

# Remembering Durban’s “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding”: Creating Urban History through Digital Spaces

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**Abstract:** The “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding” is a closed Facebook group about the historically “Indian” neighborhood in downtown Durban, South Africa. It creates an informal archival repository and provides a new space to reify contemporary understandings of historical places within the Durban Central Business District. The informal nature of this space allows the layperson the ability to participate in historical inquiry and exhibits the diverse ways places in Durban are remembered and memorialized. In this paper, I argue the wealth of knowledge generated on informal online platforms, such as this Facebook group, should influence and inform historical interpretations of our urban pasts.

**Résumé:** La « Casbah de la rue Grey et ses environs » est un groupe Facebook fermé sur le quartier historiquement « indien » du centre-ville de Durban, en Afrique du Sud. Il crée un dépôt d’archives informel et fournit un nouvel espace pour réifier les compréhensions contemporaines des lieux historiques dans le quartier central des affaires de Durban. La nature informelle de cet espace permet au profane de participer à une enquête historique et expose les diverses manières dont les lieux de Durban sont mémorisés et commémorés. Dans cet article, je soutiens que la richesse des connaissances générées sur les plateformes en ligne informelles, telles que ce groupe Facebook, devrait influencer et informer les interprétations historiques de nos passés urbains.

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I first discovered the “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding” Facebook group (hereafter “Grey Street Casbah”) when searching out images for a conference presentation.<sup>1</sup> Initially, I did not consider the Facebook group as an archive but was simply fascinated by the store of information it contained. Since I joined the group, posts would frequently appear in my feed. One post in particular that caught my eye shared information about the establishment of a historical society through the new 1860 Heritage Centre.<sup>2</sup> Comments by the administrator who made the post prompted me to reconsider the significance of the group. He lamented, “Sadly it seems our group were not even notified! I guess we are probably not ‘academic’ enough,” and after wishing the 1860 Heritage Centre well, he reminded the “Casbah family, we will continue to put out ALL OUR history on the ground as best as we can.”<sup>3</sup> As a result of this post, it became evident to me that the group’s administrators and many of its members understood the archival value of the group, so why are historians overlooking it? In this paper, I argue that the wealth of knowledge generated on informal online platforms such as this Facebook group should influence and inform historical interpretations of our urban pasts.

As we emerge into a post-COVID world, it is essential that scholars recognize the role that digital “community-based archives” will play in influencing our work.<sup>4</sup> For example, the “Grey Street Casbah” is a compelling collection of thoughts, memories, and emotions that should influence our interpretations of the past. It is not only a way for members of the group to

<sup>1</sup> I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Jason Morgan and Anthony Edwards for their support and encouragement, as well as for tirelessly reading the many versions of this work. I would also like to thank Lorelle Semley and the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript, who dedicated significant time and energy in their extensive feedback. This work is all the better for their efforts. Cacee Hoyer, “Red Square: Geographies of Democracy, Spaces of Protest, and Indian South Africans of Durban,” paper presented at the 2015 African Studies Association Conference, San Diego, 19–22 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The 1860 Heritage Centre is a physical and digital museum in Durban, South Africa. Its mission statement says: “The 1860 Heritage Centre strives to document, preserve and record aspects of the South African Indian Community as part of our collective national heritage and identity. It seeks to do so by using multi-media technologies and methodologies best suited for the achievement of the same, as efficiently and effectively as possible.” For more information, see <https://1860heritagecentre.wordpress.com/>, (accessed 2 November 2018). For their Facebook page, see <https://www.facebook.com/1860heritagecentre/>, (accessed 2 November 2018).

<sup>3</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” <https://www.facebook.com/groups/greystreetcasbah/posts/1852790838103923>, Facebook, 16 October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives,” in Daniel, Dominique and Levi, Amalia S. (eds.), *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2013), 35–55.

share their stories and (re)connect with their community but it is also a validation of their role in building contemporary South Africa.

In marginalized populations, such as Indian South Africans, all too often historians prioritize the voices of notable members of society, placing the hopes, motives, and actions of those few as representative of the masses as well.<sup>5</sup> This is all too frequent not only within their political analyses, but also with historians' evaluations of the socioeconomic and cultural issues within the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>6</sup> Finding ways to access the voices of the "masses" or the "subaltern" is difficult. However, social media sites such as this Facebook group provide a space for the subaltern to be seen and heard.

Urban scholars have made distinctions between place and space, where space is "impersonal and unrelated to people, but a place is what people give names to and get used to and have a unique relationship with. Space does not belong to anyone in particular, but a place has a social and cultural meaning to people who live there [...] Place means different things to different generations."<sup>7</sup> The "Grey Street Casbah" consists of people who "live[d] there"

<sup>5</sup> To avoid the harmful practice of apartheid-era classifications, "Indian South African" has become the phrase most frequently used by local scholars to describe people of Indian descent in South Africa. As such, I have chosen to adhere to their custom. For further discussion on positionality of minorities in South Africa, see also Sindiso Bhebhe and Mpho Ngoepe, "Elitism in Critical Emancipatory Paradigm: National Archival Oral History Collection in Zimbabwe and South Africa," *Archival Science* (2020), 1–18. Jon Soske refers to Indian South Africans as the "also colonized other," indicating their unique positionality before and during apartheid-era South Africa. Jon Soske, *Internal Frontiers: African Nationalism and the Indian Diaspora in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), i.

<sup>6</sup> Formal archives in Natal house primarily materials from notable Indian South Africans, namely the Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre, the Killie Campbell Library Collections, the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives, the 1860 Heritage Centre, and the national and local archives of South Africa, National Archives and Records Service (NARS), [www.nationalarchives.gov.za](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.za), (accessed 7 November 2018); Rehana Ebr-Vally, *Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South Africa* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> C. Mamet, "Fictional Constructions of Grey Street by Selected South African Indian Writers," (unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007), 7. See also P. Pratap Kumar, "Grey Street Casbah: Market Town as a Symbol of Indian Diasporic Experience," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 54–2 (2019), 155–168; Catherine Sutherland, Dianne Scott, Etienne Nel, and Adrian Nel, "Conceptualizing 'the Urban' Through the Lens of Durban, South Africa," *Urban Forum* 29–4 (2018), 333–350; Lindy Stiebel, "Last Stop 'little Gujarat': Tracking South African Indian Writers on the Grey Street Writers' Trail in Durban," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 22–1 (2010), 1–20; Alan Muller, "A Handful of Spaghetti: Entanglements of Space, Place and Identity in the Works of Imraan Coovadia," (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2014); Olivier Moreillon, "'Remember the Old Days?': Durban's Grey Street Area in Mariam Akabor's Flat 9," in Moreillon, Olivier, Muller,

with the goals of collecting and sharing the social and cultural meanings they have with the places of the Casbah. One could argue that the creation of the entire Facebook group itself was an act of nostalgic nationalism<sup>8</sup> – a way to maintain an identity its members felt was being expunged by yet another government who did not have Indian South African best interests at heart.<sup>9</sup> As such, the “Grey Street Casbah” provides digital space for Indian South Africans to remember, memorialize, and reminisce about the place they fondly refer to as the Casbah. In many ways the Facebook group functions in the same way: a place for a community to gather much as they did in the physical places of the Casbah.

This paper argues that it is essential that academics understand the role that digital “identity-based community archives” such as the “Grey Street Casbah” can play in our work, especially when considering the collection, accessibility, and current movements to “decolonize” African archives.<sup>10</sup> Michele Pickover, Curator of Manuscripts of the University of Witwatersrand’s Historical Papers, has questioned the emphasis and prioritization of what is collected and digitized in African archives. She is critical of persistent trends towards a “monolithic nostalgic legacy,” and rather challenges historians and archivists to consider “who has agency to recover narratives of the past?”<sup>11</sup>

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Alan and Steibel, Lindsey (eds.), *Cities in Flux: Metropolitan Spaces in South African Literary and Visual Texts: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Em. Dr. Therese Steffen* 12 (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2017), 145; Beverley Jane Cornelius, “Postcolonial Nostalgia and Meaning: New Perspectives on Contemporary South African Writings,” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Magnus T. Bernhardtsson, “Faith in the Future: Nostalgic Nationalism and 1950s Baghdad,” *History Compass* 9–10 (2011), 802–817.

<sup>9</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 20 December 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries,” 35–55; Jean Allman, “#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968,” Presidential Lecture presented at 61st Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, 29 November 2018; Marius Kothor, “Race and the Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies,” *Black Perspectives*, April 8, 2019, [https://www.aaihs.org/race-and-the-politics-of-knowledge-production-in-african-studies/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=race-and-the-politics-of-knowledge-production-in-african-studies](https://www.aaihs.org/race-and-the-politics-of-knowledge-production-in-african-studies/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=race-and-the-politics-of-knowledge-production-in-african-studies); Amina Mama, “Is it Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom,” *African Studies Review* 50–1 (2007), 1–26; Robtel Neajai Pailey, “Where is the ‘African’ in African Studies?,” *African Arguments*, 7 June 2016, <https://africanarguments.org/2016/06/07/where-is-the-african-in-african-studies/>; George J. Sefa Dei and Nana Sefa Atweneboah, “The African Scholar in the Western Academy,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45–3 (2014), 167–179, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572948>; Dennis Masaka, “‘Open Access’ and the Fate of Knowledge from Africa: A Theoretical Discussion,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 87–4 (2018), 359–374, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.87.4.0359>.

<sup>11</sup> Michele Pickover, “Patrimony, Power and Politics: Selecting, Constructing and Preserving Digital Heritage Content in South Africa and Africa,” paper presented

Vivian Bickford-Smith has challenged historians to use less conventional sources in their research. Referring specifically to South African history, he urges historians to consider sources such as:

travelers' accounts, newspapers, government commissions, oral histories, popular 'city' songs, and autobiographies [...] but there are also, and in prolific numbers, local city histories, guides, novels, poetry and books about the 'state of the nation' [...] newsreels, documentaries and feature films [...] Many of these sources have hitherto been little used by histories.<sup>12</sup>

The "little used" sources, he argues, "provide rich evidence about South Africa's urban past."<sup>13</sup> By accessing such sources, historians get a much richer and complex depiction of the past. Social media collections, such as the "Grey Street Casbah" can accomplish the same sort of enrichment, especially in South Africa with its long tradition of colonial and apartheid sponsored archives. One way to "decolonize" the archives is to do as Pickover suggested, allow the *people* to have "agency to recover *their* narrative of the past."<sup>14</sup>

The "Grey Street Casbah" is doing exactly as Pickover suggested.<sup>15</sup> The stated intent of the group claims:

This group [is] for all the people that lived in Durban in the 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's. Remembering life back then. People that lived in [T]own[,] what you remember and for those that lived out of [T]own, how you use[d]

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at International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) World Library and Information Congress (WLIC), *Libraries, Citizens, Societies: Confluence for Knowledge*, Lyon, France, 16–22 August 2014, <http://library.ifla.org/1023/1/138-pickover-en.pdf>; Marla L. Jaksch and Angel David Nieves, "Africa is a Country? Digital diasporas, ICTs, and Heritage Development Strategies for Social Justice," *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* 6 (2014), <https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/11/29/>.

<sup>12</sup> Vivian Bickford-Smith, *The Emergence of the South African Metropolis: Cities and Identities in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Pickover, "Patrimony, Power and Politics."

<sup>15</sup> Facebook Groups operate in a variety of ways. A "closed" group has administrators who set criteria for belonging to the group and are responsible for determining who does and does not belong. In order to join a "closed" group, Facebook users must send a request to join to the administrators, often explaining why they should belong or offering credentials that validate their belonging. Often "closed" groups have particular rules, such as privacy, language usage, courtesy, etc., which, if not followed, provide grounds for a person to be removed from the group. This particular "closed" group has the following rules set by the administrators: "Please note that we do not allow advertising, Jokes, sayings or religious post and tips in this group. Those who do post will be deleted immediately from this group. Please post things that are related to our group ONLY." This is the only limiting factor for group members, so this space allows quite a bit of freedom of topics to post and discuss on its pages.

to catch buses and come to Town to buy clothing, music, going to the bio's [sic] or meeting friends.<sup>16</sup>

An administrator clarified that “this group is here to make some record of the pass [sic], as in history. If things posted bring back wonderful memories that [sic] good. Part of our history was also bad, that lets [sic] talk about it, record it. Remember why this group was formed.”<sup>17</sup> The priority of the administrators of the group insist on giving agency to the people who experienced a particular place at a specific moment: a downtown Durban neighborhood during apartheid South Africa. They do so in order to provide a space for a collective effort to recover a history of a community that, due to the end of apartheid, no longer exists as it once did.<sup>18</sup> They are also acting out of a perceived need to record such histories – a sense that the “average” person, the subaltern, has not had their history told. As a result, this collection contains a tremendous store of memories and experiences essential to our understanding of the past.

This paper will first define the Casbah and explain the methodologies included in this project. Then, this paper will discuss the unique functions and contributions of this Facebook group, and those like them, to urban history. The final discussion will explore potential themes or topics that would benefit from academic examination of such a Facebook group as the “Grey Street Casbah.”

### Defining Place, Space, and Methodology

The Casbah, also referred to as the Grey Street Complex or Duchene, has its epicenter on Grey Street (now Dr. Yusuf Dadoo Street). Its borders, however, are a bit more fluid. Aziz Hassim, a well-known historian and an original administrator of the Facebook group, defined the Casbah as “running from Darby Street near Greyville Racecourse in the north to Pine Street in the central business district, from Soldiers Way up to Warwick Avenue on the

<sup>16</sup> Administrators, “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, created 23 September 2011.

<sup>17</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 May 2012.

<sup>18</sup> In the early 1990s, and especially following the 1994 change in government, the Casbah grew to be more multiracial. This is largely attributed to an influx of African-owned businesses and residents, both formal and informal, and a migration of Indian residents and businesses away from the Casbah. This change has influenced both its cultural and physical appearances. Add to this the changes in street names and there is significant dissonance between old memories of the Casbah and current appearances. See also Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, “Between Apartheid and Neoliberalism in Durban’s Indian Quarter,” in Bond, Patrick (ed.), *Durban’s Climate Gamble: Trading Carbon, Betting the Earth* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2011), 52; Kumar, “Grey Street Casbah,” 155–168; Bickford-Smith, *The Emergence of the South African Metropolis*.

fringe of the Berea. It was a place where the ‘real South Africa’ converged.”<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg describes it as:

An old precinct in the city that grew on the periphery of the European CBD [Central Business District], starting in the Grey Street area and growing outwards to the west and north-west in the Wester[n] vlei. Shaped, restricted and compressed into a fairly small area it has all the ingredients of what constituted a community, such as commercial and residential areas, worship sites for Muslims, Hindus and Christians, educational institutions including a University of Technology, recreational and cultural sites, a women’s hostel, a burial site, hospital, fire station, bus, train and taxi transport nodes, numerous markets and struggle sites.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the Durban Municipality’s varied attempts to control it, the Casbah was a unique “black spot” that endured.<sup>21</sup> In colonial Natal, the Native Affairs Department controlled the movement of black South Africans to the Durban Central Business District (CBD) by requiring a permit and passing the Native Beer Act of 1908, which used beer revenue to subsidize hostels and control the availability of African labor.<sup>22</sup> The “Durban System,” as this became known, was then utilized as the groundwork for apartheid-era legislation limiting space for Indians and black South Africans while maintaining the dominance of whites in the CBD. With this long history in Durban of racial segregation, post-apartheid restructuring was highly problematic.<sup>23</sup> As a result of the influx of black South Africans into the Durban CBD in the 1980s, Indians fled the Casbah (whites fled downtown as well) for new private, walled developments on the Durban periphery.

<sup>19</sup> Niren Tolsi, “Back in the Day” *Mail & Guardian*, August 2, 2006. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-08-02-back-in-the-day>

<sup>20</sup> L. G. Rosenberg, “A City within a City: Vestiges of the Socio-spatial Imprint of Colonial and Apartheid Durban, from the 1870 to 1980s,” (unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012), 8.

<sup>21</sup> A “black spot” is considered an area of black settlement surrounded mainly by white settlement. Andrew Emmanuel Okem, Sithembiso Lindelihle Myeni, Oliver Mtapuri, and Siphonkambule, “A Historicity of Housing Policies in Apartheid South Africa,” in Myeni, Sithembiso Lindelihle and Oken, Andrew Emmanuel (eds.), *The Political Economy of Government Subsidised Housing in South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 28–38.

<sup>22</sup> For more information, please see M. W. Swanson, “The Durban System: Roots of Urban Apartheid in Colonial Natal,” *African Studies* 35–4 (1976), 159–176, doi: <http://doi.org/10.1080/00020187608707473>.

<sup>23</sup> One example of this would be the street renaming debate. For an analysis of the dispute over post-apartheid street renaming, please see Orli Bass and Jennifer Houghton, “Street Names and Statues: The Identity Politics of Naming and Public Art in Contemporary Durban,” *Urban Forum* 29 (2018), 413–427; James Duminy, “Street Renaming, Symbolic Capital, and Resistance in Durban, South Africa,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014), 310–328.

The “Grey Street Casbah” Facebook group was created in 2011 by Aziz Hassim, and is currently administrated by Ishaan Blunden and Buddy Govender, both born in the Grey Street neighborhood and activists in promoting local history.<sup>24</sup> Demographically, the “Grey Street Casbah” is mostly Indian South Africans who grew up in Durban and their descendants. However, the 2011 census reported 573,334 people (16.7 percent) of eThekweni (Durban) Municipality as marking the Indian/Asian category.<sup>25</sup> There seems to be a substantial portion of group members who no longer live in Durban; some of this diaspora have moved to other South African cities such Johannesburg or have relocated outside of South Africa altogether.<sup>26</sup> Temporally, this “Grey Street Casbah” addresses the apartheid years of the 1950s to the 1980s, but discussions range to other topics such as issues of Indian indenture or modern South African governance.

I approached the closed Facebook group in the same manner historians approach a private/closed archive that requires permission from administrators to use its materials. The administrators suggested to me that group members provided their permission by agreeing to the terms of the group and thus were fully aware that their words may be used. Since there is no privacy statement for the group, their information is open to the public despite it being a private group.<sup>27</sup> A significant challenge of using the group’s information is balancing the need for data collection with privacy or ownership concerns of individuals within the group. Informal archives force historians to think about source material and contributors in a different way.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In addition to administrating the “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Ishaan Blunden and Buddy Govender do weekly radio shows called “Walk the Talk” on Lotus FM and have several publications promoting the history and culture of the Casbah.

<sup>25</sup> 2011 Census, eThekweni, Statistics South Africa, [http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1021&id=ethekweni-municipality](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1021&id=ethekweni-municipality).

<sup>26</sup> “Diaspora” here is referencing those Indian South Africans who have left Durban. Please see Kumar, “Grey Street Casbah,” 155–168.

<sup>27</sup> Roxana Willis, “Observations Online: Finding the Ethical Boundaries of Facebook Research,” *Research Ethics*, 15–1 (2019), 1–17, doi: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117740176>.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew J. Salganik, *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Michael Zimmer, “‘But the Data is Already Public’: on the Ethics of Research in Facebook,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 12 (2010), 313–325, doi: <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-010-9227-5>; Katrin Tiidenberg, “Research Ethics, Vulnerability, and Trust on the Internet,” in Hunsinger, J., Allen, Matthew, and Klastrup, Lisbeth (eds), *Second International Handbook of Internet Research* (Dordrecht, Neth.: Springer Nature, 2020), 569–583; Alexandra Olteanu et al., “Social Data: Biases, Methodological Pitfalls, and Ethical Boundaries,” *Frontiers in Big Data* 2 (2019), doi: <http://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2019.00013>; Bernhard Rieder, “Studying Facebook via Data Extraction: the Netvizz Application,” paper presented at the 5th Annual ACM Web Science Conference (WebSci ’13), Association for Computing Machinery, New York, May 2013, 346–355, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2464464.2464475>;



The three primary ethical areas of concern for me were the nature of consent, properly identifying and respecting expectations of privacy, and strategies for data anonymization.

I struggled with the nature of consent and respecting expectations for privacy because of different expectations on how postings of social media can vary between people. Michael Zimmer has argued that it is problematic to consider the justification that anything submitted to Facebook is done so with the belief that it can potentially be used in a public manner.<sup>29</sup> He echoes my concern that this view “reveals a troublesome lack of understanding of how users might be using the privacy settings within Facebook to control the flow of their personal information across different spheres.”<sup>30</sup> However, Roxana Willis has argued that Facebook observations are “comparable to observational research in a public space,” and thus justifies waiving informed consent of group members.<sup>31</sup> Willis also makes a compelling argument for the consideration of this information as public or “semi-public.”<sup>32</sup> She argues that informed consent is not required due to the unique nature of private Facebook groups. The space between public and private on social media can be difficult to delineate. Whiteman argues that technical levels of access do not determine whether information is considered public or private, rather it relies on the levels of privacy or publicness as “perceived by the users of online communities.”<sup>33</sup> Since the administrators of the “Grey Street Casbah” have indicated that group members view their memories and stories as public and the group was formed in part to help people have a fuller understanding of Durban history, they have essentially granted access to researchers.

I also struggled with how to appropriately anonymize the names of the contributors while maintaining readability. The administrators suggested to me that I should footnote the author of the quotes and contributions I would like to use as “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” thereby avoiding

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Todd Suomela, Florence Chee, Bettina Berendt, and Geoffrey Rockwell, “Applying an Ethics of Care to Internet Research: Gamergate and Digital Humanities,” *Digital Studies/le Champ Numérique* 9–1 (2019), doi: <http://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.302>; Kath Hennell, Mark Limmer, and Maria Piacentini, “Ethical Dilemmas Using Social Media in Qualitative Social Research: A Case Study of Online Participant Observation,” *Sociological Research Online* 25–3 (2020), 473–489; Dariusz Jemielniak, *Thick Big Data: Doing Digital Social Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Gabrielle Samuel, Gemma E. Derrick, and Thed van Leeuwen, “The Ethics Ecosystem: Personal Ethics, Network Governance and Regulating Actors Governing the Use of Social Media Research Data,” *Minerva* 57–3 (2019), 317–343.

<sup>29</sup> Zimmer, “But the Data is Already Public,” 318.

<sup>30</sup> Zimmer, “But the Data is Already Public,” 318.

<sup>31</sup> Willis, “Observations Online,” 1–17.

<sup>32</sup> Willis, “Observations Online,” 1–17.

<sup>33</sup> N. Whiteman, “Control and Contingency: Maintaining Ethical Stances in Research. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics* 3–1 (2010), 6–22; Willis, “Observations Online,” 1–17.

specifically naming individuals without their explicit permission while enabling researchers to still be able to verify my research. Out of respect for their preferences, I have followed their suggestions in this body of work.

In examining posted materials, I have employed an oral history methodology as my primary analytical approach. Oral histories have become the industry standard for “history from below.” Rife with their own issues of memory, remembering, and forgetting, oral history requires the parties involved to build a rapport over time to cultivate a level of trust. This trust lets the interviewee feel free to convey their ideas in an honest and open way. The traditional format for collecting oral histories has been to conduct and record interviews. While this format is beneficial in many ways, in our digital era I argue that there are other ways to acquire this source material that can avoid some of the challenges inherent in the interview process. One way is online platforms, such as the “Grey Street Casbah,” which act as informal archives where anybody who is a member can contribute memories and share experiences and photographs.

As these members construct their archive, they are also creating their own narrative of history. Despite its more than 15,000 members, the fact that “Grey Street Casbah” is a closed group provides a sense of security or safety, despite the actual public nature of social media. This feeling of being amongst trusted friends enables many people to post more freely and openly about personal experiences relative to the urban locations being mentioned or shared. Some of the personal stories shared in the “Grey Street Casbah” are very similar in nature to collections of oral histories. For example, I have conducted many oral histories that focus on the late post-war era, including memories of the 1949 “riots.”<sup>34</sup> Posts and comments about the riots also appear in the “Grey Street Casbah” and mirror many of the discussions I had when conducting my interviews. Posts included personal accounts from those who experienced it,<sup>35</sup> a debate on the causes of the riots,<sup>36</sup> and unpublished photographs of the chaos.<sup>37</sup> One particular photograph of the riots elicited 75 responses.<sup>38</sup> Amongst these responses, some comments shared personal or family memories, such as one man who shared his father’s injured shin while working in town<sup>39</sup> or another’s story about her mother being hit in the head with a brick.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The 1949 Durban Riots was an episode of racial violence that broke out between Africans and Indians in Durban, 13–15 January 1949, with 142 fatalities and thousands of injuries. It resulted in a significant number of Indian South African refugees, and its legacy was a narrative of racial distrust to last beyond the end of apartheid.

<sup>35</sup> Such as “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 7 June 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Such as “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 7 June 2014; “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012.

<sup>37</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012.

<sup>38</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012.

<sup>39</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012.

<sup>40</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012

The photograph also stimulated the same type of debate about the causes of the riot that I heard during my oral interviews. Some commenters mentioned the urban legend of white men in black face, the official story of an assault on an African boy by an Indian, and even white government divide-and-rule tactics.<sup>41</sup> Stories in this format provide an open and convenient way to help historians contend with the various issues of nostalgia, collective memory, and remembering public events through “broader commemorative trends.”<sup>42</sup> Historians need to engage with these processes. We, as academics, would benefit greatly from contributing, participating, and cultivating relationships within online groups and incorporating these important historical materials into our scholarship.<sup>43</sup>

I have found using an oral history method quite useful in my various examinations of the 1940s–50s Durban landscape. For example, my earlier project on “Red Square” examined the connections made between the spatial history of Red Square, fondly remembered for its anti-apartheid meetings, protests, and activities, and the role Indian South Africans played in the anti-apartheid movement. My work discussed how memory of such sites, now obliterated by a parking garage, persist in stories of the Casbah and illustrate a resiliency of the area.<sup>44</sup> This Facebook group supports these conclusions. For example, a member posted a current picture of the intersection where Red Square used to be and captioned it: “This often taken for granted intersection with the old Red Square to the right and Madressa Arcade on the left still traverses the throbbing pulse of our city.”<sup>45</sup> Another responded to the post with “a part of Durban that has a lot of history and character that is no more [...] sad it is no longer ther [sic] but still remains in our minds hearts and soul.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, another member shared that “We used to feel proud to

<sup>41</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 19 June 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review*, 34–1 (2007), 49–70.

<sup>43</sup> For further reading on topics where academics evaluate the benefits of using social media as a resource, please see Niall McNulty, “The Ulwazi Programme: A Case Study in Community-Focused Indigenous Knowledge Management,” in Osei-Bryson, K.-M. et al. (eds.), *Knowledge Management for Development, Integrated Series in Information Systems* 35 (2014), 215–232, doi: [http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7392-4\\_13](http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7392-4_13); Aubrey Parke, “StoryCorps and Crowdsourcing in the World of Digital Humanities,” *Oral History Review*, Journal of the Oral History Association (2021) <http://oralhistoryreview.org/>; Christopher Helland, “Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12 (2007), 956–976.

<sup>44</sup> Hoyer, “Red Square.”

<sup>45</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 April 2015. The caption states that the picture was taken the day previous when the photographer was coming off the Western Freeway.

<sup>46</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 April 2015.

attend a meeting held at THE Red Square! There was a sense of belonging and of fighting back in our simple way. And the turn-outs used to be huge and many significant speeches were heard there.”<sup>47</sup> Despite the disappearance of the physical site in discussion, these group members were able to contribute to a collective memory that can help historians reconstruct the past.

While examining this group with an oral history approach is quite beneficial, the fact that it is not an oral history must be acknowledged. The group has similar issues related to memory and nostalgia as oral history collections, as well as similar considerations of trust and ethics relative to oral histories. Social media, such as this group, also provide a space for contributions to our collective knowledge, facilitating authentic “history from below” in similar ways oral histories do. However, contributions are primarily textual and photographic in nature, with some video/audio posts. The vast number of posts are not oral. Despite this, I feel the dynamic nature of social media facilitates posts that are interactive and cooperational in their construction and are thus similar to the interview process. While I am still developing my own approaches, I am confident scholars can find a method that will bridge the gap between more traditional historical methods of analysis and oral history methodology.

Lastly, I would like to briefly comment on my own positionality within this work and my larger research agenda. I am an academic of the Global North whose work centers on understanding the history of the Global South. I have spent substantial time living and working in Durban, but I am not *from* Durban. I did not grow up there and so while I understand cognitively much about the people, their culture and politics, I cannot embody the social and political landscape of Durban. I am an outsider looking in. As such, however, I recognize most keenly the need for historians, archivists, and the academy as a whole to focus its efforts on centering the voices of those of the Global South. I realize my positionality challenges this, perhaps even hinders it, but the goal of this project, and my work as a whole, is to do my part to aid the move to decolonize the academy.

## Rethinking the Urban History Archive

The “Grey Street Casbah” is particularly useful for its contributions to urban history. The geographical and temporal boundaries of the group mean that photos, comments, debates, and discussions are all centered on spatial understandings and considerations of place. Indeed, even the definitions of these boundaries are frequently negotiated among members of the group.

Perhaps one of the more enticing aspects of using social media, such as the “Grey Street Casbah,” is its convenience and functionality. An administrator of the group put into words my initial sentiment upon discovering this group: “This is just a snippet of the ‘magic’ we have in our Casbah collection

<sup>47</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 29 July 2015.

[...] original, never-before-seen photos of our Casbah.”<sup>48</sup> There is a tremendous storehouse of knowledge, experiences, and ephemera being collected and stored in this group – often by people who would never think to donate their materials to an official archive. These are things passed down to family members and stored in attics and on dusty bookshelves. This group allows them out into the light and for public access, some for the first time. Additionally, the ability to search the group is perhaps my favorite function. Rather than having to sift through thousands and thousands of documents, a simple key word search can reveal a wide range of relevant pictures, comments, and people.

The “Grey Street Casbah” allows a collective interpretation of the urban landscape, landmarks, street names, etc. that are often missing from most traditional (and even digital) archives. Facebook comments seem to also act as a way to corroborate memories – when someone posts about a building and calls it a landmark, that action historicizes it, cementing it into a position of social and cultural (and perhaps political) importance. When others comment on these same locations expressing a variety of positive memories, it further bolsters a collective agreement that these places played a significant role in the development of both the “imagined” community and the individual, simultaneously. Amanda Grace Sikarskie refers to this development as “citizen scholars.”<sup>49</sup> The mixture of collective agreement and diverse perspectives provides historians and researchers a significantly larger pool of information with which to consider these sites. By studying the series of comments on such posts, researchers can begin to reconstruct the urban environment – not just geographically or physically but also in relation to the sociocultural environment and political sentiments and situation. A great example of this was on a thread about a fish tackle shop:

Member #1: “[administrator], do u recall in the 70’s there used to be a fish tackle shop along this road. The owner used to also make bookings for dep [sic] sea fishing. Can’t seem to remember the owner or the name of the shop.”

Member #2 responded “Anglers paradise moved to berea road.”

Member #3 first mentioned a roasted nuts factory behind the Kajee Moosa Building which was in the picture adjoining the original post.

Member #4 responded “remember the nuts place-one could buy a paper cone of them for a few cents and the yard where the muharram stuff was held.”

<sup>48</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 26 October 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Amanda Grace Sikarskie, “Citizen Scholars: Facebook and the Co-creation of Knowledge,” in Dougherty, Jack and Nawrotzki, Kristen (eds.), *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 216–221.

Member #3 replied, “the smell of the nutr [sic] was tempting”

Member #5 agreed that “the smell of those nuts wafted thru [sic] the whole area...”<sup>50</sup>

Such interactions show us the sociocultural attachments people associate with their urban environment. The transformation of the thread from one about a well-known fish tackle shop to the tempting smell of nuts provides a sensory rich glimpse into how the people who lived in this area remember these places. It also illustrates the ability of this type of platform for contributing to collective remembering – where one person’s memory triggers another in someone else and thus builds off itself, creating an intricate description of a particular location at a particular point in history that was created, or reimagined, by a group of unrelated people who experienced it.

Another unique and helpful feature of such collections is the flexible use of the comments, which allows discussion, debates, and expressions of memory and nostalgia. However, they also provide a space for collaboration where commenters can tag friends, ask questions, or reply with images or pictures that can further the discussion of the original post or take the discussion in an entirely new direction. For example, in 2014, two group members discussed pictures posted of golf players.<sup>51</sup> This discussion devolved into one member sharing that he had his father’s old golf pictures, to which the administrators requested an email of digital scans of them to make them shareable. This illustrates how this archive is molded and shaped by its contributors as well as its administrators. Others posted questions, such as those seeking clarification on an “urban legend or truth” that Zulu was the lingua franca between whites, Indians, and Africans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> The ability to pose a question that facilitates historical inquiry generally does not exist in a traditional archival setting.

One very important element of social media is that people are able to engage in debates. Therefore, within this group researchers can become more in-tune with the varying perspectives and topics that garner heated debates within this particular community. This transpires in both historical and contemporary topics. The debates also offer glimpses into how people within the community base their information, sometimes being ahistorical or composed of rumor and sometimes centered on their own personal examples. For example, one member lamented the loss of “another Durban landmark crumbling away [...] all gone now, replaced with characterless businesses.”<sup>53</sup> The responses varied from blaming the corrupt government, calling Durban a “slum,” claiming the inferred decline was due to a loss in hope, examinations

<sup>50</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 3 March 2014.

<sup>51</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 3 March 2014.

<sup>52</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 May 2013.

<sup>53</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 20 December 2014.

of suburban growth (i.e., white/Indian flight) at the end of apartheid, and a claim to “love Durban warts and all.”<sup>54</sup> This feature provides the unique ability for an archive to include historical and contemporary contexts simultaneously with its artifacts.

Additionally, the desire to “save” history is pervasive throughout the posts and comments in the “Grey Street Casbah.” Some view the group as one of the only places trying to keep the Casbah “alive.”<sup>55</sup> Other discussions lauded the preservation and dissemination of information on the group for its ability in “reviving a culture [that] will soon spill down to the younger generation.”<sup>56</sup> It appears there were two primary foci in using the group in this vein. The first was a sense of bringing together “multi generations on several continents”<sup>57</sup> to share “priceless memories”<sup>58</sup> with “our children,”<sup>59</sup> who, as understood by a collective assumption of loss here, “miss out on the ‘Real Durban.’”<sup>60</sup> The second was an acknowledgment that the collection of memories, pictures, and stories on the group was a valid contribution to the historical knowledge their children would benefit from. Indeed, one member responded to a post by one of the administrators of the group, who was discussing the “sustainability of the memory of all this [sic] was Casbah,”<sup>61</sup> by claiming “And when we die [...] our ONLY hope is that our children look into material of calibre from YOUR ARCHIVES [...] that YOU’VE PRODUCED.”<sup>62</sup> Such emphasis indicates a belief in the vital role the “Grey Street Casbah” plays in influencing the historical narrative for future generations. This sentiment seems especially important throughout discussions in this group, perhaps due to post-apartheid changes in the Casbah, which according to Derek H. Alderman “challenge[s] lines of identity.”<sup>63</sup> Some members of this group desire to

<sup>54</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 20 December 2014.

<sup>55</sup> For example: “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014: “Thank you so much [administrators] for everything you have done to bring the ‘Casbah’ and our childhood memories to life again [...] it’s like giving us a new lease on life. The reminiscence and nostalgia is like food for the soul”; “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 26 October 2014: “Gee!!! Guys iv been goin through all the comments here and Hey! what a wonderful feeling 2b taken down memory lane... thank you Buddy & Ishaan for your tremendous efforts in keeping the CASBAH alive”; “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014: “cannot thank you and Ishaan for bringing all our memories alive.”

<sup>56</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014.

<sup>57</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014.

<sup>58</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 30 September 2013.

<sup>59</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014.

<sup>60</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 30 September 2013.

<sup>61</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Emphasis original. “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 6 April 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Derek H. Alderman, “Place, Naming and Interpretation of Cultural Landscapes,” in Graham, B. and Howard, P. (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 195.

promote the history of the Casbah, not just for its historical and cultural significance, but as a way to locate and maintain their identity in the midst of rapid change.

Efforts to archive or “save” history include strategies such as posting images of particular locations with simple labels, such as “Berea Road” or “Pine Street now days,” seeking to elicit memories and stories by group members.<sup>64</sup> Others post questions or advertise events, such as sharing a news article to the group page asking group members to “please help save our history & heritage by supporting this cause [...] We would also appreciate any historical photos and other records”<sup>65</sup> or comments on threads such as one member who was “working on Red Square. Any folks with memories or images of it are encouraged to share them with him.”<sup>66</sup> Such posts speak to the utility of this archival format as well as to the sense of community the archive has cultivated. Both indicate a way to tap into and develop additional resources that can only enrich academic research and our collective understanding of the past.

Finally, I argue that there should be a place in the digital humanities for informal “identity-based community archives” such as the “Grey Street Casbah.”<sup>67</sup> Aubrey Parke makes similar claims regarding the searchable online archives *StoryCorps*. Parke states that *StoryCorps* can “claim scholarly space in the field of Digital Humanities” because it is a digital tool for “crowdsourcing” oral histories.<sup>68</sup> Parke’s discussion of *StoryCorps*’ emergence into the digital humanities is based on the belief that the digital humanities support research that can “facilitate new, collaborative modes of teaching and publication,” in similar ways to the “Grey Street Casbah.”<sup>69</sup>

Academics and archives alike are exploring innovative ways to (re)define the digital humanities. Jennifer Douglas argues for the need to “expand the principle of provenance by exploring methods or archival creation,” arguing for a “broader understanding of the types of agents and processes that create an archive.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps more importantly, considering social media community archival sites as a part of the digital humanities supports moves in academia to decolonize the archive. James Ocita has argued that post-apartheid narratives celebrate ethnic self-assertion and foregrounds cultural

<sup>64</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 25 May 2018; “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 16 May 2012.

<sup>65</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, image share “Lease row over old Indian burial site,” from post October 26, 2016; “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 29 October 2016.

<sup>66</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 April 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries,” 35–55.

<sup>68</sup> Parke, “*StoryCorps*.”

<sup>69</sup> Parke, “*StoryCorps*.”

<sup>70</sup> Jennifer Douglas, “A Call to Rethink Archival Creation: Exploring Types of Creation in Personal Archives,” *Archival Science* 18–1 (2018), 29–49.



authentication, thus validating social media as archives as providing a way to better understand contemporary subaltern voices.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Patrik Svensson has argued that “one of the most important functions of the digital humanities is to empower individuals and groups whether they are based in a department, a digital humanities lab, or elsewhere.”<sup>72</sup> The increasing awareness of scholars for the need to broaden the umbrella of digital humanities facilities a greater, and much needed, democratization of archival and research practices.

## Debating Identity and Belonging

The “Grey Street Casbah” has a wide variety of examples of nostalgia, discussions of “community,” and debates over issues of belonging. Because these discussions are all framed within a bounded location, they serve to expand our understanding of how a particular place, and its spatiality, influence the identity of those who experienced it. The Facebook group serves as a precise example of Diener and Hagan’s claim that “the city serves as crucible that concentrates and focuses notions of memory, collective identity, and place attachment.”<sup>73</sup> Arguing for the importance of understanding memory within an urban setting, they explain, “we affix memories and identities to urban space and place as a means of giving tangible and lasting form to intangible and transient moments.”<sup>74</sup> Scholars have referred to this as “counter-memory” where a group’s collective memory makes an identity directly connected with a place, such as the Casbah.<sup>75</sup>

Those in the diaspora, whether they be in Australia or Johannesburg, further complicate post-apartheid Indian South African identity. Pratap Kumar argues that the nostalgia for the newer generation of Indian South Africans is for a particular street or location, such as the Casbah, rather than previous generations’ nostalgia for a “universal place called India.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, “counter-memory” acts to create to different identities amongst two different generations, despite the fact that they all originated from the same place.

<sup>71</sup> J. Ocita, “Diasporic Imaginaries: Memory and Negotiation of Belonging in East African and South African Indian Narratives,” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Patrik Svensson, “Making Digital Humanities,” in Svensson, Patrik (ed.), *Big Digital Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 173–174.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagan, “The City as a Palimpsest and Crucible of National Identity,” *Global Urban History* (9 November 2018), <https://globalurbanhistory.com/2018/11/09/the-city-as-a-palimpsest-and-crucible-of-national-identity/>, (accessed 16 May 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Diener and Hagan, “The City as a Palimpsest.”

<sup>75</sup> Mamet, “Fictional Constructions of Grey Street,” 24.

<sup>76</sup> Kumar, “Grey Street Casbah,” 155–168.

The pervasive nostalgia in this Facebook group is also significant within the urban South African context. Vivian Bickford-Smith argues that “Black as well as White South Africans often recalled aspects of everyday city life within the apartheid era in nostalgic fashion. Their memories reveal an intimate relationship between social identity, territorial belonging and loss.”<sup>77</sup> The Casbah, by definition, holds these elements. The memories and experiences of this group demonstrate repeatedly what Bickford-Smith describes as “positive remembrance” of a particular place and time which are amplified primarily because of the lack of community that resulted from the demise of the location.<sup>78</sup> While Bickford-Smith is referencing apartheid-era removals, the members of “Grey Street Casbah” likewise exhibit a sense of a “paradise lost” with accounts mourning the loss of “places destroyed.”<sup>79</sup> Similarly, examples of what Jacob Dlamini calls “native nostalgia,” which asserts a society’s “right to recollect both the good and bad” aspects of a township, is evident throughout the “Grey Street Casbah,” suggesting Dlamini’s notion “that a sense of place plays an important role in individual and collective identity.”<sup>80</sup> Vivian Bickford-Smith explains:

Such reminiscences frequently also demonstrate that this identity is influenced by the national and international circulation of ideas and popular culture [...] for their part, memories of those forcibly removed during apartheid suggest that the past in general is often remembered as a ‘Lost Eden’ myth, the ‘reverse image’ of the difficult present. Within such mythology in memories of ex-residents across the globe, the ‘slum’ is commonly transformed into a ‘warm and homely place, a little commonwealth where there was always a helping hand.’ The experience of urban life for the majority living in ‘slums’ surely lies somewhere between the grimmest judgments of external observers and this nostalgic insider remembrance.<sup>81</sup>

While the Grey Street Complex is rarely depicted as a “slum,” ample examples from the “Grey Street Casbah” support notions of “native nostalgia” by disregarding the hardships that existed. For example, “native nostalgia” can be found in a series of responses to a picture posted of Clover Beach, the apartheid-era Indian-only beach:

Member #1: Now this looks more like FUN. The good old “INDIAN” beach.

Member #2: Awesome memories...wish we could bring back the good old days...

<sup>77</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 262.

<sup>78</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 268.

<sup>79</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 263.

<sup>80</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 270. See also Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Jacana Media, 2010).

<sup>81</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 271.

Member #3: Tin fish sandwiches...I wish we could go back to those days...all the beaches were noit [sic] open to us but we were happy and at least we could all go to clover beach...can't do it anymore<sup>82</sup>

Additionally, another member commented on a thread discussing nostalgia within this group which exemplifies “native nostalgia” by explaining “when some post ‘good old Days,’ people are talking about friendships, safety and happiness, where your kids could walk safely, the house parties, the old school dancing, socialising, cafes, eating houses, nightclubs, although not everyone was privileged to own big homes and drive German cars people generally made the most of it and had a good time with very little.”<sup>83</sup> Such examples indicate the importance for urban historians and other researchers to pay particular attention to the type of nostalgia prevalent on particular threads, as they provide a variety of ways to understand Indian South African approaches to grappling with post-apartheid changes to the Casbah, and perhaps to South Africa in general.

One of the earliest posts in this group acknowledged the nostalgia problematic. One member posted:

Being a regular contributor to this wall and others of a similar nature, has led me to the conclusion that most of us at some time or the other, tend to be less than honest when we romanticize the past and talk about the so-called ‘good old days’. If we are really honest with ourselves, we will admit that the physical and also the financial hardships that most of us experienced in those days were far worse than the position of relevant comfort that most of us find ourselves in now.<sup>84</sup>

His honest reproach towards frequently nostalgic posts provides a critique intended to challenge such moves.

Woven throughout many of the discussion threads is a curious interplay between those living or working in the Casbah, those living in greater Durban, and those in the diaspora. Due to the global nature of the group, conflicts often boil down into these types of assertions – as if staying in Durban legitimates one’s experience over those who have left. This is clearly articulated in a somewhat heated exchange where one commenter accused another of speaking like a “white racist,” to which the subsequent exchange occurred:

Member #1: “... assuming you not in Durban”

<sup>82</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 December 2011.

<sup>83</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 May 2012.

<sup>84</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 May 2012.

Member #2: "...no, but I'm from Durban"

Member #1: "Maybe you need to visit then comment"<sup>85</sup>

Such discussions contribute significantly to understandings of the changing notions of community and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly amongst Indian South Africans. This example illustrates a dissonance created by post-apartheid migrations. However, social media debates that use spatial proximity to legitimate memories can also illustrate growing connections. In other words, members who live geographically closer to the place in discussion have more perceived legitimacy when sharing their memories than those in the diaspora, and yet these debates are able to connect members who would have never met in person. Christopher Helland argues that "modern social media is playing a major role in connecting people who have not seen each other for decades."<sup>86</sup> Kumar agrees that "such re-connections of people revolve around more and more concrete spaces that they had shared," such as specific street names, where the "street becomes like the home that they once shared."<sup>87</sup> Whether reconnecting people with their memories, reconnecting old friends, "bringing together lost friends and families," facilitating new friendships and acquaintances, or connecting the diaspora with its "homeland," members feel a bond between themselves based primarily on a connection with a place that was once frequently visited.<sup>88</sup>

### "Nostalgia" and the Racial Politics of Place-Naming

Much of the nostalgia shared about the Casbah is a mournful tone of the loss of a safe place to socialize.<sup>89</sup> For example, one member responded to a

<sup>85</sup> "Grey Street Casbah and surrounding," Facebook, 21 April 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Helland, "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier," 974.

<sup>87</sup> Kumar, "Grey Street Casbah," 157.

<sup>88</sup> For example: "Grey Street Casbah and surrounding," Facebook, 6 April 2014: "You have created a wonderful platform for us to reconnect with old friends and make new ones through shared remembrances – I don't think there is anyone who turns away from this page without a snile [sic] in their heart or sometimes a nostalgic tear."; "Grey Street Casbah and surrounding," Facebook, 6 April 2014: "U [sic] guys have brought tears of joy to me. I have been in contact with so many friends that I grew up with."; "Grey Street Casbah and surrounding," Facebook, 6 April 2014: "it [the FB page] has revived my love for the Glorious Casbah that we all grew so fondly of and love till this very day, You guys are doing wonders to reconnect past memories and friends."

<sup>89</sup> "Indeed, efforts to restore precolonial histories and cultures through place-naming in contexts such as Australia have occasionally unsettled a general 'sense of security' and public 'ownership' surrounding a Eurocentric knowledge of the past – leading to 'insecurity, paranoia, even hysteria' from those feeling threatened."

picture posted on the group of a scene from 2019 on “West” Street, “I don’t if [sic] I’m disgusted or just sorry the way this once beautiful city has turned into a filthy, dangerous ghetto,” to which she added “I can’t believe I worked in ‘West/Smith St’ @ a bank & felt safe walking all the way to Grey St daily for my ride home & shopping to my hearts [sic] content in the 70s without all that mess & mayhem now.”<sup>90</sup> Since notions of safety are wrapped in the relatively privileged position of Indian South Africans during the apartheid era, many comments and posts are feebly masked racism. While many Indian South Africans suffered under apartheid, they often held a more privileged position above their African compatriots, such as the potential to earn higher wages, gain permits to own their businesses, and pursue higher education. What is frequently missing in these posts is the admission to this in-between status of Indians at the time and the resulting level of privilege this offered. The Casbah seems to be collectively remembered as an oasis of free movement, despite the presence of gangs, the intrusion/discrimination of the Durban municipality, and the ever-oppressive apartheid state.

Researchers can also glean a variety of viewpoints on spatial perceptions of race and racism within memories of the Casbah and Durban Central Business District in general. Contemporary conceptualizations of these spaces as in moments of “decline” are a rampant and oft-repeated theme amongst group members. Perhaps best illustrated on a recent thread discussing “Queen Street,” where a poster claimed, “Name change of streets has contributed to the decay of Durban [...] very sad.”<sup>91</sup> The member demonstrated a racist nostalgia for apartheid-era controls when interpreting the change in street signs as being symbolic of the loss of a “golden age” for Indians in South Africa. She clarified her position that “queen street is regal [...] now the universe is subject to...” while not specifically naming who the “universe” refers to, the comment suggests racist sentiments towards black South Africans in Durban.<sup>92</sup> Such a comment equated white/British/Euro-pean as better or “regal” and trails off indicating African is equated to “decay.”<sup>93</sup> This sentiment was echoed not-infrequently amongst group

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T. Birch, “‘A Land So Inviting and Still Without Inhabitants’: Erasing Koori Culture from (Post-) colonial Landscapes,” in Darian-Smith, K., Gunnar, L., Nuttall, S. (eds.), *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia* (London: Routledge, 1996), 177; Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 313.

<sup>90</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, response to picture posted with tag “Randerees Pharmacy Corner – DOP: 11 August 2019.”

<sup>91</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 April 2018.

<sup>92</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 April 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Derek Alderman discusses in his work the conceptual framework of understanding place naming as bringing “distinction” or “status” to the space associated with its name. Alderman, “Place, Naming and Interpretation,” 195–214; Similarly, Forest and Johnson have supported this notion by suggesting developers in the southern United States naming developments “plantations” to convey a valuable or

members, where commenters would reminisce that “Those were the good old days – apartheid and all,”<sup>94</sup> or another who when discussing West Street, wonders “if it is still called that?” in an unmistakable tone of disdain and with much irony since the post was in 2017 and almost a decade after streets had been renamed.<sup>95</sup>

However, it should be mentioned that some commenters would call out the racist and ahistorical nostalgia in their responses. One member clarified on this thread that, “Queen Victoria was indirectly responsible for destroying the lives of millions of Indians. This street observes the British monarchy, who are responsible for the shit that were [sic] in. Live with African dirt or European rape?”<sup>96</sup> So, while acknowledging racism from British Imperialism and white control, at the same time the member is also displays racism towards Black South Africans. Unfortunately, such racist comments often engendered very little recourse. The simple response to this comment was “Understand your point, but they built some beautiful buildings.”<sup>97</sup> Despite this languid reply, several other posts in this group call out this racism claiming, “what I resent most is the thinly disguised racism in posts....”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, another responded to a series of comments: “Can we please not have any racist comments on this page. The name of a street has nothing to do with the decay!”<sup>99</sup> Such interactions provide insights into the ways the people express the relationship between identity, memory, and the urban environment, specifically place and space. These interactions also expose racism and racist attitudes that still exist within the community and challenge accessibility of the group. Racism in such groups often act to silence or censor people. Although some become more vocal as illustrated above, most do not. As such, allowing racism in this group is a hinderance to members, the community, and researchers.

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“venerated,” albeit ahistorical, persona for these spaces. B. Forest and J. Johnson, “Unravelling the threads of history: Soviet-era monuments and post-Soviet national identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (2002), 524–547; For more information, please see Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 310–328.

<sup>94</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 30 September 2013.

<sup>95</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 28 July 2017.

<sup>96</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 April 2018. While many comments supported notions of decline, some castigated similar claims for their racist underpinnings, “I’m so tired of the over used and boring mantra, that the Durban beachfront is a dirt and overcrowded mess” in another response to a post of a “New pic West Street Marine Parade intersection,” on 24 November 2017; or “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 24 November 2017: “Sometimes, reading the comments on here, you would think Durban was like Beirut....”

<sup>97</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 21 April 2018.

<sup>98</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, post of a “New pic West Street Marine Parade intersection,” 24 November 2017.

<sup>99</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, on 21 April 2018.

Recent studies on the link between power and naming include a variety of examinations on government bodies using everyday locations as spaces to assert a particular version of the past, while “alternative histories and ideologies are erased.”<sup>100</sup> However, Kumar suggests that identifying landmarks from the Casbah on the Facebook group is a way participants can remind “themselves of who they were and how they could be identified,” even at a distance.<sup>101</sup> He calls this an “imaginary bond” where those who once lived in the Casbah or feel associated with it but do not have any actual “tangible” connections now feel a connection to this “common place.”<sup>102</sup> While I agree with his notion of “imaginary bond,” I think it might be more complex. I proffer that this bond is also quite real, particularly in the context of the Casbah. I acknowledge, however, that there is a different connection/bond to a location, street, building, or landmark from those who have left than from those who stayed. However, just because the people are not there anymore does not invalidate their connection or make it any less real (i.e., imaginary). Vivian Bickford-Smith urges for a “social and territorial component” to collective recollections which are not “purely imagined.”<sup>103</sup> He explains that social networks, often built up over generations, contribute to “perceptions of common ties.”<sup>104</sup> Diener and Hagan describe this phenomenon as a “palimpsest of identity” where the urban landscape is repeatedly rewritten but “earlier writings are never completely erased.”<sup>105</sup> Evidence of this exists throughout discussions in the Casbah group, especially surrounding landmarks and street names.

Street naming, and renaming, play significant roles in generating and preserving personal connections to specific locations, despite a lack of physical connection to those places.<sup>106</sup> South African street (re)naming is especially complex, because the process of colonial and apartheid naming and subsequent post-apartheid renaming cannot be divorced from its racialized past.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription: New Directions in Critical Place-name Studies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34–4 (2010), 460; see also Maoz Azaryahu, “The Critical Turn and Beyond: The Case of Commemorative Street Naming,” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 10–1 (2011), 28–33; Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 313.

<sup>101</sup> Kumar, “Grey Street Casbah,” 157.

<sup>102</sup> Kumar, “Grey Street Casbah,” 157.

<sup>103</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 269.

<sup>104</sup> Bickford-Smith, *South African Metropolis*, 269.

<sup>105</sup> Diener and Hagan, “The City as a Palimpsest.”

<sup>106</sup> Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription,” 458.

<sup>107</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 311. See also Bass and Houghton, “Street Names and Statues,” 413–427.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, place-name studies had a “critical reformulation” that transformed approaches to the field.<sup>108</sup> As a result, recent scholarship has focused less on names of geographic locations and more on the “cultural politics of naming” due to its role in oppressed or minority groups as they “struggle for legitimacy and visibility.”<sup>109</sup> Researchers argue this approach allows us to understand naming as a “contested spatial practice”<sup>110</sup> essential to understanding the “ideological construction of nationalisms.”<sup>111</sup> As a result, scholars agree that place-naming, especially street renaming in places such as South Africa, are social constructions, often with “competing interpretations,” which allow people to orient themselves within “wider networks of memory.”<sup>112</sup> Additionally, as is the case with the Casbah, researchers understand naming to “conflate place and group identity.”<sup>113</sup>

Post-apartheid street renaming occurred in Durban in 2007–2008.<sup>114</sup> It was directed by the African National Congress (ANC)-led local government with the aim of “symbolic transformation” and the goal to support and memorialize a particular version of the past.<sup>115</sup> Many minorities in South Africa subsequently perceived this as a threat to their own histories and legacies. As a result of the way the renaming occurred, much debate and resistance was expressed – to the point that still today, many inhabitants of Durban do not refer to the new names, despite their existence for over a decade. Interestingly, commenters in the “Grey Street Casbah” almost exclusively call the various streets of Durban by their apartheid and colonial names. This is perhaps understandable for those not living in Durban as they have not been confronted with the new name changes and are thus largely

<sup>108</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 312; for more information, please see Bass and Houghton, “Street Names and Statues,” 413–427. Maoz Azaryahu, “The Power of Commemorative Street Names,” *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996), 311–330; Alderman, “Place, Naming and Interpretation,” 195–214; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription,” 453–470.

<sup>109</sup> Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription,” 457.

<sup>110</sup> Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription,” 455.

<sup>111</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 313.

<sup>112</sup> Alderman, “Place, Naming and Interpretation,” 195–214.

<sup>113</sup> Alderman, “Place, Naming and Interpretation,” 195–214.

<sup>114</sup> Planning started as early as 1999, but the actual renaming project was enacted during 2007–2008. For a more detailed analysis, see Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

<sup>115</sup> According to James Duminy, opposition was largely led by middle-class suburbanites, but much dissatisfaction was expressed in the Indian South African community, as well as by members of the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party. Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 312.



ignorant of them. It could also indicate that few of the commenters in this group venture to the Grey Street complex on a routine basis such that they would gradually need to start integrating the name changes. Most likely it is due to a “subtle” resistance that has persisted more than a decade since the names officially changed.<sup>116</sup> However, based on the pervasive use of older street names, it could also be argued that group members apply a collective determination to use historical place/space names as their form of discourse, the old street names act as a common language of identity between expats and residents alike within a historically bounded context. Regardless of the intent of commenters using older street names, the result is that historians are provided the historical context – a glimpse into a historical moment – that subsequently no longer exists as it once did.

Additionally, it appears most Durbanites are generally unaware of the historical significance of the people the streets are named after. The members of the “Grey Street Casbah” are not trying to commemorate the European people by their continued use of colonial and apartheid-era street names but have rather applied their own (local) historical context to these streets, where the European references were the lost and new, arguably just as problematic, ones applied. Before the post-apartheid renaming, most Durban streets were named after European historical places or prominent people.<sup>117</sup> An interesting example is Aliwal street, renamed Samora Machel Road, which was originally named to commemorate the 1849 British victory against Indians near Aliwal in Punjab, India.<sup>118</sup> So the continued use of the colonial and apartheid era street names, such as Queen and Aliwal Streets, illustrate John McIntyre’s belief that the street names are “household words but which have no significance for most of us.”<sup>119</sup> Despite McIntyre’s beliefs, the “Grey Street Casbah” demonstrates street naming significance relative to their own collective memory rather than the streets’ historically accurate significance.

Perhaps that is why the resistance to the post-apartheid street renaming project in Durban was so strong. The recognition, whether conscious or not, that these culturally constructed (or reconstructed) historical contexts

<sup>116</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 320; some geographers argue that the often subtle use of place naming as resistance indicates a practice of self-determination. Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, “Geographies of Toponymic Inscription,” 463.

<sup>117</sup> Often referred to as the Imperial Ghetto because many of the streets were named after the Royal Family of Britain: Beatrice Street, Victoria Street, Prince Edward Street, and Queen Street. Rosenberg, “A City within a City”; “David Dick’s popular history *Who Was Who in Durban Street Names* (2008) recognises that a considerable proportion of street names in the central business district and surrounding suburbs were borrowed from places in the United Kingdom and Ireland,” quoted in Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

<sup>118</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

<sup>119</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

relating names of streets and places in the Casbah would be lost if the names were lost, despite the irony of the oppressive imperial and racist legacies of the people and places being commemorated. Much research on renaming places in former communist countries supports this idea, concluding that “such renaming of streets virtually wiped out old memories of people.”<sup>120</sup> As a result, scholars have described the renaming of places in post-apartheid South Africa as “acts of transformation and resistance.”<sup>121</sup> However, the complexity of the Casbah example needs further exploration, because this resistance continues to act within apartheid era paradigms of racial constructs and behaviors.

### Conclusion: New Local, Digital Histories

The abundance of information shared on informal online platforms, such as the “Grey Street Casbah,” can shape and inform historical interpretations and our understanding of urban history. The informal nature of this space allows the creation of identity-based community archives that can share a vast amount of knowledge, memories, and experiences, while allowing members to partake in the construction of their own history.

Using social media as data sources for research is not without its issues. As discussed throughout this article, any analysis of such sites requires careful consideration and mindfulness of nostalgia and the nuances of memories within the particular culture of the group. This obviously also applies to the bias and/or specific focus of the group. While the geographical and temporal focus of this group is definitely a benefit for those working on urban issues, it comes with its own issues and biases. Accessibility is an especially challenging aspect to social media groups. For example, since the “Grey Street Casbah” group is closed, non-members (i.e., other academics or those reading this article) cannot verify any of my citations. Additionally, problems with sourcing the reliability of contributions seems inherent in social media platforms. Often either no one follows up or questions the source of things shared, or, if questioned, sometimes members do not know the original source of their contribution or simply do not reply. Similarly, not all 15,000 members are contributing to the discussions, so original posts and the comments are driven and navigated by a significant minority of the group membership.<sup>122</sup> Thus, an inherent bias develops which influences the tone of the discourse and what others would be willing to share and comment on. Members can also delete posts, so information can be lost very easily.

<sup>120</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

<sup>121</sup> Duminy, “Street Renaming,” 315.

<sup>122</sup> “Grey Street Casbah and surrounding,” Facebook, 8 May 2012: “Most members don’t even post or contribute to posts; Some only to certain topics over again; Others to what they hold close; This site is definitely romanticism of the past in many ways.”

Despite these various issues, data from social media discussions such as the “Grey Street Casbah” offer researchers much in return. The ease and convenience with which researchers can navigate these groups is vastly more efficient than most formal archives. The type of material, such as personal photographs and ephemera, are often not the type of materials collected, recorded, and shared widely by formal archives in South Africa. Additionally, the flexible use of the comments feature can facilitate further discussions in the original post or take the discussion in a new direction, which is a unique contribution of social media collections.

Social media collections can act as complimentary repositories of historically relevant material. Groups such as the “Grey Street Casbah” are sites of organic creation. The detachment of this collection from academia, and instead its cultivation by those who lived there encourages members to share unsolicited information and minimizes issues such as the observer’s paradox.<sup>123</sup> The administrators and members understand themselves to be saving their own history. The global nature of the group facilitates connection with the diaspora. By allowing the diasporic communities to be in conversation with one another, the “Grey Street Casbah” provides a way to bring together the diaspora in one space that does not otherwise exist. Perhaps most importantly, incorporating collections such as the “Grey Street Casbah” into our research repertoire supports important movements to decolonize the archives. Maja Kominko agrees that “access to records is crucial not only for knowledge of the past and the self-definition of communities, but also for shaping communities’ futures; it is vital for justice, reconciliation, language revitalization or any other form of mending broken links with the past.”<sup>124</sup> Most South African archives historically have left out the voices of their Indian citizens, excepting perhaps its notable members, which is perhaps why many in the Indian South African community understand the value of creating their own collection.

<sup>123</sup> The observer’s paradox is the circumstance in which the subject being studied is inadvertently affected by the presence of the observer/researcher. Patricia Cukor-Avila, “Revisiting the Observer’s Paradox,” *American Speech* 75–3 (2000), 253–254.

<sup>124</sup> Maja Kominko, “Crumb Trails, Threads and Traces: Endangered Archives and History,” in Kominko, Maja (ed.), *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), lix.

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