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District Six Removals and Ethnic Cleansing of Palestinians – Do Parallels Exist?

Ralf G Will.

Anthropology, Arts and Communication Research, Book author: Role of Artist in Society, Semantic Scholar AI Search Engine - Member

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***Corresponding author:** Ralf G Will.

Anthropology, Arts and Communication Research, Book author: Role of Artist in Society, Semantic Scholar AI Search Engine - Member

Abstract

This essay tries to trace parallels between proposed ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza and forced removals in South Africa during Apartheid. As perfect historical example the razing to ground of District 6 in Cape Town in mid-1970ies is quoted.

This with regard of a social analysis of Richard Rive`s 1986 novel „Buckingham Palace, District 6“, divided into 3 main parts and each section introduced by the author`s personal memories.

Furthermore, Mr Rive constituted an integral part of my series of artists talks from 1986/87, entitled ROLE OF ARTIST IN SOCIETY, 24 INTERVIEWS FROM SOUTH AFRICA. The book laid groundwork for my New Theory of Art – socially based ANTOA.

Even though Mr Rive`s fictional masterpiece was published almost 40 years before the fact, strong parallels between forced segregation under Afrikaner Nationalist Apartheid law and current proposals, however fictitious, by the Trump regime in US and that of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, do indeed exist.

Keywords: *Apartheid Law - Artist`s Role – District 6 - Ethnic Cleansing – Forced Removals - Gaza – Human – Humour – Israel - Palestinians – Racial Segregation – Resistance - Richard Rive – Social Situation – South Africa.*

Introduction

Would we know, even predict what awaits Palestinians once ethnic cleansing a la Donald Trump is enforced, and they would be relocated elsewhere from the Gaza strip? Obviously this an utterly fictional premis, hypothesis, yet in terms of Israel's genocide against Palestinian culture and existence, as charged by South Africa, Algeria, Ireland, Norway and other nations at the UN's highest court in The Hague, Netherlands, a very real prospect. That is, if left unchecked, not challenged and generally accepted as given fact, namely as result of the destruction meted out in wake of the horrible conflict that unfolded there over the last 15 months or so, having started on 7 October, 2023. But in truth having started much earlier, going back to the occupation of Palestinian lands in the mid 1960ies.

If we continue to spin this concept of racial segregation and degradation, followed by removing the oppressed group from its place of origin and belonging, and deeply entrenched in the historical concept of Apartheid, now brought to life once more and enforced by Israel against its subordinate Palestinian population, we could indeed refer to an example of ethnic cleansing that occured in South Africa in the late 1960ies to mid-1970ies. This not as example how the US suggestion of resettling Palestinians in Jordan or Egypt should be run but as blueprint and fictional story-line dealing with a sad and depressing period in South Africa's history, namely the relocation of a once proud ethnic group, a social and cultural experience in its own terms. And this also a well-documented historical fact, talked about and comprehensively dealt with in a famous novel by writer Richrd Rive. The latter part of my interview series from 1986 to 88, gathered in my book „Role of the Artist in Society, 24 Interviews from South Africa“. His novel called „Buckingham Palace, District 6“ and released in the same year we got together in his house in the Cape Town suburb of Grassy Park to discuss how artists, here folks with a strong creative urge, could best deal with the horrors of racial segregation and cultural supremacy of one ethnic group over another.

So the removals in question here the infamous razing to the ground of District 6, a once vibrant suburb on the slopes of Devil's Peak, situated right on the edge of the inner heart of Cape Town, the so-called Mother City on the shores of Table Bay. Where, back in the mid 17th century, the colonization of South Africa had started.

The comparison suggested here only hypothetical, due to fact that Mr Rive's book is so permeated by a human, compassionate and humourous streak, that drawing parallels to the Palestinian situation in Gaza and elsewhere in Israel may sound far-fetched and rather difficult to fathom. Nonetheless, this essay will try to trace Mr Rive's lively description of an infamous episode in Apartheid's playbook as reminder of how bad and impossible yet strangely realistic such a totalitarian effort, the removal of a whole people from their places of birth, indeed comes across. The author telling us in no uncertain terms and with that sarcasm and irony that not only marks the novel as a piece of great writing but that also represents a South Africa showcasing its deep-seated humanity as unmistakably „Cape Coloured“.

Telling us in a unique and lively language how forced removals were set into motion by the Apartheid state and its repressive Group Areas laws. And then turning from hilarious beginnings to a sad and depressing end, the author's once active and suggestive through-line, leaving the District in broken terms, devastated,

ravaged and run into ground by white greed and supremacy that breaks down and destroys all that stands in its way, walls, windows, verandahs, doors, whole alleyways and a famous public steps. And indeed in a certain sense a strong reminder of what would happen in Gaza almost 50 years later. Where god-fearing folks, albeit 2nd class citizens, would be chased away for nothing in return, aiming to resettle broken and shattered existences in far away areas. Be that tent cities in wind and sand-blown desert plains or makeshift townships on the edge of the Mediterranean.

Back in 1970ies South Africa, these Group Areas in fact a solid hallmark of racial segregation that allowed removal of ethnic groups according to legal principle, yet the enforcement of this warped and twisted law a perfect pretext for settling the white minority in preferential spaces. Taken away from, rather stolen from 2nd to 3rd class folks, as seen from a haughty, mainly European perspective. Seen from a people allegedly sent by high religious authority to civilize barbarious inhabitants, and in that way not much different from the arrogant, God-given superiority of Zionists, Israelites over everyone else. And oddly enough, as in the case of District 6, creating and leaving behind an urban wasteland, occupied by no one and a ruin of large extent and for a long time running.

„Buckingham Palace, District Six“ is divided into 3 parts – Morning 1955, Afternoon 1960, Night 1970 - and each section is introduced – in italics - by personal impressions of the author. This because his family went through the same humiliating process of relocaton as all other then-residents of District 6. Their fictional origins barely recognizable as such in the vivid and imaginative style applied by Mr Rive. Morning 1950 allows us to get familiar with events, historical period and specific atmosphere, and is divided into 7 chapters that highlight certain experiences by the characters. The chapters bear the following headings: Mary, Zoot, The Junge Boys, Pretty-Boy, Mr Wilkens, Jennifer, Mrs Knight.

The social setting that constituted then District 6, a multi-ethnic yet predominantly „Cape Coloured“ quarter, full of pervasive charme and hidden gang structures, is brought to life. And it reels off in very positive terms on the lower slopes of Table Mountain. This while South Africa's strong colonial, then British sentiment not only shines through in the title of the book, taken from a row of three cottages in then-Caledon St, but also in interior furnishings, money values and the general economic situation.

To illustrate Mr Rive's intriguing and very descriptive style that drives forward the Buckingham Palace storyline, here a quote from Part 1, Ch 4, „Pretty-Boy“:

„When Zoot moved into 203 he was uncomfortable but happy. Most of the rooms in the cottage still remained intact except for smoke marks on the walls. There was a front stoep that led into the dining room. From this room ran two bedrooms, off one of which was the toilet and bathroom which had no bath. Off the other ran a small kitchen and finally a backroom which had been most damaged in the fire. It was used to store empties and Mr Punch Davids used to fall asleep there on his way to fetch replacements. A yard, fenced in with nasty corrugation, determined the boundaries of the property.“

Zoot, poet, thief, bouncer, reformatory boy and prisoner, surveys his new home. As colourful character he mocks people, especially justice officials and headmasters, with his poetry, and gets to know the inside of prison and reformatory for all his „bad“ deeds. Yet the author paints Zoot a likeable and loveable gangster, emphasizing

the rather controversial nature of the original District setting. Zoot finds his home in the chapter labelled Pretty-Boy. The latter's code of honourable stealing sees him take only from those who deserve it and give back to those in need. Pretty-Boy miraculously always refers to a good friend who organizes goods at bargain prices. The crooked „hearts“ of these two protagonists attract and put off the reader at same time, establishing the typical double-edged nature of District 6 culture. Zoot becomes the bouncer in Mary's whorehouse, she the daughter of an upcountry pastor, Mr Bruintjes (the surname denotes a small „brown“ person“ in local Cape Dutch vernacular). So Mary starts her deviant yet adorable career of selling love after having been caught with boys in the wrong church environment. Her pastor father in the Boland eventually sends her to Cape Town to a virtuous aunt so that Mary can pick up some serious moral grounding for her future life. This obviously fails and that she ends up managing the popular Casbah brothel in the cottage next to Zoot's, the latter also called Winsor Park, underlines the dark humour that makes text and descriptions so intimately readable. Our interest as outsiders, intrigued by the yet positive outlook of original District 6 residents, is aroused by the way Mr Rive describes events and atmosphere in the first 7 chapters of the novel. We love to know more about the rather acceptable deviations that define social interactions, includes Zoot's and Pretty-Boy's regular drinking sessions with their friend Oubas, all 3 living happily next to cottage 201, or The Casbah, where Mary, formerly of the Knight family, runs her strict yet homely establishment.

As so called beacons of upright, normal living, Mr Rive then creates counter-characters like Mrs Knight, Sister Mariam, Moena Lelik, Katzen or the school principal, Mr Theo Pleintjes. They symbolize the other end of a social universe steeped in irregularities and acts of agreeable conning. And complement a cast that brings joy to the rather depressing act of living in a divided society, already by then separated according to the false colour lines enforced by the Apartheid state; the racist National Party in control since the 1948 elections that had swepted Afrikaner or Dutch-Reformed ideology to the front of political decision-making. And that rather surprisingly by a one vote majority over the more colonial English Unionists.

And then in Part 2, Afternoon 1960, the disturbing nature of this forced separation indeed breaks through a deceiving surface. Here Mr Rive applies a sublime and clever narrative tool of dramatizing events that prepares us for the shocking and sad end of the novel in Part 3. When District 6 removals and its razing to the ground are in full swing! Part 2 can be seen as an intermediary act in a powerful drama that is still underlain by that particular sense of humour, defining „Cape Coloured“ living in District 6's multi-ethnic universe. Yet premonitions of the racist destructions, wreaking havoc on Cape Town's colourful inner city living, surely come to the fore now. Forced relocations definitely don't work and never will!

Part 2, Afternoon 1960, is divided into these chapters: Knights-Before-Last, Moena Lelik, Pastor Bruintjes, Mr O'Grady and Elvis, while the key element of Apartheid's ugly divisions intrudes and breaks up the throughline of the novel in Moena Lelik's encounter on the beach in St James, a southern suburbs quarter of the Mother City on the shores of False Bay.

In this chapter. Buckingham Palace residents went for their annual picnic to the beach on New Year's Day, crammed into the suburban train's 3rd class compartment and enjoyed mocking the

white ticket controller who was chased away to do his business in 1st and then 2nd class. As a sign of how effective the change-over from a divided society to a free democracy in 1994 has been, all suburban trains only feature inclusive 3rd class compartments today!

Be that as it may, on the one day of the year when business at the Casbah in 201 Caledon St is closed, Zoot and his bouncer buddies, Mary and her girls, and the Abrahams family gather on Kalk Bay beach and enjoy sun, summer and ocean swimming, they also take a boat ride around the bay, while the two turtle doves, Pretty-Boy and Moena Lelik, go for a walk along the beach to St James.

A tragedy of stark proportions starts to unfold because Apartheid by then had divided beach life as well and the two unwittingly stumble into an area reserved for Whites. A beach constable appears and their fate as Non-Europeans seems sealed. Pretty-Boy resists the admonishments of the constable and says they can walk where they like, but the law thinks otherwise and the constable marches off to fetch a railways policeman from nearby St James station, the latter empowered to arrest the two trespassers by Apartheid's twisted laws. Luckily, the policeman is more annoyed with the beach guard than with the young couple and lets them go back to Kalk Bay.

However, Pretty-Boy is deeply offended and when they return to the picnic crowd, Moena Lelik breaks into tears. Zoot, rarely heard issuing such a windfall of words, sums up the depressing moment by saying: „You know, it's a funny thing but it's only in the District that I feel safe. District 6 is like an island, if you follow me, an island in the sea of apartheid. The whole of District 6 is one big apartheid, so we can't see it. We only see it when the white man comes and forces it on us...or when we leave the District, leave our islandand come here to Kalk Bay.“

Although racial separation has invaded District 6 as well, a result of dividing up the inner heart of Cape Town into so-called slum and commercial zones, the residents never applied ethnic prejudices amongst themselves, even though a handful of white and black folks lived there as well. The general atmosphere had been one of positive tolerance towards „foreign races“, even though some tough conflicts between Zoot and his gangster buddies, and outsiders, entering the District for different reasons, are an integral element of Rive's gripping tale. But Apartheid was not allowed among the residents and never played a decisive role till Moena Lelik and Pretty-Boy run into the beach constable in Part 2. The novel takes a turn for the worse, so to say, and Part 3, Night 1970, sees a complete change of sentiment. It is divided into these chapters: Inspector Engelbrecht, Katzen, The Last of the Knights, The Abrahamses, Dieter, The Casbah and Winsor Park. The latter chapter heading, as name of Zoot's cottage in Caledon St, a reminder of how close events and places in the novel are related to English colonialism, here albeit shortened by local dialect convention.

The residents now directly threatened by an Apartheid inspector, Mr Engelbrecht, disseminating the horrible news that District 6 has been declared a white area. And that they had to move out and find accommodation elsewhere.

In my talk with the author in his house from December of 1986, the year „Buckingham Palace...“ had appeared as his last major work before his unexpected passing in 1989, he stated clearly that he uses his writings to fight racial segregation. He knew a novel or work of creative fiction would not change the situation, but it could

contribute to spread a spirit of resistance. He said he used his writings to keep the climate of resistance alive. Among the 24 respondents in my interview book, his answers were the most committed, direct and spirited, encouraging me to base my New Theory of the Arts on social factors. His main interest throughout his life had been District 6 and Group Areas. With „Buckingham Palace...“ he in fact delivered the deserved and skilfully crafted culmination of this unique dedication.

In the introduction to Part 3, in italics, the latter intended to open a certain yet very fluent gap between the fictional characters and himself, the author again relates personal recollections, namely how he and his family left the District. He talks about becoming an academic while boarding in Grassy Park. And about „what this horrible thing of apartheid“ had done to him and that he had to go back to Caledon St and see. See the destruction and tragedy meted out by an intolerant and inhuman state. In the same Cape Town suburb of Grassy Park he would later settle for good in real life, after major travels to the UK and USA.

Showing their loyalty to their homes, their special social involvements and the by now sacred location, District residents gather in St Mark's church under guidance of the school principal and decide to show resistance. This by refusing to move out on the planned final date, before frontend loaders and bulldozers would come and take apart their cottages. As, oddly enough, Israeli war machinery did in the occupied Palestinian territories long before October 7, 2023!

One character stands out here, Mr Katzen, the Jewish, white landlord of the Buckingham Palace cottages to whom Zoot and his bunch never paid a single cent of rent, all those years they in fact squatted in Winsor Park. As a big surprise, Katzen, in the chapter of the same name, joins residents at their church gathering, admitting that he felt like one of them and would never give up his properties to the encroaching Apartheid state. And he tells them his own sad story how he had to flee Nazi Germany and his parents suffered so badly while living under the fascist regime. The tragedy of forced removals becomes the tragedy of historical injustice in Central Europe and a certain fatality permeates the meeting - what can we really do against the segregation monster? Human humour that had accompanied so many turning points in the novel, now turns to utter tragedy, initiated by a non-human agency from Pretoria, the then administrative capital of racist South Africa. Mr Katzen soon passes away in hospital while Mary and Zoot who want to visit him in the emergency ward, have to leave again on grounds of their, wrong „colour. Zoot is the last remaining resident in the Caledon St cottages and watches how the bulldozers and frontend loaders tear down the walls around him.

The desolate area left behind had already been painted in gloomy colours by the author, returning to District 6 in the introduction to Part 3, after Apartheid had achieved the forced removal of residents.

And what is left behind in Gaza today, a ruined wasteland with more than 70 % of buildings damaged or destroyed, offers similarly bleak prospects, underlined, almost legally enforced by the planned ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the name of the Trump and Netanyahu regimes.

It is strange and striking at same time how this amazingly real yet utterly invented story by Richard Rive opens unknown parallels. At least unknown almost 40 years ago, when „Buckingham Palace, District 6“ was published in Cape Town. Was it a blueprint for the

destruction in wake of the bitter Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Middle East? Certainly not, yet its symbolic message and close link to a future that is now, ravages mind and spirit on the very day this article appears!

Furthermore the prospects created by the utterly fictitious plan of relocating Palestinians without a chance of return to the land of their birth and origins a real horror story indeed?

As shown in Mr Rive's amazing and intriguing literary masterpiece, forced relocations will never work and should by now be a thing of the past. All they do is turn comedy to tragedy and joyful sentiment to bitter resistance. In South Africa, history has proven that resistance against such conditions has to be a success, and then the free and anti-racist South Africa was established in 1994. Despite teething problems like corruption and power blackouts, the way the country took is irreversible, freedom from racial persecution is real, and what the Trump and Netanyahu regimes try in Gaza should surely follow the same forsaken path that Apartheid stumbled along and fell down on in South Africa!

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