



## Why story?

Stories are a part of human culture and it is through storytelling that generations have been provided with a worldly compass. We have been telling stories through the ages as a way of understanding our our world. They order life as we know it; they entertain, they inspire and they give us hope. Before schools or books the human species was telling stories as a way of passing on knowledge and skills to each generation.

Stories are also by it's nature a co-creative process. The storyteller describes and those of us who hear or watch or read it, interpret and leave transformed with something unique as our own thumbprints; that magical process is the alchemy of storytelling.

## The story of Princess Vlei



The story of princess vlei is a vibrant, living example of oral history at work. The story goes that a Khoi San princess was abducted by Portuguese sailors and it was her heartbreak and tears at this violent event that created the vlei. This tale has endured and has been passed on from generation to generation, albeit in various forms, as the telling and re-telling of this sad tale has evoked some grand embellishments.

The tale of the heartbroken princess is a piece of cultural history. Through interviews I had done previously with a few people living near the vlei all their lives, the message the tale appears to convey is one of caution when approaching the vlei's waters.

The exact origin of the story is difficult to pinpoint and the main character of the story ie. the princess has taken on a mythical status. The community members living near the vlei remembers hearing (a version) of the story being told to them. The story is an important historical marker for the people living near the vlei in that it specifically places the people near the vlei in the context of the history of Cape Town. Given the genocide of memory and cultural history due to colonialism and later Apartheid, the story provides an invaluable and colourful slice of living memory that has endured precisely because people have kept the thread of their origin

alive through the re-telling of this particular story.

Why an oral storytelling and memory project for Princess Vlei?

Background:

I had previously worked on an English radio documentary commissioned by the German Broadcaster, Deutsche Welle and interviewed several community members about their memory of the vlei and more precisely, their personal stories about the vlei. The original myth/story of how the vlei was formed was used as a springboard to record very personal narratives from individual community members and how they remembered the vlei. During this process, a rich tapestry of narrative stories emerged from the community with the vlei at the heart of it.

These were personal recollections by those who interacted with the green space. The stories provided the human element conspicuously absent in the reportage of the vlei which came in for media attention after news broke that the city was keen for a shopping mall to be built on site. A community led campaign was launched to raise awareness about the proposed shopping mall and it gave rise to a community collective actively taking ownership of the vlei in a bid to protect it from the proposed development. The campaign was a success and the city has confirmed that the proposed mall on princess vlei has been scrapped.

The memory project aims to collect, to broadcast (via podcast) and “narrowcast” (via community events) the personal memories of Princess Vlei by those who have interacted with the “Princess”. It is not solely to record memories for its own sake but is meant as a vibrant repository of history; an attempt to resist the erasure of the cultural memory of Princess Vlei. Further to that end, the memory project is a celebration of the vlei, the people who live near her and if there were a broader consideration to this project, it is to invert the assumptions of areas and spaces that may exist.

This project will ultimately, in the future, draw in other spaces on the ‘flats’ and elsewhere as a celebration of cultural memory that I hope will feed into a broader local (later national) map made up of personal narrative about space/place that has been previously defined by the oppressive power of colonialism and Apartheid. The legacy of those previously defined spaces has leaked into the current context of our political freedom where those Apartheid delineated spaces have not changed much to reflect our political gains.

This year South Africa marks twenty years of democracy; but it has not translated into spaces being “freed” instead spaces have been locked up in a particular narrative and stereotype that have become difficult for South Africans to re-imagine.



## Mapping the stories

Storytelling circles, the most ancient form of stories will be used as a way of kickstarting the process of storytelling. It might be that some workshopping is required in order to guide participants as to shaping all the important elements of their personal memory about the vlei. The individual stories will be recorded and it will be audio recordings with a simple portrait of the storyteller. I've selected audio as the most uncomplicated and most effective means of communication. Simply put, the act of listening is powerful and active. When we have a history of the majority of the people ignored, not given voice and not listened to, the medium of audio has a deeper more significant meaning. Whoever listens, needs to pay attention and the alchemy of the listener interpreting the story plays into the realm of the imagination of the listener. Individual stories will be collated, curated and placed on a website. A podcast will be created weaving the stories together. At present, this project is a personal endeavour and the vision of it will include an attempt to

harness innovative trends in technology such as digital mapping and place-based media. How far and wide it goes is dependent on time and resource allocation I will be able to harness.

ENDS.