# "Waar Val Jy Uit?": District Six, Sacred Space, and Identity in Cape Town

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## Abstract

This article discusses apartheid-era urban redevelopment in Cape Town, South Africa, and the forced removal of the residents of District Six in the mid to late twentieth century in particular. It looks at how the memories of former District Six residents have been enrolled in the shaping of coloured subjectivity in Cape Town. Moving beyond conventional social scientific approaches of history and memory studies, it critically engages with former residents' recollection of the suburb as a form of mythopoeia using theory and method from religious studies. In so doing, it demonstrates that District Six evictees interpreted their experience of forced removal and the radical transformation of the city's urban profile through concepts of District Six as a utopian space of Fairyland, a degenerating space of Wasteland, and a lost space of Exile. Attending to religious-like practises aimed at recovering human dignity in a context of urban and social dehumanisation that resonated with a particular segment of the coloured population, this article posits that the District Six story became a form of symbolic currency in post-apartheid claims of coloured cultural and subjective authenticity. Overall, it seeks to extend the work of previous analyses of sacred space in the city of Cape Town, and highlight the significance of religious studies methodology for understanding the practise of subjectivity formation in South African urban settings.

## Introduction

The phrase "*Waar Val Jy Uit*," or "Where do you come from," is a humorous colloquial expression that is sometimes used amongst coloured people in Cape Town, South Africa, to ridicule individuals who make apparently absurd

statements, or display eccentric behaviour. "[T]he term 'Coloured' in the South African context refers to those people often described in other societies as mixed race, *mullatoes* or half-castes" (Lewis 1987: 1). Coloureds are therefore similar to other peoples of mixed race like the Creoles of Mauritius and the *Mullatoes* of Brazil. In the coloured community, the expression in question is considered humorous because it implies that the agent's idea or behaviour, which is out of tune with familiar cultural codes, indicates that, as persons, they must be of alien cultural origin. Generally, individuals who stray from communal norms are *othered*. Sociologically, community members who poke fun at those individuals who display a marked sense of agency seek to re-establish the limits of what is culturally acceptable, thus redefining the boundaries of communal belonging. By drawing upon the question of cultural authenticity in this way, the phrase "*Waar Val Jy Uit*" operated like a formula for calculating coloured social identity, as it brought important ideas of cultural identity and individuality into the realm of public scrutiny.

Funnily enough, during the apartheid era, the coloured population as a whole became the subject of a similar kind of denigrating humorous mockery, as they often featured as the butt of widely shared jokes that derided their ambiguous racial identity, the validity of their cultural heritage, and their marginally privileged social status (Adhikari 2006). One of the more popular versions of this jest was a joke which usually began with a "scenario which provokes a Coloured person into hurling racial insults at an African and repudiating him as an inferior being." At this the African would respond "with the punchline that 'God made the white man, God made the black man, God made the Indian, the Chinese and the Jew—but Jan van Riebeek, he made the Coloured man" (Adhikari 2006: 149). The humour would easily register with those familiar with cultural norms about race and social status in South Africa; that being that the African has insultingly subverted the argument upon which the coloured individual's claim to superior social status is based. Alas, for those who failed to catch the joke, some explanation is in order.

The coloured's claim was based on a narrative of origin which dexterously weaved together taken-for-granted notions of race with a "factual" strand of South African history. Coloureds based their argument for relative superior social status on the claim that they were "partly descended from whites" and that they were more "closely associated to Western bourgeois culture" (Adhikari 2006: 150). According to this reasoning, coloureds claimed Jan van Riebeeck as their primordial white progenitor. On the orders of his employers, the Dutch East India Company, Van Riebeeck established and officiated over the first permanent settlement at the Cape in 1652. The success of the settlement as a refreshment station was heavily dependent on the supply of resources from the local indigenous people. But trade relations between the Dutch and local Khoi-Khoi were not exclusively politically or economically motivated. Isolation from Europe coupled with an asymmetrical ratio of Dutch men to women meant that intercultural

intercourse also tended to the physical and psychological needs of the lonely male settlers. The offspring conceived under these conditions of interracial contact, it was frequently argued, were the first generation of coloured people in South Africa. Or, as another version of the joke in question put it, "the genesis of the Coloured people" could therefore be dated to "nine months after the landing of [Van Riebeeck and his] party" (Adhikari 2006: 152).

While a proportion of the coloured population may have shared in this light-hearted humour, jokes such as these are no laughing matter. They are indicative of a complex of deep-seated negative beliefs and sentiments about the real and imagined place of the coloured population in South African society. By drawing on essentialist notions of history, heritage and identity, in essence, they question the authenticity of coloured identity on the grounds of race, history and culture. Significantly, the way in which the term coloured was deployed in these insults also elided the myriad complexities and sensitivities regarding issues of essentialism and coloured subjectivity formation (see Erasmus 2001; Adhikari 2005). Nevertheless, different segments of the coloured population have at times sought to respond to jibes of this nature by developing grand strategies of claim-making which aimed to reconfigure the authenticity of coloured culture and identity (see for example De Wet 2006; Bank 1998; Nissen 1990). Since the majority of South Africa's coloured population resided in the city of Cape Town, many of these claim-making endeavours not only emanated from this region, but also enrolled the city and the history of its coloured residents into their arguments for legitimacy. In the post-apartheid era, cities have become an arena for a wide range of contesting claim making endeavours, dealing with identity, heritage, memory (see Murray et. al. 2007). In developing their cases, varying parties have sought to engage with the material substance of the city, as a carefully planned urban environment engineered and controlled by the state, through practises that worked to transform its cold concrete foundations into real or imagined places of significance.

This article seeks to engage with a similar claim-making strategy which has evolved around the case of District Six in Cape Town. As a result of apartheid-era forced removal enacted under the auspices of urban renewal in the 1960s, the black and coloured working class residents of District Six—which was situated near Cape Town city centre—were evicted and relocated to townships on the outskirts of the city. Much has been written about the politics of memory regarding District Six (see, for example, Thornberry 2003; McEachern 1998; Malan and Soudien 2002; Trotter 2006; Rasool 2000; Jeppie and Soudien 1990) and its representation in academia, the media and popular culture (Marquard 1995; Coombes 2003). While paying heed to the significance of the District Six narrative as relevant and meaningful to its former residents, the literature dealing with the history, memory and representation of the suburb has in the post-apartheid period especially tended to emphasise critical engagement with the subject. This has meant reading

into the complexities and challenging aspects of the narrative, downplaying its distinctiveness as one of many cases of forced removal in South Africa, and steering clear of the myth-making that has come to dominate popular writing about the suburb. Considering the moral gravity of the subject of forced removal, as well as the demands of scholarly rigour, these qualifications are important. Yet if we were to give credence to the act of myth-making as a valid religious practise rather than viewing it as the activity of generating popular fiction, it would be possible to read the District Six narrative, in a broad sense, as the search for the restoration of human dignity in a dehumanizing context.

As previous analyses of sacred space in Cape Town have shown (see Chidester 1996; Tayob 2004/5), a focus on myth-making in the urban setting extends beyond a purely discursive concept of myth, and takes "into serious consideration . . . the whole of religious expressiveness within which myths function" (Bolle 2005: 6360). By looking at myth as one part of a tripartite alliance of myth, ritual and symbol which constitute the basis of "human religious expressiveness in its threefold form of sacred speech, sacred acts and sacred places" (Bolle 2005: 6360), the alternative reading of the District Six narrative as myth advanced here also pays attention to acts, objects, and overtures as interconnected, equally important expressions of meaningful human labour invested in formulating a concept of District Six as a space of ultimate meaning in the everyday lives of its former residents. As will be shown, since the majority of those evicted were coloured, arguably, in the post-apartheid era, the District Six narrative has presented itself as an ideal trope upon which claims of coloured cultural and subjective authenticity could be attached. That is not to say that the coloured population could lay ultimate claim to the District Six story, or that it only registered with this population as a place of loss and meaning, for, as Rassool (2006) has shown, in the contemporary era of contested politics of memory and recollection it has become increasingly important to be critical about posing the District Six narrative as relating exclusively to the coloured population (see also Rassol and Prosalendis 2001). The politics of symbolic space is always open to contestation and reinterpretation, and the District Six story is no different.

To begin, therefore, this article will start by outlining the circumstances surrounding the modern redevelopment of the city of Cape Town, and the context in which the forced removal of the District Six residents took place. In the following section, it will provide some explanation as to how the memories of former District Six residents were enrolled in service of shaping a coloured identity on the Cape Flats. It then moves on to demonstrate how former residents interpreted their situation of forced removal and the radical transformation of Cape Town's urban context through constructions of District Six as a utopian space of Fairyland, a degrading space of Wasteland, and a lost space of Exile, and concludes with a reflection on how this construction of District Six continues

to resonate in the post-apartheid urban political economy around housing and subjectivity formation in the city.

## Modern Cape Town

In 1965, Harvey Cox observed that the modern era was characterised by "the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion." From this perspective, he noted, the modern city was the ideal representation of the modern age because it was founded on secular ideals. Secular in this case referred to a society's predominant worldview, and the prevailing value system underwriting the city's existence as a man-made material structure. By extension, then, modernity could be analyzed historically according to the presence of religion in urban space. The city could therefore be compared to the spatial arrangements of the tribe and the town. As the most basic spatial order, the tribe was characterised by a collective of small clan-based groups who participated in a localised subsistence economy, sparked mainly as a result of an abandonment of superstitious beliefs for real religion. The town, epitomised by the Greek *polis*, succeeded the tribe as a spatial order, and was made up of a conglomerate of tribal communities unified through their subscription to a new religion that centred on devotion of a common divine ancestor. The town was therefore a charged space, since the "founding of the *polis* was a religious act," and to be a member of this new community "was to be a member of the new *cultus*" (Cox 1965: 8). The urban space of the town was therefore characterised by a social order where political and intellectual authority were intertwined with religion. In contrast to the spatial formations of the tribe and the town, as the epitome of the age of modernity the city was the material "field of human exploration and endeavour from which the gods had fled" (Cox 1965: 1).

Early twentieth-century Cape Town was far from modern. One of the major problems facing municipal authorities was the deteriorating state of the built environment in and around the city centre (Worden et al. 1999). The city's squalid state could be put down to the large population of black and coloured workers residing in the area. As the commercial and administrative hub of the province, flanked on one side by a busy trading port, and an expansive industrial area on the other, the city centre offered workers a number of employment opportunities but also assured them easy access to their places of work. This commercially orientated spatial arrangement, designed to promote the flourishing labour intensive factories and industry located in the centre, was typical of Victorian cities. So too were urban decay and squalid urban conditions. The situation was compounded by a legacy of bad urban planning, since, Cape Town's urban space had expanded haphazardly as and where space allowed from the time it had been established as a separate dwelling area for Dutch free burgers in the seventeenth century. At heart,

it still retained its original Dutch urban heritage, with a grid-iron road pattern, but, under British rule, urban development continued around the old town in a way that suggested the new Victorian planning model had simply been imposed on its predecessor and the majestic surrounding landscape, dominated by Table Mountain (Worden et al. 1998). In the early twentieth century, then, looking at the consequences of the city's disorganized urban layout, authorities recognised that in future urban planning had to be managed more carefully.

The first wave of urban renewal was initiated in the 1930s when the South African Railway embarked on its plan to construct the Duncan dock (Pinnock 1989; Worden et al. 1999). This was an immense project which entailed claiming space from the ocean, and making room for a new central railway station. At the same time, authorities seized upon the opportunity to deal with the scourge of overcrowding, and improve the city's aesthetic profile. To address these issues city authorities turned to the ideas of the modernist Swiss planner Le Corbusier. As "the urban planner of monopoly capital," Le Corbusier viewed urban space in functionalist terms, and placed emphasis on efficiency, order and control in his designs (Pinnock 1989: 154). The city was to be an ordered space where capitalism was to flow freely without hindrance. Maximizing a city's economic potential required, in the first instance, that development be initiated on a clean slate, starting with the city centre, so as to replace "the accidental layout of the ground" and overcome the haphazard flaws of extant planning models (Pinnock 1989: 155). By default, this entailed clearing out the city's residential population. In contrast to the densely populated Victorian city, therefore, the modern city was a low-density, efficiently functioning commercial centre.

By extension, if the city centre was to be cleared, new residential areas would have to be constructed in the suburbs to accommodate the working classes. "The 1947 Foreshore plans of the City Council" therefore "included a regional diagram for "defined communities," which contained "ring roads and radials with neat self-contained townships in between" (Pinnock 1989: 157). The new diagram indicated that local planners drew their inspiration from the overseas planning models of the Garden City and the Neighbourhood Unit when preparing accommodation for the proletariat. The Garden City, an English urban design, had been successfully piloted in the 1920s already, forming the conceptual basis of the suburbs of Maitland, Pinelands and Langa. Conceived by the British town planner Ebenezer Howard, the Garden City was an urban reformist planning model that aimed to address "the overcrowded, polluted, unsanitary conditions of Victorian cities amid fears of working class revolt" (Pistorious et al. 2002: 41). To relieve the burden from the city centre, Howard proposed the idea of developing a network of rail-linked, low-density, self-sustaining towns on the outskirts of the city. The Neighbourhood Unit, on the other hand, hailed from America, and was designed with the intention of promoting the development of cohesive communities by

constructing inward-looking, self-contained residential areas that were enclosed in an expanse of undeveloped grassy terrain or green belt.

With the rise to power of the nationalist government, and the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950, the broader scheme of modern redevelopment was implemented with greater expediency, mainly because apartheid ideologues came to recognize that modern urban designs could also be used as a tool for urban segregation. Under the apartheid regime, the program of urban renewal in Cape Town became synonymous with the state's separate development policies, as it wove racial oppression into the material foundation of the new city. In the city centre and its nearby surrounds the process of clearing out a number of black and coloured working class communities from pristine suburbs which had been reclassified as white, and relocating them to townships on the outskirts of the city was therefore greatly accelerated (see Field 2001; Western 1981).

Located at the periphery of the city, townships were built using a set of plans based on an amalgam of the designs of the Garden City, the Neighbourhood Unit and the new racial ideology, resulting in residential areas that materially reinforced racial discrimination. Three features of the new townships bore this out. Firstly, their location on the periphery of the city spatially asserted white supremacy over the city centre. Secondly, townships were often bounded by large swaths of open land, or buffer strips, so that they were cordoned off from other nearby suburbs and readily available for stationing armed forces in times of unrest. Thirdly, by planning only one main road entrance and a maze of interlinking roads within, townships were designed to more or less trap their residents and force them to develop a racially defined sense of community. Overall, therefore, the apartheid state capitalized upon the original grand plan to modernize the city, steering it in such a way that its racist ideologies linked the remodeling of the city centre with the forced relocation of inner city communities, and the creation of the outlying townships.

The most notable example of this merger of forces, arguably, was the forced removal and relocation of the inner-city residents of District Six (Jeppie and Soudien 1990). Situated near the city centre, District Six was populated predominantly by working class coloureds, but also included small white, black and Indian populations. The District was a classical example of Victorian urban planning where the working classes overwhelmingly populated the city centre or its nearby surrounds, eventually resulting in overpopulation, squalor and decay. So, from the late nineteen hundreds already, District Six had been identified as an overpopulated slum. Despite repeated concerns about the state of the District, neither landlords nor the municipality chose to implement measures to improve residents' squalid living conditions (Bickford-Smith 1990; Barnett 1993). It was therefore under the auspices of slum clearance, as part of the process of urban renewal and racial segregation, that District Six was reclassified as a white area in

1966 (Hart 1990). This initiated an era during which more than fifty thousand working-class coloureds, as well as Indians, whites and black Africans, were forcefully removed and relocated *en mass* to the Cape Flats, their former community demolished to make way for redevelopment. By the late 1980s all that remained of the suburb were a few Muslim and Christian places of worship dotted on a largely barren and desolate expanse of building rubble.

Considering how significant modern planning concepts were in the overall redevelopment of Cape Town, it would appear that Cox's theory about the modern city was applicable locally. This was borne out in two ways. Firstly, the local program of urban renewal was based primarily on modernist urban planning concepts. Indeed, every stage of the process was pervaded with the modernist ideology of efficiency, order and control. Modernist spatial planning was aimed at promoting capitalism at all levels of society, from the grand concept of the city as a functional commercial centre, to the idea of the township home as a functional living space. The city's urban space was therefore organized to reinforce the binary of worker and employee, eventually expanding to include those of white versus black and oppressor versus oppressed. In this way, modern ideology became deeply imbued in the foundation of the city. Secondly, the overall pattern of urban renewal, flowing from the centre towards the periphery, could be read as a metaphor for expanding secularism with progress and development overcoming tradition, culture and religion. By the end of the twentieth century, then, Cape Town could confidently claim the title of being a modern city.

## Remembering District Six

In the wake of this wide-scale urban redevelopment, like so many other forcibly removed communities, District Six evictees turned to their memories of their former home to make meaning out of their new lives in foreign parts of the city. The symbolic significance of District Six for its former residents could therefore be traced to the labour they had invested in formulating meaningful stories about their forced removal. For example, after having been relocated to the distant coloured township of Mitchell's Plain, Mrs Hettie Adams, a former resident of William Street District Six, frequently referred to her experiences of "the life and times in District Six" when trying to make sense of her difficult living conditions on the Cape Flats. Having to travel long distances to work, struggle with hostile neighbours, and live in constant fear of criminal elements, life in her new neighbourhood seemed to be the total opposite of that in District Six. "There is so much that is not right here in Mitchell's Plain," she complained. "In District Six," for example, "everyone would lend you things, do shopping for you, but in Mitchell's Plain no one will lend you a match." Furthermore, "people never fought with one another, no one ever went to jail because of a neighbour."

In comparison to the warm and friendly social environment of District Six, the best way to describe Mitchell's Plain was to say that "here you feel hate" (Adams 1988: 71-72).

Situating one's biographical narrative in an evaluative "then and now" story arc was a common feature of District Six evictees' narratives about the experience of forced removal. For example, Henry Trotter (2006) has shown that when asked to share their memories of District Six, evictees frequently drew on three distinct yet interrelated narrative themes to express their feelings. When prompted, evictees typically provided an idyllic, utopian account of life and circumstances "back then" in District Six. This nostalgic recollection, firstly, served as a form of counter memory because it challenged the "official transcript"—which claimed that District Six was a crime infested slum—developed and broadcast by state officials to justify its clearance. Secondly, evictees' pleasant image of District Six was often used to compare, in an evaluative manner, the difference in the quality of their lives following relocation. In this way, eviction became a turning point marking the start of their social demise. Thirdly, by expressing their memories of District Six in resistance to the official transcript, and using them to make meaning of the present through comparison, overall, "as a means of grieving and coming to terms with their loss," evictees hoped to commemorate the collective experience of their destroyed communal home (Trotter 2006: 19).

The significance of evictees' stories, Trotter concluded, was that it inverted the system of power relations aimed at subordinating the coloured community, coalescing ultimately, in the form of a powerful claim over the city. Firstly, the District Six forced removals were an extension of the Group Areas Act, a measure aimed at giving "concrete expression to the [otherwise arbitrary] coloured racial category." It was therefore intended to enforce an artificial sense of groupness and urban and social boundedness that had previously been absent. Yet within these confines evictees organically cultivated their collective memories of District Six through day-to-day, face-to-face interaction in a way that effectively "constituted their given situation with affirmative content." These conditions, overall, allowed for the emergence of a shared sense of Coloured identity that went "beyond mere instrumentality." Secondly, the organic proliferation of evictees' commemorative narrative "beyond the confines of the townships" has resulted in it becoming, in a sense, "the story of Cape Town itself" (Trotter 2006: 34). Refracted through the mimetic prism of District Six, the coloured community's day-to-day negotiation of life in the city, overshadowed as it was by the racist political conditions of apartheid and the harsh urban environment of the Cape Flats, affirmed the concept of coloured identity's intimate bond with the city, and reinforced the coloured community's claim to the city.

## District Six, Sacred Space

In retelling her story, Mrs Adams found solace in religion. Why were things so terribly bad in Mitchell's Plain, she despondently asked? "It is all the fault of forcing you people away from your real home," her Jewish employer declared (Adams 1988: 70). On another occasion, her employer was able to comfort Mrs Adams after making a similar complaint by quoting from Shylock's speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. This Jewish advice resonated deeply with Mrs Adams, and when her employer went on to read "other things about the Jews," she was able to recognise its wider social relevance, as it "could be about us in South Africa" (Adams 1988: 73). The significance of this religious counsel, arguably, could be seen in her understanding of the relationship between her own situation of escalating domestic upheaval, and the coloured people's wider scheme of suffering as being related to their eviction from District Six. "My house is broken, my garden trampled, the furniture wrecked. I have no insurance. And all because we're not in William Street [District Six]. It seems it is always us coloureds who must carry the load" (Adams 1988: 73). Her careful reflection therefore suggested that age-old Jewish teachings could serve as a valid religious supplement for interpreting reality in twentieth-century Cape Town.

As a former resident of District Six, Mrs Adams would have frequently come into contact with Jews and the Jewish faith. The District was well known for its religious diversity, boasting a population that largely subscribed to Islam and Christianity, but also a minor contingent of Jews and Hindus. The District Six Jews were mainly of Eastern European origin, having arrived at about the turn of the twentieth century. They opted to settle in the district because of its convenient location, and the low cost of living. By this time, there was already a well-settled Cape Jewish population, which had consecrated the Gardens Synagogue in 1867. By the 1930s, the Jewish population had left an indelible mark on the District, having established some nine synagogues in and around the area, as well as a number of businesses that spanned from retail to rentals. Mrs Adams' experience with Jews in the mid twentieth century, therefore, would have been confined to encounters at some of the many Jewish-owned shops and stores (Mendelsohn and Shain 2008).[1]

In some ways, Judaism could be described as a religious tradition that revolved around the intimate relationship between space and identity. For example, in his discussion of sacred space, Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) argued that its revival as an analytical tool in the academic study of religion "has become more than an academic enterprise," especially in the case of Judaism. With the "repossession of the Land of Israel in 1947, and the repossession of the site of the Temple in Jerusalem in 1967," Jews had rediscovered a sense of "cosmic orientation." This rediscovery required that Jews adopt "a new mode of being," which, significantly would speak to the situation of Judaism after the Holocaust. The concept of sacred space was therefore fundamental for negotiating Jewish identity. Considering that

a similar relationship seemed to exist locally, categories and structures of sacred space in Judaism could perhaps shed more light on this bond. Therefore, by adopting the "historian of religion's privilege of disregarding chronological and geographical considerations, of comparing and bringing together, as revealing texts from widely different periods and contexts" regarding District Six, and comparing them with Smith's analysis of categories of sacred space present in Judaism, it may be possible to explore the idea of District Six as a sacred space (Smith 1978: 105-108).

*Fairyland*

The wealth of historical material on District Six makes it clear that it was remarkable, different, set apart. In the memory of its former residents, it was 'that other place'. When you entered District Six you entered *Fairyland*, as graffiti inscribed at its entrance once exclaimed. For one, it was a "place of terrific contrasts" (Mrs S. N. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 69). It was a timeless urban world of "crazy architecture," where beautiful old Victorian style buildings stood alongside rundown dilapidated tenement blocks, across from which may have stood a modern cinema and a nineteenth century church. When spied from above it looked like "a confused and disorganised abstraction of rusted roofs, turrets minarets, towers, arches, ornate facades, colonnades and Gothic spires, dazzling in their variety and colour" (Breytenbach 1970: 6). Socially, while it was overwhelmingly populated by working class coloureds, District Six was also strikingly cosmopolitan, non-racial and classless. "A child growing up [in District Six] might be the progeny of a West Indian seaman and a migrant Coloured woman from the rural Southwestern Cape. Its schooling would be mostly meagre, but varied in choice: taught by Germans in a Lutheran School, Irish Nuns in a Catholic School, or Scottish masters in a Dutch Reformed Church School which enrolled poorer Afrikaner, Jewish and Coloured pupils" (Nasson 1990: 64).

Despite its terrific social contrasts, as one former resident put it, "District Six was a community" (Mrs S. N. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 69). It was animated by a profound sense of homogeneity "that created a sense of belonging; it had a mind and soul of its own" (Rive 1990: 112). Visitors therefore couldn't help but describe it as a place "that was vibrant, colourful, and full of history and character,"[2] or "a place of love, tolerance and kindness" (Schoeman 1994: 43). It was a charged space; it pulsated with life, and had a soul, or spirit, that was almost tangible. The streets were always "crowded, full of noises, full of people, full of friends" (Adams 1988: 63). Here, it was as if there was a "band all around" and people would "dance, guma" in the street (Jeppie 1990: 85). You could say it was animated by an ethereal "rhythm" that was "living"; a "beat of the people all around" ("Klop Klop" written by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, 1989). The "spirit of District Six" was infectious. It was in the streets, structures and buildings,

and saturated the ground upon which District Six was built, transforming its very material constitution, so that it became "set apart from other residential areas" (Nasson 1990: 64). Indeed, it became "more than a geographically defined area" that was sacred to coloureds as their homeland (Rive 1990: 112).

In Judaism, Jonathan Z. Smith noted, the most basic way of speaking about Israel was by referring to it as a strategic hamlet, or enclave, an oasis of order and meaning in a wilderness foreign and demonic forces. The sacred space of the enclave, however, had to be founded, or established, as the place for human dwelling separate from the outlying chaos. One of the ways the sacred significance of Israel had been established was through "living in relationship" with the land, forging a historical bond with it that ultimately transformed it from being the "uninhabited wasteland into a homeland" (Smith 1978: 110). In the same way, many District Six residents frequently stated that despite the fact that they lived in poverty, or that circumstances were bad, they had built everything in the District, marked and made everything, just through being there.

Mythically, Israel was believed to be the centre of space, radiating potent centrifugal force throughout the cosmos. Since the Ark of the Covenant was situated in the holy of holies, which was situated at the very centre of the temple, in the centre of Jerusalem, which was at the centre of Israel, which was believed to be the centre of the earth, it was as if concentric circles of blessing were radiating out into the world. In a similar manner, "the true Cape spirit" was believed to be located in Hanover Street (the District's main arterial and commercial centre), which was at the heart of District Six, which was in the heart of the city. Ultimately, it would extend out to all corners of South Africa. And when you entered the confines of District Six, as in mythical Israel, you roamed in a place that was "pre-eminently real," a place that was marked with a "superabundance of reality," that expressed itself in three distinct ways (Smith 1978: 113).

Firstly, in District Six, one's senses were overwhelmed. As we have already seen, sights and sounds were more prominent here. You were particularly struck by the food in District Six, which was always of a better quality, more aromatic, and more scrumptious and appetising. Here you would be able to find "the best peanuts in town, the freshest full cream milk" and "lovely cakes" (Fortune 1996: 62-64), and when it came to crayfish, a crustacean delicacy, "it was not the small shells you get now . . . they were big shells, and big legs" (Mr O. A. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 76).

Secondly, in a social environment marked by widespread abject poverty, District Six was a place of abundance and generosity. You could acquire almost anything here, as the lists and lists of consumer goods annotating many former residents' biographies indicated. And there was always more than enough for everyone. For example, when it came to food, "neighbours often made contributions to help" each other out. Furthermore, "if people had food left over, it was common

practice to send it over to those who didn't have." In District Six, therefore, "you never needed to starve" (Fortune 1996: 97). Local shop keepers would also often give away sweets and other luxuries, *passela*, for free, to children who came to buy goods for their parents. This spirit of generosity was so pervasive that District Six was otherwise known as *Kanaladorp*, which stemmed from the Malay word *kanala*, meaning "to help each other out" (Bickford-Smith 1990: 36).

Finally, money had radically increased in worth. Trotter pointed out that "even though some families have more now than ever before, they still present the past as an epoch of abundance compared to today's scarcity." As one of his interview subjects put it, "My father earned little, but we had all the comforts" (2006: 17-18). In District Six, for a few cents you could buy "a bag of sweets that could last you for days" (Fortune 1996: 62). This was a place where even "the meanest coin meant something . . . even a half cent had worth" (Breytenbach 1970: 3).

"The land of Israel," Smith noted, "is understood to be the centre of time as well" (1978: 115). In this case we find the centre resonated with potent centripetal forces, "attracting to itself, to the site of the Temple, to the primeval stone, the Stone of Foundation, which stands at the base of the Temple, all of the important creation events of Israel's traditions." The Foundation Stone was like "a 'dreaming' in the sense that the Australian aborigines use the term, that is, a track or sign left by a primordially significant being in mythic time" (1978: 115-116). In District Six it was at the famous Seven Steps, a flight of granite steps located in the heart of Hanover Street, where time began, would end, and ultimately begin anew. The lyrics of Kramer and Petersen's *Seven Steps of Stone* (1989) captured this poignantly.

It was here you must remember
That our children played their games
And the skollie gangs smoked dagga
Young lovers scratched their names

These stone steps bear the memory
Of our people scattered wide
Been worn away by the south east wind
And the tears our children cried

They've been smothered by many footsteps
Of those who once lived here
Let them not be forgotten
Even though they disappear

The children will revenge us
For better or for worse
For they can clearly hear the steps
And understand its curse

> For they too have been broken
> And scattered like the bricks
> The stones cement and concrete
> That once was District Six

The steps were a common point of reference for former residents, and, as material objects that bore the weight of the community over so many years, it was as if they were inscribed with the very life of the community. In time, when the District had been reduced to a barren wasteland, they would take on even greater significance.

*Wasteland*

The total annihilation of District Six was a slow drawn-out process. Impending doom had been visible on the horizon long before the first bulldozers and Group Areas eviction officers had arrived, appearing in the form of the evil, insidious apartheid segregation laws that encroached ever nearer. Beyond the confines of the district lay a world shrouded in the dark spectre of evil; it was an alien place of oppression, degradation and shame. "Then afterwards they marked all that. This is for Europeans, this is for coloureds. They even marked the benches on the station. . . . I felt embarrassed. I felt so ashamed. I just ran [home]" (Mrs G.J. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 77). As a young adult, Linda Fortune also started to notice it.

> As I started to work and move outside District Six, I had become more and more aware of the apartheid laws that were being enforced. In the District the colour of one's skin never counted. At work we had to use separate toilet facilities; there was hardly any eating place in town where we could sit down and have a meal. (Fortune 1996: 118)

Evil, therefore, first entered the District through frustration and concern about life outside, before becoming fearful rumour and gossip that revolved around the fate of life inside. For example, since he worked at the Supreme Court, Sammy, Hettie Adams' brother, had long heard about the plans to declare the District white, and with every passing day as the rumours continued to circulate his fear mounted, eventually having to exclaim to his father, "Dadda, I live in a hokkie (shack), but I love it, I made this little kitchen, and Dadda they are going to come and chuck us out. I am telling you it is all the talk!" (1988: 51). As another resident put it, "I was so frightened. I was so scared" (Mrs G. J. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 77).

The official declaration came as expected, marking the start of a protracted period of destruction, violation and suffering. This was the time of the bulldozers. As Adam Small, a local poet put it,

They came right in,
And knocked flat
Everything here
All, all,
Houses, hearts
The lot,
Everything,
God!

(Small 1973; cited in Hart 1990: 130)

These machines crushed houses, buildings, but also the coloured psyche. Father Peter Stien, a priest visiting the area at about this time could not help but notice that the "District reminded him of the bombed out towns in England where he had worked with youth after the war." This would explain why local "children all showed symptoms of war psychosis."[3] Concerned groups and organisations soon stepped in to help the "bulldozer kids to forget their environment of destruction and insecurity."[4]

The government was not just destroying buildings and homes; they were destroying families, the community, District Six. It was a violation of the land; this was "the rape of District Six" (*Cape Times* 21 June 1982; cited in Hart 1990: 134). As James Mathews, a former resident and acclaimed poet put it,

Mechanical monsters
With rapacious lust have ravished
The beauty of district six.

(cited in Hart 1990: 117)

Sexual assault was a powerful metaphor signifying the violation and transgression of that which was pure and sacred. Indeed, the mystical traditions in Judaism affirmed the awesome significance of sexual union, since it was the unending intercourse of the cherubim on top of the Ark in the Holy of Holies that maintained the order of the cosmos, and of "YHWH having nightly intercourse with his bride on the 'couch' of the site of the Temple in Jerusalem" (Smith 1978: 115).

In District Six, this was a time of hopelessness and despair, where indomitable forces of evil were desecrating the spirit of the land. And, as if to salvage the last vestiges of their pride, old, long time residents simply expired rather than be forced out of their homes. As Richard Rive, a former resident noted, "many died spiritually and emotionally. Some, like my mother also died physically although she was fortunate not to be alive to see the wholesale destruction" (Rive 1996: 126).

Ultimately, the land became contaminated with the people's pain and suffering. They had stained it with their tears. After their eviction, Sammy, Linda Fortune's

brother, would return to their old neighbourhood on weekends while some of the buildings still stood, just to sit and look and cry (Adams 1988). Large corporations, like the Shell Oil Company, shied away from buying and building there, affirming the belief that "a stigma attaches to association with the tainted ground of District Six."[5] (*Cape Times* 3 December 1979). The land had been cursed. A plaque inscribed on the side of the Methodist Church in the district commanded,

> All those who pass by remember with shame the many thousands of people who lived for generations in District Six and other parts of the city and were forced by law to leave because of the colour of their skin.
> Father forgive us. . . . (cited in Hart 1990: 135)

When asked about the planned erection of a Technikon on the land in the late 1970s, Mr Mogamat Bekker, a resident in the area, stated "they can build it, but it won't stand for long. There'll be a curse on it."[6] Similarly, Linda Fortune's mother prophesied to a forceful Group Areas officer, "the ground in District Six is going to lie empty for many years to come" (Fortune 1996: 127). This was a haunted place, a place of the dead, "a vast cemetery," where residents rather died than face the ignominy of being forcefully evicted (Rive 1990: 111; see Jonker 2008). Following the District's demolition, one visitor to the site remarked "We went up there the other day and I got goose bumps. It was as if I could feel the spirit of the people. But someone from the Technikon came up to us and said we should leave the area and we needed a permit to be there."[7] This was forbidden ground, saturated with destructive religious power, and where dangerous forces roamed. At about the same time, another curious visitor to the site found the mangled leg of a doll amongst the rubble. It made her burst into tears, and lament, "everything that grows there now is stunted and gnarled like that dolls leg."[8]

But if tamed, this religious power could be used for the good. When the state planned to raze a number of homes as part of the Technikon project, members of the Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church decided to stage a protest that would draw on the power of the District's tainted ground. At a special service held on a barren plot adjacent to the church, clerics and residents scooped up some soil and placed it in a chalice which was then blessed by Bishop Lesley Stradling, former Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg. The consecrated soil was then sent off in sachets to different parts of the globe, where ministers were instructed to use it in similar services to highlight the plight of the District Six residents.[9] Overall, however, it seemed a more powerful religious ceremony was required to lay the forces lurking in the ground to rest. It was notable that in the twenty-first century, other than the Cape Technikon building, a few old religious structures, and a small housing development built as part of a fiercely contested land reform initiative, the wasteland that was once District Six remained largely undisturbed.

*Exile*

> To be exiled is to be cut off from the land, from the blessing, from the ancestors, from history, from life, from creation, from reality, from the deity. It is to enter into a new temporal period palpably different from that which has been before. It is to descend into chaos. (Smith 1978: 120)

"And so," the Cape Town poet Adam Small opined, "District Six has turned out to be a place and time with *diaspora* . . . in the towns and townships of the Cape Flats" (Wissema and Small 1986: 11). To be in exile, to be in diaspora, on the Cape Flats was to dwell in a different place, a place of chaos and disorder, a place without meaning, without blessing, without holiness. In Mitchell's Plain, Hettie Adams complained, "the choir can't even sing, they're so out of tune. It doesn't make you feel like you're in a church. In St Mark's [in District Six] it felt holy" (1988: 76). The Flats "was a barren land. There was nothing" (Mr K. T. cited in Swanson and Harries 2001: 78). Or, to put it simply, "the desolate Cape Flats had no soul" (Rive 1996: 127).

This was a hostile environment; danger, death and disease lurked everywhere. Nowhere was safe. It was a place of "violence, sickness, deaths," where "even with the doors locked, bolted . . . you were still not safe" (*Cape Times* 3 October 1974 cited in Hart 1990: 129). And it was a time of mourning, of yearning to go back to the land. "Please give us back the one place that we, our children, the aged and the poor need so badly. Give us back District Six" (*Ibid.*). The city became shrouded in an unbearable cacophony of grief and sorrow; "give them back their beloved district" many white individuals and organisations pleaded.[10]

Yet in some ways, District Six was already with the people. It was as if they had packed it up and took it with them in the form of their memories, in the same way the exilic Jews transported Israel in their sacred texts. It told of the past, but in the vast expanse of de-creation and chaos, it became a polestar, a compass leading the way back. As one evictee put it, "you can take the people out of the heart of District Six *ou pellie*, but you'll never take District Six out of the heart of the people" (*Cape Times* 8 March 1966; cited in Hart 1990: 123).

To recover one's identity, to re-establish one's place in this vast expanse of meaninglessness, required reconnecting with the land. One means of re-establishing a connection was to recover the sacred objects of the past. For example, in 1987, the Cape Town City Council embarked on a search for the famous seven steps, only to find they had lost all but two of them. Once the demolitions started, the council had planned to recover and restore the steps as part of a monument, since they "were such a valuable cultural landmark and symbol of the once vibrant community and their forced removal."[11] But, as we have seen, the steps were more than a cultural landmark; they resonated with potent religious significance. To the

people of District Six, they were like the Ark of the Covenant. Only, the writing on the stone was something less overt than with Moses: and yet as real as that ancient imprint of Jehovah" (Wissema and Small 1986: 11).

"Most particularly, as is widespread in the history of religions, exile may be overcome in moments of sacred time" (Smith 1978: 124). Sacred time was a timeless, extraordinary realm where the sacred was brought into being through careful ritual performance. Two occasions where sacred time was generated was firstly in the District Six museum, and secondly, in commemorative cultural productions, like novels, poetry, and plays. The District Six Museum, as a structure, as a space, created a temporal vortex that drew one into the mythical time and landscape of District Six. It officially opened its doors in 1994, but originated in the late 1980s as the concept of the Hands Off District Six campaign (Jeppie and Soudien 1990). It was erected in the Methodist Church, which was a struggle church during the 1980s, and was located in Buitenkant Street, on the periphery of the old District Six. Approaching the site, a plaque on the outside of the building inscribed with the opening phrase "all who pass by remember . . ." initiated one's mythical journey. At the entry point one was greeted by a former District Sixer and invited inside. Upon entry, one would be confronted with the Museum's exhibition statement, here abbreviated,

> In this exhibition
> We do not wish
> To recreate District Six
> As much as to
> Repossess the history of the area
> As a place where people lived,
> Loved and struggled.

These words reordered time, so that one was transported into a new temporal domain, a temporal reorientation that brought the past into the present, and transported one into the past. This was reinforced through the objects on display, and the interactive map of the District on the floor where District Sixers were encouraged to write their names, mark their homes and other landmarks, as well as talk about their experiences. As Charmaine McEachern put it, "the map works as a mnemonic, which both allows the recall of the place but also puts the rememberer back into it, as they literally have put their names back into District Six by writing them on the map" (1998: 506). Engaging and negotiating the map became a kind of ritual, where District Six was evoked as a sacred space in the realm of the personal and located in the past, but situated and contextualized it in a public space in the present through practises that perpetuated it into the future.

Of the many cultural productions commemorating District Six, the popular

musical *District Six*, written and staged by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen in the 1980s, arguably, marked the public revival of District Six story. Kramer and Petersen had met by chance in 1986, when, coincidently, they were both busy working on a play about the district. By this time, Kramer was already an iconic figure in South African popular culture, having made a name as the theatrical focal point of a widely acclaimed ad campaign for a Volkswagen family motor vehicle. Having been born and raised in District Six, Petersen's entertainment skills emanated from the suburb's vibrant artistic climate where he sang in talent contests and played music during the traditional New Year's festivals. After the opening of their inaugural work, Marianne Thamm declared, "District Six lives!" It lived "not only in the hearts and minds of the community that lived there," but now also survived "on stage," she went on to explain. This musical rendition of the District's life and culture had "immortalized the music and people of District Six" and was "the definitive monument."[12] The play was deeply rooted in the spirit of District Six since Taliep Petersen had grown up there, and many of the cast members also grew up there. And when it came to the choice of venue when travelling to other parts of the country, its producers tried to act within the spirit of its former residents.[13] While foreign reviewers sometimes lambasted the play, saying, for example, that it was the "most perfect clash between form and content," in Cape Town, the play evocatively recreated the past, and took the audience on a turbulent emotional journey that they experienced in the present.[14] As one of the cast members put it around the time of its first stage appearance,

> Ever since the show opened people have cried like you won't believe when we sing *Seven Steps*. A lot of people who lived out in District Six find [the play] a very emotional trip. They relate to whatever's happening on stage.[15]

The ultimate reconnection, however, was through the real recovery of the land, of being able to reoccupy it. But reuniting with the land was a volatile process steeped in religious power. For example, recognizing that the "District Six story was a symbolically contested space with many competing truths," Shamiel Jeppie and Crain Soudien argued that the suburb presented itself as a "momentous prize in the scramble and struggle for symbols amongst the stakeholders for a future South Africa" (1990: 13). This "small patch of ground," they claimed, was of momentous importance because it was marked by a bitter past and, as a barren wasteland, served as a daily reminder of apartheid's most heinous face. Few places, therefore, had better credentials as a healing symbol for a new reconciled South Africa. With proper care, reconnection with the land therefore could activate potent healing forces that would radiate to all corners of the nation.

## Conclusion

Former residents of District Six drew meaning and inspiration from their former home, and expressed their feelings about the important role it played in their lives by sharing their memories with others. The scale of the old community's tragic experience meant that the public was forced to listen. On one level, their communal narrative, or, the District Six story, was meaningful in and of itself, as the painful history of urban segregation. Yet many who encountered the District Six story were moved in a way that suggested it was more than a communal memory. It had a deeper meaning that could be detected in the way the District Six story was told, about how things were magical in the beginning and hellish in the end, and the abundance of sparkling references to life in and around the heart of the city. The story could be felt in the emotive nuances and subtle inflections generated by the evocative language with which it was told.

Significantly, the continued material and imagined significance of District Six in the everyday lives of the coloured population and their relationship with the city is revealed in the case of the urban political economy around the issue of housing in post-apartheid Cape Town. For example, for the most part of 2007, predominantly coloured backyard dwellers in the Cape Flats township of Delft watched as day by day new brick and cement houses were being erected as part of an expansive new provincial housing project. As part of a broader state-driven initiative aimed at improving the living standards of South Africa's impoverished masses, the new housing development was the material fruition of the spirit and ideals guiding South Africa's democratic dispensation. The Delft backyard dwellers had a stake in the new homes as they were a primary example of the effects of the apartheid government's housing and economic strategies. Many community members had also applied more than a decade ago already to the municipal housing department for housing allocation. To their dismay, however, the provincial housing department declared that the new houses were destined for black African shack dwellers living in another part of the city. In December of the same year, the Delft community's patience with the provincial housing department ran out and they stormed the nearly finished building site and claimed the houses for themselves.[16]

On one level, the case of the backyard dwellers demonstrated that "the template [of the] postmodern, post-apartheid city could seamlessly settle upon the spatial order the spatial order" forged by "apartheid era social engineering" and in effect perpetuated the social divisions and injustices of the past by keeping the black and coloured working classes at the margins of the city (Robbins 2007: 28). Nevertheless, as part of a wider trend regarding housing and residence in Cape Town, the Delft community's actions contributed to a growing perception of the city's urban space as a racially volatile and fiercely contested political arena. For example, in the aftermath of the illegal occupation, community members claimed

they had been spurred on by a local ward councillor who argued that the blatant social neglect of the circumstances of the coloured people on the part of the state and the province justified their right to claim the homes.[17]

During this time, there has also been a growing perception that the city's tarnished image was somehow related to coloured identity. For example, when analysts engaged the subject of the coloured community's political decisions, Cheryl Hendricks has argued, the debate was overwhelmingly characterized as revolving around coloured identity. Foreclosing the argument in this manner, she contended, was problematic for a number of reasons. In the first instance, since coloured identity was made to appear contentious and problematic, it suggested that coloured people were somehow flawed. Furthermore, this approach overlooked the "larger context of identity constructions in South Africa," and failed to "adequately address the issues that generate conflict in the Western Cape" (Hendricks 2005: 118). In this way, Cheryl Hendricks demonstrated that proponents of the reductionist idea that the city's negative image could be traced to the notion of coloured identity had failed to engage with the coloured community's relationship with Cape Town.

In early 2008, only a few months after taking illegal occupation of the provincial housing development, the Delft backyard dwellers were dramatically evicted in a well organised police crack operation. It was in the context of the community's dire circumstances not long after their eviction, that a popular local tabloid, the *Daily Voice*, offered a striking alternative interpretation of the nature and source of the coloured community's political inspiration. Headlined "Invincible Cape Flats Spirit," the editorial of 21 February 2008 read,

> after surviving rubber bullets, stun grenades and being moered (beaten), the mense (community) tried to get their lives back to normal the very next day. That's if you can call sleeping on the pavement with all your possessions and k@kking [defecating] in the bush normal. But this is spirit of the Cape Flats.[18]

This "indomitable spirit," it continued, had become entrenched in the coloured psyche as a result of centuries of oppression, marginalization and dispossession "at the hands of Dutch invaders, white racists" and presently "*slapgat* (lazy) politicians." It was the same spirit "that kept people's dreams alive of one day returning to a free and non-racist District Six." The case of the Delft backyard dwellers therefore proved the historical fact that "we [the coloured people] on the Cape Flats are survivors," and because of that enduring hardy spirit "we will be around longer than the two-faced lying politicians and their promises." According to the *Voice*, therefore, the backyard dwellers' actions were motivated by internalized beliefs and feelings stirred by a history of racial oppression and marginalization that

revolved around space in Cape Town. Considering that this news item was implicitly cast in the light of racial differences between black and coloured, the awe and reverence that surrounded the subject of "District Six" indicated that it played a highly significant role in local ideas about coloureds and the city. As it was deployed in the *Voice*, however, "District Six" became a focal point for the history of urban marginalization endured by the coloured community, and the imagined centre of socio-political liberation in the future. In other words, it was a symbolic space that mediated the idea of coloured identity being situated in the social experience of the city.

At heart, however, the District Six story was about how a community came to occupy a special place in the world simply by living and being there, so that it came to define their unique place in the world, and explain how the world worked, so that, ultimately, just dwelling there gave them a profound sense of humanness. Ultimately, it was their story of having been stripped of their humanity through forced removal, demolition and banishment to a dehumanizing world, and then recovering a sense of dignity and humanity from within this experience of humiliation and dispossession by invoking the spirit of their former home. It was therefore significant for two reasons. Firstly, District Six meaningfully linked the communal experience of urban transformation with the wider processes of a transforming city and society. It was therefore their story about Cape Town, the modern city. Secondly, looking at the story's religious overtones, it could be read as a counter-metaphor for an alternative religiosity, as it was developed on the margins and spoke about the centre. Or as St Augustine of Hippo put it to his contemporary, Varo, "true religion owed its foundation to no city; it was itself the foundation of a wholly celestial city" (1958: 126).

## Notes

1 "The Jews of District Six." *Weekend Argus*, 21 January 1989.
2 "War Damage that Embarrasses a City." *The Star*, 1 May 1979.
3 "District Six Scars for Life from the Bulldozers." *Cape Argus*, 11 August 1979.
4 "Social Workers to Open Part-Time Office in District Six." *Cape Argus*, 29 December 1979.
5 "Shell D6 Move Hailed." *Cape Times*, 3 December 1979.
6 "A Curse Lurks in the Shadow of the Technikon." *Cape Argus*, 10 October 1979.
7 "Funfinder: Singing Star from Seven Steps." *Cape Times*, 17 April 1987.
8 "An Ironic Visit for District Six Cast." *Cape Argus*, 15 April 1987.
9 "'Raped' District Six Soil for Overseas." *Cape Times*, 17 September 1979.
10 "War Damage that Embarrases a City." *The Star*, 1 May 1979.
11 "Seven Steps May 'Live' Again: A New Council Plan May Restore 'Vyf's' Notorious Stamping Ground." *Cape Argus*, 9 May 1987.
12 "A Definitive Monument." *Cape Times* 13 May 1987.
13 "Cancellation of District Six Play Hits 10 000." *Cape Argus* 12 February 1988.
14 "Where Did District Six Go Wrong in Transfer?" *Cape Argus*, 6 September 1988.
15 "The Music is the Main Thing Says District 6 Star Madeegha." *Cape Argus*, 26 May 1987.
16 "Hundreds Lay Claim to Delft Houses." *Cape Argus*, 21 December 2007.
17 "DA Councilor in Court." *South African Press Association*, 21 December 2007.
18 "Editorial: Invincible Cape Flats Spirit." *Daily Voice*, 21 February 2008.

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