

Abstract

In the Eyes of the Sea: Memories of Place and Displacement in a South African Fishing Town

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Today there is a growing multidisciplinary field of studies that focus on the role of social or 'collective memory' in the building of social identities. Of particular concern is how groups deal with pasts that are characterised by rupture, displacement or various forms of oppression. This study explores remembering as a social and cultural process by focusing on memories of displacement in contemporary South Africa. A central theme concerns how social actors represent the past in narrative and conversation. Such representations are seen as social portraits that not only communicate fundamental values and beliefs, but also create, sustain or challenge notions of locality and local identity.

Geographically, the study focuses on Kalk Bay, a small fishing town outside Cape Town, South Africa. As a result of the proclamation of the town in 1967 as a 'white Group Area' in terms of the Group Areas Act of 1950, it was reserved for residents who were classified as white under the Population Registration Act of the same year. As a consequence, around a quarter of the original fishing community, which was classified as coloured, was forced to leave the town. Today, over thirty years after the proclamation, those who were displaced from Kalk Bay remember the proclamation very differently from those who stayed behind. The study builds on interviews and anthropological fieldwork and compares representations of the past among those who managed to remain in the town as well as among those who were forced to move to areas outside Cape Town. The historical context within which such narrations are formulated are also discussed, as well as the significance of contemporary social and political developments related to South Africa's recent transition to democracy.

A main theme concerns the representation of locality in Kalk Bay. Depicted as a place of tolerance and multiculturalism, Kalk Bay is construed as a locality that is socially and culturally shaped by the fishing tradition. Such representations constitute 'collective memories' of Kalk Bay as a place where apartheid was successfully resisted. Another theme of relevance is how construction of locality in Kalk Bay involves broader ideas and practices associated with apartheid, such as the expression of racial hierarchies through metaphors of health and disease.

The study further explores how those who were displaced to areas outside Cape Town sustain enduring identifications with Kalk Bay. By visiting their former place of living as well as by expressing a Kalk Bay identity, former residents reject the apartheid ideology that in the past prescribed a rigorously upheld social, cultural and physical separation between Group Areas. Finally the study examines how within the Land Restitution scheme former residents mobilise their local memories and put them to instrumental use in the present by applying for legal compensation for the loss of their homes in Kalk Bay. This is an ongoing legal process, and its outcome is as yet undecided.

Key words: South Africa, Kalk Bay, apartheid, segregation, Group Areas, landscape, displacement, collective memory, locality, land restitution