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Two-dimensional engagements: photography, empathy and interpretation at District Six Museum.

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As one of six internationally recognised ‘Sites of Conscience’ in South Africa, District Six Museum in Cape Town has been at the forefront of the community museum movement since its inception in 1994. Organised by those directly affected by apartheid’s Group Areas Act, the Museum is dedicated to preserving and fighting for the rights and memories of those who were forcibly removed from their District Six homes between 1966 and 1982. A uniquely intimate space, the Museum seeks to balance empathy alongside what it calls ‘critical non-racialism’, as it engages in the ambitious project of re-defining racialised communities in post-apartheid South Africa.

This paper explores the tensions between criticality and empathy in relation to District Six Museum’s photographic collection. Focusing particularly on the problem of perspective-taking, this paper analyses the ways in which gradual changes in the Museum’s visitor demographic are compromising its non-racial project. Based on qualitative research that suggests contemporary visitors are less likely to engage in the kind of reconstructive, politicised imaginings that the Museum’s displays require, this paper argues that empathy, rather than a tool for critical engagement with District Six’s history, is increasingly becoming the means through which alternative memories of District Six are silenced.

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[...] You are going to look at it differently. An architect is going to look at it differently. An archaeologist is going to look at it differently, historian, photographer, look at it differently. The people of District Six — they look at it differently! They look at it completely differently. They see what we can't see. We see this two-dimensional thing on the wall. They see something very different. They see three-dimensionally, I believe.

(Tina Smith, Curator at District Six Museum. Interview with author.).

There has in recent years been a notable increase in the number of museum practitioners and researchers engaging with the emotional life of the museum. Part of the broader 'emotional turn' (Lemmings et al. 2014, 3) in the humanities and social sciences, issues that were once treated with disdain are increasingly the focus of a renewed curiosity within museums and heritage studies (Smith *et al.* 2016). This trend is clearly articulated by the recent proliferation of projects exploring affect and empathy in the museum (Landsberg 2004; Witcomb 2012; Arnold de Simine 2013; Waterton *et al.* 2015; Tolia-Kelly 2016). Whilst these projects are disproportionately focused on the study of 'traumatic histories' (Smith *et al.* 2016: 449) there remains, as Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell suggest, room for further 'theoretically robust' work on the topic (2016: 444) Indeed, whilst other disciplines have offered considerable critiques of empathy, highlighting its use in the advancement of a neoliberal or western-centric agenda (Boler 1997; Berlant 1998; Clohesy 2013; Pedwell 2014; Berlowitz 2016), some of these more critical debates have yet to make their way into our study of museums.ⁱ

As one of the institutions directly impacted by this renewed interest in emotion, organisers at District Six Museum are among the most vocal critics of empathy (Rassool 2007, 105). For the Museum's curator Tina Smith, generalised assertions about visitor emotions are part of a broader return to the ethnographic, which overlooks the differences between site visitors. As she so succinctly puts it, 'the people of District Six' (for whom the museum was originally conceived) experience in their encounters with the Museum 'what we can't see' [...] They see three-dimensionally' (TS, interview with author).

The distinction between two- and three-dimensional seeing is a pithy analogy for empathy's role in the museum. As Megan Boler observes (1997, 258), one of empathy's great ironies is that whilst it is often diagnosed as a universalising condition that brings the world closer together, 'empathetic identification' is actually predicated on the Westernised need to 'consume' difference. Arguing that such consumption 'annihilates' the 'other' of empathetic identification, Boler (1997, 259) suggests that in most cases empathy forestalls insight into the empathiser's complicity with another's suffering, 'situat[ing] the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection'. Exploring empathy's manifestation in relation to the commemoration of the 1807 bicentenary, Laurajane Smith's visitor study confirm Boler's observations. Noting that whilst visitors of African/African-Caribbean descent demonstrated clear moments of empathy in relation to the exhibition material, Smith (2010, 193) observes that the majority of white visitors tended to react with 'platitudes' and 'strategies of disengagement', expressed through banal phrases about 'man's inhumanity to man'. Particularly disconcerting is Smith's observation that 42% of white British visitors to these sites outright refused the connection between slave trading and British history, further demonstrating Boler's (1997, 259) claims about empathy as a

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reinforcer of the status quo. Smith (2010) writes that the impact of such strategic disengagement is particularly profound when it occurs in relation to difficult histories, where drawing on pre-existing ‘authorised heritage discourses’, it frequently silences alternative memories of the past.

Other enquiries into empathy’s presence at heritage sites have replicated these findings. For example, Arnold Modlin *et al.* (2011, 5) draw attention to the ‘affective inequality’ that circulates at plantation house museums, and which they suggest result in a lack of ‘historical empathy’ for narratives of the enslaved, whilst Andrea Witcomb (2015, 332) has spoken of the difference between a critically engaged ‘pedagogy of feeling’ in museum visitors, and the more banal reactions that simply promote ‘tolerance towards difference’ (2015, 327). However for the most part, discussions of empathy in relation to these sites tend to obscure the discrepancy between visitors’ emotional encounters with the museum. This discrepancy expresses not just individual visitor politics, but ultimately draws attention to the inconsistent nature of the museum going experience itself which, for curators at District Six Museum, is articulated through the visual.

Drawing on Tina Smith’s original observation about the difference between two and three-dimensional seeing, this paper will explore the impact that different ways of seeing in District Six Museum have on visitors’ abilities to empathise and critically engage with the material on display. Focusing in particular on the Museum’s vast photographic collection, which was the backbone of its first exhibition, and which continues to be a key mnemonic device for visitors to the site (Smith *et al.* 2001), this paper will examine how increased tourism to the Museum has inadvertently reinforced suppressive State narratives about District Six, eroding alternative memories of the area. Addressing the role that empathy plays

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in this erosion, this paper will explore the impact of tourism on the Museum's broader political project as one of the major stakeholders in the District Six land claim process. In privileging non-local experiences of District Six Museum this essay has two main objectives. Firstly, to draw attention to a dilemma faced by many community heritage sites, which often financially reliant on tourism, must make difficult decisions about whether to adjust their content for a less local audience (Karp 1992; Simpson). Secondly, by specifically addressing the tourist experience in District Six Museum, this paper will ultimately gesture towards the silences that occur when locally generated memories 'go global', and the attendant complex narratives around race, class and restitution are reduced to two-dimensional empathetic engagements.

i. Conceptualising empathy

Before embarking on an appraisal of its effects in the museum, it is necessary to acknowledge what is often described as empathy's 'ambivalent grammar' (Pedwell 2014, 1). Noting that the study of empathy has an 'expansive reach [...] across diverse disciplines', Carolyn Pedwell (2014, xiv) suggests that rather than defining empathy, researchers should engage with its ambiguity as symptomatic of the 'complex transnational workings of emotion' (2014, 4). Within heritage and museum literature, studies of empathy have ranged from ethnographic appraisals of exhibitions (Landsberg 2004; de Simone 2013; Witcomb 2015) to large scale qualitative interviews with museum visitors across the world (Sandell 2007; Smith 2010; Smith 2016). Following Pedwell's comments, it is my position that methodological variety is one of the strengths of the discipline's approach to empathy, providing researchers with a number of comparative frameworks and theoretical junctures through which empathy's 'ambivalent grammar' can be addressed. In response to this, this project employed a number of different research methods to explore the ways in which empathy operates at District Six's

site.

At the time of conducting the original fieldwork in 2012 a number of different methods were deployed in an attempt to get a sense of how empathy operated at District Six's site. Whilst this project was initially informed by that 'ethnographic gaze' (TS, interview with author) that the Museum's curator warned me against, it rapidly became clear that such an approach failed to capture the richness of District Six Museum's curatorial tradition. District Six Museum is a highly intertextual space, and many of the artists and activists who feature in its exhibitions also author its critical literature (Bennett 2012; Julius 2008; Layne 2008; Rassool 2007; Jeppie et al. 1990). Similarly the site is now also subject to an intense mythologisation in South Africa, and the countless memoirs, novels, paintings and plays that have emerged from its residents are almost inseparable from contemporary experiences of the Museum. In response to the challenge of separating such cultural imaginings from visitor interpretation, a number of different resources, expanding far beyond the physical site, were engaged with throughout this project. These included memoirs, novels, poetry, photographic collections and documentary films, many of which are already incorporated into the Museum's exhibitions and gift shop.

Deconstructive readings of the Museum as 'non-unifying text' (Soudien 2001, 119) were then complemented by a number of informal discussions and interviews with members of the Museum staff, many of whom are also ex-residents of the District. Fifty questionnaires were handed out to visitors, specifically asking for reflections on the Museum's photographic material. The questionnaires and the conversations that took place as I engaged the participants occasionally yielded in-depth insights into visitor interests. Alongside the size of

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the sample, there were specific limitations to the data collected from this method. Many of the participants were international visitors encountering the site as part of a 'Township Tour', which allowed them to spend little more than thirty minutes in the Museum. This meant that responses were often given in haste. Therefore further data was collected using the other mainstays of the ethnographic toolkit (Hammersley 2006), including alternative forms of visitor observation and engagement documentation such as the 'visitors cloth' in the Museum, and the online review site Trip Advisor.

In view of the limitations of the data collected, the contents of this paper are perhaps better treated as a position piece, rather than as a determinate excision of all that District Six Museum and its visitors have to offer. However it is my belief that there is significant scope for these same questions to be addressed through a larger, more comprehensive study in the future.

Partly as a result of this mixed methodology, and due to the multivalency of the site, it quickly became clear that a full scale appraisal of empathy's presence or absence within the Museum would be an impossible task, requiring artificial distinctions to be made between the Museum, its literatures and its activism, whilst institutionalising District Six's history in order to treat it as a site of static meaning and interpretation. Given that District Six Museum espouses itself as a 'hybrid' (Rassool 2008, 72), non-archival 'generative' space (Julius 2008, 113) which privileges transience, performance, and collectivity over permanent structures, static meaning and authoritarianism (Rassool 2008) this kind of operation would clearly do a disservice to the Museum, and would only accentuate the problematic discourses that underwrite uncritical approaches to empathy.

Rather than subject the Museum to such dissections, this study takes empathy less as a pre-prepared definitive response to an image, narrative or exhibition (Boler (1997: 259) describes this as ‘passive empathy’), and more as a spectrum of affective, cognitive and emotional conditions, all of which are necessary for empathy, but which also have their own nuanced, individual relationships to memory and identity. As such, this study aligns with the thinking of philosopher Amy Coplan, who in her own work has defined empathy as:

A complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation. To say that empathy is ‘complex’ is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that *empathy is ‘imaginative’ is to say that it involves the representations of a target’s states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer’s perception.* And to say that empathy is a ‘simulation’ is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target’s experiences while maintaining a clear sense of self-other-differentiation.

(Coplan 2011, 40-41, Italics my own)

Highlighting her observations about the empathy’s imaginative dimensions, Coplan’s attention to the tension between observer ‘perception’ and target ‘representation’ is particularly relevant to this paper’s concerns, given the distinction curators at District Six Museum make between two and three-dimensional ways of seeing. Whilst other empathy scholars have also drawn attention to these tensions (Berlant 1998; Batson 2009; Lopes 2011), Coplan’s definition is the most comprehensive, also providing a discursive framework to that match that used by scholars of the visual (Edwards 2001; Schirato *et al* 2010).

ii. Historical context

Nestled on the outskirts of the city, District Six Museum is inconspicuously situated beneath Cape Town's Table Mountain. Now a popular tourist attraction, the Museum prefaces the empty land once occupied by its people, where it evokes a quiet but prescient testament to the lives and communities destroyed by apartheid [Figure 1 near here].

First opened in 1994, District Six Museum technically emerged out of the 1950 Group Areas Act. Viewed as formalising (rather than instigating) racial segregation in South Africa (Maylam 1995, 27), the consequences of this Act for the people of District Six were still devastating, as 65,000 individuals were forcibly removed from their homes between 1966 and 1982 once the neighbourhood was declared a 'whites only' area (Hart 1990, 129). Before this, District Six had been an impoverished multi-ethnic neighbourhood which, benefiting from its proximity to Cape Town's harbour and city centre, gave thousands of coloured, African, Indian and (poor) white peoples access to relatively stable education and employment opportunities at a time when such opportunities were generally barred to non-whites in particular.ⁱⁱ

What Annie Coombes (2003: 125) describes as a 'reflective' nostalgia means that the District is often fondly remembered by ex-residents as 'one happy melting pot' of racial and cultural mores, in spite of the definite 'hierarchy of pigmentation' that existed within it (Bickford-Smith 1990, 37). As will be addressed later in this paper, such recollections have been challenged on a number of fronts, most notably by District Six's often forgotten African residents (Ngcelwane 1998; Beyers 2008; Sambumbu 2010; Beyers 2010). Nevertheless this cosmopolitan narrative gained traction after the completion of demolition in 1982, and is

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advanced by both South African and international activists today as the main reason for the infliction of the Group Areas Act on District Six in the first place (Layne 2008, 55).

The Museum was the product of the “Hands Off District Six” campaign - a committee formed by a group of activists, artists and intellectuals in reaction to the National Party’s attempts to sell District Six’s land to British Petroleum. As part of their campaign a small exhibition of photographs was curated in the Buitenkant Church in 1992, and two years later, the Museum’s first permanent exhibition “Streets: Retracting District Six” opened in the same building (Rassool 2006, 288). Featuring a range of artefacts donated by ex-residents, the Museum is uncompromising in its commitment to ‘sustain[ing] a vigorous and fiercely proprietorial community’ (Bennett et al. 2008, 61) of District Sixers, and creating a space in which the very notion of a ‘District Six community’ is actively redefined, and reframed, in ways that go beyond ‘descent, mere historic claim or spatial presence’ (Bennett et al. 2008, 74).

At first the Museum’s proprietorial ‘community’ seems self-evident, as the family photographs adorning its walls attest to a diverse grouping of (largely) non-white Capetonians, brought together through the axis of poverty, shared space and culture. Indeed, the curators go some way to reinforcing this image, as particular attention is paid to spaces and places that have universal significance for District Sixers, such as the famous commercial Hanover Street, ‘Seven Steps’, and the local barber shop [Figures 2, 3 and 4 near here]. However as District Six’s mythology has grown, and possibilities of returning to its land have become reality, a number of frictions have emerged between ex-residents who share the Museum’s vision for a redefined, non-lineal District, and a different set of stakeholders,

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whose demands for an alternative, more exclusive future for the land, rejects the Museum, and its concept of community altogether (Ernsten 2015).

From the outset District Six Museum declared it would be ‘strategic’ about its vision for the ‘community’, observing that the use of the term ‘community’ during apartheid (where it functioned as a euphemism and justification for racial segregation) had left many South Africans with deep feelings of unease about the concept (Bennett et al. 2008, 73). However, rather than ditching the concept altogether, the founders of the District Six Museum expressed a desire to reconstruct the notion of community through the lens of ‘critical non-racialism’, defined by one of its activist-academics Crain Soudien (2001, 116), as ‘a form of anti-racism that consciously seeks to work with, and takes into account [...] “difference”’. What this means in practice, is that whilst the Museum acknowledges the impact that racial classifications had on residents of District Six, it refuses to reproduce these within its displays, engaging instead in an imaginative process that re-fashions post-apartheid identities, and attempts to bring them together within the Museum along non-racial lines (Bennett et al. 2008, 74). As a utopic vision for the future, such an undertaking is an ambitious attempt to undo the psychological wounds inflicted upon a nation violently segregated along racial, cultural and ethnic lines. However a national return to entrenched racial identities (Seekings 2008; Posel 2001a), coupled with the Museum’s involvement in District Six land claims, has made implementing such a reconstructive vision a problematic way of dealing with apartheid’s legacy.

The other effect of this refusal to provide an easily digestible, neatly racialised narrative of the past is that unlike other heritage sites of its stature, District Six Museum is consistently overlooked by governmental funding sources. Suggesting that their refusal to

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draw on a singular ethnic narrative of District Six means that the Museum ‘cannot be “claimed” by either of the parties of government in the province’, Annie Coombes (2003: 122) notes that financially the site relies on charging entrance fees to non-resident visitors, as well as support from international donors and organisations. Consequently, contrary to its status as a ‘community’ heritage site, the Museum now receives considerable interest from international visitors, meaning that some days there are far more non-local visitors to the site than ex-residents. Such dramatic shifts in the visitor demographic has also impacted the affective experiences of the site, as well as the interpretation of its displays. Although staff remain impassive in their refusal to adjust the displays for these new audiences, there have been calls for the Museum to introduce more ‘scaffolded interpretation’ for these international visitors (Ballantyne 2003: 281).

iii. ‘Coloured’ narratives of District Six

In spite of its attempts discourses of race have dogged the lifespan of District Six Museum. From its initial failure to appeal to governmental funders, through to current debates surrounding the right of the indigenous Khoisan and San people to District Six’s land (Ernsten 2015), critical non-racialism has proven difficult to negotiate for the Museum’s organisers. Most difficult to shift, however, have been the accusations that the Museum is an active perpetuator of the mythology of District Six as ‘ethnic homeland’ and birthplace of the coloured population in South Africa (Wicomb 1998: 94)

Until the late 1990s, ‘Coloured’ as a racialised form of identification was regarded with deep cynicism by many activists and intellectuals in South Africa. Regarded as a relic of apartheid, during which ‘Coloured’ was used by officials to refer to individuals who officials felt were neither ‘Bantu’ (African) nor ‘White’, serious engagements with coloured

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experiences and politics didn't begin until the shock-vote of 1994, when the population voted overwhelmingly for the racist National Party, rather than the ANC, in South Africa's first democratic election (Adhikari 2008: 83). Attributed to the particular oppressions experienced by coloured folk under apartheid, there is increasing recognition in post-apartheid South Africa that coloured identity is also socially and culturally distinct from African and white identities (Erasmus 2001; Hendricks 2005; Adhikari 2008). This, and the fact that some forty percent of coloured voters live in Cape Town, with two-thirds residing in the Western Cape (Adhikari 2005, 2) partly accounts for why District Six is often perceived as being a 'coloured place'. Add to this the number of high-profile coloured novelists, activists and artists stemming from District Six (many of whom were also involved in the creation of the Museum), and it is easy to see why District Six Museum's non-racial philosophy is often treated with scepticism by its critics.ⁱⁱⁱ In reality, whilst coloured residents do account for a significant proportion of District Six's demographic, they are by no means the only stakeholders in the current land restitution case against the State. As Christiaan Beyers (2007, 272) notes, whilst precise figures are hard to come by, at the time of the 1966 removals there was a significant (albeit concealed) African population in District Six, and yet as key figures within the Regional Land Claims Commission have acknowledged, African applicants to the Land Claims Office (for restitution of land lost through the Group Areas Act) are disproportionately fewer than amongst their coloured neighbours.^{iv}

This is where the Museum's commitment to critical non-racialism has been invaluable, as through direct links with the District Six Beneficiary Trust (the committee set up to oversee residents' land claims in District Six), they have attempted to reach out to disenfranchised African ex-residents, both through marketing strategies within select townships, and by consciously building an Africanised element into their exhibitionary

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narrative (Beyers, 2008). Most notable is the exhibition ‘Nomuvuyo’s Room’ which based on a memoir written by African District Sixer Nomuvuyo Ngcelwane, offers an exact replica of her old family home (Layne et al. 2001, 149). And yet as noted by Leslie Witz (2007, 244), the Museum continues to attract complaints that its ‘exhibitions and photographs on show tend to reinforce the myth of the district as a “coloured” place’, suggesting that somewhere between the Museum’s attempts to convey a visually de-racialised aesthetic, and its interpretation by the public, the message about District Six’s multi-ethnic future, is being lost. This is also where the challenges involved with empathy’s representational and interpretive processes become most apparent, as prompted by the increased volume of international visitors (who tend to be less familiar with South African racial politics), there are risks that District Six Museum’s photographic archive inadvertently contributes to the re-centralisation of coloured narratives and experiences of District Six.

iv. Reading race in the Museum

In spite of District Six Museum’s attempts to put together a non-racial archive at the site, staff frequently reflect on discomfiting moments in which people from outside the immediate community of residents have come into its space and applied racialised logics to its visual material. In a footnote to his work on the Museum, Ciraj Rassool highlights a particular moment when a visiting researcher began to scour the Museum’s photographic collection in search of images of ‘Indians’ for a photographic book. Rassool (2006, 318) notes of the moment that such purposeful looking was disquieting for the way it ‘slid uneasily back into visual codes and identifications of race, with more than a passing resemblance to colonial physical anthropology’.

Despite the Museum's wholehearted rejection of these physiological readings, such habits appear to be difficult for District Six's visitors to overcome, and amongst the participants in this study a number of international tourists continued to refer to the popular notion of District Six as a 'coloured place', suggesting that the Museum was a much needed reminder of a 'forgotten' "'coloured" population' and particularly commenting on 'family photos [sic] of "coloureds" at various celebrations prior to their removal'. Given these questionnaires were appealing to only a small sample of the Museum's visitors, it is well worth noting that a similar pattern emerges on TripAdvisor, where reviewers make the same mistake of exclusively aligning 'coloured' and 'District Six' histories. Likewise, the 2012 visitors' cloth (a sheet of material that museum staff encourage visitors to write on instead of a book) also revealed these tensions amongst domestic visitors, as comments such as 'wonderful to see our "coloured" history' and "D6 was not a "coloured" place!" hint at the ongoing challenges facing the Museum, as it tries to convince its stakeholders of its non-racial ethos. Given the Museum's dependency on international support for its projects, and its broader involvement in land returns, such interpretations matter regardless of how infrequent they may be. Not least, as Ciraj Rasool (2007, 96) points out, because of the problematic impact that 'tourist imaging' has had on South African geographies in the past, whereby 'the existence of communities and their boundaries became determined by their attraction to the tourist gaze' (Rasool 2007, 96).

Indeed perhaps as a result of this pathologization of the coloured experience, in 2006 the Museum and the District Six Beneficiary Trust found themselves objecting to propositions from Cape Town's council to make the return to District Six a 'coloureds only' event (Soudien 2008, 23). Certainly, with an increase in the number of international tour groups visiting the Museum (*District Six Annual Report*, 2014), its caretakers are having to

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work harder than ever to ensure that its basic message of ‘critical non-racialism’ is communicated to museum visitors. In terms of the photographs that are on display at District Six Museum, the tendency for these images to be read as ‘Coloured’, can be explained both by the image’s ‘polysemic unpredictability’ (Edwards 2001, 189), and as a result of the mythologisation of racial difference in South Africa. Both of these phenomena challenge many of District Six Museum’s philosophies, and undercut the basic premise on which empathetic engagement with the its photographs should be based -- that of an ‘accurate’ and contextually appropriate interpretation of another’s representations (Coplan 2011). The precise means through which such inaccuracies can occur will be explained in more detail below.

Writing on the museological image, Elizabeth Edwards (2001, 189) observes that the introduction of photographs into a museum exhibition is often accompanied by the ‘implicated belief that context is capable of controlling the polysemic unpredictability of the image’. Such a position, Edwards advises, has been consistently undermined by the museum going public, whose contradictory interpretations of visual material demonstrate that it is they, and not curators and directors who ‘define the appropriateness and affective limits of “context” of the image’ (2001, 189). For the caretakers at District Six Museum, this has always been the essential conundrum of the work they do with photography, which curator Peggy Delport (2000, 158) describes as being a tussle between their inherent value as ‘unstable signifiers’ and ‘sites of semiotic energy’, and deep concern with ‘the risk in images and the danger of aesthetics becoming vain and loosening its moorings to the rooted content that gave it form’ (Delport 2001, 162).

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The intended ‘context’ for the Museum’s photographs is best reflected in the rationale behind its biggest exhibition to date, *Digging Deeper*. Summarising the launch of *Digging Deeper* in 2000, Delpont describes the exhibition as formalising:

the belief in the role of the museum space as a framework for interpretation, not as fixed by historians, curators and artists, but something that is continually *shifted, layered and subverted by its visitors, in particular ex-residents* and others affected by experiences of forced removals.

(Delpont 2001, 159, Italics my own)

In striving to conceptualise the exhibition and Museum in this way, organisers at District Six Museum sought to challenge both the ‘coloured-centric’ narratives that had accompanied District Six’s legacy up to that point (Rassool 2007, 102), as well as formally establishing the Museum as a ‘living memorial’ (Kolbe 2016) and ‘generative space for working with and interpreting memory’ (Julius 2008, 113). It is here that distinctions between two-dimensional, and three-dimensional types of seeing come into play, as many of the exhibition’s iconic installations, such as the giant floor map of District Six [Figure 5 near here] (described by Charmaine McEachern as the museum’s central ‘mnemonic’ device [1998, 508]), and the collection of family photographs that adorn its walls on the ‘Interior’ display, are subjects to radically different interpretations, depending on the prior knowledge of the audience in question.

Lovingly donated by hundreds of District Six’s former residents viewing the photographs on display in District Six’s ‘Interior’ section is an intensely intimate and moving experience which often provokes extreme emotional reactions in museum visitors [Figure 6

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and 7 near here]. Roy Ballantyne (2003: 281) describes District Six Museum as a site of ‘hot interpretive experience’, and there is no doubt that the arrangement of its photographs on the ‘Interior’ display are designed to elicit deep levels of emotional identification in visitors, which have the potential to be transformed into empathy. The ‘Interior’ wall also provides a crucial orientation for first time visitors to the Museum, where scenes familiar to most visitor such as the jubilant snapshots of weddings, birthdays and religious holidays greet the viewer, providing a universal emotional anchorage from which identification with District Six residents can emerge. It is notable that in spite of the more official ‘starting point’, signalled by a timeline that is located on the opposite side of the Museum, the majority of first time visitors naturally gravitate towards the ‘Interior’ wall and will tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time in close contact with the display, absorbing these fragments from a lost community [Figure 8, 9 and 10 near here]. For ex-residents, the ‘Interior’ section is also the locus of intense nostalgia, joy and melancholia as particular photographs remind them of families long since dispersed, whilst offering a means of ‘inscrib[ing] their pasts into the fabric of the Museum’ (Smith et al. 2001, 133).

Co-founder Crain Soudien (2006, 9) admits the importance of these photographs to the Museum experience, but suggests that in the case of non-local visitors, full comprehension of their significance only comes about through direct interaction with ‘native informants’, who are usually one of the Museum’s two education officers (2006, 8). Soudien explicitly uses the language of empathy when discussing these encounters, suggesting that the work of the education officers ‘inaugurates a pedagogical practice that takes the horror and the trauma, and asks the visitor to see and recognise the inhumanity in these and to develop a sense of empathy in relation to them’ (2006, 8). Suggesting that these informants ‘activate the visitor’s capacity for empathy’ by ‘requir[ing] the visitor to insert himself or herself into the

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shoes of the mediator and to use his or her imagination for understanding' (2006, 9), Soudien is attentive to the instrumental role played by the education officer as agents of 'co-option' (2006, 8) who shape and determine how visitors relate to the narratives offered at District Six Museum.

Certainly, at the time of conducting this research, both education officers, Noor Ebrahim and Joe Schaffers, were primary agents in tourists' interactions with the photographs on display in the 'Interior' section. Noor in particular (whose own memoir of District Six is available for purchase in the Museum shop) frequently uses the 'Interior' display to frame his introductory speech, pointing out certain individuals and using them to highlight important District events. These patterns were replicated in my interview with him, as particular photographs on the wall were enthusiastically introduced to me, and the lives and quirks of their subjects were explored: "And you know this lady here — I will tell you a story about this lady" (NE, Interview with author). In this sense, the guides physically embody the Museum's desire to create a space for the performance of memory, as visitors receive highly personalised, and largely unscripted memorandums of the photographed subjects.

However, Soudien's vision of empathy is then offset by what he calls a 'what-are-the-implications-of-this' approach (2006, 7), which echoing Boler's (1997: 263) call for an empathy driven by a 'testimonial reading', is where he suggests the more critical elements of the Museum's pedagogy comes in. Describing the giant map which adorns the Museum's floor, Soudien suggests that this 'much tougher engagement' occurs as the 'visitor is deliberately confronted with the challenge of positioning himself or herself' and 'imagination is no longer in search of empathy but of responsibility' (2006, 10). Quite how this positioning takes place reveals the kind of visitor Soudien envisions engaging with these critical

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discourses, as he describes visitors attempting to mark the location of their old homes onto the map — something that is only possible for ex-residents. Certainly, whilst Soudien is explicit about empathy as a pedagogical practice reserved for foreign tourists, stating that ‘for visitors who are not residents the purpose is to draw out feelings of empathy’ (2006, 9), he is less emphatic about the role of critical dialogue in the non-resident visitor experience. By presuming that non-local visitors are less capable of critical engagements, Soudien fails to fully realise the ways in which empathy as a ‘perspective taking’ process necessitates the same kinds of positionings and interpretations he references in his work on critical dialogue, in order to be effective. It is worth noting that whilst these tensions are already relevant to the discussion of tourist audiences, they are also increasingly applicable to a whole new generation of South Africans, who never having directly experienced apartheid themselves, may also struggle to engage in the kind of critical dialogues that Soudien is pushing for

The problems involved in asking international visitors to engage empathetically, but not critically, with ‘Interior’s’ photographs come to the fore in the mis-readings of these images as symbols of ‘colouredness’, which is further cemented by the Museum’s avoidance of discussing racial categorisation in the first place. As has already been noted in Roy Ballantyne’s (2003: 281) early study of the site, whilst foreign visitors to District Six Museum are quickly able to make ‘hot’ emotional connections to its content, they often struggled to ‘make connections or build bridges between new information and their previous experiences and knowledge’ (2003, 290), often requesting ‘further information on the relationships between the various races of people living in District Six’ (2003, 286). This is a central problem of the visual experience at District Six Museum, where in line with the desire to avoid replicating racialised logics and identifications, only one placard gestures to the original wording of the Population Registration Act, through which racial classifications in

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South Africa were formalised. This placard is located in the upper right hand corner of the Museum, far away from the 'Interior' section of the exhibition, and whilst the tour guides may occasionally produce a hand held copy for those they are providing guided tours to, the uninitiated visitor will find very little information to guide their interpretation of this process. For those tourists who enter this space as part of a rushed thirty-minute 'township tour', and who are likely to miss out on chances to interact with the education officers, such vital information is easily overlooked, as they are drawn towards the more emotionally fulfilling, and accessible photographs. As a result, it is my suggestion that empathy in these cases substitutes critical engagements with race with a more familiar biological essentialism, that privileges popular coloured-centric readings of the Museum's images.

That photographs in District Six Museum can be particularly read as coloured belies Edwards' observations about the context-setting nature of interpretation, and underscores empathy's central problem with perspective-taking. Indeed, it is my contention that non-racial approaches to visual interpretation in the Museum, whilst effective for an older, domestic audience, actually hampers the interpretive process for non-familiar, younger visitors, resulting in depoliticised, abstracted empathetic engagements. Writing on the use of photography within District Six Museum, curator Tina Smith has suggested that:

District Six Museum has become a key exhibitionary space in which visual knowledges of South African society have been developed which begin to challenge ethnographic forms of representation and to transcend a narrow documentary framework.

(Smith et al. 2001, 131).

The 'visual knowledges' that Smith speaks of, and which she uses to euphemistically refer to the reading of race are particularly entrenched in South Africa, given the credence lent to such readings by the 1950 Population Registration Act. From this period onwards, as all South African citizens were assigned an identification card that gave them a racial classification, there was significant investment in the 'common sense' narratives of identification, which subjected individuals to a humiliating series of socio-cultural checkpoints that identified racial classifications 'in ways which connected them closely to factors of lifestyle and social standing' as well as the usual physical markers of hair texture, skin colour and facial shape (Posel 2001b, 88). However, although Posel emphasises that apartheid's architects were less invested in racial biologism than people now believe (2001b, 88), she does note that particularly in cases where there an individual's classification was challenged, 'physical anthropologists or geneticists were called as expert witnesses by the appellant to testify that their physical features (such as skin, hairs, ears, and nose) did not conform to the racial category officially assigned to them' (2001b, 107). In this way, Posel suggests, 'the daily lived experience of race derived from the ordinary, immediate experience of how people looked and lived' (2001b, 95), and continued to be intimately connected to the physical. The arrangement of photographs in District Six Museum is designed as a pointed challenge to these kind of essentialist readings, as the staff have made a conscious attempt to source family photographs from a wide variety of District Sixers, and display them together on the mocked-up family wall in 'Interior', thereby refuting the concept of a racially divided District [Figure 11 near here]. Nevertheless, particular images in the Museum's collection continue to attract more visitor interest than others, and it is these that I argue confound the problems of racial interpretation.

Scattered above, and in between the display of family photographs on the 'Interior' wall, sits a remarkable set of images taken by the photographer Jansje Wissema. Wissema, a Dutch-born photographer sympathetic to the plight of District Sixers, took many of what are now considered to be its most iconic images, many of which are included in the Museum's displays. Kylie Thomas (2014, 288) has suggested that Wissema's portraiture is remarkable for the way in which subjects are 'not portrayed as representative of a particular race or class, but as individual subjects in a state of absorption', in a way which 'dislodges the dominant and conventional ways in which subjectivities were portrayed under apartheid', which no doubt also accounts for the inclusion of her work within the Museum. My interview with Tina Smith confirmed the centrality of Wissema's photography to the Museum's visual lexicon, as she described it as 'coming from a very emotive point' (TS, Interview with author) that reflected residents' connection to the area. However, these portraits are remarkable not just for their emphasis on individuality, but also for their aesthetic qualities, which can distort the Museum's attempts to create more progressive 'visual knowledges'.

Wissema's subjects are frequently photographed sitting in doorways, or by windows, where natural light dapples their faces, showing up in striking contrast against darker skin [Figure 12 near here]. Often captured in moments of intimate conversation with siblings, parents or friends, or in the quietude of preparing tea, and hanging out the washing, these photographs are both deeply moving testaments to everyday lives destroyed by apartheid, and in many ways resist the kinds of racialised anthropological readings that the Museum rejects. Indeed, skin tone in these images is largely incompatible with phenotypical constructions of race, as the play of light positions individuals as uncertain ethnic subjects, offering a nuanced challenge to those lingering 'common sense' narratives of race in South Africa. For international visitors, however, these subtle curatorial devices are not always legible, and as

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demonstrated by some visitor feedback both in my questionnaires and online, uncertainty can be interpreted as ‘colouredness’, thus reinforcing the very ethnographic approach that the Museum tries to destabilise.

Ironically, this tendency to racialise uncertainty replicates the kinds of colonial logics that led to the anti-coloured rejectionist movement in the 1980s, in which acceptance of coloured identity was seen as ‘a concession to apartheid thinking’ (Adhikari 2008, 80). ‘Growing up coloured’, Zimitri Erasmus writes (2001, 13), ‘meant knowing that I was *not only* not white, but *less than white*; *not only* not black, but *better than black*’; a sensation of inbetweenness facilitated by a system that categorised people as coloured because of the literal uncertainty that their skin tone and hair texture presented to census enumerators. In her fictional account of a ‘white’ South African who discovers that her parents were actually classified coloured, Zoe Wicomb (2006) offers an ironic account of the fanaticism with which skin colour has been treated in South Africa. Describing her protagonists first encounter with a portrait photograph of her grandparents Wicomb writes:

The pictures are of an uncertain genre, neither photograph not painting, and there is an other-worldly quality about the subjects. The ouma looks feverish. Her cheeks glow with a rouge that a plain country woman would surely not have used. Her husband’s dark skin is skilfully daubed with colour that could represent light bounding off the planes of his angled face, but that also hints at a whiteness straining its way through time.

(Wicomb 2006, 173)

This somewhat cynical description of a white woman realising her own coloured heritage for the first time, aptly summarises South Africa’s historical over-investment in skin tone as a

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marker of colouredness (Adhikari 2005, 2; Posel 2001a, 58) — a discourse that also seems to percolate through visitor engagements with Wissema's portraiture. As a site that seeks to actively resist such modes of identification, the use of its images to reproduce such discourses contains echoes of colonial anthropological approaches to photography, and mimics a bureaucracy that used photographs to separate and classify its citizens (Posel 2001b, 112) — both of which are positions that the Museum rejects.

For a Museum that defines its value through its ability to actively reconstruct racialised notions of community, the potential for these kinds of interpretations to take hold are disturbing, and signal subtle fractures in the Museum's imaginative project. In the absence of a conscripted interpretive framework, a decisive pedagogical moment is lost, and international visitors in particular lose out on the opportunity to engage critically with discourses of race. Such a framework is all the more important given the strong emotions that being in District Six Museum appears to elicit in visitors, and which as Soudien suggests, invite visitors towards an empathetic engagement with the site and its community. Indeed, amongst the more banal 'platitudes' and 'disengagements' which my own questionnaires turned up (references to "Man's inhumanity", and "people not races" were plentiful), there were also expressions of keenly felt sorrow and identification amongst visitors, which suggested a deep desire to empathise with the victims of forced removals. One notable instance of this emerged when a young woman from Johannesburg described being brought to tears by a Wissema portrait of a young girl swinging on a street post, observing that image reminded her of herself at that age.

However given the significance of the Museum's role as a beacon for a diverse and critically non-racial future such uncritical emotional engagements with these photographs

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may prove to be damaging in the long run, particularly with regards to the Museum's involvement in the recovery of District Six's land. Between local government's politically-driven perpetuation of the District Six –as-coloured myth, and the growing disgruntlement of (mostly white and coloured) wealthy ex-residents who seek to remake the District in their own image, the Museum is now one of the few stakeholders representing those marginalised and historically silenced African District Sixers in an otherwise protracted and chaotic land restitution process. Without a broader international audience to support its work and these representations, the Museum faces certain closure. However through the very solicitation of this support, it risks destabilising the critical foundations on which the site was first built. The choice facing current curators at the Museum is, it seems, one of an emotionally-driven, but two-dimensional attention to solipsistic narratives of race in South Africa, or increased entrenchment in the much deeper, more complex three-dimensional engagements that the Museum was predicated on, but which as residents age, move away, or are begin to die, are increasingly becoming irrelevant to a newer, younger audience.

v. Conclusion

As recently as June 2013, disputes over District Six's land were once more brought to the fore after several new-build apartments, earmarked for returning ex-residents, were occupied by Khoisan activists. Stimulated by the President's announcement earlier that year that applications to the Land Claims Commission would be re-opened, the activists were protesting their historic exclusion from District Six's restitution process..

The re-opening of the claims process means that the work of District Six Museum as an imaginative and reconstructive project is now more important than ever, particularly since the bitter removal of the District Six Beneficiary Trust from the negotiating process (Ernsten

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2015). As such, the ability of District Six Museum to communicate its vision to a broader international audience, and turn these audiences into potential stakeholders in its vision, is also becoming increasingly important, especially considering that there are now more international tour groups visiting the Museum, than local and national educational groups (*District Six Annual Report, 2014*). Moreover, the recent decision of the Museum to charge its visitors for the very introductory talks that Soudien suggests are essential to the formation of empathetic engagements with its material, means that increasing numbers of international visitors are likely to miss out on the interpretive frameworks that underpin the radicality of the Museum's non-racial vision, and its photographic collection. Given the tendency for oculo-centric experiences to 'constitute a set of routines in the museum' (Feldman 2006, 251), interpretation of visual material in District Six Museum is also likely to have a lasting impact on foreign visitors, particularly those who enter the Museum as part of a township tour, and who are more likely to spend their restricted time looking at photographs, than engaging with convoluted text.

These challenges are all significant ones that staff at District Six Museum are acutely aware of, and are trying to address. However between budget struggles, and the loss of the Beneficiary Trust, the majority of resources and energies are being channelled into continuing to connect with, and sustaining the Museum's ageing community of ex-residents. Finding an approach that balances core commitments to its original community, whilst recognising the needs of a newer, international one, is not easy, and indeed may not be at all desirable for a site that defines itself, above all, a site of local, social memory. But it is a challenge that many community museums will face during their lifespan, and as such requires concerted critical attention in the present from academics and practitioners alike.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. An overview of inside District Six Museum

Figure 2. "Hanover Street"

Figure 3. "Barber Shop"

Figure 4. "Seven Steps"

Figure 5. Visitors interacting with the floormap of District Six

Figure 6. "Interior" display of photographs

Figure 7. Wideshot view of the "Interior" display

Figure 8. Visitors interacting with photographs on the "Interior" display

Figures 9 and 10. Family photographs on the "Interior" display

Figure 11. Family photographs alongside Jansje Wissema's portraits.

Figure 12. Jansje Wissema's portrait of "Mrs Ralie May" on "Interior" display.

ⁱⁱ For notable exceptions to this trend see: Smith 2010; Modlin *et al.* 2011; Arnold-de-Simine 2012; Smith 2016; Witcomb 2015

ⁱⁱ After the Population Registration Act of 1950, citizens of South Africa were assigned permanent race status as either 'Whites', 'Bantu' or 'Africans', 'Coloured' and 'Indian'. These

classifications determined people's access to work, education, and freedom of movement in South Africa. Whilst these categories were initially rejected by a post-apartheid government that advocated an official policy of 'non-racialism', race has continued to be salient mode of self-identification in South Africa, and these terms are now popularly used in contemporary censuses, and for affirmative action programs in the workplace. As such, in line with other researchers, contemporary racialised terms are used in this paper without scarequotes 'to refer to the social construction of bodily difference' and in recognition of the fact that these constructions have, and continue to be, 'inseparable from other fault-lines of difference and repertoires [sic] of power' in South Africa (Posel, 2010, 161). For more on this see: Posel 2010; Posel, 2001a; Seekings, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Selected works to have emerged from 'coloured' District Sixers include: Richard Rive. *Buckingham Palace, District Six*; Alex La Guma. *A Walk in the Night*; Rozena Maart. *Rosa's District 6*.

^{iv} Under the 1994 Restitution of Land Rights Act, those (non-white) citizens who were dispossessed of their land and homes by the Group Areas and Native Lands Act are entitled to apply for governmental compensation. This is often financial, but in some cases (as with District Six), applicants can request resettlement on the land they were dispossessed of. In District Six's case, where the land is still unoccupied, the District Six Beneficiary Trust submitted a group claim on behalf of ex-residents, which explicitly fought for the rights of tenanted District Sixers as well as landowners. These proceedings have not been without controversy however, and debates over entitlement to restitution are ongoing. For more on this see: Ernsten, 2015; Beyers, 2010; Beyers, 2007