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'What we have done remains': Rural remains in Eastern Cape Museums

MICHELLE SMITH
Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2781-2338

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Abstract

This article reflects on the museum's historical project of constituting an urbane subject, one that requires a notion of the rural. Building on Premesh Lalu's suggestion that 'the rural functions as a silent referent in the discourse of the urban,' it considers an empty tomb accompanied by two photographs at the Red Location Museum in Gqeberha alongside an exhibition at the East London Museum. I argue that the latter, ostensibly a display of beadwork from the Transkei, remains a part of an undertaking of producing urbanity. This article attends to these remains of the Transkei Homeland in the East London Museum, and to the tomb at the Red Location Museum, which is no longer in use, to understand how this silent relationship is visualised in these two museums. Specifically, it attends to the construction of race in the relationship between a display of a fossilised fish, the Coelacanth, and a display of beadwork in the East London Museum. From there, it considers how a racialised rural subject, produced within the East London Museum, haunts the urbane subject of struggle photography in Red Location. Ultimately it argues that the urban remains of the Red Location Museum can be understood in relation to what remains, stubbornly, museums' disciplining of the urbane subject whose other remains a buried rurality.

Keywords

Eastern Cape, Red Location Museum, East London Museum, Race, rural subject, urban subject, Photography, Visual History

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of this special issue. Not only for including my article here but especially for the time they gave to reading it. Their insightful comments were invaluable in those moments when writing was difficult.

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This paper reflects on the museum's historical project of producing an urbane subject, one that requires a notion of the rural. The aim is to ask whether and how this project remains lodged in the idea of the museum as it operates in South Africa, now. To enable this inquiry, I want to think with the elements of display at two museums in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the East London Museum and the Red Location Museum (which remains closed since 2013). Both institutions rely on photographic images to bring fragments of a past into the experience of the present. This paper will focus on particular exhibitions in each museum. At the East London Museum, I consider their beadwork display that has not changed since the 1940s, except for the addition of captions in isiXhosa. The other is a tomb located inside the derelict Red Location Museum which was intended to be the final resting place of Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba.[1] Bringing these two displays, located at different points of the East Coast into contact, with a focus on the curatorial mobilisation of photographic images in both instances, creates a proximity that allows one to think about how the museum relies on a notion of urbanity that in turn relies upon the visualisation of the rural.

In thinking through these questions, I draw on Premesh Lalu's 'Leaving the City: Gender, Pastoral Power and the Discourse of Development in the Eastern Cape.'[2] Lalu proposes a notion of the urban as central to how Eastern Cape history is produced. As Lalu argues, 'the rural is a silent referent in the discourse of the urban. … What the discourse of the urban represses, is the history of the modes of power that have come to define the rural as such.'[3] In the same paper, Lalu draws attention to the ways in which graves of chiefs in the Eastern Cape mark and inform its history. For him, burials and graves play a part in the power relations of colonialism, and here he turns to 'the convergence between missionary discourses and native administration,'[4] which both, as Lalu puts it in Foucauldian terms, 'produce the object of which they speak,' namely, 'the native as a specifically rural subject.'[5]

Tony Bennett has shown how, during colonialism, the historical sciences were deployed in 'administrative procedures that categorised indigenous populations as if they were museum specimens and managed their location in social space as if this were a matter of assigning them to appropriate places within evolutionary museum displays.'[6] Taking Lalu's formulation as a point of departure, I want to suggest that museums come to play an integral role in this production of the 'rural native subject' as object within the museum, furthering a polarised relation between the rural and the urban.

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1 Govan Mbeki was the chairman of the Eastern Cape branch of the ANC, and an active member of the South African Communist Party (SACP). Raymond Mhlaba was the Secretary of the SACP's Port Elizabeth branch and a member of the ANC. Both of these leaders were Rivonia Trialists; a trial which saw many of South Africa's liberation leaders imprisoned on Robben Island in Cape Town.

2 P. Lalu, "Leaving the City: Gender, Pastoral Power and the Discourse of Development in the Eastern Cape," in N. Murray, N. Shepherd and M. Hall (eds.), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (Routledge, 2007), 195–214.

3 Lalu, "Leaving the City," 210.

4 Lalu, "Leaving the City," 201.

5 Lalu, "Leaving the City," 202.

6 T. Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memories: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 10.

'What we have done remains': Race and Science at the East London Museum

In the 1990s a series of powerful arguments were made concerning the ways in which the modern museum emerged along with changing ideas around culture in the late nineteenth century.[7] Whereas earlier forms of display were a kind of 'private institution' signifying wealth and status, the modern museum was geared at 'civilising' communities and nations through its status as a 'public institution'. As Tony Bennett posits, the 'birth of the museum' occurred concurrently with the shaping of a 'new discursive space' and this 'effect' is important in the transformation and reconfiguring imperatives of post-apartheid South African museums.[8]

Scholarship on museums in Europe reveals an important function of the museums founded in South Africa, a function well described by Greenhill-Hooper, Walsh and Pearce: the museum as an institution of exhibition forms part of a complex relation of power and discipline.[9] This is what Bennett terms the 'exhibitionary complex.'[10] In a public context, where objects are displayed, the museum is an instrument useful not only in disseminating the messages and meanings of those in power. The exhibition of objects is also one of the ways through which the museum is able to produce particular subjects. As Bennett puts it, exhibitions of objects are a resource used and offered by the museum to its visitors 'through which they might actively insert themselves within a particular vision of history by fashioning themselves to contribute to its development.'[11]

Museums also visualise and shape the places where they are built and carry legacies of their making. In our context, the city of East London was established in the nineteenth century, serving as a port and outpost to establish colonial rule and from which British army troops were provided with supplies during the frontier wars.[12] An official municipality was formed in the 1870s and the town had its first mayor in 1881. East London became a city in 1914 and grew in size with the incorporation of the Cambridge municipality, Amalinda and other areas in the 1940s, and the incorporation of Berlin and Mdantsane in the 1970s. This colonial past of East London as a frontier river-port was and is constituted around a 'white mythology' which, like its urban landscape, marginalised the Black residents of the town.[13] Throughout the twentieth century, East London, along with its museum, created a public history

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7 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995). E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and The Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992). K. Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern world* (London: Routledge, 1992). See also D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff (eds.), *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

8 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum.*

9 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and The Shaping of Knowledge*. Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*. S. M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Smithsonian Books, 1992).

10 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*. See also T. Bennett, 'Exhibition, Difference, and the Logic of Culture' in I. Karp, C. Kratz, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarra-Frausto (eds.) *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham: Duke University Press, Durham, 2006).

11 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 47.

12 J. Peres, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989). The Frontier Wars refers to a series of revolts fought by the indigenous people of the Eastern Cape against the colonial British army, between 1779 – 1879.

13 G. Minkley, "Border Dialogues: Race, Class and Space in the Industrialization of East London, C1902-1963" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1994), 21-23.

that 'emphasized the pre-twentieth century in thick description of personality—the "courage and faith", in building the "fighting port", and thereafter a municipal, trading/commercial and public works history, correlated with a "cultural modernity" of sport, circular drives, art galleries, theatres, tourists, and garden parties.'[14] The East London Museum, as I will show below, formed part of an impetus for a white, urban and supposedly cultured citizenry.

The idea of a museum for East London was conceived of in 1920, along with the founding of the Museum Society, and was recognised officially in 1924.[15] On 29 March 1920, a meeting was held at the council chamber, presided over by the Deputy Mayor at the time, Mr. C. J. Neale, to discuss the possibility of establishing a museum in East London. It was decided, because of financial constraints, that the town could not afford to have a museum at that time. Instead, a Natural History Committee was formed that would start thinking about how to bring it about in the near future. The site of the present museum building was procured in 1948 and the new museum building was opened in 1950.[16]

In 1938, the museum society's first curator, Marjorie Courtney-Latimer, claimed the discovery of a Coelacanth – a fish that had been thought to be extinct for millions of years – for the East London Museum. It was Captain Hendrik Goosen, skipper of the Nerine trawler who pulled in a 'strange' fish from the Chalumna River on the Eastern Cape coast. He alerted Courtenay-Latimer, who went to the harbour to collect the fish. Within a few days she called on Dr J.L.B Smith of Rhodes University to identify this specimen and he was then permitted to take the specimen back to Grahamstown to conduct further research. The coelacanth, by now identified as such, was eventually sent to James Drury in 1939 to be mounted and cast, which he completed in 1940. Under Courtney-Latimer's curatorship, exhibitions mediated a sustained colonial preoccupation with science and progress within and through which discourses of race can still be read in this museum. During the Heritage Day celebrations of September 2003, Courtenay-Latimer was proclaimed a hero of the Eastern Cape when a clay impression of her footprints was made, joining the footprints of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and others at Heroes Park.[17] In 2003, she was quoted as saying that the honour bestowed on her reminded her of her family crest: 'What we have done remains.'[18] Yet what exactly was done – how the coelacanth came to occupy the prominent place it did, enabling the urbane 'we' of Courtenay-Latimer's comment to settle before and around its exhibition – calls for further attention.

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14 Minkley, "Border Dialogues," 23-24.

15 *Daily Dispatch*, 29 March 1920, "Museum Project: Too expensive for the town at present: A small beginning."

16 *Daily Dispatch,* 28 May 1947, "The Museum: Appeal for Funds for New Premises," *Daily Dispatch*, 8 October 1949, "Money needed for new museum: No provincial Assistance for fitting-out".

17 Heroes Park is a project intended to 'celebrate Eastern Cape men and women who have made a significant contribution to the development, success and liberation of the country'. It is located along the beachfront in East London, across the road from the East London Aquarium. It consists of a Wall of Remembrance, celebrating the contributions of Eastern Cape struggle heroes whose names are etched into the granite wall, which sits alongside the Multicultural Man statue donated by the Italian state and sculpted by Italian artist Francesco Perilli, and the German Settler Monument acknowledging the German families who settled in the Eastern Cape in the second half of the nineteenth century. It would go too far to say that Heroes Park is in a state of ruin but it has been vandalised, is remarkably overgrown with weeds, marked by fires, and is frequently strewn with rubbish. See B. Hollands, 'Heroes Park in a State of Neglect', *Dispatch Online*, 18 June, 2016. https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2016-06-18-heroes-park-in-state-of-neglect/.

18 *Daily* Dispatch, 23 September 2003, 'Courtney-Latimer honoured'.

In 1988, when the East London Museum celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the coelacanth in 1938, the Greater East London Publicity Association decided to adopt the coelacanth as their emblem.[19] Across South Africa, the late 1980s was a time of civil unrest that had intensified to such an extent that it became clear that the apartheid state was beginning to disintegrate. Courtney-Latimer is quoted as saying 'I am fighting for the East London Museum and I will still fight for East London.' These were Courtney-Latimer's words after it became clear that the East London Coelacanth was not thoroughly recognised as the first 'discovered' coelacanth.[20]

Courtenay-Latimer's fight for what was 'inside the museum and for her East London'[21] was not unrelated to the fighting that was taking place on the streets of East London, the Eastern Cape, and South Africa. She was fighting against change, along with the rest of the museum researchers, curators and board members who had constructed a colonial fantasy, one which Courtenay-Latimer wanted to remain.[22]

Courtenay-Latimer's words 'what we have done remains,' give us a sense of the standing of the museum in the historical imaginary of the city itself. What her words also bring into view is the museum's historical entanglement with the violence of imperialism, in the acquisition, research and displaying of human remains. What they obscure are those who were classified as 'native' inhabitants of East London, against which her 'we' emerges. This veiling does not belong to Courtenay-Latimer alone and it has found various iterations, 'most explicitly in the denial of "native" agency in East London's "inspiring history" and "prosperous state."'[23] Indeed, it is manifest in the establishment of segregated locations in the 1890s which enabled a local discourse that represented 'the native inhabitant' and 'his location' as squalid and threatening, constructed and reinforced through the media, official reports, statements and personal correspondence. These processes of 'epistemic violence' dictated a local public history that excluded East London's 'native inhabitants' from this urban space and its history.[24] Instead, the 'native inhabitants' of East London were cast into the 'museum world' but at the same time never not in service of that historical narrative that constructed East London as 'white'. [25]

What I want to think through now is the way the 'native' subject has not only been racially marked but also defined and confined by a mediated relationship to a rural landscape, a relationship that the museum, still, relies on. In taking this up, I turn to the museum's historical entanglement with the violence of imperialism, specifically the acquisition and display of human remains. In the East London Museum displays, I will argue, we can see how this legacy still haunts museum's representational

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19 *Daily Dispatch*, 2 March 1988, 'EL museum marks coelacanth discovery'.
20 Her focus was on the coelacanth found by J.L.B. Smith in the Comore Islands. The Rhodes Institute of Ichthyology had adopted the coelacanth as their emblem, which Courtenay-Latimer believed to belong to East London and its Museum.
21 G. Lizmore, 'Coelacanth: East London left out in the cold', *Coastal Profile*, March 1988.
22 On aspects of this struggle, see P. Mnyaka, "Re-tracing Representations and Identities in Twentieth Century South Africa and African Photography: J. Denfield, Regimes of Seeing and Alternative Visual Histories" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Fort Hare, 2012).
23 G. Minkley, "Border Dialogues," 21–23.
24 Minkley, "Border Dialogues," 23 – 24.
25 Minkley, "Border Dialogues," 23 – 24.

practices, giving casting, taxidermy and the diorama problematic afterlives. First, though, I turn my sights further along the Eastern Cape coastline.

Forced Removals, 'Sanitation' and the Red Location Museum

During 1903, in what used to be known as Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) The Red Location was established, when, according to Gary Baines, the Cape Colonial government saw the spreading of the bubonic plague as an opportunity 'to fulfil a racist dream of establishing a single location outside of Port Elizabeth Town and this with talk of "more sanitary" conditions for these residents.'[26] While the Colonial government was initially hesitant in assisting the Town Council with the relocation exercise as the plague had not reached epidemic proportions, this did nothing to sooth the fears of whites who saw the town locations as a health threat. It was the Native Reserve Location Act (Act 40 of 1902) that legitimated the authorities of Port Elizabeth to implement a mass slum clearance.[27] This Act allowed the Cape Governor power to declare segregated 'native' locations where he saw fit, while making it illegal for those classified as native (and later African and Black), to live within urban municipal boundaries.[28] The colonial state had long been waiting for an opportunity to do so.

Maynard Swanson proposes that what he calls the 'sanitation syndrome', emerging in the early 1900s was an important factor in the later creation of urban segregation and then apartheid. It, as Swanson puts it, 'altered the racial ecology of South Africa.'[29] Bubonic plague reached South Africa during the South African War through the seaports of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. In Cape Town the Emergency Plague Administration's immediate focus and anxieties were directed at people classified as 'native', who were framed as being connected with the conditions that allowed the plague to spread. Swanson argues that the underlying question in the decision of the Cape colonial government to implement plans of segregated urban development was 'how to organize society to provide for the mutual access of Black labourers and white employers in the coming industrial age without having to pay the heavy social costs of urbanisation or losing the dominance of white over Black.'[30]

When the municipality wanted to put into effect the Native Reserve Locations Act in Port Elizabeth and move Africans into the location of New Brighton, things did not proceed as planned. Thousands of people decided to move to Korsten and Dassies Kraal on the edge of the city where they would be less subject to government control. People who were forced out of the city also demanded the transfer of the

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26 F. G. Baines, *A History of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, South Africa 1903-1953: The Detroit of the Union*, (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 64.
27 Baines, *A History of New Brighton,* 64.
28 J. F. Kirk, J.F, "A 'Native' Free State at Korsten: Challenge to Segregation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1901–1905," *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 2, 1991, 309–336.
29 M. W. Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909," *Journal of African History,* 18, 3, 1977, 387, 391.
30 Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome," 394.

titles to their property and compensation if they were to move into the government location of New Brighton. Although government discourse employed the image of 'unsanitary' conditions, people were resentful and aware that government attitudes were in fact grounded in racist ideology.[31] This is also clear in the plans of the government at this time to separate those classified as 'Africans' from 'coloureds', designating separate locations for each.[32]

The Secretary of the Public Works Department denied residents demands for a guarantee of tenure before moving willingly, since this would interrupt what should, in the government's view, be a 'uniform system of administration in Native Reserve Location.'[33] As far as housing was concerned, the idea was to erect a number of block huts with particular consideration to class. Class A would be two-bedroomed structures, reserved for 'civilised natives', Class B one-bedroomed for 'native labourers', and Class C were dormitories reserved for 'single men'.[34] Class A and B huts were constructed in reduced numbers, and to reduce costs the rest of the huts were constructed with wood and corrugated iron from the dismantled concentration camps that had existed in Uitenhage and De Aar during the South African War and from accommodation for a British battalion during this war. Afterwards, the corrugated iron was used to erect shack dwellings in the area where the Red Location is situated.[35] It was this part of New Brighton that came to be called the Red Location, either because of the rust that formed on the corrugated iron, or because the erected structures, assembled from concentration camp materials, were painted red.[36]

It suffices to say at this point that discourses of development are very much part of projects of urbanisation, of which the Red Location Museum is a prime example. Construction of the Red Location Museum began in 2003 and opened to the public in 2006. The museum forms part of a cultural precinct – entailing an Art Gallery, a Centre for Creative Arts, a market, a library, a hall and conference centre[37] – which was designed by Noero Wolff Architects who were chosen as the winners of a national architectural competition in 1998. The architectural design of the Red Location Museum was featured in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010.[38] During this time Noero was quoted as saying, 'What is important to stress is

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31 Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome," 402.
32 Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome," 403.
33 Baines, *A History of New Brighton,* 65–66.
34 Baines, *A History of New Brighton*, 67.
35 *Cultural Precinct: Phase 2 Business Plan.*
36 Baines, *A History of New Brighton*, 67.
37 *Cultural Precinct: Phase 2, Business Plan*, 12.
38 The plan for the Cultural Precinct was laid out in two phases. Phase I included the Museum, Olaf Palme Avenue – which is the tarred road running along the front of the museum, and between it and the library – and Pelip Housing, which is the housing provided for those whose shacks had been cleared to create 'space' for the precinct. Phase II of the precinct plan comprises the art gallery; the library and library archive; a commercial complex; subsidy housing units and a commercial, multi-storey housing development; the conversion of the Old Beer Hall into a backpackers hostel; the redevelopment of the open-air theatre into a weather-proof structure; the preservation of the four remaining historic Red Location buildings, the redevelopment of Skyman's store into an education centre; the building of an open-air, public sculpture and the creation of a 'heritage walk' from the Precinct to Emlotheni; the restoration of the New Brighton Station; the creation of dedicated and safe parking; the creation of a precinct shop and office, and other facilities for precinct staff. The point here is that the Red Location Museum building itself was significant from the very start of the project. From its visual effects on the landscape and its spatiality, to the symbolism of its structure, the apparatus was always already at work, from the laying of the first brick, attempting to put in place the museum's temporal logic. See M. Smith, 'Interment: The frame of the Red Location Museum (2006-2013)', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 42, 1, 2016, 155–173.

that this is not just about doing good things for poor people, but giving poor people world-class architecture too..'[39] This utterance 'draws attention to the fact that the architectural design of the museum is rendered novel on account of its location. What is important here is that the museum's responsibility entailed not only a curatorial narrative, but also an intense proximity between the site of the museum and the residents of New Brighton.'[40] Furthermore, in the building of the museum precinct 'the materiality of the township was deployed as the conceptual starting point' for Noero Wolff Architects.[41] The museum, and the rest of the precinct, however, commandeers the space; its grandeur is in stark contrast to the dwellings around it, in which it assumes a place.

The Red Location Museum and the East London Museum are, clearly, different. They are neither the same kind of museum nor are their exhibitionary modes the same. There are, however, correspondences in the ways their different exhibitions work to produce an urban subject whose 'silent referent' is a rurality into which both cast the Black subject. If this is easier to see in the East London Museum, attending closely to what may appear obvious repays the effort when turning to the Red Location Museum.

Staging the rural subject at the East London Museum

At the East London Museum, one enters the Coelacanth Gallery by exiting the display area for South African animals, and from the Marine Hall one can climb a set of stairs to the Human History section. Having followed this route, visitors enter the so-called Southern Nguni Gallery, a term that retains a remarkable anthropological freighting. On the other side of the room, opposite the wireworks display, is one of the series of dioramas in this gallery. 'Xhosa Home Life c.1950' (figure 1) depicts 'daily activities in the umzi (homestead) in the first half of the 20th Century.' The accompanying text points out the dress in this scene and how one can discern marital status through dress and the significance it has to ritual. 'Three stages of dress c.1950' depicts how the age and marital status of a women would determine her dress; it depicts a 'young unmarried girl', 'a married woman' and an 'older woman' in the age- and status-appropriate dress. 'Xesibe dress c.1950' uses models of a women and young boys and the accompanying text tells the visitor where this 'group of people' live (Transkei) and describe the function of the beads and some objects in the display.

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39 B. Hollands, "New Accolade for Bay Museum," *Weekend Post*, 31 July 2010.

40 Despite and perhaps because of the protest and rejection of this project by the residents, decisions about their well-being are made for them on the assumption that they themselves do not know what is 'good' for them. What is masked by this notion of doing good for the poor is the attempt to act on behalf of the 'poor' Black body. See M. Smith, 'Interment: The frame of the Red Location Museum (2006-2013)', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 42, 1, 2016, 155–173.

41 N. Murray and L. Witz, 'From eviction to commission in Lwandle: Stories of museums, design and urban development', presented at Wits City Institute Seminar Series for Semester Two, seminar 1 of 15, 2015, 8.



Figure 1. The 'Xhosa Home Life c1950' diorama, East London Museum. Photographed by the author in 2019, in East London.



Figure 2. Close-up of the 'Xhosa Home Life c1950' diorama. Photographed by the author in 2019, in East London.



Figure 3. The angle of this photograph shows more of the painted background of the 'Xhosa Home Life c1950' diorama as well as a close-up of the figures who are not facing the viewer. Photographed by the author in 2019, in East London.

'San Bushmen Life c. 1950' (figure 4), like all the other dioramas in this gallery, is separated by tribal names. Here, a 'San' woman and man are fixed to the ground, with a fantasy scene behind them. The accompanying text explains to the reader where the 'San' have lived in Southern Africa, their 'way of life', and so on. Also mentioned is that 'through successive contact with Bantu-speakers, 'Khoekhoe' (Hottentots), and whites, many 'Bushmen' were killed or assimilated into these societies as herdsmen or labourers.' [42]

There are two scenes, depicting rites of passage: 'Initiation into manhood c.1950' (fig. 5) and 'Initiation into womanhood c.1950,' which continues the use of the landscape scene, the modelled body and the relevant decorative tools and objects which are by now expected as part of these types of dioramas. It is a visual knowledge that is both produced, authenticated and circulated by museum discourse. Indeed, this context was important for establishing the East London Museum as aligned with apartheid state prerogatives.

It is worth noting that throughout South Africa in the 1950s anti-apartheid demonstrations were taking place. The ANC was becoming a mass-based political

42 Like 'Bushmen', 'Hottentot' is a derogatory term.



Figure 4. 'San Bushman Life c. 1950' Diorama. Located in the 'Southern Nguni Gallery.' Like the rest of the displays in this gallery, very little has been done to address or engage any of the politics of these kinds of ethnographic representations. Photographed by the author in 2019, in East London.

organisation and the passing of a number of segregationist laws drove political organisations towards the culmination of the Defiance Campaign and subsequent mass-based politics. This made it even more important for the museum to make colonised people legible through a museum discourse, especially one which showed that they belong in the homelands.

The motif of the diorama that focuses on women's rites of passage is one of domesticity, in which women are always depicted and shown in the act of domestic work. In the visual constructs of the museum diorama these women are always shown as carrying children, while cooking and cleaning, a formulation that is perpetuated through and beyond apartheid. Inside the museum, the dioramas constitute a sense of exposure, vulnerability and the arrest of time. These subjects can do nothing about their subjection and capture, as if they can be known and their essence shown quite simply through how they carry wood on their heads and beads on their bodies. What people aligned with the anti-apartheid struggle were vehemently resisting outside the museum was being carried out inside of it through displays and dioramas.

The dioramas at the East London Museum are constituted through a calculated and systematic set of anthropological methods and forms of collection. Its visual



Figure 5. Diorama titled ‹Initiation into manhood c.1950.' Located in the Southern Nguni Gallery, East London Museum. It remains untouched, much like the rest of this gallery. Photographed by the author in 2010, in East London.

authenticity was seen to be dependent on acquiring 'genuine native articles,'[43] which would be directly connected to the environment where these articles were either worn or used. The condition of objects as 'genuine' is also meant to recall the hands that produced it and the body that wore it. The 'genuine' article was meant to work like an inscription, which brings its 'context' within accessible reach.

The c1950 collection (and thereafter), which continues to be featured in this central hall of the museum, was constituted through a series of museum-led excursions as well as from a number of related anthropological donations from collectors. The Museum Director's reports consistently expressed an urgency to collect more and more 'Native material' because 'it is becoming extremely difficult to obtain genuine Native articles, therefore it is necessary to collect ethnographic material as systematically as possible before it is too late.'[44] 'Native materials' were also purchased from 'Natives as opportunities arose.'[45] The relegation of Black life into the science of anthropology and ethnology is glaring not only in the inheritance of these categories in the old displays and the Museum Director's reports, but also, as will be seen below, in the Museum Annual Reports throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

43 East London Museum Director's Report, 31 December 1945.
44 Ibid.
45 East London Museum Director's Report, 31 December 1947.

The 'historical section' of the museum, on the other hand, is reserved for a depiction of the lives of settlers and the displays concerned with the Frontier Wars, then referred to as the 'Kaffir Wars'. An East London Museum 1949 visitors guide has the following popular description of the various rooms (which are currently collectively named as the Humanities Hall):

> The Main Gallery upstairs contains an extensive and valuable collection of native material displayed in attractive kraal scenes which show off to advantage the beauty and simplicity of native life… To the left of the main hall is the Archaeological or Primitive-Man Gallery where many objects of value are to be found. This gallery leads into the Historic Gallery or Old East London Room. This collection of costumes, old china and oddments depicting the life of the early pioneers is of great interest to visitors and should not be missed.[46]

Much later, the museum report of 1960 contains a section written by ethnologist M. M. De Lange, who reflects on the 1960 Museums Conference saying that:

> Of the many interesting discussions, that promoting the formation of an Institute for the study of man in Africa held particular appeal, collating as it will with the various branches of research undertaken in the field of ethnology and social anthropology, and eventually presenting us with a composite picture of the rise and spread of civilisation in Africa.[47]

This gallery essentially maintains this form in the museum today and its evolutionary mode of structuring the visitors' visual environment remains. In order to reach the 'Historic Gallery', visitors must walk through the displays of 'Native material' which demonstrates the past of 'civilisation', when 'tribes' of people lived according to ritual and superstition, a way of life which was supposedly surpassed by Europeans. Anne Maxwell writes that the

> decision to display colonized peoples coincided with the public's growing interest in scientific theories about the origins of the different races … [E]xhibition managers also exploited time-worn myths about practices such as cannibalism and prostitution… [T]hese myths allowed Europeans to deflect the violence they had inflicted on 'native' populations back on to the people whose cultures they were undermining.[48]

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46 *City of East London Official Guide, 1953,* 40.
47 East London Museum Annual Report, 1960.
48 A. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' and the Making of European Identities.* (London: Leicester University Press, 1991), 2. See also M. Scott, *Rethinking Evolution in the Museum: Envisioning African origins* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

Of course, such ideas were already well entrenched in the European imaginary, but became particularly entrenched during the forming of the National Party in 1914.[49] As one of the essential parts of their ideology, racism and a belief in white supremacy were central to the ways in which Afrikaner nationhood was constructed. By the time this public guide was published, the National Party's apartheid policy was well on the way to creating the social past museums still have to contend with in their production of public history across South Africa today. The East London Museum is a particular case in point; its understanding of itself as preserving 'the native's' way of life worked to perpetuate an idea of the white man as guardian, and to produce 'native' subjects as distinctly rural and therefore belonging outside of South Africa's urban, apparently 'civilised' metropoles.

D.F. Malan became the prime minister, the first National Party leader to do so, under apartheid from 1948-54. It was under his governance that the Population Registration Act of 1950 was enforced and South Africans were increasingly categorised according to race. During the same year the Group Areas Act – an elaboration of the Natives Land Act of 1913 – was put in place, giving the government the power to determine human settlement on the basis of race. These forms of legislation then allowed the 'Native' reserves to become what was notoriously known as homelands, or Bantustans. It is the idea of the homeland that is shaped in the Hall of Ethnology, through the on-going and equally central display of the museum's collection of beadworks.

The display in Figure 6 visualises a part of what is now called the Humanities Hall, surrounded by a number of dioramas depicting 'native' scenes. As the list of references to the displays show, there was a consistent and systematic study of the Transkei Homeland and a preoccupation with an imagistic rendering of it. What becomes increasingly apparent in this construction of the Transkei is an imaging of the 'native' in their rural surrounding. All of this congeals in the technology of the diorama, which forges an image of the Transkei as completely 'other', 'primitive' and rural.[50] The photograph, the artefact/object and the body in the field – both those who were being objectified and those who did so in the name of participant observation – are mobilised to produce an image of 'the happy living Native' with a 'gentle and spontaneous humour and joy of living'[51] who can be banished to the 'homelands'.[52]

This 'joy of living' in the 'homelands' to which it is tied, is placed in glass cases displaying items of beadwork – the beadwork is either laid flat or in some cases draped on busts; rural life is shown encased in cabinets reminiscent of burial coffins

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49 C. Van der Westhuizen, *White Power & the Rise and Fall of the National Party* (Cape Town: Zebra Press 2007).

50 H. Nielsson, "Photography and the Crisis of Ethnographic Display," in E. Edwards and S. Lien (eds.), *Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs* (Farnham: Ashgate 2014), 55, 67. Nielsson writes that "human diversity [being] visualized and understood in terms of spatially discrete units – of people with a distinct and separate culture, an argument enhanced and reified through the use of photographs."

51 B.J. Vorster, 'Forward' in *The Republic of the Transkei* (Johannesburg: Chris van Rensberg Publications), no page numbers.

52 When considering the 'independence' that the homelands supposedly afforded, it is significant that Steve Biko described homelands as 'nothing else but sophisticated concentration camps where Black people are allowed to "suffer peacefully"'. In Biko's understanding the Bantustan was a place of perpetual violence, the site at which those banished to their 'natural' homelands can be, to put it in biopolitical language, abandoned, left to die. Cited in A. Sitze, 'The crime of apartheid: Genealogy of a successful failure', *London Review of International Law*, 7, 2, 2019, p. 10.



Figure 6. These glass and wood display-cases are situated in the middle of the Southern Nguni Gallery. The East London Museum's bead collections are displayed in a number of these cabinets. The detached head models in this cabinet are used to show how some of the bead items would be worn. Photographed by the author in 2010, in East London.

containing detached head models, suspended in these coffins like bodily remains. The information sheets, photographs and maps protruding from the coffin appear like the gravestones of a mass marked grave.

Photographic fragments and rural remains at the Red Location Museum

These dioramas possess an uncanny relationship to photographic preoccupations of the 1940s and 1950s in South Africa, particularly to the exhibitions of the photographs made by Leon Levson as part of the preoccupations with 'native studies'. Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool write that these 'Reserve photographs' – forming part of one exhibition entitled *Meet the Bantu* – are reframed as part of a paradigm of social documentary photography that attributes agency to its African subjects through transformation in an archival collection at the Mayibuye Archives at the University of the Western Cape. In their encounter with the Levson collection, they note that 'it was the fact that Levson photographed Black people, Black subjects, that served to define him as a social documentary and 'oppositional' photographer. This was so in spite of the overwhelming body of photographs that contradicted the legibility of

this connection.'[53] In their discussion on the categories of photographs that Levson took, Minkley and Rassool describe his 'Reserve' photographs as establishing 'a set of visual meanings about the Reserves that locate a tribal past and kraal belonging to Native/Bantu identity as the most desired and real.' Significantly they point out that 'Levson's 'urban photography' almost instrumentally in and of itself constitutes its appropriate past and future, and its meaning with the discursive space of the Reserve and the tribe. In many respects the subject of the photograph – 'the Native' or 'the Bantu' – and the rhetoric of the image constituted by this given subject conferred these meanings and histories.'[54]

Present in the encounter with the photographic image is the expectation that photographs will show us something 'real' about the past.[55] The problem of the notion of the 'real', as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has shown, runs through both photography and the museum: 'Museums pride themselves as being places where "real objects" can be seen.'[56] Visual interpretations are set apart according to the 'social discourses' in which they are located and it is on this configuration that meaning in museums is grounded.[57]

As such, photographs are perceived as providing context, explaining, authenticating and sometimes acting as substitute or supplement for objects and artefacts. They are also used to represent people and place, 'establishing a social reality.'[58] In the signifying processes of photographs, the temporal shift, where the 'there-then' becomes the 'here-now', can act to confirm and legitimise colonial visual tropes and stereotypes instead of troubling and unsettling them.[59] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett speaks of ethnographic objects, 'created by ethnographers', as fragments that are 'informed by the poetics of detachment.'[60] She explains 'detachment' as referring not only to a physical act, but to an attitude, detached in nature, which makes 'fragmentation and its appreciation possible.'[61] She distinguishes two modes of display, 'in situ' and 'in context', the former entailing metonymy and mimesis.[62] Objects are placed 'in situ' through the ability of mimesis, for example, in the form of period rooms, photomurals or ethnographic environments and so forth. This approach inflates the boundaries of the ethnographic object to include what was left behind when the object was removed or detached from its usual location. Such 'in-situ' displays are not neutral, constituting the subject through its construction.[63] The second mode of display and installation—often through the re-using of photographs—provides and develops a sense of being 'in context', so as to 'establish a theoretical frame of reference for the

53 G. Minkley and C. Rassool, "Photography with a difference: Leon Levson's Camera Studies and Photographic Exhibitions of Native Life in South Africa, 1947–50," in L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool (eds.) *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (University of the Michigan Press 2017), 153.
54 Minkley and Rassool, "Photography with a difference."
55 E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge 2000), 16.
56 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 14.
57 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 15.
58 E. Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (London: Bloomsbury 2001), 186.
59 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 196.
60 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in S. Levine and I. Karp (eds) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press 1990, 368-443), 388.
61 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," 388.
62 Ibid.
63 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," 389.



Figure 7. Photographs of Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba in the tomb, at the Red Location Museum, which was meant to be the resting place for their remains. Here it is the reflections of the photographs that are interred. Photographed by the author in 2011, in Port Elizabeth.

viewer, offer explanations, provide historical background, make comparisons, pose questions, and sometimes even extend to the circumstances of excavation, collection, and conservation of the objects on display'.[64]

Near the entrance of the Red Location Museum is a closed off exhibition space. On my first visit there, the room was occupied by replicas of former President Nelson Mandela's diaries and letters. The museum was not able to display the original documents because of inadequate temperature control facilities.[65] On my next visit this exhibition had been taken down, and the space was empty, except for a sound-proof door that led into a kind of chamber. Inside were remnants of what was intended to be a tomb, which would keep the remains of Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba.

According to Christopher Du Preez, the last curator and head of the museum, the architect, Joe Noero was instructed by the Executive Mayor to add a space on the inside of the building for the reburial of Mbeki and Mhlaba, thus 'sacrificing a crucial area intended for object storage and part of the museum restaurant.'[66] As expected, a

64 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', 390.

65 The acting director at the time, Christopher Du Preez, explained to me that the walls of the Red Location Museum building capture moisture and as a result are often damp, sub-optimal conditions for the display of these documents. As a consequence, the small collection that they did have was kept in Bay Museum's storage room. I cannot be certain that this is still the case.

66 C. Du Preez, 'The Role of Architecture in South Africa's Unequal Society: The Closure of Red Location Museum as a Case Study' (Presented at the International Union of Architects World Congress in Durban, South Africa 2014), 2.

controversy ensued around this tomb which did not materialise largely through an intervention by former president Thabo Mbeki, the son of Govan Mbeki.[67] To add to this, the architect and the Mayor wanted this to be a space of reflection and quiet, but this contrasted directly with the interactive curatorial objectives the museum had set itself.[68]

Both the disassembled body parts visible in the display at the East London Museum and the attempts made at the Red Location Museum signify what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls an 'attitude of detachment'. It constructs the 'native' body, as it does the 'Transkei', as an ethnological site/sight, creating a disciplinary boundary between those who know and those who are known, between those who look and those who are looked at, bifurcated positions that I understand as entailing the rural and the urban, respectively. The 'poetics of detachment,' as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, is not only an act but an attitude, producing what she calls the 'ethnographic fragment' rather than object.[69] The actor here assumes a particular kind of detachment from the object and its site as a fragment of scientific study. That which cannot be physically detached, the ephemeral or immovable, becomes inscribed or represented in photographs, and becomes an 'ethnographic document.'[70]

While community and struggle museums frequently understand their own undertakings as separated from the legacies of museums established before the end of the legislated apartheid state, the contestation over human remains represents an uncanny return of what remains unresolved in South African public history. As Martin Legassick and Ciraj Rassol have written, the history of museums in South Africa are haunted by the collection and display of human remains, where 'skulls, skeletons, and plaster casts were indeed the museum "alternatives" to the objectification and dehumanisation involved in the display of live Bushmen.'[71] Up until the closure of the Red Location Museum, and perhaps still at this time, instead of their remains there were placed two enlarged photographs of Mhlaba and Mbeki leaning against the walls of the tomblike space. Figure 7 shows the photograph of Mbeki, with its reflection appearing inside the tomb. Indeed, the photograph is made to stand in the place of the body.[72] As a compromise of sorts, photographic images in the museum do not resolve these issues. They remediate them into complex arrangements.

There is a strong visual relationship between the two displays that this paper brings into conversation. We see some curatorial processes in the East London Museum being echoed in the chamber in the Red Location Museum. The beadwork display mobilises models of detached heads – recalling human remains – placed within a glass-case with photographic images, while the Red Location Museum displays an

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67 *The Herald*, 19 April 2005. The reburial of Mhlaba and Mbeki was intended to coincide with the opening of the museum, but Mbeki had wanted to be buried next to the people he served, in the Veeplaas cemetery. After his death, Mhlaba was laid to rest next to him. Jack, M. "Oom Gov to remain at Veeplaas Cemetery".

68 Du Preez, 'The Role of Architecture in South Africa's Unequal Society', 2.

69 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', 387.

70 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', 394-395.

71 M. Legassick and C. Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South African Museums and the Trade in Human Remains, 1907–1917* (Iziko Museums of South Africa 2015), 5.

72 M. Sturken, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero," *American Ethnologist*, 31,3, 2004, 311–325). In the Red Location Museum, it is the photographic image that acts as substitute.

empty tomb within a large glass enclosure with Mhlaba and Mbeki's portraits leaning against the glass on its outside. There is an odd uniformity to the two photographs, which appear to be taken for the purpose of identity documents – both with a white background, both struggle heroes wearing white shirts. This is not to claim that these two photographs become 'ethnographic documents' of ephemeral remains. The two leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle are displayed as urbane figures. Rather, what the encounter between the two displays, located at different points of the East Coast, makes available is how this display of the urban struggle heroes is constituted against what the East London Museum continues to produce as a figure of the 'rural native'. The 'rural' silently adheres to the urban; if the two photographs of departed struggle heroes, as we see them, show no sign of this, reading them alongside the East London Museum bead displays asks us to imagine the ethnographic fragment on the other side of the photographs. The 'rural' as what is left behind, a trace on the other side of the image.

Conclusion

In September 2025, the local Herald Newspaper reported that the Nelson Bay Municipality has earmarked the Post Office complex in Baakens Street in the Central Business District, the heart of 'the urban', as the new 'location' for the Red Location Precinct (which would include the Museum, digital library and art gallery).[73] This complex built in the mid eighteenth hundreds, apart from the old Post Office, also includes the architectural remains of the old Magistrates Court building as well as the old Police Station and Barracks. These institutions were important sites of bureaucratic stamping, sorting and processing of people for the colonial Native Administration Department and later the Apartheid government. A key objective of which would have been removing 'the native' from the urban centre to the 'waystation' of the location, often to 'shack' structures, which some residents live in, and which the Red Location Museum turned into one of its objects of display.[74] What then will haunt this 'new home'[75] for the Red Location Museum in the urban centre but the racially marked 'native' subject, confined to its visually mediated relationship to the rural?

73 N. Qoyo, "Red Location precinct could find new home in CBD," *The Herald* 10 September 2025.
74 See M. Smith, "Interment: The frame of the Red Location Museum (2006-2013)," *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 42, 1, 2016, 155-173.
75 During community protests against the building and then opening of the Red Location Museum, the residents renamed the museum, 'A house for dead people.'