during Mandela’s time as president is especially relevant because the rhetoric of his administration promoted a positive, optimistic, forward-looking vision of the country’s diverse peoples as one nation, even as it commemorated a contested and divided past. By choosing to examine District Six and Robben Island Museums, both local and national museums respectively, this study reveals how minority heritages like that of District Six can help to foster a wider national heritage. In its turn, Robben Island constitutes an invaluable showcase of precisely that national heritage to which the District Six Museum has in some respects been assimilated.

## **Historiography**

Before moving on to a discussion of Nelson Mandela and the TRC, I propose here to look at some of the work that has most influenced my own thinking during the research and writing of

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<sup>16</sup> Tunbridge & Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 46.

this thesis. In addition to Gross's and Lowenthal's work, this dissertation has been significantly shaped by work undertaken specifically on heritage and memory in South Africa. Harriet Deacon, Ciraj Rassool, Patricia Davison, Leslie Witz and Sarah Nuttall, among others, have all produced essays and articles on the subject. While many of these authors have addressed the heritage industry in general rather than heritage sites in particular, the vast majority of the work on heritage and memory in contemporary South Africa deals either directly or tangentially with Robben Island and the Robben Island Museum. This academic attention is a testament to Robben Island's perceived importance in the new South Africa's heritage sector and thus makes the museum that bears its name a vital part of any heritage study. That is not to suggest, however, that scholars are necessarily pleased with Robben Island Prison's transformation into Robben Island Museum.

Véronique Riouful, for example, argues in "Behind Telling: Post-Apartheid Representations of Robben Island's Past" that the museum's exhibits have favoured representations of the past that promote cohesion in the present.<sup>17</sup> She further suggests that the violence of life on Robben Island, the complicity of those who perpetuated that violence and the division among political prisoners has been downplayed in favour of a vision of Robben Island as a place of "great friendships and solidarity, outstanding moral strength, terrible hardships and challenges, fantastic achievements and victory at the end."<sup>18</sup> Rather than dispute Riouful's reading of Robben Island as a space in which a positive narrative of the country's struggle against oppression is showcased, I will build on her work by suggesting that this type of narrative was strongly encouraged by the ANC-led government during Mandela's presidency. Concerned about the omission of certain unpleasant aspects of life in the prison, Riouful is

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<sup>17</sup> Véronique Riouful, "Behind Telling: Post-Apartheid Representations of Robben Island's Past," *Kronos* 26 (2000): 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 27.

critical of the tendency toward the positive in the museum. The marginalisation of difficult and divisive memories of Robben Island, she argues, “hinders the process whereby contemporary South Africans and future generations can have a comprehensive knowledge and remembrance of the past, including painful and problematic memories.”<sup>19</sup> While I do not discount the veracity of these claims, I do not altogether agree with them. I will argue that during Mandela’s presidency factual truth and historical veracity were not as important as exploiting the unifying potential of the Robben Island heritage brand.

Riouful’s work on Robben Island is complemented by Noel Solani’s thesis, “Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum, 1997-1999.” A former employee, Solani argues that the museum was an explicit and important contributor to the nation-building project undertaken during Mandela’s presidency. From its inception in 1997, “as a Heritage site and a National Museum...it was aimed that it should become a ‘showcase of the new South African democracy.’”<sup>20</sup> Solani contends that the government intended to have the heritage sector in general and Robben Island Museum in particular participate in the wider nation-building process. While Solani’s thinking on this subject reflects my own, I intend to use his work primarily as a stepping stone for my own on the role of the museum curator and the means by which the public is encouraged to visit both District Six and Robben Island. Solani does not elaborate on his suggestion that the museum curator’s invisibility suggests an unmediated presentation of history. I will develop the concept that Robben Island Museum’s nation-building potential is maximised in the space where visitors believe that they are being presented with the “truth” about life in Robben Island Prison. This concept will also be useful in the section on the District Six Museum

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<sup>19</sup> Riouful, “Behind Telling,” 35.

<sup>20</sup> Noel L.Z Solani, “Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum, 1997-1999,” (M.A Thesis, University of Western Cape, 2000), 24.



and with specific reference to “Stan’s Walk,” a museum-sponsored walking tour of the former district, in which visitors are presented with only one authorised version of life in the area.

While both Riouful’s and Solani’s works were indispensable in the formulation of my own ideas about heritage in South Africa, perhaps the most exhaustive and complete work on the subject is Annie E. Coombes *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Coombes’ work, which explores many of South Africa’s monuments and museums, is the only extensive work that deals meaningfully with both District Six and Robben Island. While I support her central thesis that “visual and material manifestations of new public histories are both produced by and effectively inform changing definitions of community and nation during periods of political transition,”<sup>21</sup> I do not agree with some of her arguments. I disagree, for instance, with Coombes’ contention that, unlike Robben Island Museum, the District Six Museum is a space open to interpretation, and I will argue that the core memory guarded by the District Six Museum is an unchanging and unchallenged one despite the constant flux in detail.

In her examination of the collective memory of Robben Island, Coombes echoes what has already been argued by Riouful and Solani: that the overarching narrative is positive, optimistic, hopeful and ultimately white-washed. By contrast, District Six is not easily accommodated in the new South Africa because of its history as a predominantly Coloured working-class cosmopolitan area.<sup>22</sup> Coombes argues that it nevertheless “proposes nothing less than a utopian moment and, by implication, future.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the validity of her assertion here, Coombes does not then make the connection with the hope that is also displayed on Robben Island. Robben Island Museum also provides a utopian moment to its visitors, and yet Coombes

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<sup>21</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 118.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 126.

never links the two through the context in which they were both created and inaugurated. She fails to position her work in the context of Mandela's presidency, thus leaving its influence on the heritage sector in general and District Six and Robben Island Museums in particular totally obscured. It is in this space that I have situated my own work on heritage and memory in post-apartheid South Africa.

## **Chapter 1: “It is not the individuals that matter but the collective”: Nelson Mandela, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Creation of a Post-Apartheid Moment**

### **The Figure and Myth of Nelson Mandela**

The role of Nelson Mandela in South African history is central to a discussion of South African heritage in the post-apartheid period. As South Africa’s most important political prisoner, its first democratically elected president and the country’s most respected public figure, Mandela helped to promote heritage sites all over South Africa and was himself the focus of some of the most successful. Mandela’s status during the post-apartheid period is directly related to the pivotal role he played during the liberation struggle. From the Soweto Uprising in 1976 and through the years of high political and social tension in the 1980s, Mandela commanded a personal following among South Africans that went far beyond the number who claimed to support the African National Congress (ANC).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Mandela’s celebrity, and ultimately, his mythical status in the apartheid struggle, arose long before his imprisonment in 1964. It is therefore important to discuss the roots of Mandela’s place in South Africa, both as a freedom fighter and since 1994 as a politician and elder statesman.

Mandela spent more than twenty-seven years incarcerated as a political prisoner, first on Robben Island, then on the mainland, initially at Pollsmoor Prison and finally at Victor Verster, the prison from which he was released in February 1990. He first emerged as a national figure in 1952 when, as one of the organisers of the Defiance Campaign, Mandela encouraged black South Africans to engage in non-violent protest against petty apartheid laws that forced them to use separate and inferior amenities. A national symbol of the struggle thereafter, Mandela was a favoured target of the South African state. Forced underground in 1961, he founded *Umkhonto*

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<sup>24</sup> Tom Lodge, “Nelson Mandela: Political Saint for a New Democracy”, in Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives, eds. G. Cubitt & A. Warren, (New York: St-Martin’s Press, 2000), 248

*we Sizwe* (MK), the military wing of the ANC. A wanted fugitive, Mandela was dubbed “The Black Pimpernel” and became a media celebrity by issuing to newspapers statements criticising the government and sometimes even announcing impending MK acts of sabotage. Daily sightings of “The Black Pimpernel” were published in the burgeoning black press. Without the media, especially print media, in the early years of the anti-apartheid struggle, Mandela would not have become as widely known and respected. Through this coverage, however, Mandela did not only gain notoriety as a man but was transformed into a mythic character struggling against the forces of evil. While the press created the myth, Mandela was and continues to be cognizant of its potential influence. Indeed, Tom Lodge asserts that certain sections of Mandela’s autobiography “[are] a significant indication of Mandela’s own consciousness of inventing a public identity and acting out a heroic role.”<sup>25</sup>

Mandela was finally arrested in Johannesburg’s Rivonia suburb in 1963 and charged with high treason. In his political statement from the dock at what was known as the Rivonia Trial, Mandela solidified his heroic standing and gave substance to the burgeoning myth. He concluded his hour-long speech with the statement:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.<sup>26</sup>

One of the last public statements Mandela would make for twenty-seven years, his Rivonia Trial speech resonated with his followers. Willing to die to achieve freedom for all South Africans,

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<sup>25</sup> Lodge, “Nelson Mandela,” 244.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson Mandela, “I am Prepared to Die: Nelson Mandela’s Statement from the Dock at the Opening of the Defense Case in the Rivonia Trial,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1960s/rivonia.htm>, retrieved 27 March 2007).

Mandela secured his place as both the symbol of the struggle against apartheid and its mythical hero.

Mandela's tracts, writings, pictures and statements were banned after his imprisonment.

Lodge argues that this official bans created a context in which

public narratives were shaped by words and images that were available from the epic struggle which stretched from the Defiance Campaign to the Rivonia Trial, a few timeless and ageless texts and pictures which, as Rob Nixon<sup>27</sup> perceptively notes, kept 'circulating in a heraldic fashion perfect for the needs of an international political movement'.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, while secluded from public view for nearly three decades, the myth of Mandela grew, fuelled by countless retellings of his exploits underground and his willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the struggle. His reputation and the myth around which it was built went untarnished. Those accounts of his life that did emerge from Robben Island only served to strengthen the Mandela myth. In his autobiographical work, *Robben Island: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary*, Indres Naidoo, an ANC member incarcerated on Robben Island, describes how the myth was maintained in prison:

Comrade Mandela--with him you had no choice, you had to respect him. There was something about his large calm physical presence and that assured thoughtful manner that carried people along; his manner of always approaching problems in a correct way and guiding us in solving our day-to-day difficulties. We sensed his leadership even when he was not with us.<sup>29</sup>

The day that he was released, Mandela made an attempt to dispel the myth, announcing in a widely publicised statement: "I stand before you not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of

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<sup>27</sup> Rob Nixon is a South African journalist and scholar; this quote appears in an article entitled "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media" published in *Transition* in 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Lodge, "Nelson Mandela", 248.

<sup>29</sup> Indres Naidoo & Albie Sachs, *Robben Island: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 259.

you, the people.”<sup>30</sup> Ten years later, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, he continued to claim to have wanted to dismiss the myth surrounding him.<sup>31</sup> The publication of his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* in 1994, however, only reinforced the Mandela myth. A sweeping narrative that carries Mandela from his birth in 1918 into the royal Thembu household of the Transkei to his election as president of the Republic of South Africa in 1994, *Long Walk to Freedom* strengthens the image of him as a man of almost impossibly high principles. While Mandela’s autobiography certainly humanises him--the reader is confronted with a young Nelson’s awkward encounter with shoes, cutlery and women--the overarching narrative does less to challenge than to acknowledge and perpetuate the myth. *Long Walk to Freedom*, as Richard Stengel, Mandela’s ghost-writer suggests, “is a ‘mirror’ of the proud and graceful persona Mr. Mandela has crafted for himself.”<sup>32</sup> It is evident from Stengel’s comment that Mandela is conscious not only of how he is perceived in South Africa but also of how this perception might be used to further his post-apartheid political agenda.

Mandela’s exploitation of his own influence in South Africa is nowhere better evidenced than in his decision to publish *Long Walk to Freedom* in the first year of his presidency. His autobiography teems with the values that he wished his country to espouse, adopt and internalise. Mandela led by example; vignettes from his time on Robben Island Prison included in *Long Walk to Freedom* demonstrate the way in which he expected his fellow South Africans to approach life in the new democracy. I would argue further that Mandela used his autobiography to construct an image of the nation to which South Africans could turn in the uncertain period of transition from apartheid to democracy. Mandela’s autobiography was an excellent source of

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<sup>30</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Nelson Mandela’s Address to Rally in Cape Town on his Release from Prison,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1990/release.html>, retrieved 14 June 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Maryann Martin, “Throwing off the Yoke to Carry the Man: Deconstructing the Myth of Nelson Mandela,” *Topia* 12 (2004): 55.

<sup>32</sup> Lodge, “Nelson Mandela,” 242.

heritage for the new South Africa. In a vignette from his childhood at the Thembu royal court, Mandela reflects on how “democracy in its purest form”<sup>33</sup> was practiced by his uncle, the kingdom’s regent:

There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens.<sup>34</sup>

By relating his boyhood memory of how democracy was practiced in the Transkei, Mandela “offers a modernity which is not linear but cyclical”<sup>35</sup> and is “stressing the likeness of the past and present--”<sup>36</sup> something that Lowenthal argues is a common aim of heritage. Mandela’s earliest speeches as the president-elect of South Africa also included references to the necessity for reconciliation, unity and diversity in the new South Africa.

In a “victory” speech on 2 May 1994, after F.W de Klerk conceded the election and it became apparent that the ANC would form the country’s first democratically-elected government, Mandela claimed that “[i]t is not the individuals that matter but the collective.”<sup>37</sup> By sublimating the individual to the collective, Mandela downplayed his contribution and highlighted that of all of South Africa’s people to the struggle. In so doing, he was suggesting that apartheid could only have been overcome through the unity of all South Africans. This idea of a collective was further reflected in Mandela’s inauguration speeches from Cape Town on 9 May 1994, and in Pretoria on the following day. In Cape Town, Mandela proclaimed that the creation of a new social contract and a better South Africa would necessitate “unity of

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<sup>33</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, vol.1, (London: Abacus, 2002), 30

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Holden, “Other Modernities: National Autobiography and Globalization,” *Biography* 28 (2005): 99.

<sup>36</sup> Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Speech by Nelson Mandela Announcing the ANC Election Victory,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/sp940502.html> retrieved 9 May 2007).

purpose...It requires us all to work together to bring an end to suspicion and build a nation united in our diversity.”<sup>38</sup> Mandela’s Pretoria speech again highlighted the importance of unity of purpose among South Africa’s diverse peoples, as he invited all South Africans to “act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation-building, for the birth of a new world.”<sup>39</sup>

Mandela remained faithful to his vision of a unified and yet diverse South Africa as the cornerstone of his nation-building project. Thus, on the annual Heritage Day, when he addressed Parliament and in speeches given at unveilings of monuments to the memory of South Africa’s new heroes, Mandela reiterated the theme of diversity and unity, often using Desmond Tutu’s expression “rainbow nation” to describe his vision for South Africa. As South Africa’s most respected statesman, Mandela used his influence to create a post-apartheid moment in which the hope of the nation transcended its fear for the future. His rhetoric of reconciliation, unity and diversity marked every speech and every public appearance he made in the early years of his presidency. Using his personal popularity, Mandela encouraged his fellow South Africans to adopt his vision for the country as their own. Despite claiming that he wished to dismantle what was termed the “Mandela Myth,” Mandela understood the political currency of its perpetuation. Through *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela did not challenge his status as an epic hero by divulging his anxieties and doubts about the struggle and the transition to democracy. Instead, Mandela provided the nation with an account of his life that strengthened the image of himself as having always acted in the correct way, as having never lost faith in the cause and the country.

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Nelson Mandela’s Address to the People of Cape Town, Grand Parade, on the Occasion of his Inauguration as State President,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/inaugct.html> retrieved 9 May 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Statement of the President of the African National Congress Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela at his Inauguration as the President of the Democratic Republic of South Africa Union Buildings,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/inaugpta.html>, retrieved 9 May 2007).



Ultimately, Mandela provided the country with the beginning of a heritage, passing his own memory into the collective memory of the new nation.

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Despite his many references to nation-building, Mandela's encouragement of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was possibly his most important contribution to the project. The TRC, established by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, signed into law in 1995, constituted the cornerstone of Mandela and the ANC government's project of reconciliation and nation-building, and is undeniably South Africa's most important memory project. It is therefore vital to assess its influence on the national mindset and collective memory of South Africa's people. For more than two years, from April 1996 to July 1998, the TRC collected statements and depositions that had a deep effect on the country's psyche. The Commission consisted of three tribunals: one to hear cases on human rights violations, one for amnesty, and one for reparation and rehabilitation. Some of the human rights violations and amnesty hearings were held publicly; two thousand of the more than twenty thousand people who made submissions were invited to give their testimony in front of the TRC's commissioners and thus the wider public.<sup>40</sup> Hearings were held all over the country; testimonies were chosen by the Commission to reflect the race, gender and age characteristics of that particular location. In this manner, the Commission hoped that the testimonies that would be most widely disseminated would most closely resemble the audience's personal and individual memories of apartheid violence and oppression. It was believed that the audience, by recognising their own experience

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<sup>40</sup> Tanya Goodman, "Setting the Stage for a 'New' South Africa: A Cultural Approach to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 2004), 90.

in that of the individual giving his statement, would relate to the testimony in a more meaningful way.

The public hearing was thus, as Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson argue compellingly, the most powerful tool at the disposal of the TRC for the formation of common memories of apartheid. They suggest that public hearings

were the primary means for constructing collective memories of oppression and struggle, shaped by powerful epistemological myths about the primacy and authenticity of direct experience—‘seeing’—in recounting truth. The hearings were construed as opportunities to ‘uncover’ pristine uncorrupted truths about a past previously ‘hidden from history,’ by creating safe public spaces in which victims and survivors...could tell their stories directly and openly. Memory was rendered as merely a passive recollection of the past, rather than as a more active, selective remaking of it.<sup>41</sup>

Posel and Simpson here emphasise how testimonies were interpreted and internalised by the audience. The space in which individuals were invited to share their memories was constructed as unmediated and unbiased, and thus the testimonies heard in this space were misconstrued as objective renderings of South Africa’s apartheid past. I will return later, in my discussion of “Stan’s Walk” at the District Six Museum and Robben Island Museum’s guided tours, to this idea that public acts of remembering, whether at the TRC or in South Africa’s museums, are considered objective and unbiased by the audience.

Posel and Simpson, however, also point to the importance of public remembering. The public hearing was indeed the “primary means for constructing collective memories.” As such, it was the most important space in post-apartheid South Africa for the creation of a collective memory of apartheid. Understanding this, the TRC’s commissioners exploited the potential of the public hearing. Open to the general public and broadcast live on television, a point to which I

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<sup>41</sup> D. Posel & G. Simpson, “The Power of Truth: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Context,” in Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, eds. D. Posel & G. Simpson, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), 7.

will return later, the chairman of the Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, heard individuals describe specific acts of violence in sometimes excruciating detail but consistently made an effort to relate such testimony to the violence that the audience had also experienced. Countless South Africans could identify with those few invited to give a public statement. The Commission's chairman often "acknowledged the individual stories but then wrapped all the participants into a universal embrace, making space for all in the vision of the future."<sup>42</sup> The chairman thus not only recognised that all South Africans were victimised by apartheid, but also encouraged citizens to embrace their victimisation and in the ultimate act of remembering, empathise with the victim and the country as a whole. As the individual was asked to remember, so too was the nation. There was therefore a layering of memory in this public testimony: first the individual was asked to remember specific details. These details were then subsumed in the wider narrative, marginalised in what was now considered more important: the national memory. These individual memories became national memories, memories the population was encouraged to embrace as emblematic of their own.

This process was a direct reflection of the ANC's desire that the TRC should begin the creation of a national collective memory of apartheid. Collective memory, as defined by Heribert and Kanya Adam, "constitutes the informal, widely accepted perceptions of past events in which the collective identity of a people is mirrored."<sup>43</sup> Wiseman Chirwa further develops this definition by arguing that collective memories "must have historical and emotional relevance, connecting seemingly discrete events in a cause-and-effect manner."<sup>44</sup> As Adam and Adam point

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<sup>42</sup> Goodman, "Setting the Stage," 115.

<sup>43</sup> Heribert Adam & Kanya Adam, "The Politics of Memory in Divided Societies," in After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, eds. W. James & L. Van de Vijver, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001), 32.

<sup>44</sup> Wiseman Chirwa, "Collective Memory and the Process of Reconciliation and Reconstruction", Development in Practice 7 (1997): 482.

out, shared memories are a necessary aspect of shared identities; and as Chirwa elaborates, for these memories to be effective in the creation of a shared identity, they necessarily have to illicit an emotional response. Chirwa concludes that it is through this process that the collective memory of an event or period becomes part of the process of healing, reconciliation and reconstruction, both individually and communally.<sup>45</sup> This process of creating collective memories, a feature of many of the world's truth commissions, lay at the heart of the TRC. Deputy Chairperson Alex Boraine, at a conference addressing the role of the media in the TRC, claimed that "South Africans desperately need to create a common memory."<sup>46</sup> The TRC provided the first opportunity for the whole country, historically divided by race, language, culture, class and geography, to come together to forge a collective, national memory of the most painful aspect of their shared past.

In part through the universalisation of individual memories during public hearings but also through its very structure, the TRC created an official memory of apartheid. The commission, however, also created an official memory of apartheid through blatant omission. Truth commissions, Richard A. Wilson argues, "like all nation-building processes, construct a revised national history."<sup>47</sup> Omissions were perhaps best documented in the TRC's amnesty hearings. In order to receive amnesty for crimes committed between 1 March 1960 and 1 December 1993, applicants not only had to give full disclosure of their crimes but also had to provide proof that these crimes were politically motivated. Perpetrators who exhibited personal remorse when giving their testimonies opened themselves up to prosecution for failing to

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<sup>45</sup> Chirwa, "Collective Memory," 482.

<sup>46</sup> Anthea Garman, "Media Dealing with the Past Seminar," (Unpublished Document, 29 November 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Richard A. Wilson, The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14.

demonstrate the political nature of their crimes.<sup>48</sup> By forcing perpetrators to describe the political motivations of their acts, the commission necessarily removed responsibility for crimes from those who committed them and shifted it to the wider apartheid system. This cultivated the sentiment among some participants and certainly among the ANC political elite that perpetrators should be forgiven because, as one victim claimed, “they were tools of the evil system which is Apartheid.”<sup>49</sup> Removing personal responsibility for acts committed during the apartheid era also shifted accountability away from the wider population for whom these crimes were supposedly committed. The “carefully calculated avoidance”<sup>50</sup> of responsibility in South Africa’s white population for human rights violations committed during apartheid was now absolved by the TRC.

The official memory of apartheid created at the TRC illustrates how what is officially remembered is often as important as what is omitted and thus forgotten. By divesting the white minority of its responsibility and complicity in apartheid, the TRC encouraged the idea, in the name of nation-building, that all South Africans were oppressed by an evil system. In reality, however, not everyone was a victim. Many whites actively supported the policy of apartheid, and proved it by voting in increasingly majorities for the NP;<sup>51</sup> in 1994, even previously liberal white constituencies, fearing the African-dominated ANC, voted for the Nats.<sup>52</sup> National remembering in this context was thus also a national forgetting, still further shaped by the Commission’s refusal to subpoena the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) leader Chief Buthelezi or the records of the South African Defense Force (SADF), both of whom played pivotal roles during the transitional

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<sup>48</sup> Goodman, “Setting the Stage,” 99.

<sup>49</sup> Goodman, “Setting the Stage,” 100.

<sup>50</sup> Kader Asmal et.al., Reconciliation through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid’s Criminal Governance, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), 144.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 148.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 166.

period. According to Janet Cherry, John Daniel and Madeleine Fullard, who worked as researchers for the TRC, these exclusions were purposeful, reflecting the belief of some of the commissioners that “there were times when too much truth could imperil the goals of national unity and reconciliation.”<sup>53</sup> Regardless of responsibility, both sides of the struggle had to be accommodated in the new South Africa if the nation-building project was to have the support of all of South Africa’s people.

### **The TRC and the Media**

The media perhaps most contributed to the national forgetting that took place during the operating years of the TRC. Indeed, the media, as Gross argues in *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*, “now have the greatest say in how the past is framed.”<sup>54</sup> Given their impact on the formation of collective memory, the media was indispensable to the proceedings of the TRC. Mandela and the ANC government, aware of the power of the media and eager to provide a way for the whole country to participate in the proceedings, encouraged the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to broadcast the TRC’s public hearings live. Mandela acknowledged the media’s important role at the TRC when he was given the Commission’s interim report in October 1998, claiming that they allowed it to become a “truly national process.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the cooperation of the media was essential to any national healing begun by the TRC. The media made small public hearings--the country’s most important space for the creation of collective memory--into national events to which virtually all South Africans

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<sup>53</sup> Janet Cherry et.al., “Researching the ‘Truth’: A View from Inside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, in *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, eds. D. Posel & G. Simpson, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), 26.

<sup>54</sup> Gross, *Lost Time*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Statement by President Mandela on Receiving the Report of the TRC”, (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1998/nm1029.htm>, retrieved 10 May 2007).

could assist. The TRC's "role of forging a common national history of the apartheid era," argues Ron Krabill, "would [have been] impossible without the mass media's ability to disseminate [its] work."<sup>56</sup> The media, able to diffuse the proceedings in real time and then again in edited clips for broadcast news, made the TRC into a national event. Wilson, discussing the TRC's importance in South Africa between 1996 and 1998, writes that "[f]or two years, in the historical moment that the fledgling 'new South Africa' was born, the TRC's hearings became national rituals of reconciliation, forgiveness and truth-telling."<sup>57</sup> In addition to providing a window through which the country could witness the creation of the memory of its past, the media also repackaged the TRC's proceedings for those who could not watch it live. Many South Africans relied on evening and weekly reports, inevitably condensed to fit in the allotted time. The media therefore had tremendous influence over what would or would not be rebroadcast in the daily and weekly recaps, contributing significantly to their self-perception as contributors to the nation-building project.

The media thus possessed an inordinate power over what its audience would think was imperative to remember and acceptable to forget about apartheid. Journalists did not file objective reports; they instead reported on elements that heightened the sense of a shared bond between witness and audience, and thus the various segments of the national community. The day's testimonies were condensed to elicit the greatest sympathy from viewers in an effort to create a sense of belonging to the wider whole. Those witnesses who exhibited an excessive amount of bitterness and rancour and testimonies in which witnesses accused or blamed specific individuals for their suffering were cut from rebroadcast clips of daily hearings as potentially divisive material. Purposefully edited testimonies of TRC witnesses reflect what Gross notes in

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<sup>56</sup> Ron Krabill, "Symbiosis: Mass Media and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa," Media, Culture and Society 23(2001): 568.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, Politics of Truth, 98.

*Lost Time*: that the media “have come to exert the greatest influence on what people think worthy of being remembered and what they think is permissible to forget.”<sup>58</sup>

In South Africa during the TRC, the government used the influence of the media to its advantage. By encouraging SABC coverage of the proceedings, the government endorsed these edited versions of testimonies and, by extension, also the media’s omissions. Mandela’s government cultivated a context in which journalists no longer perceived their role as objective purveyors of information but rather perceived themselves to be active participants in the process of nation-building. Media objectivity was consciously rejected during the years that the TRC operated in favour of “an active role in interpretation, introspection and interjection,”<sup>59</sup> a decision that allowed journalists themselves to experience the TRC as citizens marked by the existence and death of apartheid. Max Du Preez, when commenting on the importance of *TRC Special Report*, a weekly show broadcast by the SABC devoted exclusively to reporting on the TRC, said: “We make very sure that we are fair and balanced, but we are up-front that we are not objective.”<sup>60</sup> During the TRC’s deliberations, audiences were provided reports that highlighted a hopeful, reconciliatory message and underlined the new memory of apartheid being promoted by the Commission’s chairpeople. The nationally broadcast segments, in addition to *TRC Special Report*, diffused this official memory to the widest possible audience.

The media was an important part of the government’s ability to create a memory of apartheid and in turn begin the process of nation-building through the TRC. The ANC actively encouraged the media’s presence at public hearings, fulfilling a desire to keep the proceedings public and accessible. Thus the Truth and Reconciliation Commission became a “media event”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Gross, *Lost Time*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Goodman, “Setting the Stage,” 132.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 133.

<sup>61</sup> Krabill, “Symbiosis,” 569.



in South Africa. In contemporary society most media events are events of state: state funerals, royal weddings and addresses to the nation by its leader. In what Krabill calls “fractured societies,” divided by war or loss, media events provide “a moment of common experience that transcends the daily divergence” of individual lives.<sup>62</sup> In this context, the TRC provided a starting point from which the people of South Africa could be forged into a nation. During those hours many South Africans were engaged in a common activity, one that elicited “a renewal of loyalty to...society and its legitimate authority through” collective experience.<sup>63</sup> Testimonies by witnesses often bearing the physical scars of their brush with the apartheid state were meant to create a sense of national community in which the audience could relate (some for the first time) with other South Africans. This “awakening to a shared bond” between both the audience present at the public hearing and those watching at home, however fleeting that bond might have been, was often emphasised in media reports of the hearings.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, journalists were encouraged not only to reflect on the proceedings of the TRC but to “frame their stories within the master narrative of reconciliation and the vision of founding a new nation.”<sup>65</sup>

Ultimately the TRC created a moment in which South Africa could come together as a country and begin the process of becoming a nation. Mandela’s efforts to engender national feeling among South Africa’s disparate peoples (if only sustained during the short years in which the TRC operated) were a success. If Mandela and the TRC did not succeed in sustaining this national feeling among South Africans, Mandela did create context in which the heritage sector if not accepted, then adopted his vision for the country. According to Grunebaum-Ralph, the nascent South African heritage industry adopted the new ethos and committed itself to projects

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<sup>62</sup> Krabill, “Symbiosis,” 570.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 570.

<sup>64</sup> Goodman, “Setting the Stage,” 87.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 132.

that highlighted Mandela's commitment to reconciliation, unity, diversity and the building of a South African nation.

## **Chapter 2: ‘A unity in diversity:’ Individual and Collective Memory and the National Significance of District Six**

During the apartheid era, District Six was an important memory space for the millions of people dispossessed by the Group Areas Act (1950). Forced removals of non-whites, which started in the 1950s and ended in District Six in 1981, affected all of South Africa’s urban, cosmopolitan areas. It destroyed multicultural communities such as Cato Manor in Durban, and Sophiatown in Johannesburg, an area which was replaced by a whites-only neighbourhood that totally eliminated the visual memory of the successful, vibrant multicultural community which had once flourished there. Under apartheid, District Six emerged as a metonymic<sup>66</sup> for all those South Africans affected by forced removals. “The name ‘District Six,’” argues Ingrid De Kok, “signified for years apartheid’s savage attack on family life and its ruthless destruction of the fabric of functioning communities.”<sup>67</sup> The district’s national recognisability during the apartheid era continued into the post-apartheid period of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, and was institutionalised by the creation of the District Six Museum in 1994.

### **The District Six Museum**

The museum is located on Buitenkant Street in the former Central Methodist Church at the heart of what was formerly District Six. The site was chosen because it was one of only a few buildings from the area that remained and because it had once been used as a sanctuary for political opponents and victims of apartheid. It was therefore significant to a large part of the former population as a marker of resistance to the regime. The museum project was the result of the “Hands of District Six” campaign launched in the late 1980s, started in part to prevent the

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<sup>66</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 121.

<sup>67</sup> Ingrid De Kok, “Cracked Heirlooms: Memories on Exhibition,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. S. Nuttall & C. Coetzee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64.

district's redevelopment by British Petroleum (BP) as South Africa's first open residential area.<sup>68</sup> The District Six Foundation was created in 1989, and the museum opened on 10 December 1994 only seven months after Mandela's inauguration. The museum's first priority was its former residents<sup>69</sup> and, despite its obvious national relevance when considering the number of communities that were dismantled as a result of the Group Areas' Act, it was never recognised by Mandela's government as a national institution. Nevertheless, through its exhibitions, collections and "Stan's Walk," a museum-sponsored walking tour of the former district, the museum reflected the new dispensation's rhetoric of unity and diversity. District Six Museum is important in South African memory studies, moreover, because it was entirely the creation of the district's former inhabitants and their memories of the area before its demolition. In this regard, a discussion of District Six is also a discussion of trauma, the importance of the present on the formulation and expression of memories of the past and the nostalgic impulse that is its result.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, District Six, which extended from Table Bay harbour into the foothills of Table Mountain, and from the commercial centre of the city to the edge of the suburbs, was a predominantly working-class area, impoverished and overcrowded, and "woefully neglected by the Cape Town Municipality."<sup>70</sup> It was heterogeneous from its earliest beginnings, its population including Cape Coloureds, Malay Muslims, and members of various African ethnicities from the interior of the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, after an outbreak of bubonic plague, District Six's African residents were moved to Uitvlugt (later known as Ndabeni) on the Cape Flats in what was the country's first urban

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<sup>68</sup> Martin Hall, "Cape Town's District Six and the Archaeology of Memory," in Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property, eds. R. Layton et.al., (New York: Routledge, 2001), 300.

<sup>69</sup> Charmaine McEachern, "Mapping the Memories: Politics, Place and Identity in the District Six Museum, Cape Town," Social Identities, 4(1998): 506.

<sup>70</sup> Vivian Bickford-Smith, "The Origins and Early History of District Six to 1910," in The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present, eds. S. Jeppie & C. Soudien, 35-43. (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990.), 35.

African township. Later groups to settle in District Six included a small number of other Africans, Italian and Portuguese immigrants, Levantine, Russian and Polish Jews, poor immigrants from Britain and Australia, Indians from Durban and a few Chinese. The majority of District Six's residents, however, were Coloured.

Despite this long history as a place of cultural interaction and amalgamation, District Six Museum's inaugural exhibition *Streets* in 1994 focused almost exclusively on the 1940s and 1950s. While this is not altogether unsurprising considering that the museum's collection was largely based on the living memories of its former residents, the erosion of its earlier history is questionable as it is rife with examples of ethnic and cultural segregation, a legacy hardly addressed in the museum's exhibitions. Africans tended to live close to one another, Jews formed their own trade unions, and Malays sang in their own choirs and bands. Indeed, the removal of District Six's African residents in 1901 was met "with a passivity that exposed class and ethnic divisions among District Sixers."<sup>71</sup> Vivian Bickford-Smith suggests, moreover, that District Six was divided by a "hierarchy of pigmentation" where those with lighter skin tended to receive better wages and thus live in better conditions than those with darker complexions.<sup>72</sup> As Cape Town was a commercial rather than an industrial centre, most locally available work for Coloureds and Africans was in the harbour where demand was largely for seasonal and casual labour. By contrast, most poor whites, Indians and Malays engaged in relatively secure and lucrative commercial activities, as merchants, shop owners or in skilled trades.

This alternate vision of District Six, as an area characterised by racial difference and a class hierarchy, was not reflected in the narrative of the museum's collection between 1994 and 1999. The museum eschewed this earlier history in favour of the living memory of former

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<sup>71</sup> Alessandro Angelini, "Spaces of Good Hope: Inscribing Memory, Territory and Urbanity in District Six, Cape Town," *Dark Roast Occasional Paper Series* 13 (2003): 5.

<sup>72</sup> Bickford-Smith, "Origins and Early History," 37.

residents which portrayed the area as a place where various religions, cultures and ethnicities lived in harmony. This is problematic for several reasons. Most of the returning residents to District Six during Mandela's term in office were Coloured. They represented the vast majority of the area's residents at the time of the Group Areas' Proclamation in 1966--less than one thousand residents were classified as other than Coloured<sup>73</sup> that year. The memory of District Six subsequently institutionalised by the museum is based largely on the remembrances of this community. This obscures the recollections of the area's other residents, calling into question the likelihood that a Coloured representation of District Six reflects how non-Coloured residents would represent it. Indeed, Dullah Omar, Mandela's Justice Minister, complained that the result is a "distortion of history"<sup>74</sup> where the African voice is only notable through its absence. Coloured returnees were remembering what District Six meant for their community rather than the community as a whole. Based on anecdotal evidence mostly drawn from a single source, the characterisation of District Six constitutes a romanticisation of the area's history during the 1940s and 1950s.

*Streets*, the museum's inaugural exhibition, was opened by Omar, in December 1994. Initially planned to run for a few weeks, *Streets* dominated the museum's space for the next four years.<sup>75</sup> The exhibition used the district's original signage which had been clandestinely preserved by David Elrick, the supervisor responsible for the area's demolition. The exhibit was designed and implemented by former District Six resident and Robben Island survivor Lionel Davis and included a map of the former district and several calico cloths that residents signed and inscribed with their own memories of life in the area. The cloths, which were incorporated

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<sup>73</sup> Hall, "Cape Town's District Six and the Archaeology of Memory," 299.

<sup>74</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 141.

<sup>75</sup> Ciraj Rassool, "Introduction: Recalling Community in Cape Town," in *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum*, eds. C. Rassool & S. Prosalendis (Cape Town: District Six Museum Foundation, 2001), vii.

into the permanent exhibition, and the map, constituted the museum's most important artefacts. The map, which covered the museum's entire floor, was made of heavy paper, covered in plastic, and decorated around the edges with poems about life in the district and linocut scenes from Davis' memories of the area.<sup>76</sup> Former residents could, moreover, rebuild the district as they remembered it by writing their names and addresses on the map. More importantly, former residents filled the map and the cloths with comments, descriptions, stories, poems and memories, thus rebuilding the spirit of the community. De Kok notes that these secondary inscriptions on the map and cloths, inscriptions that move beyond name and address, are a form of writing back to the apartheid regime: "the official script is thus thrown off," she writes, "and replaced with a denser, fuller account."<sup>77</sup> Through these tangible acts of remembrance, former residents re-appropriated their right to remember the district as a positive rather than a negative space, itself a form of writing back to the apartheid government's desire to destroy the physical and ephemeral memory of District Six's existence.

Centering initially on these artefacts, the museum provided a place of both meeting and contention, where former residents could reminisce about the district and correct each other's recollections. Thus the history was in constant motion, as more residents returned, some from abroad but most from the surrounding townships, to visit the museum and add their own memories to the map. Despite contention about certain details, the overarching narrative that the amalgamation of memories had created was never questioned. Residents would argue about who had lived where and for how long, who had lived next to them and when they had moved away, but never about the fundamental characterisation of District Six as a functioning, harmonious multicultural community. Returning former residents were largely self-selecting, mostly

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<sup>76</sup> Charmaine McEachern, "Working with Memory: The District Six Museum in the New South Africa," Social Analysis 42 (1998): 53.

<sup>77</sup> De Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms," 66.

Coloured, and already certain that the romantic version of District Six which they had carried with them since their forced removal from the area had been the reality. The absence of critical comments on the calico cloths illustrates that those who did not agree with the official memory being created in the converted church simply did not return to visit and correct it.

In addition to the map and cloths, the museum created a walking tour of the former district. The overall narrative of this walk, which centres on the vibrancy and cohesion of a multicultural and multiracial rather than ethnically divided community, was in keeping with the rhetoric of reconciliation, unity and diversity that characterised Mandela's presidency. Stan Abrahams, who grew up in District Six and lived at 7 De Villiers Street until the 1970s, created this tour, known simply as "Stan's Walk," as a way in which to personalise and humanise the area for its visitors. "Stan's Walk" is an example of how South African heritage and its cultural analysts seek "to recover the intimacies, reciprocities, and exchanges of language, culture, and religion that have always been at play in South African human formations."<sup>78</sup> Given District Six's history as a cosmopolitan, multicultural space, it is not surprising that "Stan's Walk" provides a nostalgic glimpse of interactions and intimacies between the area's diverse peoples.

The walk begins on the steps of the District Six Museum on Buitenkant Street. Here Abrahams tells the participant that the tour is based on his view of District Six and that his aim in establishing the walk was to "recreate the District Six that I knew,"<sup>79</sup> implying that there are other interpretations of life in the area. Ultimately, however, as the only one endorsed by the museum, the tour is interpreted by the visitor as the "truth" of life in District Six before its destruction. Like *Cell Stories* on Robben Island, an exhibition in which the cells of the Rivonia

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<sup>78</sup> David Chidester, "Indigenous Traditions, Alien Abductions: Creolized and Globalized Memory in South Africa," In *Religion, Violence, Memory and Place*, eds. O.B Steir & J.S Landres, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana State University Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>79</sup> Stan Abrahams, "Stan Abrahams' Walk through District Six," (<http://www.districtsix.co.za/frames.html>, retrieved 31 May 2007).



Trialists are equipped with audio of their reflections on their time in prison, “Stan’s Walk” lends an air of authenticity to the memories being presented. Here, I disagree with Coombes’ assertion that “Stan’s Walk” exemplifies the complexity of memory at the District Six Museum. While she maintains that “Stan’s Walk” “makes us aware that this is one view among many; it might well be shared but it could equally be very different,”<sup>80</sup> the museum fails to offer an alternative tour that highlights a different District Six.

By including personal memories and anecdotes about District Six--he points out Peninsula Maternity Home, where he was born; Gordon Primary School, where he went to elementary school; and the corner shop, where on Fridays he and his brothers spent their pocket money at the soda fountain--Abrahams revives District Six for the participant. This is important in a space that has been destroyed, where the only original buildings are on sacred ground and where the remainder of the area is undeveloped. Abrahams then universalises his experience through references to events or locations that touched many of the district’s former residents. In the frame of his primary school, for example, Abrahams emphasises that twelve different schools serviced the community. More tellingly, however, in the frame for the Peninsula Maternity Home, Abrahams notes that “thousands of Cape babies were born here every year.”<sup>81</sup> The implication in this frame is that babies of all colours were born in Peninsula Maternity Home, a recognition that District Six did not share the apartheid-era’s racial apprehensions.

In addition to these frames, “Stan’s Walk” features several memories of the former area that reflect its multiculturalism and ultimately the rhetoric of Mandela’s presidency. On Harrington Street, the participant is told that this was the Jewish Quarter, just as Beikinstadt Book Sellers is mentioned to have been owned by Lithuanian immigrants. On Vernon Terrace,

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<sup>80</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 133.

<sup>81</sup> Stan Abrahams, “Stan Abrahams’ Walk Through District Six,” (<http://www.districtsix.co.za/walk/frames.html> retrieved 31 May 2007).

walkers are encouraged to notice the palm trees which were planted from seeds that had been brought back from Mecca by District Six's *hajjis*. Abrahams is also careful to include Bloemhof Flats on the tour, a housing development built in the 1930s and which he claims was "known for [its] large and vibrant community."<sup>82</sup> In an effort to give visual life to the tour, certain frames of the walk posted on the website are accompanied by photographs. In the image that accompanies the Bloemhof Flats frame, Abrahams has included an image of District Six's multicultural community in which White and Coloured children laugh together. This frame of the children in the 1940s and 1950s borrows heavily from the government's national discourse on the rainbow nation and is the embodiment of Mandela and his government's rhetoric in the 1990s.

### **The Destruction of District Six**

The District Six remembered in the museum, and especially by Abrahams in "Stan's Walk," in which the various ethnicities lived together, was destroyed by the Group Areas' Proclamation when the area was declared whites' only. In keeping with the provisions of the Group Areas' Act and the apartheid government's racial apprehensions, the forced removal of District Six's residents began in 1966. De Kok describes how "chillingly logical" the destruction of District Six was. She writes:

[F]irst the occupations of the residents are deleted, so that there is no sense of economic activity at all. Then the names of the residents become fewer and fewer and then, as the houses are demolished, even street names are no longer recorded. By the end it is as if nobody had ever lived in District Six.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately the state wanted to eliminate not only mixed communities but the very memory of those communities, as they represented "nonracial, cosmopolitan living, everything the apartheid

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<sup>82</sup> Stan Abrahams, "Stan's Abrahams' Walk through District Six," (<http://www.districtsix.co.za/walk/index.html> retrieved 31 May 2007).

<sup>83</sup> De Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms," 65.

regime feared.”<sup>84</sup> By the time relocations had ended in 1981, between 55 000 and 65 000 people had been removed from District Six.<sup>85</sup>

Residents were relocated systematically according to their colour classification under the Population Registration Act. Africans were removed to informal settlements in Kensington, Langa and Ndabeni; Coloureds were relocated to new settlements hastily established on sandy lots on the Cape Flats. Located at significant removes from Cape Town, townships were inconveniently distant from places of work in the city. Forced removals, however, not only involved removal from a physical space but from a social space as well as many neighbourhoods were permanently fractured. There was, as Duncan Innes suggests in his work on the Coloured township of Ocean View in the 1970s, “a major social upheaval” among displaced South Africans.<sup>86</sup> Community relations, norms and customs that had been cultivated over decades among the residents of District Six were not easily transplanted to the new locations. Where once whole families lived on the same street in the district, after the forced removals and relocations, families might be scattered among many different townships. Charmaine McEachern cites the example of Hettie Adams, a Coloured resident of District Six, whose extended family was moved to no fewer than five separate townships.<sup>87</sup> Even those who were moved to the same townships as their extended families were, experienced “weakened...structures of support” among their remaining family and friends.<sup>88</sup> The Cape Flats thus represented a shift away from the familiar and the comfortable, away from the working social relations of the former community. Rather than the communal living of District Six, where some residents recall “how

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<sup>84</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 117

<sup>85</sup> Ibid 121.

<sup>86</sup> Duncan Innes, *Disqualified: A Study of the Uprooting of the Coloured People in South Africa*, (London: Africa Publications, 1975), 26.

<sup>87</sup> McEachern, “Working with Memory,” 51.

<sup>88</sup> Innes, *Disqualified*, 26.

they would enter each other's houses without asking,"<sup>89</sup> residents relocated to the Cape Flats lived insulated lives in which they did not know their neighbours, where they retreated into their houses and where ultimately they shrunk away from the community in its entirety.<sup>90</sup>

The trauma of relocation from one area in which the residents felt a "sense of belonging"<sup>91</sup> to the isolation, squalor, neglect and crime that characterised the new Cape Flats townships significantly shaped the memory of District Six in the minds of its former residents. The forced removal from their homes and the subsequent destruction of recognised social structures and relations had a significant impact on how former residents of District Six remembered the area upon their return to it in the early 1990s. As early as 1975 when Innes visited Ocean View, he noted the sense of romanticised memory of the areas from which residents had been forcibly removed. "There is," he writes, "a constant tendency to refer back to the past, to romanticise it often beyond what it really was."<sup>92</sup> In large part, this inclination to glorify the past can be explained as a psychological response to the trauma of forced removal, the extreme violence in South Africa after the institution of the State of Emergency in 1985, the political uncertainty after Mandela's release from prison in 1990, the transition to democracy in 1994 and the place of the Coloured community under the new dispensation. Stéphane Leman-Langlois notes that the most tumultuous period in South African history came between 1991 and 1993 during constitutional negotiations between the ANC and the National Party government, then under F.W de Klerk. Factional fighting, murders and reprisals were daily occurrences as the various national political parties attempted to gain support in the townships. The SADF continued to terrorise the African population, and in certain cases the De Klerk government

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<sup>89</sup> McEachern, "Working with Memory," 57.

<sup>90</sup> McEachern, "Mapping the Memories," 512.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Rive, "District Six: Fact or Fiction," in *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*, eds. S. Jeppie & C. Soudien, (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990), 112.

<sup>92</sup> Innes, *Disqualified*, 26

stood accused of fomenting violence among the various ethnic groups. A fear that the constitutional negotiations would fail, that the state would dissolve and a full-scale civil war would emerge created a deep sense of uncertainty in South Africa after Mandela's release in 1990. In the townships, the hope engendered by Mandela's release dissipated as factional violence was added to the already rampant quotidian violence that existed in the townships. This new violence, politically motivated and shocking in its brutality--this was the era of neck-lacing, a practice in which a burning tire was thrown around the neck of its victim--only served to further heighten the tension among South Africans.

For South Africa's Coloureds, concentrated in Western Cape Province, this violence compounded the sense of alienation in their new townships as it signalled the end of their privileged status under apartheid and the beginning of a new era of uncertainty about their position in the coming order. While the Group Areas Act had destroyed many Coloured communities, apartheid policies also worked to advantage Coloureds over Africans. Thus, while the freedom of the new dispensation provided the space in which former residents of District Six could return to their former community, many had voted for the National Party in the elections of 1994. While the Coloureds had experienced apartheid's racism, they were far better treated than their African counterparts, enjoying a relatively privileged position. During the campaign that preceded the elections in 1994, this relative advantage compared to the country's Africans was exploited by the National Party as a way in which to garner votes from the Coloured population. The NP circulated a comic strip in the run-up to the election in which a Coloured son asks his father what the NP has done for them. In response the father claims he has a reasonable income and that the son is in university. In contrast, the cartoon "is filled with images of apparently

unemployed African people sitting beside decrepit shacks in abject poverty.”<sup>93</sup> As Courtney Jung argues in her explanation of the comic strip:

The subtext of this widely disseminated message was that the NP had taken care of Coloured people and treated them well compared with Africans. The Coloureds’ relative advantage was suddenly threatened by the end of apartheid and imminent African rule.<sup>94</sup>

The election of the NP in the Western Cape, in which the Coloured community formed a significant portion of the population, reflected the success of this rhetoric among the Cape Coloured. William Beinart argues that the NP’s success at defining itself to the Coloured community “as the party of security, safety, property and homeownership,”<sup>95</sup> was important in the NP’s victory in the Western Cape in 1994. This redefinition contrasted with the association of the ANC with “the demands and interests of the vast African informal settlements on the Cape Flats, and with the violence and disruption of the early 1990s,” and by the definition of “the ANC as the party of toyi-toying squatters and youth,”<sup>96</sup> a characterisation that ultimately served to racialise voting in the Western Cape, pitting Colouredness against Blackness.

Coloured social services had been better under apartheid, standards of living had been higher and governmental monetary supplements more generous than those provided black South Africans. Under the new dispensation, the preferential treatment shown the Coloured population through subsidies and the apartheid government’s willingness to provide electricity and water to their communities ended and the Coloured population no longer benefited from its status as Coloured. Mohamed Adhikari suggests that Coloureds were worse off in 2004 than they had

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<sup>93</sup> Courtney Jung, *Then I was Black: South African Political Identities in Transition*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 202.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 292.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

been in 1990 when the political transition began.<sup>97</sup> In this regard, then, the enfranchisement of the African majority in part disenfranchised the Coloured minority as all apartheid-era subsidies ended under the new dispensation. “The Coloured community,” Adhikari argues, “especially the working classes, see themselves as having gained little, if any, tangible benefit from the new dispensation.”<sup>98</sup>

This economic uncertainty during the political transition and throughout Mandela’s presidency was accompanied by an uncertainty in the Coloured community of their social position in the new South Africa. The working classes especially found that the transition to democracy did not give way to a democracy in which they felt valorised in the new vision of a united yet diverse nation. Rather than embracing the new rhetoric, many working-class Coloureds continued to “adhere to a racialised conception of Colouredness with strong affinities to whiteness and a defensive racism toward Africans.”<sup>99</sup> A sense of marginalisation in their own country as their apartheid-era benefits eroded and as many employers scrambled to hire black Africans created a sense of uncertainty in the Coloured community under Mandela’s presidency. As Adhikari argues “[r]ainbow nationalism has proven to be an arid ideology that is long on rhetoric.”<sup>100</sup> This marginalisation in the present and sense of uncertainty for the future had a significant impact on the memories former residents chose to pass into the collective memory of the District Six Museum. Symbolising a time in which they last felt a sense of belonging, former residents romanticised their memories of the area.

Given the trauma and uncertainty in the lives of District Six’s former residents, nostalgia played an important role in the formation of the official memory of the museum. Remembering

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<sup>97</sup> Mohamed Adhikari, “‘Not Black Enough’: Changing Expressions of Coloured Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *South African Historical Journal* 51 (2004): 172.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid 171.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid 170.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid 176.

the past, as James Fentriss and Chris Wickham emphasise, is significantly influenced by the present as “individuals invent or redefine the past to fit the present.”<sup>101</sup> Maurice Halbwachs argues that this is also demonstrated in collective remembering. According to him, “collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, which adapts the image of old facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present.”<sup>102</sup> The present of the Coloured community in the 1990s was marked by a sense that it did not belong in the new South Africa, that “rainbow nationalism...[was] long on rhetoric but short on practical solutions to racially defined problems.”<sup>103</sup> Former residents then, returned to the space in which they last experienced a sense of belonging in South Africa, and imbued that space with memories and recollections that exemplified that sense of belonging. Janelle L. Wilson argues that “[e]xpressing and experiencing nostalgia require active reconstruction of the past—active selection of what to remember and what to forget.”<sup>104</sup>

This tendency was clearly in evidence at the District Six Museum among former residents who returned to remember the district. Many who were experiencing post-apartheid urban violence recalled crime in District Six nostalgically as having existed within an acceptable social framework. They recalled mobsters, dressed in suits like American gangsters, who were discrete about their illegal activities and who walked midwives home in the middle of the night. This was in contrast to the violence they were actually experiencing in the Coloured townships in which gangs were “notorious for violent bloody deeds that include[d] severe physical assault, murder

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<sup>101</sup> James Pennebaker & Becky L. Banasik, “On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology,” in Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives, eds. J.W. Pennebaker, et.al., (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence, Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997), 6.

<sup>102</sup> Dario Paez et.al., “Social Processes and Collective Memory: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Remembering Political Events,” in Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives, eds. J.W. Pennebaker et.al., (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence, Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997), 15.

<sup>103</sup> Adhikari, “Not black enough,” 176.

<sup>104</sup> Janelle L. Wilson, Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 25.



and rape.”<sup>105</sup> An older gangster known as Uncle Buks interviewed by Elaine Salo in Manenberg claimed that the younger generation engaged in violence without forethought, without a conscious understanding of the role that they might play in the community. He contrasts this with how violence used to be handled in the past. He claims

that in the past the old gangs carried out warfare in a more ritualized, carefully planned fashion. Gang leaders challenged each other to warfare at an appointed time, at night, on open fields beyond the residential perimeter, in order to prevent injury to innocent residents.<sup>106</sup>

Here the violence of the previous generation is considered organised, premeditated and involves a gentlemen’s agreement not to harm an innocent population. It is clear that the violence is remembered as having had purpose and meaning for the community. It is understandable here, then, that former District Sixers whose recollection of gang violence mirrored that of Uncle Buks<sup>107</sup> would be alienated in their new areas where violence in the 1990s was rampant and uncontrolled. Indeed, as Salo insightfully points out, where formerly a gangster identity provided a young graduate with a “recognized role in the community,” contemporary gang members were often high school students at odds with the older generation and community at large.<sup>108</sup> As McEachern remarks, the social meaning with which crime was imbued in District Six was “denied in the experiences of contemporary violence and crime in the townships.”<sup>109</sup>

The importance of the nostalgic impulse in the District Six Museum is further demonstrated by the memories and inscriptions that were left on the map and the calico cloths that figured so prominently in the *Streets* exhibition. In addition to the romantic vision of the role

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<sup>105</sup> Elaine Salo, “Mans is Ma Soe: Ganging Practices in Manenberg, South Africa, and the Ideologies of Masculinity, Gender, and Generational Relations,” in States of Violence: Politics, Youth and Memory in Contemporary South Africa, eds. E.G Bay & D.L Donham, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 150.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid 171.

<sup>107</sup> McEachern, “Working with Memory,” 59.

<sup>108</sup> Salo, “Mans is Ma Soe,” 170.

<sup>109</sup> McEachern, “Mapping the Memories,” 513.

played by District Six's gangsters, former residents remembered their community as one in which they could "enter each other's house without asking, and many told stories of meals shared or remembered how the woman living next door would chastise them as freely as their own parents when they misbehaved."<sup>110</sup> The overall narrative as described by McEachern recalls an area in which "people liv[ed] together regardless of religion or race, according to their own cultural and religious practices but also as members of an encompassing District Six community."<sup>111</sup> District Six represented a multicultural landscape in which the Coloured community remembered a familiar interaction with various cultural groups, and as such served as a blueprint for how they should act in the new South Africa. Remembering the past, even nostalgically, allowed Coloured District Sixers to recognise that they had a place in the new South Africa just as they had once had one in District Six.

These remembrances nevertheless obscure the historical reality of racial tension, poverty and hardship in District Six, and concentrating as they do almost exclusively on the recollections of the District's Coloured community, they marginalise the memory of the area's black African residents. Richard Rive, celebrated author and former resident of the district, provides a sharply contrasting view of District Six which he remembers as an overcrowded slum without plumbing or electricity. Crime and violence were rampant and arbitrary; white police officers who patrolled the area were "always fully armed."<sup>112</sup> As a child, Rive

witnessed street fights, barefisted [sic] rituals watched by an intense and silent crowd. As children, we believed that on Christmas Eve one could commit any crime one pleased with impunity...There were frequent raids for illicit liquor. Being imprisoned in Roeland Street jail carried no social stigma. One was merely in trouble.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> McEachern, "Working with Memory," 57.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid 54.

<sup>112</sup> Rive, "District Six," 111.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Even before the forced removals, those who could afford to do so moved out of District Six: the wealthier to Walmer Estate and Wynberg; the less wealthy to the City and Divisional Council housing projects on the Cape Flats. As Rive claims “[t]hose who remained were by and large those who were unable to go.”<sup>114</sup> Rive’s vision of life in District Six contrasts starkly with the nostalgic image of District Six presented in the museum’s initial exhibitions.

### **The National Significance of District Six**

In the South African collective memory, District Six represented apartheid’s “savage attack on family life and its ruthless destruction of the fabric of functioning communities.”<sup>115</sup> It is known nationally and internationally both as one of the most multicultural communities that South Africa ever produced and as one of those communities that best reflected apartheid-era racial apprehensions. The destruction of the district resonated across the country as countless communities were dislocated and destroyed to create the apartheid vision of South Africa. In Cape Town alone forty-two communities were dispossessed under apartheid.<sup>116</sup> The museum, therefore, reflects an important part of the apartheid system that affected millions of South Africans. In this regard, the museum is not simply local in character.

This wider importance for District Six has already been acknowledged by the other dispossessed communities of Cape Town. In the years after its official opening, District Six Museum was criticised for focusing on District Six alone; critics claimed that by privileging the memory of this particular area, other lesser known removals that also occurred in Cape Town were obscured. In response to such criticism, the museum mounted an exhibition in 1998 in honour of the residents of Tramway Road who were forcibly removed in 1959. This history is,

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<sup>114</sup> Rive, “District Six,” 111.

<sup>115</sup> De Kok, “Cracked Heirlooms,” 64.

<sup>116</sup> McEachern, “Working with Memory,” 67.

however, largely unknown, even in Cape Town. Using similar techniques to those employed in the permanent exhibition, the museum encouraged former residents of Tramway to tell their stories; maps, diagrams and photographs of the former area were included as part of the collection. In this regard, the museum expanded its scope from district to the city of Cape Town. Today the museum includes in its guiding principles a desire to “serve the interests of the victims of the various forms of forced removals that occurred in District Six, the larger city of Cape Town and in other parts of South Africa,”<sup>117</sup> enlarging its scope even further.

District Six Museum in the 1990s was thus a paradox. The official memory of the area as one in which a cosmopolitan, multicultural community functioned was created by Coloureds, the majority of whom were dissatisfied with their place in the new South Africa, and yet this was the vision that best fit with the rhetoric of Mandela’s nation-building project. McEachern describes how former residents are aware the significance of the memory of District Six for the whole country. They

often assert that District Six already was what ideologues in the ‘new South Africa’ 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 stands for the ‘new South Africa.’<sup>118</sup>

The memory of a functioning multiracial community in apartheid South Africa, as presented by the District Six Museum was too valuable a heritage asset to question or criticise. The creation of a historical myth based on selective nostalgic remembrance, was acceptable and “serve[d] important productive functions given the reconstructive and transformative South African context.”<sup>119</sup> The tendency to romanticise in the museum’s space was not widely considered

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<sup>117</sup> District Six Museum, “Guiding Policies, (<http://www.districtsix.co.za/frames.htm>, retrieved 5 March 2007).

<sup>118</sup> McEachern, “Mapping the Memories,” 516.

<sup>119</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 124.

problematic as it provided former residents (especially former Coloured residents) with the tools to cope with present uncertainties at the same time as it pointed the way to a united future.

This future was one in which South Africans were cultural citizens,<sup>120</sup> where a shared identity between communities was highlighted and what differentiated them was accepted but not made divisive. The memory created at the District Six Museum was thus one in which the convictions of the present and the hopes for the future existed in the past. District Six provided and continues to provide today a space to which the government can point as a model of its vision for the future. District Six allows “people to imagine the unity in diversity...in ways which make sense.”<sup>121</sup> The national importance of the District Six Museum’s memory project between 1994 and 1999 overshadowed the blatant omissions and rewriting of history that occurred in its space. The nostalgic remembrance was ultimately validated by the government--remember Dullah Omar did not discredit the memory of District Six, merely the absence of a black African voice-- as it sought to find a historical basis for its vision. In this regard, the District Six Museum represented one of the most important heritage institutions in South Africa, one that exemplified what Mandela and his government wished the nation to become.

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<sup>120</sup> Harriet Deacon, et.al. Protecting our Cultural Capital: A Research Plan for the Heritage Sector, (Cape Town: HSRC Publishers, 2003), 9.

<sup>121</sup> McEachern, “Working with Memory,”66.

### Chapter 3: “An icon of hope”: Nelson Mandela and the Robben Island Heritage Brand

Robben Island, located nine kilometres from the mainland in Table Bay, has been used throughout its history as a place of exile. Enemies of the initial Dutch settlement--Khoisan and Muslim leaders--were sent to Robben Island as punishment for their opposition to the new settlers. Perhaps the most famous Khoisan exile was Autshumato, a middleman between the Dutch and the Khoisan who was sent to Robben Island in July 1658 after Jan Van Riebeeck concluded that trade between the two groups would be cheaper without him. When the British took the Cape from the Dutch in 1795, they too continued to use Robben Island as a place of detention. Prisoners included British Army deserters, criminals convicted of fraud, theft, assault and murder, and those local leaders who resisted British rule.<sup>122</sup> During the Hundred Years War fought between the British and the Xhosa in the nineteenth century, captives like Makana, a Xhosa leader, were imprisoned on the island much as enemies of the Dutch had been in the seventeenth century. By mid-century, however, the island was used mainly to house lepers, lunatics and the poor sick, another kind of prisoner. They suffered in deplorable conditions, were rarely allowed to receive visitors and almost never left the island. Robben Island was taken over by the SADF in 1936 as a strategic base and was fortified in preparation for the Second World War. In April 1961, the Department of Prisons took over Robben Island from the South African Navy. Within a few short months, the first apartheid-era prisoners were transferred to the island.

As the space in which Nelson Mandela, South Africa's most important political prisoner and its first democratically-elected president, was incarcerated for eighteen years, Robben Island has become an important symbol of the struggle for freedom in the new South Africa. As such the island was an important heritage asset for the new democracy, and what to do with it publicly

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<sup>122</sup> Barbara Hutton, Robben Island: Symbol of Resistance, (Johannesburg: SACHED, 1994), 24.

debated. Some wished the history of the prison to be remembered, rather than buried under its potential incarnation as a resort and nature reserve. Others suggested that the prison, and ultimately the memory of its existence, should be destroyed in order to allow the country to move away from its past and turn toward its future. Robben Island's most famous political prisoners, the Rivonia Trialists, wished Robben Island to become a site commemorating the triumph of freedom over oppression and a monument to the struggle against apartheid. Robben Island Museum, officially inaugurated by Nelson Mandela on Heritage Day in September 1997, emerged as the most important and most recognisable museum in post-apartheid South Africa. As such it became the keystone of the revitalisation of the South African heritage industry and was the principal space in which the first ANC government's vision of the new South Africa was created. To achieve this, the directors of the museum created a heritage brand which was closely associated with Mandela and his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. This focus in turn shaped the Robben Island narrative and ultimately created an important link between Robben Island, the museum that bears its name and the nation-building project undertaken by Mandela until the end of his term in office in 1999.

### **The Robben Island Museum**

Robben Island's position as the most important heritage site and museum during Mandela's presidency was incontestable. No other heritage space during this period received more publicity or had more visitors. Entirely conceived post-apartheid, Robben Island Museum did not have to undergo a transition of meaning as some other prominent museums were forced to do. The Voortrekker Monument, for example, built as a symbol of the Afrikaner nation's covenant with God and the physical manifestation of its right to rule over South Africa, was in

the post-apartheid period, obliged to downplay this heritage, and focus instead on its significance as a site commemorating the Great Trek.<sup>123</sup> The Robben Island Museum, heavily funded by the government and anxious to attract international tourists, was free to create a national narrative that would form the basis for a new public memory of apartheid.

In this respect, Robben Island Museum fulfilled the functions of a national museum. Intended as the physical expression of the spiritual connection among a country's citizens, national museums, such as Robben Island, exhibit an interpretation of the past that silences the shameful aspects of the collective history at the same time as they promote the country's national identity. National museums, Patricia Davison notes, "give material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time become institutionalised as public memory."<sup>124</sup> This public memory, however, is not an invention of the directors of the museums themselves. Rather the public or official memory husbanded by museum curators is often one promoted by the government itself. Davison argues that "state-funded national museums have tended to pursue projects that further the national interest, even if this is not openly acknowledged."<sup>125</sup>

While states do not directly dictate what collections and exhibits will be displayed in museums of national importance, funding or the denial thereof, which most often comes from state, provincial and national governments, can have a significant impact on the types of exhibitions staged and the types of narratives told. The fact that in South Africa, the heritage industry is "notoriously dependent on public finance,"<sup>126</sup> had direct implications for the types of

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<sup>123</sup> Estelle Pretorius, personal communication, 16 January 2007. Pretorius argues that as a theme museum, the Voortrekker Monument's symbolism is exclusively connected to the Great Trek and has no ties to the apartheid era. Pretorius further suggests that the Voortrekker Monument has significance for South Africa's other ethnicities as it depicts the "role of the black nations who were then part of the interior, such as the Ndebele, Rolong and the Zulu," although she is careful not to mention that in the monument's famous friezes, these peoples are depicted as savages.

<sup>124</sup> Patricia Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory," in Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa, eds. S. Nuttall & C. Coetzee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 145.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid 146.

<sup>126</sup> Deacon et.al., Protecting our Cultural Capital, 21.



stories that museums and monuments told during Mandela's presidency. In the initial years of transition and uncertainty, the heritage sector was called upon by Mandela and his government to create a new national narrative. Indeed, in May 2000, Ben Ngubane then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology claimed that museums "'are uniquely placed to help develop and promote' a new consciousness and thereby contribute meaningfully to the rebirth and renewal of South African society."<sup>127</sup> Although Ngubane was minister under Thabo Mbeki, this sentiment is also a reflection of Mandela's vision for South Africa's museums. Although Harriet Deacon, Sephai Mngqolo and Sandra Prosalendis claim that the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) and its successor, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), desired to keep their distance from the daily workings of the heritage sector,<sup>128</sup> it is inconceivable that under Mandela's presidency, museums and monuments, especially those with national implications such as Robben Island Museum, would be allowed to spend public funds without regard to the government's vision for the country. Here, I am more convinced by Davison's assertion that the DACST "made [it] clear that financial support [would] be awarded to those heritage projects that contribute to transforming national consciousness."<sup>129</sup> Mandela's government, in an effort to create a context of reconciliation, unity and diversity in a South Africa divided by race, language, class and geography, was anxious to harness any public institutions that would have facilitated its promotion of a new national vision.

Indeed, the importance of Robben Island in framing the national values of the new South Africa and as a valuable heritage resource is best characterised by a speech given by one of Mandela's fellow prisoners and closest friends even before the first elections were held in 1994. At the inauguration of the EsiQithini exhibition given at the South African Museum in Cape

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<sup>127</sup> Deacon et.al., Protecting our Cultural Capital, 11.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid 24.

<sup>129</sup> Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory," 148.

Town in 1993 in part to help decide how Robben Island would be preserved, Ahmed Kathrada spoke on the meaning of Robben Island in the South African collective memory. Reflecting the values that would most characterise the Mandela government elected less than a year later, and speaking for all of Robben Island's former prisoners, Kathrada said:

While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument of our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a monument reflecting the triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation; a triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old.<sup>130</sup>

This vision for Robben Island's role in the new South Africa was echoed by Mandela in his address to the nation on Heritage Day in September 1997. Speaking from Robben Island, Mandela said:

In affirming a joint heritage, in this place, we are reminded that our noble ideals were spurred on even more by their long denial, that today's unity is a triumph over yesterday's division and conflict...With democracy, we have the opportunity to ensure that our institutions reflect history in a way that respects the heritage of all our citizens...Robben Island is a vital part of South Africa's collective heritage...I am confident that we will together find a way to combine the many dimensions of the Island, and that we will do so in a manner that recognises above all its pre-eminent character as a symbol of the victory of the human spirit over political oppression; and of reconciliation over enforced division. In this way we will help strengthen the ethos of heritage as a binding force, rather than a divisive one; as a force for truth rather than an artificial construct to satisfy all and sundry.<sup>131</sup>

Kathrada's words at the first exhibition on the history of the island in 1993 and Mandela's words at the formal inauguration of Robben Island Museum are not altogether different. Both signal the importance of Robben Island in the history of South Africa; both express their desire that the island be remembered as a place of triumph and reconciliation rather than as a place of

<sup>130</sup> Harriet Deacon et.al., *EsiQithini: The Robben Island Exhibition*, (Cape Town: Mayibuye Books, 1996), 10.

<sup>131</sup> Nelson Mandela, "Address by President Mandela on Heritage Day," (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1997/sp0924a.html>, retrieved 12 January 2007).

humiliation and oppression. Mandela emphasises, however, to a far greater degree the heritage potential of Robben Island. By signalling the island's importance for South Africa's heritage industry as a place where all South Africans can find a common heritage, Mandela not only recognised the value of Robben Island in the cause of nation-building but the value of all heritage institutions. By choosing to celebrate Heritage Day on the island and formally inaugurate it as "the first major new heritage institutions [sic] of democratic South Africa,"<sup>132</sup> Mandela was acknowledging the significant role he expected Robben Island to play in that heritage.

### **Branding Robben Island**

While Mandela's endorsement of Robben Island as one of the most important heritage sites in the new South Africa significantly increased its profile both domestically and internationally, museums and heritage sites in South Africa were not visited by domestic tourists on the same scale as those in many other parts of the world, a result perhaps of misgivings about such places engendered by their apartheid use to divide rather than unite. The proliferation of heritage sites in South Africa, moreover, in the initial years of the post-apartheid era made it difficult for the DACST to interpret these sites and incorporate them into a wider heritage narrative. The confused and conflicting heritages needed a unifying image, one that would raise their profile. In their report on the challenges facing the South African heritage industry, Deacon and her colleagues argue that the heritage sector needed "an interpretation of the past, or a heritage brand"<sup>133</sup> that could be sold to domestic and international tourists. Even though the heritage industry in general had not succeeded in branding itself as late as 2003 when this report

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<sup>132</sup> Mandela, "Address by President Mandela on Heritage Day."

<sup>133</sup> Deacon et.al., Promoting our Cultural Capital, 11.

was released, Robben Island Museum had an early success. The museum quickly associated its brand with that of the president and emerged as the “showcase of the new South African democracy.”<sup>134</sup>

The figure of Mandela, argues Rassool, has been a driving force in the creation of the Robben Island narrative since the museum’s inception in 1997<sup>135</sup> and that this narrative and its associated brand were significantly influenced by the president’s autobiography. While there are alternate published interpretations of life on Robben Island—I am thinking of *Robben Island* and *Hell-Hole Robben Island*—the museum’s themes and narratives rely heavily on Mandela’s account of life in prison provided in the second half of *Long Walk to Freedom*. Previous accounts such as Indres Naidoo’s and Moses Dlamini’s underline the brutality of life on the island; in contrast, Mandela’s interpretation eschews these descriptions in favour of an account appropriate to the post-apartheid moment. David Schalkwyk suggests that Mandela’s prison experiences, as remembered in his autobiography, are “mobili[sed]...in the cause of the kind of nation-building that was to mark at the least the rhetoric of the first years of the ANC-led [Government of National Unity].”<sup>136</sup>

This is best demonstrated in his description of his interaction with the warders. While Naidoo and Dlamini describe the violence of their arrival on Robben Island, Mandela avoids such a description. Instead, there are threats of harm from the guards that never come to fruition. Mandela refuses to acknowledge their control over their own actions in a way that Naidoo specifically does. Mandela describes their threats of physical violence and murder and the

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<sup>134</sup> Solani, “Memory and Representation,” 24.

<sup>135</sup> Ciraj Rassool, “The Rise of Heritage and the Reconstitution of History in South Africa”, *Kronos* 26 (2000): 17.

<sup>136</sup> David Schalkwyk, “Writing from Prison,” in *Sense of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, eds. S. Nuttall & C. Michael, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), 283.

intimidation that marks his first interaction with them as their duty<sup>137</sup> rather than their choice. This is an important distinction in South Africa in 1994. Where once apartheid had oppressors and oppressed, in the post-apartheid era all South Africans are considered victims of the evil system. Mandela is contributing to the notion, one that will gain wide circulation during the TRC, that even those that participated in the crimes of apartheid were not responsible for their actions. By blaming the system, rather than the individual, reconciliation and unity were supposed to be facilitated. Robben Island Museum became the physical space in which Mandela's interpretation of apartheid found a home. Riouful argues in an article on representations of Robben Island's past, that the museum adopted Mandela and the TRC's interpretation, and by doing so institutionalised "the notion that all South Africans were victims of apartheid and are now linked by their common identity as 'survivors' of the evil apartheid system and by the common improvement of their situation in the advent of the 'new' South Africa."<sup>138</sup> This narrative, an important part of Robben Island's branding, reflected Mandela's vision of a South Africa in which all would celebrate their participation in ending apartheid and would look toward Robben Island as the birthplace of their democracy.

In keeping with Mandela's spirit of reconciliation and nation-building, *Long Walk to Freedom* also provides an opportunity for recognising a common humanity between those who supported apartheid and those who were its victims. Robben Island, as a microcosm of South Africa, reflected the apartheid vision of the country. As Mandela describes in his autobiography, "[t]he racial divide on Robben Island was absolute: there were no black warders, and no white prisoners."<sup>139</sup> In his work, Mandela does not dwell on the racism and violence of the warders but instead encourages his readers to accept their shared humanity. Claiming that the warder in a

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<sup>137</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, vol.2, 14.

<sup>138</sup> Riouful, "Behind Telling," 28.

<sup>139</sup> Mandela, *ibid*, 81.

prisoner's section was the most important actor in a prisoner's life, Mandela describes how "[n]ot all of our warders were ogres. We noticed right from the start that there were some among them who believed in fairness."<sup>140</sup> Mandela does not acknowledge their complicity in apartheid, choosing instead to demonstrate that they have been conditioned by the system. Mandela insists that Robben Island's warders could be made to realise, as indeed happened to one warder, that the policy of non-racialism, as espoused by the ANC, "makes more...sense than the Nats."<sup>141</sup> By reflecting Mandela's memory of Robben Island, Robben Island Museum became a space in which its visitors were encouraged to recognise their common humanity. It was a space ultimately designed to inspire them to support Mandela's nation-building project.

Rather than focusing on the hardship and violence of prison life, through the museum the island "has become a symbol of transcendence over oppression, an icon of hope."<sup>142</sup> Memories like those in *Long Walk to Freedom* promote an image of right action in which respect for others breeds respect for everyone, a necessary rhetoric in a post-apartheid period in which South Africans were just learning how to live together. Mandela and the Robben Island Museum's focus on the ability of everyone to claim to have participated in the struggle, while inaccurate, was a powerful force in the new democracy. As a respected leader of the struggle and as the president of the republic, Mandela held significant sway over the national discourse on apartheid. Although the living memory of many would have contradicted the government's interpretation of the past, both Mandela and the Robben Island Museum used the traditional secrecy of the prison in order to create a memory that was more difficult to contest. As a result, Robben Island was an ideal space in which to build the official memory of apartheid.

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<sup>140</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 128.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid 130.

<sup>142</sup> Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory," 154.

While the prison housed many political prisoners during its period of operation, few have written about their time on the island. Only Naidoo and Dlamini have published works that deal with Robben Island in a significant and meaningful way. Mandela's account of life in prison, as the most important autobiography to have been written in the post-apartheid era, thus had a significant impact on how Robben Island Prison was remembered during his presidency. Indeed, *Long Walk to Freedom* has been so important in South Africa that Uma Mesthries has already wondered, "to what extent what has already been written about prison by others--not least that by Mandela himself--now determines how others will tell their story."<sup>143</sup> While others have been welcome to make public their dissenting views on life on Robben Island, ultimately Mandela's memory has been the most influential in shaping the official memory of the island. That Mandela's memory of Robben Island was passed into the official memory that was created in the Robben Island Museum makes it that much more difficult to contest.

Outside access to Robben Island during the apartheid period was limited to Red Cross observers, Department of Corrections bureaucrats and a few political figures. Prisoners' visitors were restricted to the visitors' area and the conversations were monitored closely by the prison's warders. With a severe limitation on the available alternate memories of Robben Island Prison, Mandela was shrewd in supporting Robben Island Museum as the space in which he wished the values of his presidency to be given their physical expression. Indeed, Coombes has commented that the narrative on Robben Island is "hard to challenge without sounding like some reactionary stalwart of the right."<sup>144</sup> The Robben Island Museum's heritage brand, therefore, created during the museum's first years of operation, was marked by the rhetoric of the first ANC government. This heritage brand had to be marketed and sold to the public for its consumption. Mandela's

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<sup>143</sup> Solani, "Memory and Representation," 78.

<sup>144</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 95.

standing in South Africa and the close association between his personal memory of Robben Island Prison and the public memory guarded by the Robben Island Museum had a significant impact on the brand's success. There are, nevertheless, other factors that contributed to the success of the Robben Island heritage brand.

The appearance of objectivity that museums project significantly contributed to the heritage brand's success. Like "Stan's Walk" at District Six Museum, Robben Island Museum's interpretation of the island's past is perceived by visitors as accurate because it is perceived to be unmediated. Exhibitions are not signed by authors; the obscurity of the designers creates a space in which the audience absorbs the narrative without considering the designers' intention. Visitors to Robben Island, unfamiliar with the island's history and presented with a single narrative, accepted the museum's narrative of prison life as the "true" vision. There was no nuance that might signal to the audience that there were other possible versions of Robben Island's story. In the 1990s, this effect was compounded by the expressed desire of the museum's curators and managers to structure visits in a way that promoted what Clifford Shearing and Michael Kempa describe as "a direct experience of prisoners' hope sensibility and its accompanying way of being."<sup>145</sup> This way of being was marked by an unrelenting belief in the value of the struggle and the solidarity among its participants. Direct experience of "prisoners' hope sensibility" was not only incorporated into the museum's exhibitions, but was further promoted by guided tours provided by former prisoners. That tours were guided was problematic in itself; that they were guided by former prisoners presented significant issues of objectivity. During Mandela's

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<sup>145</sup> Clifford Shearing & Michael Kempa, "A Museum of Hope: A Story of Robben Island," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 592 (2004): 69.



presidency, there were no unguided tours of Robben Island;<sup>146</sup> as a result, visitors were not allowed to interpret the island's significance for themselves.

That tour guides' personal memories of Robben Island Prison were overwhelmingly positive during this period was also problematic. Rather than challenging the museum's narrative or suggesting that, while Robben Island should be interpreted as a site of hope and reconciliation, it was also the site of ubiquitous degradation and humiliating abuse, tour guides instead preferred to keep within the museum's triumph narrative. Shearing and Kempa describe how the guides that they interviewed "were unanimous in the expression of their own desire to communicate a narrative of inclusion, tolerance and triumph of the human spirit."<sup>147</sup> From their comments to these authors, it is evident that these guides supported the government's vision and the museum's heritage brand. One interviewee suggested that apartheid

bedeviled the populace for centuries. And the result is that we are still a very divided society because of colonial rule. And I realized that here was an opportunity for me to talk about my experiences in jail, and how [the prisoners representing very different political views] found one another. How we had to learn to live together. How our common humanity was realized in jail. And I thought this would be an appropriate message to give to South Africans in particular, but (also) to the whole world. So that is what I've been doing and I've been trying as much as possible to spread the message of the need for greater tolerance and less prejudice...And if I can convince ten people out of 200 per day, then I think I am actually making a contribution to the healing of this very divided world we live in.<sup>148</sup>

In the wider context of South Africa, this tour guide gave tangible meaning to the government's rhetoric on unity and diversity and helped promote the heritage brand of the museum. Like visitors and former residents who returned to the District Six Museum, South African visitors to Robben Island were presented a reference point to which they could turn for guidance on how to act in the present and how to build a nation for the future

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<sup>146</sup> Myra Shackley, "Potential Futures for Robben Island: Shrine, Museum or Theme Park?" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7 (2001): 356.

<sup>147</sup> Shearing & Kempa, "A Museum of Hope," 70-1.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid 71.

There were, however, guides at Robben Island who did not explicitly show their support for the museum's brand. Christopher Colvin writes of a guide named Thembile Mzola who confronted visitors with detailed accounts of the misery of life in prison. Mzola described the heat of summer on Robben Island and the presence of rats in the winter, the torture of work in the lime quarry, and the cunning of prison censors.<sup>149</sup> Mzola, as Colvin describes, confronted visitors "with the re-enactment of his own pain" which was intended to allow "visitors to confront their own hidden participation in apartheid."<sup>150</sup> Even those former prisoners-turned-guides who presented tourists with the hardship and degradation of their imprisonment were working within the confines of the official memory established at the museum. While the example provided by Mzola might suggest that the island's heritage brand was not as dominant as has been argued here, Mzola provided a cathartic moment for visitor and guide where both could accept their different roles under apartheid, and ultimately come together to participate in the construction of a new South Africa. Whether guided by former prisoners interviewed by Shearing and Kempa or by guides such as Thembile Mzola, the intended result of such interactions was the same. The experience of Robben Island was meant to inspire visitors to connect with fellow South Africans through a shared heritage. Ultimately, even Mzola's confrontational style did not damage Robben Island's branding so much as reinforce the inspirational value of the space.

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<sup>149</sup> Christopher Colvin, "'Brothers and Sisters, do not be afraid of me': Trauma, History and the Therapeutic Imagination in the new South Africa", in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds. K. Hodgkin & S. Radstone, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 154.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid 155.

## What is being Forgotten on Robben Island

This discussion of Robben Island Museum's heritage brand has also been a discussion of what is remembered and what is forgotten on the island in the official memory created by the museum's curators. Omission and silence were both components of Robben Island Museum's violence against the memory of apartheid promoted under Mandela's presidency. Prisoner abuse was perhaps the area in which silencing was most marked. I have chosen to focus on this particular subject, not because it is the most sensational, but because two works written by former prisoners in the 1980s contrast nicely with the museum's version of Robben Island's history. While Solani argues that both Naidoo who published *Robben Island: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary* in 1983 and Dlamini who published *Hell-Hole Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* a year later were influenced by their associations with the ANC and the Pan-African Congress (PAC) respectively, I believe their accounts are nonetheless valuable in bringing alternative versions of life on Robben Island to light.

Naidoo and Dlamini both provide vivid descriptions of the ubiquitous violence on the island in the early years of the prison's existence. In one of the most telling passages in his work, Naidoo relates his arrival on the island in 1963:

Batons rained down on us and we ran wildly around, trying to protect ourselves, our chains rattling loudly, one pulling in this direction, the other in that, all of us colliding and falling over as we ducked the blows. We would look up and see the senior officer enjoying the spectacle. Even when Head Warder Verster, the person in charge of security on the Island eventually instructed the warders to take off the chains and handcuffs, they continued to beat us and our protests were simply ignored.<sup>151</sup>

In contrast to Mandela's version, Naidoo details the brutality with which he was greeted on the island. Although it is entirely plausible that Mandela and those with whom he arrived were

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<sup>151</sup> Naidoo & Sachs, *Robben Island*, 65.

spared the abuse summarily visited upon rank and file political prisoners, that Mandela refuses to acknowledge that his arrival on the island was thus atypical of arrivals in general is a significant omission on his part. That the museum chose to immortalise his memory rather than Naidoo's was a significant silencing of the reality of daily life on the island in its earliest years of operation.

In his work, Dlamini describes the hardship of life on Robben Island. He often writes in the first person, encouraging the reader to experience life on the island as he relives it through his recounting. In a vivid description of daily work in the stone quarry, Dlamini writes:

The sun is scorching hot. The faces of the other prisoners look horrible. They are filled with sweat and dust, with lines where sweat is running through. I wonder how I look. My stomach growls. I'm hungry. I wonder when we are going to get our lunch...So this is life on this island. I wonder whether some of us will be able to leave this place alive or still sane. I could imagine leaving prison like a vegetable, unable to speak coherently—stuttering or with a slur and fearing any White man I come across. And when someone tells of the struggle for freedom—looking at him in shock and shaking my head.<sup>152</sup>

In this passage, Dlamini is pointing to the apartheid regime's desired effect of Robben Island Prison. The island was intended by the Department of Corrections to break its prisoners so that when they returned to the mainland "free" men, they would no longer have the drive to continue to pursue the struggle. This is not, however, the narrative that is reflected at the Robben Island Museum. Indeed, the museum's overwhelming message of hope and of triumph leaves no place for the desperation and devastation that Dlamini describes here. This alternative heritage, one in which the heroes are mortal, have doubts, want to give up and return to the mainland cowed just as the Department of Corrections intended them to, did not figure at all in the official memory preserved by the Robben Island Museum.

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<sup>152</sup> Moses Dlamini, Hell-Hole Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1984), 33.

Neither Naidoo's nor Dlamini's versions figure in any prominent way in the narrative of Robben Island Museum. Instead, Mandela's memories of prison were borrowed from heavily by the museum's curators. The tour guides, perfectly placed to counter the dominant account, chose instead to present their memories in a way that supported the triumph narrative and the museum's heritage brand. Naidoo's and Dlamini's memories and their presentation as an important part of the museum's exhibition would have been incongruous in the context of the new South Africa. Detailed renderings of suffering and abuse, while certainly characteristic of these authors' realities on the island, were not compatible with Mandela's rhetoric on reconciliation and unity. Indeed, had the framers of Robben Island Museum's narrative incorporated explicit references to the abuse of black prisoners at the hands of white warders, such a narrative would have been out of context in the new spirit of the political class and would have significantly reduced the profitability of the Robben Island's branding as a place of reconciliation.

As a firmly post-apartheid institution, Robben Island Museum was not the appropriate space in which to expose the trauma and violence of life under apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created in part to provide such a space for apartheid's survivors. Expressions of violence and detailed descriptions of abuse and torture at the hands of the apartheid state were accepted in the public hearings of the TRC as a means of exposing the country to its past. The TRC, however, had proscribed limits of date and time so that South Africa's period of grieving would not continue forever. Although the vast majority of South Africans were not allowed to give their testimony publicly, in the rhetoric of the TRC and the government, the entire country had been given a chance to expose its painful experience of apartheid. Both by witnessing public hearings and having been enveloped by the chairman's universalising embrace, all South

Africans were supposed to have confronted their painful memories. For Robben Island Museum to continue to confront South Africa with its past after the end of public hearings in 1998 would have been inappropriate. In Mandela's South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been the designated space for divisive memories; Robben Island Museum had been created in order to establish unifying ones.

The silencing of the island's unpalatable history was a conscious effort by the administration. Perhaps this is best evidenced in visits Annie E. Coombes made to the site when researching *History after Apartheid*, a work she published in 2003. The author noted that during her initial tour of Robben Island in April 1997, before Mandela had officially opened the museum, the physical aspects of the prison had changed little. Beyond a coat of paint, she described, little had been altered or added.<sup>153</sup> While tour guides did not mention any cases of brutality to the museum's visitors (already an indication that some memories were being silenced), guides did describe their daily lives as having been marked by humiliation and degradation. Prisoners were at the total mercy of the guards, often forced to eat inadequate or rotten food, and after 1975 only allowed to watch sports or children's programming on television.

In Coombes' subsequent visits, the prison changed significantly. In an effort to shift the focus of the narrative from the hardships of prison life and toward the inspirational message that had emerged as its brand by 1999, cells in block B (where Nelson Mandela and his fellow Rivonia Trialists were held) had been painted; beds with mattresses had been installed with every cell now including a slop bucket. Only Mandela's cell was identified specifically, further associating the Robben Island brand with Mandela's name. The corridors were decorated with murals, and "in the guides' narratives there were fewer of the details that brought to life so

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<sup>153</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 74.

vividly the dehumanizing aspects of the prison experience.”<sup>154</sup> By painting over the prison’s grimy walls, the museum’s directors were literally white-washing the prison’s history to make way for the promotion of its heritage.

Coombes suggests that by her last visit in December 2000, Robben Island Museum had transformed Robben Island Prison into the country’s most important heritage site, a space in which Mandela and the ANC’s vision had come to fruition. The tour began at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront where visitors were greeted by a gift shop selling merchandise with the Robben Island logo and where tourists gathered to take a catamaran the twelve kilometres to Robben Island. There was a video for the crossing, describing Robben Island as the birthplace of the new nation and a cultural showcase for South African democracy.<sup>155</sup> In a permanent exhibition known as *Cell Stories*, each cell in B block was identified by a name and fitted with an intercom that allowed visitors to learn, directly from former inmates, about their experiences of Robben Island. Although *Cell Stories* lessened the explicit association of Robben Island with Mandela, his cell remained the most popular among visitors. Invariably, the stories provided by former inmates, like the museum itself, emphasised the solidarity and community that characterised life in B block; this emphasis on the positive aspects of imprisonment silenced the oppression of such a life. This had become the Robben Island Museum’s heritage brand; Robben Island itself had become an experience.

It was this branding, this close link between the museum and the figure of Mandela that made Robben Island an international tourist attraction. It would be unwise, as a result, to end this chapter without discussing the influence of Robben Island’s international recognisability on its heritage brand. The museum’s close association with Mandela, a household name in the west,

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<sup>154</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 74.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid 75.

makes it a target for the international tourist visiting South Africa. Even before Robben Island's nomination as a World Heritage Site in 1999, international tourists flocked to the site, far outnumbering domestic tourists. While this study has thus far neglected to discuss the success of Mandela's nation-building project and Robben Island's role in it, the fact that more international than domestic tourists visited the site under his presidency suggests that his vision had yet to emerge as that of the country as a whole. The crippling poverty experienced by many in South Africa, however, contributed to the small number of domestic tourists to Robben Island. At R100<sup>156</sup> or \$14US, the entrance fee for Robben Island continues to represent a significant obstacle for many South Africans.

Since becoming a World Heritage Site in 1999, Robben Island's international profile, already high, has risen significantly. The increasing popularity of the museum is linked to Deacon's suggestion that the "official message" of the island "is closely aligned...with global heritage tourism's moral aesthetic."<sup>157</sup> In this regard, the international tourist visits Robben Island not for the historical accuracy of the museum's exhibition but to be inspired by the museum's narrative. Robben Island's status as a World Heritage Site, moreover, has forced the island to maintain its inspirational message. Unlike many such sites, Robben Island's physical space was not enough to guarantee its position. Having won its nomination as a site of conscience, based largely on its relation to Mandela and the peaceful democratic transition--a transition that is widely considered a "miracle" in the west--"Robben Island is obliged to maintain the symbolic interpretation under which it was inscribed."<sup>158</sup> Robben Island's nomination is thus an indication of the success of its heritage branding and of the public memory

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<sup>156</sup> Shackley, "Potential Futures for Robben Island," 356.

<sup>157</sup> Harriet Deacon, "Memory and History at Robben Island,"

(<http://www.celat.ulaval.ca/histoire.memoire/cape1/deacon.htm> retrieved 16 March 2007).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.



that has been created in its space. That in order to maintain its status as a World Heritage Site, however, Robben Island must maintain the triumph narrative beyond its value as part of the nation-building project, is unfortunate for South Africans like Riouful who hoped that one day Robben Island would emerge as a site in which the truth of its history might be contested.

Robben Island Museum is a classic example of a heritage site promoting the nation-building project of a newly-elected government. Supported by members of the ANC as an inspirational space even before the ANC was elected in 1994, Robben Island, as the most recognisable symbol of oppression in the apartheid-era, was transformed into the most recognisable symbol of triumph over that oppression in the post-apartheid period. Given the national significance that Mandela's government wished Robben Island to have, I would argue that promoting an inclusive heritage (even one with glaring omissions and outright fabrications) rather than an historically accurate but ultimately divisive one, was important in the initial years of democracy. Robben Island's potential as a unifying space was unchallenged by any other site. Robben Island Museum, however, is not a unique example of a heritage site that eschews the truth in favour of a coherent and uniting narrative. Lowenthal argues in *The Heritage Crusade* that ultimately "commitment and bonding demand uncritical endorsement and preclude dissenting voices. Deviance from shared views is not tolerated because group success, even sheer survival, depends on everyone pulling together."<sup>159</sup> The success of the Robben Island brand was a direct result of the absence of objection from South Africa's political and social elites. Mandela's vision for South Africa was uncontested by anyone in the ANC or the media that supported the democratic transition. Although Lowenthal's work concentrates on western notions of heritage, his analysis is just as useful in the South African context. That South Africa

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<sup>159</sup> Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 121.

is the most westernised of Africa's countries and certainly the one with the most entrenched westernised traditions, makes Lowenthal's work relevant in this context.

Divergent voices were not heard on the island under Mandela and were not promoted precisely because the survival of the new idea of the nation depended on their absence. Today, Robben Island continues to be the most visible and most promoted symbol of the country's resistance to apartheid. As such it wields significant influence over how living memory of apartheid is shaped individually as visitors continue to flock to the site and collectively as Robben Island continues to guard the public memory of apartheid. Like their former-prisoners-turned-guides, Robben Island Museum's audience is encouraged to align their own memories of apartheid--perhaps even memories of apartheid prisons--with the presented narrative. The notion being cultivated on Robben Island is that the space in which Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for eighteen years is "the birthplace of...the new nation,"<sup>160</sup> a nation united in its diversity and committed to ensuring its own survival and success.

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<sup>160</sup> Rassool, "Rise of Heritage," 17.

### **Conclusion: The Short Distance between District Six and Robben Island**

This dissertation turns on my characterisation of Nelson Mandela as the most recognised, respected and influential figure of the post-apartheid period. The black African media, burgeoning when the African National Congress was in need of heroes to promote its cause, found their first media celebrity in Mandela. He rose to national prominence during the Defiance Campaign and became a mythic hero as “The Black Pimpernel” while he was underground. Captured and sentenced, Mandela secured his status in his Speech from the Dock, his last public statement for twenty-seven years. Mandela’s celebrity and status grew in prison, as apartheid-era bans on his words and pictures shielded his name from tarnish. Emerging from prison in 1990, Mandela claimed to be at the service of the South African people; within four years he would lead them to democracy.

Mandela chose the values of reconciliation, unity and diversity as the foundation of the new democracy and they dominated the rhetoric of his presidency. He encouraged the country to acknowledge and confront its past through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and used the reach of the media to do so. This was important in ways that I did not entirely anticipate at the beginning of this undertaking. The media not only reported on the proceedings and findings of the TRC but actually became civic educators, promoting Mandela’s vision for the new South Africa. No longer concerned about their objectivity, the media reported on events at the TRC that would promote national feeling among their viewers. In addition to their contribution to nation-building, the media allowed the TRC to become the most important memory project to be undertaken in post-apartheid South Africa. Mandela hoped a national healing would arise in the process, where the TRC would be the foundation for the creation not only of a common collective memory of apartheid but the beginning of the nation-building project itself. This

context significantly influenced the burgeoning South African heritage industry, where Mandela's core values were promoted as the foundation of the new South African heritage. The reliance of South Africa's heritage sector on public funds only increased the likelihood that new heritage spaces would reflect the rhetoric of the new dispensation.

It is in this context that both the District Six and Robben Island Museums emerged. The opening exhibition at District Six, *Streets*, was designed to allow former residents to reclaim the area, to re-inscribe themselves into a space from which they had been removed between 1966 and 1981. In this context, former residents were invited back to write their names and their addresses on a map that covered the entire floor of the converted church. While this physical reclamation of District Six by its residents was important, the reinsertion of residents' memories of the district into the historical narrative of South Africa was literally a rewriting of apartheid history. The destruction of District Six and South Africa's other multicultural communities was also a destruction of the memory that these communities had ever functioned and flourished.

It was not widely considered problematic that this vision of District Six was significantly influenced by a nostalgic impulse caused by the trauma of forced removal and then the uncertainty of the political transition to democracy after Mandela's release in 1990. The romanticised memory of District Six--what one visitor to the museum called a myth--<sup>161</sup> was not widely condemned by the former community. This is in part due to the fact that those who returned to the District Six Museum after 1994 were self-selecting. Those with largely fond memories of District Six, those most likely to inscribe nostalgic memories and romanticised anecdotes of life in the area on the map and the accompanying calico cloths, were not likely to contradict the overall narrative created in the museum's space. Former residents who did not

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<sup>161</sup> McEachern, "Mapping the Memories," 510.

share these memories, who did not feel the need to return to District Six and rebuild its memory, stayed away.

The memory created by the museum also had significance for Mandela's wider national project. In the context of Mandela's term as president, District Six Museum was a showcase for the twin concepts of unity and diversity, despite the fact that it was never officially recognised by his government. The memory of the area was imbued with the sense that District Six had been a vibrant multicultural community that worked. Various cultural groups all lived and worked together in the same area. Sandra Prosalendis, the museum's curator during this period, claimed that

District Six is remembered by many who had lived there as a place where they were able to cross religious, class and social boundaries. As a place where they were able to share their everyday experiences and live not as "coloured," "whites," "Africans," or "Indians" but as South Africans, District Six occupies a special place in the history of South Africa.<sup>162</sup>

District Six Museum's narrative was dominated by this vision during Mandela's term in office. What is perhaps most striking is that this interpretation was built entirely from the memories of the district's former residents rather than from the creative vision of the museum's curators. The paradox here is that the historical vision of what the new South Africa could become was provided by a Coloured minority that was deeply dissatisfied with its place in the new dispensation. Despite their dissatisfaction in the new South Africa, however, former District Sixers remained within Mandela's dominant heritage narrative, a clear indication that the macro-heritage of which Tunbridge and Ashworth write successfully subsumed this micro-heritage. "Stan's Walk," reconstituted by a former resident from his own personal memories of the area, is a further reflection of Mandela's rainbow nationalism. Abrahams signposts inclusive memories of District Six in which all of the former population--White, African, Coloured, Indian and

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<sup>162</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 121.

Malay--are present. Although the museum claimed that “Stan’s Walk” was intended to be only one person’s view of District Six, ultimately because it is the only one presented, passes in the visitor’s mind as the authentic District Six experience.

Given the approach of the District Six Museum and its basis on the memories of former residents, it is surprising to find that the memory work and the heritage being created there is similar in tone and message to that which was being built during the same period at the Robben Island Museum. Where the initial purpose of the District Six Museum was to create a space for a local memory project, from its inception, Robben Island was intended to have national significance as a heritage space. Opened in January 1997 soon after the last warders were removed, Robben Island Museum quickly became the cornerstone of South Africa’s heritage industry. Both domestically and internationally recognised, Robben Island was a symbol of resistance to apartheid. It was also recognised as the space in which Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for much of his twenty-seven years in prison and thus had become synonymous with the triumph of democracy over oppression.

Unlike the District Six Museum, Mandela’s government fully endorsed the memory work carried out on Robben Island and the president himself officially inaugurated the museum’s opening in September 1997. On that day, he claimed that Robben Island was “a vital part of South Africa’s collective heritage.”<sup>163</sup> By doing so, Mandela endorsed the narrative of the Robben Island Museum and strengthened his already close association with the Robben Island heritage brand. The museum marketed itself as the space where the country triumphed over oppression; where inmates came together and struggled against the racist policies of the Department of Corrections to achieve better and fairer living and working conditions in the island’s prison; and where the new nation itself was born. Mandela’s vision for South Africa,

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<sup>163</sup> Mandela, “Address by President Mandela on Heritage Day.”

based on the values of reconciliation, unity and diversity, were institutionalised in the museum; indeed, the museum's narrative very closely followed that of the president's autobiographical account of his time on Robben Island. Between 1994 and 1999, the hardship and despair of life on the island, the cold winters and hot summers, the absence of decent food and the physical and psychological abuse were marginalised or silenced altogether. The warders were divested of personal responsibility for their actions and transformed into victims of the evil system. As they were humanised in *Long Walk to Freedom*, so too were they in the Robben Island Museum.

The Robben Island heritage brand centered on this new narrative of the island as place in which hope won out over despair and where the champions of democracy won out over the purveyors of oppression. This vision was kept alive, even authenticated, by former prisoners who were now turned into tour guides. Rather than challenging or providing some nuance to the museum's narrative, guides reinforced it by remaining within its confines. One guide suggested that

keeping the memory [of what happened at Robben Island] alive and allowing people to experience that, and also talking about the healing we went through as human beings, discovering the common humanity, those things must be the basis of whatever we say or do on Robben Island.<sup>164</sup>

While the guided tours of Robben Island were problematic on several levels, they offered an interesting and altogether unexpected parallel with the media's role during the operation of the TRC. Both the journalists reporting on the TRC and the prisoners who guided visitors through Robben Island Museum during Mandela's presidency engaged in a type of civic education and nation-building that I did not anticipate uncovering. The guides interviewed by Shearing and Kempa share similar desires to those of the journalists that covered the TRC: both wanted to

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<sup>164</sup> Shearing & Kempa, "A Museum of Hope," 71.

reveal to their audiences the common humanity of all South Africans in order to make a meaningful contribution to the nation-building effort.

Like the journalists covering the TRC, and indeed like “Stan’s Walk” at the District Six Museum, there was a total absence of objectivity in the guided tours of Robben Island. Visitors were stripped of their ability to create meaning for themselves and were purposefully left with the impression that the tour was an authentic representation of prison life rather than an interpretation of someone’s prison experience. Even if Robben Island’s tour guides explicitly claimed that their interpretation of life on the island was personal and therefore not representative, as the only one presented to visitors, the interpretation would be taken as representative nonetheless. Despite their differences, District Six and Robben Island Museums developed into heritage spaces in which the dominant rhetoric of the political elite found physical expression. Although District Six Museum was created entirely from the memories of former residents and received little in the way of public monies in which to create a memory space, it represented a heritage in which the ideas of reconciliation, unity and diversity came to be celebrated. These same values were enshrined in the narrative of Robben Island Museum, a memory space in which the narrative was largely based on the memories of the Rivonia Trialists and especially on Mandela’s memories in *Long Walk to Freedom*. Despite their similar and even overlapping narratives, the District Six and Robben Island Museums diverge in ways that I had not entirely anticipated at the beginning of this work. While I thought that the national significance of District Six was directly related to the culture of remembrance that dominated Mandela’s presidency, ultimately its importance as a national site (if not its recognition as such) was not the museum’s initial intention.



In stark contrast, Robben Island Museum's narrative was engineered by the ANC government as a way in which to husband national feeling in South Africa's diverse population. It is significant (and typical of the centralised nature of the ANC) that no former ANC prisoners have criticised the way in which Robben Island Prison has been represented at the Robben Island Museum. The narrative had the ANC leadership's and Mandela's endorsement and financial support. Indeed, in 1998 alone, Robben Island Museum received fully 80% of the available government grant for "arts, cultural and heritage institutions."<sup>165</sup> This highlights the ANC's perception of Robben Island Museum as a unifying symbol in the post-apartheid period. It is here that the narratives of District Six and Robben Island converge. Although their incorporation into the wider post-apartheid narrative followed dissimilar paths, both District Six and Robben Island Museums were important memory spaces and heritage sites for the new South Africa. Both provided a view of the past that allowed all South Africans to navigate the present in ways that made sense.

Both District Six and Robben Island Museums, however, posed significant problems of legitimacy in the post-apartheid period. District Six Museum was criticised for turning the history of the former area into a myth. Former black African residents did not return to District Six in the same numbers as their Coloured neighbours, an indication that perhaps they did not share the official memory enshrined at the museum. On Robben Island, Véronique Riouful has claimed that the overarching narrative of the museum is problematic. Ultimately, however, the writing of District Six and Robben Island in a way that serves the project of nation-building was necessary under Mandela's leadership. The country was too divided for public images of that division to be displayed in heritage spaces. Especially on Robben Island where the country was supposed to have become a nation, a divisive narrative in which warders were presented as

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<sup>165</sup> Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 118.

personally responsible for their actions and where exhibitions that presented the daily abuse of prisoners were displayed would only serve to sharpen differences of interpretation. Such a narrative would have been completely out of context in Mandela's South Africa anyway; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been created in part to provide an appropriate space to expose the truth of apartheid and then begin the process of national reconstruction. Heritage spaces were supposed to build on the national healing created by the TRC. Nelson Mandela attempted to use heritage and memory to bring South Africans together, where once they had been used to keep them apart.

The heritage industry, especially as characterised by the District Six Museum in Cape Town and Robben Island Museum just off its coast, under Mandela's presidency was ultimately an important part of his government's nation-building project. That Mandela never recognised District Six Museum as a national institution was, I have argued, irrelevant. Both the museum's curators and directors and indeed some of its former residents acknowledged the national implications of their local memory project. Indeed, that former residents of other displaced communities complained that the District Six Museum marginalised their own experiences of expropriation indicates that the wider South African population recognised District Six's national importance as well. The fact that Robben Island was recognised for its national significance even before the first democratic elections speaks for itself. As the most recognised and recognisable symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle, the island prison was destined to become an important memory space in the post-apartheid period. While it remains to be determined how successful Mandela's nation-building project was, it is incontestable that both District Six and Robben Island Museums respectively provided the most explicit and best spaces in which to showcase the values and rhetoric of the new democracy.

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