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## Chapter Five

# Portrait of a Place: Mobilising Photographs to Reconstitute the Old Location

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The National Archives abound with documents relating to the Old Location but contain very few pictures. The only ones I came across were those that illustrated the publication made for the “Golden Jubilee” of Benoni’s Town Council in 1967. The photographs selected for the publication show off the new buildings infrastructures that had recently been built for the “Native Advancement” of the Bantu living in Benoni, such as the Davies Social Centre. None of these pictures however give viewers a sense of what the location actually looked like before it was destroyed. This is one of the reasons why the Ngilima collection is so valuable. As detailed in the first chapter, Ronald Ngilima was highly mobile, both geographically and socially, visiting communities across the class and racial spectrum throughout Benoni. Though these photographs were meant to be portraits of people, many of them were taken outside people’s homes, offering us a unique view of the houses and streets in the location, as experienced by its residents.

This chapter argues that photographs are able to convey a sense of place in a unique kind of way. It is not just that photographs make things visible, but that they give visibility to intimate experiences of the place, attracting our attention to certain details and narratives that we might otherwise fail to notice. Place, according to Yi-Fu Tuan, can be defined as “centres of felt value”; “the organized world of meaning”.<sup>510</sup> The notion of place distinguishes itself from the more abstract concept of space because of the intimate knowledge that people develop in relation to it, allocating value to it as their familiarity with it grows. Houses and streets alone do not give a place its unique local flavour, though it might give it a distinctive visual

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<sup>510</sup> Y.-F. Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4 and 179.

character. It is rather a combination of factors: architecture, notable events and local figures, kin and neighbourhood ties, a collective place-consciousness. Basso and Feld have defined sense of place as “the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, remembered (...)”, or in short “how places are lived out in deeply meaningful ways”<sup>511</sup>.

Studying the details of perceptions and experiences that made the Old Location a unique place for local residents is important for several reasons. First it prompts one to take the local seriously, and enquire how the location as place was shaped and imagined. Nieftagodien remarked that despite the abundance of historical studies on black urban populations in Johannesburg, researchers have ironically tended to consider ‘the local’ as merely “a place in which history happens”, without looking into how it was constituted.<sup>512</sup> Second, it enables one to pay attention to the hard work behind creating distinctions within the space of the location. The 1955 map of the location (Map 4) accurately captures the way the Town Council perceived the location. The map flattens out all nuances into neatly divided zones to control. In its inhabitation of the place, local residents created their own mapping of the place, adding adjectives to the neighbourhoods in the location to create differentiation (safe, unsafe, rich, poor, familiar, unfamiliar, etc). Their daily practice of space created a different set of boundaries that at times overlapped but also contradicted those of the local administration. Third, such research crucially acknowledges that the location was not simply a homogenous sea of corrugated iron simply characterized by overwhelming poverty and appalling living conditions. Chapter four has shown that people strove to personalise the identical matchbox in Wattville and to create variation in the landscape. As Dlamini writes about his home township in the East Rand: “Katlehong is more than just a township made up of houses and basic amenities. Katlehong is also a world that exists in the imagination, a world where the metaphorical is as important as the material”<sup>513</sup>. It follows that one must take seriously the feeling of loss that many of my interviewees expressed regarding the Old Location as it was prior to the removals. Attempting to understand the making of place equals attempting to grasp what made life in the Location worthwhile to remember. It is recognizing that “life under apartheid was not all doom and gloom”<sup>514</sup>. The numerous reports on the Location,

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<sup>511</sup> S. Feld and H. B. Basso, "Introduction," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and H. Basso Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>512</sup> Nieftagodien, "The Place of 'the Local' in History Workshop's Local History,"

<sup>513</sup> Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*, 107.

<sup>514</sup> *Idem*.

whether written by the Town Council, the press, or associations, all concurred to expose the failings and the moral void of the Location, reducing its complexities to a series of health and delinquency problems requesting external intervention. The Ngilima collection in contrast offers a very different perspective on the location, as an environment worth remembering fondly.

The first part of this chapter details the different ways I was able to extract different kinds of information in relation to the Old Location on the basis of the photographs. From the detailed reading that interviewees had of the photographs, to the memories relating to a specific mode of life in the location that the photographs triggered, to walking through present Actonville in the attempt to locate the photographs with today's geography—all these different methods of working with the photographs enabled me to articulate people's perception of the location, as they remember it. Photo-elicitation has been an effective starting point for a discussion that has brought forth “forms of local knowledge and localized forms of expression” vis-à-vis the Location.<sup>515</sup>

The second part of the chapter compiles the information generated through the photographs with the methods described above. I analyse how the photographs enable us to understand how class organised the space of the location, and how it was visually translated in terms of materiality (bricks vs. zinc, etc). I associate interviewees' ability to locate photographs within their cognitive map of the location on the basis of details picked out from photographs with the more general trend of verbal “place-making”, i.e the practice of allocating nicknames to various neighbourhoods within the location and within Wattville, based on particular landmarks. I am interested in what Feld and Basso have called “forms of local knowledge and localized forms of expression”, which translate “modes of imagining and enacting place”.<sup>516</sup>

I continue my analysis of place with the other major factor that influenced the internal organization of space in the location: race. One of the major characteristics of Benoni's Old Location was the fact that racially it was very mixed. This was generally the trend in other cities in the East Rand, but it reached a higher level in Benoni, for instance for the fact that its Asiatic Bazaar was not fenced in from the coloured and African section of the location. Approaching the complex and heavily-studied theme of race from ex-residents' spatial

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<sup>515</sup> Feld and Basso, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>516</sup> *Idem*, 7.

experience enables one to understand how space played a role in the abstract (and often incoherent) construction of race. The socio-economic reality was such that on a daily basis, interactions among people undermined such borders. Here the photographs played a role of generator and facilitator of discussion on this potentially sensitive topic.

In seeking for a place's distinct potencies or uniqueness, there is a danger of falling into a conservative essentialism (i.e. the "real" Paris) that negates the fact that "all places are already hybrid" and that "local uniqueness is always already a product of wider contacts".<sup>517</sup> The tendency to see the past as "embody[ing] the real character of the place" can easily slip into exclusionary visions of place and translate into quasi-xenophobic feelings regarding "newcomers"<sup>518</sup>. As Driver and Samuel ask: "can we understand the identity of places in a less bounded, more open-ended way? Can we write local histories which acknowledge that places are not so much singular points as constellations, the product of all sorts of social relations which cut across particular locations in a multiplicity of ways?".<sup>519</sup> I would argue that much of the work in qualifying the location as distinctively urban was based on the ability to visualize its connectedness with the world beyond, in particular "America". If spaces are also made imaginatively<sup>520</sup>, then the Ngilima portraits are all the more indicative of how Location residents used photography to give substance to their imagining of themselves as cosmopolitan citizens living in an urban space. The chapter thus closes with a section on jazz and the role of photography in laying claim to the idea that this transatlantic cultural style was locally available and integral to the making of Benoni's Location.

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<sup>517</sup> D. Massey, "Places and Their Pasts," *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995), 183.

<sup>518</sup> *Idem*, 183. Some of interviewee's responses went in that direction. Between Actonville and Wattville lives a community of squatters living in shacks, who established themselves along the defunct railways lines in the 1990s, with the relaxation of influx control. Up till today, they are considered as "newcomers" and part of the reasons why Benoni as a whole "degenerated".

<sup>519</sup> F. Driver and R. Samuel, "Rethinking the Idea of Place," *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995), vi.

<sup>520</sup> I. Hofmeyr, "Turning Region into Narrative: English Storytelling in the Waterberg," in *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality, and Culture in the 19th and 20th Century South Africa*, ed. Philip Bonner, et al. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1989), 263, as quoted in Nieftagodien, "The Place of 'the Local' in History Workshop's Local History," 46.

## PART ONE. METHODOLOGIES OF PHOTO-ELICITATION

### *Reading Backgrounds: Identifying the Significance of Details*

I begin this chapter with a more detailed analysis of how I mobilised the photographs to yield information about the Old Location, focusing on the different ways that interviewees engaged with the photographs. This happened in a number of ways, producing different types of information. To start with, I was often surprised by some of my interviewees' remarkable engagement with minor details barely visible in the background of the image, what Edwards has called a forensic reading of a photograph.<sup>521</sup> Considering that the location was removed about half a century ago and how much the space of the location has changed today since then, interviewees' ability to recognize, remember and associate visual elements with a particular place is all the more remarkable and points towards the importance of the visual in the act of remembering. Interviewees would use these details to guess where the photograph was made, "placing" the image within their mental mapping of the place. Viewers mainly lingered on details relating to the material environment: the type of construction material, the shape of the ventilation grid, the model of the house, the presence or absence of trees, etc. The bits and pieces of infrastructure visible in the photographs (the street lamps, the street signs, the poles, the corrugated iron) were elements of materiality that evoked a particular landscape of the past. It was difficult— if not impossible— to determine with certainty whether an interviewee's guess regarding a photograph's supposed geographical location was accurate, approximate or totally wrong. The accuracy of their guess is not as important as the forensic evidence that emerged from this process—a database of visual elements that people mobilized in the construction of a cognitive map of the location, informing me about interviewees' subjective perception of the place. In several instances, interviewees' guess concerning the potential geographical location of certain photographs contradicted each other, suggesting that there were in fact several cognitive maps of the place coexisting. However, some of the answers were consistent enough to point towards something like a local common knowledge of the place. In this perspective, I use the Ngilima photographs here essentially as a starting point to analyze ex-Old Location residents' representation of locality.

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<sup>521</sup> E. Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001), 87-88.

To give an example, Mrs. Poppy Fortuin could easily make out houses from Modderfontein, the mine compound where she grew up, as these houses had a distinctive irregular plastering on the outside (figure 5.1).

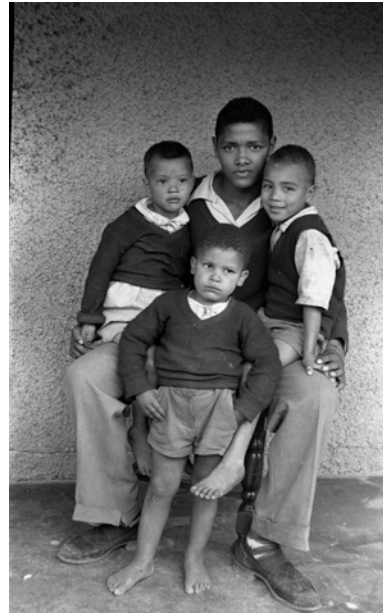


Figure 5.1: Modderfontein houses, mid-1950s, NPC.

She was furthermore convinced that another particular photo had been taken behind her mother's house, as it was apparently the only house in the compound to have such a wooden fence made of round logs instead of flat boards.<sup>522</sup> More impressively, an interviewee from Actonville suddenly realized that figure 5.2 had to be flipped horizontally in order to make sense. He had noticed the bridge on the far right of the picture and recognized it as the bridge connecting the Asiatic Bazaar to Wattville.

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<sup>522</sup> Interview with Poppy Fortuin, 08.02.2012, Reigerpark.





Figure 5.2: Brick house in the Asiatic Bazaar. The bridge to the right of the (left) picture only makes sense when the picture gets flipped horizontally (as in the right picture). Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.

Given the configuration of the two places, the bridge could only be on the left side of the image, thus confirming that the image had been scanned in reverse.<sup>523</sup> As for Farrell Ngilima, he managed to identify houses from Daveyton in several photographs on the basis of the ventilation grid visible on the façade of the houses. Somehow he knew that Daveyton houses had round ventilation grids, whereas those in Wattville had rectangular ones. In another remarkable example, Farrell helped us find a household I was keen on locating, which appeared in an unusually large series of pictures depicting a little girl’s birthday party. The birthday party was being celebrated outside, on the front lawn. In one of the pictures, one could see the last three numbers of the house number yet the crucial first number was simply cut off (figure 5.3). Scrutinizing the pictures carefully, Farrell noticed a church visible in the background, and more importantly the cables of the small electric pillar peaking from behind the house (figure 5.3). These two landmarks, the church and the electric central, enabled us to finally locate the house. This intense engagement with the photographs bears witness to people’s surviving intimate connection to a specific urban environment at a specific time in the past. Interviewees knew and still remembered clearly which material was used where, where shacks were allowed and where they were forbidden, and the subtle variations in the various models of “sub-economic houses”. Combining the photographs with interviewees’ acute observations, it became possible to develop a sense of the range of various neighbourhoods that constituted Benoni’s location and township. These various

<sup>523</sup> The person responsible for scanning the negatives was under time constraints and scanning in bulk. Many of the negatives were not turned the right way up and thus the scan is a flipped version of the negative. Identifying reversed letters in the photo remains the easiest and surest sign that the scan needs to be flipped horizontally. Other elements like shirt buttons and watches can also provide useful clues—men’s buttons, for instance, were always on the right side of the shirt.

neighbourhoods both affirmed and contested the Town Council's map of the place, challenging the notion that Benoni's non-white residential zone, tucked away behind the industrial sites, was characterized solely by homogenizing mass poverty and overpopulation. Differences between the old location and the new location—the modern township, distinctions between neighbourhoods and even between streets within a single neighbourhood, mattered to those actually living there. The Ngilima photographs were a powerful starting point to discuss these distinctions.



Figure 5.3: Guessing the location of the house thanks to details in the background, like the church and the electric cables. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

### *Evocative Details: Remembering a Certain Lifestyle*

The details that interviewees picked up become significant once placed within a certain narrative — a story, an association, a memory— thus infusing it with meaning. Often, interviewees reacted to the photographs emotionally. On seeing certain details, they were plunged into powerful sensual memories of their childhood and youth. These details do not necessarily relate to the exterior infrastructure of the Location, but more generally to a particular material environment associated with a particular time and place. Clothing elements for instance reminded certain viewers of a particular fashion specific to the 1950s. With the clothes came an entire lexicon that has become so evocative of that time (banana hats and

dignity bags, blocks socks, two-toned shoes and double-breasted jackets, figure belts and platform shoes). These details (for instance, of domestic interiors) effectively plunged many interviewees into sensual memories of the place, without necessarily “showing” the location. This is probably because such memories are deeply entangled with the notion of place. They revolve around the architecture of local housing, local infrastructures, and local shops. Thus they too generate interesting information about the kind of lifestyle and social dynamics that characterised life in the Old Location.

A session with Mamsi Boshielo, in particular made me aware of this. Doreen Ngilima had introduced me to her, the day we went knocking on the door of her house in Wattville, with two compiled albums of Ngilima photographs tucked under my arm. Though unannounced, our visit was welcome, Mrs Boshielo declared herself very keen to see the photos of the place where she was born (in 1939) and had grown up. We sat at the kitchen table, perched on high stools; the conversation flowed easily. As Mamsi Boshielo flicked through the volume of Old Location photos, she was reminded of her childhood, at the sight of specific details of key objects, which strongly evoked living conditions associated with a particular time and place. For instance, recognizing a paraffin lamp in one of the pictures reminded her of the strong smell of paraffin burning. She suddenly remembered how her father had scolded her once for falling asleep with the candle left on.<sup>524</sup> The sight of the “studio-couch”, a piece of furniture found in many households in the Old Location, reminded her of her parents’ own cramped dining room. The studio-couch would be converted into a bed, and the dining room turned into the children’s bedroom at night. She also recognized in one picture an ice-chest, the precursor of the fridge. She remembered her father acquiring a similar ice-chest at an auction, and the impact this purchase had had on their diet. For one, they had for the first time jelly for desert during the Christmas holidays. More importantly, the ice-chest allowed her mother to freeze their meat and thus spared her the chore of having to go buy meat everyday.<sup>525</sup> Mamsi Boshielo’s experience of the Ngilima collection shows us that memory can be embodied and materialized in certain objects. The sight of these objects triggered spontaneous implicit memories that further called upon other senses and developed into more explicit stories: the paraffin lamp evoking a particular smell and the continuous fear of fire tied to this precious

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<sup>524</sup> People burning to death from paraffin or candles falling during their sleep occurred on regular basis in the townships.

<sup>525</sup> Interview with Mamsi Boshielo, Wattville, 04.04.2012.

yet dangerous source of light, the ice-chest and the refreshing taste of jelly. I suggest instead that the paraffin lamp, the ice-chest and of the convertible “studio-couch” worked for Mrs. Boshielo in a similar way as Proust’s *madeleine*, as mnemonics for her childhood, out of which emerged a more general sense of place. Mrs. Bashiello’s memories revolved around small habits or practices that structured her daily life, combined with particular anecdotes of family life. Her memory of the “studio-couch” was not as much focused on the overcrowded living conditions, as it was about underlining her parent’s ability to deal with shortage of space and other resources, through the trick of convertibility. In this way, the “things” remembered are intrinsically associated with places.”<sup>526</sup> According to Dolores Hayden, “memory of place” can be defined as memories of sensorial experiences in which the natural and built environment gets intertwined with the cultural landscape.<sup>527</sup> The memory of places is thus where personal memory potentially intersects with collective memory.<sup>528</sup> While the Ngilima portraits were initially produced for the restricted circle of family and friends, external viewers upon looking at them are nonetheless able to establish a link between “an individual’s personal, biographical experience and experiences common to the neighbourhood as a whole”<sup>529</sup>.

### *Mapping the Old Location*

Amongst my interviewees, Khubi Thabo had perhaps the sharpest memory relating to the Old Location. He is also the one who responded most strongly to the photographs depicting the Old Location. More than once, as we sat together scrolling through the Ngilima pictures on my computer, he would stand up from his chair in excitement to lean closer to the screen, when he thought he had recognized a face or a certain place. He would try to make out in his head the exact location of photographs that revealed street signs. The photographs that most galvanized him were those related to the Old Location’s main square, “*Esquareni*”.

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<sup>526</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 41.

<sup>527</sup> D. Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 46. As quoted in S. Field, *Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113.

<sup>528</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 43.

<sup>529</sup> A. Bohlin, “The Politics of Locality: Memories of District Six in Cape Town,” in *Locality and Belonging*, ed. Nadia Lovell (London: Routledge, 1998), 171.

According to Thabo, it was *the* place to see and be seen, to show off one's new pair of shoes or where boys could briefly meet girls after mass. Thabo's visual memory of the place was astonishing. Before I'd even show him the pictures, he was able to describe me the square in very precise geographical terms: "Because at the square you had all the churches. *At the right hand side, when going up*, it was the hostel. You had the AME church, *on 9<sup>th</sup> street*. St Albem Anglican church was *on 8<sup>th</sup> street*, and *on your left hand side*, you had the Presbyterian church, *9<sup>th</sup> street*, and *on your left hand side on 7<sup>th</sup> street*, you had the Methodist church. And there was a bus stop *right in the middle* of the square". When I showed him the two different portraits taken on the square, Thabo was elated (figure 5.4). He assigned to every element visible in the background a name or a memory: this was so and so's shop, this is the back entrance of the Methodist church, this was 8<sup>th</sup> street, leading up to the Nopatula hall... As he spoke, he used hand gestures to mark directions (indicating left, right, "going up"), took a few steps. In other words, he used his body to help him to orient himself in a corporeal way, turning the two-dimensional representation into a quasi three-dimensional panorama. His performance reminds us that "the body, the absolute here, is the landmark for any there, be it near or far, included or excluded, above or below, right or left, in front or behind...".<sup>530</sup> Paul Ricoeur has argued that the body acts as the primordial site that links corporeal memory to memory of places: "The transition from corporeal memory to the memory of places is assured by acts as important as orienting oneself, moving from place to place, and above all inhabiting (...)." Through this topographical reconstruction of the square, Thabo was able to convey the dense social activities of the location's main square.<sup>531</sup> The Ngilima photographs became powerful mnemonic devices that helped Thabo and others reconstitute the social and physical landscape of the Old Location. In the absence of a familiar face, the street signs, the corrugated iron and brickwork and the Asiatic shops would still call out to interviewees as something strongly familiar and evocative.

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<sup>530</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 168.

<sup>531</sup> Interview with Khubi Thabo, 17.06.2011, Daveyton. Emphasis added.

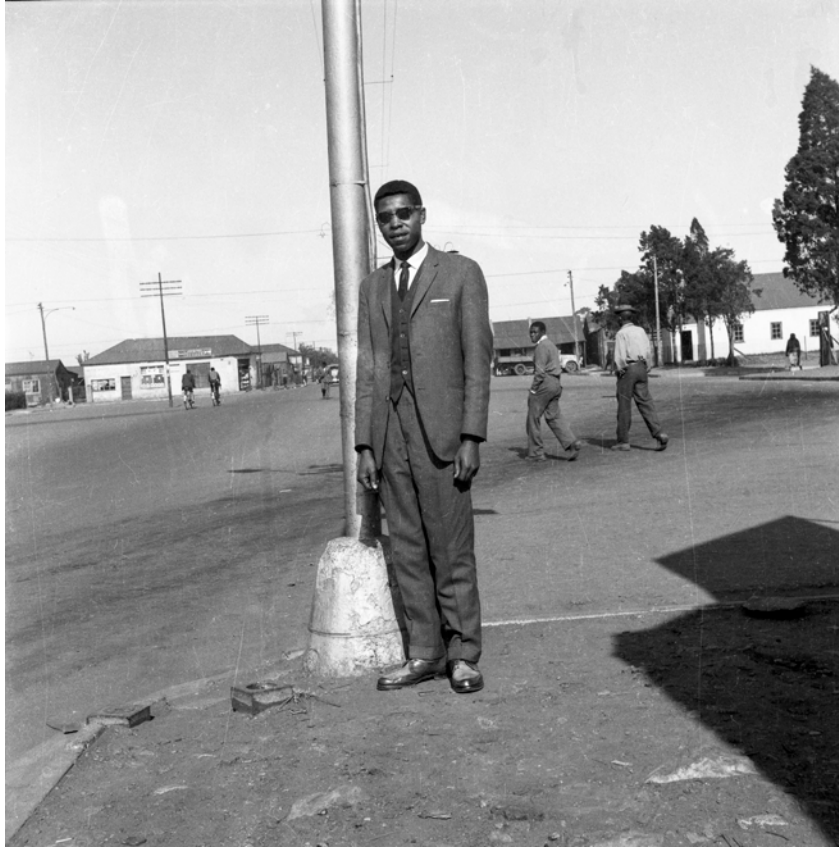


Figure 5.4: Two photographs depicting the main square of the Old Location. Late 1950s, early 1960s, Ngilima collection.

On the basis of this experience, I later proposed to Thabo another experiment: to physically walk (and drive) through Actonville, with the ambition of precisely locating some of Ngilima portraits on the present map of Actonville, using a 1950's map of the Old Location and his memories. I asked him to show me some of the other landmarks he had told me about, such as the collective washing site for women, the municipal compound for the Bacas, the Nopatula hall, the football ground. In addition, we were hunting for a few original houses that survived the 1960s removal. While the last two goals were successfully achieved, locating photos very precisely was quite difficult in the absence of street signs or visible landmarks. Nevertheless, Thabo was able to figure out the location of the cobbler's shop, which appears in one of Ngilima photographed. We ended up mainly working on the two pictures of the main square, in particular on reconstituting figure 5.4, by photographing Khubi at the same place as the subject in Ngilima's original photo (figure 5.5). In the next chapter, I return to this exercise and analyse more deeply what its significance for Khubi and other ex-Old Location residents who were removed to Daveyton.



Figure 5.5: A reconstitution of figure 5.4 (top picture ) in Actonville, 2013 (photograph by the author).

### *Generating Encounters and Starting Discussions*

Beside what they actually showed, the Ngilima photos were useful interviewing tools in many ways, for instance because it provided me with a legitimate excuse to knock on people's doors and ask them whether I could interview them. The Ngilima collection thus led me to make remarkable encounters with interviewees that I would otherwise never have met. Researchers who have worked on the social and political history of the area have to a certain extent tended to interview local figures who for some reason "stood out": community leaders and party activists, ex-members of the Advisory Board, key trade-unionists, school principals— people who have tended to be somehow at the frontline of public affairs. My only guideline for selecting interviewees has been whether they appeared on the Ngilima photographs or whether they were able to recognize any of the depicted subjects. Because Ngilima was affordable and accessible to a large section of Benoni's black population, his collection of portraits can be considered to be a sample that to a large extent reflected the diversity of the location and township's population. I was thus able to meet people of very different walks of life, whose common point was either that they contracted Ngilima's services and/or the memory of a particular place in time. To give an example, Painy Singh, whose biography I detail in the next section, was quite sick and bed-ridden when I met her. Appearing on several Ngilima photographs, she had been identified by another Indian interviewee, which enabled me to approach her via her daughter Vera (who also appears in the photographs). Mrs Singh has never been in the public spotlight during her lifetime. In fact, as a hardworking housewife looking after a large extended family, Mrs Singh has spent most of the time indoors. It seems clear that without the Ngilima photographs, I would never have met Aunty Painy and heard her remarkable stories.

Finally, the photographs greatly facilitated approaching sensitive topics and abstract social constructions during interviews, such as notions of race. Some interviewees would scrutinize depicted subjects' features and other clues such as religious decorations in order to guess his/her race and thus "place" the picture within their mental mapping of the location. "These are coloureds, so it must be the Cape Stands", was the reasoning behind their judgement. Interviewee's guesses were perhaps incorrect, but their reading of the photographs is nevertheless emblematic of the way people combined various visual factors relating to both body and culture (skin tone, material culture, interior decoration, architecture, etc) to conform to a collective understanding of race. This exercise was particularly useful in making me



realize to what extent Indians applied a similar racial hierarchy for members of their own community, which placed dark-skinned Tamils beneath fair-skinned Hindus and Muslims, in particularly Gujarati Muslims, considered as the Indian elite.

My analysis of interviewee's reading of race must however take into consideration the fact that their present reading is informed by fifty years of living under the Group Areas Act (living in 'racially exclusive' residential areas clearly separated from one another), whose legacy can still be felt today. Nieftogodien has argued that the experience of living separately combined with racially divided politics heightened South African's consciousness of race and contributed towards erasing the memory of what it was like to live in a mixed location in the 1950s.<sup>532</sup> Apartheid's racial system was far from being coherent and lacked clear guidelines as to what a "coloured" or a "Native" looked like. The system however relied on a notion of race "as common sense", on a typology of racial difference that "resonated closely with those produced socially" – i.e existing class and status hierarchies, cultural styles, making race an entrenched notion that permeated South Africans' daily life.<sup>533</sup> The experience of Group Areas further entrenched this notion of race as "common sense".

Using the photographs as a starting point for a discussion on race, it becomes possible to understand how the notion of race became "common sense", and how it functioned in relation to vision and space. Yet discussing cases of individuals who clearly blurred the racial categories was also useful to question the limits of this notion.<sup>534</sup> Certain photographs confronted us for instance with the reality of interracial marriages, another interesting yet also potentially highly sensitive subject of discussion. I suggest that photographs facilitated such conversations: In one particular case, I was discussing with Abie Karodia a photograph depicting his relatives, including his cousin Solly Rahman and his coloured wife Myriam Rahman. The theme of race and interracial marriages casually slipped into our conversation on the family's history. The popular apprehension of photography as a transparent and objective translation of reality in this case served the purpose of dispelling the aura of secrecy

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<sup>532</sup> Nieftogodien, "The Implementation of Urban Apartheid on the East Rand, 1948-1973: The Role of Local Government and Local Resistance" , 324.

<sup>533</sup> D. Posel, "Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa," *African Studies Review* 44, no. 2, Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism (2001), 107.

<sup>534</sup> Mendou Charles for instance had initially been identified as African, for he was in a family picture taken in Wattville. I later found out that Mr. Charles' original name was Mgangabula but had managed to change it when he applied and was successfully reclassified as Coloured thanks to his light skin complexion.

or taboo around the topic. With the photo laid out on the table, there was no option but to acknowledge the fact that such marriages did take place, making it perhaps easier for interviewees to talk about it.

The following section compiles the information concerning the Old Location that these various methodologies of photo-elicitation generated. It will hopefully show how the Ngilima photographs, though conceived as portraits of people, can also be considered to be portraits of a multifaceted place.

## PART TWO. RECONSTITUTING THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF THE LOCATION

In this section, I argue that the Ngilima photographs helped me get a sense of how differences between neighbourhoods within the location translated visually, and how the photographs facilitated a detailed conversation about class differences within the black population of Benoni.<sup>535</sup> To begin with, Wattville could be easily identified by its row of uniform houses made of large bricks, for their large yards and for the visible presence of sidewalks. Planned prior to the harmonization of norms (the famous NE 51/6 and 51/9 model of Sowetan matchbox houses), Wattville houses were unique in their design. Much to female residents' chagrin, this model house had no veranda, not even a *stoep*. Houses were stacked with its shorter side facing the street, while the front door was placed on the long side of the house, perpendicular to the street. This was something many women initially disliked, as it limited their ability to survey and engage with people passing by on the street.<sup>536</sup> The windows, mounted by recognizable thick white frames and a ledge were small, making the rooms dark and cold (figure 5.6, top photo). Changing the windows was part of the upgrading scheme for the house, while women took to colouring the ledge the same colour as their added *stoep*, to add colour and thus a distinguishing touch to their house. The presence of a row of trees along the main street was indicative of Dube street, Wattville's main street and the only one to have trees planted along it (figure 5.6, middle photo). Within Wattville is a section called Rooikamp, the original strip of first houses built in 1941, located directly opposite the Asiatic Bazaar, on the other side of the train tracks. These houses are substantially smaller in size and were built with smaller red bricks<sup>537</sup>, which gave Rooikamp its name (figure 5.6, bottom photo). Another clear difference is that Rooikamp houses included a front porch facing the street, but no front lawn. The presence of external toilets made of bricks, with a flower-like ventilation grid, was another distinctive characteristic of Rooikamp infrastructure.

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<sup>535</sup> See maps 3 and 4.

<sup>536</sup> Interview with Dumisani Dhlamini, 28.04.2011, Wattville. In an Advisory Board meeting concerning Daveyton, a member of the board put forth women's request to have the main entrance door on the street side, rather than on the length of the house.

<sup>537</sup> Rooikamp means "red camp" in Afrikaans.



Figure 5.6: Three pictures taken in different parts of Wattville, showing the distinctive model of sub-economic houses (top), Dube street (middle), and Rooicamp, the oldest section (bottom). Photographs by Thorence Ngilima. Early 1960s, NPC.

Photographs taken in the African Location, Asiatic Bazaar and the Cape Stands were easily distinguishable from Wattville photos, though not necessarily from each other. Portraits taken in the location depicted an urban environment dominated by indistinguishable wood planks, barbed wires, sandy streets, and most of all corrugated iron or zinc (figure 5.7). Most site holders built their houses themselves, houses that came to be known as “wood-and-iron” or “zinc houses”. When the type of constructed material is insufficient to localize a photograph with much precision, other clues came into play to help situate the photograph. One interviewee for instance identified immediately photograph figure 5.8 as being taken on the 15<sup>th</sup> street of the Old Location, because of the exceptional width of the street on which the subject was depicted walking down, heading towards the camera. 15<sup>th</sup> street had the particularity of being the only street in the township that was double in width, a fact that a quick look at a 1950s map of the location confirmed.



Figure 5.7: Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.



Figure 5. 8: Unidentified woman walking down on 15<sup>th</sup> street, Old Location. Photograph by Thorence Ngilima. Early 1960s, NPC.

### *Performing Class Through Materiality*

Notions of class, gender and race crucially animated the cognitive mappings of the location. It created different sets of invisible yet nevertheless tangible borders, which both overlapped with the municipal council's own map of the place, but also contested it. These social borders were not constant: there were times where they were temporarily more rigid, for instance following an exceptional historical event, such as the 1952 race riots, to which I come back later in this chapter.

The type of material used for construction, one of the most visible elements in the backgrounds of the pictures, was part of a material culture evocative of class differences. While Wattville was architecturally homogenous, stand-holders were free to build what they wanted according to their means. Within this context, any addition to the basic wood-and-iron

house was a manifestation of economic well-being. Brick, a relatively pricey material, had objective advantages over wood-structures covered in sheets of iron, in terms of insulation and durability. Symbolic values were added to the material superiority of brick, as brick came to represent affluence and permanence or stability, in a society that constantly had to fight back against the hazards of life. Other signs of relative wealth included any additional constructed elements such as a veranda, a *stoep*, ornamental columns, elaborate metal work for window bars and the front gate (figure 5.9). Having street lamps on one's street and electricity in one's home was also another sign of economic prosperity, while roof tiles and a double-storey house meant that the household was not just well-off but *definitively* rich. But even for those who were not able to afford such additions, there were visible distinctions to be made in terms of the relative quality and nature of the material. Informal collage of worn and bumpy scraps of zinc hammered together conveyed shabbiness and the scramble for survival, in contrast to smooth walls made of single sheets of un-creased corrugated iron, which were probably bought new (figure 5.10).



Figure 5.9: Brick, pillars and verandas as a sign of economic prosperity. Photo on the left is probably taken in the Old Location, while photo on the right is from Linda Jangu's relatively well-off family living in the "New Stands". Mid 1950s- early 1960s, NPC.

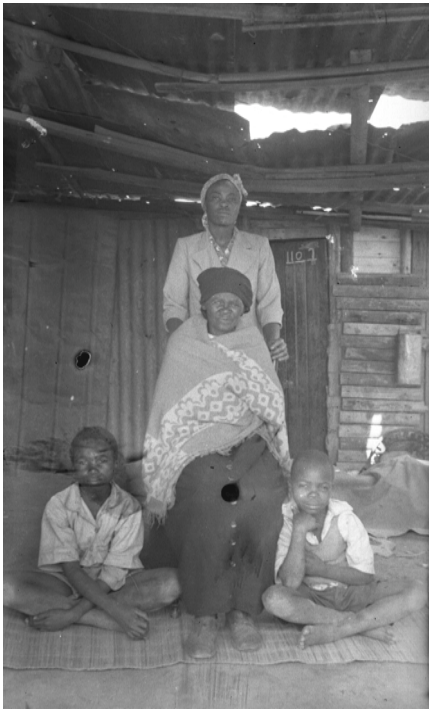


Figure 5.10: Houses made of scraps of zink, compared to photo below right, combining brick and new smooth pieces of corrugated zink. Old Location, mid-1950s, NPC.

As a result, the location was like a sea of wood-and-iron houses perforated with pockets of relative wealth. Figure 5.11 is a picture of Linda Jangu and her family, celebrating her



engagement with her (first) husband.<sup>538</sup> The Jangus were a very well-off family, both parents being teachers who originally came from Sophiatown. In the 1950s, they bought a house on 21<sup>st</sup> street. From 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> street, was a section that came to be known as “the New Stands”. It was the latest addition to the location and concentrated a highly professional black class living in houses built according to the owners’ own model. The New Stands acquired the reputation of being “like suburbs”. Figure 5.9 (right) is a family picture that was taken out on the front porch. One can notice that the house was entirely made of bricks, two front columns carry the roof of the large porch. Small shrubs planted in a neat row doubles the action of the front gate and wall that surrounds the property. The front wall is also made of brick, topped with ornamental metalwork that matched the window bars. Such houses were spared from being torn down during the forced removals and were sold to Indian families (at a very unsatisfying price according to ex-Old Location residents).<sup>539</sup> In contrast, the “Dark Starries” was the section situated somewhere at the heart of the location, considerably poorer than the New Stands. The fact that it had no public street lamps meant that it was constantly plunged in the dark, the reason for its nickname. In reality, the mixed and dense nature of the location meant that “beautiful houses” were found across the entire location (figure 5.12).



Figure 5.11. Linda Jangu celebrating her engagement with her husband-to-be at her parents’ house in the “New Stands”. Early 1960s, NPC.

<sup>538</sup> I mention Linda Jangu in chapter four, including in the section detailing certain interviewees’ biographies.

<sup>539</sup> Some of these houses still stand up to this day, as Khubi Thabo showed me, though most present Actonville residents probably assume that they are post-removal dwellings.



Figure 5.12. One of the few pre-1950 houses from the Old Location that was deemed of good enough quality and was not knocked down, thus survived the mid-1960s forced removal. Actonville, 2014. Photo by the author.

Throughout the century, urban planners launched a few attempts to spatially concentrate a higher-class black population, as with the New Stands. The “respectable township” of Langa (Cape Town, established in the 1920s), the “model village” of Lamontville (Durban, 1930s), the “garden village” of McNamee (Port Elizabeth, 1930s) and the home ownership scheme Dube (Soweto, 1940s) were all conceived with the intention of targeting the “better type of native”.<sup>540</sup> Jacob Dlamini, author of *Native Nostalgia*, grew up in Katlehong (East Rand), where he remembered there was a section nicknamed “the Administration Block”, where the professionals (state clerks, doctors..) used to live. Mrs Charlotte Moroasele, a retired nurse and proud member of the Benoni Association of Retired Professionals, considered Wattville substantially plainer than Lady Selbourne (Pretoria’s location) or Sophiatown, yet was reluctant to ever leave her neighbourhood. “The whole section around my house, we were doctors, teachers and nurses”. The coloured community had a similar “fancy” section called Parktown, initiated in 1947. Though only separated from the location by the municipal

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<sup>540</sup> See for instance L. Torr, "Providing for The "Better-Class Native": The Creation of Lamontville," *South African Geographical Journal* 69 (1987).

compound, one official qualified Parktown as a “suburb of Benoni”, rather than an extension of the location (figure 5.13). My interviewees described it as having similar standard as the New Stands, both in terms of both the quality of the brick houses and the social quality of the people residing there (“the professionals”). Parktown was built for the coloured families who were ejected from the backyards in Benoni town, or who were left homeless after several mine compounds (such as Modder Bee) were closing down. Though destined for primordially working-class families, Parktown was perceived as being “reserved to the “high-bucks”—teachers, school principles, social workers, doctors, railway employees. This probably had to do with the superior quality of the new houses. The presence or absence of greenery was another visible sign of class distinction. Cape Stands had some flowerbeds along the side of the zinc house (figure 5.14), while Parktown and the mine compounds had “proper gardens” but the rest of the location none at all.

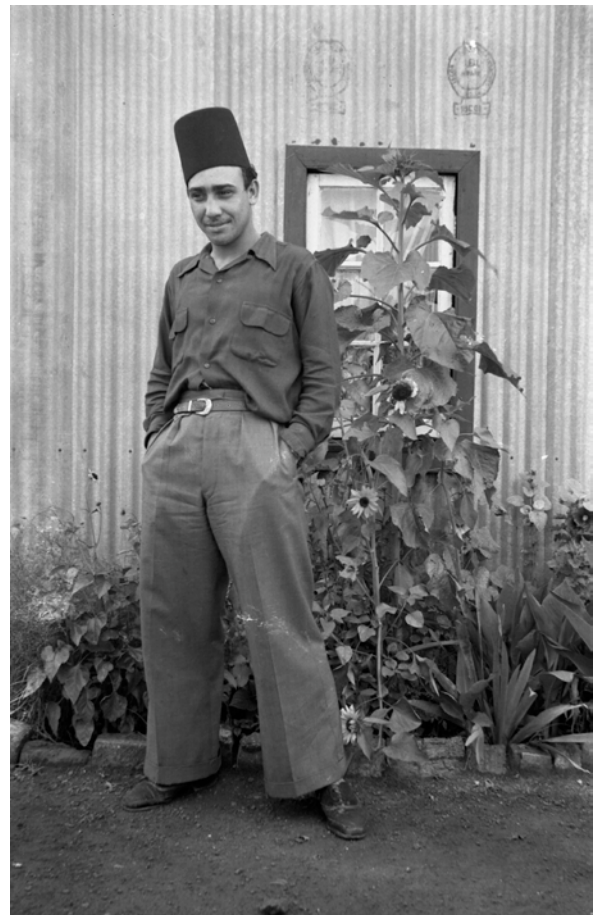


Figure 5.13 and 5.14: Parktown (left) and Cape Stands (right). Mid-1950s, NPC.

Unlike the Cape Stands and the African location, the Asiatic Bazaar simply did not have any space to create a section separating the higher-classes of the Indian community from the working class. Double-storey brick houses stood next to rickety shacks, inhabited not only by recently arrived African tenants but also by poor Indian families. Photos of Indians taken outside the gate of their house suggest that the family house was not always visible from the street. The quality of the interiors therefore played an even more important role in expressing class distinctions. The better-off had inner walls lined with thin wooden planks or, a notch higher, plastered walls. The less economically-endowed used newspaper to insulate and decorate their walls (figure 5.15). Looking at the pictures taken at her home for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Mrs. Joyce Mohamed remembered how they used to make the wallpaper glue paste themselves, mixing flour and water. Houses on 3<sup>rd</sup> street, located in a slight dip compared to the rest of the site, were regularly subject to floods after heavy rains. After every flood children were sent off to the *veld* to get a new batch of clean sand that would get mixed with cow dung. This mixture was then smeared onto the floor; women made patterns with the smearing so as to try to simulate the patterns of a carpet.<sup>541</sup>



Figure 5.15: House decorated with newspaper. Old Location, mid-1950s, NPC.

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<sup>541</sup> Interview with Joyce Moodley Mohamed, 28.02.2012, Brakpan.

Pictures in figure 5.16 show a large and airy lounge. What immediately struck me were the unusually large windows, reaching almost down to the floor, yet combined with a thin see-through curtain, too thin to block off any curious viewers. The door, also bearing glass in its full length, surprisingly had no curtain. These details, combined with the metal work visible on the brick wall behind the glass door, suggests that this lounge was not on the ground floor but rather situated at balcony level of a double-storey building. The minimalist furniture and the uncluttered and luminous quality of the lounge fitted with the aesthetic of 1950s modern apartments. It contrasted strongly with more traditional Indian interiors, characterised by thick, heavily patterned curtains and rugs, and an abundance of religious images and photo frames and shiny ornaments dominated the room (figure 7.17). In this case, the outside and the inside both conspired to convey wealth: double-storey brick constructions, which only started to appear in the early 1950s, were still very rare and new in the neighbourhood. The double-storey brick houses were some of the few houses which survived the forced removals and can still be seen today.



Figure 5.16: An airy modern flat, belonging to a Gujarati family. Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.



Figure 5.17: Interiors of Indian households. Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.

### *The Practice of Nicknames: Producing Landmarks*

My interviewee's ability to visually detect difference in neighbourhoods on the basis of what the photographs showed can be closely related to another common practice of "place-making", namely the allocation of nicknames for each of these neighbourhoods. These nicknames were significant of the collective production of landmarks (for instance, the Nopatula dance hall) that reflected people's appropriation of the place. Allocating nicknames was a way for organising the space of the location according to a meaningful order—for instance, where one could safely go and where not, or where did "home" end and the outside world begin. The allocation of nicknames was not necessarily coherent or systematic: at times, there were various nicknames referring to the same section while other nicknames were only used within one community or a particular generation of this community. Nevertheless, by analyzing the production of landmarks and the allocation of nicknames in relation to the various neighbourhoods visualised in the Ngilima photographs, we are able to sketch out a mental map of the location based on people's personal experience of the place.

Many nicknames were appropriations of existing administrative entities: Africans referred to the Asiatic Bazaar as “Makuleng”, while Rooikamp was known as “Overline”, because it was located on the other side of the railway tracks. The railway tracks were supposed to act as a natural barrier separating the Indian section from the new African township (and also Benoni town from the industrial zone, adding yet another barrier between the white areas and the black location). However, up till today, Wattville residents cross the tracks at all times (especially now that the railways are defunct), as the quickest shortcut to the Indian shops, the alternative being a rather lengthy walk up to the sole bridge that linked Wattville to the Asiatic Bazaar, at the far end of the township. Other nicknames subdivided the location into smaller units, based on the territorial map of local gangs. The 1950s represented the peak in gang activity or what Nieftagodien and Bonner have called “the *tsotsi* phenomenon”.<sup>542</sup> *Tsotsi* gangs distinguished themselves from earlier gangs such as the “*AmaRussians*”.<sup>543</sup> For the Russians, the gang formation was a way of reinforcing their ethnicity and maintaining their ties to the home village (“performing ruralism”, in Ferguson’s terms).<sup>544</sup> In contrast, *tsotsi* gangs were multi-ethnic, and their membership was territory-based. They were dedicated to performing their attachment to urban culture (for instance by adopting names inspired by American movies). In Benoni’s location, the “Dark Starring” controlled the deeper end of the African location (the section without public lighting, known as Dark Starries), while the Mashalalas controlled everything between 11<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> street and the Plantation Spoilers controlled from 1<sup>st</sup> street to 10<sup>th</sup> street, including the crucial access to the Star cinema on 4<sup>th</sup> street on the Cape Stands side (“Spoilers” allegedly referring to their status as unemployed).<sup>545</sup> The “Hong Kong” gang would hang out at the Asiatic Bazaar shops, from which its name derives. In Wattville, the “CPZ” gang was named after the postal code of that area, the “Puddin’ Cake” gang controlled the area around the baker which was famous for its pudding cake, while the “Bushabeds” revolved around Wattville’s butcher.<sup>546</sup> Though many

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<sup>542</sup> Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Ekurhuleni: The Making of an Urban Region*, 61-65.

<sup>543</sup> The *amaRashea* or ‘Russians’ were a dreaded group of South Sotho migrants from Lesotho, which terrorized most of the Witwatersrand between the late 1940s and the late 1950s. They got into violent clashes with other gangs based on ethnic fractions, essentially over territory and women. Their ultimate enemy however were the urban youth gangs, the *tsotsis*. See Bonner, “The Russians on the Reef”.

<sup>544</sup> J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>545</sup> Interview with Khubi Thabo, 08.06.2011, Daveyton.

<sup>546</sup> Interview with Rebecca Mmope, 03.2011, Wattville.

female interviewees were familiar with these gang names, it is not clear to what extent these gang names were used beyond the confines of gang members. “Etwatwa”, however was the name Africans use up to today to refer to the African location. There are diverging explanations for the name, but the most recurrent is that Etwatwa is derived from the onomatopoeic translation of gunshots (*twa twa*). According to trumpeter Johny Mekwa, Etwatwa refers to the infamous shooting incident that took place in the Davies Social Centre during a jazz concert (in which jazz musician Hugh Masakela was allegedly playing) between a gang from Alexandra and a local gang. His version of the story ends with the Benoni gang victoriously chasing away the Alexandrians, who ran away leaving their cars behind.<sup>547</sup> The veracity of the story is less important than the message that it conveys: that Benoni gangsters were to be feared and respected and, by extension, that Benoni location is as worthy a place as Alexandra.

Several nicknames contain traces of collective memory of the location’s tumultuous past, in particular in relation to the squatter movement that led to the establishment of Wattville in the early 1950s and the 1960s’ forced removals. “Tent Town” is the name that Wattville residents still use to refer to a particular section of Wattville that was built on the location of Harry Mabuya’s squatter camp, where thousands of families simply set up tent at the peak of the housing crisis. It is also known as “Silver Town”, because of the shiny type of roof these particular houses had, made of a different material than the earlier houses. In Daveyton, there is a section nicknamed “Skotiphola”, which can be translated roughly to “rest in that hole”. As one of the last sections to be added to the sprawling township, it is also the only one that escaped the ethnic organization that characterized this “model township”, to which urbanized Africans were bitterly opposed. The reason why Skotiphola is so mixed is because this section gathered the last residents who refused to move from Benoni location to Daveyton. They were mainly stand holders, who had more to lose than to gain from the transfer to Daveyton. Many of these families were bitter about leaving their house, built with their own means, which was

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<sup>547</sup> Alexandra, together with Sophiatown, was the oldest black township in Johannesburg. Its proximity to Johannesburg gave it a special aura as being the epicentre of black urban culture at its coolest. See P. Bonner and N. Nieftagodien, *Alexandra: A History* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008). Cohen confirms that Twatwa means ‘the sound of bullets’ but suggests that the nickname emerged in the 1920s and 30s, because of its general “violent and unsavoury character”. Cohen, “Twatwa: The Working Class of Benoni During the 1930s,” 77.



larger than the “Robert houses”,<sup>548</sup> the model houses allocated in the new township and for which they received too little compensation money. Hence the name echoes the feeling of defeat that ex-residents felt when it became clear that the anti-removal movement had failed: “this is the hole we came ‘to rest’, for the rest of our lives”.<sup>549</sup>

As some of the gang names suggest, certain shops such as the particularly good baker and the butcher in Wattville stood out as landmarks that punctured the endless stretches of drab, homogenous model houses (or the patchwork of corrugated iron in the location), thus humanizing their urban environment. Obvious landmark existed in public spaces, for instance the washing area (for clothes), known as “Ematualene”. The main square, popularly referred to as “Esquareni”, was perhaps the most important landmark in the location for all three communities (figure 5.4). It concentrated various social institutions and flows of visitors: not only was it the terminal bus stop and taxi rank for the entire location, it was also where the four main churches were based (Anglican, Methodist, AME and Presbyterian).<sup>550</sup> Sites of entertainment were unsurprisingly major generators of popular landmarks, being key hubs of socialization and meeting points for romantic encounters: the three cinemas (Liberty, Star and The Palace), certain key taverns (the “Frigin”, famous for being the first one to have a fridge and serve cold beer, and “London”, where one could find gin and brandy), and in particular the rudimentary football ground, known as “Katanga”.<sup>551</sup> Katanga offered no benches or any shade from the sun, yet inevitably every Saturday large crowds of fans from all over the location would gather for the football matches.

Some of the nicknames also translate how residents organized their living space into safe and unsafe zones, by articulating spaces in a centre/periphery type of relationship. 13<sup>th</sup> street was nicknamed “Devil street”; it was apparently notorious for the amount of people found dead on the street in the morning, victim of the violence that already characterized daily life in the

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<sup>548</sup> These houses were known as “Robert houses”, which is short for Mary and Roberts, the name of the building company that built those houses.

<sup>549</sup> Interview with Siphso Rubusche, 24.02.2012, Daveyton.

<sup>550</sup> The Methodist school situated adjacent the main square, was also a somewhat more amusing landmark known as “the Fort”, getting its name from the large set of carved wooden doors at its entrance that the school principal would lock at the beginning of the class. Interview with Khubi Thabo, 08.06.2011, Daveyton.

<sup>551</sup> On the role of football as a major popular sport and a crucial form of interracial mixing, see Nieftagodien, “The Implementation of Urban Apartheid”, 280-281.

location.<sup>552</sup> The expression “deep in the location”, used mainly by interviewees living in the Asiatic Bazaar or Cape Stands, gave the distinct impression that the central part of the Location was paradoxically perceived as being a black hole, isolated from the rest, as in “deep in the jungle” (thus nicknamed “Dark Starries”). While Indians and coloureds often crossed the location for various reasons, there was also a certain reluctance to going too deep into the African section.

Another feared place was the municipal compound, called “*Imzemkhulu*”, where the night-soil removers, in charge of removing the soiled buckets from the public toilets, used to live. The ungrateful task fell upon a particular ethnic group, the amaBhaca, who exclusively performed this task. They all stayed in the municipal compound, together with the donkeys that pulled the collecting wagon. The Bhaca were considered mysterious and scary, staying only amongst themselves and easily identifiable by their practice of facial scarring. Parents would threaten their children that if they misbehaved, a Bhaca would take them away in the middle of the night. The eastern side of location was where the central refuse depot and the sanitary depot were located, behind the municipal compound. The hostels situated opposite the location, near the local Native Affairs offices, were also considered a no-go zone, except for young men who would enter the premises after a football match, to take advantage of the only shower facilities in the area.

To be situated on the margins of the location was not always perceived negatively. Martha Billings for instance appreciated Parktown for being “out of the location”.<sup>553</sup> Built on the other side of the coloured school, itself adjacent to the Cape section, Parktown was qualified as being “half-way to (Benoni) town”, which was to some extent geographically justified (being the section of the location that was closest to town, though still at a “safe” distance from it). It was considered as being socially higher up the social and racial ladder. Similarly, 15<sup>th</sup> street, the double-width street, led straight to the edge of the location, to an open-space populated by trees nicknamed “Lovers’ lane”, where young couples could go in search for privacy and where adolescent Xhosa boys were allegedly sent there to perform their initiation rite.

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<sup>552</sup> According to Khubi Thabo, today’s violence is “peanuts” compared to what it was like in the location. Interview with Khubi Thabo, 08.06.2011, Daveyton.

<sup>553</sup> Interview Martha Billings, 06.06.2011, Reigerpark.

## **PART THREE. THE SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF RACE**

Racialised spatial practices have been the hallmark of South African cities, from the earliest days of Cape Town to, centuries later, those of Johannesburg.<sup>554</sup> Yet Parnell and Mabin have warned against the tendency in South African urban studies to regard race as a de-facto state of affairs, an organizing system rather than an object of study. They encouraged scholars to look more closely at how South African urban society came to be racialised and to adopt more systematically “cross-racial interpretations of urban life”.<sup>555</sup> Writing a history of Benoni’s location lends itself well to this research agenda: as in most East Rand locations, Africans, Indians and coloureds found themselves sharing the same increasingly cramped space. The following section looks at how race and class overlapped each other, substantiating the popular perception that race was “common sense”.

The local class divisions were tightly enmeshed with South Africa’s political system of racial hierarchy. Allocating separate living spaces for various groups of people categorized in terms of race was probably the government’s single most consistent policy from the earliest days of the segregation period to the high-point of apartheid. As “the social construction of bodily differences”, the ideology of race required a plethora of measures, including the racialization of space, in order to allocate meaning to these bodily differences. Racialized spatial practices were one of the key factors that entrenched the ideology of apartheid and enabled race to permeate all aspects of life.<sup>556</sup> The location itself was placed about two kilometres from the centre of town. The centre of town and the industrial neighbourhood acted as buffer zones that “protected” the white northern suburbs from the black location. During the very conception stages of Benoni’s location in 1910, it was suggested that “provision should be made for the segregation of the coloured people from the natives in the location by the allocation of a distinct portion of the site for each of these classes and that the stands for natives be 50 feet

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<sup>554</sup> Maylam, "Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of South African Urban Historiography," . See also K. Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and the Shaping of the City* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004).

<sup>555</sup> S. Parnell and A. Mabin, "Rethinking Urban South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995), 40-41.

<sup>556</sup> D. Posel, "Races to Consume: Revisiting South Africa's History of Race, Consumption and the Struggle for Freedom," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010), 161.

and those for coloured people be 100 feet by 50 feet”.<sup>557</sup> An Asiatic Bazaar was added to the plan the following year. Clearly defined spaces according to race were so important in anchoring race ideology, that the Provincial Secretary of Transvaal insisted that the Town Council “amend(s) the diagram to show exactly the various sub-divisions for coloured and Asiatic persons and a Compound”.<sup>558</sup> A 1950’s map of the location shows that about half of the plots in the coloured section and about 80% of Parktown were indeed double stands. In the Indian and African section, the only double stands were those allocated to religious institutions (the mosque on 6<sup>th</sup> street, the churches on the main square) or to the shops (along 1<sup>st</sup> street and 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue) and on the entire length of 12<sup>th</sup> street.

While the apartheid regime introduced a renewed effort to produce a “systematic, rigid and totalizing approach to the business of race”, administrative bureaucrats paradoxically did not have a fixed definition of race. Decisions based on bloodlines required long research into the person’s ancestral history, which was too unpractical when applied to large masses. Race was more than ever defined according to administrators’ judgements on the person’s socio-economic status and culture, such as his/her modes of living, the way of talking, walking, dressing. “The fact that race was officially construed as a judgement of respectability—along with the social and material dimensions of status—created circuits of power that produced, and constrained, modes of aspiration and identification”.<sup>559</sup> This ideology thus closely correlated racial hierarchy to hierarchy in social status and lifestyle. In this circular, self-confirming discourse, “material possessions and their display were crucial pieces of evidence for racial classification”.<sup>560</sup> This included the material culture revolving around the house and its interiors. It is thus no coincidence that mine compounds such as State Mines allocated entire houses for each coloured family, while African men were usually offered little more than bed bunks in collective dorms. The Town Council generally considered that coloured families required higher standards of living than Africans or Indians. Ngilima portraits of coloured families living in the mine compounds or in Parktown show interiors that came closer to what one could find in white suburban houses: spacious and luminous rooms with

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<sup>557</sup> Letter dating from 1910, signed by Alfred B. Roberts, the Acting Secretary to the Administrator, addressed to the Acting Secretary for Native Affairs. National Archives, N.A. 4501/10., CIA H4 vol 1/2 (3).

<sup>558</sup> Letter from the Town Clerk, 31 August 1911, CIA H4 vol 1/2, Rs/S..19.8 (A.2704), National Archives.

<sup>559</sup> Posel, “Races to Consume”, 167.

<sup>560</sup> *Idem*, 166.

high tin ceilings, smoothly plastered white walls, large wooden frames decorating these walls, long curtains and rugs, and matching furniture sets, a piano. The Town Council allocating larger plots to coloureds might explain why photographs of Cape Stands and particularly Parktown and the mine compounds present grass lawns and flower beds. The yards in the African location and Asiatic Bazaar were simply too small to accommodate gardening. In addition, coloured were also given higher salaries than Africans, which meant that they were less in need to rent out back rooms in the yard to make ends meet. Pictures from Modderfontein in contrast show idyllic large yards on which residents could grow food, maintain “proper gardens”<sup>561</sup> and even keep chickens (figure 5.18).



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<sup>561</sup> Interview with Poppy Fortuin, 08.02.2012, Reigerpark.



Figure 5.18: Top picture, view of a garden from a Parktown house. Below, yards from Modderfontein, large enough to even have chickens. Mid-1950s, NPC.

Other administrative practices helped to further materialise and substantiate the social meaning of race. Despite being so close together, the three communities were served by three different authorities. Affairs relating to the Asiatic Bazaar were initially handled by a subsection of the Foreign Affairs Department and were subjected to a different set of rules from those of native and coloured locations. Indians and coloureds initially shared primary and secondary schools, while African churches ran their own schools (until the Bantu Education Act put an end to it in 1953). Indian entrepreneurs were given special rights to engage with small-scale businesses in the location. In the 1950s, they were also allocated the lion's share of taxi licences. The economic advantages which Indian businessmen benefitted from included for instance facilities to obtain loans, tolerance towards them being active in the centre of town, exoneration on certain taxes, etc. In addition, some Indian landlords exploited the shortage of housing and were charging extremely high rent for their backrooms. These elements combined led to much resentment amongst aspiring African traders, culminating in

the 1952 riots, locally known as the “Korean War”. It started in retaliation to the Faizel family’s deadly assault on their domestic helper’s son. The young African boy had been beaten to death, accused of having stolen from their shop. Noni Monare, a lawyer’s clerk and a member of the ANC Youth League known for being an agitator, mobilized the location youth, mainly *tsotsis* and fellow ANC Youth League members. The rioters looted and burnt down about twenty Indian shops and one Chinese shop, before it eventually quieted down.<sup>562</sup>

### *The Asiatic Bazaar: Blurring Racial Borders*

Yet many details that emerged out of my interviews with ex-location residents led me to conclude that daily life systematically undermined these rigid borders. Having obtained a sense of the differentiated spaces of the location from the photographs, I was interested in finding out how people used the space of the location on a daily basis, and to what extent they adhered or transgressed the borders established by the Council. Unlike other Asiatic Bazaars, Benoni’s was unusual in that it was not fenced in. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue was the only physical landmark that indicated the border between the ‘Native’ and the Indian section. Yet the amount of movement across this avenue contributed to making this border in effect irrelevant. “These streets became zones of interaction, rather than being the ‘racial barriers’, which the government intended them to be”.<sup>563</sup> Indian shops being larger than African corner shops, their competitive prices attracted clients from all over the location. The Asiatic Bazaar was clearly the commercial centre of the location, Wattville included. Most Africans coming to do their shopping at the Bazaar either crossed the railway line (separating Wattville and the Bazaar) or crossed 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue. Moreover, Indians taking the bus or attending someone’s arrival had to go through the location to get to the main bus stop. Coloureds wanting to go watch a movie at the Liberty cinema, in the Asiatic Bazaar, used a short cut across the African location instead of “going round” on Reading Street. Indian children initially walked across the African and coloured location in order to get to their school and walked across Wattville to play football at the football stadium located there.

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<sup>562</sup> For a detailed account on this event, see Nieftagodien, “The Implementation of Urban Apartheid”, 285-92.

<sup>563</sup> Nieftagodien, “The Implementation of Urban Apartheid”, 277.

Furthermore, the acute shortage in housing led many people to find housing and reside outside of their allocated section. Joyce Ndlazilwane remembers for instance how she and her husband were fined in 1965 for being caught living in the coloured section as Africans.<sup>564</sup> People found ways to bend the law without disobeying it outright: when Mary Moodley was kicked out of Modder Bee mine compound upon her husband's death, she was able to relocate her family to Asiatic Bazaar, despite being officially classified as coloured, by marrying an Indian man.<sup>565</sup> The Asiatic Bazaar was the most mixed section of all the location, as both Africans and coloureds flocked across 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue to rent a "back-room" from one of the Indian stand-holders. The scale of the phenomenon was such that it created an island of freedom, a "state of lawlessness" as the Town Council described it, which attracted migrants without papers and enabled women brewing beer to hide in the mass. This is an interesting case in which local residents were able to exploit administrative distinctions: both 'illegal' migrants and beer-brewing women knew that the Location Regulations did not apply to the Asiatic Bazaar and that the permit system applicable in the African sector was not obligatory there. The Asiatic Bazaar was thus less subject to police raids than the African section.<sup>566</sup> Over time, the Asiatic Bazaar had become "a location in its own right" with entire African families crammed in the backyards of Indian landlords.<sup>567</sup> Indeed, by 1945 it was estimated that there were 2500 Africans for 1000 Indian residents crammed into this tiny strip of land. Five years later, the African population had doubled.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Ndlazilwane's husband Victor came from a mixed family, with a Xhosa parent and a "mixed-race" Coloured. Part of his family were able to change their family name to Collis and were reclassified as Coloureds, but not all of them. As a result, after the forced removals the family was split between Reigerpark and Daveyton. Interview with Joyce Ndlazilwane, 24.02.2012, Daveyton.

<sup>565</sup> Interview with Joyce Mohamed, 15.06.2011, Brakpan.

<sup>566</sup> Cohen, "Twatwa: The Working Class of Benoni During the 1930s," 92. On the other hand, in 1927, an Indian landlord called Jaghbay accused of housing natives managed to win his court case that the Council brought against him, on the argument that the Asiatic Bazaar had never officially been proclaimed an Asiatic Bazaar. It could therefore not reasonably be proven that the Asiatic Bazaar was not part of the native location. National Archives, *Benoni Asiatic Affairs: Indian Account*, MB 2/3/11 AA11.

<sup>567</sup> Nieftagodien, "The Implementation of Urban Apartheid", 35.

<sup>568</sup> *Idem.*





Figure 5.19: Basie Singh's wedding ceremony held in the yard of his house. Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.

Figure 5.19 depicts Basie Singh's wedding and gives us a sense of this interaction. The central figures of the ceremony (the groom and presumably the priest) are sitting on the straw carpet. Behind them, Indian men wearing suits fill up the rest of the courtyard. On the right, an equally important number of Africans are looking over the fence, catching a glimpse of the ceremony. While it is impossible to ascertain how typical this situation was for those years, the photograph gives clues about the social interactions that were taking place between Africans and Indians. While African tenants were not exactly invited to attend the ceremony, their presence and witnessing of the ritual was nonetheless tolerated. According to certain interviewees, Indian weddings were always a very public event, where food was generously distributed amongst neighbours. Ronald Ngilima's daughter Doreen for instance remembers her father bringing home *samosas* and such Indian delicacies, when he came back from photographing an Indian wedding.<sup>569</sup> It is worth recalling that there was at least one African on the other side of fence: Ronald Ngilima, the photographer taking this picture. As described in chapter 1, Ngilima had many regular clients amongst the Indian and coloured community,

<sup>569</sup> Conversation with Doreen Ngilima (fieldwork notes 2011), Wattville.

their photos corresponding to a good fifth of the collection. In other words, in addition to what these photographs depict, the photographs themselves, as objects, are the product of a society that was increasingly becoming mixed, to the point that an African photographer could become an intimate friend of Indian or coloured families and was called upon and trusted to record their most cherished and intimate moments of family life.

### *Of Interracial Marriages*

Perhaps the strongest evidence of cross-racial integration that can be seen in the Ngilima collection are photographs depicting inter-racial couples. Photos of figure 5.20 for instance depict two cases of identified coloured women who married into Indian families. Another picture depicts a coloured woman, Myriam Rahman, sitting with a child on her lap. Her husband Solly Rahman is standing behind her and her mother-in-law sitting next to her. She is thus positioned at the heart of the family group, between her mother-in-law, representing family ancestry, and her own children, representing the continuation of the family line. Her wearing the salwar-kameez and a light veil casually pulled over her hair, as the other women in the picture, completes the visual depiction of an apparently successful integration into the Karolia family. Having passed away, it was not possible to interview Myriam Rahman and verify this narrative. According to Abie Karodia (Mr. Rahman's cousin), the couple was perceived as different or special, but were not discriminated against.<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Interview with Abie Karodia, 19.04.2011, Actonville.



Figure 5.20: Two photographs of coloured women who dated or married Indian men. Benoni location, mid-1950s, NPC.

Not all my interviewees agreed with this narrative. While interracial marriages were fairly frequent, they were not necessarily easy to live. Mrs Cobie Joseph and Mrs Joyce Mohamed, both coloured women who married into Indian families, both stated that there was a real risk of being ostracized when one married outside of one's community.<sup>571</sup> It was unclear whether or not the emerging cross-racial working-class community sufficiently compensated for the isolation within one's own racial community. The level of tolerance depended on a number of factors. Certain alliances were more tolerated than others, according to a sliding scale defined not just by race but also class and gender. Marriages between a coloured and an Indian or a coloured and an African were far more frequent than marriages between Indians and Africans. The Indian community, and in particularly Muslim families, were generally patriarchal; thus Indian men could cross the race or ethnic line more frequently and with more legitimacy than Indian women. Among the Indian community, it was mainly Tamil (generally working-class) and working-class Muslim men who openly dated young coloured women, though few of

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<sup>571</sup> Interview with Jacoba Ellen Joseph, 06.2011, Rynsoord. Interview with Joyce Mohamed, 15.06.2011, Brakpan.

them actually ended up marrying them. The most frowned-upon scenario, the biggest taboo, is no doubt that of an African man marrying an Indian woman.<sup>572</sup> Yet Myrian Ali's portrait (figure 5.21), in combination with her brother's testimony, is further evidence that Indian-African alliances, however rare, did take place.



Figure 5.21: Portrait of Myrian Ali. Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.

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<sup>572</sup> During the extent of my research, I came to know one example of such as scenario. Photographer Alpheus Mhlanga's son married an Indian woman, who is as far as I know the only Indian woman presently living in Daveyton.

Myriam Ali is the daughter of an Indian father and Zulu mother. She and her three siblings grew up speaking Gujarati, Afrikaans, English, Zulu and Sotho. Every December, they would drive down to visit their mother's mother in KZN for a week, while bringing their own pots to accommodate the obligations of a halal diet. Their father's decision to marry an African woman was not accepted by all members of his family: one aunty in Newcastle refused to receive them. Myriam Ali ended up migrating to Canada, but as other interviewees recognized her in the picture, I was directed to Duman Rahman, her younger brother, who was born in 1935 in the Asiatic Bazaar and currently still lives in Actonville. From Mr. Rahman's interviews, I gathered that it was far from easy, to fall outside of the usual social categories. Mr. Rahman remembers playing with Africans as a child, and his impressive language skills enabled him to play the role of the pacifier when fights erupted between Indian and African children. Yet while he could relate more to African children, he knew that he "did not fit the box". His duty to observe a halal diet prevented him from accepting any food, including birthday cakes, from his African friends. While he did not "feel Zulu", Mr. Rahman felt nonetheless comfortable with his mother's family in Natal. Yet he also remembers the constant teasing, mainly from the Indian side. People of "mixed race", like him and his sisters, were pejoratively nicknamed "maplas". He particularly remembers the humiliation of having his marriage proposal to an Indian girl rejected by her parents, on the grounds of his mother's origins. Though mentalities have changed in the meantime, he remembers how he used to "hate Indians" back then. He recalled an episode, where he had been sent to neighbours to ask for some Indian cooking ingredient. Mispronouncing the Gujarati word, a young Duman ended up asking for a kiss instead, thus provoking peals of laughter amongst the women. Though the story is amusing, Mr. Rahman experienced it as a painfully embarrassing experience, probably because it underlined his inability to speak his father's language, Gujarati.<sup>573</sup> His older sister Myriam, by contrast, could speak Gujarati fluently. According to her brother Duman, she was not so interested in getting to know their mother's family. When a cousin came to visit them in Benoni, she allegedly refused to see her. "It depends on the individual", concluded Mr. Rahman.

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<sup>573</sup> Interview with Duman Rahman, 28.09. 2011, Actonville.

## *Cultural Borrowing*

The geographical proximity of Indians and their African tenants meant that cultural exchanges were inevitably taking place in other quiet, often unnoticed ways. Curry, for instance, has become an integral part of township cuisine, as I was reminded by an interviewee from Soweto, when she asked me to buy her “mother-in-law”, her favourite curry that was particularly hot. According to Duménil Dlamini, spices had become another marker of urban/rural distinction. She recalls how her father’s sisters, all urbanites working in Hillbrow and living in Sophiatown, would initially refuse to eat her mother’s food. Having arrived to Johannesburg as a country bumpkin from KZN, she “didn’t know Joburg food”. Her food was considered “too plain”, because it was cooked only with salt and no spices.<sup>574</sup> In reverse, many Indians also endorsed aspects of African culture. My interview with Mrs Sunderpathee Singh was particularly enlightening. Born in 1923 in the Asiatic Bazaar, both her parents came from Punjab, India. Her father was a successful businessman, who started with a small factory grinding *mielie* (maize) for horse feed, then expanded into grocery shops. They lived in a big four-room house on 10<sup>th</sup> street, with many African tenants in their backyard. Mrs Singh or ‘Aunty Painy’ as she is known, grew up with Hindi, English, Afrikaans, but also isiZulu and Sesotho. Up to today, she communicates with her African domestic helper in Sesotho. Much to my surprise, I found that this was far from being exceptional. Many Indians living in Actonville still speak an African language (unlike the overwhelming majority of white South Africans). She remembers playing “dolly-house” in the yard with her siblings and other African children, where they would make dolls out of rags and pretend to cook for them in small pots. Aunty Painy also confessed that, unlike her daughter, she really enjoyed eating *pap*, and in particular *putu*, which are food with a clear class and racial connotation. Pap is generally related to African lifestyle, though many white South Africans (both Afrikaners and Anglo-Saxons), living in the countryside also consume it.<sup>575</sup> Hence she asked her Sotho neighbours to teach her how to cook pap, and also how to “carry babies in blankets”, strapped on her back. Returning to Posel’s observation that lifestyle was an essential element in

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<sup>574</sup> Interview with Duménil Dlamini, 28.04.2011, Wattville.

<sup>575</sup> ‘Pap’ (porridge in Afrikaans) is ground *mielie* cooked in boiling water until becomes a fluffy dough that can be eaten by hand. ‘Putu’ is pap left to cook longer, until it dries out and crumbles. It is then usually mixed with *amasi*, sour milk.

administrators' judgement of race, the biographical details such as Aunty Painy's are highly relevant of how close coexistence eventually led to a culture of relative tolerance, which enabled members of different "racial" communities to borrow elements of lifestyles from each other. The blurring of spatial and cultural boundaries directly contradicted the concept of race that underpinned the entire apartheid racial construct. This helps to understand the apartheid government's desire to remove all the "black spots" from the Rand, of which many were found in the East Rand.

The economic inequalities that existed between Indians and Africans, however, cannot be ignored. These inequalities generated power dynamics of landlords/tenants, and shop owner/customer, leading to the 1952 riots described above. The riots were a faint echo of the notorious anti-Indian riots that exploded in Durban in 1949, but nevertheless left scars in the community.<sup>576</sup> The racial borders temporarily hardened following this event: from then on, the Indian community organized a bus to bring Indian children to school, so they wouldn't have to walk across the African location. Yet the 1952 riots did not seem to affect Indian-African relationships as deeply as it did elsewhere in the country. Several of my interviewees acknowledged the fact that these riots were politically motivated, and far from being endorsed by all Africans. In fact, the intervention of African tenants living on Indian stands was instrumental in limiting the fire damages and eventually in putting an end to the riots. Indian shopkeepers hired Russian gang members to fight off the *tsotsis* Noni Monare had mobilized. A photograph of her younger brother wearing a Sotho hat, a blanket and holding up a stick to the camera in a mock gesture of attack made Joyce Mohamed, who lived in the Asiatic Bazaar, talk of her close friendship with her Sotho neighbours (figure 5.22). What I had initially taken for a rare demonstration of ethnic identity in the Ngilima collection, turned out to be a photograph of a coloured man living in the Asiatic Bazaar, borrowing props from a Sotho neighbour, "for the fun of it". Mrs. Mohamed talked of her Sotho neighbours as "our guardians", who would protect the Moodley girls against young Indian ruffians.<sup>577</sup> Such anecdotes underline the complexity of alliances established in the location, which cut across simple racial divisions. Finally, the multiple local social institutions such as the local drinking

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<sup>576</sup> In January 1949 an anti-Indian pogrom exploded in Durban, with considerable loss of life (50 Indians, 87 Africans) and property. See B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990* (London: Heineman, 1995), 57.

<sup>577</sup> Interview with Joyce Mohamed, 28.02.2012, Brakpan.

taverns, 'bioscopes', churches and sports clubs (and in particular football) ensured that interactions between all three communities somewhat survived this dramatic event. In this sense, the photograph of the Hindu wedding mentioned above is perhaps an adequate metaphor for describing this form of communal living without falling into romantic idealisation of the past: tolerated, at times friendly interactions, spilling over tentatively erected borders, which nevertheless marked clear hierarchies.



Figure 5.22: Joyce Mohamed's younger brother, wearing a Sotho attire. Asiatic Bazaar, mid-1950s, NPC.



## PART FOUR. THE OLD LOCATION AND THE WORLD BEYOND

As the previous section suggests, a place is usually relational, in that it is defined in relation to other places. As Doreen Massey argues, “the local is always already in part a product of ‘global’ forces, where global in this context refers not necessarily to the planetary scale, but to the geographical beyond, the world beyond the place itself”.<sup>578</sup> Through elements such as the Ngilima photographs, the practice of nicknames and landmarks, we are able to grasp how Old Location residents articulated their day-to-day living space in relation to the rest of the world. As the famous anecdote of the Davies Social Centre’s shooting tells us, what was at stake was establishing the feeling that Benoni, and in particular Benoni’s location, was, if not exactly on par, than at least *in dialogue* with Johannesburg, the mythical capital that had attracted thousands of men and women from all over Southern Africa over the decades. Benoni could of course never compete with Johannesburg in terms of infrastructure, economy, wealth, size, etc. But it could compete in terms of producing the “vibe” of urban living, the sense of being connected with the world at large. Photography was part of the effort to qualify Benoni location as belonging to the urban world. As seen in chapter four, visualizing consumption, leisure and entertainment were elements of this visual code that signified urban lifestyle. Jazz in particular played an essential role in creating a sense of urbanness and cosmopolitanism for location residents, in particular for young African men.

This process is most reflected in Thorence’s photographic work: most of the photographs depicting jazz musicians or referring to jazz were part of the rolls identified as being Thorence’s negatives.<sup>579</sup> It is probably no coincidence that jazz is more predominantly present in Thorence’s work than in his father’s, given that Thorence belonged to the very age group that were most fervently devoted to jazz at its peak. Thorence frequently photographed the musical events at the Davies Social Club and jazz rehearsals<sup>580</sup>. Ronald’s clients tended to pose with plain, unidentifiable vinyls; in contrast, Thorence’s subjects held up album covers in a way to make the name of the musician readable to the viewer. Here the record is not only

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<sup>578</sup> Massey, "Places and Their Pasts," , 183.

<sup>579</sup> For a full explanation about distinguishing Ronald from Torrance’s material, see chapter one.

<sup>580</sup> Ronald Ngilima also photographed musicians, mainly individuals sitting by the piano and pretending to play.

a symbol of leisure and modernity but the explicit affirmation of specific music taste. The albums were all of black American jazz, swing or RnB musicians: Johnny Hedges, Lloyd Price, Duke Ellington, Louis Jordan, the Big 18, Norman Grantz's "Jam Session". Figure 5.23 and figure 1.14 for example are two different shots of the same group of young men sitting out on a street corner. Two of the men are holding up covers of jazz albums (Norman Grantz's 1952 "Jam Session nr.2" and Duke Ellington's 1952 "Seattle Concert"), while the others are pointing towards the album, adding emphasis.



**Figure 5.23: Young men on street corner posing with vinyls by Duke Ellington and Norman Grantz. Photograph by Thorence Ngilima. Old Location, early 1960s, NPC.**

How to understand the connection between the Ngilima photographs, jazz music and place? How did music help to produce place and what role did the Ngilima photographs play in allowing me to understand this process? I will begin with an excerpt of a conversation that took place with jazz musician Johnny Mekwa and Khubi Thabo, a jazz fan and avid record collector. Mekwa is a trumpet player who had a successful international career and is presently directing his own music school in Daveyton. He was initially very reticent to receive me and even less enthusiastic to be interviewed. Thanks to Thabo's intervention, we managed to obtain an appointment with him at his school. The interview was initially loaded with tension. Mekwa was reluctant to allow me to record the interview, afraid that we were going to "steal" crucial material on the history of jazz for a book that he himself was planning on writing one day. The moment he started seeing the photographs and recognized a family member, his mood completely changed and the interview took an unexpected turn. It was as if the fact that we possessed a photo of a relative instantly transformed us instantly from being potential rivals to being old trusted friends. As Thabo and Mekwa were flicking through the Ngilima photos, Mekwa paused at a particular photo taken in front of a house in the Old Location.

Mekwa :“Auw there's that famous stoep, my brother...the famous *stoep*, you remember? The houses were all like this. Yaaaah, you'd sit on the *stoep*, ya know?

Interviewer: what would you do on the *stoep*?

Mekwa and Thabo: Ooooo!

Mekwa: drink tea... (Thabo laughs). At times we'd practice (...). They used to sit on the veranda and then they'd practice”.

Thabo: “Like I told you these guys, Mongezi Feza<sup>581</sup> came to play, then he played trumpet on that veranda. (...)

Mekwa: It's true! I believe you!

Thabo: I believe he died in Sweden.

Mekwa: He died in London. He was with the late Chris McGregor. The Blue Notes. He came with late Johnny Dyani, who lived in Copenhagen for the rest of his life. Yah!

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<sup>581</sup> Mongezi Feza was a trumpet player and member of The Blue Notes, a particularly successful jazz band that toured internationally.

(Later in the interview) Mekwa: These are *memories*, man! All these kids, they must know their history, where they came from!”

This dialogue extract is interesting, for it clearly connects the “famous *stoep*” with the practice of jazz. It also connected the location, symbolised by the *stoep*, with far-away places such as London, Sweden and Copenhagen. According to Sarah Cohen, music plays a role in the sensuous production of place. It is both a setting for everyday social relations, practices and interactions (for instance dance halls or religious musical groups) and a symbolic practice evoking far-away places (Jewish communities in England listening to Yiddish music evoking memories of family left behind in Eastern Europe). The effectiveness of music in producing a sense of identity and belonging lies in its sensuousness (stimulating movement of the body and emotions) as well as its ability to materially and symbolically articulate the local with the world beyond.<sup>582</sup> In Benoni, music prevailed in all parts of its location, in particular in public spaces, contributing to the common perception that the Old Location was unmistakably a lively place, a hub of socialization where urban recreation and leisure took many forms. On weekends, the Bhaca from the municipal compound, the Pedi and the Zulu from the hostels, would come into the location to busk on the streets or by the Indian shops, performing gumboot dances and ‘traditional’ music.<sup>583</sup> Choirs accompanied by the piano filled churches with music. At night, music concerts prompted social gatherings: live dance-orchestras playing ballroom music attracted coloureds from neighbouring mine compounds and towns, while jazz and Mbanqanga filled shebeens with eager jivers. The “famous *stoep*” was hence only one among many points of musical production, yet one that perhaps most embodied lifestyle in the location. Local music bands would practice on porches; there was always a brass band accompanying the wedding parade or animating a fund-raising party (*stokvel*) in someone’s courtyard (figure 5.24). Even though gramophones were intended to domesticate and individualise music experiences (offering the luxury of enjoying music at home), many location residents insisted on dragging their gramophone onto the *stoep* and sharing (or imposing) one’s records with the neighbours, a practice common in township life today (figure 5.25).

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<sup>582</sup> S. Cohen, "Sounding out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place " *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 4 (1995).

<sup>583</sup> For an explanation of gumboot dance, see glossary.



Figure 5.24: Brass bands playing at weddings. Photograph by Thorence Ngilima. Old Location, early 1960s, NPC.



Figure 5.25: Listening to records in one's yard. Old Location, mid-1950s, NPC.

Mekwa remembers spending many Sundays sitting on the *stoep*, listening to records while polishing his shoes and watching people walking by.<sup>584</sup> Mrs. Mohamed for instance remembers playing ballroom music records out on her mother's porch as the much-looked-forward Saturday treat, entertaining the family, their friends and even their eager female Indian neighbours.<sup>585</sup> Loudly playing the gramophone on the veranda, allowing the sound to spill onto the streets, was also a very efficient way to publicly proclaim one's status as an owner of a gramophone player.<sup>586</sup> As the crucial locus for playing and sharing music, the

<sup>584</sup> Interview with Johnny Mekwa, 06.06.2012, Daveyton.

<sup>585</sup> Interview with Joyce Mohamed, 28.02.2012, Brakpan.

<sup>586</sup> Cohen, "Sounding Out the City", 439.

*stoep* became emblematic of location way of life, characterized by an active street life and the blurring between public and private spaces. This symbolic association between music and the *stoep* produced a certain cultural coherence and identity to the location, despite its heterogeneous population and the consequently diverse music being played there. David Coplan argues: “because it was indispensable and common to both middle and lower class social functions, musical performance provided an important point of contact for all groups of urban Africans. In trying their best to please audiences of all kinds, urban musicians built cultural bridges between members of the African community, as well as providing an expressive focal point for their social differentiation”.<sup>587</sup>

Other famous bands and musicians came to perform in the more formal setting of the Davies Social Centre (including Blues Ntaka who appears in the collection, Hugh Masakela, Miriam Makeba). For instance Thorence photographed The Flames— a famous rock band of Indian musicians from Durban, at the very beginning of their successful career. Yet Old Location residents were particularly proud of the fact that Benoni also generated its own set of bands and musicians, some of whom eventually became famous. The Ngilima collection includes photographs of the No Name Band and the Hollywood Swingsters (figure 5.26). Interviews with retired musicians such as Paul Kgaodi (saxophone player for the Hollywood Swingsters, who appears in bottom photo of 5.26) and Johnny Mekwa (who started his music career with the No Name Swingsters, a band that was also photographed by Thorence) generated heated and enthusiastic conversations about Benoni’s music scene, during which a long litany of names would be recited: the Harmony Quavers, the Wood Wood Peckers, The Prospects, Bra Madala (the disabled shoe-maker and talented piano player), Mr. Mehlomakulu (who sang exactly like Nat King Cole and “made girls scream”), one of the famous Mahoteli Queens singers came from Etwatwa... “This town produced so many great musicians! This was the Mecca of jazz”, said Johnny Mekwa. This nostalgic statement perhaps exaggerates Benoni’s overall contribution to South Africa’s musical heritage. But it captures the message that came out quite forcefully from most interviewees: that Benoni Old Location mattered as a place. The cultural production taking place in Etwatwa meant that it had gravity: it was a centre point in and of itself to those living there and beyond, as opposed to simply being a marginal township of a small (but economically prosperous) town, an insignificant satellite rotating

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<sup>587</sup> D. Coplan, "The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900-1960," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979), 138.

around Johannesburg. As Thabo remarked: “I’ll compare Benoni to Chicago, because we had everything in the township. We had bakeries, bioscopes, ...the entertainment hall was only built in 1955. We used to go to the hostels for our shows.” In the dialogue transcribed above, Thabo underlines the fact that Mongezi Feza, a famous trumpet player who travelled and even died “overseas”, came to play his trumpet on an Etwatwa veranda. This seemingly anecdotal detail in fact serves to add a layer of glamour, of acknowledgment and legitimacy to this local institution.







Figure 5.26: Two local bands from the Old Location, the Hollywood Swingsters (top above, at the Davies Social Centre) and the No Name Band. Photographs by Thorence Ngilima. Early 1960s, NPC.

Khubi Thabo was perhaps the most fervent about Benoni's musical heritage, despite the fact he was not a musician himself.<sup>588</sup> His memories of the music scene in Benoni are revealing of the way music can evoke imagined connections to far-away geographies.<sup>589</sup> As mentioned above, black South Africans felt particularly related to the black mounting stars of jazz music the United States. Black American jazz musicians, such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, were Thabo's heroes. They incarnated the dream of any musician: having record contract with major studios and performing in important (white) concert halls were the highest signs of success which elevated them to the status of professional musicians. Mongezi Fesa and Johnny Dyani (the two musicians evoked in Thabo and Mekwa's dialogue), were

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<sup>588</sup> Thabo aspired to be a musician and ever started clarinet classes in Johannesburg, but his family obligations vis-à-vis his mother prevented him from pursuing this path and ended up opting for a job at the factory instead.

<sup>589</sup> Cohen "Sounding Out the City", 444.

part of the Blue Notes, a “mixed-race” band which played a crucial role in bringing Charlie Parker’s bebop to South Africa. The Mongezi Fesa anecdote thus plays the same role as the photos of young men posing with American records: visualizing the material and symbolic bridges that connected Etwatwa to America. Martin Stokes argues the importance of looking at the ways place is evoked through music, encouraging anthropologists to move beyond the simple notion of music *in* places.<sup>590</sup> Jazz music evoked America, not so much as a clearly defined geographical and material place, but as a rather fuzzy yet powerful idea. Many bands adopted names evocative of American cities, such as the Manhattan Brothers, Hollywood Swingsters, Harlem Swingsters. Yet interviewees themselves rarely mentioned specific American cities nor evoked specific imageries relating to that place. The *idea* of America none the less embodied the notion of modernity, sophistication and the promise of financial and social success *as a black man*. America was perceived as the place where black progress was possible, where a black man could transcend class and racial boundaries, in contrast to the repressive political conjuncture in South Africa in the 1950s, with the government increasingly limiting forms of mobility and communication.

The importance of American culture for black South Africans did not begin in the 1920s, nor was it restricted only to the African community. Campbell wrote about the period 1920s and 30s: “For th(e) small, embattled community (of educated, urban blacks), African American cultural forms became crucial emblems of sophistication and urbanity”.<sup>591</sup> South African society as a whole was generally very receptive to the multiple forms of cultural inputs coming from the United States, whether as films (as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), magazines, the introduction of the car and consumerist practices stemming from the introduction of shopping malls.<sup>592</sup> It is interesting to underline how black South African jazz lovers also seemed to share a passion for a particular American material culture. A passion for jazz music

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<sup>590</sup> M. Stokes, "Introduction," in *Ethnicity, Identity, Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994), as quoted in Cohen, “Sounding Out the City”.

<sup>591</sup> J. Campbell, "The Americanization of South Africa" (paper presented at the conference University of Witwatersrand, 1998), 9.

<sup>592</sup> For a general introduction to the topic, see Campbell, "The Americanization of South Africa" and Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* ; on America’s influence on South African music and the syncretic results of this influence in the form of *marabi* and *mbaqanga* music, see Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*. On the influence of American Westerns, see Gainer, "Hollywood, African Consolidated Films, and “Bioskoopbeskawing”, or Bioscope Culture: Aspects of American Culture in Cape Town, 1945-1960" .

often went hand in hand with an equal passion for American clothes and style. “Everything I wear is American. The suit I wore to my wedding came from the USA”, said Thabo. According to Farrell Ngilima music and fashion were taken as equally serious in jazz circles. His father Benjamin Ngilima, also a lover of jazz, gladly admits his obsession for sophisticated clothing, inspired by magazines such as *Esquire* and *Ebony*. According to Benjamin, his father never approved of his hobby, but his older brother Thorence, somewhat more inclined to indulge in fashion, would often buy him shoes.<sup>593</sup> Thabo participated in various saving schemes that allowed him to buy one by one the elements of a complete outfit. As a serious record collector, Thabo would also buy his records in Johannesburg’s record stores, where he had also started taking music classes for a while. His passion for jazz was thus the frame for specific consumption practices, which took place in Johannesburg and materially connected him to “America”.

Coplan points out that black American music had an impact on black South Africans not only in terms of the musical register, but also in terms of “cultural images and personal style”. Star performers created a picture of the American jazz man as being a very desirable figure, an image which they effectively communicated through mass media, including magazines. “Mastery of this cultural style not only connected Africans to world Black advancement, it appeared materially as an avenue to individual fame, wealth and self-respect”.<sup>594</sup> Coplan’s emphasis on cultural style is useful to explain the link between jazz, fashion, and Thorence’s photography. Being a jazz aficionado (whether as musician or record collector) was as much about image as it was about musical talent or knowledge of music. Mastering the jazz man’s style required access to economic resources (to buy the records and the clothes from “overseas”) but also a certain amount of cultural capital, the swank to pull off the American style. I would argue that knowing how to pose for the camera, in a style that echoed the imagery crafted by African-American performers, was part of the process of mastering this cultural style. In chapter two, I proposed that Thorence’s photography is visibly more inspired by photojournalist codes picked up from magazines, emphasizing portraits of people in action and in natural settings.<sup>595</sup> This comes across in particular in his series of 11 shots of a popular

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<sup>593</sup> Interview with Benjamin Ngilima, 31.03.2012, Wattville.

<sup>594</sup> Coplan, "The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900-1960," 146.

<sup>595</sup> See chapter 2.

local band, the No Name Band. The series include several bust shots of individual musicians engrossed in playing their instruments and full-body length of the band practicing together. Chris Sonxaba, the charismatic leader of the band, is portrayed holding his saxophone, his hand on his hips (figure 5.27). He is all smiles, and looking sideways, away from the camera, as if caught in the midst of a dialogue with a third person situated out of the frame. This composition (rarely found in Ronald's photos) conveys a sense of popularity and stardom: the subject's attention being requested by several people at the same time, him being accustomed to and even comfortable with being (literally) in the spotlight (illuminated obliquely by the flood lamp). Figure 2.26 (bottom photo), depicting all the band members drinking (presumably whisky), smoking and practicing all at once, tries to evoke the kind of lifestyle popularly associated with jazz musicians, constantly threading the line between work and play. The cramped room (furniture visible at the edges), the shabby state of the recognizable Wattville wall and the sagging curtain to a certain extent compromise the glamour effect that they were seeking. The posing allowed them nonetheless to make the claim that American glamour was locally available. Attempting to master the transatlantic jazz stylistic culture through popular photography was yet another way of expanding the narrow borders of their daily geography. The effort to visualize one's connection to America cannot simply be understood as escapism; interviewees' responses to Thorence's photographs suggest that articulating a connection or a relationship with America participated in the very formation of a local identity, in the making of Etwatwa as "the Mecca of music". As Massey argues, "The global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local".<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> D. Massey, *Place, Space and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 120.



Figure 5. 27: Chris Sonxaba, leader of the No Name Band. Photograph by Thorence Ngilima. Wattville, early 1960s, NPC.

## CONCLUSION

The Ngilima collection has a remarkable ability to evoke what life was like in the Old Location, in a way that textual and visual archives produced by local authorities cannot. The collection translates a resident's perspective on township life and dwells on its positive aspects. Municipal administrators, doctors, urban planners and journalists, have tended to focus exclusively on the squalor, the crime and the impoverished living conditions of the Old Location. Portraits taken out on the streets, on the stoep, at the shopping streets of the Asiatic Bazaar, convey not only the materiality of the place but also a certain lifestyle. In addition, the Ngilima collection includes traces of the multiple social events and institutions animating everyday life within the Old Location and Wattville: jazz concerts, beauty pageants, the men's body building club, women's saving group (*stokvels*), small Africanist church groups, the prize-winning gospel choir, young *tsotsis* hanging out on a street corner, the home fund-raising parties revolving around the consumption of beer and other alcohol, etc. The Ngilimas ended up compiling a diverse archive of a community— its people, the cherished places and events that made the location a “place”.

This chapter has shown that the Ngilima portraits taken in and around the Location, combined with the knowledge of ex-residents, have the potential to make viewers more attuned to the complexities of social dynamics in the Location and the nuances between the various neighbourhoods. The unique demographic configuration of the Asiatic Bazaar created a culture of cohabitation that determined the urban identity of the place. For Nieftagodien, the political unity that emerged between various local bodies to protest against the forced removals was indicative of the incipient working class unity that had been taking shape among Benoni's black population up until that point. Fifty years later, the Group Areas Act has all but erased the memory of this chapter of cohabitation. The forced removals of the 1960s has had the effect of freezing racial identities: “The disestablishment of Benoni Old Location and other ‘black spots’ ended an era during which the development of a relatively united black urban working class seemed a real possibility. Now, instead, the implementation of group areas ushered in a period of ‘racially’ divided politics”.<sup>597</sup> The next chapter focuses on the politics of memory in relation to the Ngilima collection, and how difficult it is to establish links between the map of the Location in the 1950s and today's map of Actonville.

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<sup>597</sup> Nieftagodien, “The Implementation of Urban Apartheid”, 324.