

Ostranenie in Cape Town

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For Viktor Shklovsky, habitual perception born of an automatic, regular viewpoint, was the greatest obstacle to knowing reality. Russian formalists saw de-familiarisation (*Ostranenie*) as a way to gain a fresh perception of reality. In this article I argue that the principle of *Ostranenie* can be applied to urban ethnographic research, which can generate a process of de-familiarisation in the subjects involved in movement the research. Inspired by Russian formalists' ideas, I adopt a method of ethnographic observation in the city that seeks to generate a de-familiarised viewpoint among its inhabitants. In my research in Cape Town I used urban movement as a fieldwork tactic in the attempt to observe the relationship between the city's inhabitants and its urban spaces beyond a habitual relationship. This experiment generated a fresh perception of the city's places, which were described and represented 'as if for the first time'.

Keywords: Russian formalists, de-familiarisation, Cape Town, photo eliciting, urban.

Introduction

In Russian formalist thought, de-familiarisation (*Ostranenie*) is seen as important to awakening what is dormant. In *Art as Technique* (1917), Victor Shklovsky defined de-familiarisation as the true origin of experience, the only thing that can overcome the indifference of habit-bound perception. Shklovsky introduced the theory of de-familiarisation through the interplay of opposites, such as life vs. death, vital vs. fossilised and aesthetic perception vs. habitual recognition. The Russian formalists considered the 'first impression' to be a revelatory experience, while they saw a habitual, automatic viewpoint as an obstruction to understanding the true meaning of things. Shklovsky wrote, 'Habitualization devours works, clothing, furniture, one's wife, and fear of war...And art exists that one may recover a sensation of life, it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not they are known' (1965 [1917]: 12).

In this article I argue that we can usefully translate the principles of formalist concepts into ethnographic observation, particularly of urban phenomena, and that we can view the de-familiarised viewpoint on a city's locations as a particular form of observation that can reveal aspects which would be otherwise hidden by a habit-bound viewpoint. By transposing formalist ideas to the ethnographic observation of the city, we can engage in an investigation of urban places in which they are described by the city's inhabitants through a de-familiarised viewpoint. In the pages that follow I shall describe some key elements of my research in post-Apartheid Cape Town. I shall relate how, through the application of investigative techniques such as urban movement and dramatization of experience, I have attempted to observe the relationship between the city's inhabitants and the city's places and the ways in which these places were signified drawing on 'first impressions', or on the meaning given to these places on first seeing them. This investigative method brought out the interviewees' 'distorted' representation of the city and its spaces, with certain locations being represented in relation to particular events of their lives.

Be Free

In March 2011 I went to Cape Town to conduct the fieldwork for my PhD. I investigated the processes by which urban places were signified in the post-Apartheid period. I had booked an apartment in the centre of town, where I was to conduct much of my fieldwork. A few days before I travelled to Cape Town I was notified that the apartment was occupied and I would have to spend the first night in a nearby hotel, the Tulip Inn. When I got to this hotel, I found that I had been given a room on the top floor, from where I had a view of Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD). When I opened the window curtains, I saw a billboard with the words 'e - Be Free' written on it.



Image 1: Tulip Inn 1



Image 2: Tulip Inn 2

I paused, reflecting on what to 'Be Free' meant. Instead of the abstract notion of freedom, I started thinking about what it had meant to me in the past; how the way I understood freedom had changed through what I had read, the people I had met and where I had travelled. I remembered meeting Shirley Gunn in Cape Town. This is a white woman who in the name of freedom abandoned her family and left her work in order to take part in the armed conflict. I remembered this tiny woman whose hands shook when she recalled certain events in her life. Readings on the subject of freedom also came to mind; particularly about Brutus, in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, ruminating over freedom after having killed his mentor.

Reconstructing past events, losing myself in my memories led me to re-examine what and who I had been but also what or who I wanted to be or, more specifically, what my desires and aspirations were, especially those linked to my experience in the field. The imaginary creation of my freedom followed a spatial-temporal order. I wanted to see again specific places that I had visited in the past, such as Cape Agulhas, where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic. I wanted to experience certain feelings, such as meeting friends I hadn't seen for years. *The Snap* came to mind, a nightclub where I first met Kay on a Wednesday evening in 2005. I wanted to walk along the promenade at Sea Point on a stormy day. That night, I stood by the window of the Tulip Inn for a long time, reflecting on how my memories and personal life experience could enable me to enter into a dialogue with Long Street and with post-Apartheid Cape Town.

Seeing an advertising message such as ‘e - Be Free’ in an urban landscape is a perfectly normal experience for a European used to living in a city. Yet, in the context of ethnographic research, such an experience might become the moment when new types of urban communication are revealed. Vincent Crapanzano (1986) has defined the ‘Hermes Dilemma’ as the art of revealing what is masked through ethnographic interpretation. ‘The ethnographer is a little like Hermes: a messenger who, given methodologies for uncovering the masked, the latent, the unconscious, may even obtain his message through stealth. He presents languages, cultures, and society in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness’ (Crapanzano 1986: 51). This analogy between anthropological description and the messenger of the gods is based on a methodological reversal that makes the foreign familiar and the familiar foreign. The art of interpretation or ‘hermeneutics’ is found in distancing the near.

It was only after I had spent a considerable amount of time in the field that I discovered that the ‘e’ in the aforementioned billboard advert referred to a local television station and that the billboard was probably meant to promote freedom of information, or state that only by gaining access to information it is possible to win freedom. The ‘strangeness’ of the city had prevented me from grasping the meaning that the message’s sender had likely intended to convey; yet, it was precisely through this ‘misunderstanding’ that the start of a particular dialogue with the city became possible.

The fact that I did not know who was the sender of the advert and what were its communicative intentions had triggered an inner dialogue; the advert’s ‘strangeness’ had generated in me specific memories, emotions and hopes. In other words, my ‘strangeness’ had not impeded communication with the city, but had actually elicited a new form of intense and engaging communication. My memories, things that I had read and trips that I had taken came into play and ‘entered into a dialogue’ with the urban space.

Traditionally, ethnography involves uprooting and alienation as situations of distress, and lack of familiarity with the field is often described as something of a purgatory you have to get through to attain the entry keys to understanding the object of study. Nonetheless, there are many examples in which the first approach to the field, including the urban field, is described by the fieldworker as revelatory.

Massimo Canevacci noted that a new arrival’s viewpoint on a city could be taken as a state that could reveal that which is incomprehensible to the habitual, familiarised viewpoint. He stated, ‘Often the uprooted viewpoint of foreigners can grasp differences that the habituated viewpoint does not see because it is too internal and too habituated by an excess of familiarity’ (Canevacci 1996: 16). For him, uprooting and alienation are privileged conditions that ‘can let us rise towards new cognitive possibilities, through a (dirty) result of unexpected, random mixtures between the rational, perceptual and emotional levels, such as only the city-form can combine’ (Canevacci 1996: 18). During his field research in Sao Paulo, finding himself in a strange city, unable to withdraw cash and without any local contacts, Canevacci decided to enjoy his disorientation and ‘get lost’ in the city. From this experience, he drew the foundations for a particular methodology based on urban disorientation. He wrote, ‘I am convinced that we can only develop a more or less precise research method on urban communication with one condition: that we want to get lost, enjoy being lost, accept having

become foreign, uprooted and isolated before we can rebuild a new metropolitan identity' (Canevacci 1996: 18).

Andrew Irving, like Canevacci, considered one's initial perception of the city as an invaluable moment for ethnographic research. In 'Journey to the End of the Night: Disillusion and Derangement among the Sense' (2008) he describes how his arrival in New York was 'marked' by his previous time in Africa. 'Manhattan's long, straight avenues, full of vast buildings and consumer goods, look strange, because my reality is formed in contrast to the sights and sounds left behind in Uganda, rather than what is empirically present and perceived' (Irving 2008: 134). Irving does not see the first impression of the field as a preliminary phase in understanding the object of study; on the contrary, for him the initial perception is a revealing viewpoint that can unveil what a habitual perception misses.

In line with the ideas of the Russian formalists, both Canevacci and Irving emphasise how an excess of familiarity can render opaque what an uprooted, displaced viewpoint can reveal. Both make a distinction between the researcher's unfamiliarised viewpoint (as that of the traveller or the newcomer to a city) and the viewpoint of locals, emphasising how these different viewpoints may generate different perceptions. On the one hand, Irving notes, there is the habitual relationship of locals, who 'experience and negotiate the city's complexity through familiar paths, movements, and practices. Rather than always being consciously aware of their actions'. On the other hand, there are the new arrivals who 'must frequently enter the self-conscious and reflective realm of the cogito to know how to act or where to go, they potentially see, sense, and understand things that the local does not' (Irving 2008: 137).

The newcomer's unfamiliarised viewpoint is thus described as a 'state of grace', so to speak, that (like Hermes) can reveal what appears opaque to a habituated viewpoint. Here, the dichotomous distinction between the perception of the observer (newcomer) and that of a local person evokes two separate realities that cannot permeate or influence each other. Yet, as Gregory Bateson (1951) stated, the *process* of knowledge should be seen as a *relationship* between the perceiving subject and the perceived subject. From this epistemological perspective, all knowing processes (including ethnographic ones) should be seen as a relationship between these two interdependent entities. The 'perceiver and perceived' are not autonomous, separate agents; they are 'intrinsically connected' (Rapport 1997: 5). While it is true that the habitual viewpoint of a local person can progressively influence that of the newcomer (and make it habitual), the opposite process can take place whereby a foreigner's viewpoint can sow seeds of de-familiarisation amongst locals. In the present discussion, I suggest that the outsider's viewpoint of the ethnographer (and newcomers in general) can generate an uprooting of the habitual perception and spark a process of de-familiarisation among those involved in the ethnographic research.

On Method

After my arrival in the field, I realised how an unfamiliar viewpoint on the city could reveal aspects that would otherwise be inaccessible. Thus, I asked how I could generate a de-familiarised viewpoint on the city also through its inhabitants. My arrival in the city made me understand how the fact of being a stranger could favour a particular kind of communication

in which a de-familiarised viewpoint on its places, buildings and streets could foster introspection and inner searching. This experience became a *conditio sine qua non* for building the research methodology through which I intended to pursue the following objectives:

- a. Determine how I could investigate the memory of my interviewees by going through the city's places and inciting particular memories and feelings related to specific urban places, which could not be observed through traditional tools of study;
- b. Explore how urban movement could generate a process of de-familiarisation with urban places among my interviewees and observe them in relation to personal experiences in contrast with their habitual viewpoints born of familiarity with these places;
- c. Adopt a kind of 'distorted' representation of the city through the combination of written excerpts from the interviews and pictures of urban places in order to convey the process of 'making strange' places that were considered habitual and regular.

The method that I used has three separate phases:

1. Movement through city with the interviewees, going through places that they considered significant because they were related to a particular personal experience;
2. Taking photographs of the places we went to and recording comments and quotes from interviews;
3. Combining the pictures and texts from the interviews.

A primary source of inspiration for my methodology was the 'deambulation' method employed by the French surrealists. They undertook a journey without a purpose and without a destination, a literary wandering through the map of a mental territory. In surrealist terms, space is an active, living subject. It is an autonomous generator of affections and relationships. It is a living organism with its own character, a conversation partner that has shifts in mood and can be visited regularly to establish a dialogue. The surrealists' wandering through such a territory was guided by psychic automatism and spontaneous disorientation. By taking inspiration from their deambulation method in my study of urban phenomena, I intended to let my subjects explore like unknown areas the parts of the city that were familiar to them, and delve into the mazes of their memory and into the infinite dialogues of their inner worlds.

A second source of inspiration for my methodology was Andrew Irving's research in Kampala, London and New York on HIV-positive people (2004 and 2008). His methodology was based on urban movement and sought to explore the lives of the people he interviewed by relating their personal experiences to the urban places. The person is asked to walk around the city, recounting his or her thoughts and life. The fieldworker observes how the past emerges in the present, records the interviews, asks questions and takes pictures of the places that they visit. Thus s/he builds an urban pathway made of different places that have significance for the interviewee. The city is subdivided into psychic and emotional areas which the subject experiences through movement. The act of walking through the city spurs the interviewees to relive their past and explore it anew. Walking facilitates one's own lived experience through the reliving of the actual experience (*Erlebnis*), or allows one to have new experiences.

When I started my project I had not yet realised the potential of this method. It was only when I tried it out with my interviewees that I realised how it could generate a shift in the perception of the city. During the fieldwork I noticed how residential places, streets and clubs that were habitually acknowledged for their practical value started to be seen as places in which one's past could be explored. The city stopped being seen as a familiar place, as it was discovered as an unexplored domain in which resided memories, emotions and hopes that had been obscured by habitual perception.

Looking at the pictures that show places where significant events in their lives had taken place prompted my interviewees to explore the meaning that these places had had in their personal experience. Their habitual, automatic viewpoint was challenged through an exercise in which exploring certain urban places coincided with exploring memory. The places that they thought they knew became 'places full of hidden temporalities' that were not yet fully explored. Like Hermes, my interviewees revealed what the habitual viewpoint had obscured. The process of exploring the city ethnographically led them to making places become de-familiarised.

This method had a number of limitations, particularly the fact that it did not always lead informants to adopt a completely de-familiarised viewpoint on the city. Initially, I intended to use this method to lead my interviewees to observe urban places 'as if for the first time'. I thought it would be possible to avoid any influence from a habituated viewpoint. However, during the fieldwork I realized that it would not always be possible to make an absolute distinction between a habitual viewpoint and a de-familiarised one. It often happened that informants overlapped descriptions of places as if seen and perceived for the first time with their habitual attitude to the city. For example, a street could simultaneously be the place where a man realized that he had become homeless and the place where he goes every day to find sources of sustenance. I chose excerpts from interviews in which the interviewees described the places of the city, remembering the first time they saw these places, or the first time they attached a particular meaning to them. I decided not to include the parts in which they focused on their everyday relationship with these places. I wanted to emphasize the de-familiarising aspect of the ethnographic process.

In the pages that follow I will examine three cases. Louis, Xolewa and Kay are three residents of Cape Town with different sociocultural backgrounds and life experiences. Louis is a 37-year-old man of Afrikaans origin who became homeless after a chain of economic and family problems. He went to live on Long Street, one of Cape Town's oldest, best known streets frequented by many locals and tourists, particularly at night. For him, Long Street was both the place where he lived and the place where he found his means of subsistence. Xolewa is a 28-year-old girl of Xhosa origins from Eastern Cape who lives in Kayelitsha, one of the country's largest and most populous townships. In Kayelitsha, Xolewa found the place where she finally felt accepted after a number of family and social conflicts that made her feel like 'an outcast'. Kay is a 35-year-old coloured woman from a town in the Western Cape (Worcester). She came to Cape Town in search of a more cosmopolitan environment where the social and racial divisions inherited from the Apartheid period were less harsh than in her native town. I went with these informants to the places that they considered significant. I shall

report excerpts from the interviews conducted in places that they considered particularly familiar but that they saw from a fresh viewpoint as they became involved in my ethnographic study.



Image 3: Long Street - *This street is my mother*

Below is an excerpt from an interview I did with Louis in Cape Town in April 2011. He said:

‘When I got to Long Street, my first thought was of my mother. I knew that I had forever lost the only person who really cared about me. I knew no one would love me like she did. It was three in the afternoon and Long Street was deserted. The image of my mother mixed up with that of the street’s pavement. As I walked I started to think about where I would sleep that night and how I would get money to eat. At one point I started to think that Long Street would be the one to take care of me, feed me and give me a place to sleep. Long Street would be my mother.’

In 2008, after losing his mother, Louis chose to leave his father’s home for good and became homeless. As I have said, he lives on Long Street. I met him in a bar on Long Street while he was drinking a coffee at a table. When he found out that I was a foreigner he decided to buy me a drink. Only later did I find out that this was his tried-and-true way of approaching tourists. Louis told me that Long Street was full of black and coloured homeless people who were ‘often poorly dressed or had a threatening attitude’. He said that being white could be a disadvantage for him because ‘no foreigners believed that a white person could be homeless in South Africa’ and because ‘tourists think that whites are just the ones exploiting blacks’. This is why Louis decided to camouflage himself as a patron of the street’s bars, trying to keep a presentable appearance and investing part of the little he had in ‘hooking’ tourists, buying them drinks to start a conversation and then ask them money or offer to be their impromptu guide for payment.

Over the years Louis learned to recognise the comings and goings of the street’s regulars and discovered the tricks and secrets that helped him survive life on the street. He knew every building on Long Street and had been in almost all its nightclubs, and often knew

their owners, the staff and many of the regulars. Although it had only been five years since he had started living on Long Street, he was so habituated to Long Street's life that I found it hard to imagine his life elsewhere. He told me that before moving there he lived in a residential area not far from the city, where only whites lived. After the death of his mother he had a fight with his father and sister and ended up living on the street. I asked him to take part in an interview and he accepted.

We started on the lower part of the Long Street, where many tall buildings and skyscrapers are located, housing offices of local and international banks and firms. Walking to the intersection with Strand Street, Louis remembered the day he decided to leave his father's home and gathered his belongings in a small backpack and went to Long Street in search of shelter.

'When I got to Long Street that day, in my head I went over everything that had happened in the previous months. I saw the image of my father's face when he got the news of my mother's accident. Sh.t he got old in a few seconds, all at once. His face turned yellow and he was bent like a branch. I thought of the image of the accident when she died, though I hadn't seen it, just imagined it. I thought of the face she might have made when the car skidded and went off the road. I thought of myself and how I was before she died and how I was changing. I saw these buildings of the city and it seemed like something cruel was pushing me away. It seemed to me that my life had said to me: "No".'

Having walked through the street's lower part, Louis and I went to the hostel where he had stayed during the first days he spent in Cape Town. He said:

'When I saw that hostel I immediately understood that my life had changed. I saw the faces of the janitors who looked at me like, 'What the f..k are you doing here?' It was a place full of mainly Nigerian and Congolese immigrants and only a few desperate coloureds from the provinces. The janitor gave me the keys to my locker (which was broken into that very night) and sheets. Going up to the stairs I felt a rage that I'd never felt before. I felt my back muscles throbbing like I was getting ready to fight'.

As we left the hostel behind us and started walking down Long Street again, Louis told me that a long time later he understood that he would gradually stop thinking of his mother and family and try to adapt to his new situation 'keeping [his] eyes open' and 'looking at things as they really are.' He added:

'My mother loved me a lot and this made me happy, but at the same time all the love she gave me prevents me from adapting to the situation I am experiencing. I can't bring myself to steal, or to knife someone to take their money, or to be totally unscrupulous. The people with whom I live now feel no remorse at all in taking whatever action they feel necessary; they bear hate within them and this

enables them to survive in this environment. The more hate you have within you, the more lacking in manners and morals you are, the better you can adapt to this type of life. It is as if everything has been turned upside down: in normal white society if you are well-behaved, if you are loving, you win the prizes; where I am now, these are considered limitations. My background is a handicap and “they” are aware of it, they feel it, they smell it. From a certain point of view, my mother’s love has destroyed me.’

After Long Street, Louis decided to take me to a place near the Garden district, a residential area close to the city centre. We went through the neighbourhood’s streets and sat across from a palm tree. He told me that he used to come here frequently to go to the house where a childhood friend he still saw lived. Louis told me how these places were important for him because it was here that he had had a series of thoughts that let him better ‘accept’ his homeless situation. As we sat under the palm tree, he started to recall:

‘Last year I ended up waiting here for my friend to come home so I could have a roof over my head. It was five o’clock and he was due to come back at six, an hour later. While I was waiting I got a text message telling me that he wouldn’t be able to put me up that night. I was finished; I didn’t have a single rand in my pocket and I didn’t know where I was going to sleep. Just the thought of going back to Long Street made my flesh creep; under the tree I started to think about what I should do.

My only solution was to go back there, but just thinking about it made me shudder. I didn’t want to feel the stench of those people; I didn’t want to sleep with my arms round my rucksack, terrified of being knifed during the night. I started looking for a reason why I’d ended up in that situation; what harm had I done? I started to pray. I thought perhaps there was something somewhere that could help me if I start praying; I was tired and exhausted and I had given in to the situation and my fate.

I said, “If you are there, superior being, come and save me, I surrender myself to you.” At a certain point I heard a text message arriving: it was my friend telling me he’d managed to get out of what he was doing and I could go to his house if I wanted. I had a feeling of infinite joy; it was an extremely pleasant feeling; it felt to me like a greater force, a higher power was looking after me. That day I understood that whatever happened to me, I would survive.’

Louis views this episode as the moment in which hope was born in him. Spending hours under the tree had led him to recognize and review his awareness of his own situation. Before this, he had devoted his energies to ‘finding solutions for survival’. Now, he was questioning himself. This awareness plunged him into a state of ‘desperation’, but the arrival of the text message suddenly triggered a feeling of hope and a new faith in his destiny. Louis also said

that this was the first time he had told anyone about this episode. In this case, it was the interview process that reawakened his memories of that day.

Xolewa: Shack and Love

When I met Xolewa in May 2011 in an Internet café in the centre of Cape Town where she went to check her email, she was living in Khayelitsha, the largest township in Cape Town and the second largest in South Africa after Soweto. Originally, we know, from Eastern Cape, she had been living in Cape Town since she was 13-years-old, when she was entrusted to the care of her aunt. A few days after we met, Xolewa accepted to do an interview with me. She told me that, unlike many of the township's residents, Kayelitsha was not her first destination and that she came there after having lived in the centre of Cape Town.



Image 4: *While I made love and thought of his death, I discovered I was free* – Kayelitsha

Listening to her life story, I discovered that Xolewa's experience was marked by different forms of exclusion (social and family) and how she found in Kayelitsha the comfortable environment that she had long sought. She told me that it was because of her confrontational relationship with her mother and her partner that the decision was made to entrust her to her aunt. She said, 'When my mother met her new partner our relationship began to deteriorate. That man had two children with her and treated me differently because I wasn't his daughter; they made me feel like an outsider.' Xolewa recalls with distress how she started experiencing loneliness in her family: 'I lived with them, but sometimes it felt like I was invisible, like I didn't exist. All the attention was reserved for my little brothers and I was treated like a domestic servant or worse'. The young girl's feelings of deprivation and discomfort exploded in a confrontational relationship with her mother who decided to send her to her sister.

'The situation didn't change much with my aunt. She treated me like a maid who had to clean, iron, cook and didn't allow me to go out with other kids of my age'. However, in Cape Town, Xolewa began to learn what life was like for children of her age, particularly at school. Thus, she became aware of the existence of other worlds, different from her own circumstances, and when she came of age she decided to leave her aunt's house and to live on her own in Khayelitsha. The house where she move, she recalls, 'was just a shack, but it was all mine. No-one could tell me what to do'. For many of those who live there, Khayelitsha

symbolised their hope to change their lives, to find work in the city. For Xolewa it represented freedom.

I started my pathway with Xolewa in Senator Park; the place, that is, where she went to live when she first got to Cape Town. She told me how she often happened to pass this building and ‘no longer took notice of it’. But on the day that I did the interview with her she started to recall her early days in the city. Until twenty years ago, Senator Park was a predominantly white, middle-class residential place, but it has gradually been taken over by immigrants, some of whom are involved in illegal activities such as drug dealing and prostitution. Today, Senator Park is seen as one of the most disreputable places in Cape Town. It has also been the location of serious crimes, such as the kidnappings or murders of people who had been lured into the building.



Image 5: Senator Park - A sense of powerlessness

Our interview took place in the street because it would not be safe for us to go inside the building. Standing across from Senator Park, Xolewa started to recall the time when she lived with her aunt. When she arrived in Cape Town, this building was going through a transitional stage. She said, ‘It was beginning to be inhabited by migrants who lived crammed six to a room, but there were also still white residents living in comfort in their own flats.’ Xolewa added that at this time whites were starting to gravitate towards other areas of the city, like Sea Point, Rondebosch and Claremont. She remarked:

‘Every time the blacks arrive in a place, the whites start to take flight, it’s what they’ve always done and they did it at Senator Park, too. I lived with my aunt in a small flat on the ninth floor. I remember how difficult it was living in close proximity to that woman. When I used to live in the Eastern Cape and the atmosphere got heavy at home, I could go out into the street. Here, in town, that wasn’t possible. That woman wouldn’t allow me to go out and kept me shut inside those four walls. Sometimes the house would be clean. Everything had been

washed and ironed, and I was having a nap when she would wake me up and make me keep working, even if there was no need. I remember on one occasion the clothes were folded and I unfolded them, then refolded them just so I would look busy and wouldn't have to put up with that woman's screaming. For me this building has a curse on it; it reminds me of how lonely I felt and the sense of powerlessness I experienced within its walls. My mother never phoned me and sometimes I tried to get in touch with her but she never answered. That man had taken her away from me and I hated him for all I was worth'.

During the interview, Xolewa described how, at that time, she often remembered the wrongs that her mother and especially her stepfather had done her and she described the sense of liberation she felt when she left Senator Park. A few days later, I decided to go with Xolewa to Khayelitsha to visit the house where she moved when she decided to live on her own. Here, she connected her inner distress at Senator Park with a specific event that she saw as retribution; the day, that is, when she got a call informing her of the death of her stepfather. Xolewa's shack was very small, just like the majority of the shanties in Khayelitsha. Inside there was only a bed, a small camping stove and a cupboard made of salvaged materials. When inside, Xolewa stretched out on the bed and, looking at the ceiling, recalled an episode that had happened many years before:

'I know it's horrible to say this, but one of my fondest memories is of a telephone call to tell me that my stepfather had died. I was in my boyfriend's shack and we were still sleeping. The phone was ringing, but I didn't answer the first time; the second time I answered and I was still half-asleep. I heard my mother's voice, she was crying and I was worried. She told me that man had been shot dead in Pretoria. It was as if she was looking to me to comfort her and this made me feel uncomfortable. She'd abandoned me for that man and his daughter and now he'd been killed; she was asking me to console her. Perhaps she was hoping I would feel grief, but I felt I had been set free. When I was little, I hoped he would die so I could become close to my mother again, but now I was with my boyfriend, I didn't need her anymore. I had a man and she didn't have one anymore. When I hung up my boyfriend asked me what had happened; I didn't tell him anything and we made love. I was happy and I felt free.'

Kay's farewell

Born in Worcester, a town in the Western Cape province, Kay was 23-years-old when she decided to leave her birthplace and go to live in Cape Town, where she would finally be able to forget life in the provinces. In Cape Town she discovered a place rich in opportunity and, most important, a place where she could build her own personal identity regardless of her racial background and political affiliation.



Image 6: *Forget* – Going into Cape Town

In South Africa, the 1980s were marked by violent confrontations between opposing groups. Because Kay's family was involved in the political conflict, their house was searched and they were under constant police surveillance. After the collapse of Apartheid, all Kay wanted was to forget that time and start a new life. She told me that in 1994 she got a job in a hotel in Worcester that had an exclusively white clientele, and that she was the first coloured girl to have been taken on there. Her experience at the restaurant did not turn out well. Kay understood that, despite the changes in policy and laws that allowed her to work side by side with whites, her town was not ready to accept these changes. Tired of the atmosphere in Worcester, she decided to leave the small town for good and go and live in Cape Town.

It was only in 2011, years after I first met her, that I decided to interview Kay. I started my pathway with her on Strand Street, opposite the office building of the company that had hired her when she arrived in the city. As we walked to the front of the building, she told me about the first day she had set foot in the company office:

'I remember when I was in the elevator, shaking. I had to have my interview and I didn't know how I'd be seen. I thought I would have to show that I was smart even though I was coloured. The elevator went up quickly, but it felt like hours to me. When I finally got to the last floor and the doors opened I saw a blond woman who smiled at me, and I said to myself, "They'll take me. I'm sure of it."'

Kay told me how after having found a job in the city, a 'wonderful' period started when she felt free of the bad memories connected to her hometown. She was proud of herself, she said, for having been able to leave her town and make a decision 'without thinking too much'. After Strand Street, we decided to go to the tattoo shop where during her first weeks in the city she had decided to get a tattoo. Standing in front of the shop she started to recollect:

'I'd decided to get a tattoo and I felt the Nike slogan was the best choice. Things were going well in my life at the time, I used to go out with my group of friends and everything was becoming easier. The Nike slogan then was 'Just do it'. I felt like that slogan had been written for me. One afternoon I was walking past here, and without a second thought, I went in and had my tattoo done. While the tattoo

artist was drawing on my body I felt a sense of completeness and it seemed to me like I finally understood how I should act in the world without ever making a mistake’.

A few days after this interview outside the tattoo shop, Kay suggested that I go with her to Worcester to visit her family and the places of her childhood. After spending the entire day in the town, we went to an intersection where she had gotten a ride to go permanently to Cape Town. Although she had been to this place many times, during the interview she started to recall the day when she left her town for good:

‘I wanted to forget everything’, she said, ‘the problems with my family, the provincialism of my town, even the fact that people knew me. One day I was speaking to a girlfriend who had moved to Cape Town and had come to Worcester to see her family. She told me that she felt free, that her life had changed completely and she was happy. I didn’t think about it a minute longer. I decided to leave and a week later I was in the city. I believe that if I’d started to think it over, if I’d considered all the risks, if I’d talked it over with my family, I’d still be in Worcester with three kids, a huge belly and a coloured husband who expects his dinner to be waiting for him. But it didn’t turn out like that because I took action immediately. A few hours later I was in the street looking for a ride to Cape Town. I knew that my fate would change forever. ‘

Conclusion

The theory of *Ostranenie* is also called an ‘economics of perception’, where the cost of perception lies in the difficulty of engaging in de-familiarisation, creating a textual plane for readers bound by the space of meaning and by the time needed to recognise the ‘deformed/de-familiarised object in its poetic description’ (Crawford 2008: 4). We have seen that Victor Shklovsky explained how an aspect of the process of de-familiarisation has to do with the process of ‘distortion’ and making the habitual ‘strange’. According to him, the de-familiarised view leads to a distortion of habitual reality and the adoption of a poetic language. He gave literary examples of writers, such as Leo Tolstoy, who present objects in novels as if they had never been seen before. He wrote, ‘In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. For example, in “Shame!” (1895), Tolstoy “de-familiarises” the idea of flogging in this way: “to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches”, and, after a few lines, “to lash about on the naked buttocks.”’ (Shklovsky 1965 [1917]: 13). Tolstoy avoids defining concepts and places with their names; instead he distorts them through metaphors and other definitions. And yet it is precisely the semantic shift (*sdvig*) typical of poetic language and its distortion that, according to Shklovsky, ensures the perception of the object.

During my research, I discovered how for my interviewees the process of de-familiarisation of the city meant avoiding calling with their original name the places that we

walked through. Instead, they described these places through metaphors and other kinds of words. We have seen how Louis compared Long Street to his mother and how Xolewa called the roof of her house ‘the place I was looking at while I was making love and thinking about his (my stepfather’s) death, and I discovered I was free’. When Kay passed by the intersection of the highway connecting Worcester and Cape Town, she identified it as the place where she ‘would start to forget’ and where she went ‘after having made a sudden decision’.

In order to convey the process of de-familiarisation elicited by ethnographic research, I chose to represent my work by associating excerpts from the interviews with pictures of the urban pathways. Thus I produced a number of representations in which visual texts, written texts and their interaction create a hybrid, multi-dimensional form of communication. Ephrat Huss (2012) has argued that in visual anthropology there is a ‘conflicted relationship’ between visual and verbal ways of understanding. He has noted that for many authors images are ‘a discrete (compositional) language that does not need explanatory words’, and ‘that images are a more authentic or universal form of expression than words’ (McNiff cited in Huss 2012: 1441), while others have emphasised how the use of art to illustrate words ‘is a reduction of their inherent characteristic’ (Mason cited in Huss 2012: 1441). My contention is a form of ethnographic representation in which written text and visual materials are intended not as illustrations of each other but as essential, complementary parts of one expressive, interpretive flow.

On this point, important sources of inspiration include works by artists such as Jim Goldberg, W. G. Sebald and Hamish Fulton. In his *Rich and Poor* (1985) and *Raised by Wolves* (1995), Goldberg pairs portraits of individuals and groups with their handwritten impressions. John Collier has noted how Goldberg’s work can be seen as a form of a photographic interview in which the interviewees question themselves in relation to the images rather than engage in a dialogue with the researcher. In this sense, the visual and textual are anchored to the meaning that the subjects give to the images and their experiences. Sebald also used a particular combination of texts and images in his work, describing himself a bricoleur. His work is marked by the juxtaposition and overlapping of images and writings from different sources. In some cases, he produced the texts and images himself; in other cases, he borrowed from other artists and just composed the two languages. In this juxtaposition of images, the two communicative forms borrow fragments of communication from each other. Mark Anderson (2008) noted how Sebald’s written texts aspired to take on a visual form, while his photographs were intended as a form of writing. As Sebald noted, the use of photography in his work was not intended for illustrative purposes but as a source of inspiration for his writings. For him, when writing, you see ways of departing from the images or entering into them to tell your story, to use them instead of a textual passage (Sebald in Scholz 2007).

My combined use of written and visual materials is aimed to express the process of de-familiarisation that shapes the discovery of the city through participation in an ethnographic study. We have seen how, during the interviews, my informants rarely called the places with their original name; they referred, instead, to ‘other’ situations that were distant in time and space. Louis Crawford (2008) has noted how, in the process of de-familiarisation, the

semantic shift from representation and from the represented object should be read as a mediation of time and space. On the one hand, de-familiarisation involves an extrapolation of the temporal context in which the object was originally set; he remarks, ‘Since an artistic device like de-familiarisation is a restoration of difference to an object which has lost it in the course of a life’ (Crawford 2008: 9). On the other hand, each representation can be understood only in so far as it is spatially outside the text to which it refers; according to him, ‘The text and its signs remain spatially secondary, since while they are metaphorically aligned on a spatial grid of meaning (a semantic chessboard) in which the semantic de-familiarisation is effected by displacements into different contiguities, the perception thus engendered is not of the signs and the text but of objects elsewhere.’ (Crawford 2008: 12).

In my work, I have tried to create a semantic de-familiarisation. I realized that combining the pictures taken during the fieldwork with excerpts from the interviews resulted in ‘distorting’ the city, in ‘making it strange’. Louis viewed Long Street through the memory of his mother’s death, which occurred a few months before he came to the street as a homeless man, several years before the interview. Similarly, Xolewa cast the roof of her house in the light of an event that happened in Pretoria, of a lonely time that she experienced many years earlier in the Eastern Cape and of her living in Senator Park in Cape Town. Through the memory of places, as seen for the first time or when a particular meaning was first given to them, the interviewees progressively distanced themselves from their habitual perception and expressed this through new descriptions. Distorting the city’s language in this sense became an expression of their de-familiarisation.

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