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**Portraits of resilience : writing a socio-cultural history of a black South African location with the Ngilima photographic collection. Benoni, 1950s-1960s.**

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## Chapter Six

# The Politics of Memory After Displacement

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For this chapter, I jump fifty years forward to the post-apartheid South Africa of the present day. Maps, much like photographs, give places the illusion of stability and continuity, when they are in fact a representation of places caught in a moment or “slices through time”.<sup>598</sup> In the case of Benoni’s location, maps have altered drastically since the implementation of the Mentz Committee’s plan in the 1960s that reshaped the entire East Rand through its series of forced removals. Benoni Old Location, Cape Stands, Asiatic Bazaar were eliminated as official entities and transformed into a single Indian Group Area called Actonville. About 20 000 Africans and 5000 coloureds ended up being relocated to Daveyton and Reigerpark.<sup>599</sup> Since 1994, with the end of the system of influx control, the demographic composition of places has also been shifting substantially for the second time. Those who could afford it have been moving out of these racially defined spaces and buying houses in previously white-only suburbs, adding yet another layer of change to the East Rand (known as Ekurhuleni since 2000). Not surprisingly, the process of hunting ex-Location residents down brought me to many different places scattered across Ekurhuleni and even Soweto.

Many writers on photographs have pointed out that the relationship between photography and the past is far from straightforward. Considering Benoni’s tumultuous history after the forced removals, the gap between the Ngilima photographs (“stuck” in the 1950s) and today seems all the more difficult to bridge. This chapter calls into question the metaphor of photographs acting as a bridge between the past and the present. During my fieldwork, it became clear to me that Benoni’s 1950 location and the Actonville of today could not easily be equated with one another. In chapter 5, I focused on the visual and verbal processes of place making, highlighting the nuances and the complexities of Benoni’s location that one can work out

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<sup>598</sup> Massey, “Places and Their Pasts,” 188.

<sup>599</sup> The removals took place in waves between 1955, when Daveyton was first inaugurated, and 1968. At its peak in the mid-1950s, the African location had about 20 000 people. By 1961, there were only 9 971 residents left. About half of the African location population voluntarily left, mainly tenants living in backrooms, attracted by the promise of upgrading to a brick municipal house with better facilities and infrastructure. The other half, for the most part residents who were reluctant to lose their status and income as landlords, resisted the removals until they no longer had the choice.

from analysing the Ngilima photographs. Here, I attempt to question the relationship between photography, memory and place in the context of displacement. This chapter complicates the sense of place that emanates from the previous chapter, by shedding light on the different – at times conflicting—interpretations of what the Ngilima collection actually stands for, what it commemorates. The Ngilima collection as a single unit gives the misleading impression that all the subjects, for having lived in the same area and used the services of the same photographer, shared the same past. But the unity that the collection suggests does not correspond to the way some of my interviewees, in particular Indian interviewees, imagined the outline of “their” community or “their” history.

During my fieldwork, I organized several small-scale projects involving the Ngilima photos and the participation of interviewees on the very grounds of Benoni location/Actonville. One of them was an informal exhibition of Ngilima photographs put up in the streets of Actonville, called “Searching for the Old Location”. Through this participatory project, I became unwittingly pulled into certain disputes within to the Indian community of Actonville. Through this experience, I realized how entangled history projects can get with local struggles that are informed by present-day concerns, in particular to define the contours of a rapidly fluctuating ‘local community’. The “resurrection” of the Old Location in the form of photographs is an awkward load to accommodate in the present day political context. We found out that it was impossible to commemorate the Old Location without taking into account the fact that the outcome of the 1960s’ forced removals was very different for Indians, Africans and coloureds. This is a topic which remains sensitive for many Indians and Africans alike. It confronts viewers with issues that have never fully been digested or resolved: who benefitted from the forced removals? Can African and coloured ex-location residents still lay claim to Actonville? Does the chapter of multiracial cohabitation make any sense after forty years of separate living? The localization exercise with Khubi Thabo described in chapter five took the forced removals as the major “before/after” point, without taking into account the more contemporary evolutions that took place *since* the removals. This chapter explores the challenges that emerge when one assumes that the Ngilima collection could help reconstruct a coherence of place through time in the present socio-political context.

Liam Buckley concluded from his fieldwork in Gambia that photo-elicitation using photographs from the colonial period did not as much generate data about colonial life nor connect people to this past as much as it revealed the aesthetic values governing the present.<sup>600</sup> Similarly, I would argue that my interviewees' response to the Ngilima photographs were very informative about present tensions and frictions born of the shifting relationship between place and the "imagined community".<sup>601</sup> Confronted with the discrepancies between this 1950s image world and the present day social reality of Actonville, I was brought to reflect on the different ways that people read, interpret, and put this photographic collection to use to shape ideas about their history in the on-going reconfiguration of local identities.

### *The "Searching for the Old Location" Project*

Attracted to the democratic (and affordable) nature of street exhibitions, I was inspired to organise one myself, in order to share a selection of the Ngilima collection with a broad audience, reaching out to people who might otherwise not visit gallery spaces. While Farrell Ngilima and I initiated the idea, photographer Hemisha Bhana, whose parents are originally from Actonville, became my main partner in the organisation of the event. We consulted various local residents at different stages in the process, mainly individuals whom I came across during my fieldwork, some of whom became more active volunteers in the project. Hemisha and I wanted to experiment with this idea of juxtaposing the images of Old Location with the present-day geographical topography of that very place. By making Actonville our exhibition space, our aim was to remind present-day local residents and pedestrians of the tumultuous history of the forced removals, by confronting them with the images of these people who lived on these very streets, some fifty years ago. But our intention was also to celebrate a moment in South African history where people of different ethnic background developed a culture of cohabitation and tolerance. We hoped the collection would potentially revive bonds between ex-Old Location residents, much like the District Six Museum had managed to create a new sense of community between former District Six residents (Cape

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<sup>600</sup> L. Buckley, "Photography and Photo-Elicitation after Colonialism," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2014), 720.

<sup>601</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

Town).<sup>602</sup> After three decades of Group Areas, Daveyton, Reigerpark and Actonville residents presently have few opportunities to cross the long distances between them and actually meet.<sup>603</sup> The existence of a single photographic collection that depicted members of all three communities was ideal to create an ongoing dialogue on the legacy of this common history, shaped by the Old Location.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2011, Farrell, Hemisha and myself held the event in Actonville, which we called “Searching for the Old Location”. It consisted in gluing poster-size enlargements of Ngilima photographs on various surfaces in Actonville (electricity boxes, walls, gates, street lamps...). The small group of participants included the great-grand children of Ronald Ngilima, as well as high school students from Wattville and Actonville, accompanying parents, students from the Witwatersrand University and international guests, all armed with buckets of self-made glue (figure 6.1). The 15 participants were split into three groups and sent to different parts of Actonville. They were given maps of the place indicating the key landmarks of the Old Location and/or ‘allowed’ spots for putting up a poster. For instance, one of the larger posters was glued at the back of a shop, indicating the former entrance of the Star cinema, one of the three popular bioscopes of the location. We also wanted to honour some of the local figures, for instance by gluing an Ngilima photograph of Mary Moodley with her family at the Mary Moodley clinic. Under each photograph, the name of the photographer and the event was added, as well as the phrase “*Benoni Old Location is home. Stay home. Come home*” (figure 6.2). The quote came from a flyer that was circulating in the 1960s, as part of the protest campaign against the imminent destruction of the Old Location.<sup>604</sup> Hemisha and I also encouraged the students to find out more about the local history of the place by asking Actonville residents some questions. Entering into a dialogue with local inhabitants turned out to be easier than expected (figure 6.3). Putting up posters disrupted the usual urban order and quickly aroused curiosity and/or suspicion amongst pedestrians walking past the students (figure 6.4).

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<sup>602</sup> Bohlin, "The Politics of Locality: Memories of District Six in Cape Town," 1998.

<sup>603</sup> Only Wattville residents, within walking distance of Actonville, still cross the railway line to visit the shops or facilities such as the municipal library. Actonville residents however rarely go into Wattville.

<sup>604</sup> State Archives, Central Archives Depot, Pretoria. TAB, MB 2/3/97, Minutes of the Management Committee Meeting, 8 November 1966.



Figure 6.1: Xolani Ngilima (great-grandson of Ronald Ngilima) on the left, Hemisha Bhana (middle) and another participant in the action of gluing the posters. Photo by the author, Actonville, 2013.





Figure 6.2: "Benoni Location is home. STAY HOME. COME HOME". Photograph by the author, Actonville 2013.





Figure 6.3: One of our participants in discussion with the local Indian butcher. Photo by the author, Actonville, 2013.



**Figure 6.4:** Xolani Ngilima, great-grandson of Ronald Ngilima, gluing a poster on a wall in Actonville. Photo by the author, 2013.

A few lingered long enough to share personal memories with the group. The most vivid reactions emerged when we were at the main commercial street called Mayet Drive, where Indians families have been running their shops for several generations. Upon many of our volunteers' enthusiasm vis-à-vis a particular picture depicting six Indian men, we had decided to save this A0 poster for Mayet Drive, which on a Saturday morning is always busy with shoppers. Before being glued to a wall, the poster circulated in several shops and was passed around to have a better look, creating a buzz amongst the Indian shopkeepers and their clients. As people gathered around the poster, they scrutinized the depicted men's familiar faces,

loudly debating over their names until they eventually agreed over who was who (figure 6.5). *“These men are amongst the pioneers of our community, the pioneers of Actonville. This is really our history”*, one of the shopkeepers was reported stating.



Figure 6.5: Picture of the “pioneers of Actonville” that caused much of a stir during the event. Ronald Ngilima, Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.

After the morning gluing session, a workshop was hosted at the local high school, where we had invited several former Old Location residents to have a discussion with our group of students. While people from Daveyton and Wattville were present, no one from Reigerpark was able to come, most likely because of transportation difficulties.<sup>605</sup> However many other Actonville residents unexpectedly joined the workshop, and the classroom was filled with a group of about 30 participants. The conversation initially dwelled on the multicultural dynamics in the Location. Inevitably the discussion veered towards broader topics of social changes since the 1950’s, and in particular the youth’s supposed present lack of respect

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<sup>605</sup> Because the transport system of taxis is entirely centralized around Johannesburg, there are no direct lines between Reigerpark and Actonville, which makes it surprisingly time-consuming and costly to make this short journey without a private car.

towards their elders. The workshop ended with historian Noor Nieftagodien giving a short speech on the importance of such an event and stating his wish to repeat this experiment in the near future.

Thus summarised, the event appears to have been a success on many levels. The public gluing session had created a buzz and a dynamic interaction between the gluing group and local residents. The young participants were enthusiastic about the gluing experience and felt they discovered a local history they were completely unfamiliar with. Most local residents we came across were relatively positive about the outcome of the exhibition. The discussion at the workshop was animated by great storytelling and laughter but also a sense of importance, ending with the firm resolution to regularly host history workshops. Yet describing the event simply as an outstanding success would be telling only half the story. The planning process leading up to the event, the event itself, and even its aftermath, were marked by multiple tensions with and among local residents and volunteers. General public enthusiasm vis-à-vis the photographs and the event hid profound disagreements over topics that initially appeared trivial (for instance, disagreement over geographical names, over the selection, over who is and is not to participate, etc). These frictions are interesting to analyse because they reveal a series of broader issues and problems that go far beyond the immediate organisation of a modest, small-scale event. These tensions can be roughly associated with three sets of assumptions that I had unconsciously made while conceptualising the event. All three assumptions revolve around the complex relationship between local identities, the notion of rightful belonging, and the legitimacy to produce local history.

### *The Ngilima Collection: Between Family Property and Public Good*

A first cluster of tensions revolved around the question of ownership of the photographs. This question is key to determining who has the legitimacy to decide what to do with them and how to exhibit them. Farrell Ngilima wanted to make people aware of the existence of the Ngilima collection, spreading the news that it was an open archive for people to consult and potentially find pictures of family members and long-lost friends. But as long as the Ngilima collection was not officially a public archive, I felt compelled to respect Farrell's future plans to eventually sell some of the images to museums and publications, and hence keep some control over their circulation within Actonville and Wattville. As I conducted my research in

Actonville, I was suddenly confronted with the question of copyright when my (informal) research assistant, Bahij Ibrahim, requested digital copies of the photographs depicting Indian families. He wanted to show them on his laptop to various families in Actonville, so as to help me speed up the identification process. With few African families in Wattville having their own computers (let alone laptops) this situation had never previously arisen. With Farrell Ngilima's permission, I eventually gave Ibrahim a digital copy of 70 portraits of Indian families, but under the naïve condition that he would not pass the files onto anyone else, and that he would inform the families about the identity of the photographers, so as to spread Ronald and Torrance Ngilima's names. Yet I was taken aback by the speed at which the photographs began to circulate in Actonville, via email and memory sticks. It was not long before I would step into a house for the first time, only to realise that the family had long seen the photographs but were nevertheless still unaware of the identity of the photographer. Interestingly, Ibrahim was not apologetic about breaking the terms of our verbal agreement but was simply pleased with the initial stir of excitement that he had created.

Ibrahim and I clearly had different understandings as to whom these images belonged. For me, it was obvious that the images still belonged to the author of the photographs and that his descendants' copyright over these images was to be protected.<sup>606</sup> Yet for Ibrahim, the claim to authorship was overshadowed by the claim to family bonds. According to this logic, a photograph of one's grandmother clearly belongs to the private realm of one's family and not

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<sup>606</sup> It is rather complicated to legally determine who actually has copyrights to the Ngilima images, both in terms of the duration of copyrights and the role of the commissioner (the client). According to the South African Copyrights Act of 1978, copyrights over a photograph expires 50 years after the year it was "made available to the public with the consent of the owner of the copyright" or the year of its first publication. In the case that the photograph was never published, the copyright expires 50 years after the work was made (section 3.2.b). In the Ngilima case, the photographs were never published but the work was only made officially public in 2006, at the Museum Africa exhibition. Hence in theory, Farrell Ngilima would still own copyright over the images until 2056. However, doubt remains whether Ronald and Torrance's clients own copyright over a photograph that they would have commissioned. Indeed, the S.A Copyrights Act differs from international law in that it provides the commissioner ('a person [who] commissions the taking of a photograph [...] and pays or agrees to pay for it in money or money's worth') copyright over the work, in the case that 'the work is made in pursuance of that commission', unless an agreement between the two parties (including a verbal agreement) defines otherwise (Section 21.1.c). We do not know enough about Ronald and Torrance's photographic practice to determine whether a payment was promised before the making of the portrait. It is clear however that more negatives were produced than prints were effectively bought. Without being an expert in copyright, I would think that only clients owning the original (i.e 1950s or 1960s) prints could claim copyright over those particular images. But from my observation, very few households that I visited actually owned original prints. From his reading of the copyright law, John Pepper concludes differently. Whether a transaction has or has not taken place is irrelevant, the photographs were explicitly commissioned, thus sitters and their descendants still possess at the very least image rights. John Pepper, presentation at the panel "Photographs, Ethics and Africa on Display", ECAS, July 2015.

to some unknown people from Wattville. Within the Indian community, the notion of ‘extended family’ often includes distant relatives, regardless of how remote the connection. Given how interconnected the various households of Actonville were, Mr Ibrahim considered that it was harmless and even legitimate to have these images circulating freely within these extended families. I eventually accepted the situation, hoping that the low-resolution nature of the files circulating would anyhow restrict the usage of the images to strict viewing.

But while the photographs could circulate within the generous borders of the extended family, having them dragged into the public sphere was another affair. In a first informal meeting with local residents (including Ibrahim), in which Hemisha Bhana and myself introduced the project, there were immediately some objections and concerns. The first concerned our choice of the street as an exhibition space. The posters would not last more than a few hours before being vandalised, they argued. Moreover, considering that the photographs showed ‘the pioneers of our community’, the depicted people surely deserve a more honourable and respectable form of exhibition.<sup>607</sup> Why not hire the community hall, have the pictures nicely printed and framed and have a big reception, they protested. The ‘ideal’ exhibition would focus on the portraits of prominent Indian families, or on portraits of identified subjects, implying that portraits of unknown African and coloured people would not be included. In other words, Bhana’s and my vision for the street exhibition clearly did not correspond to their perception of how an exhibition should be held in order to honour their ancestors in a dignified way. Moreover, they were concerned that families might react negatively if we were to publicly exhibit photographs of their relatives in the streets without consulting them first. Hence it was agreed that the event could not go forward before Bhana and I sought permission, not only from the house owners whose walls we wished to use for our posters, but also from the depicted subject’s families. Hence the bulk of the work for this event involved making many rounds of social visits, explaining our project and obtaining people’s permission. Questioning our plans and determining these conditions was a way of establishing ownership over the Ngilima portraits of Indian families. Bhana and myself, being ‘outsiders’, were not free to carry out just any ‘artistic experiment’ with this kind of material. This

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<sup>607</sup> ‘Pioneers of Actonville’ was a recurrent expression in any conversation about commemorating local history. See for instance interview with Shabir Mohammedi, 01.06.2011, Actonville.



meeting also made clear that for these local residents, the Ngilima collection was not so much a legacy representing an entire (multiracial) neighbourhood as it was (Indian) family property.

### *Defining Territory*

The second issue revolved around the choice of names used to define neighbourhoods and therefore the lines of belonging. In the conception of the October event, Farrell, Hemisha and myself had considered the Benoni Old Location as a single unit of space, functioning as the basis for this common past and local identity. Confronted with an equally heterogeneous population, the District Six Museum opted for “territoriality and memories of belonging” as the criteria of belonging to the District Six.<sup>608</sup> Its exhibition made no distinction between tenants or landlords, addressing anyone who “previously (...) had an address in the area”.<sup>609</sup> Yet some aspects of the event subtly challenged our use of the ‘Old Location’ as common denominator. When asked to voice his reactions to the event, a local resident pointed at the caption underneath the poster and replied, visibly annoyed: “You got it all wrong. This wasn’t the Old Location. This was the Asiatic Bazaar. Black people lived in the Old Location. We lived here”.

As detailed in chapter 5, the reality of social interaction blurred the administrative borders between the three sections. An analysis of archival documents and my fieldwork notes however led me to conclude that the use of the name ‘Old Location’ was at very least ambivalent. The day-to-day reality on the ground was such that J.C. Lemmer, chief inspector from the Boksburg district, deplored in a letter to the deputy commissioner of Johannesburg in 1949: “(...) the already overcrowded Indian Bazaar which *adjoins but actually forms part of the old Native Location*”.<sup>610</sup> The next day, Lemmer described the situation to the Town Clerk of Benoni in similar terms: “The Asiatic Bazaar does not form part of the location (...) but *due to its situation and the number of natives residing there makes it in fact part of the location*”.<sup>611</sup> Evidence from my interviews also suggests that the name Benoni Old Location

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<sup>608</sup> Bohlin, “The Politics of Locality: Memories of District Six in Cape Town,” 181.

<sup>609</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>610</sup> Emphasis added. Letter dating from the 26th September 1949. “Unrest Among Basutho- Witwatersrand- Benoni Location”, ER. 7N/56/2, Central Archives Depot, National Archives, Pretoria.

<sup>611</sup> Emphasis added. Letter dating from the 27th September 1949. “Re-Asiatic Bazaar: Benoni Location”, ER. 7N/56/2, Central Archives Depot, National Archives, Pretoria



emerged as the oral term used to refer to the area as a whole, in the absence of a common name.<sup>612</sup> Indeed elder Indian and coloured interviewees seemed to use the term Old Location quite flexibly when referring to the entire area, including when speaking specifically about the Asiatic Bazaar.<sup>613</sup> For instance, Pat Moonsammy, depicted in one of the photos chosen for the posters, explained the configuration of the place to me in these words: “You see, *we* were in the *Old Location*, then we got the Bantu Location, then we got the coloured section, then you got our schools. So we had to pass all these places. But we never had any trouble whatsoever”.

The local resident’s protest was more than just a squabble over terminology. In his rejection of the term Old Location, he explicitly rejected the notion that Indians and Africans could be identified as a single community, sharing the same fate. This resident was probably not the only one in Actonville to feel this way. Looking through my recordings and notes from the October event, I realised that the name ‘Actonville’ came up far more often than ‘Old Location’ or ‘Asiatic Bazaar’ when talking to the Indian residents of Actonville. The popular expression “pioneers of Actonville”, which recurred very often in conversations, suggests that local history begins with the creation of Actonville, hence erasing what happened prior to the 1960s forced removals and the official establishment of Actonville as an Indian Group Area. Remembering the forced removals is potentially ambiguous for the Indian minority. African residents from the Old Location felt however that Indians had benefitted from the removal of Africans and coloureds and were somehow complicit in this forced removal.<sup>614</sup> The 1966 anti-removal flyer included these following sentences: “Benoni Old Location is not moving to Daveyton and is not given to the Indians. (...) We are very sorry for the Indians. They must find their own Location”. It is a fact that some Indians (including Indians evicted from other towns, with no ties to the community) were buying up Africans’ houses as soon as they were evacuated. Most Indians, in particular shopkeepers who were concerned about losing the bulk of their clientele, vigorously opposed the removal. Yet while some became heavily involved in the anti-removal campaign, other Indians saw in the removals a chance to get out of their

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<sup>612</sup> ‘Etwatwa’, the nickname Africans gave to the Old Location, was not often used by Indians and coloured interviewees, though they were perfectly familiar with it.

<sup>613</sup> Interview with Pat Moonsammy (italics added, emphasis of the author), 02.10.11, Actonville.

<sup>614</sup> Nieftagodien, "The Implementation of Urban Apartheid on the East Rand, 1948-1973: The Role of Local Government and Local Resistance" , 249.

overcrowded living conditions and improve their situation. Making the nominative distinction between Asiatic Bazaar and the Old Location affirms Indians' long-rooted presence in the area, thus legitimizing their claim over present-day Actonville, while perhaps relieving them from having to feel responsible for the fate of the Old Location.<sup>615</sup>

Ambiguous feelings about the forced removals echo those about the post-1994 change in government, as many Indian South Africans are still struggling to find their place in the 'New South Africa'.<sup>616</sup> Many South African Indians today feel economically and politically marginalized within the South African State, stuck between an African majority and a white minority maintaining certain privileges. According to Radhakrishnan, "the relationship between Indians and Africans in general remains at best ambivalent; African bitterness about the relative upward mobility Indians have enjoyed in South Africa coexists alongside Indian discomfort with losing the privileges maintained by apartheid".<sup>617</sup> In reality, the majority of the local Indian population far from prospered under the apartheid government's policy of 'separate development'. The fact remains that the large majority of South African Indians voted for the National Party instead of the ANC in the 1994 elections, translating a fear of change and of losing the few privileges that they may have had. Since then, South African Indians have begun asserting themselves as a minority voice, by using the language of culture to "reinvent essential racial difference".<sup>618</sup> I suggest that the frictions emerging from this local history project must be interpreted as part of a larger political project to assert and reinforce the imagined community of Indians as a single united cultural minority. Clinging to the name Asiatic Bazaar, just like the desire to focus on pictures of well-known prominent or 'pioneering' families, edits out some of the messier details that complicate this Indian narrative, such as the portrait of Myriam Ali, of Indian and Zulu origins (see chapter five). Identifying an ethnic history focusing solely on Indians becomes a priority over embracing a common 'rainbow-colour' past, in a context where South African Indians are figuring out

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<sup>615</sup> As far as I know, there have been no efforts to ever discuss the forced removals publicly, apart from the land claim in 2008.

<sup>616</sup> A. Desai and B. Maharaj, "Minorities in the Rainbow Nation: The Indian Vote in 1994," *South African Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 96 (1996).

<sup>617</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, "'African Dream': The Imaginary of Nation, Race, and Gender in South African Intercultural Dance," *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003), 531.

<sup>618</sup> — — —, "'Time to Show Our True Colors': The Gendered Politics of 'Indianness' in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 2 (2005), 264.

citizenship and entitlement in a post-apartheid South Africa. Articulating the unity of the “Indian community” is all the more pressing considering that long-standing ethnic divides, paired with growing class inequality, are threatening to dismantle this fragile fiction. This is the subject of the next section.

### *Defining the ‘Local Community’*

The notion of ‘visual repatriation’ usually involves a museum institution vowing to share digital and/or physical copies of its ethnographic photograph collection with the ‘source community’— the descendents of the depicted indigenous groups— and to actively collaborate with them on research projects, such as the identifying the subjects in the pictures.<sup>619</sup> In the growing literature about visual repatriation, the source community is usually a homogenous collective audience, unambiguously defined by their ethnicity. The situation is clearly very different with the Ngilima collection: it depicts an urban population made up of individuals with various ethnic and racial backgrounds, whose descendents have long been scattered across the Rand. Nevertheless, I had assumed that the Ngilima collection had a ‘local community’ to address and engage with amongst the present-day residents of Actonville, namely the descendants of the subjects depicted in the Ngilima photographs.

Sean Field coined the term “community-in-memory” to refer to the effort to provide coherency to a displaced and dispersed community, through the discursive construction of myth and memory.<sup>620</sup> “People’s sense of place frames an imaginative “holding together” of both themselves and of their community’s identity”.<sup>621</sup> The sense that I got out of my

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<sup>619</sup> For an example of visual repatriation with local communities in Papua New Guinea, see J. Bell, "Looking to See: Reflections on Visual Repatriation in the Purari Delta, Papua New Guinea.," in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison Brown (London: Routledge, 2003); with the Maori in New Zealand see J. Binney and G. Chaplin, "'Taking the Photographs Home: The Recovery of a Maori History'," in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison Brown (London: Routledge, 2003); and with Aboriginal communities in Australia, see J. Stanton, "Snapshots on Dreaming: Photographs of the Past and Present," in *Museums and Source Communities : A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison Brown (London: Routledge, 2003); Kratz on her work with the Okiek in Kenya C. A. Kratz, *The Ones Who Are Wanted: Communication and the Politics of Representation in a Photographic Exhibition* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); and A. Brown and L. Peers, *Pictures Bring Us Messages: Photographs and the Histories of the Kainai Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), on their work with the Kainai community in Canada.

<sup>620</sup> Field, *Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, chapter three.

<sup>621</sup> *Idem*, 97.

interviews, is that most of my interviewees, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, expressed a fondness and attachment in their memory of the place. I also got the sense that the Old Location was still very much alive, in that it still actively shapes certain networks and fosters a deep sense of belonging. For instance, when introducing me to certain interviewees, Doreen Ngilima would often explain to me that the link between the interviewee and the Ngilima family went back to the years where they were still living as neighbours in the Old Location. Interviewees living in Wattville also felt strongly connected to the Old Location, as most of them were born there or grew up there, before their parents obtained a house in Wattville. Interviewees used the Old Location as the factor that distinguished the “original” families from the newcomers (in particular the squatters who came after 1994 and the end of the influx control, many of whom made their homes in the squatter camp along the railway lines that divide Wattville from Actonville). Joshua Bell has argued that bringing photographs back to a source community was to place them back into the network of relations from which they were cut.<sup>622</sup> I witnessed this myself during the 2011 workshop. While the ex-location residents had been invited separately, they quickly mutually recognised each other as insiders of this lost locality and verbally established past connections, reflecting the dense social network existing in the Location. “I remember your father very well, he sold coal with a horse cart to my father”, said Khubi Thabo to Duman Rahman. In that sense the Ngilima collection stands for and perhaps even revives the myriad of relationships that Ronald Ngilima fostered through the years and thanks to his meanderings through the various neighbourhoods, of which the Asiatic Bazaar and the Old Location were clearly the heart.

Yet during my fieldwork in Actonville, I was quickly exposed to the fragility of conceptualizing the Location as a unit of space overlapping with a single unit of people (residents). Assuming that the Indian residents of Actonville formed a single coherent group that one could call a ‘local community’ proved to be perhaps the biggest mistake of all, a mistake which Ferguson and Gupta have identified as belonging to “the ethnographic tradition of taking the association of a culturally unitary group (the “tribe” or “people”) and “its” territory as natural”.<sup>623</sup> Race being the primordial system of classification under apartheid, the highly heterogeneous degree of the Indian minority was generally overlooked, whether in

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<sup>622</sup> J. Bell, "Out of the Mouths of Crocodiles: Eliciting Histories in Photographs and String Figures," *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2010), 366.

<sup>623</sup> J. Ferguson and A. Gupta, "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992), 11.

terms of regional provenance, language group, religion, ethnicity, caste or class.<sup>624</sup> The apartheid system heavily oriented scholarly research on South African Indians, focused on dynamics between different ‘racial’ groups (especially between Indians and Africans), neglecting to look into ‘intragroup relations among Indians’.<sup>625</sup> Some of these divisions have historical roots, for instance the divide between Indians descending from ‘indentured labourers’ (those who were contracted by the British to work in the sugar field plantations) and those descending from the ‘passenger Indians’ (those who got to South Africa by their own means). In Benoni’s Asiatic Bazaar, the Gujaratis were the most established merchants, with shops in the location and in town, bank accounts and even access to credit (Bhana and Brain 1990, 83). In contrast, most Tamils descending from former indentured workers became either informal hawkers or wage labourers, working mainly as waiters in ‘white’ restaurants and hotels or on the mines. This economic disparity coincided with a difference in skin colour, with Tamils tending to be darker in complexion. Interestingly enough, former Old Location residents who I interviewed did not dwell on these ethnic, religious or class distinctions.<sup>626</sup> While a few Gujarati families were perhaps “keeping to themselves” and “looking down on the rest of us”, their obligation to share the same living space with all other Indians gave little room for expressing these divides in a significant way.<sup>627</sup> Afrikaans (not English) became the lingua franca that slowly replaced Indian languages at home. Mixing amongst each other and with members of other racial groups was the inevitable result of overcrowding and a necessary neighbourly solidarity in the face of generalised economic oppression. The photograph of the six Indian men that we put up on Mayet Drive bears witness to this degree of integration (figure 6.5). The depicted group includes four Tamils, a Muslim and a Hindu, all wearing suits and no external signs of religious belonging. Furthermore, five of them were dating coloured girlfriends at the time.

My experience of the present-day Actonville community was very different from this rather harmonious depiction of the past. Interacting with Lilly Pillay especially enabled me to

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<sup>624</sup> U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life*. (Roggebaai: Kwela Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>625</sup> S. Bhana, "Indians in South Africa (Review)," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001), 410.

<sup>626</sup> Interview with Pat Moonsammy, Duman Ali, Maniboy Asmal, Reni Singh, Perry Vierasammy, May Revally-Chittny, 2011-2012, Actonville.

<sup>627</sup> Interview with Perry Vierasammy, 08.06.2011, Actonville.

apprehend how divided the community presently is. A woman in her late fifties, identifying herself as a South African Tamil, Mrs. Pillay feared that Tamil families were being kept out of Bahij Ibrahim's initial circle of circulation. Without consulting us, she therefore began an alternative distribution circuit, using her office's printer to print Ngilima pictures *en masse*, and giving away these compiled packets to Indian families supposedly kept out of the loop. Later, she was of the opinion that the Tamils were underrepresented in my initial sample of pictures for the street exhibition. I observed that Mrs. Pillay's reading of the Ngilima photographs differed greatly from older interviewees' interpretation as she was the only one to put so much emphasis on identifying the ethnicity and religion of the depicted subject (Muslim, Hindu, Tamil, coloured, mixed). She claimed for instance that it was possible to recognise a depicted woman's caste by looking at the photograph at how her sari's *palu* was tied.<sup>628</sup> In her late fifties, Mrs. Pillay did not experience the Old Location's multiculturalism from the 1950s as much as the era of forced removals. She grew up with the implementation of Group Areas and the decades of racial politics, which dismantled the emerging multicultural urban working class and heightened people's awareness of race.<sup>629</sup> Mrs. Pillay estimates that the Tamils, the "darkies" of the Indian community, have always been victims of discrimination from the Muslim community.<sup>630</sup>

Furthermore, the post-apartheid era has profoundly altered Actonville community. The abolition of discriminatory trading restrictions targeting Indian entrepreneurs and conceived to protect white-owned business enabled a larger section of Indians to become economically successful. Since the late 1980s and especially since the repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1991, affluent and middle-class Indian families have been leaving Actonville and moving to the traditionally white suburbs, accelerating the process of marginalization of Actonville described in the previous section. Class distinctions are now expressed in terms of area of residency and access to private education. A clear distinction grew between Indian families who, like co-organiser Hemisha Bhana's family, moved to formerly white suburbs such as Lake Field and Westdene, and those who, like Mrs Pillay, have 'stayed behind' in Actonville in neglected flats and shabby houses. Hemisha was also one of the few with Actonville roots to study at a prestigious Johannesburg university (Wits University). Grasping this inequality

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<sup>628</sup> The palu is the part of the sari that hangs over the shoulder. It is usually more elaborate in decoration than the preceding six meters of fabric.

<sup>629</sup> Nieftagodien, "The Implementation of Urban Apartheid", 324-5.

<sup>630</sup> Interview with Lilla Pillay, Actonville, 01.06.2011

enabled me to understand why some of our Actonville volunteers tended to undermine co-organizer Hemisha Bhana's role in the organization of the event and cut her out of the planning.<sup>631</sup> They questioned her legitimacy to lead such a local history project, on the basis that she was (in their opinion) not really from Actonville.

Ironically, Actonville has regained some level of ethnic diversity, as Africans (from South Africa but also from other African countries) have been moving into town.<sup>632</sup> But as one interviewee stated: "It'll never be the same. Because it isn't the original residents who are moving back in. They are complete outsiders".<sup>633</sup> The end of apartheid's influx control system created another wave of urbanisation, enabling more Africans from the rural areas to move to the city. As I toured the high schools of Wattville and Actonville, recruiting young students to participate in the event, I was confronted with sceptical teachers and principals asserting that most of their pupils were from families of newcomers and would therefore have little interest in local history.

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<sup>631</sup> It included for instance inviting me but not her to post-event celebration meal; arranging meetings with Actonville residents without her; arranging alternative housing in Actonville so that I did not need to stay with the Bhana family, etc.

<sup>632</sup> Though mainly in the poorer sections of Actonville, for instance the neglected flats and the original run-down houses in the former Asiatic Bazaar triangle.

<sup>633</sup> Interview with Duman Rahman, 23.02.2011, Actonville.



## CONCLUSION: PRODUCING HISTORICAL FRICTIONS

Despite the various disagreements with certain Actonville residents, the experience of organising a street exhibition with the Ngilima photographs was both exhilarating and productive in many ways, not least in its ability to reveal the assumptions I had evidently made about the role of photographic collection in the production of local history. Namely, that there could be a straightforward correlation between a photographic collection and the local community, with the single space unit as the continuous bridge between the past and the present. Whereas the term ‘class’ refers to social bonds transcending particular geographical locations, the term ‘community’ implies “a space within which the group is formed and reproduced. This spatial dimension is probably what lends the term ‘community’ its timelessness, its sense of coherence and its claim to specificity”.<sup>634</sup> Yet with the painful chapter of the forced removals, the issue of “place and placelessness” and its flipside— the question of rightful belonging— have added another dimension to this equation.<sup>635</sup> My mistake was not to take into account the diverging outcomes of the forced removals for the various communities and how that would influence their understanding of their past. Nor did I take into account the multiple changes that took place between the forced removals and today. Between its former African and coloured residents scattered in different townships, the Indians moving to more gentrified places, and Actonville’s ‘newcomers’ and squatters, Benoni’s loaded history highlights the fact that the relationship between the place and its community is always very tenuous.

This does not mean that no-one in Actonville makes claims to local history. My elderly Indian interviewees, the project volunteers living in Actonville and the young students participating at the event were all very invested in the production of local history, perhaps precisely because the locality-community relationship is in crisis. The seeming stability of a fixed image offers the promise of redrawing the contours of a fluctuating Indian community. Our Indian volunteers searched the Ngilima portraits of Indian families for signs of an appealing ‘origin’ of a community defined by a mythical, essential Indianness. “In South Africa today,

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<sup>634</sup> B. Bozzoli, "Class, Community and Ideology in the Evolution of South African Society," in *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 27

<sup>635</sup> Bohlin, "The Politics of Locality: Memories of District Six in Cape Town," 168.

local identity is as much an outcome of processes of exclusion and the reification of difference, as it is the result of collective identification and the creation of a common past”, argues Bohlin.<sup>636</sup> Instead of becoming a platform acknowledging a common, multicultural past, the Ngilima collection was used as a tool for the reification of difference. French historian Pierre Nora would certainly not be surprised. Observing in France a trend away from national, official commemorations and towards local-scale memorial activities, the author of *Les Lieux de Mémoires* warned his readers that this shift in social power presents the danger of developing communalism based on race, ethnicity or religion. Nora saw few reasons to celebrate the decline of national commemorations and the rise of local commemorative activism, which he called “this commemorative obsession”. Having each local group claiming its right to determine their own commemorative activity, he argued, will inevitably lead to “internal conflicts”, to further social division and exclusion.<sup>637</sup>

The notion of ‘history frictions’ is perhaps useful to understand the outcomes of our street exhibition in a positive light. It is borrowed from the term ‘museum frictions’, which acknowledges the fact around the institution of the museum, “disparate communities, interests, goals and perspectives...produce debates, tensions, collaborations, (and) conflicts of many sorts”.<sup>638</sup> By extension, Witz and Rassool understand ‘history frictions’ as the “ongoing negotiations where different and competing narratives, claim and priorities come up against each other”.<sup>639</sup> Beyond being ‘containers of histories’ enclosing multiple narratives within their frames, the Ngilima photographs also present opportunities to confront these multiple narratives with one another.<sup>640</sup> Working with the Ngilima collection crystallised the various stakes and perspectives on local history, in particular between African residents from Daveyton nostalgically longing for the vibrant Old Location and the Indian Actonville residents in search for the golden age of a close-knit Indian community. These productive

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<sup>636</sup> *Idem*, 178.

<sup>637</sup> N. Wood, "Memory's Remains: Les Lieux De Memoires," *History and Memory* 6, no. 1 (1994), 143.

<sup>638</sup> C. Kratz et al., *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), as quoted in L. Witz and C. Rassool, "Making Histories," *Kronos* 34, no. 1 (2008), 12

<sup>639</sup> Witz and Rassool, "Making Histories," 13.

<sup>640</sup> Bell, "Looking to See: Reflections on Visual Repatriation in the Purari Delta, Papua New Guinea.," 120.

collisions are in turn useful to understand how history is mobilised in the shaping of local identities, in the complex present day configuration of post-apartheid South Africa.