**Introduction**

May 26th, 2016: the South African national television channel Sabc 2 broadcasts live from the Red Location Museum (Rlm) in Port Elizabeth, in the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality of South Africa. At the beginning of the programme, the reporter remarks upon the exceptional nature of this event: it is the first time in three years that the museum has opened to the public after having been under occupation by the Red Location Steering Committee (Rlsc), a group of residents of Red Location, the township in which the museum is located. The group had forced the closure of the cultural centre to demand that the Municipality uphold its promise of repairing over two hundred nearby social housing units. The reopening of the museum coincided with the handover of the keys back to the mayor – the handover, but not the return. The photograph taken at the close of the press conference speaks volumes: on the right, Executive Mayor Danny Jordaan holds in one hand the iron keyring; on the left, Khusta Mbotyi, appointed representative of the Rlsc, grasps the bundle of keys. Beside them, another representative from the residents’ committee points to their two hands.[[1]](#footnote-1) The message is clear: the keys belong to them both. At the end of the ceremony, the mayor makes a statement that will be cited by all the journalists present, “this key that the Rlsc is handing over to us does not only open the doors to the Red Location Museum, but it also unblocks the entrance and opens the path to the township’s economy and cultural economy”.[[2]](#footnote-2) This day marks more of a ceasefire than an endpoint in a conflict that has lasted almost twenty years, since the Red Location Museum and Cultural Precinct (Rlmcp) was first designed.

I went to Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 2015 for a sixteen-month visit to the Development Department of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (Nmmu) as part of my doctoral studies in “Social and Political Change”, facilitated by a EUSA\_ID Erasmus Mundus mobility grant. My research project centred on the concepts of ownership and appropriation, primarily their role in socio-economic development projects. South Africa struck me as a particularly apt site to investigate the ways in which development policies pursue the objectives of ownership and restitution in contexts that are marked by processes of dispossession and deprivation. I was also interested in the relationship between development projects and the formation of the new South African nation, as the reduction of economic inequality and the abolition of past segregation seemed like immediately necessary conditions for post-apartheid transition. Additionally, I set out to closely analyse the effects of public policy on identity frameworks and everyday dynamics of recognition and ownership.

Upon arrival in Port Elizabeth, I thought it would be useful to get an idea of the city’s history. All the tourist websites praised the innovative character of the Red Location Museum, a museum that was part of a cultural centre being built in the small location of Red Location,[[3]](#footnote-3) in the township of New Brighton. During the first week of my stay, I decided to visit the museum as part of a tourist trail called “The Real City tour” that promised to guide participants through the discovery of Port Elizabeth’s townships. The tour’s website read, “townships are the heart of urban African life. They’re vibrant, heart-breaking, heart-warming, resilient, cohesive, and dynamic”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The museum was meant to be the last stop, the culmination of the tour. To my great surprise, however, as soon as we reached the centre of the Red Location Museum and Cultural Precinct (Rlmcp), the tour guide limited herself to speaking only about the architectural qualities of the buildings, adding that they and the museum were closed because of “community protests”, and so that it was impossible to go inside.

The cultural centre, consisting of the museum, a library and an art gallery, was flanked by informal settlements on the one side and social housing on the other. The Rlmcp and the surrounding dwellings comprised a sort of district in themselves, not far from the industrial area of Deal Party and connected to the main road and the train station. The cracks in the glass doors, the broken windows, the graffiti on the walls and a few scraps of paper on the ground testified to the abandoned state of the buildings, while the shadows of security guards inside the buildings and the groups of teenagers hanging about gave an impression of vitality, of a place that was lived in. The door of the main entrance was emblazoned with two notices: the first, typed out on the computer, warned in a tone that was somewhere between formal and intimidating that permission from a member of the Red Location Steering Committee (Rlsc) was necessary to enter the buildings.[[5]](#footnote-5) The second was handwritten and listed the names and phone numbers of the representatives of the Rlsc, with no indication of any particular hierarchy. The buildings that made up the Rlmcp were inaccessible from October 2013, when the Rlsc made the decision to occupy them for as long as it took for the Municipality to start repair works on the by-then derelict social housing. The repairs, which had been promised for years, are yet to be completed.

The Rlmcp was a project initiated in the mid-1990s that aimed to promote urban regeneration in the location through the creation of an anti-apartheid history museum and investment in the sectors of tourism, art, culture and entertainment. The project planned for the construction of a large cultural centre and simultaneous improvements to the surrounding area through building social housing and reorganising the main public transport infrastructures. The first phase involved preparations for a museum and the construction of an art gallery, library and restaurant, while the second anticipated the construction of several auditoriums for theatre and cinema, rehearsal rooms and spaces for creative workshops, alongside the establishment of an arts school. The project was supposed to inspire a complete transformation of the location, making it an utterly innovative district.

The Rlmcp can be described as a project aimed at the “redemption” of a marginal space. The word “redemption” carries multiple meanings. On the one hand, it can imply release, liberation and emancipation, but on the other, it is associated with the religious concepts of forgiveness, absolution from original sin and reconciliation with the divine. While the first meaning foregrounds the agency of those who redeem or free themselves, the second indicates the presence of someone or something else through which the redemption occurs. The redemption of Red Location, however, struck me as “forced”: while the organisers imposed the project on the residents, in some way, the residents sabotaged it. In having imposed their own presence and occupied the spaces of the museum, they “forced” the project open to seize ownership of it. The Rlmcp therefore struck me as an interesting starting point from which to explore and understand the relationship between ownership, appropriation and development policies.

In this thesis I examine the ownership and appropriation practices that have accompanied the history of the Rlmcp – from its initial conception through to the conflicts of recent years – as diverse actions through which multiple actors participated in the governance of development. Additionally, I will demonstrate how ownership practices operate simultaneously through temporal and spatial dimensions, on symbolic and material levels, sparking conflicts and confrontations that not only shape social change but that also contribute to the redefinition of belonging and substantiate the exercise of citizenship.

1. See Appendix 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. SABC 2, news, 26/05/2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the Eastern Cape, the word “location” refers to the *Native Reserve Location Act* of 1902, an act passed by the Cape Colony government that created residential areas designated for Black Africans (so-called “natives”) in order to remove them from the city centre, ostensibly to improve health conditions following an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Subsequently, the use of the term “township” to indicate larger settlements or groups of settlements has become commonplace. Today, citizens of Port Elizabeth generally refer to the Black residential areas built in the twentieth century before and during the apartheid government either as “locations” or “townships” (or “kasie”, an isiXhosa word derived from the Afrikaans for location, “lokasie”), according to their toponomy, which can often reveal much about the creation date and use of the established term, an aspect I explore further in Chapter 9.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Calabash tour website. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Appendix 3: Images, figure 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)