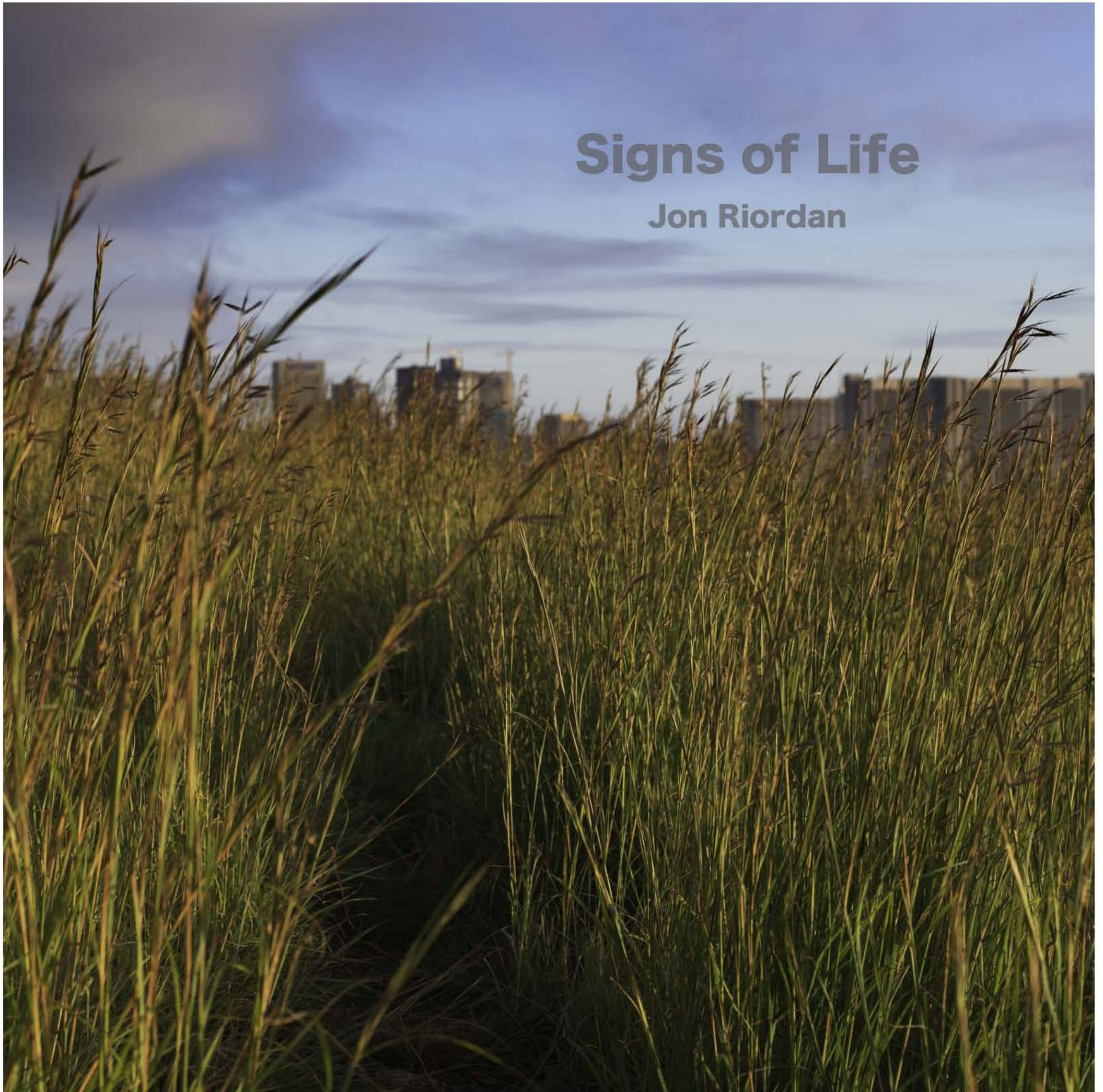


# Signs of Life

Jon Riordan



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Title of creative project:

**Signs of Life**

by

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STUDENT NUMBER: RRDJON001

SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Masters in Documentary Arts

Centre for Film and Media Studies

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Date of submission: December 2013

Supervisor: Paul Weinberg

# Signs of Life

“Alas poor District Six! They are planning your downfall. They wish to make an end to the live throbbing area. They are making Darling Street a dagger pointed straight at your heart. What will I find if, in another life, I re-visit the old district?”  
The Torch Newspaper, 1940

The history of District Six is a compelling one. Nestled at the foot of Devil’s Peak, it was home to a multi-ethnic community that can be traced back to 1830 when soldiers’ families and freed slaves first settled in the area. And as a result of its proximity to the harbour, the area developed a growing reputation for liveliness and vibrancy.

The area’s turbulent history began as early as 1901. The African populace in District Six was forcefully relocated after an outbreak of bubonic plague, to a farm named Uitvlugt, later known as Ndabeni, one of South Africa’s first townships<sup>1</sup>. Although District Six remained mixed in race, with both coloured and white inhabitants, it became, effectively, the home of Cape Town’s coloured people<sup>2</sup>. It was this community, together with its physical homes, that was systematically destroyed by the apartheid government in the second half of the twentieth century. This destruction and the relocation of the area’s population was so comprehensive that it was described by Richard Rive, a popular writer from the area, as ‘South Africa’s Hiroshima’<sup>3</sup>. Today, almost 50 years since the demolition commenced, much of this land still lies barren.

District Six was a community defined by contradictions. It was a non-racial community surrounded by legally entrenched whiteness. It was a multicultural community but was largely defined by ethnic solidarity. It was a safe and vibrant community but was also blighted by gang violence and crime. There was little in District Six that did not cover both sides of the spectrum and everything in between.

Since the demise of the apartheid regime in 1990, there have been constant questions focusing on how best to memorialise this community and its history, as well as the most effective way to reintroduce the land into common experience. These questions have focused on the visually empty stretches of land bordered by Nelson Mandela Boulevard and De Waal Drive on two sides and Walmer Estate and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology on the other two sides. There were efforts made to declare the land a national heritage site but through a lack of political will, this was never completed. This was combined with continual uncertainties regarding the construction of structures on the land and how it could be returned to the surviving members of the former community.

In 2006 a memorial park was established in the area. This park focused on the area surrounding the steep, cobbled remains of Horstley Street, the site of the first forced removals in 1901 and the last of the removals in 1982<sup>6</sup>. But today, this land appears as bleak as the neglected land that surrounds it.

Perhaps it is fitting, that the land meant to be a park commemorating this history is just as full of contradictions and ambiguities as the original community was. It is land that is referred to as dead and desolate but at times it is so covered by wild flowers that it could rival the Namaqualand in spring. It is a space where a man can be stabbed for a R50 cell phone but where, he tells me, while holding a dirty rag to the bleeding wound, that he feels safer than he did in Blikkiesdorp from whence he came. Above all, it is land scoured of its identity and presumed to be emptied, but which is actually inhabited by a settled community. Perhaps it is these contradictions, the empty land left to the circadian rhythms of nature and those that society has marginalised, that provide the greatest monument to one of the darkest events in South Africa’s darkest history.

1. Pistorius, P. (2002). *Texture and Memory*. Cape Technikon: Cape Town.

2. Goldblatt, D. (1998). *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

3. Rive, R. (1990). District Six: fact and fiction. In S. Jeppie and C. Soudien (Eds.), *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*, (Pp. 110-116). Cape Town: Buchu Books.

4. Pinnock, D. (1984). The Argie Boys to Skollie Gangsters. *Studies in the History of Cape Town* 3:131-175.

5. Rassool, C. (2013). *District Six Revisited*, Unpublished paper presented at South African Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Cape Town.

6. Ibid.

It is a land of ghosts. Indeed, it could be described as the epitome of the traumatic landscape. Those who once lived on it have found little to no closure, and those who presently live on it do so with little hope that their lot will be improved. Hidden amongst the boulders and the long grass are the repressed memories of the past, crumbling bits of plaster, brick and concrete, and pieces of structures that may be ruins of a destroyed building or portions of a building left unfinished. The famed street life of the former community is reduced to crumbling cobblestones and pathways winding through the weeds and wild vegetation. These pieces lie hidden beneath the surface and only after great exploration and interrogation do they hint at their past stories.

As repressed as these memories are, the present is equally so. The most intricate of structures are created amongst the long grass and alien vegetation that fill this land. These vary from the modest, such as a foam mattress and thin blanket hidden under tinder dry branches, to the memorable such as a small hole dug into a hill that opens up into a three-bedroom home. All of these provide shelter for society's most invisible members, the homeless.

This view again illustrates the contradictions of the area. That this community is viewed as homeless is not debatable except to some of the community members themselves. Bennedict Khoza, the man responsible for creating the subterranean refuge, claims, 'It's warm down here and it's safe. They tried to move me to a place in Delft but I had to come back here. It's my home,' he says, and since he has lived in the area for more than ten years, it is hard to argue this point.

Some members of this community go so far as to live off the very land that has been discarded by those that control it. These people can be seen collecting wild fennel, which is used to make soup, and other plants for use as flavourings and for their medicinal properties. It is not surprising then that the area's inhabitants are beginning to think of the land as theirs. 'This is our land now', said Loxton, a tall, intimidating man with spiky dreadlocks; 'my friend and I have been living here for 7 years now. The police, they know us. We always live here and they don't bother us. If they take this land away from us now we will be very angry.'

If this land has proven anything, it is that those who make a claim for the land do so at their own peril. For many years the focus on the inhabitants of this land has been on the community that was forcefully removed by the apartheid government in the second half of the twentieth century. Attempts have been made to provide restitution to this community by building new houses on sections of the land for surviving members of the former District Six community<sup>7</sup>.

Recently, however, this focus was redirected. An activist group claiming to have descended from the original Khoi inhabitants of the area, who were forced off the land by South Africa's first settlers, invaded these buildings, demanding restitution for themselves. In addition, some of their supporters built an intricate hut, similar to those built by their ancestors, on a promontory overlooking the city. While their claim does not immediately reconcile with today's political agendas, it emphasises the need for continued debate about reconciliation concerning past land dispossession.

If anything can be learned from these clashes, it is that this land has been caught at a major crossroads between the past, the present and the future. A fraught history contested by groups of economically and politically vulnerable members is caught in a stalemate between more powerful structures that have struggled to provide satisfactory solutions. What lies at stake is the possibility of future reintegration of this land into contemporary experience, at the very core of which, is the potential of this land to once again form memories and communities<sup>8</sup>.

To say this process is burdened and precarious is an understatement. At times it seems as if the stubborn adherence by those in power to a narrowly focused narrative of nation building has forced an active decision to turn their backs on this history<sup>9</sup>. The strange design of buildings facing away from the open parkland hints that either greater plans for the land has fallen through or, that like various participants along the way, the buildings have also turned their backs on this historic, but lamentably embarrassing, land.

The environment itself echoes this concealing of the past and the present. In the winter months the land, which is seated on the slopes of Table Mountain, is greeted by mists so thick that the mountain disappears entirely. These mists emphasise the isolation and disorientation surrounding this region that has been so severed from its past. And in the blisteringly hot, dry summer months, fires run through the area. These fires erase, and sometimes conceal, under layers of ash and soot, evidence of the past while forcing the current inhabitants to abandon their homes and move to safer parts.

7. Fischer, R. (2013). District Six: The Sould of Land Distribution. Daily Maverick, 11 February.

8. Baer, U. (2005). Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma. Massachusets: MIT Press.

9. Rassool, C. (2013). District Six Revisited, Unpublished paper presented at South African Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Cape Town.

The ambiguities and controversies that surround this land make the attempts at memorials contentious. Considering the enduring threads of unresolved conflicts amongst the former inhabitants, those in power and the present inhabitants, the land's current state, desolate, untended and forgotten, could be regarded as an appropriate monument to the history of District Six. The land is the epitome of an emptiness that cannot be hidden. It sits, a giant elephant on the peninsula, largely ignored by Capetonians but noticed by all newcomers to Cape Town prompting the question, 'What is that land?'

In the sense that James Young wrote that it is impossible to redeem catastrophe through art and memorials<sup>10</sup>, the creation of a manicured memorial park would be pure window dressing. Furthermore, Ciraj Rasool has argued that the future of land restitution in District Six is not purely about housing but also about symbolic politics and the understanding of this area as a landscape of memory<sup>11</sup>. Such understanding requires that memorialisation of this contested landscape should not be anchored in a nostalgic past. Instead, it should be a tool used to enlighten the present day and help us plot our futures.

It is these themes that this collection of images hopes to confront and address. At the centre of this encounter are two theories that dominate recent landscape photography. The first of these is Simon Schama's assertion that: 'The landscape is a work of the mind built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'<sup>12</sup> Schama's hypothesis is informed by landscape theory dating back to the end of the 20th century, which is in turn influenced by the view that the passage of history is a continual and coherent narrative<sup>13</sup>. The deep and sustained desire of former residents to reoccupy and re-connect with the land and the history that was once theirs, illustrates this thesis, and is epitomised by the aspiration of certain action groups to recreate the area and community exactly as it once was. It can also be glimpsed in the images in this collection that explore the historic, the rubble, the ruins, and the physical remnants of what is such a traumatic aspect of South Africa's history.

Challenging this theory is the hypothesis propounded by Ulrich Baer, based on an interpretation of Freudian trauma theory. Baer argues that extreme trauma can cause a distortion of memory and time<sup>14</sup>. In contrast to the previous view of history as a continuous narrative, this theory posits that events of extreme trauma can effectively sever the bonds between memory and the landscape. In some ways this is emphasised by the argument that while social identities are influenced by place, environments do not produce them but instead nurture them.

Social identities arise primarily out of interaction amongst people and within communities, and the vicious, calculated destruction of District Six arguably severed the social identity from the physical home of that community, leaving the land an ahistorical wasteland plagued by repressed memories<sup>15</sup>. Some members of the former community have stated that the destruction of District Six had such an impact on them that their memories of their lives before the catastrophic removals seemed to belong to another world, one physically and morally different to the racially differentiated world into which they were forced<sup>16</sup>. This experience is acknowledged by those trying to reincorporate the land into contemporary society, but as Rural Development and Land Affairs Minister, Gugile Nkwinti, admits, 'However, things can never be the same.'<sup>17</sup> The images of the land shrouded in the heavy morning mists engage with this view, prompting the question whether or not the now unidentifiable land holds any claim to its past.

There is a more promising vision that these images also hope to engage with. It is the idea put forward by Ciraj Rasool, that we need to engage with the symbolic as much as the physical if we are to recreate the link between this land and memory<sup>18</sup>. It is here that art becomes integral in the possible regeneration of this land for if the memory of the landscape can be disconnected through extreme trauma it is through a tradition of reimagining and mythologizing that it can be rebuilt once more.

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12. Schama, S. (1996). *Landscape and Memory*. London: Vintage.

13. Baer, U. (2005). *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

14. Ibid

15. Jackson, J.B. (1984). *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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18. Rasool, C. (2013). *District Six Revisited*, Unpublished paper presented at South African Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Cape Town.

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Schoolgirls enter the former District Six from Woodstock - November 2012



Facing north-west across the Former District Six towards Robben Island



# Signs of Life

By

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Die Graanhuis - Desember 2012





Remains of Horstley Street - September 2013



Remains of a house - March 2013



Storm drains from District Six - February - 2013





Facing west across the memorial park towards the city centre - November 2012



Fire ravaged landscape - December - 2012



Graffitied boulder - February 2013





Bedding left out to dry - January 2013



Discarded automobile seat - February 2013



Gathering up of belongings before moving - January 2013





Clothes and bedding dry - June 2013



Hut built by Khoi protesters - August 2013



Hidden by long grass, part of a shopping trolley is used as a grill to cook over - August 2013





Trousers left out to dry amongst blooming spring flowers - July 2013



Remains of a building behind Rahmanyah Primary School - November 2012



Salvaged lounge suite - February 2013





Entrance to a three bedroom subterranean home - June 2013



Makeshift bed - November 2012



Sleeping area fashioned out of foraged pieces of the former District Six - June 2013





Home engulfed by early morning mist - May 2013

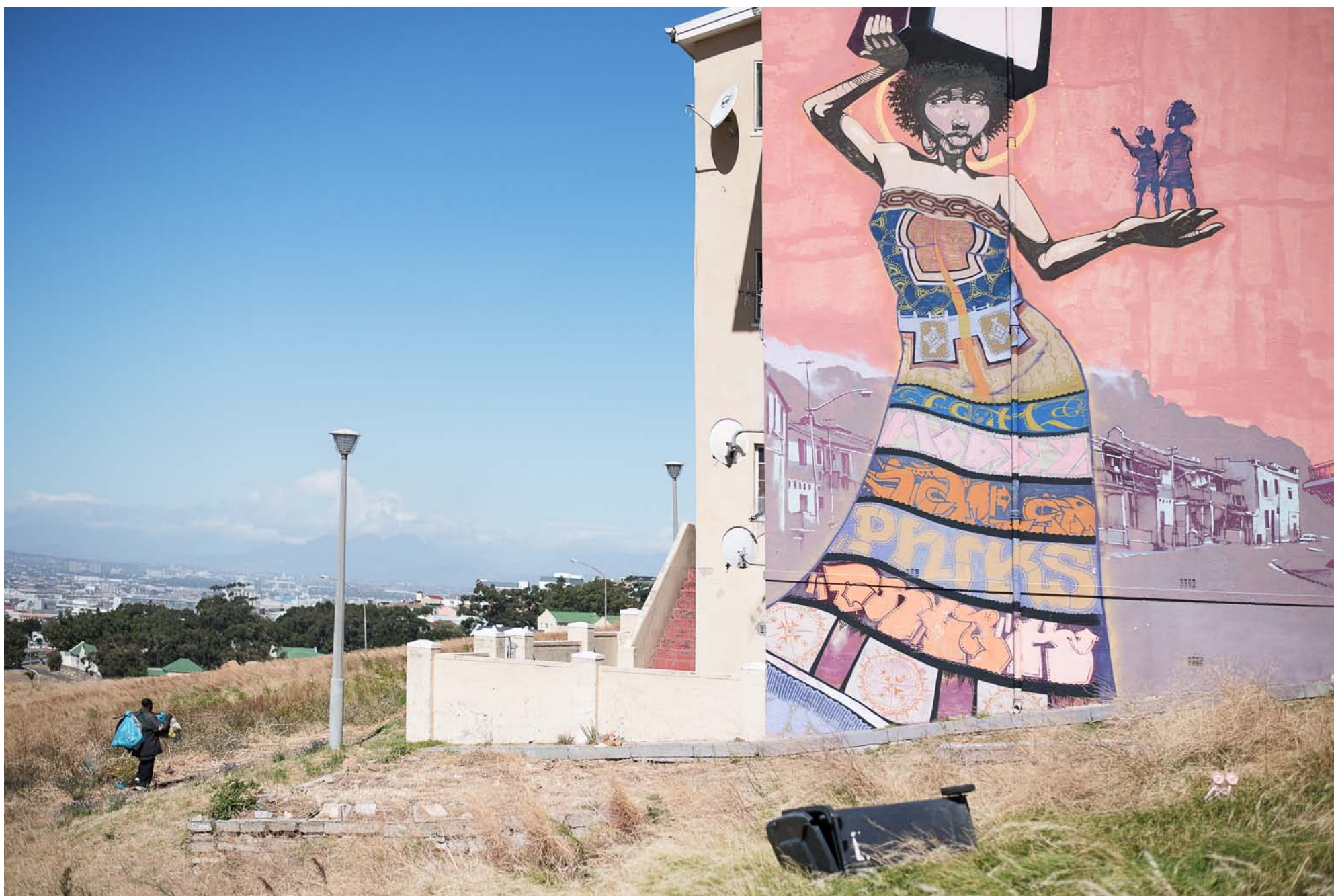


Thatched home - August 2013



Tents of two Zimbabwean painters - August 2013





Mural by internationally awarded artist, Faith47, commemorating the former District Six - November 2012



Feeding birds - May 2013



Cauvin Road - May 2013





Shelter housing 3 residents and their child who have moved to the area from Blikkiesdorp - April 2013



Harvesting wild fennel - September 2013



A resident packs away his belongings in the morning to avoid them being stolen - August 2013





Resident brushes his teeth in the morning mist - August 2013



Pathways through a recovering landscape - February 2013



Pathway through long grass - June 2013





Abandoned Sleeping area - August 2013

Many thanks to my supervisor,

Paul Weinberg

Your advice and support  
was invaluable.



People today so intensively occupy land, filling inhabited places and investing every inch of those places with cultural meanings, that we have come to associate empty landscapes with nature. We contrast occupied land with wilderness, and productivity with barrenness. Yet archaeology and anthropology demonstrate that few landscapes were historically empty or devoid of cultural meaning.

Amy Gazin- Schwartz

