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Uncanny District Six

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Introduction

The city of Cape Town is stunningly beautiful. Its historic colonial centre nestles within the city bowl area surrounded by mountains and oceans. But this environmental beauty and its appealing surfaces conceal painful sites of memory. Paradoxically, hiding in plain sight, on the edge of the city centre is the perceived wasteland of rubble and weeds where the District Six community once lived (Figure 3.1). District Six was a pre-apartheid community erased through racist forced displacements. In the 1950s, under apartheid, all South Africans were racially classified coloured, black, Asian, and white. And, under the Group Areas Act, the apartheid state forcibly displaced and dispersed all District Six residents across the city and beyond. The architecture of District Six was bulldozed into smithereens, only places of worship were not demolished. The state planned a wealthy white inner-city suburb, but this did not happen as former residents resisted this apartheid development aim. To the present day, District Six looms large in the popular imagination of the city. Much has been written about its history and the post-apartheid memorial strategies steered by the District Six Museum and former residents.¹ I sketch the District Six history before and after removals, but my central focus is rather the personal meanings of this public space. This site contradicts both the seductive beauty of the landscape and the recurrent nostalgic memory patterns about community life before displacements. This chapter is also an excavation of photographic and oral remains obscured within my family archive by racism and overshadowed by the iconic District Six story.

The bleak space – where District Six thrived before erasure – is frequently referred to as ‘empty,’ ‘empty land,’ ‘empty traumatic space,’ and other variations. But this so-called empty space is neither materially nor symbolically empty. What remains is a proliferation of hauntings and other meanings (Jonker & Till 2009; O’Connell 2015). There are also many material traces: on the site, in people’s homes, and those curated at the District Six Museum (Rasool & Prosalendis 2001). My aim is to move beyond the perceived emptiness of the space to look at District Six as a site of many mirrors, which reflect the mixed meanings of ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault 1986). Most typically, District Six is imaginatively remembered as the ideal home and community of the past and future. But such nostalgic reification psychically displaces ‘homely’ images onto a utopian plane, which conceals the ‘unhomely’ – the uncanny – that emerges from the familiar.² I argue that uncanny associations are evoked by spaces and objects in the present but the past sources for such affects are childhoods, especially unconscious early childhood. This means we need to discursively deploy both historical and psychoanalytic modes of thinking to explain how differing temporalities – conscious and unconscious – create uncanny senses of place.
Anxious ambivalences have dominated the writing of this chapter. There are three broad reasons. Firstly, several authors have noted that writing about the uncanny is necessarily shaped by its ambiguity and strangeness (Royle 2003). Secondly, it is evoked by working through my family dynamics linked to District Six. My family lived there from 1956 to 1962 and were not forcibly removed. The family archive I engage with here is in no way more important than the pain of the District Six community that still reverberates across generations. Thirdly, writing about early childhood involves encounters with my parents’ racism and other parental issues since my birth in 1961 in District Six. I argue that the uncanny might be perceived as out of place with public memories of District Six, but a psychoanalytic reading shows that *uncanny evocations* provide pathways to analyse a city’s memoryscape as more than its nostalgic or beautiful surfaces. I conclude with reflections about the deferred regeneration of District Six.

**Before and after removals**

The figure of the forcibly removed forms a kind of absent presence at the centre of the contemporary discourses of the city. Just as s/he haunts the post-apartheid city, its lines of yearning and desire, are etched deep in living memory, form a supervening grid through which the city is experienced and erupt in the present.

*(Murray, Shepherd & Hall 2007)*
District Six in Cape Town, Sophia Town in Johannesburg, and Cato Manor in Durban are the most well-known urban examples of apartheid erasure. Before 1948, colonial and segregationist South African governments entrenched racial divisions through job and accommodation reservation across the country. While often exaggerated in liberal imaginaries, in Cape Town, residential pockets such as District Six, Woodstock, Mowbray, Rondebosch, Claremont, Retreat, and other spaces were, to varying degrees, culturally heterogeneous until the late 1950s (Field 2001).

District Six originated in the 1830s and many early residents were emancipated indigenous KhoiSan and slaves from Asia and Africa, who gradually adopted the label ‘coloured’ and, by the late nineteenth century, ‘coloured identity had crystallized’ (Adhikari 2005: 2). Moreover, from the 1860s with the emergence of Kimberly diamond and Johannesburg gold mining, Cape Town as a British imperial port grew and many sailors, migrants, and passing travelers from the North and East found residence in nearby District Six.

In the twentieth century, soldiers returning from the South African War (1899–1901) and both World Wars found a home there. More significantly, the area had a diverse popular cultural life, which included various music genres, dance bands, New Year’s carnivals, youth gangs, and a thriving ‘bioscope’ scene (Jeppie & Soudien 1990; Mainguard 2017). It also had a network of traders and street corner shops, and many found employment in the nearby city centre, the harbour, and textile and garment factories. By the 1940s, District Six was deemed a ‘slum’ by city planners and its proximity to the city centre gave it economic potential and its cultural diversity was anathema to the onset of apartheid.

After District Six was zoned a ‘white area’ in 1966, removals occurred from 1968 to 1982. The ubiquitous ‘knock on the door’ was the dreaded moment when Group Areas inspectors came to inform families when they were to be removed. More than 60,000 people were forcibly removed from District Six and over 200,000 across the city in what was a massive apartheid program of social re-engineering. District Sixer’s classified as ‘African’ were relocated to the apartheid township of Guguletu (or endorsed out the region to the so-called rural ‘homelands’) and people classified as ‘coloured’ went to Bonteheuwel, Manenberg, Hanover Park, Mitchells Plein, and other new townships. The apartheid designed townships of the Cape Flats became known as the ‘dumping grounds’ of people displaced from the older inner-city suburbs (Field 2001). The widespread anguish and anger that was evoked by these racist removals gave impetus to the formation of an anti-apartheid coalition of organisations, for example, ‘The Hands-off-District-Six’ campaign. They were largely successful at blocking economic development in the 1980s (Jeppie & Soudien 1990). The one exception was the controversial construction of a university campus on the western side of District Six.

The Hands-Off campaign was a forerunner to the formation of the Museum. In 1995 a temporary exhibition about District Six was planned to run for only two weeks. But it was such a popular success that it developed into a permanent museum. The Museum placed considerable emphasis on visitor experiences and public dialogues. Former residents inscribe their stories onto memory cloths and are interviewed on site. The rekindling of place stimulates the imaginative ‘holding together’ of both self and community identity. The most profound activity is former residents writing their family homes onto a street map of District Six (Rassool & Prosalendis 2001). The map is located beneath the entrance floor of the Museum (Figure 3.2) and works as a mnemonic device, which recalls place and symbolically ‘returns’ former residents (Coombes 2004; Meachern 2001). The museum offers former residents with opportunities to re-connect with each other at exhibitions, book launches, music events, and public education programs, which creates a social framework to hold memories, emotions, and imaginings of District Six. These public projects have rebuilt community networks and are a form of social regeneration, but it remains partial and in-process (Field 2012). The kind of community people spatially return to will neither be the community before erasure nor the community imaginatively remembered thereafter.
Family remains

the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar. How is this possible, in what circumstances can the familiar become uncanny and frightening?

(Freud 1919: 220)

It is strange that the initial three years of human life remain outside conscious memory. Yet we have fundamental experiences in those early years. In later life stages, we might have flashbacks, auditory echoes, embodied memories, and uncanny sensations from early childhood, but such elusive phenomena require discursive psychoanalysis to make sense of. This acknowledged, I explore traces of my early childhood, which were mirrored to me through stories others told about my upbringing. I interpret three overlapping memory traces from the family archive: firstly, a conversational disclosure by my brother; secondly, a photograph of my mother with me; thirdly, an oral history interview with my mother.

The first trace. My family lived in a narrow semi-detached house on Lemmington Terrace from 1956 to 1962. I was born there in 1961 but have no memories of this home and the surrounding spaces. I have two siblings, Yvonne (born 1951) and Ronald (born 1953). I grew up with many stories about our Lemmington Terrace home, which my parents referred to as being in the suburb of Vredehoek. That suburb is above a highway, then called De Waal Drive, whereas District Six is directly below the highway Figure 3.2).
During a conversation with my brother – in the late 1980s – I referred to our time in Lemmington Terrace, Vredehoek. My brother’s corrective response surprised me:

That wasn’t in Vredehoek, you know how racist dad and mom are, they said that because we had coloured neighbours. Lemmington Terrace is in District Six. They were ashamed we lived in District Six, so they told everyone we lived in Vredehoek because that is a white area.6

Lemmington Terrace was in fact on Upper Constitution Street (some residents refer to it as ‘old Constitution Street’). Upper Constitution Street according to municipal maps is very much in District Six and from the stories of other residents it was unequivocally seen as part of the District Six community, albeit on the edge of the area. From 1953 to 1956 my family rented in Vredehoek where ‘we had rooms,’ but the 1956 move to Lemmington Terrace was significant as it was the first family house they rented. But in my mother’s narrative, District Six was described as ‘down there’ or ‘down where it was rough,’ as if District Six only began several blocks from where we lived. Lemmington Terrace had several white families but there were certainly coloured families too. Yet my mother portrays ‘all’ of Lemmington Terrace as white, and speaks of coloured children playing in the road as if they mysteriously came from elsewhere.

My official birth certificate – completed by my mother – does not indicate the suburb where we lived but indicates our home address as: ‘63 Lemmington Terrace, off De Waal Drive.’ This documentary fudging together with the oral denial of our home being in District Six is indeed evidence of racism. This was partly fuelled by their shame over the family’s positioning within a racialised class hierarchy. They had a deep desire to be ‘better off’ and throughout my childhood my father drummed into my head, ‘you must study harder, so you can be better off than we are.’ Their desire for upward class mobility involved attempts to distance the family from South Africans of colour, and efforts to improve their material position entailed the ‘underestimated emotion of envy’ (Steedman 1986: 6). This is not exceptional; when I was conducting PhD interviews with white working-class residents of other culturally diverse communities, such as Kensington, many engaged in the same racist denials or incorrect labelling of where they lived (Field 1996).

Before I began excavating my family archive for other articles (Field 2013), I used to believe that it was just a historical co-incidence that my family lived in District Six, but it was no co-incidence. District Six absorbed migrant former soldiers like my British army veteran father. And it absorbed poor coloured, African, and white rural inhabitants seeking a foothold in the city, such as the unskilled farm girl that was my mother. Her parents were tenant farmers in the rural hinterland of the Western Cape. My mother only had one year of high school when her father compelled her to leave school to work, and my father had three years of high school in Birmingham, before joining the British Army in 1940, coming to South Africa in 1948. In 1962, my family moved from District Six to Maitland, which was a white working-class neighbourhood. In 1969, they moved from Maitland to Bothazig in the northern suburbs. Bothazig was a housing project of the apartheid, Department of Community Development. The suburb was named after that department’s minister, PW Botha, who later became an infamous apartheid Prime Minister. It is often forgotten, but the apartheid state was also a welfare state for the white working class, and my family and I were beneficiaries of those policies.

The second trace. With no irony, my physical conception was constantly described by my mother as, ‘Sean was a mistake, but he was a lovely mistake.’ The photograph is small (8 x 9 cm). It shows my mother smiling at me in her arms (Figure 3.3). It was taken on 11 December 1961, my christening day. My mother adopts a Madonna pose. Perhaps my Catholic father and photographer composed the scene. In her words, ‘You have a christening robe on that was in the family – it was from my mother originally – I have a pretty dress on to, it was tan and white, this is the steps of Lemmington Terrace, sitting with you.’ This is my only visual glimpse of that house, and a rare linking of oral and visual traces.

She looks happy in the photograph, but the image depicts more than that. My birth was a life or death moment: my parents had conflicting positive/negative blood groups, and hence the rhesus-factor came into
conflict with me as the third child. In-utero, my mother’s anti-bodies were attacking my blood as an alien presence. This was five years before the invention of in-utero blood transfusions. So, I was a rhesus baby, two-months premature, severely jaundiced, weighing only three pounds. I had a ten-day stay in an incubator and two months in the hospital. My birth was a ‘shock to her system’ (she had no prior knowledge of the rhesus factor), which was compounded by the mother-child separation. Repeatedly she said, ‘But I went and saw you every day, even hitch-hiked on De Waal Drive’ to get to Groote Schuur hospital. This photograph was roughly taken a week after my arrival in Lemmington Terrace after two months in hospital, it frames not just happiness but also her immense relief at my survival.

My near-death birth marked, what she admits, the beginning of her ‘over-protectiveness.’ She keeps me ‘in the cot’ next to the parental bed until age three. And I stay in the parental bedroom in Maitland until 29 May 1969, the day we moved to Bothazig. I was exactly seven years and ten months old. Others see this

Figure 3.3 On the steps of 63 Lemmington Terrace.
Uncanny District Six

The nineteenth-century umbrella category ‘coloured’ masks the clustering of creole identities, which cohere through popular cultural processes in colonial inner-city spaces such as District Six. These identities are not reducible to so-called miscegenation but are, in part, a colonial political construct and, in part, a product of creolisation (Constant-Martin 2013) and popular agencies (Adhikari 2005). While there is a historiography on the production of coloured identities and spaces (Erasmus 2001), a genealogy of the category ‘coloured’ from the late Dutch colonial period (1652–1806) and during the British imperial regime (1806–1910) is still to be written. That historical genealogy will make more explicable the imagined elevation of District Six to iconic status within the popular imaginaries of people who self-identify as coloured across the Cape and beyond. The apartheid erasure of District Six painfully sedimented that iconic image through the injuries of racist displacement. However, nostalgic constructions of pre-apartheid District Six as a culturally diverse haven obscures how the formation of this community occurred during post-emancipation British colonialism and liberal paternalism. A hankering that draws on such imperial discourses can still be found in family photograph collections, oral memories, and conservative political sensibilities of older coloured
generations. With these discourses in mind, I focus specifically on the relationship between historical losses, the uncanny, and the happy family trope that dominates the nostalgia for a pre-erasure District Six.

Nostalgia is an imaginative process of framing evocative memories driven by psychic defenses and reinforced through shared memory patterns with others. This is a response to the historical loss of home and community which was especially devastating for those born and raised in District Six and who experienced removals as the severing of emotional attachments to their community spaces. For many it was also as if their inner-self was fragmented and imaginary mental places were reconstructed to sustain a degree of self-cohesion in the post-removals context marked by the social fragmentation of community and family networks (Field 2012: 87–100). Moreover, for the thousands who have for decades lived in poverty-stricken, violent ganglands across the Cape Flats, a major everyday concern is safety. These anxious safe/unsafe discourses are saturated with narratives of broken families damaged by domestic and gang violence, sexual abuse, drugs, and other vicissitudes of working-class life. Note also that poverty, inequality, and violence has dramatically increased under post-apartheid governance. Both common law criminal violence and the structural violence of poverty dominate precarious lives on the Cape Flats. For older generations, a reconstruction of the pre-erasure District Six as a safe and peaceful community where ‘we had nothing, but we were all happy together’ is a common response. In this context, it is little wonder that forms of nostalgia provide some solace while enduring the daily stresses of the unsafe present. And, yet, the victims of apartheid removals managed to forge ‘new communities’ on the Cape Flats (Salo 2005).

These interweaving explanations are crucial, but engaging family archives – as I have done in the prior section (see also O’Connell 2015) – suggests that more attention needs to be given to the uncanny evocations from childhood in understanding how nostalgia functions and how it induces the forgetting or silencing of uncomfortable aspects of intra-community contestations and histories of family dynamics before displacement. But nostalgia also involves desire or, more significantly, unfulfilled desires:

A longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed . . . modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.

(Boym 2001: xiii)

Paradoxically, nostalgia removes the subject from history, while the desire to be mirrored in history and to gain restitution continues. Temporally, the District Six nostalgic narrative is as follows: everything was fine before apartheid, during ‘the good peaceful times,’ but apartheid destroyed everything and ‘bad violent times’ commenced. This split-view of before apartheid as utopia versus the dystopia of present and future reinforces a crude binary: utopia as imagined perfection and dystopia as imagined negation. While bearing in mind these imagined extremities, we need to create holding frames for other possibilities to be articulated. The answer lies in heterotopia as the space of mixed mirrors.

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also in itself a heterogeneous space . . . The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. As for heterotopias as such how can they be described?

(Foucault 1986: 23–24)

Heterotopia holds utopian and dystopic views, at times in conflicting temporal sequence and with uncanny affects. Foucault’s framing of ‘heterotopia’ could be usefully deployed in writing a spatial history of colonial
and apartheid planning, regulation, and governance of inner-city spaces such as District Six. Moreover, heterotopia provides a conceptual frame to apprehend the public circulation of memories and meanings. The curatorial strategies of the District Six Museum have created such a heterotopic framework that holds a range of imagined memories and ways for identities to be empathically mirrored back to former residents and others who experienced apartheid displacements across the city. But mourning continues as legitimate desires for a spatial return are not being fulfilled. The realisable hope for a spatial return overlaps with an unrealisable fantasy to return to a pre-injurious emotional state, which is articulated through the trope of the happy family.

The trope of the happy family requires us to distinguish forms of loss experienced during childhood in contrast to those that occur at later life stages. As Steedman puts it, ‘All children experience a first loss, a first exclusion; lives shape themselves around this sense of being cut off and denied’ (1986: 6). However, such early childhood losses might be better termed an ‘absence’ (LaCapra 2001) or a ‘constitutive lack’ (Lacan 1977). Early childhood losses and exclusions produce problematic or faulty mirroring, which are the primary cause of narcissistic wounding, a central psychoanalytic conception (Freud 1991 [1914]). These forms of faulty mirroring, to varying degrees, occur within all families, but the happy family trope of nostalgia silences or conceals these difficult or painful aspects of parent-child relationships. These early childhood scenes constitute unconscious frames through which people experience and comprehend (or are unable to register and comprehend) the historical losses inflicted in later family life or by institutions beyond the family such as the apartheid state’s dismantling of the District Six community.

The District Six space of today has been called ‘haunted’ by many (Jonker & Till 2009). These hauntings are fueled by uncanny affects from pre-linguistic and early childhood and compounded by apartheid’s severing of children’s emotional attachments to homes, streets, and other communal spaces. The uncanny is not necessarily traumatic in origin but its pre-linguistic childhood source means that it is a weird companion to trauma. But there is an unresolved conceptual problem, psychoanalytic theory has not clearly worked out the relationship between trauma and the uncanny (Masschelen 2011), given that both are not directly registered in language. Moreover, I differ with ‘event-centred’ notions of trauma — such as post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) — and prefer the Laplanchian view, which focuses on the temporal dialectic between early childhood scenes and later life events to produce traumatic traces (Laplanche 1976). In brief, neither the interiority of childhood family scenes nor the intrusions of exterior violence are sufficient explanations in of themselves to explain the aftermathness of trauma or the uncanny. It is through the intersection between differing temporalities where potential answers lie. On the one hand, the present-to-the past reminders from the mirrors of heterotopia (which include nostalgia and dystopia), and on the other hand, the past-to-the-present unconscious transmission of enigmatic messages that emanate from childhood. As mnemonic objects are encountered, or people move through spaces, affects travel from these temporal directions to converge and evoke uncanny senses of place.

These are my brief conceptual contours for future research to historically trace the discursive webs between the materiality and affectivity of spaces. We also need to historicise the socio-political, economic, and psychic conditions of possibility that give rise to the mixture of nostalgic memories, fantasies, and myths that frame people’s intersubjective attachments to spaces and what unfolds after forced displacement. In summary, the undecidability of the uncanny dominates the District Six memoryscape: where on-going nostalgia has become ‘strangely familiar’ and the site of erasure continues to be ‘disquietly unfamiliar’ (Kohon 2016: 13) and incongruent with the city landscape. The site remains as a spatial wound that never heals nor fulfils the desired return to a mythical pre-injurious emotional state.

Finally, the partial regeneration of the District Six community by former residents and the Museum is significant. The Museum named its new public education space ‘the Homecoming Centre.’ But the community return to the original site has been repeatedly stalled. At a 2004 ceremony, former President Mandela handed the keys to 24 families, but since then only another 115 houses have been built. A further 1,260 families were given the legal right to return and were promised housing, but they are still waiting.
Moreover, with the national re-opening of calls for restitution claims in 2014, a waiting list of a further 3,000 former District Six claimants have been reported (Rawoot 2016). However, the erratic process of return shames both city and national government departments. As the District Six Museum director, Bonita Bennett, put it:

A pall of disappointment hangs over the District Six community. Despite the successes of this community’s land claims, the way in which the Land Restitution Act has found expression in practice has been slow beyond comprehension, occasionally opaque in its processes and often painful.

(Bennett 2018)

When the homecoming eventually happens for this community and cycles of social life are rekindled, degrees of restoration of self through community is conceivable. What might be the most meaningful for aging former residents will be to see their children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren living in the new space and community that District Six will become. Sadly, even such opportunities are fading as former residents pass on and both restitution and regeneration are repeatedly deferred.

Notes
2 For different definitions of the uncanny: the psychoanalytic (Freud 1919), deconstruction (Royle 2003), and phenomenological (Trigg 2012).
3 For popular accounts of family histories from District Six, see Fortune (1996), Ngcelwane (1998) and Ebrahim (1999). On photo albums and family life in District Six, see O’Connell (2015).
4 After the 1990s’ first round of restitution applications, over 130,000 Cape Town residents had restitution claims verified. The second round of applications are ongoing since 2016.
5 Note four developments: the infant’s recognition that it is a separate body/being from the primary caregiver (‘mirror stage’ between six to nine months); learning to walk (between nine and fifteen months); and the entry into the symbolic world of language. And, by age five, ‘object relationships’ between the child’s sense of self and the world are unconsciously configured.
6 This was an unrecorded conversation with my brother. All other oral quotations are from recorded interview sessions conducted by the author with Mrs. Hermie Field at Hermanus (2, 4, and 12 April 1999).

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