

Paper Proposal
"Similar in Content, Different in Form:
Cape Town's District Six Museum, *Yizkor* Books, and Communities after
Catastrophes"

Katrin Paehler, Associate Professor of History
Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA
katpaehler@ilstu.edu

The District Six Museum commemorates a racially mixed neighborhood in Cape Town, South Africa, which was destroyed by the apartheid regime by the forced removal of some 60,000 people after its designation as a "white area" in 1966. Founded in 1994, the museum displays objects of the neighborhood and its residents as well as pieces created by former residents since the museum's inception. As a museum, it differs in form from the *Yizkor* (memorial) books of the Eastern European Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust—as well as similar books by the Armenian and Palestinian diasporas—but bears striking resemblance in content.

What does that mean? What can these transnational observations tell us about communities after catastrophes, their efforts to create and maintain communal identity, their sense of self, and their views of the future?

Based on a detailed reading of the museum's space, its objects, and their interdependent relationships and a comparison with *Yizkor* books, my work draws out similarities and differences in form, content, and function between the museum and the books. I argue that self-referential texts such as the District Six Museum and *Yizkor* books serve, firstly, the destroyed, displaced, and traumatized communities; they reaffirm their existence in time—past, present, and future—and in space—the former and the current, often far-flung, "neighborhoods." In addition, I propose that this reassertion as well as the community's agency in creating its forms of commemoration presents an important opportunity in post-genocidal and post-conflict societies. They make marginalized voices heard and sites visible to the community at large, while prioritizing ordinary people's lives and well as their implicit visions for the future.