

Introduction

“Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators” (Trouillot, 1997:2).



Figure 1: Graaff Reinet as seen from the Valley of Desolation in the Eastern Cape.

Rumour has it that¹ in the confines of an old Karoo town, Nieu Bethesda (see Figure 1), emerged a misunderstood artist. Helen Martins, or Miss Helen as she was known, the artist of the Owl House², was said to have been abused as a child by her father. As the story goes: he would lock her in a cold, dark, windowless room³ in their home. As she grew older she apparently became scared of the dark and so left home when she was old enough to do so, only to return when her mother passed away and her father needed to be cared for. Supposedly, as a form of revenge, Martins painted her father’s room black, covered the walls in shards of glass and locked him in there. She called this room ‘The Lion’s Den’ (see Figure 2).

¹ This story appears to be the more popular version of events amongst residents and visitors in Nieu Bethesda as it was presented more readily when asked about the history of Helen Martins, and it was known by more of the research participants I interacted with than any other version of events.

² It is popularly believed that Helen Martins is the sole artist of the Owl House. This point has been challenged and debated more recently. For purposes of telling this story the way that many informants had shared it with me I will not touch on that debate as yet.

³ Some of the informants referred to this room as a basement, although there was no such room in the house.

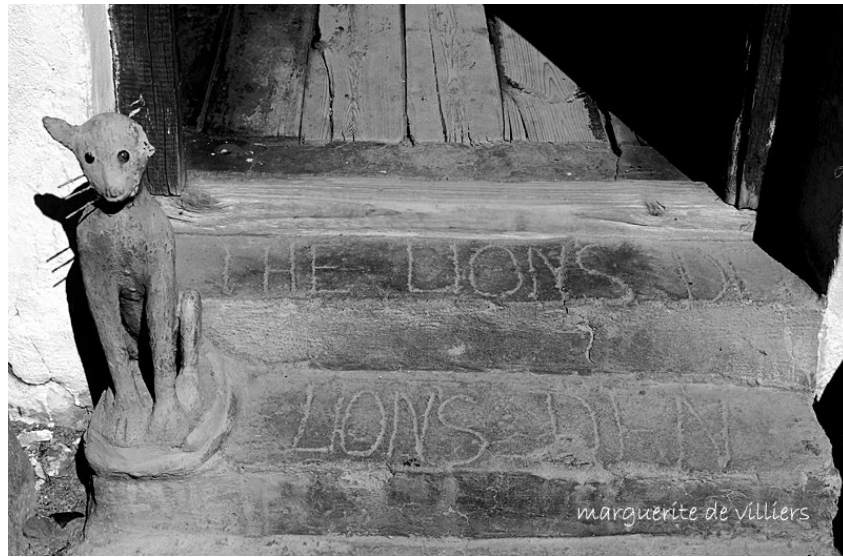


Figure 2: The steps leading out into the Camel Yard from the room through which visitors enter.

After her father's death Martins was alone in her childhood home at the edge of the small and seemingly uneventful village. Allegedly rejected by the community, she turned to art to translate her loneliness, pain and ideas into artistic creations. She built almost life-sized, wide-eyed sculptures of people and animals out of wire, cement and glass; the large glass eyes are understood to symbolise her fear of the dark and wanting to let light in. Her house, too, was coated in fine, crushed glass; the walls, ceilings and doors (see Figure 3). After years of working with this fine glass that she ground in a coffee grinder, her eyesight began to fail and her hands grew tired with arthritis. Judging by the events and elements of the story thus far, it is believed that her fear of the dark coupled with the possibility of going blind was what led Martins to taking her own life.



Figure 3: crushed glass covers the walls of the Owl House's interior.

This story was dubbed “the wild imaginings of bored locals” by one of the tour-guides at the Owl House. When visitors enter the Owl House they are presented with the ‘official’ story of Helen Martins and her artwork. Visitors do not enter through the front door, but rather through the Lion’s Den. Plastered on the walls are posters with pictures and text depicting the life and times of Martins. There is a bench on which visitors sit so that they can watch a video clip on a T.V. screen giving a brief life history of Martins. This is the official⁴ story of Helen Martins as presented by the Owl House Committee that runs, maintains and manages the Owl House:

⁴ Although this is considered to be the master-narrative by those managing the Owl House, it is not to say that it is the only truth surrounding Martins. There are different versions of events, but none is more true than another.

Helen Martins was born in the isolated Karoo village of Nieu Bethesda in 1897. She was the youngest of six children. At twenty-three she married Johannes Pienaar; a charismatic school teacher who later became a politician. The couple found work in the distant town of Volksrust. Together they explored the world of amateur theatre. Helen's vision of romance and travel however ended in betrayal, separation and finally divorce in 1926.

Details of the intervening years are vague, but in her mid-thirties Helen Martins, as the youngest and unmarried daughter, reluctantly returned to Nieu Bethesda to care for her ailing parents. The children had been fond of their mother who died in 1941, but their father was apparently a very moody and difficult man.

Early signs of Helen's wilful determination appeared when her elderly father was moved to the windowless outside room. After he died in 1945 she painted the room black and named it 'The Lion's Den'. Alone, middle-aged and nearly destitute, Helen had been made redundant by her romantic dreams. Lying ill in bed one night with the moon shining in through the window, Miss Helen, as she became known, resolved to bringing light and colour into her life.

She had no overall plan, but what began as a decorative quest soon developed into a fascination with interplay of reflection and space; of light and dark. Miss Helen hired local workmen to do structural modifications, mostly replacing windows with painted glass that would bathe her home in multi-coloured hues of light. Helen's simple decision to embellish her environment grew into an obsessive urge to express her

deepest feelings, her dreams, and her desires. From the mundane articles that surrounded her she created a symbolic language of sun faces, owls and other images.

When Miss Helen turned her attention to the exterior of the house she went again to the builders and handymen for assistance. Piet van der Merwe, Jonas Adams, and finally Koos Malgas were invited to try their creative hand with cement and glass. Koos Malgas quickly developed techniques for working with these difficult materials and before long he was regularly employed. Over a period of about twelve years, she and Koos Malgas created from her imaginings the hundreds of sculptures and relief figures that crowd the Camel Yard and cover the walls of the House.

The procession of shepherds and wise men [depicts] a vast, almost life-sized camel train towards a humble nativity scene. Miss Helen was inspired by the poetry of Omar Khayyam, the works of William Blake, and had a deep fascination for religious imagery. An arched entrance-way from the street watched over by a double-faced owl is significantly barricaded by a wire-mesh fence and tall cacti. Like the bottle-skirted hostesses within the yard, this arch must have been intended to welcome visitors into the yard into the land of mystery and enchantment, but the fence speaks plainly of an increasingly troubled relationship between Helen Martins and the outside world. The few friends she had described her as an intensely passionate person who became animated and excited when discussing her latest ideas.

The Yard is dotted with sphinxes, Buddhas, and sanctuaries of tiered glass bottles that Helen called her Meccas. The highlight for any visitor, enacted with great sentiment, was the illumination of Miss Helen's world by her vast collection of lamps and candles.

In order to pursue her vision, Miss Helen had managed to endure great emotional hardship. That is, until her eyesight began to fail her. On a cold winter's morning in 1976 at the age of 78, Helen Martins took her own life.

The blatant differences in these two narratives are what initially sparked my interest in using Nieu Bethesda as a field site; specifically looking at the rumours and stories that generate and circulate around Martins and her home long after she has passed and the addition of new sculptures has stopped. Additional to this, the appeal of Nieu Bethesda as both a tourist attraction and escape from city-living makes it an interesting case study that contributes to the understanding of where small towns fit economically in to present-day South Africa. An assessment of the role of memory and rumour in the local tourist industry then leads to an examination of the race relations involved in the economic workings of Nieu Bethesda; who is able to benefit from an income generated by the tourism created surrounding the Owl House.

Chapter One explores the economic viability of Nieu Bethesda within a broader South African context as well as the economic role of the Owl House on a more localised level. It is estimated⁵ that 50% of Nieu Bethesda's residents depend on this tourism for an income. In order to better understand Nieu Bethesda's role as a country escape for city-dwellers as well as the commodification of culture and the creation of value through conversations and the circulation of stories, I examine works by Raymond Williams, Jean and John Comaroff, and Nancy Munn respectively. Chapter Two identifies the way in which the circulation of rumours about Martins' life and the contestation surrounding her work both contributes to

⁵ An estimation made by three Nieu Bethesda residents on different occasions.

and detracts from the official story presented at the Owl House. Similarly so, some stories are suppressed or subverted for the purpose of maintaining the official story as a kind of master-narrative. An example of this, as explored in the chapter, is the accusations about Martins' assistant Koos Malgas' contribution or lack thereof. Malgas' involvement is largely omitted from the official story and popular stories that circulate. It is only more recently that his role has been emphasised and celebrated. Rather than verifying, proving or debunking these stories, I draw on theoretical texts on memory and oral history as well as analyses of such texts so as to draw out the social functions of these types of conversations. Chapter Three deals with racial inequality and tension within the Nieu Bethesda community which seems to be a contributing factor to the debate surrounding Malgas.

In order to conduct this research, I visited Nieu Bethesda in November and December of 2012 for preliminary research and again the following year in March, June, July and September to perform fieldwork. I interviewed residents and tourists to obtain life stories, rumours and reasons for being in Nieu Bethesda. I consulted local documents found in a newly established Helen Martins museum, in residents' homes and information made available at the Owl House. I drew on techniques used in various bodies of literature that I discuss in the three data chapters to interpret stories and to record oral history. I included photographs that I took on each of the trips in order to present to the reader my fieldsite as I saw it and to capture the experience of being in Nieu Bethesda and the Owl House. My main method of research was participant-observation in which I participated in and recorded conversations that were part of the experience of being in Nieu Bethesda; conversation seemed to be a product of this place that is produced, shared and consumed by residents and visitors. The disjuncture between telling, receiving, coding and decoding stories surrounding Martins and the Owl House encouraged contestation over the past and stimulated active

rumour-mongering amongst residents and visitors which in turn generated further interest in Nieu Bethesda as a tourist destination. Conversation then becomes a central site of participant-observation.

My research aims to present Nieu Bethesda as an experienced place in which experiences go beyond donkey-cart rides, artisanal cheese and beer tasting, admiring local artworks, learning about fossils, going on hikes in the arid surroundings, and communal dinners on Saturdays; it extends to the experience of being in a place that gives the illusion of an escape from the 21st century, contributing to a controversy through story-telling, being drawn into the community as a temporary member, and witnessing the racial, geographical, temporal, historical and economic disjuncture that is present and often-times covered up by tourism-related activities.

Context: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Time runs like stone

In these parts

Of bleached grass and bone⁶



Figure 4: The view of Nieu Bethesda upon arrival.

“The N1 highway – South Africa’s national road – runs roughly through the centre of the country. For most that have travelled its long distance, it is a type of transitional space; it is the line connecting our place of departure to our end destination”⁷. Towards the end of the seemingly endless journey from Johannesburg to Cape Town, the long stretch of tar enters the Karoo. Sheep dotted here and there, sapphire blue skies, distant purple mountains melt into the horizon, and the windmills blur into an arid landscape. After almost ten hours of listening to the monotonous drone of tyre on tar, there is a sign for an ‘owl route’ perpendicular to the main road. This is one of two routes that I know of. The more popular

⁶ Excerpt from Kobus Moolman’s collection of poems, *Time Like Stone*; some of which were inspired by and written during his stay in Nieu Bethesda.

⁷ Taken from a television series, *A Country Imagined*, documenting art inspired by South African landscapes.

of the two is a half tarred dirt road, winding through the mountains. The other is a rocky dirt road. After about thirty minutes of driving towards an ever-distant, seemingly unreachable point, the road curves and the majestic Kompasberg Mountain comes into view. Down below in the valley a sole tractor ploughs a green field in a Karoo oasis (see Figure 4). This seemingly isolated place that, at first glance, appears to have missed the 21st Century, is Nieu Bethesda.

Things seem to change very slowly in the Karoo. I overheard a visitor to Nieu Bethesda remark that this place reminded them of the ‘old South Africa’; an obvious lack of modern-day technology or city-style luxuries, and a residential layout that is similar to other parts of the country. Idil Sheard, a resident of this village for about two decades now, in her description of Nieu Bethesda said that it is a place that is not on a main road heading somewhere, nor is it near a big city. Founded in 1878⁸, farmers in Middleburg grew tired of travelling to Graaf Reinet every Sunday to attend church and so insisted on having a *N.G Kerk* of their own halfway between Middleburg and Graaff Reinet. “Nieu Bethesda was named by its Dutch Reformed founders after the biblical pool of Bethesda.... an archetypal pool of healing” (Malgas & Couzyn, 2012:7) (see Figure 5). Sheard mentioned that because of the church, few shops, windmill, police station, tennis club and local school which boasted two-hundred learners, the town flourished. The introduction of the motorcar resulted in people moving away and sending their children to bigger schools elsewhere, namely in Graaff Reinet. The local school in Nieu Bethesda closed down in 1971 and only a few elderly residents were left. As is mentioned in a local documentary on South African art and landscape, ‘A Country Imagined’, this small Karoo settlement “remained a forgotten

⁸ Information about Nieu Bethesda’s history was presented to me in written, but not published, form by Sheard.

outpost, nestled amongst the Kompasberg mountains, so far off the beaten track... and so it would have remained if it had not been for an extraordinary artist who had the courage to give expression to her inner landscape, and a world-famous playwright, Athol Fugard, who was deeply inspired by her story". The artist, Helen Martins, is believed to have constructed the art within and around the Owl House, although the 'true' artist of the Owl House has been a contested topic since Martins' death in 1976 at the age of 77 or 78. Fugard's play, 'The Road to Mecca', inspired by Martins' story, is what many people attribute the village's prolonged existence and current success to as a tourist destination.



Figure 5: Picturesque Nieu Bethesda.

According to popular belief, Martins spent the last decade or two of her life transforming her home in one corner of Nieu Bethesda into an expressive space filled with cement and glass sculptures that illustrated her interest in religion, spirituality, mythology, poetry, history, and geography as well as the inspiration she drew from the surrounding Karoo landscape. She named her home 'The Owl House' (see Figure 6) and her garden 'A Camel Yard' (see Figure 7). The house itself is on the edge of the village, overlooking a stream.



Figure 6: The original front door of the Owl House which is no longer used.



Figure 7: The Camel Yard through the kitchen window.

It was only after Martins' death that the Owl House seemed to attract substantial attention from the outside world (see Figure 8). Many of the people I spoke to in Nieu Bethesda and Graaff Reinet attributed the town's new-found tourism status and its overall present survival to Fugard's play and status as a well-known and respected playwright on the global stage. Sheard said that about half of the people in Nieu Bethesda make a living out of tourism today and that "if it hadn't been for Athol Fugard writing the Road to Mecca [in 1985], this place wouldn't have existed at all". This sentiment was echoed in conversations I had with various residents. Peet van Heerden, a fifth generation farmer at Doornberg a few kilometres outside

of Nieu Bethesda, pointed out that people should not take Fugard's play "too seriously" as "there's a lot of artistic license in there". Fugard states in the preface of the play that it is not a biography of Martins, "I've done my own thing; I've not written a documentary" (Fugard, 2003:11). Fugard did not have the opportunity to get to know Martins personally, but he had been provoked by her story. My research partly acts as an example of how rumours and stories surrounding Martins and the Owl House could serve as sources of oral history. It is in the contestations, discussions and justifications of stories that the place's history is recorded. Whether the stories are factual or not, their social value is established through their circulation.



Figure 8: Martins was not buried in the graveyard; her ashes were strewn in the Camel Yard.

Just as the N1 highway is a liminal space that connects one point of a journey to another, the title of Fugard's 'The Road to Mecca' invokes similar ideas. Mecca refers to a Muslim pilgrimage with the intention of worship and cleansing, while here it seems to refer to Martins' somewhat spiritual yearning and interest in Islam. A visitor to the Owl House had remarked that the noticeable chaos of various religious imagery indicated Martins' "search for spiritual peace". In a community founded on Christian beliefs, practices and values, I

imagine that the road to Mecca that Martins had travelled must have resembled the winding, rocky road entering the village. Not because of possible difficulties she may have encountered with regards to her interactions with the community, but because she ultimately gave her life to her art and apparently endured many personal and financial struggles as a result. The play presents “the almost feudal world of New Bethesda – a South Africa which disappeared from the rest of the country a hundred years ago” (Fugard, 2003:11).

Fugard indicates that he was struck by the isolation of Nieu Bethesda as it offered an escape from the city. Ironically, it was the allure of the city life that had initially drawn people out of Nieu Bethesda in search of financial prospects, whereas now people are looking to escape from the urban back to the rural. What makes Nieu Bethesda an interesting case study is its perceived purpose and what it means for urban white professionals. Only two of the white residents I spoke to grew up in the area while the rest are from big cities around South Africa and from Holland. “Leave the barriers behind you when you cross the Orange River”, said Peet. There was no need for locking doors, closing gates or building walls in Nieu Bethesda. Fences exist to keep livestock in or out and to indicate property boundaries. Residents often speak fondly of their inability to get used to walking past a *bakkie* parked in the street with its keys in the ignition and its doors unlocked while the owner of the vehicle is busy elsewhere. There is even a comical account shared of how one such vehicle had a key in the ignition for so long that when the owner tried to remove it, the key snapped in half. It is these humorous tales along with folklore-type narratives and rumours that I will discuss in great detail at a later stage as it is central to understanding the everyday discourse, happenings and lifestyles of Nieu Bethesda residents.

The idea that the majority of residents move to Nieu Bethesda to escape the pressures of urban life, especially crime and being ‘prisoners in their own homes’ behind high walls and electric fences, comments very strongly on the fact that Nieu Bethesda is not in opposition to the life from which residents escaped, but rather complimentary and connected to the broader context of 21st century South Africa. In attempting to move away from boundaries they are in fact acknowledging their existence and reinforcing them. I got the impression, after speaking to several visitors and recent residents, that their interest in Nieu Bethesda stemmed from a dislike of and even a distrust in change. Cities are characterised by fast-paced, continuous changes and so Nieu Bethesda offers an escape from that. Our inability to predict what an uncertain future might hold diverts our attention to a known past which we can refer back to. It is for this reason that, although just on the surface, an unchanging Nieu Bethesda offers stability in a broader unstable context. In contrast, Anne Emslie in *A Journey Through The Owl House* views the recording and documenting of The Owl House as “a valuable and necessary process – particularly so because of the ephemeral and changing quality of the place” (1997:ix). She goes on to say that “it was an artwork and a home, a space that breathed and altered with the changing moment”. The changes that Emslie refers to are natural processes such as weathering that bleaches the paint, cracks the cement and washes away the glass fragments, but also other changes such as plants and birds having disappeared in the garden; a visible sign of neglect or lack of human intervention. Contestation surrounding ideas of restoration or maintenance will be discussed in relation to the opinions of artists who seek refuge in Nieu Bethesda, and a committee dedicated to ensuring that The Owl House continues to function as a tourist attraction and as an icon of their village. The Committee: an institutional face of the Owl House, and the tourism generated by it, along with rumours as oral history is what contributes to the branding of Nieu Bethesda. This idea of branding is the connecting feature of my research. By the end

of this paper I hope to have illustrated clearly the manner in which Nieu Bethesda is branded and how that brand identity attracts tourists and encourages people to live there.

Chapter One: Economic Viability

Present, Past and Paradise Lost

“Was jy al in Johannesburg?”

She shakes her head.

“Dis nie lekker daar nie. Was jy al by die see?”

She looks down at her toes in the sand and shakes her head.

“Dis ook nie lekker nie. Weet jy waar’s dit lekker? Net hierso by die huis.”⁹

Driving from Johannesburg to Cape Town can be both tiresome and rewarding. The visible transition through the provinces, the way the scenery and people change, is something to behold. The Free State’s fields of gold and green so flat you can see the curvature of the earth, a solitary windmill breaks the static landscape and a solo traveller wearing a Springbok rugby jersey walks alongside the highway. The Free State, viewed through a car windscreen, is a place of vast space and scattered people. Just when you think it cannot possibly get any more arid or lonely and the people any more scarce, you enter the moonscape of the Northern Cape. Slowly but surely hills and mountains rise from the red earth. Until, finally in the Eastern Cape, it is as though you have stepped into a Pierneef painting with geometric rock formations and shades of purple, green and orange. The first thing you notice is the way the light filters through the tall grass, and the silence. The transition from a fast-paced, ever-changing, always moving city to the consuming silence, slow motion, and freeing vastness of the Karoo is immediately felt.

⁹ A man visiting Nieu Bethesda with his family kneels in front of a young girl from the township. She stands with the traders who sell cement sculptures as souvenirs outside the Owl House. The man films this conversation with his cell phone and the girl, about five years old, seems shy because of being on camera and of the man’s questions. (6 June 2013)

The road from Johannesburg to Cape Town has been travelled by many. It is a trip characterised by anticipation, admiration and impatience. Many people in older generations I spoke to remember single-laned highways, stopping at designated eating areas with white concrete tables, driving in slow chunky cars with no air-conditioning, and completing the trip without any overnight stays halfway. The drive was more of a chore or sacrifice needed to be made in order to be rewarded with what waited at the end of it. Presently, the journey is as much part of the holiday as the end destination is. During my final night's stay at Ganora Farm just outside of Nieu Bethesda, a young couple from Cape Town and an older couple from George asked which towns I plan on driving through on the way back to Johannesburg. When I said that I would stick to the highway and drive through the Free State they protested and said that I would be missing out on all the "wonderful small towns" along the way. They likened Clarens in the Free State to Nieu Bethesda, but said that it had become far too commercial and full of tourists. They preferred Nieu Bethesda for its seemingly preserved and "untouched" appearance and atmosphere. Wanting to escape from other visitors like themselves, experiencing or reliving the inverse of city life, getting in touch with nature, and being free of modern day concerns seems to be what people are after when visiting Nieu Bethesda and other towns like it. The general consensus among people from older generations that I spoke to is that "the world is corrupt", "children are addicted to technology", "family time and face-to-face communication has been lost", and "we live like prisoners in the city". Small towns that have maintained a sense of community life, common suffering, collective memory, and shared rewards is something that they are nostalgic about and either want to return to or encourage younger generations to experience while it is possible for them to do so.

The country and the city are often viewed as two polar opposites or as contrasting one another in terms of ways of life, social relationships and values. Marcel de Certeau in *Walking in the City* (1981) characterises the city, Manhattan in his case, as a place where extremes coincide (1981:91); a place of ‘ambition’ and ‘degradation’, brutal oppositions of races and styles, and “contrasts between yesterday’s buildings... and today’s urban eruptions” (de Certeau, 1981:91). The way de Certeau describes it, the city is a place in which people are in a state of the perpetuated present. Similarly so, he describes New York as never growing old; its present invents and re-invents itself, and it does not build on its pasts: “throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (de Certeau, 1981:91). This is characteristic of modernity; constant change and linear progression. Modernity, modernism and modernisation seem to be central themes in discussions on cities and urban areas. Modernity is not exclusively associated with the urban; there are aspects of modernity in the rural, although rural areas tend to be associated with a rhythmic cyclical time and repetition is a threat to modernity. Modernity produces a linear and abstract notion of time. Nieu Bethesda offers a kind of certainty by moving in cycles. People can predict what their life would be like there because they know where people before them have come from and gone to.

Leslie Bank in *Home Spaces, Street Styles* (2011) discusses Mdantsane and Duncan Village in South Africa as examples of the impact of modernism. Mdantsane, a quiet and empty satellite homeland town, was affected by apartheid-driven resettlement in the city. This is an example of racial modernism which is when urban restructuring is racial in character and modernist in orientation. The social consequences of this racial modernism and the forced removals included: loss of community, the breakdown of pre-existing social ties and the blurring of old identities. Paul Rabinow’s concept of ‘middling modernism’ further explains

this social impact by indicating that the inhabitants or residents of such spaces were ‘formed and normed’. Bank indicates that modernist planners are thieves of memory: they erase all traces of the past for growth and future progress. The intention then of middling modernism, especially in the apartheid South Africa context, was to create abstract sites in which the past and pre-existing urban social norms were eliminated.

Bank also touches on the topic of refashioning identities based on new localities by drawing comparisons between rural and urban life. He mapped out the continuity and change across the urban-rural divide and was interested in the change in city life, townships as complex spaces, everyday encounters, architecture of social and cultural change, the implications of urban restructuring, and gender and generational relations and identities. According to Bank, while there is continuous face-to-face interaction in rural communities, there is a sense of loss and displacement in city settings. The city has a heterogeneous element because of people’s migration from elsewhere, a dense concentration of development, and complex systems of functioning. New forms of urban life are constructed and reconstructed continuously, and so are worldviews; depending on what people are exposed to. Contrary to Bank’s attempt to move away from the Philip and Iona Mayers’ monograph, *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (1974), in their contrast between the rural and the urban in the Eastern Cape, he re-inscribes this distinction and reinforces its boundaries and limitations through his use of binaries. He re-imposes the binaries, conventions, divisions, contestations, dualities and boundaries in the Mayers’ work by challenging, going against and moving away from their ideas, but at the same time he also re-invents them. It is this re-invention that plays an important role in doing research on rural and urban sites in South Africa as it interacts with a dialogue of definitions and contestations in a broader context.

Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) argues that a contrast of nature versus worldliness or greed versus innocence is not an entirely accurate or useful one; to see only one contrast is to see only some of the results that the country and the city offer (1973:293). He argues that the city and the country are different ways of seeing change and that this would be a more useful distinction. The country is often associated with the past: “an idea of the happier past...also...[the] idea of innocence” (Williams, 1973:46), while the city is often viewed in relation to the future. This leaves us with an undefined present (Williams, 1973:297). The country evokes images of ‘old ways’, ‘human ways’ and ‘natural ways’; the past is something seemingly certain and knowable. The city is synonymous with progress, modernisation and development; the future is filled with hope and anticipation for what is to come. The present is then experienced as tension (Williams, 1973:297); ambiguous and liminal. I argue that it is this romanticised idea of the past that Nieu Bethesda embodies which visitors are after; an unopened time capsule which promises to meet their nostalgic needs and expectations. At the same time it is the uncontrollable future rife with imagined corruption and danger that lures people to this place. I will explore the ideas that people have of the contrast between the city and the country in order to gain a better understanding as to why it is that people move to or visit places such as Nieu Bethesda or what it is we can take from their discussions and views of this contrast. Williams (1973:289) says that when we are able to explain the historicity and persistence of such concepts as well as “the co-existence of persistence and change” will our interpretations have been successful. The main point to take from his work is that the relations between country and city are of an active and continuous history and “the relations are not only of ideas and experiences, but of ... interest, of situation and power; a wider system” (Williams, 1973:7). In the case of Nieu Bethesda within a broader South African context – the relationship between country and city is shaped by race and the quest for profit.

To get to the underlying motive for the distinction between country and city, one must ask: “what is happening in a period, to ideas of the country and the city” and what is happening to other ideas within that general structure or context (Williams, 1973:290)? What this means is that images associated with the country and city vary depending on the time frame in which these ideas are formulated. The fact that the country is associated with either settlement or the idea of retreat, depending on perspective and temporal context, comments greatly on the time in which these opinions are adopted; it says more about the context than it does on the actual place, perspective or person. For example: Williams (1973:290) traces the transformation of ideas associated with the city. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was seen as a place of money and law, in the 18th where people enjoyed wealth and luxury, the late 18th and 19th centuries it was where the mob and the masses were located, and in the 19th and 20th centuries the city was associated with mobility and isolation. What then of the 21st? What associations and ideas of the country and the city does this century hold? Perhaps it is here where Williams’ study ends that mine could begin to formulate an understanding of how people view these two types of settlement and how that comments on the broader context. It is not so much about what people in the city are leaving behind, running away from or escaping to in the country, but rather how the context shapes the ideas associated with the country and the city; “the country and the city are changing realities, both in themselves and in their interrelations” (Williams, 1973:289).

Before I explore the terms and words used by my informants and research participants to describe the country and the city, I will outline the phrases Williams has used. I make use of his method of first distinguishing between and then connecting the two categories in order

to better understand their connectedness. First, the country. When the country comes to mind so too do images of a 'rural area', a 'whole society', "a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (Williams, 1973:1). Alternatively, the country is seen as a "place of backwardness, ignorance, imitation" (Williams, 1973:1). Some may argue that "an innocent and traditional order was being invaded and destroyed by a new and more ruthless order" (Williams, 1973:49): capitalism in the city and exploitation in the country. In this instance the country would be seen as settled and a place of lawful order, while the city is seen as a parasite that exploits the country. The country is more recently viewed "as a settled way of life disturbed by unwanted and external change" (Williams, 291). The city, in one superficial contrast to ideas of the country, is associated with the "idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light... a place of noise, worldliness and ambition" (Williams, 1973:1). Louis Wirth in *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1938) places 'rural' and 'urban' in opposition because the time in which he wrote demanded a clear distinction between different types and ways of life, but as Williams points out: there is more to these categories. An issue I will not cover here, but one worth mentioning and is raised by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal in *Writing the World from an African Metropolis* (2004). Mbembe and Nuttal highlight that African cities, until now, have been compared to European cities. They want to move away from this restricting view and limited understanding of the city. The city, as a symbol of modernity, is composed of a multiplicity of various images, perspectives, interpretations and characteristics. The African city tends to be placed in the category of development and so is subject to an othering process. Instead of putting African cities in a unique category in opposition to European cities, they call for writers and theorists in urban and city studies to drop some of the associated ideas around these comparisons.

The combination of people from different places with different capabilities in the city creates the “sense of possibility, of meeting, and of movement” (Williams, 1973:6). The city is a place of production, independence, political power, agency, and restrictions. Although people in the city have a collective consciousness, individuals are conscious of themselves not as a collective; a crowd of strangers, alone in a crowd of people, together but separate in their own endeavours. The country then offers an alternative where communal decisions are made, teamwork is employed and neighbourly support is given. Or at least, so it seems. Nieu Bethesda is an interesting case in that it is perceived as a country space which is made up of people of different professions from various urban areas, as well as people who were born and raised there and those who are unemployed. Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘third space’, as explained by Felipe Herndandez in *Bhabha for Architects* (2010), could be applied to the case of Nieu Bethesda. For Bhabha, the idea of third space comes into play when migrants from rural areas negotiate aspects of the rural in the urban. Third Space, as Bhabha explains, is not an actual place but rather a concept that can be equated to hybridity; a concept that goes beyond the boundaries of oppositions such as the self and the other, centre and periphery, colonised and coloniser. Like hybridity and liminality, third space is something that is in between and constantly transforms itself. Hybridity is simultaneously open ended and closed down. It is a mixture in which nationality, identity and interpretations are not singular. Bhabha sets out to disprove the negative connotations attached to ideas of hybridity. Rather than viewing combinations as a sign of impurity, he understands language, culture and identity to be fragmented and ambivalent. This cultural hybridisation and interaction is what allows culture to continue to exist. Rather than assuming one ‘culture’ is superior over another or as being authoritative, he sees it as a sign of cultural productivity. Ivan Vladislavić, as discussed by Gerald Gaylard in *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* (2011), looks at what is lost in hybridity: “Vladislavić’s portrayal of

Johannesburg is... not merely a celebration of hybrid cosmopolitan spaces so much as an exploration of the torsion between those and the physical detritus of the losses they involve” (Gaylard, 2011:6). ‘Hybridity’ as the idea of how the concept of selves and surroundings changes and ‘marginality’ as a form of exclusion that preserves and subverts ideas through interaction, illustrate how these terms are fluid in their meaning and usage in different bodies of literature as well as in demonstrating the limitations of conceptual tools in allowing us to see certain things and to do a particular type of analysis.

People in Nieu Bethesda are not attempting to produce a culture or consolidate identities to form a type of nation, but rather they have created a third space in which its economic system operates. Residents in the village are urban professionals from different parts of South Africa as well as from other countries and negotiate their urban trades in Nieu Bethesda in order to make a living. Williams argues that there is no distinct divide between country and city and that one is not dominant over the other, nor do they take advantage of one another in a one-sided relationship. He argues instead that there is an interconnectedness and a mutual dependence amongst various types of settlement, not just these two defined categories. Vladislavić focuses on what is lacking and what is lost in hybridity, while Bhabha looks at what results and how things are incorporated or built on from existing social structures. What needs to be understood is that the country and the city do not operate as separate entities, but as interconnected forms of settlement that influence and draw inspiration from one another.

History: His Story

“The perfect way to explain history”, says Frans¹⁰ sipping his coffee and apologising for his slippers, “is if you break it up into two parts: his story. So it’s always somebody’s story. The Owl House is the perfect example of that. There are many different stories” (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: One of Frans' sculptures titled Mama Africa

Although most of the white residents in Nieu Bethesda are originally from elsewhere, there is a term used to describe people from here: *kapaaislanders*. There is a local newspaper called *Kapaaislander* which features articles on personal experiences, histories, events and initiatives that take place in the area. A *kapaaislander*, as defined by Peet, is a person who comes from a place where there is snow on the mountains, but is a term specifically used when referring to people from the village. It is a term better known amongst older generations or people originally from the village years ago. In a recent issue of the *Kapaaislander* Peet’s wife, Hanna – originally from Gauteng, researched the origins of the term and found out that it is an old name for ‘*Griekwaland-Wes*’ or a part of the Eastern

¹⁰ Frans Boekkooi is a South African sculptor living in the village who is celebrated for his artworks that, in his own words, “feed off the nostalgia of innocent times”. Quote taken from www.southafricanartists.com, accessed on 6 February 2014.

Cape. In order to understand what life was like for the average *kapaaislander* living in Nieu Bethesda in the broader context of apartheid South Africa I had to do some digging as there is not a lot of information available on the history of Nieu Bethesda. Fortunately, Peet had a collection of weekly letters his father had written during the 1970s and '80s. These letters paint a picture of everyday life in the village and on Doornberg farm. Peet is the fifth generation van Heerden to own this farm and hopes to avoid an unfortunate family tradition in which the men, all born in August, died at age 59. In the letters, Peet's father, a farmer, mostly speaks of weather conditions, his live stock, sport, immediate family, close friends, pets, wildlife, hunting, broken down vehicles that need fixing, church, travelling to cities such as Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth to sell or trade, money, army life, the landscape, the introduction of new technologies, loss, 'drama', and school.

Peet and his siblings, like most of the children in Nieu Bethesda at the time and presently, were sent to school in Graaff Reinet and would go home at the weekend. Peet's father wrote these letters, on Sundays mostly in English, some in Afrikaans, to stay in touch and to keep them up to date with the weekly happenings. A typical day in terms of weather seemed to be "monotonously cold" (7 August 1977), "getting drier and drier" (1 November 1978), "a lovely day, a real Indian summer although the nights are getting chilly" (1 April 1979), "July/August winds" (24 June 1979), "overcast and dull with some thunder" (26 September), and "pretty miserable" with some nearly nice days (5 September 1976). There were some exceptional days where "the seasons seem to be getting later every year" (1 May), "a marvellous Indian summer with just no wind and not hot" (10 July 1977), "the biggest snow most people can remember and surely the biggest since 1953" (15 May 1977) and "lots and lots of rain... the rivers are running white water... Nobody can remember such wonderful rain at this time of the year and you can actually hear the *veld* grow" (10 October 1976).

There is not much mention of the community in general, let alone black or coloured residents and so it is difficult to formulate an idea of the social interaction between races at the time and whether or not it was similar to that of the rest of South Africa under apartheid conditions. In an interview with a former resident of the village she mentioned that when she was younger in the 1970s she did not know what apartheid was and that people of different races had lived together in the village. At the time, working class men were referred to as 'boys' and so the phrase "happy as a sand-boy" (7 August 1977) stood out in one of the letters. In the early 1800s this term referred to someone who would drive donkey carts selling sand¹¹. The implication was that it was someone who made very little money, but was happy with what they had or expressed joy when acquiring alcohol.

Another example of the use of the term 'boy' when referring to an employee or a male worker in that historical context is when, in the letter, Peet's father says "we have sold that blue *bakkie* to a boy for R3661. I think we will be glad to see the last of it" (21 August 1977). This is not to say that they sold a vehicle to a child, but rather it indicates that the language used to speak about black or coloured men was one that degraded their masculinity and status to that of a child's. Furthermore, it is not to say that the speakers consciously made this connection between the label 'boy' and its demeaning connotations in their use of the word, but instead it comments on the broader context in which this word circulated

¹¹ Definition and explanation of the term taken from www.stackexchange.com, accessed on 11 February 2014.

It is interesting to construct a timeline of conflict in the area because it is a prominent feature that has survived through time. “In the 18th century the first farmers moved into the *Sneeuberg* Valley where Nieu Bethesda is situated today”¹². These Dutch farmers were soon joined, after 1820, by British settlers who “moved to farms in the Eastern Cape [because of Xhosa attacks in Grahamstown] which were sold to them by farmers who were trekking north to get away from British rule in Cape Town”. Following this was the Anglo-Boer War between 1899 and 1902 which had “brought great suffering and divisions to the area”. After which apartheid law in the 1970s called for young men to join the army and in the 1980s called for ‘separate development’ based previously established segregation laws which led to the construction of *Piensaarsig*; a township and coloured residence (see Figure 10). The few mentions of army life and race relations in the letters are brief and quite light-hearted. Perhaps because the army did not feature high up on the list of daily concerns, it was a painful topic to discuss in great detail, or because the details of it were not allowed to be shared with those not in the army. Here are three examples: “in the end Peet came down again this weekend. Apparently they have now had enough of army life and being chased around. They were out in the veld all week and lived on dog biscuits” (1976), “David Kingwill and Fox will be going off to the border shortly. They will be gone for about three months” (1 May), and “They have a student in Bethesda for the Pinkstêr services... we went into this course of the army and it interfered with our holiday plan. In the end I managed to get out of it temporarily but I do not know what the movements will be in the future. We have to get this Civil Defence moving too and I do not see chance to do both of them. I am leaving it to the powers that be to sort out where I fit in. I do not see myself as a fighting soldier so would rather be a radio operator or some other desk job” (7 May 1978). These

¹² Taken from a written piece on the history of Nieu Bethesda by Sheard in the guestbook of Ganora Farm.

three examples illustrate a perpetual uncertainty of a future unknown and a theme of conflict characteristic to life in South Africa, regardless of the temporal context.



Figure 10: Pienaarsig as seen from Auntie Evelyn's place.

Additional to this theme of conflict is the idea of race relations, which I will only touch on now and expand on in the last chapter of this paper. Similarly so, it is hardly mentioned in the letters, but still gives some idea of how these relationships might have changed, adapted or stayed relatively the same over time. Allusions to black and coloured residents in the letters are mostly made when talking about employees: “On Monday I had to go to the station to fetch a load of salt with the help Ford. Fortunately I had arranged with Gardener to pick up two boys to help with the loading of it” (29 October 1978). References are also made when making comparisons or making use of stereotypical phrases: “Peet... is sitting around feeling very sorry for himself. Yesterday we went to go and hunt a few Springbuck...Peet went on the motorbike instead of a horse. He had a wonderful time being more in between the buck than anything else until he was looking at the buck instead of where he was going and he came off. He got a crick in his neck and is short of the skin on the one side of his face and his lips are swollen like that of a Negro” (July 1977). This form of story-telling with an element of comic relief and incorporation of contemporary terms or phrases is still a manner

in which people in Nieu Bethesda speak today. I will say more of this narrative form and the race relations in Nieu Bethesda in later chapters.

Back to the Future

“I don’t think fracking is so much a concern about the environment here, it’s more people-centred”, says a middle-aged man from Johannesburg, “I think the people here just don’t want the government or big companies to interfere with their timeless oasis”(see Figure 11).



Figure 11: an organised protest against fracking in the Karoo. This took place during the Nieu Bethesda festival.

Having said all this, I can now make the comparison between present-day Nieu Bethesda and the ‘old South Africa’ that some visitors and residents seem to be attached to. I want to start off by saying that experiences are relative. Being content or dissatisfied with one’s circumstances, lifestyle, living conditions and context is all relative. In reading these letters in present-day South Africa the image comes to mind of a safe haven within a harsh

landscape and in an even bigger context of apparent political turmoil, ominous crime, imminent financial crises and an uncertain future. This time capsule town of ‘the good old days’ provides an escape from such hardships. The problem is that hardships are relative to the context and to the person. Although these may change over time, there are some that have continued from a previous time to the present or from another context to this one.

The most pressing issue that Nieu Bethesda is presently facing as a threat to tourism and a concern for those worried about their environment, surroundings and the impact nature has on their society, is the issue of fracking. For thousands of years communities have understood there to be a connection between nature and culture: in many cases it is believed that conflict in society will present itself in nature as natural disasters. A similar understanding of this relationship can be expressed in the perceived impact fracking might have on the Karoo. Residents in the village and on the surrounding farms are concerned about the chain reaction fracking could have. Fracking “is the process of drilling and injecting fluid into the ground at a high pressure in order to fracture shale rocks to release natural gas inside”¹³. It is feared that this process will contaminate the underground water source as well as waste water that is so scarce in an area as dry and arid as the Karoo. Upon entering Nieu Bethesda there is a recently erected billboard that calls for water conservation or saving water in the area. The sign has nothing to do with protesting against fracking, but rather is just a general instruction. The residents were not happy with this sign at all and wanted to cover it with an anti-fracking banner instead. Fracking not only threatens the community’s precious water, but also propels the picturesque snapshot of a time gone by

¹³ Taken from www.dangersoffracking.com, accessed on 10 February 2014.

into the 21st century where technological developments and modern practices interfere with the Nieu Bethesda brand.

As I have mentioned, many communities understand there to be a relationship between nature and culture. The case of fracking is not one of culture, but it is useful to look at some anthropological theories of culture and apply it to the interaction between Nieu Bethesda, its tourism and livelihood, and its surroundings and environment. Michael Fischer's *Culture and Cultural Analysis as Experimental Systems* (2007) is based on the definition: "culture is that relational complex whole... whose parts cannot be changed without affecting other parts, mediated through powerful and power-laden symbolic forms, whose multiplicities and performatively negotiated character is transformed by alternative positions, organisational forms, and leveraging of symbolic systems, as well as by emergent new technosciences, media, and biotechnical relations" (Fischer, 2007:1). He traces the definition of culture through to the present and views culture as a symbolic engagement with the world. He goes on to discuss how interaction and communication are mediated through technology. Fischer's notion of the cultural is differential and relational and of culture as something that evolved as a conceptual tool used for interpretation. He is also aware that the culture concept changes and, similarly so, social or cultural change and transformation create a kind of chain reaction. An example of this is the impact of globalisation; an increasing interconnectedness and influence between civilisations, as well as fracking; the impact of technological interference on the environment and the people who depend on the affected land. In summary, Fischer views culture as a methodological conceptual tool, relational, ever-changing, where meanings are interlinked and changed, beyond the control of individuals, a space in which contestation and negotiation take place, a form of dynamic knowledge, and

everything that is produced by human beings; there is no culture because all that we do is cultural (Fischer, 2007).

Nieu Bethesda, Inc.

“If I can’t sleep at night I don’t count sheep”, says Idil, “I count the different people in town. Sometimes the Engelse and the Afrikaners, sometimes the young people and the old people. Perhaps what I need to do is count those of us who are pensioners and those who are making a living here in town. I imagine that half are making a living out of tourism.”

Sheard reckons that 50% of Nieu Bethesda’s population makes a living off of the tourism generated by the Owl House. Whether it be directly in selling souvenirs or items imitating the imagery found in the Owl House, or indirectly in creating businesses that offer services to visitors: restaurants, accommodation, and so on. Although Nieu Bethesda makes a conscious effort to resist change by changing in order to stay the same, Jean and John Comaroff in *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009) offer a way for Anthropologists to assess the impact of commercialisation, tourism or commodification of places such as Nieu Bethesda and the practices that take place in terms of generating an income through cultural tourism. This can then be applied to my understanding of how the branding of Nieu Bethesda takes place, what the outcomes might be, who benefits and what the results of that are.

The main aim of *Ethnicity, Inc.* is to interrogate the hyperextension and migration of an old “world-wide phenomenon in the making; one that is much more complicated than it first appears” (Comaroff, 2001:30)¹⁴. The Comaroffs make it clear that they are not promoting

¹⁴ Quotes are taken from a presentation in 2011 given by the Comaroffs on their *Ethnicity, Inc.* published in 2009. Accessed online www.umich.edu on 8 September 2013. Quotes taken from the original text will be referenced with the date 2009.

or discrediting the idea of *Ethnicity, Inc.*, but rather call for anthropologists “to fashion an engaged anthropology to deal with its unfolding logic, its ambiguous promises, its material and moral vision for times to come, the deep affective attachments that it engenders” (2011:31). In other words: the outcome of *Ethnicity, Inc.* might not be favourable, but it is something that is occurring and should be dealt with accordingly. It is important to note here that, while many anthropologists do not approve of or encourage the use of the terms ‘culture’ or ‘cultures’ and prefer using the word in its adjectival form (cultural), I interpret the Comaroff’s use of the word to indicate how cultural entities composed of practices, beliefs and so on are distinguished from one another for purpose of marketing a brand and participating in cultural tourism. It is the differences between these entities that set them apart from one another and so make them both marketable and desirable for consumption by ‘outsiders’. I offer Nieu Bethesda as a current case study to illustrate the Comaroff’s discussion of *Ethnicity, Inc.*: “a dialectic between the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture; and... between indigeneity and the human cosmopolis” (2011:29). What once started out as a community founded on the desire to practice religion, became a tourist attraction and then an escape. Ultimately, Nieu Bethesda has become a brand.

To illustrate the extent to which Nieu Bethesda has been branded and the success with which it has attracted ‘consumers’, I offer the example of a street wedding (see Figure 12). The wedding, not an isolated occurrence in the village but the only one I witnessed, took place in March 2013. White tables and chairs lined the road adjacent to the street the Owl House is on, transparent perspex boxes displayed a variety of berries, driftwood, cinnamon sticks and other items, the chairs were labelled with postcards from Nieu Bethesda, wooden bird cages hung from tree branches, and the bathrooms’ ‘ladies’ and ‘gents’ signs were covered

with images of caricatured owls (see Figure 13). The bride and groom were from Johannesburg and had 'rented' the village for a wedding weekend. They brought with them make-up artists, hair dressers and a wedding planner. Among the residents of the village, the elaborate cost of the wedding is what occupied most of their conversations. A mixture of Greek practices, dust-covered clothes, and a donkey cart ride at the end of the ceremony gave the couple the unique experience they were after (see Figure 14).



Figure 12: Tables being set up for the street wedding.



Figure 13: Examples of the way in which the Owl House's images were incorporated into the wedding.



Figure 14: One of the horescarts that transports visitors through Nieu Bethesda.

Brave Neo World

“If the worst I can hear in the news is ‘Jacob Zuma says...’”, sighs Peet, “I just go back to sleep”.

Ethnicity is increasingly moving into the global market place in the form of tourism. Tourism, as the Comaroffs indicate, is the “archetypical site for the commodification of culture” (2011:1). Ethnicity in post colonies such as South Africa is concerned with culture, customary law, and the collective rights of indigenous peoples (Comaroff, 2011:1). The commodification of culture and the commercialisation of identity does not merely reduce them into mere commodities, but is rather a way of finding one’s place in the world, constructing one’s own identity, and producing a collective sociality. In marketing what is authentic to a particular time, place or people, cultural tourism takes identity into the market place and offers financial futures or possibilities for those with no work or not much else to sell; a universal being-in-the-world seems to rely increasingly on tourism (Comaroffs, 2011:2). Particularly in South Africa, selling culture plays a similar role as the selling of physical labour; if all you have available to sell is cultural or labour-based. The future lies, as the Comaroffs emphasise, in the “juxtaposition of branding, marketing, culture, and

identity” (2011:7). In summary: branding creates an attachment to a commodity (Comaroff, 2011:7), marketing sells a commodity through convincing potential buyers of the commodity’s value, culture is both “the quintessential space of self-fashioning” (Comaroff, 2011:14) and, particularly in the case of *Ethnicity, Inc.*, is “a naturally copyrighted, legally protected collective possession” (Comaroff, 2011:15), and identity defines one’s recognition, being and belonging in the world. Identity can be individual, but when collective is a shared essence. It is this essence that is marketed as being at the core of a particular ‘culture’. We exist both in relation and in contrast to one another; what sets us apart is what keeps us connected. In solidifying difference, locality and indigeneity, it promises universal recognition and a universal being-in-the-world (Comaroff, 2011:4). A threat to this kind of belonging and to the survival of particular cultural identities is an indifference to difference.

Martin Chanock, as quoted by the Comaroffs (2011:7), says that “to survive...cultures, like brands, must essentialise. Successful, sustainable cultures are those that brand best”. It is the essence of what it means to belong to a particular ‘culture’, a particular brand that sustains it. The problem with this is that it might lead to the segregation, limiting, generalisation and stereotyping of people, practices and ideas in order to define the essence of a defined ‘culture’. At the same time, a positive outcome in the marketing of a cultural brand is a membership, or the ability to identify with other members, in a kind of imagined community. In a time where globalisation and instant connections to the global are increasingly present in everyday life, “cultural survival is giving way... to survival through culture” (Comaroff, 2011:7). Culture is consumed as a commodity and so ethnicity adapts through commodification in order to find its place in the interconnected world. Similarly so, traditions can also be commodified “in the pursuit of authenticity” (Comaroff, 2011:8) and

defining oneself. An example of the commodification of tradition in South Africa that the Comaroffs (2011:7) provide is that of the Pedi initiation rites in which deep knowledge is transmitted and where cultural secrets are passed on. “It is also a lucrative business” (Comaroffs, 2011:7); meaning that, as I have mentioned, “the sale of culture seems... to have replaced the sale of labour in the Brave New South Africa” (Comaroff, 2011:4).

The cultural tourism responsible for branding Nieu Bethesda creates an image of a lifestyle in which the biggest tragedies or crises include: family disputes, broken farm equipment, the loss of stock or pets, and children causing trouble, as one of Peet’s letters indicates: “Other drama is that it now comes out that the children opened up the tophouse *stoep* floor and got into the cellar. They went off with a lot of cooldrink and we are missing some wine too. Moral is that if you have got win you must drink it and if you have got cooldrink you can expect the same” (20 October 1978); all of which are manageable in the eyes of the city-dweller who deals with threats of crime, financial distress, anonymity in a sea of strangers, and more. In Nieu Bethesda the burden of technology is a choice and for some is seen as a blessing, while for others it is more of a nuisance. Peet’s father’s letters give a colourful description of the introduction of technology into the village: “We will probably have telephones within a day or two. Most places the lines are still lying like spaghetti. Yesterday lunchtime they got Bethesda connected with the outside world” (15 May 1977), the influence of technology on life in the village: “We watched television with the Rosenbaums. Some of their programs are really very good and I can quite understand how people can get addicted to it” (5 September), and a hint of apartheid evident in the exposure of technology to different races: “They had an excellent bioscope on soccer and they are now busy showing it to the coloureds” (5 September). In Nieu Bethesda “no news is good news” (10 July 1977) and it is easier to disconnect oneself from the troubles of the outside world. This selective isolation

from a broader context is appealing to many residents and is what makes the cultural tourism in and the branding of Nieu Bethesda so successful.

In as much as Nieu Bethesda is viewed as a snapshot of the past, it has undergone changes in order to maintain this image. The times have changed and with it the people and their struggles, too. Changing context does not mean ridding oneself of one's problems, but rather taking on a set of new issues to deal with, different obstacles to overcome and challenges to take on. Escape is merely change incarnate. The purpose of Williams' book is to "describe and analyse images and associations that persist in and through the differences between country and city" (1973:2). These variations and transformations in the relations between country and city are contextualised historically and as experiences of the times, rather than as experiences of the places themselves. This is because the ideas of country and city vary socially and historically, but the images with which they are associated have persisted. "A retreat to country or coast... is then a different vision from the mere contrast of rural and urban ways of life" (Williams, 1973:46), it is more than just a comparison between 'rural virtue' and 'urban greed' (Williams, 1973:48); it is a contrast between social and moral orders that are products of their time. The virtues assumed to be in the country are sought after by nostalgic nomads, but unfortunately "the rural virtues are there but as a memory" and "in the city these virtues are often a lying nostalgia" (Williams, 1973:47). The solution that Williams (1973:54) offers to improve city living is not to escape to the country where residents have to deal with their own sets of issues, but rather to change social relationships and essential morality in the city. The analysis of images associated with the country and the city as "ways of responding to a whole social development" (Williams, 1973:297) reveals the underlying structure of these perspectives in their interrelations. The image that Nieu Bethesda has maintained in turbulent or uncertain times is the brand that it advertises

to people looking to escape the city. Fracking threatens the branding of Nieu Bethesda and meaning making process behind it, stories of discord between man and nature challenges the beliefs people have of the village, the appearance of residential division based on race groups tarnishes its image, the presence of technological development and influences teleports the seemingly preserved village into the 21st century, and the sense of community coupled with contestations over opinions, rumours, beliefs and ways of life is what reinforces the branding of Nieu Bethesda. What I will now look at in the next two chapters is the insitutional face of ‘Nieu Bethesda, Inc.’, the Owl House Committee, and how the survival of the Nieu Bethesda image is dependent on the circulation of stories and counter-stories which both undermine and maintain the brand.

The Fame of Nieu Bethesda

“Bethesda is possibly one of the most tolerant places”, says a resident in the village, “You won’t find that anywhere else. It’s because it is a small tourist community working hard. You have to look past your differences and work together”.

Nancy Munn’s monograph on *The Fame of Gawa* (1986) provides both a theoretical framework which can be applied to similar studies, and a rich ethnography of the way in which a community is capable of reproducing itself and its own viability by reproducing particular values or valued qualities that bring that viability into existence, maintain it and expand it. Alan Rumsey’s *Ethnographic Macro-tropes and Anthropological Theory* (2004) analyses *Writing Culture* (Thornton, et al: 1988) with regards to ethnographic writing. Rumsey says that the ethnographic monograph is only one genre of such writing and the central organising figure of this genre is the trope of classification (Rumsey, 2004:269). The main aim of the trope of classification is to create a sense of internal coherence, closure,

comprehensiveness and wholeness; a social whole that is characterised by a connectedness of related parts. The text comes to represent the social reality being depicted: in completing the text, the ending gives meaning to the whole. Culture and society are constructed as wholes in ethnographic monographs in order for us to understand social relations within them (Thornton, 1988:287). Tropes are an entry point into understanding these social relations. From what I understand, tropes used in writing are large organising genres and metaphors of description, narrative, analysis and synthesis. They are structures of relations that shape the writing, express the character of that writing and analyse social situations.

Central themes that Munn covers and that are useful to my own research include: action, value production, signification, space and time, and exchange (Munn, 1986:xi). I will discuss these themes in relation to the economic viability of Nieu Bethesda; how actions and cultural practices by actors construct their lived world, the manner in which Nieu Bethesda produces valued aspects that are essential to its communal viability, the symbolic process of producing meaning through actions which both shape and are shaped by meanings relevant to its context, the space-time (the domain in which fame expands and contracts) created by acts (such as material transactions related to tourism and immaterial transactions like the exchanging of stories and rumours surrounding the Owl House and Helen Martins), and finally I will end the discussion with Munn's view of exchange in terms of the interrelatedness of speaking and listening. This will then lead into the next chapter of my paper which is on rumours as oral history; the formation, expansion, manipulation and exchange of stories in order to achieve various desired outcomes.

Munn was interested in three general features of Gawan society (1986:xiii): the giving of food versus food consumption (food transmission), the outward expansion of Gawa's fame within a broader network of inter-island relations, and the importance of witchcraft assumptions ('assumption' being the operative word as it is a key contributing factor to creating rumours; rumours are based on both fact and fiction or fabrication). Munn's main interest was "in developing a model of symbolic process that was able to convey the interrelations between these and other dimensions of Gawan society (1986:xiii). It is this connection between aspects of a broader context that I wish to show in my own research on Nieu Bethesda; how it fits into the bigger picture of 21st Century South Africa, while still being able to pay attention to the individual aspects that make up the community, without giving primacy to either perspective.

Munn's model of value transformation illustrates how communal value is formed. Communal value is what the community regards as being essential to its viability; "actors create communal value through effecting positive value transformations" (Munn, 1986:20) formed in tension with negative value transformations. The latter is a contraction of or a failure to expand space-time, while the former is what leads to the creation and spread of fame. Negative value transformations are also a subversion of positive transformations and so result in value reversals or preventions. The community seeks to produce the positive and negate or prevent the negative. Through this process the "community creates itself as the agent of its own value creation" (Munn, 1986:20). Munn demonstrate that value production is part of a wider dialectical system in which tensions, manipulation, combinations and outcomes play out. A closer look at the components that make up Munn's model of value transformation explains this further. Consider the following elements as being essential to the outcome of the value transformation process and to understand the interrelatedness of

the components: the actor or storyteller who acts as the medium through which value is transmitted, the act itself which produces value, space and time which are equal but different aspects put together to form space-time, fame or tourism as the favourable outcome, and finally the structure, context or framework in which the value transformation process occurs. The value-producing act results in different positive and negative value transformations depending on the culturally defined type of act, possible outcomes, symbolism and meaning of the act within a social framework, and the intentions of the actor. The community, a collection of actors, is closely connected to the action that produces its value. This process results in a reproduction of the self. A community reproduces itself in terms of the value-producing act; Alain Touraine (1977:4) in Munn's ethnography (1986:3) states that "a community may be said to act 'as an agent of its own self-production'". Although space-time is one composite idea, it is made up of two separate, yet relational, concepts. There is a transformative process that takes place when all the above mentioned components are combined; this process is value production or fame creation that occurs through exchange. It is a process that results in social bonding and forms relationships between people and with places which, ultimately, is how value is created, circulated, maintained, and expanded.

Gawa is a small island society made up of 532 people at the time in which Munn (1986:5) wrote her ethnography. It is an important link in the Kula trade ring which operates as a complex system of long-distance exchanges. The Kula trade ring is an intricate time-space-person network (Munn, 1986:5) that functions according to connections and relationships amongst its members. "Gawan society has to be understood in terms of its grounding in this inter-island world" (Munn, 1986:6). Munn examines the lived world of Gawa as part of the wider process of value-creation in which it exists. Having said this, something similar can

be noted about Nieu Bethesda: it is a small community made up of about 1000 people. It is both isolated geographically from other bigger towns or cities, just as an island is separate from surrounding land masses, while simultaneously being part of a broader network of long-distance exchanges in that people travel from distant places to or through Nieu Bethesda; these places are connected by the movement of people between them as well as by the N1 highway that people use to get there. Metaphorically, Nieu Bethesda is Gawa and South Africa is the Kula trade ring in which its citizens move through time and space, ultimately forming connections and relations between time, space and people. In Gawa objects circulate in order to generate fame, while in Nieu Bethesda people move between places to create a space in which they can capitalize on heritage. The interaction with tourists from further away frames the production of value in Nieu Bethesda.

As I have already mentioned, Munn's book "is concerned with certain types of transformative action through which a community seeks to create the value it regards as essential to its communal viability" (1986:2). This is also what is taking place in Nieu Bethesda in terms of rumours generating tourism, fame and essentially communal viability. Food transmission in Munn's case and the sharing of stories in mine is what initiates change in the form of positive or negative outcomes and transformations to create the value that is needed for the community's viability. Bear in mind that there are various modes of positive value creation and food transmission and storytelling are just two such modes. Munn's symbolic relation between consumption and transmission (1986:13) can be applied to both food and rumour-related activities: the actor transmits and those acted upon consume. Food and story transmission generate positive value which then results in an expansion of the self. Gawan witchcraft is viewed as "subversive intersubjective space-time" (Munn, 1986:13)

which is a form of consumption that negates or destroys positive transformation possibilities. In essence, Gawan witchcraft is the spatiotemporal control of one actor expands to destroy the spatiotemporal capacities of another (Munn, 1986:13). Even though it prevents positive value transformations, it is still a mode of value production and a specific construction of being (Munn, 1986:13). The witch is a consumer whose consumption is the expansion of their own intersubjective control at the contraction of another's. It is not merely a contraction of the other's control and positive value potentials, it is a destruction thereof.

It is important to note that for every action there is a counter-action or a reaction as well as numerous potential outcomes. More specifically, positive transformations are in constant tension with negative potentials which threaten the production of desired value, the ideal construction of self and positive social relations (Munn, 1986:3). The community attempts to control these negative transformative possibilities which have three possible outcomes that Munn (1986:3) outlines: the negation of positive value, the subversion of positive value, and the destruction of positive value. In summary: there is an interaction, dynamic and tension between positive and negative value creation, transformations, potentials and construction of the self. This proves to be interesting when considering the purpose, desired outcomes and the actual effects of particular rumours told by residents of and visitors to Nieu Bethesda: are they sharing stories for their own benefit, for value-creation in the form of tourism, or merely to participate in a network of conversations? If the outcome of particular rumours has a negative impact on either the community's tourism or the image of Helen Martins, the Owl House and the community itself, does that make the storyteller comparable to Munn's idea of Gawan witches in that they are consumers who expand their own spatiotemporal control by destroying others'? The concept of a rumour has negative

connotations and so it might require a reworking of one's understanding of how rumours might act as transmitters of positive value, or an analysis of how rumours could either destroy or construct spatiotemporal control and positive value potentials.

Actions, as discussed by Munn, are aimed at positive value-creation and controlling the negative alternative. Actions are culturally meaningful forms part of practices whose meanings are culturally defined, context-specific and determined by internal relations which specify the nature of the value produced (Munn, 1986:3). According to Munn (1986:8), the lived world is the arena of action as it is constructed by action and complex cultural practices; it shapes and is shaped by these practices. An act is performed by an actor capable of agency, it has a potential for various outcomes and effects or positive and negative value transformation; its capacities and meanings are culturally defined (Munn, 1986:8). In other words, the act or action is part of a culturally-defined practice which initiates a process of value-creation which is essential to communal value or the community's viability and may result in either positive and desirable outcomes or negative and undesired effects. The value of an act is determined by its capacity to produce particular outcomes. Essentially, these outcomes are the products of acts that carry value potentials. Value is measured, relational and a deeper dimension of cultural meaning (Munn, 1986:9).

'Intersubjective space-time', as defined by Munn, is 'multidimensional', 'a symbolic order and process' and connotes 'self-other relations' (Munn, 1986:9). From what I understand, 'intersubjective space-time' refers to an agreement of a shared meaning that is constructed through actors' interactions with one another; it is a shared experience and a shared understanding of that experience. This is also known as a 'synchronisation of space-time' or

a 'spatiotemporal co-ordination' (Munn, 1986:12). It is interesting that a literal analysis of 'inter-subjective' results in a different understanding of the word: rather than referring to a shared meaning, it refers to an act that operates between the different actors' subjective understandings of their shared experience. It is literally between (inter-) two or more subjectivities. This could also be interpreted as a 'fragmentation of space-time' (Munn, 1986:12) which is a negative value transformation or a failure to extend value. It is important to note that Munn's analysis of space-time is specific to Gawa. Her model cannot directly be applied to Nieu Bethesda as there is a diversion towards heritage rather than fame in my case.

If intersubjectivity, or a shared understanding of communal value and shared problems faced by the community, is needed to arrive at a shared sense of possible solutions to those problems and in order to generate the community's viability, how can this theory be applied to Nieu Bethesda's tourism and the rumours that contribute to it? Intersubjectivity – shared understanding, meanings, values, interests, experiences – implies a community's ability to act collectively and so a lack of intersubjectivity could then mean a failure to do so. This seems to be somewhat contradictory as the literal sense of the word 'inter-subjective' means a disjuncture between actors' understandings, while an interpretation of 'intersubjective' shows a shared understanding amongst actors involved. Ironically, it is the inter-subjective act of storytelling that contributes to and generates solutions to a shared interest in creating tourism in Nieu Bethesda. Each storyteller has their own understanding of the same story regarding Martins, and so too does each audience member who hears, interprets and alters the story in order to retell it according to their own understanding of what happened, what they heard and how it could be linked to the storytellers themselves. It is in their inter-

subjectivity – their disjuncture in meaning and reception – that a shared interest grows and contributes to a common interest: tourism.

Munn (1986:9) goes on to explain the concept of ‘spatiotemporal transformation’ or a ‘spatiotemporal process’ which I believe will further illustrate how the act of spreading rumours can be a valuable part of creating tourism. To put it simply: an act or practice forms a spatiotemporal process because it is a mode of space-time, as previously discussed. This process consists of relations between distance, location, directionality, duration or continuance, succession, and timing (Munn, 1986:9). An act is valued if it is capable of extending or expanding intersubjective space-time; the value of an act is determined by its level of potency (Munn, 1986:9). The space-time and value generated by particular acts can then be analysed in terms of three concepts: spatiotemporal process (a relational interaction between contributing factors that influence the process itself), spatiotemporal transformation (an act’s ability to alter space-time) and spatiotemporal extension (the expansion of intersubjective space-time). Rumour falls under these categories as it incorporates contributing factors (such as the storyteller, the context in which the story is told, and so on), it travels across time and space, and it extends or expands in order to generate an interest and ultimately tourism surrounding the stories discussed. The uncertainty, or the disjuncture in space-time, results in a continuance of interest that spans over great distances and consecutive time periods as well as an intersubjective space-time that unites speakers and listeners in a common interest or shared understanding of value, although it might not entirely be a conscious or intentional value-creation.

Different actions create different space-times. The act of giving, that Munn focuses on in Gawa, allows the actor to enter a network of actions and outcomes; it “initiates the possibility of entering into a particular kind of reciprocal transaction” (Munn, 1986:9). Similarly so, the exchange between telling and listening allows for actors to enter into a similar network. This particular mode of space-time created through the act of giving is one that connects people from different places at different times. Additional to this are subjective aspects of the acts, such as the act of remembering which is a kind of continuation of the act beyond its immediate space-time and the transaction itself. In summary, there are three aspects of space-time (Munn, 1986:10): the material (the gift in Gawa or perhaps souvenirs, photographs or the Owl House itself in the case of Nieu Bethesda), the non-material (fame in Gawa or rumours, storytelling and memories in Nieu Bethesda), and actors (the bodies through which these agents are transmitted and transferred). In analysing these three aspects as condensed space-times, we are able to understand the broader intersubjective space-time in which they operate and circulate. It is this space-time that actors create and are shaped by; in engaging actively in practices they form an intersubjective space-time, or their own lived world, as well as aspects of themselves. This gives new meaning to Martins’ use of the phrase “this is my world” written in wire letters on the fence that encloses her hand-made mecca (see Figure 15). She both literally and figuratively constructed the world she lived in. Literal in that the Owl House, Camel Yard and Nieu Bethesda itself are physical representations of a time and people that passed by, but are remembered and represented through physical entities. Figurative in that Martins’ almost life-size sculptures, use of colour and broken glass convey messages, meanings and symbolism relevant to a specific and condensed space-time that Martins created and was shaped by. General space-time is made up of various dimensions which work together to “develop historical memorability as

a unique artefact so that it may be remembered long after it has disappeared” (Munn, 1986:12). Some of these dimensions include: acts, entities and aspects of subjectivity.



Figure 5: The words "This is my world" written in wire on the fence.

The value of intersubjective space-time is achieved in the extension of “spatiotemporal relations that go beyond the self or that expand dimensions of the spatiotemporal control of an actor” (Munn, 1986:11). In the case of Gawa, fame generated through trade is the medium through which the space-time is expanded, whereas in Nieu Bethesda it is capital which is expanded through tourism which results in members capitalizing on heritage. Value is transmitted through this extension; it is an end result, not a causative factor of the expansion process. In the case of Nieu Bethesda, the community’s viability can be measured against the relative space-time in relation to which it is created. In other words: space-time is a value measure. The greater the development of outward relations is, the more fame is generated and so results in an increase in the community’s viability. Munn illustrates that in establishing connections and relations that go beyond Gawa, the community gains something that goes beyond that time and place through their transactions and the spatiotemporal extension of the self with the intention of creating positive future possibilities. It is contested whether or not Martins wanted her house to be made into a public museum, so it might not have been her intention to create the possibility for future returns in the form of tourism, donations and payments made as a result. What is certain is that the

Nieu Bethesda community has established relations with people in other parts of the country as well as in the rest of the world, especially in Holland, and so they gain something that goes beyond their specific time and place. The community's viability is dependent on the image that people outside of it have; Nieu Bethesda's image is one of an isolated and preserved village unburdened by modern troubles and untainted by the 21st century. Although this might not be the case, the fact that this is the image many people have of it is what makes this community viable and valuable as an escape from the city and the 21st century.

Chapter Two: Rumour as Oral History

The way I have organised the stories and literature I came across during my research and fieldwork is according to definitions of what each category entails and what constitutes each of them. I selected particular stories for their relevance to my research topic and usefulness in illustrating the points I made and those made by theorists. It is not to say that these were the only or regarded as the most important stories that I came across. Having placed the selected stories in particular categories does not mean that they are restricted to those definitions; they overlap and intersect. I have organised them in this manner to give examples of how the same story could be analysed or interpreted in different ways, depending on which perspective is adopted. For example: a story that falls under memory in this paper could also be classified as an informant's theory because of the subjective and sometimes unreliable nature of individual memories that might fade over time or be remembered differently from how the actual events played out. A person who recalls personal accounts of interacting with Helen Martins might describe her as they remember her; it is not to say that these are factual accounts, but rather subjective recollections. I am not concerned with proving or disproving accounts, but rather analysing them for their social value.

Folklores, Fantasies and Fireside Tales

“Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary”, says a little girl into the grimy bathroom mirror of the Nieu Bethesda tennis club house.

A little boy runs up to me in the dining hall, “kom buite”, come outside, he says.

“It’s her”, says the little girl pointing at me, “it’s Bloody Mary! Look at her eyes”.

*I rub my bloodshot eyes reddened by the braai smoke.*¹⁵

Martins' fascination with religion, spirituality and history resulted in a cacophony of signs, symbols and meanings from around the world. Snippets from poets, snatches of religious imagery, scraps of global inspiration; all came together to reveal her quest for understanding and her endeavours in meaning-making and self-construction. It is difficult then to contextualise her motivations or where exactly she drew inspiration from and for what reasons. It would not be entirely useful to analyse individual aspects of her home and art or to prove their accuracy and validity; like assessing single puzzle-pieces without seeing the bigger picture or even knowing what complete image they would create. Instead, I offer interpretations made by visitors and residents in Nieu Bethesda to try understand what their comments are saying about their geographical and temporal contexts as well as what their perspectives reveal about the speakers themselves.

The Owl House: Owls and Omens

“Her father was a difficult, difficult, difficult old man” (see Figure 16), says Peet, speaking slowly and deeply as though telling scary stories around a campfire, “people suspected she [Helen Martins] was molested as a kid. Those guys in those years believed that if this happened to you, you would give birth to a monster. So you see”, says Peet mischievously, “under one of the beds, inside the house is an animal skin with a normal human foot and an animal hoof sticking out from under this bed.” He pauses for dramatic effect, “ja, it’s a spooky one! This is potentially what she saw in her mind as what’s gonna happen to her. It might explain a lot. In later years she locked him [her father] up in the Lion’s Den, where you pay now” (see Figure 17).

¹⁵ The folklore or legend of Bloody Mary is based on the idea that if someone repeats the name ‘Bloody Mary’ several times in the mirror she will appear.



Figure 16: This is apparently a sculpture of Martins' father wanting to go back to his childhood or to when his children were young so that he could right the wrongs of the past.



Figure17: A figure described as a doorstep in printed texts, placed next to one of the beds with a spoon to one side.

According to Greek mythology, the owl is associated with the Greek goddess of learning, Athena¹⁶. It is a symbol of wisdom and wealth. For Egyptians and those of Celtic and Hindu faith, the owl is a ‘guardian of the underworld’, a ‘protector of the dead’, a ‘ruler of the night’, a ‘seer of souls’, and a ‘keeper of spirits’. When misinterpreted, these images have negative connotations and are associated with death rather than transition and protection. Amongst Native Americans, the owl is a ‘keeper of sacred knowledge’ with immense

¹⁶ Information of images associated with owls was taken from www.whatsyoursign.com, accessed on 18 January 2014, and in informal discussions with people in Johannesburg and Nieu Bethesda during 2013.

wisdom and foresight. For Aboriginal Australians the owl is a ‘messenger of secrets’, a ‘kin of sorcerers’, and a ‘companion to seers’. Similarly so, in Europe during medieval times, owls were understood to be witches and wizards in disguise. It is my understanding that in many parts of Africa the owl is far from being a totem animal and is instead seen as an omen. Not only are owls associated with witchcraft, they forecast or perhaps bring forth future disasters (see Figure 18). These various meaning attached to the symbol of the owl indicate that people’s perspectives differ based on the context in which their ideas are formulated. Many superstitions, folklores and beliefs stem from the need to teach a lesson or a moral through storytelling. It is not to say that they are false or fake, but rather that their retelling is important in order to communicate a particular message.



Figure 18: Nieu Bethesda is very proud of its owls (both real and those at the Owl House). Here is an owl which is being kept at Ganora farm.

These are all ideas that were brought up in discussion about owls and interpretations of sculptures at the Owl House. The negative imagery attached to owls and being viewed as omens was used in justifying people’s stories about Martins’ madness or her reason for using this particular imagery to signify her assumed molestation as a child. Some said that the large glass eyes of the cement figures reflect the owl’s ability to see in the dark and, according to the molestation rumour, Martins was afraid of the dark because she was apparently locked in a dark room as a child by her father. Martins’ travelling at night to

avoid being seen while collecting materials for her art is likened to this bird of prey that moves swiftly and silently through the darkness. These images and identities associated with who people believe Martins to have been is what creates a brand that attracts people to the village – they are in search of her assumed madness, the thrill of stepping into an apparently haunted house straight out of a horror movie, or the satisfaction of decoding messages and meanings hidden in the statues in order to make sense of what they see. It is this brand that Nieu Bethesda indirectly markets through the sharing of rumours and spread of speculation; this is what the legend of Helen Martins is built on.

Martins’ Mermaids and the Mermaid Myth

“No one’s ever really been able to suss her [Martins] out”, says a young couple visiting from Pretoria, “someone like that, I think, was such a complex character. But you can speculate and that increases the legend in a way.”

250 million years ago parts of the Karoo were underwater¹⁷. “When the oceans receded, they left behind a fertile valley that’s nestled between the Swartberg, Langeberg and Outeniqua mountains – where mountain springs trickle into the rock pools, and carve out the underground caverns that are said to provide sanctuary for this mythical creature”. There are rock paintings depicting fish-tailed human figures in this area. It is said that mermaids sit by waterpools or waterfalls while combing their hair and then luring people into the water. According to one of the residents in Nieu Bethesda, the Karoo Mermaid is “a popular myth amongst Bushmen living in the Karoo and Klein Karoo”. He says that because water is both scarce and dangerous the story of the Karoo Mermaid is told to prevent children from

¹⁷ Taken from www.aboutsouthafrica.com. Accessed on 18 January 2014. Several websites and television documentaries about the Karoo Mermaids include this same information.

drowning or wasting water. There are over a dozen mermaids in the Camel Yard. Many of them seem to be beckoning the onlooker to come closer to where they sit on the edge of ponds. Once again, this mythical aspect of the art appeals to visitors' imaginations, curiosity and interpretations. It is an important aspect of the Nieu Bethesda brand that people are after; a fantasy world on your doorstep, a fairytale within reach.

Speculations, Suspicions and Speculative Theories:

"You know east is there?" Albert points to the sun-warped purple mountains on the horizon. "Her east faces south. True east is there."

"Why is that?"

"I'll tell you"

"You know?"

"I think I do."

Albert Redelinghuys, described as "a Gauteng escapee"¹⁸, is an artist who lives and creates artwork in Nieu Bethesda. In addition to doing stonework and paintings of the Karoo landscape, he is now working on a maze and a labyrinth made out of plants of the Sage family which he says are not doing too well because of the weather. I first met Albert during my second visit to the village. I was drinking homemade ginger ale, the alternatives being homemade lemonade and rainwater, on a couch outside The Melting Pot. Albert sat down and, as I came to expect from the hospitality and friendliness of the people to visitors in Nieu Bethesda, he struck up a conversation. While I explained how it was that I arrived here I heard a lady, who happened to be the owner, behind me taking food orders at the next table say that they were out of eggs and so any items on the menu containing eggs would not be

¹⁸ Taken from www.nieubethesda.com and accessed on 20 January 2014

available. The customer, a relatively new resident, informed the owner that she had bought eggs the previous day and so she was welcome to walk to her house and take as many as she needed, free of charge. The door, of course, was unlocked, as I came to expect. The community seemed to help each other out in favours, knowing that they depended on one another's kindness and assistance. Favours were not forgotten. There were numerous accounts of farmers fetching petrol for stranded visitors because of the lack of a petrol station in Nieu Bethesda. Albert and I had spent almost an entire day walking through the Camel Yard, offering insight and challenging theories. He offered me one of his own, one that I think deserves to be told in full because of its uniqueness and relevance to the way in which stories are justified and explored in Nieu Bethesda. His theory has to do with the east: true east, a false east and Martins' east (see Figure 19).



Figure 19: Procession in the Camel Yard facing a false east.

Albert reckons that Martins started the transformation of her home and garden with the sculptures she asked Koos Malgas to make, “she had a small tin box, a cigar box, empty, and there was a lion's head on it, embossed, and she apparently gave it to him and she asked him ‘can you sculpt something for me?’ and he said he had never done it before. She sent

him home and said ‘go and copy that lion’s head and see if you can do it’” which was repeated by Jeni Couzyn and Julia Malgas in their book, *Koos Malgas Sculptor of the Owl House* (2012) “so she probably would’ve started here with the sculpture with Malgas doing her manual labour; the cement and doing the framework with wire”, said Albert. Some of the sculptures appear to be newer or of different styles, but this could be because of recent restoration or because different artists might have been responsible for creating different artworks. It is not part of my research to get involved in the debate about who the ‘real’ artist of the Owl House is, I am more interested in the discussions themselves; I will not prove or disprove theories, but rather offer those I was given as they were told to me. Having said that, one of the more recent debates has to do with the restoration of the Owl House: some are for it, others against. There are also those that agree with it, but not with the manner in which it has been done, and those who see something poetic in the way that the sculptures are weathered by the Karoo and return to the soil leaving only traces and memories of their existence. Albert said that there are photographs of the statues as they stood just after completion and these photographs were used as reference when repainting the fading colours, fixing crumbling limbs and reattaching broken bits (see Figure 20). “They copied the colours, but they should’ve left a part of it as it happened, that’s what you do with restoration. With this, you leave part of the old; you tell the story”.



Figure 6: Broken statues being renovated.

Albert continued to discuss the transformation as Martins, he believes, moved through themes of religion and symbols. She knew the Bible, being in a Christian community, and was deeply inspired by religious material from the east (see Figure 21). Albert draws a rectangle in the sand with the toe of his shoe, “look at the lie of this [Helen’s] plot”. He adds outlines of circles and squares to indicate the water tower, house and workroom outside. “If you wanted to do a procession you would probably do it in the longest direction and just say that is east there”, he points to the one end of the rectangle furthest away from the square house and circular water tower. It is well known amongst anthropologists that a space is activated by the activities that take place in it and, at the same time, it shapes the activities themselves. We walked to the front of the Camel Yard. He stood next to two figures; one kneeling and one standing holding onto a wooden stick. The figure standing has his free hand stretched out in front of him. Behind them are pyramids and a flat mountain, Kompasberg, “the old people call it Spitzkop”, said Albert. Behind the mountain is east.



Figure 7: Adam taking a bite of the forbidden fruit.

East plays a key role in many religions; in their imagery, symbolism and history. In Islam, people are required to travel east to Mecca. This pilgrimage is in search of light. The word ‘mecca’ is used in the title of Fugard’s play about Martins. ‘Mecca’ is also what Martins called the colourful cylindrical structures in the Camel Yard made out of glass bottles;

allowing light to filter through, reflect on the water, and bath the sculptures inside in red, green and gold. According to Christian belief, the wise men came from the east after Jesus was born, having followed a star in the east. A smiling Buddhist figure sits cross-legged in the midst of the procession, but facing the other way; Buddhism being associated more predominantly with the eastern part of the globe. For Martins, east seems to play a very distinct role when assessing the method behind her perceived madness in creating these artworks, assisted or not. The idea behind it is that half of the Camel Yard is assembled in a procession heading east, as the metal words 'EAST/OOS' indicate on the wire fence. Albert walks over to a purple-cloaked figure that seemed to shield its eyes from the sun, with the other hand it seemed to ask a question, "To me", said Albert, "he's very important. He's got glass feet and a full robe on", something consistent with the figures seated on camels who appear to be different from their cement counterparts standing next to them, "To me, he's leading the whole procession. He's saying to himself 'where to now?'" Albert walks to the figure almost directly in front of the leader, "he's looking right at that guy, facing him, no one else is". Albert stands behind the figure facing the procession and makes me stand behind the two figures; one with a walking stick and the other kneeling. He speaks as though talking for the statue facing the whole procession, "Are you looking for the way? That's the way", the statue is pointing to the right, towards true east. "He's acting like a compass. When you move, the compass also moves. All of a sudden east becomes that east and it's not about east anymore, it's about the light. What did Christ say? 'I'm the truth and I'm the light'. So it's the inner light" (see Figure 22).



Figure 22: A collage depicting the interaction between the statues Albert discussed.

Analysing these four figures in this way makes them fall into place and interact in a unique way. This demonstrates how one perspective offers numerous possibilities for interpretation. Just as Williams (1973:293) said that assessing only one contrast reveals some possibilities, so too does one view offer only some of the possible outcomes. “Interestingly enough”, said Albert, “in the books that I’ve seen [about the Owl House], this figure [the one facing the procession] doesn’t even feature. Not in words or images. This is the pivotal figure in the garden, I think”. Albert had shared his theory with Peet as well, to which Peet said: “it’s plausible. Like Myth Busters, it could be! It’s a nice story and it’s like Helen had a sense of humour. If Helen was such an introvert she wouldn’t have done that. Forget it”.

Memory Loss: a Change in Memory Studies

“There’s a girl called Jo Ractliffe, she did an art exhibition” says Peet, “It started off she got money, a helluva lot of money, from UNICEF of all people. She’s driving from Cape Town to Johannesburg via Kimberly and on the side of the road there were three donkeys shot, dood, dead. She took photographs of the donkeys and also took note of where it was

because she wanted to come back. She came back less than a week later, four days later, going past there no donkeys, no blood. Exact same place as she was. Then she drew a line between the history of South Africa and how things happen that aren't necessarily recorded."

Luise White (Cohen, 2001:276) says that "oral histories were by definition about things that were within a living memory; facts could be checked by interviewing a number of informants. The emphasis was on how to verify, not how to interpret". Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992) defines collective memory as a socially constructed notion. Paul Connerton has a similar view in that he "claims that collective and individual memory are so thoroughly interconnected, and that those interconnections are so central to how societies reproduce their social order" (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1993:707). He indicates that with regards to incorporating practices and communal memory, the communication of these memories and practices is dependent on "the presence of living models" (Connerton, 1989:73). Halbwachs views history as being 'dead memory' which no longer has a big impact on our lives, whereas memory is alive and influential in the everyday. Memory is evidence of history and history is social memory. Halbwachs distinguished between two types of memory: historical and autobiographical. Historical memory is reinforced through commemorations and is communicated through records. These records form social bonds that connect the individuals who have access to them. The commemoration of events assists in keeping memories alive, recalling the past and holding communities together. Historical memories are not remembered directly, but rather indirectly by people who did not participate in the historical events. Autobiographical memory, on the other hand, refers to memories of firsthand experience. People are able to reconstruct and reinforce the past by participating in events with others who had similar experiences. The past is reconstructed by the individual through recollection, reflection and a repetition of memories. Halbwachs mentions that memory is subjective. Memories of the past change over time and with every

individual. Shared memories, like collective memories that Halbwachs wrote about, are structured by the framework in which they are told and are influenced by the group of individuals that share memories. The social meanings attached to shared memories are understood to create social identities.

In Pierre Nora's *Between Memory and History* (1989) his distinction between memory in history, he sees memory as being social, constantly evolving, and "a bond tying us to the eternal present" (Nora, 2011:8), while history is viewed as being propelled by change and an incomplete or inaccurate reconstruction and representation of a past that no longer exists. Nora (2011:6) says that memory's demand for truth more 'truthful' than that of history is the truth of personal experience and individual memory. History, he says, although usually in opposition to memory, is built on memory. Nora places history with the nation against memory in the individual; "history was the sphere of the collective; memory that of the individual". I do not think it is fair to restrict history to the collective of the nation and memory to the individual, nor to place them in opposition with one another. Halbwachs states that collective memory operates through the remembering done by individuals as a collective group; individuals draw on one another's memories to form a collective. By Nora's definition, this should then be classified as history and not as memory.

The opening line of Nora's *Between Memory and History*: "the acceleration of history" (1989:7) is said to indicate "an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear". It indicates that things are not as permanent as they used to be. The modern world is constantly changing and we can no longer use a certain past to project onto an uncertain

future. This phrase, the acceleration of history, reappears in his *Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory* (2011). The surge in memory that he refers to is the change in the way that memory is organized. In the last 25 years there has been a shift in memory studies. Previously memory was associated with the individual and history was linked to the collective. Memory then became communal and there was a move away from western or colonial discourse about marginal histories. It is now understood that there are multiple ways of viewing the past, that multiple memories construct the past and that there are multiple angles or interpretations of the past. The acceleration of history as a result of this shift leads to a stockpiling of historical narratives and materials.

This stockpiling is different to what Richard Price talks about in *First-Time* (1983). In terms of historical anthropology, there seems to be a shift in how the past is remembered in his book. Price was able to offer Saramaka historians new information of their early past, after he was able to systematically explore their distant past, and fortunately for him his research “coincided with an independent realisation by some elders that knowledge of First-Time... had better be written down soon or else be lost forever” (1983:17). Because of their fear that ‘those times’ will come again if they forget, writing down their oral history proved to be useful in ensuring a remembrance of that past, motivated by an awareness of an irreversible loss of knowledge already occurring. A problem with this, though, is the paradox amongst the Saramaka in the remembering and retelling of a distant past: “for traditional men, it is a supreme good to know... but it is an equally grave danger to tell” (Price, 1983:21-22). This paradox resurfaces in the writing down of oral history” “damned if they do... because of terrible perceived dangers, and damned if they don’t, because the knowledge would be forever lost” (Price, 1983:22). Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewutz in *On the Generification of Culture: from Blowfish to Melanesia* (2001) discuss the preservation of

sacred knowledge through particular rituals for the purpose of younger generations having knowledge systems to refer back to. To do so there needed to be a public spectacle. In Errington and Gewurtz's ethnographic examples they illustrate how this display of sacred cultural rituals is necessary for the acknowledgment from external legal systems that these individuals hold ritual power; to recognise their authority and to authenticate this power. It is clear that through cultural generification local knowledge and knowledge-makers become comprehensible to and controlled by outsiders (Errington and Gewurtz, 2001). Similarly so, Marilyn Strathern in *The Whole Person and its Artefacts* (2004) talks about the knowledge economy in which information is used as currency. Through this cultural translation, local knowledge is made legible or understandable to others and so particular individuals of the Chambri of Papua New Guinea lose control over this knowledge as it becomes vulnerable and diluted. An example of this is the second account Errington and Gewurtz give in which a men's house is burnt down. The burning down of the men's house became symbolic of the loss of tradition and in order to receive compensation, they had to reduce the complexity of this loss and make it fit into the constraints of standardised or legible terms. Errington and Gewurtz's piece foregrounds the difficulty of authenticity and authentic representation. Their discussion of power being linked to a control over knowledge is also relevant to my chapter on race in which I explore recent debates about the 'true artist' of the Owl House and who benefits from tourism generated by the House.

Price's book also comes at a time when there is a shift in the manner in which ethnography and fieldwork is conducted; the politics and poetics of anthropology. This shift has to do with how anthropologists present and represent history: ethnographies and histories should be relatable. Price highlights some of the ethical dilemmas he faced in the writing of this ethnography such as the question of how to present the Saramaka and their knowledge. The

reason why Price sees the need to record their oral history is because a loss of knowledge was occurring. This knowledge, once lost, cannot be regained because of the changes taking place in the context in which the knowledge circulates. Price sees the need to maintain and retain that history, but has to avoid diluting their knowledge which seems to be inevitable in his recording of their stories and ultimately changing how they remember things or how they pass on knowledge. For the Saramaka knowledge is power and the passing on of that knowledge is a process in which participants actively engage. Knowledge is a valuable commodity which is shared sparingly, but the need to preserve knowledge of the past in a different way changes their interactions with their own history. All these stories and versions of the past constitute imagined histories. In terms of memory, the Saramaka keep the memory of First-Time alive through everyday speech, ritual, song and dance. These memories make up aspects of their identity. Memories in this context are an accumulation of knowledge and act as social currency in that context.

Price is mostly concerned with oral histories; their reliability, variations, fragments, contexts that make the production of such stories possible, their purpose, credibility, authenticity, and how to deal with them. His book raises questions of how anthropologists should represent such stories, especially when the same story is told in different ways. It highlights the positionality of storytellers and what their relationship to the story or event might be. Similar to Cohen's discussion on truth and Michel Trouillot's definition of authenticity, Price turns to oral histories to find truth in history; oral histories come from something that really happened and they construct notions of history. The problem with written history is that it is fixed. Stories should be analysed in context and in relation to other stories. I think that different histories and different ways of recording history depend on the intended outcome: whether it be meaning-making or constructing truth. Price seems to attempt to verify these

stories as truthful, while some theorists rather search for the social meanings inherent in stories.

Memory: Meaning-Making Methods

“As far as the rumour goes that she was abused as a child”, says an artist living in the village, “I wouldn’t know. I’d be very wary about strong rumours like that”, he looks down at the words ‘The Lion’s Den’ engraved on the concrete step, “because it could easily be a very small thing that gets a tail and then it’s an assumption and then it becomes a truth that’s spread. Speculation. Sensationalised. Be wary of that.”

Because of the complex and delicate nature of self-construction and the production of social meanings through the sharing of memories, I turned to Valerie Yow in *Recording Oral History* (2005) which provides a guide on how to approach in-depth interviews, the best ways in which to record and analyse oral history, and what the importance of remembering is for both the narrator and the researcher. Errington and Gewurtz emphasised an awareness of the ethnographer or anthropologist’s positionality and how to avoid influencing people’s recollections as well as their own understanding of the imagined, complex, cultural whole and how it is captured, interpreted and communicated through writing. According to Yow (2005:1) there is a new development “centred on a concern about the process of meaning making”. In order to understand this process researchers make use of in-depth interviews, amongst other research methods and techniques, to not only try and understand the experiences that the narrators are discussing, but to place themselves in the meaning-making process. It is through ethnographic writing that a “cultural construction of the self and the other” (Yow, 2005:1) takes place. George Marcus in *The Viral Intimacies of Ehtnographic Encounters...* (2012) invites the reader to replace particular words used in immunology with words associated with anthropology. For example: replacing ‘virus’ with ‘ethnography’ to

illustrate how the ethnographer, like a virus, infects the body of culture and is seen as an invading foreign agent. David Napier's *Nonselph Help: How Immunology Might Reframe the Enlightenment* (2012) also helps us to rethink "the nature of selfhood", the "social constructions of personhood" and "individual autonomy" (2012:118). Napier's discussion of immunity can be applied to this: "immunity was a process by which some autonomous, selfish being raised a defence against invasive agents through an orchestrated recognition and elimination of perceived otherness" (2012:120). I applied the above mentioned techniques in acquiring life histories and documenting memories or stories when conducting fieldwork and writing my ethnography. In this section I provide discussions based on two of the in-depth interviews I had with Eira in Graaff Reinet and Peet on Doornberg.

Oral history is made up of various components, namely: narrative, description, explanation and reflection. All these aspects should be taken into consideration when assessing oral histories. Because there is always an agenda behind narrative, Jerome Bruner (Yow, 2005:16) suggests that the narrator's selfhood is constructed through storytelling. Not only do we formulate an understanding of our experiences through narrative, we come to understand ourselves better. Yow (2005, 35-36) points out that "self and memory organise, construct, and give meaning to each other"; our sense of self is defined by our memories and we make sense of our experiences through stories.

It is important to be aware of power dynamics or relationships involved when talking to someone in a research situation as it may influence the outcome of the interaction. I found this to be particularly challenging in a community of just over a thousand people as it was difficult to relay information to different informants without revealing who I had received

the information from and so causing tension between the residents. Often times I was asked who had given me specific bits of information or who I had heard a certain story from. It seemed that the source of my information was more important in determining the validity of the stories than the actual evidence carried by the stories themselves. Harold Rosen (Yow, 2005:16) says that narratives are taken seriously as a source of information about the past because they help us to understand past events experienced first-hand and told as eyewitness accounts. They might not be entirely accurate or reliable, but come across as more dependable because of the narrator's direct engagement with what is being narrated.

I found that Yow's guide was useful in understanding what oral history is and why it is important to record it, but I did not agree with her endeavour to prove memories as being either true or false, reliable or unstable. My views regarding oral history are more in line with that of Luise White's where she interprets stories for their social value rather than their authenticity in *Speaking with Vampires* (2000). While Yow places emphasis on the life-history approach rather than a present-centred interview (2005:2), it is the present state of Nieu Bethesda that interests me. Its past is riddled with accusations and contestations, while its present is a mixture of nostalgia, a longing for another time, and a conscious constant battle against the contemporary. Through people's stories of the past and their discussions of the present I am able to deduce what it is people are after in Nieu Bethesda.

According to Yow (2005:3) "oral history is the recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form". Although it might be personal testimony, oral history is also shaped by external factors. Whether the narrator tells the researcher the stories they think they are after or the researcher asks specific questions they think might be relevant, there are different factors

that influence the outcome of an in-depth interview or frame the way in which it takes place. Thucydides (Yow, 2005:2) is said to be the first oral historian who viewed oral history as a tool for investigating a particular society. It is through recording the stories and talking to the narrators that we can better understand the context in which these stories circulate, the conditions under which perspectives are formed, and the methods through which people get their present views across of experiences they had in the past. Catherine Riessman (Yow, 2005:17) indicates that “narratives are essential meaning-making structures”; people construct meaning through narrative. It is my task then to analyse how this process takes place; to understand the complexity of the narrations themselves and to “reveal the meanings of lived experience” (Yow, 2005:23).

Eira

“Do you know that little chapel that Helen made in the Camel Yard?” Asks an elderly lady¹⁹ in Reinet Antiques, “Did you go into that? That was the last thing she did, my aunt told me, she threw in all those jagged pieces of glass that hadn’t been ground up so that no one would intrude her space. She did not want anybody to enter her bit of privacy. And now everyone invades her privacy.”

Eira’s father came from Nieu Bethesda and because she did not have a brother, she was her father’s son on the farm. Her parents are buried in Nieu Bethesda and she takes flowers to their graves quite often. When she was about ten or eleven years old she remembers there only being camels in Martins’ garden. “We would peek over the wall. She literally used to chase us with a broomstick. She didn’t like people. She was a recluse”, a word used by many to describe Martins’ behaviour. Eira’s uncle Billy and aunt Tiny were apparently good neighbours to Martins. “I believe she was always seeking. There’s all sorts of different

¹⁹ Eira grew up in Nieu Bethesda and was a child when Martins began transforming her home into the Owl House. She now works in an antique store in Graaff Reinet.

religions there [in the Camel Yard]. I believe that if she knew Jesus she would've had peace, but that's just because I'm Christian", says Eira, clutching in a fist the cross around her neck, "that's just my own belief". This is just one of many examples of the manner in which people placed themselves in Martins' position and tried to see it from her perspective, but tainted by their own reasoning and perspective. For Eira Martins was seeking, for Albert she was enlightened. Eira viewed the statues from a religious point of view, while Albert viewed them with a creative mind. Eira admitted that she was too young to have made an impression of Martins, but remembers the stories that circulated about her. Many of the stories that Eira recollected started with "I don't know if this is a true story, but it's one that I always heard" and ended with "I'm not sure if it's true or not so don't quote me", a similar storytelling technique used by Suzette Pienaar; the nurse who had been on duty when Martins was taken to hospital days before she died. I found it interesting how storytellers placed themselves in relation to the people and events in their stories, as if to justify the validity of what they were saying; eye witness accounts and personal memories seemed to come across as being more believable than hearsay, rumours and gossip.

According to Eira, during the times in which Martins lived, being sent to live in an old age home was a terrifying thing, "I think the big thing was she was going blind from having all this glass, working with ground glass. The family wanted to put her in an old age home in Graaff Reinet, that's what Auntie Tiny told me. People back then had an absolute horror of old age homes. I think that's what made her drink the caustic soda, she couldn't bear the thought of moving to an old age home". Peet made a similar remark in saying that it was Martins' worst fear to be a burden to anyone, "for her, to go to an old age home or to be a burden to anyone, there wasn't anything worse". At the antique shop where Eira works, a lot of the items come from people who move into old age homes and cannot take these items

with them. They then sell it in the shop because they need the money, Eira said. Her theory of why Martins may have committed suicide could be shaped by her daily interaction with people plagued by the hardships that go with moving into old age homes. This is an example of how someone's story and perspective reveals what the speaker finds important to mention; it says something about the speaker rather than about the person spoken about.

Before leaving the Camel Yard on my second visit to Nieu Bethesda, I asked Albert if he knew the story behind the small chapel that Martins had made. "It's made to come in", he said, indicating the height of the doorway. I told him that a Eira in Graaff Reinet said that Martins tossed jagged pieces of glass into the chapel to prevent people from entering the space after her death. "I could easily believe that", said Albert as he kicked at the bone dry sand in the little chapel, uncovering chunks of glass. "That's quite a lot of glass", he said, "it's deep. This should be covered with glass again. This should be sifted and covered again", but when I returned a number of times throughout the year, all that changed in the little chapel was the footprints.

Peet

"I'm telling you this story to illustrate the point", says Peet in a commanding voice, "she wasn't as withdrawn as what people like to make her; far from it. She's completely different to what people like to think she was." He hesitates and his eyes soften, "You must never see Helen Martins as a sad person. She was an incredibly happy person."

Peet talks in stories (see Figure 23). He has a way of speaking that transports you into the story. His recollections and tales are coloured with local lingo, names of people you feel like you ought to know, nostalgic laughter and reminiscent pauses. If he tells you to 'take a perch'

you should sit down, ‘*gooi* a chirp’ means you are welcome to add your opinion to the conversation, if he asks you to go for a ‘*spitseltjie*’ he is inviting you for a drink at the local pub on a Friday night, talking about a ‘*draadkar skaap*’ refers to a sheep as thin as those wire cars you see kids pushing along the dirt roads, and if he warns you about someone who is a ‘maintenance man’ who’s ‘hands are never *tuis*’ it means the man is someone who flirts with all the ladies “because he’s got his hands on everything”. According to Eira, Peet is one of the most popular storytellers at the annual ‘*stoep stories*’ in Graaff Reinet. Once a year people get together to tell stories of their past experiences and childhood memories, “but it’s something that only comes with age”, she said. Storytelling plays a big role in remembering the past.



Figure 23: Peet's dogs accompany him on his trips to the fields on his farm.

Peet went to the local primary school and was then sent to boarding school in Graaff Reinet for high school, as is the case with most of the children who live in Nieu Bethesda. He did not know Martins too well, but the recollections he has of her and the way in which she is depicted in his stories of her reveal a very different person to the one visitors and many new

residents are familiar with. I noticed that people who had spent a considerable amount of time in the village saw Martins as being eccentric and as having a sense of humour. Their stories or memories of her are not at all like the ones that portray her as a ‘recluse’ or an outcast because of her assumed madness, but she does come across as being an introvert because of her dedication to her art: “she used to go to church; was last in, sneaked into the back, listened to the *boodskap*, but before anybody else she would sneak out and back home again. She didn’t get involved. She did her art. That’s how she was”, says Peet.

Two of Peet’s stories of Martins reveal both her humorous and serious sides. The first is about Martins’ false teeth which came up in many stories, while the second is about the loss of an owl. Based on previous discussions about how memories are meaning-making systems and stories are a construction of the self in relation to the other, I was able to analyse the social value of these stories. For example, I heard someone in the village tell the story of a mouse or a rat taking Martins’ false teeth, which she had received from a mortuary because she was unable to afford new ones, from her bedside table while she slept. Both the story-teller and listeners laughed at the comical image of this event. Their discussion led to the topic of Martins not being hygienic or mentally stable; ‘*verwaarloos*’ neglected, ‘*vuil*’ dirty and ‘*af haar kop af*’ unstable. Their view of Martins revealed something about themselves: what they consider to be appropriate behaviour and how they believe a person should appear in public. Their focus on her appearance rather than a concern, empathy or sympathy with her lack of finances to afford a necessity comments on who the story-teller and listeners are and what they think is important or worth mentioning.

Peet's story about Martins' teeth, in contrast to the one above, shows more of a humorous side of both Martins and himself:

“In '66 I was a *pikkie*, I was about ten years old. The Waikite rugby team from New Zealand came to play rugby in the North East Cape in Graaff Reinet. Amongst a couple of the guys were sheep farmers and these sheep farmers they wanted to see another sheep station, another sheep farm. So they asked the group leader if they could see a sheep farmer there. They came to my dad and a couple of folks, but on the way out he stopped over at Helen Martins to show this art stuff to them. They're all walking and joking: this tiny, diminutive woman came out; making fun of her and so on, having a little giggle. And *ou* Helen was standing, gonna take a photograph of her posing with all these rugby players, and she says, 'hang on, hang on!'" Peet chuckles, "'hang on, I've gotta go fetch my teeth!' Ran into the house and out with her teeth, then she *klapped* them in and said, 'no, ok we can take the photograph'".

It is interesting to note that Peet placed himself in the story, starting it off with an indication of how old he was when this event took place. He also includes information about sheep farmers that is relevant to his father's line of work and so once again integrates his own experiences into the perspective from which the story is told. This creates a sense of authenticity and validity because of it coming across as an eye-witness account or a first-hand experience.

The second story shows the more relatable side of Martins which seems to be lacking in the stories and rumours that circulate about her, "Helen is described by her biographers as a misfit, profoundly alienated from her straight-laced, Calvinist neighbours by her eccentricities" (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:23).

“Almost everything in the back of the Owl House was enclosed with fencing. She had a lot of guinea fowl, owls and a lot of the little churches were for these little *voëltjies*; like a giant aviary, it’s interesting hey? Quite a lot of the structures was housing for animals. The one day, *ag*, I remember Helen was very sick about that one: one of the owls had made a stuff up. It had fallen into one of the tanks and couldn’t get out. The *oke* drowned. *Jitte*, Helen was very cut up about that one. She made a statue of this *oke*”.

History Repeats Itself:

There is another figure seated at the front of the assembly line, facing forward, but in a slightly different direction to the other statues (see Figure 24).

“This is her”, says Albert, “Helen. She’s pointing up to the heavens”.

Another visitor asks, “don’t you think she was seeking? It looks like she is longing for something.”

“Ja”, says Albert, “and when you are seeking does it mean that you don’t know? If you’re seeking you probably know a lot, whereas if you are religious and you are not seeking it means you know everything and you are fine with it and believe that and nothing else is true. You have the only truth. It is a very dangerous mindset.”



Figure 24: assumed to be a statue of Helen Martins.

Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* (1995) critiques both positivism and constructivism; the former being concerned with collecting relevant facts of what happened and understanding people's histories in their own words, the latter being concerned with the stories and narratives that have been left out and giving an interpretation or representation of what happened. With regards to the process or production of history and historical knowledge it is important to consider the following questions: what happened, who did it happen to, who is telling or writing the story, in what context is the story told, what is the purpose of telling this story, and what is told or omitted? Additional to this, a distinction must be made between what happened, what is said to have happened and what we understand to have happened. When it comes to identifying 'true knowledge' or determining what is 'authentic', Cohen in *The Combing of History* (1994) and *In a Nation of White Cars* (2004) illustrates the difficulty and inadequacy inherent in the verification process of oral histories and verbal testimonies.

It might be that Martins drew on different knowledge systems to explain things she did not understand, to fill in the gaps and to continue where some explanations left off. Albert described her as being *soekkend* and *ondersookend*; searching and researching. She may have been looking for spiritual peace or she was merely broadening her knowledge on various religious materials. What I found interesting is the manner in which people justified their stories or legitimised their knowledge of what they believed happened to Martins or what the motivation behind Martins' actions might have been; they assert their versions of the past as being 'the truth', but Cohen in *A Nation of White Cars* (2004) distinguishes between 'a truth', 'the truth' and 'a claim to truth' which proves to be useful here. Cohen analyses Selina Ndalo Were's story of what she saw and the retelling of this story by others with regards to the death of the Kenyan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Ouko. He examines how this process of sharing and spreading verbal information constituted the

manner in which knowledge surrounding the event was evaluated as truthful, authentic, authoritative, reliable, what made sense and what knowledge did not apply to any of the above categories. Selina's story sparked a debate about whether the death of the Minister was murder or suicide and all other 'eye-witness' accounts were compared to her dominant telling of events. Her story was the one that others were measured against. In the case of Nieu Bethesda, Suzette's story of what happened to Martins is taken to be a factual account and any other storytellers who claim to have been there are questioned or their stories measured against Suzette's.

In the oral tradition or the telling of oral histories, "voice is variously authorized or authenticated, critiqued, examined and evaluated" (Cohen, 2001:265). Selina's observation and her repeating the story of this observation transformed the story into a testimony or eye-witness account. Although there were many aspects missing from her testimony, it was considered to be "a claim to truth", rather than "a truth" or "the truth". Much of this proposed truth was based on what was not seen and an uncertainty of what actually happened. Similarly so, the residents of Nieu Bethesda participate in a similar kind of justification process and are often heard saying "this is a genuine story" or "it's the truth". This demonstrates the difference that Trouillot outlines between what happened and what is said to have happened. Oral histories are evaluated and analysed by looking at the events referred to, the context in which the histories are told presently, the narratives, the time that has passed since the event occurred, and whether or not the story has undergone any changes in terms of content or meaning.

And the Rest, as They Say, is History

“I’ll tell you the sequence of things that might be interesting to the story”, says Peet drawing on his own knowledge of what had happened, “She [Eira’s aunt] lived right next door, where the Owl House offices are. Aunt Tiny used to live there, Tiny Hotzenberg. She was a very caring tannie, a very nice tannie. As you tragically heard she [Martins] took the long way out, she drank caustic soda. Dit brand vermoer and you can’t stop it, virtually not stop it. She drank the stuff and she walked, stumbled around the back. Aunt Tiny in a panic said, ‘oh hell, Helen has fallen, she must’ve hurt her knees!’ And she went and rummaged in her first aid case before Helen even got to her and found a little bottle of mercurochrome to doctor Helen’s knees, not realising that Helen had a much more serious condition. The rest is probably what you know. Aunt Tiny was such a caring tannie. It was a sad moment at the time.”

There is not a lot written about Nieu Bethesda in terms of its history pre- Martins. The books, films and documentaries about the village are mostly focused on Martins and her Owl House. What is lacking is more information about the people who assisted her in making statues or who made statues themselves. This is not a debate I wish to participate in, but will include for its value in understanding the social dynamics in Nieu Bethesda as well as the difficulty of valorising oral history in a context where written records take preference in establishing an official history of the place. The residents of Nieu Bethesda spoke about three books in particular that have been written about Martins, the Owl House and Nieu Bethesda: *A Journey Through the Owl House* (1997) by Emslie, *This is My World* (1997) by Susan Imrie Ross, and *Koos Malgas Sculptor of the Owl House* (2008) by Julia Malgas and Jeni Couzyn (see Figure 25). The first two works were held with high regard, while the third was seen as ‘a mockery’ and ‘an outright lie’. The first is intended to ‘preserve and promote the Owl House as an example of Outsider art worthy of recognition and acclaim’, the second offers a ‘biography of Helen Martins, which tells the story of her extraordinary struggle as an artist to transform her world’, while the third challenges what is written in the first two books by presenting Martins’ assistant, Koos Malgas, ‘in his rightful place as a sculptor for the first time’. I will not go into too much detail here about the third text as I will cover it

in the next chapter on race. It is interesting to note the immediate and obvious differences between the three books: the third establishes Koos Malgas as the artist of the Owl House and opposes the popular view of historical events surrounding the Owl House, while the other two accept Martins as the artist and provide more of an analysis of the art and the artist. The third is intended to redirect a collective understanding of the past and allowing for particular people to benefit from it in the present, while the other two act more as historical records written from a more widely held perspective. The contestation surrounding Helen Martins, the Owl House, and how the community is portrayed is part of what constitutes Nieu Bethesda's social memory, history and brand identity. On the topic of the first two books written about Martins, Sheard said: "I have always thought that Sue Ross was very factual because she didn't write down anything for which she couldn't give you proof of letters or notes of some kind of substantiation. Then I spoke to Peggy Archer who is an artist herself and was here at the time Helen was here and she wasn't happy with what Sue Ross even wrote. So nobody's really happy with what everybody else writes. Peggy doesn't easily talk about Helen Martins. There's only so much you can tell". This seems to be the case with the book on Malgas as many of the white residents in the village have been angered or annoyed by the accusations made in the book. The issue of documentation, or lack thereof, in a record-keeping society in providing evidence for claims made is something I wish to touch on as it directly impacts the brand that has been created on the basis that Martins is the artist of the Owl House and the Owl House is the foundation of tourism in Nieu Bethesda. What happens to this brand identity when it is challenged, debunked or altered?



Figure 25: This is apparently a sculpture of Koos Malgas.

There are two of the problems addressed in Julia Malgas and Couzyn’s book that are given special attention by the authors and seem to be a present concern. Both issues involve a piece of paper: a missing title deed to the Malgas family home and a missing letter written to Koos Malgas by Martins on her death bed. These two cases of a lack of material records as evidence illustrates a problem often encountered when dealing with oral history and proving its validity or historical value. Peet’s story of the disappearing donkeys is a good example of this. There was no trace of what happened but it was in people’s memories. The history of the place was in their minds, in their stories and the way they talk about the place. Similarly so, Malgas and his family did not have written records or physical documentation to prove their side of the story, but it does not make it any less plausible or valuable when accounting for what might have taken place at the time. The disappearing traces of history does not mean a disappearance of historical events.

First, the title deed. The loss of land and ‘stolen land’, according to Couzyn, is “the base line of the suffering of the indigenous people” (2012:9). Couzyn’s view of Koos Malgas as a powerless figure in the “framework of the ‘baas’ culture” in a “vanquished country”; his

powerlessness being the result of “his reputation as a drinker, his illiteracy and low self-esteem” and the lack of documentation in a society that demands it, speaks more broadly of the context in which the power relation takes place regarding land ownership. “With the Khoi and the San and lots of people with land claims”, says a resident just outside of Nieu Bethesda, “they don’t have a culture of recording, where the old English and the Dutch brought that skill along; brought title deeds to property and so on”. This proves to be problematic when dealing with an instance where the person involved, according to Couzyn, has strong ties to his Bushman heritage or ancestry, not ‘San’ as she puts it because, I was told, that people in the community regard the use of ‘San’ a “swearword”, and relies on verbal agreements to prove ownership of land. According to Koos Malgas, Martins had given his father a plot of land that she owned and because of the missing title deed his family home was at risk of being taken away from them. This is where the power dynamics come into play: those in power settle disputes based on established societal organisation; in this case a western model which opposes the one employed by Koos Malgas and his family.

Not only was the lack of documentation in a westernised society an issue, apartheid seems to have created long-lasting race-relations that proved to be problematic according to Couzyn and Julia Malgas. Couzyn argues that within this ‘fractured society’ race relations dictated how Malgas and Martins interacted; he did what Martins told him to do because of the racial hierarchy that existed under and after apartheid. She bases her argument on the “many times [she] heard the coloured community described as degenerate, alcoholic, illiterate, not worth wasting time on, by self-righteous whites in and around the village in 1999” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:11). The second problem that plagued Koos Malgas was that of the missing letter. In a discussion with Emslie, Couzyn was told that “according to the minister, the missing letter concerned a small amount of money hidden under the

floorboards” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:19). When talking to people in Pienaarsig I was told that the letter was more of an informal will that left the last of Martins’ money as well as her Owl House to Koos Malgas. “Again, the missing piece of paper was tormenting the family” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:19).

Chapter Three: Race

Trouble in Paradise

“Nieu Bethesda is not the fairytale it appears to be”, says a smartly dressed lady from Johannesburg as she straightens out the items in her shabby chic style shop in the village, “you realise those fairies have scorpion stings.”

Race seems to be a prominent feature in South Africans’ discourse in general, but more so when different races live within close proximity of one another and in areas where the population density is not as big as it is in the city. In smaller communities people live closer to one another not physically but in that they are more familiar with their neighbours than what people are in built up urban spaces. People in South Africa are no longer required to live separately according to their racial differences, but at first glance it seems like some traits have persevered from the apartheid era. “Everywhere you go in South Africa”, says an elderly man visiting Nieu Bethesda for the first time, “you see the same layout: white town or suburbs here, black township there”. In Nieu Bethesda there is what most people refer to as: the ‘village’ (referring to white residents), ‘township’ (coloured residents) and ‘squattercamp’ (black residents) (see Figure 26). It is problematic when the past that people are nostalgic about and long for was one tormented by apartheid. It is not to say that people are in search of segregation or reviving a troubled past, but rather that the past they experienced is one shaped by politics and it would be difficult to avoid it in their quest for a time other than the present. To explain this point further I look at Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009) and Susan Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). These texts also offer a way in which nostalgia could be viewed, not only as a form of historical knowledge and memory, but in relation to branding; a longing for a past that is marketed through stories and sold in the form of experience in Nieu Bethesda.



Figure 26: One of the shacks that make up the squattercamp.

The title of Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* (2009) derives its meaning from the various meanings attached to the two words of which it is composed. 'Native', in this context, means 'indigenous' (2009:152) and 'a person of African descent'. 'Nostalgia' means a feeling of being 'homesick' or a longing for a lost home, but here it is used to refer to a feeling associated with "a specific time and place in South African history". 'Native Nostalgia' here then means "a longing for a lost home set in a politically problematic space and time", as felt by the 'urban African'. The reason why Dlamini uses the term 'nostalgia' instead of 'memory' is because nostalgia offers connotations relevant to the argument he makes and the context in which it is formed. As Boym (2001) mentions, nostalgia is an incurable condition of modernity; present anxieties are projected onto the past. It is no longer merely a question of remembering and memories, it is about a "longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Dlamini, 2009:16). Nostalgia is the result of treasured fragments of memories. The term 'memory' does not encompass all of these aspects of what is at play here.

Keeping in mind Boym's discussion of nostalgia as referring to both time and space, Dlamini talks to various people about the experience of both concepts with regards to their nostalgia under apartheid. As Dlamini points out numerous times, this is not to say that any of the people he spoke to supported apartheid, but rather that they are casting "their memories of the past in such a nostalgic frame" (2009:6) that it taints their memory of past experiences and perspective of present conditions. These nostalgic claims of the past offer a way to "understand the past and contemporary South Africa. The sentiments confirm that people's lives have changed" (Dlamini, 2009:12). Nostalgia, rather than memory, offers a better framework to understand this shift in the experience of time and space. "Nostalgia... is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym, 2001:xiii). Nostalgia is the desire to replace longing with belonging; it is a kind of illusion that substitutes the actual past and present condition. It is a longing for something that is not there anymore or never was, and this illusion is maintained through a 'long-distance relationship', as Boym puts it. When reality and the present meet with a fantasy and the past, time and space are compressed and nostalgia no longer survives or exists as it did in a long-distance relationship. Nostalgia is not just "a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time" (Boym, 2001:xv). At the core of the modern condition is "the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility" (Boym, 2001:xvi). Through nostalgia, the errors and problems of modernity were revealed. It is this ambiguous nature of the modern condition that forms the paradoxical nature of nostalgia; something that both unites and divides people: a shared longing, and a division in returning 'home' and wanting to belong to an imagined space.

During my first visits to Nieu Bethesda and based on what the residents had said at the time, I was under the impression that people moved there from the city to escape the crime, stress

and industrial way of life associated with it. This turned out to not be the case the more time I spent there and the more people I spoke to, but stories varied and the retelling of experiences were never first-hand accounts and rather hearsay and speculation. Nevertheless, I went to the local police station and enquired about crime in the area²⁰. “If Nieu Bethesda has an image of being stress free and lacking crime, what is the purpose of having a police station here?” I asked, after all there is no fire station, medical centre or high school in the area which makes it even stranger that enforcing a systematic approach to uphold the law seems to be more important than offering those other public services. The policewoman at the front desk laughed and called the policeman in the back room to answer my question. “There has to be a police station: the number of people that stays here”, he says, “There’s actually no crime. No, there is crime from time to time, but things like assault and type of things like that; petty crime. The biggest crime around here is stock theft”. I comment that it definitely seems to be a different lifestyle from that in Johannesburg. “*Ja*, a lot different from Jo’burg!” He says, “here people still leave their doors open, leave their stuff outside, their cars unlocked”. I found it interesting that he emphasised the word ‘still’ to indicate a connection between how people presently live in Nieu Bethesda and how they lived in the past – it is that connection that Nieu Bethesda offers that is what attracts people to the area; they want to do things the way they used to be done in a world that is constantly changing. They are after security and stability in an uncertain time and place. In Nieu Bethesda crime might be an illusion, but may also be a reality to those who are tuned in to pick up on such things. They are aware of crime because of the role it played in their previous lives elsewhere. It is through their discussion of, for example, crime that comments on the

²⁰ Spoke to policeman and policewoman on 4 July 2013.

context from which they come, what it is they value in the alternative Nieu Bethesda offers, and what aspects of the Nieu Bethesda brand appeals to or does not attract them to the area.

Another shop owner, also from Johannesburg, raised some concerns saying that many employees at the Owl House were lazy and had a “bad work ethic”. Apparently they show more interest in their cell phones than in the visitors to the house. With PPC Cement as the only sponsor and 12 000 visitors on average to the Owl House every year, some of the members on the committee put a lot of their own money into maintaining the statues, “every cent made at the Owl House gets put back into it”. The committee runs the Owl House like a business as many of the members are former businessmen and women; lawyers, accountants, and so on. I will say more about who benefits from the tourism created and businesses formed around the Owl House’s fame later in this chapter in relation to the debate surrounding who the ‘true’ artist of the Owl House is.

It Takes a Village...

“The nicest thing about Bethesda”, says Peet smiling, “is that I’ve seen some very rich people come here, but money doesn’t matter here. People come here to the village not to make money, but to have another lifestyle. So money is second-rate. To come with big money is potentially more of a stumbling block than a help”.

Every Saturday night the community has dinner together at the tennis club, around R60 per person for a meal. The times that I attended there were about twenty people from the village, although it is not restricted to white residents only. During one visit I stayed in a guest house on the same street as the tennis club and so walked the short distance, but what I did not realise is that heading back to the house at night with no street lights or tarred roads made it

almost impossible to navigate my way through mud puddles and thorn bushes. The street lights from Pienarsig on the hill shone bright enough to drown out the stars above the township; music blared in between the static of old speakers and dogs barked throughout the night. The contrast between how these two areas of Nieu Bethesda spent their Saturday nights was evident. I found it interesting that of the twenty attendees at the braai, not one of them was from the township or squattercamp; it was only white residents from the village. I enquired about this and was told that “people from Pienaarsig can come to these dinners, but probably won’t because the drinks are too expensive by their standards”. This might be plausible, but not the only reason for their absence. There are rules in the club to regulate membership, to protect the club, and to prevent possible disputes – people are only allowed to attend the dinner if a member invites them.

“The club has been racially fair since 1993”, boasts the members. This may be the case, but there is still an unspoken divide, ‘the great divide’ as one resident calls it, between the different racial groups in Nieu Bethesda: a lack of understanding amongst some residents on both sides of the divide with regards to differences in lifestyle and ways of living. For example, of the people living in the squattercamp consisting of five shacks, one resident in the village said: “the Xhosas on Kloof Street are eccentric aliens. They won’t fit in at Pienaarsig. They don’t speak Xhosa, but they practice Xhosa rituals in the *veld*, like circumcision”. A lady living in Pienaarsig had remarked on a previous occasion that there was no space for the supposedly non-Xhosa-speaking Xhosa residents. Surely she did not mean that there was not physical space as there were wide open plots of land in the township, so she must have meant that there is not a place for them in the established social structure of the community in Pienaarsig. Housing is a separate issue which I will not get into too much detail here: there is RDP housing in Pienaarsig where residents get 6kw free electricity

and 6kl free water. From what I understand, people can apply for this housing if they earn less than R1 300 a month. In the village a house can cost as much as R2million whereas one or two decades ago people bought houses for R10 000²¹. I was also told in hushed tones that about a third of the white community is made up of gay and lesbian couples, “Nieu Bethesda is now a yuppie town for artists and gay couples”, said one older resident, “like Clarens in the Free State”.

Many people do get along, however, across racial, social and other divides. “That comes naturally, helping each other out in a small community. You won’t survive in a village like this if you don’t do that”, says Peet. “I try to live as close to my staff as possible. Those guys will watch my back as well as I can look after them the best I can”. One morning when he took me on a quadbike ride to check the water levels of the soil in his fields and “reading the animal prints like you read the newspaper in Jo’burg”, he found a dead hare on the side of the road. Its fur was in good condition so he took it back with him to the farm and called one of the staff members to collect it as he [the member of staff] wanted to use the fur. He tells me a story to illustrate his point of *ubuntu*, human kindness, in Nieu Bethesda. It is a story about Bruno: the owner of a very popular pizza place in Nieu Bethesda and originally from Switzerland, but living in South Africa from the age of 18. Before there were any guest houses in the village, Bruno had made ‘the most exquisite’ dinner one night for himself and a Portuguese artist from Mozambique. They were going to have a candlelight dinner, but then there was a knock on the door. “There were two foreigners who said: ‘is there any place that we can have dinner in the village?’ Bruno says, ‘no problem, have ours’”. He sat them

²¹ Idil Sheard had bought two houses next to one another for R10 000 each. She then transformed it into a coffee shop.

down and served his dinner to them. After they left, he remade dinner for him and the artist. “That’s where Bruno’s got the essence of town”.

On the other hand, many people do find it difficult to settle in or find their place within the community: “they wonder why they aren’t part of the village 30 years on, but then you get those people that walk in and become part of the village”. Peet explains that the reason for this is that 80% of the time you are giving to the village, while 20% of the time you get something in return. He says that the rewards are so great, but so are the sacrifices: “you sacrifice your freedom in a sense because you will never be free. Everybody will know everything about you because they care. It’s a difficult thing for foreigners to get, to understand”.

The Promised Land

“To ‘kuier’ is not to visit; it is to enjoy each other’s company”²²

Because of the religious background of the village itself, there are many references to and symbols of Christian figures and expressions. Jos, a visitor from Holland, bought a couple of adjacent farms, removed the fences, added water features and “gave it back to nature”. He does not farm anything, but rather lets animals roam free on his land which spans across vast mountainous areas in the Karoo, about an hour’s drive from Nieu Bethesda. He says that when he wakes up and sees the view from his *stoep* “it is the promised land” (see Figure

²² Hanna van Heerden explaining why Afrikaans words are ‘too beautiful to translate’.

27). Life on the farm is not in total harmony with nature as the baboons prove to be a nuisance to Jos (see Figure 28). In Peet's father's letters it was evident that baboons were considered a problem then, too. Jos owns two vehicles on the farm: a safari van and a yellow Hummer. He travels to Nieu Bethesda twice a day for meals in his safari van which he also uses to drive tourists around on his farm. When he drives to his 'castle' in Simonstown in the Western Cape which is made up of several properties and a house that looks like a castle, the second of three homes (the third being in Europe where his wife, children and grandchildren are), he takes the Hummer. The baboons have picked up on this trend and so when Jos leaves in the Hummer they try and break into his house for food. He then employed someone to stay on the property when he spends up to four months in Simonstown every year. His wife does not travel with him to South Africa as she has no interest in this "dusty place". In order to get to his farm in the Karoo he has to drive through Nieu Bethesda, past the squattercamp and Peet's farm, along a dirt road, through a river, past other homes owned by people from Holland, and finally into a small valley nestled in the mountains. Some of the older ladies in Nieu Bethesda had warned me earlier that if I head to that part of Nieu Bethesda I should be sure to make a lot of noise because "those Dutchmen go crazy when they come to South Africa. They 'get in touch with nature' by running around naked". Unfortunately, I did not make enough noise and so was confronted with an awkward encounter.



Figure 27: Baboons sitting alongside the road to Jos' farms.



Figure 28: The view from Jos' house.

Just as Jos removed the fences on his farm, Peet said that I must “leave the barriers in Jo’burg”. The view that people living in Nieu Bethesda have of the cities that they left behind is that those still living there live in ‘prison’. Many are passionate about their freedom to live without physical barriers or restrictions induced by fear, “I celebrate my freedom every day. I live outside and I live the freedom”. The fact that residents took pride in their safety and were amused at how they could leave their doors unlocked, keys in the ignition and windows open, comments on the broader South African context in which crime features in daily conversations and concerns. Many find it fascinating that a place without high walls, electric fences, guard dogs, armed response and even keys exists in a country that is known to have a high crime rate. “I’m not going to be fumbling for keys, I’m not gonna be *sukkelling* with alarms, I’m not going to be doing that, I’m not gonna be *bang* of a snake, I’m not gonna be *bang* of anything. It’s important for me to live my life without barriers inhibiting my ability to do things”.

Visitors from overseas who fear crime in South Africa and visitors from South African cities who are used to constantly being aware and alert not only find it difficult to adjust to the lack of barriers, but are also the source of great entertainment for the residents in Nieu Bethesda. “I’ve got a nice story about that one”, says Peet. There was a lady from the

Netherlands living in Port Elizabeth who would take students on their gap year to work in townships in South Africa. The lady and some students stayed in the guest house on Peet and Hanna's farm. "One of the nights I was supposed to come fetch someone to go for a drive or something". The problem was that because they were all 'terrified' of staying in a house in South Africa that had never had keys to lock the doors with, "they found a chair and they propped it under the door. They were scared somebody was gonna come in", Peet smiles slyly. "I didn't know about the chair. I know the place doesn't lock and I came wondering in. I grab the door and push; the chair went flying!" He laughs, "And she keeps telling the story of their futile attempt to try and jam the door". He gets serious for a moment, "it's also a learning curve to you again, in a sense. Forget the barriers, come down, leave the barriers when you cross the Vaal River or the Orange River. Just say '*los it maar*'. Because these barriers you put in your mind, for what? Nothing's gonna happen here, nothing can happen. Just chill". I had well and truly experienced what many anthropologists experience when entering the field: disorientation and culture shock. It was an adjustment.

What's in a Name?

"Jeni is there at the art centre, well she's not there very often. She set it up", says a resident who has lived in Nieu Bethesda for a couple of decades, "She is so sad that there's no apartheid anymore because that was her passion: to fight apartheid. And she is still fighting apartheid. Julia is a nice person, but she works there at the art centre and her whole story is 'you know how we suffered in apartheid and this is the reason we need help'. Jeni and Julia were supposed to have written this thing together, of course giving Koos I think much more credit than he should've got because they make as though he was the artist, the sculptor. I asked my brother what he thought of this argument about Koos Malgas and he said 'if you take into account that Koos Malgas hasn't made one original thing after Helen died, he was not the artist'"²³.

²³ A discussion I had with a resident on the book recently published about Koos Malgas as the sculptor of the Owl House, not Helen Martins.

White looks at rumours in a colonial state as symbolic meaning-making systems. When analysing rumours it is irrelevant whether they are true or false, what is important is to determine what it is the speakers and rumours are critiquing or commenting on; more specifically: what context or framework is being critiqued? Even if the information contained in rumours is considered to be false, it is about creating knowledge and meaning. As Halbwachs (1992) pointed out, shared meaning occurs in a system of collective understanding. Rumours create that knowledge, collective memory and meaning. The key to understanding collective knowledge systems lies in the analysis of rumours, gossip, memory, history, hearsay, and other forms of talking about people, the past and the context. The purpose of White's book was to study the stories in circulation as commentary on colonialism and to extract their contested details as well as to contextualise the stories for their power both historically and socially. It is not simply about rumour and gossip, but the world that rumour and gossip reveals (White, 2000:5). White argues that it is the contestation and variation of details in the stories that give them their value as sources with which to write history (2000:4). These stories are detailed descriptions of colonial power the way they saw and experienced it; "Vampire stories are like any other historical source; they change the way a historical reconstruction is done" (White, 2000:6).

Value creation is part of a symbolic process (Munn, 1986:3). This process is context-specific, dependent on relations, and a dialectical system of meanings. The whole is made up of a dialectic between possibilities and counter-possibilities and a symbolic system of meanings that play out in socio-cultural practices. Just as actions shape the lived world and actors are shaped by it in return, so too do actors construct meaning and are constructed by it. Meaning is relational and so is defined by the practice that it molds. Similarly so, using

Nieu Bethesda as an example, rumours are manipulated by the context in which they circulate. Rumours – their structure, storyline, key elements, purpose, underlying meanings – change according to their context and the people who share them. The idea that practice is a symbolic process is central to Munn’s model. Rumour and tourism as practices are symbolic processes that shape the meanings of the acts themselves. Deciphering the meanings and symbolism behind acts will help us understand why actors perform particular actions and practices.

Rumour, gossip and accusation have different meanings not just in their definitions but in how they are interpreted and valued by speakers and listeners. They are important sources of information because they are forms of evidence that change with the times and according to place. Suspicions and gossip reveal social tensions and contradictions, whereas accusations reveal social conflict, and rumours draw together and explain contradictions (White, 2000:20). Stories are a way to articulate, communicate, and express social tensions within specific social structures. At first rumour and gossip were put together in the same category to indicate a way of talking. The implications were that rumour and gossip were unreliable or false sources of information. White shows that it is not just important how stories are told, but why; not just about the information contained in the stories, but how this information was presented and received. White presents and interprets rumours shared in Africa during colonial times; stories which expressed Africans’ anxieties about colonialism. This analysis is a way of understanding the world as the storytellers did. It is not about seeing their point of view, but rather taking it seriously as accounts of actual events experienced by the speakers; using rumour and gossip as historical sources which could be used to rewrite, revise or reconstructing the history of a place or people. What the stories in White’s book then critique is colonial power at the time. What the stories I collected in Nieu Bethesda

comment on is the problem of historical truth, the contested nature of authenticity, the latent effects of apartheid in a broader context of South Africa, and the local and national issues encountered by people living in both the city and the country. It is through the circulation of rumours that the legend of Martins and the generating of a brand identity in Nieu Bethesda is kept alive, and it is through the spreading of gossip that insight into individual lives and perspectives is presented. In order to understand Nieu Bethesda the brand we need to analyse the rumours circulating and in order to understand the people attracted to this brand and the relationship they have with it we need to assess the gossip being shared; rumour reflects the collective while gossip reveals the individual. Rumours and gossip both act as 'shared knowledge' and are techniques for summarising public opinion (White, 2000:60).

The reason why stories should be considered as historical sources is because there is a historical link to the origin of the story. Its origin is not important here, but what should be considered is that "stories may travel, but they do not travel through or to passive storytellers" (White, 2000:16). Roger Abrahams in *A Performance Approach to Gossip* (1970) sees the act of gossiping as an interaction and negotiation between the speaker and the listener(s). Just as White pointed out: participants are not passive transmitters nor receivers of the information contained in rumour and gossip, they shape and share the stories in different ways to convey different meanings. Max Gluckman in *Gossip and Scandal* (1963) makes a similar comment in saying that gossip creates social bonds between the participants and set up boundaries that structure their action; membership into a community is achieved through acquiring its gossip.

Stories are socially and historically constructed and situated. Identifying their contexts allows for their use as historical evidence. Stories, like history, are different at different times and in different places depending on the different people who interpret their meanings differently and then pass them on. Where White looks at the historical reconstruction that results from these stories, I employ a reversed process whereby I look at the stories that result from an attempt at historical reconstruction. White historicises rumour and gossip in order to understand how these stories served to discipline the community (2000:58), the manner in which they asserted values in a community, how they defined that community's standards, and in identifying the bonds and boundaries of a community (White, 2000:65). Historicising gossip allows the interpreter to access personal experiences and the speaker's way of thinking (White, 2000:85) while historicising rumour revealed a network of collective experiences and worldviews. Historicising both rumour and gossip transform them into sources of information that are both historical and personal.

Couzyn and Julia Malgas' book starts off with an epigraph which sets the tone of the book's overall argument: "you can employ a handyman to construct a shepherd, but you can't instruct him to make you a shepherd with a face full of compassion, and a body full of tenderness. For that you will need to commission an artist". It is clear that the authors view Koos Malgas as the artist, but what is unclear is the manner in which they intend to give him the recognition they feel he deserves for his art. It seems that in trying to give voice to a man portrayed as powerless under an oppressive apartheid system, they resort to devaluing Martins as an iconic figure by reducing her to the very essence of the person she is portrayed as in the rumours that circulate about her. "Accusation calls for action" (White, 2000:58) and so Couzyn and Malgas have also used accusations about Martins, the community and the Owl House Committee to force a reaction from the public. Vladislavić's work, similar

to Couzyn and Julia Malgas' book, demonstrates the fluidity of meaning in language and he "finds space within, between and beyond habitual limits and definition" (Gaylard, 2011:5). He identifies and transgresses boundaries and definitions which then become "porous and problematic" and in doing so he ultimately deconstructs "a neat distinction between place and space" (Gaylard, 2011:6). In resisting the apartheid context and the barriers inherent in it, he acknowledges their existence and reinforces them, whether it be intentional or not. I am not taking either side of the argument: Koos versus Helen as the sculptor of the Owl House, but rather offer the debates and discussions surrounding this book and what it says about the brand of Nieu Bethesda; how it impacts the image or brand identity. The book was first published in 2008 and was written by Couzyn, a South African-born British poet, and Julia Malgas, the granddaughter of Koos Malgas. For Couzyn this book is a way to recognise Koos Malgas as an artist in his own right, while for Julia Malgas it allows her "to write the true story of him the way he told [his family]". Overall the book seems to attempt to remember a time gone by, to change public opinion about what constitutes art and an artist, and to paint Malgas and Martins in a different light. In accordance with Couzyn's desire to right the wrongs of the past in apartheid South Africa, the book was published in memoriam of Koos Malgas and the proceeds are shared between Malgas and the Bethesda Foundation. "The task remains for Koos Malgas to take his appropriate place as the sculptor of the Owl House" (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:21).

The book emerged as a collaboration between Couzyn and Malgas, which is ironic because that is the opposite of how Couzyn wants people to view the relationship Koos Malgas and Martins had while working on the Owl House. I will get back to this later on in the chapter. It was a response to "whiteness in the village" (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:19) when the coloured community celebrated ten years of freedom, five years after Koos Malgas' death,

and “the only whites there were from the [Bethesda Art] Centre”. Julia Malgas had applied for a job as a tourguide at the Owl House, but was turned down for the position because, she believes, her cousin had “been charged with deliberately doing damage to some of the sculptures”. One of the members on the Owl House committee confirmed that people from the township had broken into the Owl House and broken some of the statues, but attributed it to teenage vandalism, boredom or revenge because “they believed it belonged to their family”. Julia Malgas had been bitter “that her family was totally excluded from the resource her grandfather had built, while, as she saw it, the white community in the village thrived on it” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:19). Another committee member had said that all the money made from entrance fees paid by the 12 000 annual visitors to the Owl House, as well as money paid in by committee members, goes to restoring and maintaining the weathered statues. The dispute over money, ownership, acknowledgment and benefit is one echoed throughout South Africa and speaks very clearly to a present-day problem faced by Nieu Bethesda and the country as a whole with regard to race relations: who benefits and how are different races affected?

Martins and Koos Malgas “met in the thick of apartheid” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:3). Malgas had been “obscured under the cataract gaze of apartheid for decades” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:1) while Martins was “the eccentric recluse who employed him”. They were “both children of apartheid” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:23) and it was because of this apartheid context, according to Couzyn, that Koos Malgas could not become an artist in his own right. Judging by the perspectives of the local farmers presented in the book, “Koos Malgas was an illiterate sheep-shearer, a binge-drinker who, like the rest of his community, lived and died in poverty and obscurity” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:1). Based on the descriptions by Martins’ biographers she was “a misfit, profoundly alienated from her

straight-laced, Calvinist neighbours by her eccentricities” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:23). In Couzyn’s view, Martins chose to be alone and Koos Malgas offered her companionship. They spent twelve years working on the statues, but to say that this was a collaboration is an assumption that is “a by-product of the colour blinded world they inhabited” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:3). Couzyn and Julia Malgas view Koos Malgas as the true artist of the Owl House and say that he did not merely reproduce the dreams and desires Martins had in mind for her home, but that he absorbed the information and images she provided him with, transformed them and generated his own ideas. “What Koos gave Helen was a chance to realise her ‘vision’. What Helen gave Koos was a widening of his horizons by exposure to pictures, ideas and images he would not otherwise have come across” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:3). The view that Martins was the artist and Malgas ‘her hands’ is what they challenge in this book: “Helen Martins created an environment that was eccentric and bizarre” while “Koos Malgas created sculptures that speak of humanity with conviction and compassion” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:21).

Couzyn draws a parallel, intentionally or not, between the injustices of the past and what she sees as taking place in present-day South Africa. Her descriptions catapult the picturesque and supposedly preserved village of Nieu Bethesda into the 21st Century and places the belly of the beast in the spotlight. I imagine she is making a comparison between the ‘Dutch invasion’ in South Africa during the 17th century and white settlement in Nieu Bethesda starting in the 1800s and continuing on through to the present: “how far...was Koos troubled by the genocide of his ancestors by the Dutch invaders, the destruction of the San culture and language?” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:21). She attributes his artistic ability to him being “directly descended from the San who’d painted caves” (Malgas and Couzyn, 2012:1) and further emphasises this linkage in saying his facial features reflect “the delicate

bone structure of his San ancestors”. South Africa’s track record of one race benefiting at the expense of another is what Couzyn seems to be pointing out in her description of the debacle surrounding the Owl House’s artist.

This is a very different view from that of some of the residents in the village who are angered by what was written in this book and say that the living conditions have improved substantially for the coloured community in Pienaarsig and political harmony has been characteristic of Nieu Bethesda for as long as they can remember. “You know the families quite well and they’ve always been there”, says Peet, “Where they used to live in the old days they had mud houses. It wasn’t very well-planned and the conditions were appalling. The first houses were built around 1970; the municipality built several houses in about five years. The housing has improved 100%”. To illustrate the political tolerance in the community he gives the example of an election day: “all parties are tolerant of each other. In the old days, before ’94 we never used to have an election day. There wasn’t any far right guys here, not enough to man a tent. Everybody used to have a *braai* and put up their banners and tents”, he chuckles at the idea that South Africans *braai* for any occasion. “AWB put up their tent, the guy from VF and NP”, he continues, “they all have a big street *braai*. Only about one or two people vote right wing. Jerry from the liberal side walks up to them [right wing tents] and says ‘listen, you guys can pack up your tent now ‘cause there’s no one else who’s gonna be voting right wing anymore. That’s it, they’re done’. So they packed up and left. What I’m trying to illustrate”, says Peet more seriously, “is that the far rights and the lefts would have one *groot* party. Now it’s changed a bit with more people voting. Now they just have to organise a bigger *braai*”. This, again, speaks to the image that Nieu Bethesda upholds and communicates to visitors and residents; its brand identity is an image of a

happier time in which people live in harmony. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant if the brand is marketed successfully.

To go back to the discussion of storytelling, White (2000:58) emphasises the difference between rumour and gossip by stating that rumour explains, analyses and comments on events, whereas “gossip is a matter of context and convention” (White, 2000:60). Rumours are fluid and comment on various issues. Additional to this they explain those problems faced by the collective and then naturalise them (White, 2000:62). Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) emphasises the idea of the voice; speaking is a kind of participation in a larger system. It is through talking that “a world of value and behaviour is constituted” (White, 2000:64). It seems that in trying to change the way in which people talk about Martins and the Owl House, Couzyn and Malgas are establishing new or altering established forms of value and behaviour. They are then, ultimately, affecting the branding of Nieu Bethesda. Rumour is a type of “collective problem-solving” (White, 2000:81) that not only highlights contradictions, it explains and resolves these collective anxieties. Rumours are then a way for the public to have a voice; to raise their collective concerns and have them dealt with. Couzyn and Malgas have made use of this form of communication to raise their anxieties experienced by a number of people.

The Bethesda Art Centre that Couzyn had set up and which seemed to spark a number of debates with locals in the village consists of about eighteen artists, all from Nieu Bethesda, who attended art classes at the Centre and decided to stay²⁴. The community projects and art

²⁴ Information about the Art Centre was gathered in an interview with one of the artists 4 July 2013.

they work on provides 70% commission for the artist and the remaining 30% goes towards buying materials. In addition to this artists receive a monthly stipend. Their busiest times are from September onwards when many overseas tourists and some local visitors buy their products. Their art is inspired by Nieu Bethesda and the outings they go on to places such as the Addo Elephant Park. Their pictures tell stories and many of them are part of a series – these stories are based on experiences and folklore. They sometimes make artwork inspired by the Owl House “because that’s why people come to Nieu Bethesda. If you buy an owl it shows you were in Nieu Bethesda”. The artists I spoke to did not know Martins personally and only know of her what they read or heard about. Couzyn’s interest in people’s connection to a possible Bushman ancestry is evident in the tapestries at the Art Centre. The quilts take between three and six months to make and tell stories passed down from one generation to the next amongst Bushman communities. In the room where the tapestries are on display there are sound recordings that play to tell the stories depicted in the quilts. It starts with singing and music, followed by the sounds of Hadedas and people talking in electric clicks. “No one left on earth speaks [this] language, but the stories are alive with us today. They have been carried to us by the wind”, says the narrator.

Richard Lee’s *Eating Christmas in the Kalahari* (1969) illustrates a similar feeling of misunderstanding I encountered at the Art Centre. Lee wanted to present a gift to the Bushman community who accommodated him during his research and so bought them what he believed to be the biggest ox. The community proceeded to mock the ox as a way of teaching humility. Lee was unfamiliar with this custom and so misinterpreted it. My first visit to the Centre was prior to my knowledge of the existence of a book that portrayed Koos Malgas as the artist of the Owl House. In my attempt to get the the artists’ opinions of the art at the Owl House I did not realise that their view of what constituted art was not as

relevant as their perspective on who they believed the real artist of the Owl House to be. “The sculptures at the Owl House are *mooi* because our *oupa* made them”, says one of the artists, “He made it, Helen was there with him. People argue ‘cause they are looking for trouble”.

Although there might be a sense of unity or harmony amongst different races in Nieu Bethesda, it is important to now link this information and the debate surrounding the ‘true’ artist of the Owl House to what was said in the previous chapter on how stories are meaning-making tools which comment on the context in which they circulate and have social value within that time and place. This then illustrates how debates and discussions transcend the immediate topics which they are about and touch on a broader issue or tension. In this case the artist debate draws on South Africa’s apartheid past, comments on social tensions in its present and social conflicts inherent in the tourism generated by the Owl House. The brand of nostalgia and heritage that Nieu Bethesda markets through tourism and sells by transporting people into a time and place other than the here and now is the motivation of this debate as there is an issue of who benefits from the tourism, how people are differently affected by the branding of Nieu Bethesda, and who is able to capitalise on it (see Figure 29). Couzyn and Malgas’ rewriting of an established or accepted popular history of Martins as the artist of the Owl House is a direct challenge to collective memory or communal history as well as an indirect attack on the brand that the community sells in order to generate tourism. It could also be seen as conforming to the conventions of the Nieu Bethesda brand because it is one of contradictions, contestations, and divisions. In debunking Martins the icon and drawing attention to Koos Malgas who, like Martins, comes across as being misunderstood and not able to benefit from the success of the Owl House brand, Couzyn and Julia Malgas are discrediting and downplaying Martins’ role the same way they believe

historians, residents and visitors have done through their accounts, stories and records of the Owl House, Martins and Malgas. They are not creating a new brand, they are building on an existing one.



Figure 9: Freddie is one of the locals who sells souvenirs outside the Owl House.

Conclusion

*Fluit, fluit, my storie is uit*²⁵

It is the idea of a happier, care-free and simpler past that people are after. Nieu Bethesda seems to offer a remedy for this nostalgic view of a time gone by and is successful in doing so because of the way in which it has been branded and marketed through story-telling. My research focused mainly on the economic viability and social value of a small town such as Nieu Bethesda within a broader South African context, rumours as oral history that reveal both social tension and social conflict as well as provide individual and collective perspectives on what was believed to have happened to Helen Martins and who they believe to be the ‘true’ artist of the Owl House, and the role of race in shaping relationships and distinguishing between who benefits from or is able to capitalise on the tourism generated by the Nieu Bethesda brand.

It is a romanticised idea of the past that people are after in the context of an uncertain future and a perpetuated present. The known past seems appealing then for those in search of stability and certainty. Nieu Bethesda is a unique case in that it encompasses both persistence and change, continuation from the past and a conscious effort to resist a changing of the times. Although ideas of the country and the city differ depending on temporal and geographical contexts, there are some that have persisted. These ideas are what make people view Nieu Bethesda as a retreat from the urban and modern-day concerns. This comments greatly on what people’s ideas are of the city in the 21st century. It is important to note that it is not an escape from the city or a retreat to the country, but rather a change in lifestyle

²⁵ A phrase used to indicate the end of a story.

and moral outlooks that people are after when leaving the city for the country. My distinction between the country and the city was not meant for the purpose of placing them in opposition, but rather to distinguish between them in order to show their connectedness; they are not separate, they influence one another.

What started out as a place of religious practice became a tourist attraction, then an escape or retreat, and now a brand that is marketed through conversation. Cultural tourism has allowed for, not the commodification of culture, but rather the negotiation of identity and the production of a collective sociality. The survival of the Nieu Bethesda brand is dependent on the circulation and contestation of stories that both undermine and maintain the brand. The community produces its own viability through these value-producing practices and acts. Rumours transmit, destroy and construct forms of value. The value of an act is determined by its ability to produce desired outcomes. Rumours then offer speakers' interpretations and perspectives about themselves and their circumstances which is valuable in assessing social conflict or tension. It is this exchange or interrelatedness of speaking and listening that connects the actors to one another and connects Nieu Bethesda to South Africa. Speaking not only gives voice to the speaker, but constitutes value and behaviour within a given context.

When it comes to oral history it is difficult to record, present and represent the information without diluting or compromising some of the knowledge that the storytellers share. It could be argued that it is important to record stories in order to prevent a loss of knowledge or that in making local knowledge known to outsiders could potentially make the community vulnerable to and controllable by others. Oral history is a delicate matter of constructing

selfhood through narrative of the other. Narrative is then an important meaning-making structure and process which allows speakers to formulate a better understanding of themselves and their own experiences. Storytellers and listeners shape and share stories in different ways to convey different meanings. When I analysed and assessed the rumours that circulated during the time in which I conducted my research, I was able to gain a better understanding of the context which they commented on or critiqued through the knowledge and meaning that they created. In examining how and why it is people told these stories it became clear the contribution they made to the creation and maintenance of the Nieu Bethesda brand. Additional to this, stories outline the bonds and boundaries within the community. Nostalgia is a form of historical knowledge and memory; it is a longing for continuity and certainty in a fragmented world by projecting present anxieties onto the past. It is a tainted view of the past and perspective of present conditions. The longing for a past is marketed through stories and sold in the form of tourism in Nieu Bethesda. Nostalgia, in this case, acts as a framework for understanding the change in experience of times and space which both unites and divides people in their nostalgic memories; they have a common interest in returning to another time, but they are separated in their quests to fulfil the desire. It seems that people are after safety and security in an unstable time.

In conclusion, the brand that Nieu Bethesda markets is one of nostalgia and heritage. The social and economic outcomes of the brand affect people differently; people benefit from and capitalise on it in different ways. Its brand is filled with contradictions, contestations and divisions, but that is what constitutes it. In participating in the debate, people are adhering to the conventions of this unique brand. Conversation and controversy surrounding the Owl House acts as a form of marketing and promotion. Rumours and stories are central in creating a tourism product in Nieu Bethesda.

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