

## The Paradoxical Utopias of Urbanites – Martyrs of Apartheid

Chloé Buire

Traduction: Laurent Chauvet, IFAS

### Abstract

Cape Town, the first capital of South Africa, was built on spatial injustice. First a Dutch trading post on the Route to India, then a British colony and the seat of Parliament under apartheid, the Mother City has been deeply marked by racism. In 1994, Nelson Mandela's election symbolised the abolition of State racism, but the political declarations concerning the break with the past were far from meaning the eradication of prejudices and memories of spatially engraved violence. Based on video interviews presenting the life trajectories of three township residents, this article exposes the escape routes along which the urban identities of Capetonians removed by force under apartheid are shaped. Their personal memories take on the form of a founding myth marked by a highlighted martyred experience, while trying to make sense of their daily lives through symbolic places and socio-religious imagination challenging "the order of things". As such, the notion of heterotopia can describe the parallel worlds in which urbanites take refuge, in order to invent an alternative order enabling them to overcome the marks of domination on a day to day basis.

**Key Words:** Cape Town, urban citizenship, nostalgia, utopia, myth, production of space, injustice.

*I'll start with where I come from... I'm from Simonstown originally, even the southern part of Simonstown. Since the 18th century our family has been in Simonstown. So like, my father was working at the dockyard, for the Navy, in Simonstown, for the rest of his life until they were moved to Gugulethu. So I grew up there... As we were kids now, we were mixed with Coloureds, with Indians. So we didn't play with Whites actually... The shop is only few minutes' walk, maybe 10 to 15 minutes to town. So we used to walk by foot to town. You know maybe groceries, mainly we were delivered. So you just pop to the shop and there's delivery at home. So that was the way we live. It was a beautiful life. And, when we were kids that time everything was beautiful and lovely. (Rose, interview from 19/12/2008)*

Since 1965, Rose has been living in Gugulethu, one of the main townships of Cape Town in South Africa (see Map 1). Formerly reserved for so-called 'Black African' populations<sup>1</sup>, today over 80 000 residents live in Gugulethu, affected by

---

<sup>1</sup> During the 2001 census, official statistics categorised the city's 2,9 million residents (3,5 million in 2007) as follows: Coloureds 48%; Black Africans 32%; Whites 19%; Indians or Asians 1 %. Today these categories depend on the actual declarations of the people being interviewed for the census and no longer on some administrative decision, as was the case under apartheid. The author will also use these categories, in inverted commas, so as to insist on their historical construction and to distance herself from the racism which underlies them.

unemployment and poverty. The landscape is monotonous. The apartheid government built rows of houses in crescent-shaped streets. These houses are so small that they are referred to as 'matchbox houses' and the crescent-shaped streets have led to the suburb being isolated from the rest of the city: there are only two access points linking Gugulethu to the city centre, more than twenty kilometres away. The urban shape reflects the domination imposed on those who in those days were called 'Non-Whites'. In 2008, Rose was part of a small 'African' middle class that was fully impacted by increased labour market flexibilisation. Rose is the owner of a matchbox house she inherited from her parents, and lives off her occasional services as a cook. Her husband sells chips and sweets to the children of the suburb from the stoep. While their youngest daughter is currently doing her Matric in a prestigious school, thanks to a private bursary, her prospects remain uncertain. For several years already, the two elder sons have been accumulating small jobs despite their diplomas. Rose and I took to each other immediately. I liked her cheeky but well-meaning humour. She took me under her wing. It was the beginning of the summer and I arrived at Rose's with my video camera to interview her about her life. She told me in snatches how proud she was of being "a real Capetonian", born and bred in the metropolis. Rose was born in 1950 and has experienced all the stages of apartheid, from beginning to end. I wanted her to tell me about her experience. And she began like this: "It was a beautiful life."

In the following pages, I question the social function of the image of lost paradise associated with life before apartheid. Indeed, idealising the past fulfils the role of utopia against which today's conditions are compared. The notion of utopia is used here to refer to imaginary worlds built in reaction to daily injustice. As such, this notion does not necessarily refer to specific "non-places" but, rather, to an intellectual process of the current situation, particularly through the nostalgic reminiscence of the past. Idealised representations which make of the pre-apartheid era a real "lost paradise", serve as a collective founding myth<sup>2</sup>, in the sense that they make it possible to denounce injustice under apartheid and, at the same time, current life conditions in the townships, but also in the sense that they found post-

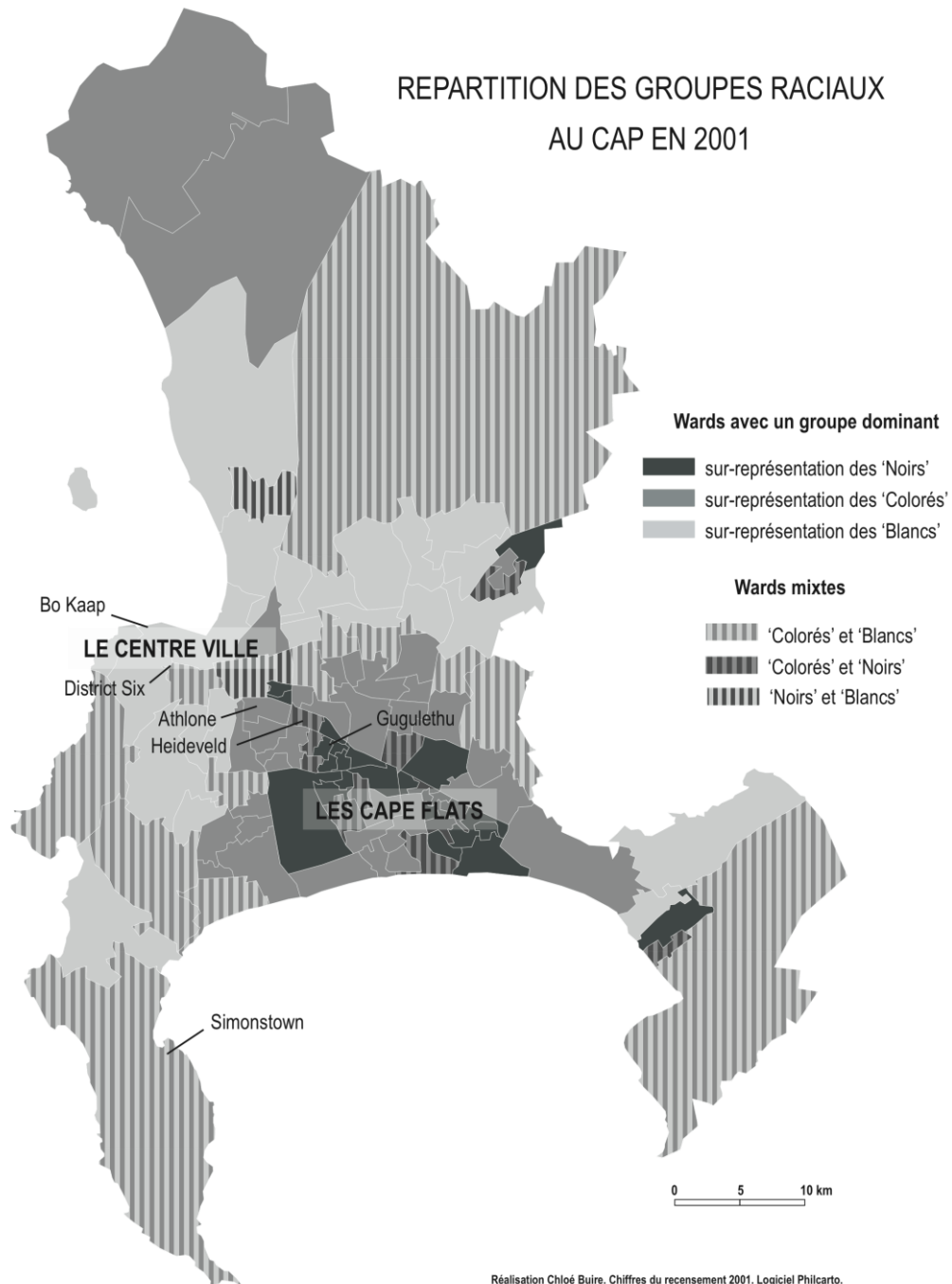
---

<sup>2</sup> While Cape Town had indeed, during her history, been a melting pot of cultural influences, the idea of racial mixing free of any form of domination is far from reflecting the historical reality of this colonial city which for a long time had been a slave city (Worden, Van Heyningen and Bickford-Smith, 1998 and 1999). As such, the use of the word "myth" does not refer to something that would never have existed, but to something that has been idealised and essentialised in specific representations.

apartheid reconciliation discourses. Through the dialectics of past utopia and current dystopia which is still present in the segregated city, the spatial dimension of representations of what is fair and unfair is questioned in urbanites' daily lives.

After reminding the reader of the close links between urban identity constructions and urban spatial structure in the South African context, I will show that Rose's nostalgia in remembering the time before the forced removal of her family, goes beyond personal memories, and is a precursor of "social memory frameworks" (Halbwachs, 1925) underlying identity "escape routes" according to which Cape Town residents invent imaginary worlds for themselves, allowing them to make sense of everyday's intolerable realities.

Map 1: Racial profile of Cape Town's metropolitan wards, showing the names used in this article. 2001 Census.



## 1. Spatial Production of Racial Injustice

*Photos 1 and 2: City Bowl and Cape Flats, when topography emphasises socioeconomic differences. Photos by C. Buire*



Photo 1: View of Table Mountain from Signal Hill (04/03/09). The City Bowl reinforces the image of affluent area isolated from the rest of the metropolis.



Photo 2: New Rest in Gugulethu (30/08/08). The Cape Flats are well-known for being flat and sandy.

These photos show the sharp contrast between these two areas of Cape Town, the second largest city in South Africa, demographically as well as economically. Even the actual shape of the city is an archetype of spatial inequalities. While the majestic Table Mountain which towers the City Bowl was recently conferred the title of "New7Wonder of Nature"<sup>3</sup>, the township of Khayelitsha includes over 400 000 residents, with more than two thirds living in shacks. The contrast between the very rich and very poor suburbs is striking not just because of its extent, but also because of its relative invisibility on a daily basis. It is in this way that Cape Town embodies the notion of spatial *injustice* and not just *inequality*. The differences between richest and poorest concern not only the unequal distribution of wealth or opportunities, but also and more fundamentally being in opposite worlds. As summarised by Myriam Houssay-Holszchuch in her thesis in 1999, this is a case of "White city, black lives". Fifteen years later, it does not look like the situation has changed much: racial homogeneity is being reproduced in the suburbs and inequalities are accumulating. The South African miracle is losing its shine, tarnished by the economic slowdown of the 2000s and a social climate marked by sometimes violent popular discontent. This instability has been exploited by the various factions of the party in power, as testified by the riots during the trials of leaders such as Jacob Zuma in 2008 or Julius Malema in 2011. For this reason, South Africa is an archetypal example not only of inequalities but, and especially, of the feeling of injustice, highlighting its eminently spatial dimension. The example of Cape Town can function as an

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.new7wonders.com/>

“optical instrument [which] functions by magnifying, spectacularising, idealtypifying or even caricaturing phenomena: it’s actually because Cape Town is sometimes so caricatured that one can recognise features in it that are too subtle in other cities.” (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2010b: 12)

Borrowing the notion of idealtypification from Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, I will use at this stage the case of Cape Town as an example of spatial production of injustice. Since the arrival of European settlers at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the establishment of apartheid during the 1950s, the city was developed on the principle of physical separation between social groups. This principle was first upheld by the Dutch East India Company. The import of slaves parked in allocated areas during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the progressive rise of the working class during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the hygienist obsessions of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Victorian power succeeded one another to produce a space crisscrossed by omnipresent socio-racial boundaries (Houssay-Holzschuch, 1999; Worden, Van Heyningen & Bickford-Smith, 1998 and 1999). When the apartheid government was elected in 1948, the general idea according to which “[town planning] standards depended on who they were created for”<sup>4</sup> (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2004: 6) had become widespread by then, and the minimalist equipment advocated for townships was accepted. Two laws published in 1950 led to the implementation of systematic segregation: the Population Registration Act which made the racial identification of all South Africans systematic, and the Group Areas Act which allocated territories to each group defined as such. Yet, Deborah Posel showed the tautological reasoning of these laws since, beyond racist anthropometry inherited from the previous century, it was specifically the places where people went and their everyday life material conditions which were used as racial identification criteria:

Typically, classifiers deployed a battery of questions so as to establish a spatial sense of people’s race: where they were born, where they went to school, where they lived, where they grew up, where their friends lived, where their children went to school, where and with whom their children played. Tautologically denying that racial mixing could be desirable, classifiers tended to read the race of an individual as a function of the dominant racial character of his/her place of residence and the community of those with whom s/he associated. (Posel, 2001: 60, my underlining).

When the government allocated badly insulated housing devoid of latrines or running water to the ‘Bantus’, it created a causal relationship between the race of individuals and the type of housing suitable for them. Posel showed that the reverse reasoning was also reproduced: race could be deducted from the spaces in which people lived on a daily basis. The tautological loop of this association between space and racial membership remains the basis

---

<sup>4</sup> This quote is extracted from a report on the cost of urban Bantu housing conducted in 1954 by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and mentioned by Houssay-Holzschuch, 2004: 6-7.

for today's urban identities. It explains the permanence of racialised frameworks in so far as no one can get rid of one's spatiality; since everyone occupies a space, everyone is also part of a race.

As such, making of Cape Town an archetype of spatial injustice is not just pointing to material inequalities as characteristic features of urban areas, but asserting that injustice is part of urban representations. Using Henri Lefebvre's vocabulary, a produced space takes on three complementary dimensions. The space in which people live daily refers to the *perceived* space. Cape Town's urbanisation is founded on the compartmentalisation of that perceived space, in such a way that the practices of 'black Africans' do not interfere with those of the 'Whites'. The 'Coloureds', half-way through this hierarchy, were grouped together in townships which were used as buffer zones between 'Whites' and 'Blacks'. But the production of such a segregated space also had an impact on the *conceived* and *lived* space of urbanites. According to Henri Lefebvre, the conceived space corresponds to spatial representations, particularly town-planning representations which have been conveyed by managers and politicians for centuries. As to the lived space, it refers to symbols and values internalised by residents, i.e. their *representational spaces*.

How should one account for the dialectical relation linking perceived, conceived and lived spaces? Cape Town's history of segregation resulted in the formalisation of particularly strict collective standards, concerning the perceived spaces allocated to each racial group. How do these representations fill the spaces in which people lived intimately? In attempting to answer this question, the article relied on a two-year ethnographic immersion programme in Cape Town. Personal relations established on the field will be published in the form of filmed interviews featuring three Capetonians. Their stories will make viewers see, listen and, hopefully, feel the key elements of their relation to the city. It will then be possible to go from the description of space as it is *conceived* in town-planning documents, to an analysis of the city as a space of representations (*lived*) acted out in the practices of urbanites (*perceived*).

## 2. Nostalgic Escapes: from Personal Recollections to Collective Memory

In the following videos, Rose, who has already been introduced, is joined by her husband Lucas. Their childhood memories are so nostalgic that their current situation appears like an unavoidable social downfall. On the other hand, Eugene's story is tinged with religious hope. He was born in the city bowl in 1973 and arrived in Heideveld with his parents at the beginning of the 1980s. It was not long before he joined a street gang, the Junky Funky Kids

(JFK). His spells in prison ensured his professionalisation on the drug scene. Wounded on the head and hospitalised for six months while the other members of JFK were all killed, he decided to “renounce the world” according to the Evangelical Rhetoric which today governs his life. One generation separates Eugene from Lucas and Rose. Eugene did not know Cape Town before apartheid. He currently lives at his mother’s house in a room which was transformed into a family apartment for his wife and two children. A racial boundary exists also between this young ‘Coloured’ man and the ‘African’ couple, and even if this categorisation is highly criticised, prejudices against ‘the other group’ remain strong on both sides. Thanks to video editing, I was able to transform three individual experiences into stories that could be communicated to those who did not experience them directly. They fulfil an abstract memory function where the here and there, the past and present are constantly being mixed, becoming utopian creations which enable township residents to express their current urban positioning. How do they make sense of their experience of violence and oppression? How do they make the paradoxes of everyday life intelligible for themselves and others? The notion of “escape routes” as used by Deleuze (1977) helps individuals to express a discourse with more fluidity.

(...) I’m trying to explain that things and people follow very different routes, and that they do not necessarily know which route they’re on, or where the route they’re busy tracing should be going: in short, there is a whole geography going on in people, with strict routes, changeable routes, escape routes etc. (Deleuze, Parnet, 1977: 16)

The notion of “escape routes” contrasts with that of segment and, therefore, demarcation. The idea is not to define clear directions, but to speak about escapes which are generally difficult for the scientific discourse to grasp. By talking about their lives, Lucas, Rose and Eugene navigate between several eras and spaces which are like “maps *inside people*”. When Rose speaks about Simonstown, a real place which still exists today, she also speaks about her childhood, a bygone era. In this process, the real place disappears behind memories of a past place evoked many times. Simonstown has become a place of fiction, a utopian place. The events that did take place there at a specific time, are never anything else but a point of comparison with their current life, their adult life. Eugene actually admits this: when he talks about his adolescence as a member of the Junky Funky Kids, he does not feel like he is talking about his own life. By suggesting that temporal and spatial distancing mechanisms intervene in the necessary reterritorialisation of urbanites on a daily basis, I do not pretend to know *better* than Rose, Lucas or Eugene what constitutes their urban citizenship, but I suggest possible structuring forms which rely on transforming forced removals into a founding myth giving rise to utopian horizons.



## Nostalgic Escape: Transforming Past Forced Uprooting for the Future

### *Video 1 Trauma: Uprooting as Founding Experience*



[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1738tw\\_video1-trauma\\_school](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1738tw_video1-trauma_school)

In the first video, I selected passages where Rose, Lucas and Eugene talk about their removal when the government displaced hundreds of thousands of Capetonians, to carry out the segregation plan provided for by the Group Areas Act: areas like the city bowl where Eugene lived, the peri-central suburbs like Athlone where Lucas lived, as well as the small towns of the peripheries like Simonstown where Rose comes from, were decreed reserved for 'Whites', and all 'Coloured' or 'Black' residents were evicted and relocated in townships (see Map 1). These forced removals began in the 1950s and went on until the mid-1980s, traumatising their victims and contributing to the creation of a real founding myth. This traumatism became a major theme of critical South African geography, as found in John Western's publication (1981) in which he pieces together the itineraries of entire families forced to leave their houses in Mowbray, to settle in the townships of Manenberg or Hanover Park.

Beyond the factual account of the interviewees' itinerary, the videos also communicate moments of hesitation and even contradiction inherent to any life story. A first level of reading shows that the three testimonies insist on the fact that the forced removals brought a brutal drop in social status. Lucas emphasised the degradation of material conditions due to the fact that he had to leave a seven-room house for a small accommodation. Rose

evoked her parents' small cattle that could not be accommodated in Gugulethu. As such, Lucas and Rose described more than a change of residence. Their whole environment changed dramatically. For them, as children, who were used to a unified social group, the township represented an austere no man's land where they were left to their own devices. Even for Rose who was part of a few thousands of 'privileged' families who benefitted from a permanent house from the 1960s already, the material realities of this new life harmed her dignity. She evokes in detail the sanitary installations of the matchbox houses in particular, where toilets consisted of a simple long drop situated in the back yard, and which often had to be shared with several families. While Rose admits that, at fifteen, she still had not grasped the nature of the South African regime, the materialisation of racist apartheid ideology as found in the government's matchbox houses, brought her face to face with injustice.

Yet, on closer examination, certain episodes are in slight conflict and call for more details. Lucas for instance, who at first talked about moving from a seven- to a three-room house, explains that, in fact, he first lived in a shack in Nyanga for about ten years. Between his eviction from Athlone and his settlement in a permanent house, he experienced life in an informal settlement and, in spite of everything, had forged new relationships there. Breaking these ties constituted for him a new heartrending experience, even if it meant accessing better life conditions in a permanent house. As such, a forced removal is not a defined break, separating one's former life in a large house in mixed suburbs from one's new life in a township, in a small under-equipped house. There are intermediate situations with obstacle courses including time spent in the suburbs (those employed as domestic workers in particular), in informal settlements (as was the case for Lucas), or still outside Cape Town (many 'African' children born in the city were sent to extended families in the closest Bantustans; 'Coloured' children were often sent to farms around Cape Town). Finally, for some, moving into apartheid lots did represent a real life condition improvement. This was the case of Eugene who does not talk about his move to Heideveld as a racist eviction but, above all, as a collective path that does not need to be called into question. "The houses in Bo Kaap were sold, people went to Heideveld." Concerning his Bo Kaap house, he struggled to remember the number of people who lived in it. He spoke of bedrooms occupied by entire families and of deplorable hygienic conditions. He mentioned the unique tap placed in the yard that served as a kitchen as well as a bathroom. What Rose resents about townships, Eugene resents about Bo Kaap. However, like Rose, he describes the emptiness of the Cape Flats and the fact that buildings were stuck here and there, without taking the urban fabric into consideration. For him, settling in Heideveld was being condemned socially: once "in the ghetto", he had no other option but to become a gang member.

In the end, beyond their personal experience, the accounts of Rose, Lucas or Eugene are a collective story which accentuates uprooting rather than the differences found in the successive episodes which, year in year out, led to their adapting to certain changes or even appreciating them. They rebuilt the collective trauma *a posteriori*. In fact, they included of their own accord the spectacular dimension of their experience, elaborating what I propose to call “martyred”<sup>5</sup> urban citizenship. This is what the second video shows in particular, insisting on the distance urbanites establish with their own lived experience. The idea of “martyr” accounts for the status given to suffering in the stories of urbanites: not only is it accepted but sometimes also claimed.

*Video 2: “It’s also nice to experience a little bit of suffering”, stories of “martyred” urban citizenship*



[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1737wg\\_video2-a-little-bit-of-suffering\\_school](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1737wg_video2-a-little-bit-of-suffering_school)

In the second video, some of the stories go beyond personal experience as they recount anecdotes and remarks made by others. As such, when Lucas recites the parable of the traveller who is welcomed in true *ubuntu*<sup>6</sup> fashion, or when Eugene evokes the abdication of

<sup>5</sup> I am keeping this expression in inverted commas to keep a distance with the disturbing sensationalistic feeling it could also evoke.

<sup>6</sup> *Ubuntu* is a word used in various Bantu languages and refers to a moral code generally rendered through the expression “I am because we are”. During an interview by South African journalist Tim Modise, Nelson Mandela explained the concept of *ubuntu* with the following metaphor: “Before, when we were young, when someone

parental responsibility which led him to do crime, there is intertextuality. It is the elaboration of a collective history founded on trauma which characterises the dystopian principle of stories about forced removals, which have become the abstract symbol of injustice. On the one hand, Lucas borrows from a general discourse of reconciliation by reusing the *ubuntu* concept which was central to Archbishop Desmond Tutu's rhetoric during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, Eugene repeats the paternalistic clichés of the apartheid government when he evokes the abdication of parental responsibility and generalised alcoholism. It is not so much the more or less progressive content of borrowed discourses which is at stake, but the operation through which pieces of ready-made sentences come to support the narration of their personal experience. The way the story is put together could be what contributes to the passage from "the multiplicity of experience memories to the uniqueness of a so-called 'collective' memory" (Lavabre, 2007: § 17). In all cases, the idea of collective traumatism is internalised or even claimed as evidence of a certain urban authenticity. As such, Murray *et al.* propose to make of the victim of a forced removal "the symbolic urban figure of Cape Town"<sup>8</sup> (Murray *et al.*, 2008: 14).

The example of Cape Town makes it possible to examine the notion of spatial injustice in more detail, by showing how racism informs the entire space production process and not only the material framework of the city. Concerning conceived space, town-planning standards reinforce and draw inspiration from prejudices. Concerning the lived space, the suffering experienced at individual level contributes to the story of a collective trauma, which in turn serves as framework for putting personal itineraries into words. As to perceived space, it is constantly reproduced by spatial practices conditioned by racial codes. The discussion is about the possibility of overcoming the description of the forms of spatial injustice, and imagining new ways of looking at space. In their collective work on Cape Town's post-apartheid imagined worlds, Sean Field *et al.* give popular myths a therapeutic value: "Popular cultural myths fulfil various functions, positive as well as negative, but of note is the fact that they give people the vocabulary and beliefs to understand and take up the myriad of challenges found in the city." (Field *et al.*, 2007: 11). When considering trauma accounts linked to forced removals as a founding myth of urban citizenship, it is then possible to open new perspectives for the production of urban space by relying on the "escape routes" of urban imagination since the end of apartheid.

---

who travelled in our country stopped in a village, s/he did not need to ask for water or food. When s/he stopped, people gave her/him food and kept her/him company. This is one of the dimensions of *ubuntu*."

<sup>7</sup> For a critical approach of the use of the *ubuntu* notion, see Marx, 2002 and Gibson, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> « *the emblematic urban figure is the victim of forced removals* »

---

## Creating a Shared Founding Myth

The first characterisation of urban experience in Cape Town today is linked to a temporal escape into the nostalgic idealisation of the city before apartheid. During the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, travellers nicknamed Cape Town “the Tavern of the Oceans”. This myth of original cosmopolitanism resurfaced in the romanticism of popular areas during the 1950s. Sophiatown in Johannesburg or District Six in Cape Town became symbolic of a golden urban citizenship age in South Africa, which was brutally swept away by apartheid. In Cape Town today, the District Six Museum illustrates how forced removals contribute to the founding myth.

The Museum arose from the mobilisation of former residents after their eviction from the suburb of District Six. During the 1980s, the bulldozers of apartheid cleared a vast land south of the city centre, which was later renamed Zonnebloem. But a support committee worked towards preserving the memory of District Six. In 1994, an exhibition was organised in an abandoned church to celebrate life in the suburb before its destruction. Based on photographs and objects lent or donated by residents, the objective of the exhibition was cultural as well as scientific (i.e. to inform the local and international public), political (i.e. to put pressure on the government to return these lands to their original owners thanks to reconciliation laws), and even therapeutic (i.e. to offer a space for expression to former residents, particularly by supporting the publication of autobiographies or training museum guides). In form and content, the initial exhibition was so well received that it ended up becoming permanently part of the District Six Museum collection, which today is acknowledged worldwide for its role in building a new society<sup>9</sup>. The former Methodist church, which is situated on the border of the city centre and at the beginning of what would have been District Six, has become a place of memory involved in making “the lost symbol of Capetonian urban citizenship” sacred (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2010: 113). Today, the reference to District Six evokes the old pericentral suburb which disappeared and the museum of reconciliation which enhances individual memories to build a collective memory. This capacity to materialise what is absent and to invoke the past into the present, is claimed by the actual Museum initiators. Their brochure quotes Museum Director Valmont Layne: “I think that we need to build a community that can satisfy the District Six concept. And I used “concept” on purpose to mean that we are not rebuilding District Six. We take the District Six concept and we apply it to new circumstances. In this light, we need innovation as much as reflecting back on the past.”

---

<sup>9</sup> The District Six Museum works in conjunction with projects in former East-Germany or Northern Ireland.

The District Six Museum illustrates a real geosymbol<sup>10</sup> which can underlie several types of discourses at the same time, serving various causes and representing various publics. This permeability is certainly key to its success. The Museum is not an unchanging showcase but a real *performance*, i.e. an individual *experience* during which the founding myth attached to District Six is materialised by the very mention of it. Myth materialisation is central to the link Joël Bonnemaïson establishes between myth and territory:

(...) reading a myth is not just literary or structural, it is also spatial. The mapping of places visited by the civilising hero, the saint or the guru, the paths he followed, the places where he revealed his magical power, create a symbolic spatial structure which shapes and creates the territory. This sacred mapping gives weight to the "founding myth", incarnating it in a territory and revealing it as a gesture creating society. (Bonnemaïson, 1981: 254)

As such, the experience of the District Six Museum is equivalent to the "spatial reading" of the founding myth, on accepting a few adaptations. The actual content of the myth, instead of being a territorial genesis, is the story of a *deterritorialisation*. *Itineraries* which "shape and create the territory" are not so much pilgrimages (although the organised tours in the ruins of District Six could be perceived as such) as evictions. In the end, the Museum makes of the mythical place a staging of the actual myth; as many ambiguities which help us to understand the notion of utopia.

*Utopia* is characterised by a double etymology, as highlighted by Thomas More in the header of the 1518 edition of his work of the same name which marked the entry of the word in everyday language. The word 'utopia' is made up of the Greek root *topos* which means "place", prefixed with the Greek negation *ou*. As such, *ou-topos* refers to "what does not take place", "that which is found nowhere". More points out that, once transformed in *u-*, the prefix can also refer to the adverb *eu* which means "good" or "fairly". He spelled 'utopia' as *Eutopia*, suggesting that this is no longer about a fictional place only, but also about "a place of Good", "a place of justice".

District Six as the idealisation of the vanished place, the incarnation of the founding myth or the celebration of the past to imagine the future, is an example of the utopian potential of memory staged by the museography. Yet, a museum is not a discourse only; it is also an undertaking which is rooted in the economic and especially political conjecture of a territory. The reconciliation discourse of the Museum founders cannot be quite understood unless it is linked to the more general context of South African nation building since 1994.

<sup>10</sup> I am relying here on the definition of the geosymbol as given by J. Bonnemaïson: "a geosymbol can be defined as a place, an itinerary or an expanse which, for religious, political or cultural reasons, takes on for certain people and ethnic groups a symbolic dimension which comforts them in their identity." (Bonnemaïson, 1981: 256)

The District Six Museum declares that it is putting down the foundations of tomorrow's society. Indeed the founding myth of uprooting imposed by apartheid had a cathartic function. Spatial injustice once denounced can be transcended, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capetonians will be able to find a cosmopolitanism all the more stable and serene since they will learn from their past. This reconciliation discourse is omnipresent in South Africa today, in expressions such as "the New South Africa" or "the Rainbow Nation". While Mandela's election opened up a new highly anti-racist and humanitarian era, we need to move beyond these grand declarations and adopt the multiple political inflexions which underlie the so-called South African "transformation". Statistics refute the advent of a more egalitarian society. At the beginning of the 2010s, disillusion has been stronger than miracles in the popular as well as sociological discourses (Gibson, 2011).

The post-apartheid period was marked by a dual relation to memory. On the one hand, the process of reconciliation, nation building and abolition of racial separation initiated a definitive break with the past. On the other hand, a form of resentment expresses the painful and more ambivalent acknowledgement of how the past is still deeply present through racism, inequalities and prejudices. (Fassin, 2007: 312)

In an unpublished article, Philippe Gervais-Lambony and Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch highlight the fact that "the past no longer only refers to the past of apartheid and pre-apartheid, but also to the beginning of post-apartheid" (Gervais-Lambony and Houssay-Holzschuch, unpublished: 13). We are seeing an increase in the number of discourses on nostalgia about life under apartheid, and more particularly nostalgia "about the hope and enthusiasm of the 1990s" (*ibid.*). The South African miracle is chipping away and, today, the post-1994 promise of a utopian world can barely contain the impatience of the majority which finds that, day after day, inequalities and the humiliation which for a while had been placed on the shelf of a fortunately bygone era, are being reproduced.

Cape Town exemplifies the city where injustice promoted temporal and spatial escape routes, associating bygone places with their symbolic reconstructions, personal memories, collective memory, intellectual idealism and institutional discourses. The District Six Museum project reminds us that building a general discourse on what could be "a fair city" lead to asking ethical and political questions. In order to show the delicate position of researchers confronted with multi-levelled discourses, I will consider Eugene whose mixed memories of prison and conversion show how parallel worlds can be built, and in which daily life is "restored to order".

### 3. Heterotopic Escapes: From Gang to Church, Eugene's Parallel Worlds

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a paternalistic legislation has been implementing social services intended exclusively for 'Coloureds' who were considered as a race of "degenerates", subjected in particular to alcoholism and the loss of family values (Adhikari, 2005; Jensen, 2008). One of the consequences of these policies has been the record imprisonment rate among this population. Today still, prison is part of the representation spaces largely shared by the residents of Coloured townships, independently of their actual experience of prison. Referring to Michel Foucault's thoughts on heterotopias, I will show that prison, as the cradle of gangs, constitutes one of these "places outside of all places" where utopias are being invented, and make it possible to restore a certain rationality for individuals at odds with the real world. The Church and the most proselytic forms of Protestant Evangelism in particular, offer a very potent means of escaping the world, the ultimate phase of disempowerment of the oppressed and a counter-model of activist thought.

#### The Role of Heterotopias: "I begin again [...] to reconstitute myself there where I am." (Foucault, 1984)

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault, 1994 [original text from 1967, first publication 1984]: 47 – Translated by Jay Miskowicz)

With the word "heterotopia", Foucault makes the existence of places "absolutely real" and at the same time "absolutely unreal" possible, with key examples going from the prison which is symbolic of Foucauldian thought, to the more surprising Scandinavian saunas, via libraries and museums, which is obviously not without echoing this article as far as District Six is concerned. Foucault explained the principle of heterotopia through the mirror metaphor.

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. 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. (*ibid.*)

The following video is an example of a “mirror” placed in front of Eugene via the camera. The memories, often alluding to the years he spent with the Junky Funky Kids, told through the Evangelical rhetoric which today gives meaning to his life, illustrate the capacity to “reconstitute oneself” which is characteristic of heterotopias.

### Prison and Gangs: Heterotopia of Violence

#### *Video 3: Eugene – from Gang to Church*



[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x188o76\\_video-3-eugene\\_school](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x188o76_video-3-eugene_school)

Veterans invariably tell idealised stories about the past. They do so, not simply to deride what the current generation has done to the Number, but also because imprisonment is a humiliating, often harrowing, experience, and constructing one's life narrative before a witness/researcher inevitably involves restoring dignity. The interviewee mutes the acts of violence he has committed and often omits the violence committed against him. (Steinberg, 2004a: 3)

The methodological remark made by Jonny Steinberg in introducing his research on gangs in South African prisons, is a reminder that anthropological surveys can open up perspectives onto nostalgia (“idealised stories of the past”) and utopia (“restoring dignity”). This process is actually stronger for a gang member (*ndota*) since revealing a gang’s internal rules and hierarchies is a crime punishable by gang law. There is indeed a complex oral tradition originating from wandering groups of bandits that gathered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the mining region of the Witwatersrand (van Onselen, 1982). Among these young men uprooted by the brutal industrialisation of their environment, Mzoozepi Mathebula was well-

known by the name of Nongoloza. The life of his army of outlaws became the basis for an odyssey which is still passed on today to the new prison gang recruits through many symbolic acts orchestrating life inside the prison cells. Beating up, rapes, stabbing wardens or members of rival gangs, the code of honour depends on the capacity to endure and accomplish acts of extreme violence that can lead to accidental death in the case of fights, and sometimes to premeditated death as sentences duly decreed by gang tribunals. As such, gangs reproduce the hierarchy and violence to which they are themselves subjected in prison. Yet this violence is sublimated by resorting to the life story of Nongoloza, who is transformed into a mythological hero able to perform supernatural exploits: he drinks poison while smiling, he fights until he is ankle-deep in blood, gun bullets ricochet off his skin etc.

Becoming a gang member constitutes an escape through which prisoners can transform their crimes and those against them (which they usually deny) into symbolic gestures enabling them to climb their way up the gang hierarchy. According to Eugene, to be a *ndota* was an opportunity for him to "receive an education": "I learned in prison. You must clean your room, wash your clothes, iron them... Now I'm a Number, a gangster, they teach you everything, how to support yourself. (...) There is a lot of mental power in the Number. It's almost like a school." The metaphorical world of gangs is also found outside prison, in the real world: in Heideveld, everyone knows a few words of *sabela*, the secret language of gangs, or can make ritual greetings between *ndotas*.

Prison constitutes a heterotopia central to township life, even for those who have never been inside. It is the place where an alternative rationality is invented, where the social hierarchy is reversed, transforming bandits into "generals" or "judges", making of crime an honorific gesture and of humiliation a display of respectability. In order to give meaning to such paradoxes, Albert Piette (1992) talks about the "minor mode of reality". Rejecting the *homo ethnologicus* theoretical model, "always believing in his beliefs (...) always aware and logical with himself" (*ibid.*: 18), Piette insists on the contradictions inherent to human nature. He draws our attention to the gestures through which each one of us is in a position to establish a certain distance vis-à-vis social standards, a testimony to one's capacity to "think about something else", what he calls "the incessant human capacity for dual personality and secondarisation" (*ibid.*: 21). The fact that Eugene can navigate between stories of extreme violence and radical religious idealism, is certainly a clue of such a "minor mode" of post-apartheid urban reality. Nevertheless, this conclusion could minimise the fundamental oppression that brings an individual to build himself on the basis of a myth of violence.

---

## Evangelical Church: Heterotopia of Renouncement

Evangelism is a branch of Protestantism based on one's personal experience of encounter with the Christ. This encounter is staged through baptism which makes conversion official, and is subsequently updated on a daily basis through Bible reading and prayer. This *rebirth* is interpreted as one's personal appropriation of Salvation, one's entry into Goodness in a dual world vision divided between Evil on Earth, where the Devil reigns and exploits human beings to accomplish his dark plan (i.e. *the World* in the words of Eugene) and the world of the converted who join God and his angels (i.e. *out of the World*, again in the words of Eugene). All of Eugene's activities are dedicated to reading the Bible or to organising the parish life (holding prayer groups and conducting the choir of adolescents). He calls it "living outside of the world". The expression evokes of course the idea of a utopia. Evangelism as practiced by Eugene elaborates a truly out-of-place experience where rationality is reduced to the unfathomable divine will. Through his conversion, Eugene lives in heterotopia: he abandoned his past gangster's life just like that. He entered another world where there was no past and no future since any human action results from the battle between God and the Devil, and will only make sense on Doomsday. Also, while on a Sunday of April 2011 Eugene and his wife Bonita were waiting for the end of the world the following month, the next day they went to court for the murder he was accused of, then to the hospital to confirm Bonita's pregnancy. In both cases, these events seemed sufficient evidence to make them admit that the end of the world is only a metaphor, since the temporalities of the real world exceeded by far the prediction of the 21<sup>st</sup> of May of which they wanted to convince me. The strength of a utopia lies precisely in its capacity to exist outside real places. As such there is no contradiction between waiting for the end of the world the following month and carrying a baby that will only be born eight months later. Whatever happens, it will be God's will. The air-tight loop of Evangelist utopia is a challenge to scientific reasoning and reflects the idea of escape routes in all its complexity.

### Spaces of Alternate Ordering<sup>11</sup>

Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Others and allows them to be seen, as an example of an alternative way of doing things (...) Heterotopia, therefore, reveal the process of social ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing. (Harvey, 2000 : 184)

---

<sup>11</sup> The expression *Spaces of alternate ordering* is borrowed from David Harvey (2003), as interpreted by Hetherington.

In gangs as well as Evangelism, utopian stories include above all an order which is executed in the heterotopias of prisons and the Church. Faced with the physical and psychological violence of incarceration, each prisoner is brought back to a departure point where he can decide to take another way, that of the gang. By converting to Evangelism, each sinner can atone for his faults and entrust his eternal forgiveness to God. As such, both utopias represent clean slates from which it is possible to begin another life. Heterotopias are above all the places where one searches for meaning. Yet, as suggested by Steinberg concerning gangs, this quest is not without incoherence. While in the myth of Nongoloza, a wise man claims that he saved the young villagers from their trip to the mines from which there was no return, he makes bandits out of them, at odds with their village:

Right at the beginning of their bandit lives, they have already forgotten their villages and have become embroiled in making the laws and mythology of their own cult-like future. (...) And so there is an incoherence at the heart of the tale. The survival of colonialism is the band's primary nourishment. They have become bandits for the sake of being bandits. If the band is to live, so must injustice. (Steinberg, 2004a: 12)

There is a thin line between happy utopia and tragic dystopia, which is precisely what lies at the centre of Evangelist faith: it is only on Doomsday that there will no longer be a line between Good and Evil, between those who will be saved and those who will be damned. One must therefore continue to endure the suffering of the World because it is that suffering which promotes faith and consolidates happiness to come. In this, gangs and Evangelist faith meet the definition of heterotopias as "spaces of alternate ordering". But if they are the reverse of society, they struggle nevertheless with questioning the contradictions of the real world. On the contrary, they allow the co-presence of opposites (violence and salvation, suffering and glory), thus annihilating any vague anti-establishment desire and in the end give the oppressed the means to accept their domination.

### **Conclusion: For a "Utopianist" Thought**

Utopianism, as used by Harvey, helps us to conclude this exploration of utopias in urban imaginaries. Indeed, while barely touching upon the contradictions linked to the realisation of utopias, Harvey persists in defending a form of intellectual creativity which can oppose the saying which today is associated with the neoliberal era: "There is no alternative". According

to Harvey, this assertion carries a deadly potential which prevents us from acting like “the conscious architects of our fates rather than the ‘helpless puppets’ of the institutional and imaginary worlds in which we live” (*ibid.*: 159). Pre-apartheid nostalgic utopia, the political utopia of the “New South Africa”, or still the popular heterotopias of the gangs or Evangelism, are all examples of these utopian thoughts which paralyse critical initiatives. To this, Harvey opposes a “dialectic utopianism”:

The task is then to define an alternative, not in terms of some static spatial form or even of some perfected emancipatory process. The task is to pull together a spatiotemporal utopianism – a dialectical utopianism – that is rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical developments. (*ibid.*: 196)

Scientific writing would then become a possible mode of expression for these different trajectories. By offering a vocal space to city dwellers, by restituting the paradoxes of their life stories and their efforts to sort out the humiliations they face daily, in the end I hope to help denounce social violence which is so internalised that it becomes invisible. The attractive project of the District Six Museum could not in fact work towards transforming society deeply, if it was not backed up by a certain transparency<sup>12</sup> concerning the unjust production of South African space.

**About the author: Chloé Buire**, GECKO – Université de Paris Ouest-Nanterre, CUBES – Université du Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

**To quote this article: Chloé Buire**, « Les utopies paradoxales des citadins “martyrs” de l’apartheid », [“The Paradoxical Utopias of Urbanites – Martyrs of Apartheid”, translation: Laurent Chauvet, IFAS], *justice spatiale* | *spatial justice*, n° 5, déc. 2012-déc. 2013 | dec. 2012-dec. 2013, <http://www.jssj.org>

## References

- ADHIKARI**, Mohamed, 2005. *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough. Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*, Ohio University Press / Double Storey Books, 252 p.
- ANTONIOLI**, Manola, 2003, *Géophilosophie de Deleuze and Guattari*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 268 p.
- BONNEMAISON**, Joël, 1981, “Voyage autour du territoire”, *L'Espace Géographique*, n° 4, pp. 249-262.
- DELEUZE**, Gilles, 1977, *Dialogues avec Claire Parnet*, Paris, Flammarion, 184 p.
- FIELD**, Sean, **MEYER**, Renate and **SWANSON**, Felicity, 2007, *Imagining the city, memories and culture in Cape Town*, Cape Town, HSRC Press, 240 p.

<sup>12</sup> In November 2011, the Parliament adopting the Secrecy Bill which made it possible to imprison journalists who reveal “secret” files, raised much concern in the media and among opposition parties, for whom this bill does away with the basic principles of freedom of expression, hard-won after years of struggles against apartheid.

- FLYVBJERG**, Bent, 2006, "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, n° 12 (2), pp. 219-245.
- FOUCAULT**, Michel, 1994, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988 Tome 4. 1980-1988*, Paris, Gallimard, 895 p.
- GERVAIS-LAMBONY**, Philippe and **HOUSSAY-HOLZSCHUCH**, Myriam, sans éditeur, "Keeping you post-ed. The 'post-apartheid' space of contemporary South African cities"
- GIBSON**, Nigel C., 2012, « What happened to the "Promised Land"? A Fanonian Perspective on Post-Apartheid South Africa », *Antipode*, n° 44 (1), pp. 51-73.
- HALBWACHS**, Maurice, 1994 (1925), *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 374 p.
- HOUSSAY-HOLZSCHUCH**, Myriam, 1999, *Le Cap ville sud-africaine. Ville blanche, vies noires*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 276 p.
- HOUSSAY-HOLZSCHUCH**, Myriam, 2010a, *Crossing boundaries. Tome 1: Itinéraire scientifique*, Mémoire pour l'obtention de l'Habilitation à diriger des recherches soutenu le 29/11/10, Université de Paris I, 110 p.
- HOUSSAY-HOLZSCHUCH**, Myriam, 2010b, *Crossing boundaries. Tome 3: Vivre ensemble dans l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid*, Mémoire pour l'obtention de l'Habilitation à diriger des recherches soutenu le 29/11/10, Université de Paris I, 270 p.
- JENSEN**, Steffen, 2008, *Gangs, Politics and Dignity in Cape Town*, Johannesburg/Chicago, Witwatersrand University Press/University of Chicago Press, 212 p.
- MARTIN**, Denis-Constant, 1998, "Le poids du nom. Culture populaire and constructions identitaires chez les "Métis" du Cap", *Critique internationale*, n°1, pp. 73-100.
- MARX**, Christoph, 2002, « Ubu and Ubuntu: on the dialectics of apartheid and nation building », *Politikon*, n° 29 (1), pp. 49-69.
- MURRAY**, Noëleen, **SHEPHERD**, Nick and **HALL**, Martin, 2008, *Desire Lines. Space, Memory and Identity in the post-apartheid City*, Londres / New York, Routledge, 315 p.
- POSEL**, Deborah, 2001, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife", *Transformation*, n° 47, pp. 50-74.
- STEINBERG**, Jonny, 2004a, "Nongoloza's Children: Western Cape prison gangs during and after apartheid", Monograph written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 64 p.
- VAN ONSELEN**, Charles, 1982, "The Regiment of the Hills – Umkosi Wezintaba. The Witwatersrand's lumpenproletarian army, 1890-1920", in *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914. (vol. 2 New Nineveh)*, pp. 171-201.
- WESTERN**, John, 1981, *Outcast Cape Town*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 372 p.
- WORDEN**, Nigel, **VAN HEYNINGEN**, Elizabeth and **BICKFORD-SMITH**, Vivian, 1998, *Cape Town, the making of a city: an illustrated social history*, Cape Town: David Philip Pub., 283 p.
- WORDEN**, Nigel, **VAN HEYNINGEN**, Elizabeth and **BICKFORD-SMITH**, Vivian, 1999, *Cape Town in the twentieth century: an illustrated social history*, Cape Town: David Philip Pub., 255 p.