

## MEANING AND MEMORY: THE KLOPSE PAST AND PRESENT

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Stooped over in his wheelchair, looking out at the passerbys in front of his daughter's house, Uncle John may not strike you as a serial entrepreneur who started klopse after klopse. But when asked to speak about those days, he straightens just slightly as he lights a cigarette and reclaims his youthful vigor. He takes you on a journey through his 75 years, 74 of which he had been a part of a klopse—and at least five of which he started and managed himself. You have in front of you this remarkable man. What kind of questions would you ask him? My central research was: how has the klopse changed during your lifetime?

The Kaapse Klopse, or Cape Coons (which does not carry with it the racist connotations in the United States), in Cape Town is one of the most colourful Carnivals in the world—both literally in the pastel wedges of parasols to the gleaming glitter of its blackface performers, and figuratively in its long and fascinating history that draws from European, American, and of course Cape culture, a singular mix giving rise to the Coloured identity. Timed to celebrate the New Year, klopses march from all over the Cape, eventually ending up at the foot of Signal Hill in Bo-Kaap.

The klopse in Cape Town has multiple origins that have collided and fused to create what is now the extravagant Kaapse Klopse. During pre-emancipation days, slaves were given a large measure of freedom on the New Year.<sup>1</sup> The first record of annual New Year celebrations was in 1823, “when bands paraded in the street to welcome the New Year.”<sup>2</sup> However, the second day soon “became necessary as the first became more cheerfully celebrated — as a day to sober up.”<sup>3</sup> Post-abolition gave rise to parades, music, and songs that drew from a variety of sources.<sup>4</sup> One particularly strong influence was the American blackface minstrel troupe, especially the Virginia Minstrels formed in 1843 from New York. Creating caricatures out of slaves, the blackface minstrel—or Coon—was transported back to Africa. One Malay family that heard the American minstrels perform was the Dantu family, and it is believed that they were the originators of the Coon carnival, with the first troupe

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel, George. “Coon Custom’s Roots in Slavery.” *Cape Times*. 30 December 1979. Ed. Martin.

<sup>2</sup> Van Der Ross. *A Political and Social History of the Cape Coloured People, 1880-1970*, 598. Ed. Martin.

<sup>3</sup> “The World Goes By [...] Second New Year.” *Cape Times*. 1 January 1934: 8. Ed. Martin.

<sup>4</sup> Martin 91.

appearing on 1 January 1888, “wearing American minstrel costume with blackened faces.”<sup>5</sup> The minstrels tradition was mixed with other traditions. One was the burying of the Old Year: people would shout at the stroke of midnight, “The year is dead — long live the year!”<sup>6</sup> The celebrations of the “Tweede Nuwe Jaar” (the Second New Year) were also absorbed. Since then, the klopse has exploded, and taken on a competitive spirit as well. Today, it is featured by both the national and city governments as one of its main cultural events.

I have had the privilege of interviewing members of the klopse in Valhalla Park through a class at the University of Cape Town called “Negotiating the South African City: Home, Citizenship and Struggle” taught by Professor Sophie Oldfield from January to March of 2010. The klopse is officially called the Valhalla Community Youth Development Entertainers, but most members just call it “Auntie Gerty’s klopse,” after its captain. For five continuous Wednesdays (plus a rogue Wednesday), we went into Valhalla Park. I was paired with another student, Sherissa Roopnarain, and a member of both the klopse and the Valhalla Park United Front Civic, Fatima Moolajee. In total, I interviewed a total of eight klopse members. I am indebted to all my interviewees, Fatima, Sophie, Auntie Gertie, and the rest of the Civic.

Drawing upon the interviews of these eight klopse members and the literature on klopse history, I seek to understand how the klopse has changed over the course of their lifetimes. My greater question revolves around the question of the making of meaning and memory. How does one relate to the memories of the past, and how then do those memories link to memories of the present? Where and how is meaning formed? How can we examine the meaning that the klopse has to its members through the interactions between past and present?

I plan to ground myself in the comparisons between present and past. In the next part of the paper, I will give a brief background on each of the interviewed klopse members, focusing on their previous engagements with klopse. The first section of my argument looks at elements of presentation and performance: what are some of the outward markers of difference between past and present klopses and their experiences thereof? I then dig below the surface to grapple with how people have conceived of klopse differently over time, and how such thoughts from the mind are consequential. Lastly, I set struggles against victories. What does one mean in the face of the other? Through this lens, I am able to see what the klopse means to its members, from a more judicious viewpoint. The struggles give meaning

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<sup>5</sup> East, Arthur Sidney. “Coon Carnival.” *The Cape Argus*. 26 January 1856. Ed. Martin.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel, Goerge. *Cape Times*. 29 December 1979. Ed. Martin.

to the victories, and the victories give meaning to the struggles. Ultimately, I return to the question: what lies at the intersection meaning and memory?

## THE KLOPSE MEMBERS

One of the most striking commonalities amongst all the klopse members we interviewed was prior engagement in klopse in their youths. For each of them, klopse was such a natural part of their lives that there was no question that they would join once Auntie Gerty started the Valhalla Community Youth Development Entertainers. On the other hand, Abigail, Esther's daughter, remarks, "Klopse is not for me. It's not in my blood. I never grew up with klopse."

Fatima Moolajee, my guide, is a 47-year-old housewife with two daughters and two sons. She divorced her husband due to abuse and is now supporting her family through two government grants. Having moved from Retreat to Valhalla Park at the age of 14, she has been in Valhalla Park for 33 years, and her current house for twenty. She has been with Auntie Gerty's klopse since it started, and is a director and treasurer. In her youth, she was a part of the Orange Plantations. While her daughter Gadija plays the trombone, Fatima loves to *jol* and dance, and it is her favorite thing to look forward to all year. When asked why she decided to join Auntie Gerty's klopse, she replied, "I come from klopse so I'm not reluctant to join; I was excited there is no problem." For her, it was a no-brainer for her.

John Brown was only a year old when he started in a klopse, and he is 75 years old now. Born in Woodstock, he moved at eight months old to stay by his uncle who was captain of a klopse. After his uncle gave up that klopse when he was seven, he joined another klopse, eventually jumping from one to the next all over the Cape Flats. In 1959, Uncle John started his first klopse in Belgravia, called the Twenty Centuries. He later also started the Jolly Johnson in Hanover Park in the 1960s, the Dark Town Stratus in Steenberg in the 1960s, the Light Bodies in Valhalla Park in the 1970s, and the Valhalla Hip Parades in Valhalla Park for nine years, ending in 2003. Figure 5 features one of the klopses he was captain of. His daughter Gloria Brooks, 47, grew up on the klopses of his father's making. Although she never joined, she contributed as dressmaker.

Uncle Charlie, 56, and Aunt Doreen Loggenberg, 52, both used to live in Kaalsteenfontein, where Uncle Charlie participated in the Zong since the age of nine and where Aunt Doreen would go watch the performances with her friends. Esther Williams, 56, grew up in Surrey Estate and was in both the klopse and the Atjas. She loved her experience with the klopse, saying "I'm full with the klopse. Everywhere they are, I'm there. I grew up

with them.” Mariam Rudolph, 62, was a part of a klopse in Steenberg. She says, “I have always had that spirit and that feeling for klopse, because my father was in the klopse, I throughout my teenage years I went to klopse.” Ealenor Adams, 62, was born in District Six, where “there were plenty of Coons” unlike Valhalla Park. She was such an avid Coons member that during the gap between the end of the Valhalla Hip Parades and the beginning of Auntie Gerty’s Coons, “I played with other troupes, like a soldier in their team.”

## PART I: TAILS AND TAMBOURINES

In comparing klopses of the past and Auntie Gerty’s present-day klopse, a number of parallels but also points of contrast can be drawn. In this section, I will discuss some of the more apparent ones that are fundamental elements of a klopse’s presentation and performance: notably, membership, clothes, and music. At the end, I propose overarching themes that are suggested by the various points of analysis.

In the previous klopses, the men were the main performers, as according to traditional gender norms, while women and children performed ancillary roles separate from the men. When Uncle John created the Valhalla Hip Parades, he started with a core group of men. He says, “Only boys were in the Coons. It’s a boys thing not a girls thing.” It seemed a commonly-held belief that the klopse was a male-only peer bonding activity, to which the women were not privy. As Ealenor states, “The men kept it for them. That’s what they believed.” While the times dictated differing expectations from men and women, the American minstrels were also overwhelmingly male. Their role models and inspirations were male, and coupled with the gender norms of the time, it’s unsurprising that women were excluded from the limelight. Only rarely did women join the men as singers. Much more frequently, “the women must just look and dance a little”<sup>7</sup> as *trompoppies* with big hats performing their own specially-choreographed dances. Ealenor participated as one such dancer in District Six, saying, “I used to dance well, quite fine and all that, for the Coons.” She was to later become a ballroom dancer, following in the footsteps of her mother.

Although the women wore the same gear as the men, they rehearsed separately and with different coaches. Women were not even allowed in the same room as the men during practice times. Only on the day of the klopse would the men and women unite to perform together.<sup>8</sup> Auntie Gerty’s klopse, on the other hand, is integrated for not only performance

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<sup>7</sup> Ealenor.

<sup>8</sup> Gloria.



but also practice. Both women and men are engaged in the same events of singing, dancing, and instrument-playing.

Instead of serving as the lead singers, however, women served the important role of tailors and seamstresses. Ealenor says, “time was made for the sewing. We didn’t go [for the klopse] until we needed to.” While this implies a sidelined role for the women, they were also crucial to the running of the klopse. Without the women, there would be no clothes and no Coons to give a performance. Uncle John said that most girls then knew how to sit behind a machine and so there were no need for hiring professional tailors as they do today. Gloria said, “I didn’t play anything because I was the dressmaker.” She used to help make all the clothes with Zaida, and even now she helps with any alterations that are needed for Auntie Gerty. As she describes it herself, “I was and always will be a dressmaker.” The advantage to being a seamstress is that of decreased financial costs—both personally for the seamstress, and for the greater klopse. Today, Ealenor still makes her own clothes, and as such she doesn’t have to pay for her uniform or the bus fare on the day of the klopse. “I earn my uniform so I don’t pay for it.”

It seems that the inclusion of women as main performers and singers of the klopse has not been entirely positive, however. Gloria describes the girls in the troupe as having an attitude which outlaws any possibility of advising them. They don’t listen, and “they only want to be with the men and flirt.” In contrast, “the men listen” and they “are more dedicated.” This gives a tantalizing look into the new gender dynamics within klopses, now that they are mixed and there is free interaction between the adolescent boys and girls. From my experience as a participant observer the first weekend Auntie Gerty’s klopse competed, I can at least partly attest to the truth of Gloria’s criticisms. In conversation with Azaria, she mentioned that teenagers join the klopse only to find a significant other. This says nothing of the differential aggressiveness with which the two sexes may pursue the other, however. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the progressive inclusion of women would incite a criticism from a female member of the klopse.

While the transition of Auntie Gerty’s klopse to a more inclusionary membership welcoming men, women, and children seems to reflect the natural progression towards greater gender equality, Auntie Gerty’s klopse does not appear to be representative of modern-day klopses. Citing Fatima: “Some men don’t like the [our] klopse. In our klopse there are more women. People always say here comes Valhalla Park with the lots of ladies.” Her statement implies that Auntie Gerty’s klopse is unique, and the other klopses are still dominated by men today (although one would assume women have more significantly

infiltrated the ranks than before). While I do not have sufficient evidence to back this up, I would think that it is the strong female leadership in Auntie Gerty's klopse that invites such a strong representation from the women.

Besides the expansion of membership to women as well as men, the klopse has also changed with regard to its presentation and "look." The dress and presentation of the klopse members have also undergone certain stylistic changes. First, the actual "gear" or uniform was previously a long tailcoat. Remarking on today's gear, Gloria says, "there is more colour now. Now it's very outrageous. Everything is sequins and whatever. The material is fine for me now. I miss those long jackets. They were more klopse like." Gloria believed the tailcoats more authentic to the klopse tradition than the suits that are worn today. The props in addition to the uniform have also changed over time. Instead of the "panama" hats that adorn everyone's heads today, members used to wear top hats. Instead of parasols, past klopses used bamboo "stokkies," meaning sticks in Afrikaans. While sticks were not as common, tailcoats and top hats were characteristic of the blackface minstrel. Take a look, for example, at Figure 1, a playbill for blackface performer George Washington Dixon, the man who made popular the stock character of Zip Coon (also called Dandy Jim).<sup>9</sup> The clothing styles of Zip Coon and other minstrels eventually became picked up by the klopses of Cape Town. However, it seems that within the last fifty years, such styles have been modified such that they are less recognizably inspired by the blackface minstrels.

In addition to changes to the look of the "gear," the application of blackface has declined. Uncle John says that the klopse members used to wear blackfaces with white paint around only one eye and the mouth in the style of Al Johnson, an American blackface performer. They put on blackface "to show that we came from black men. Most of the slaves were black people." Now, fewer klopse members put on blackface than before. Moreover, the styles and designs have changed. This year, people only painted around their mouth – white on one side and left on the other. Glitter is also in vogue. None of these designs are the Al Johnson style that he was brought up with. "That's the way I learned it," he states emphatically. "That's the minstrels style." It evoked a stronger memory of the klopse's slave origins, whereas now, "the majority like glitter." From costuming to props to makeup, the presentation of klopse members has evolved away from the traditional look of the blackface minstrel performer.

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<sup>9</sup> Zip Coon depicts a free black person trying to "put on airs" by attempting to copy the dress, social customs, and speech of upper class whites.<sup>9</sup> In the playbill, Zip Coon is wearing a top hat and genteel swallow-tail coat. If you look closely, he is holding a pair of spectacles, a symbol of the dignified and educated gentry, but he is spinning them around his finger. He also has four watches dangling from his pocket (Ryser 16).

Another element of performance that has changed from past to present is a transition in the musical form, reflecting a departure from the traditional orchestras of Southern plantation slaves (and adopted into those of the American blackface minstrel troupes) in preference for modern bands that can claim a right to modernity.

For example, string bands have been replaced by brass bands. Two of the klopse participants interviewed play instruments, and both—Uncle Charlie and Esther—play the tambourine. Although he also sings in the Combined Songs, Uncle Charlie has played the tambourine since he started in the klopse. He loves his tambourine, which he brings over to show us proudly. He croons, “this is mines. It is mine. And it costs money,” emphasizing the last word. “This is now my instrument. My girlfriend. My baby.” He did not make the tambourine himself, but it was assembled by stretching animal skin over a wooden ring and stapling it to ring’s circumference. After every use, the stretched skin goes slack and every time, Uncle Charlie cares for it diligently by applying butter and setting it out under the sun to recover the tautness.

Esther also plays the tambourine, and she comes from a highly musical family. Her brother played the banjo after “one of the big people” gave him one to play, and he also played the accordion that was in the house. Her mother could play the guitar. She talks about playing the tambourine as a young girl: “When you hear the music you just go with the beat. This all started when I was a child.”

The tambourine was the primary percussion instrument of a set of slave plantation instruments (banjo, violin, bone castanets, and tambourine) that made the transition from backyard to the professional stage via the American blackface minstrel troupes. The critical turning point was on February 6, 1843 at the Bowery Theater in New York, when the band called the Virginia Minstrels (later called Christy Minstrels) performed as the first minstrel troupe ever.<sup>10</sup> (Previously, blackface actors performed solo novelty acts.) The Virginia Minstrels became an instant sensation, and their loosely-structured show with the musicians sitting in a semicircle, a tambourine player on one end and a bones player on the other, set the precedent for what would soon become the first act of a standard three-act minstrel show (see Figure 3 for example).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Uncle Charlie and Esther, two of the children mentioned in these interviews also play instruments for Gerty’s klopse. Fatima’s 15-year-old daughter Gadija plays the trombone, and Esther’s 16-year-old daughter Azaria plays the trumpet. Martin

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<sup>10</sup> Klitz.

<sup>11</sup> Toll.

writes that in the 1950s and 1960s, klopse bands that composed of violins, guitars, banjos, accordions, cellos and percussion instruments progressively gave way to trumpets, trombones, and saxophones. This was brought on by the introduction of rock and soul music as well as Frank Sinatra and Beatles tunes.<sup>12</sup> The first team that came out with a brass band was the Cornwall Crooning Minstrels, which featured saxophones. Soon after, the Young Stars Crooning Minstrels featured trumpets. Both klopses were popular troupes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and led the movement towards more modern types of music, including a strengthening of the jazz element in klopse music.<sup>13</sup>

With the different types of musical instruments came different musical tunes and songs that are played. Uncle John laments not the loss of traditional klopse songs in the musical repertoire, but their timing. He cites very specifically a certain Mr. Menker who was an old Jewish man and a “musical doctor.” According to Uncle John, a doctor of music at a university held a higher post than a professor. Mr. Menker would judge the klopse songs, and he paid particular attention to their timing. “If it was a Coons song, it must be a Coons song. If it was a group song, it must be a group song.” Coons songs were set to the tempo of a slow jazz, whereas a group song was set to the blues. A Combined Chorus, furthermore, must be a slow waltz. With the inclusion of modern-day songs, such strict rules have been thrown out the window.

The changes in type of music and song selection have been accompanied by the change from live instrumentation to pre-recorded backtracks. Gloria says:

“They must go back to the original music. Then you could hear everything loud and clear. Today, everything is a backtrack. You see. When the band goes on stage and then if they have to do a number say the Adult Sentimental and then I have to wait for the backtrack. In the old days it was just you and the live music. That backtrack is like a Mariah Carey song without her voice. They take her voice out and it’s just the music. Then the band has to learn how to play on that backtrack. That is the new business now.”

Uncle Charlie thinks that the backtracks diminish from the energy and vibrancy of the music-making: before, “it was more carnival, more lively, and more cultural.” Fatima dismissively comments, “Now everyone just wants to sing on a backtrack.”<sup>14</sup> Martin interviewed a composer and Malay Choir coach in October 1994 who was also not a fan: “Now years ago, it wasn’t electric, not like this rubbish now with computer stuff they’ve taken...Years ago everything was done acoustically: it was banjos, guitars, piano-accordions,

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<sup>12</sup> Martin 136.

<sup>13</sup> Martin 142.

<sup>14</sup> 27 January 2010.

they would walk with cellos to give you the best sound.”<sup>15</sup> In some sense, the music was more organic and the musicians were “closer” to the music as its direct producers instead of requiring an intermediary (that of electronic technology).

Like the changes in dress, the musical changes from string to brass, strictly-tempo’ed traditional songs to popular songs of today, and live instrumentation to pre-recorded backtracks reflect the unfortunately losing battle to preserve traditions and heritage. However, such changes in the presentation and performance of klopse are also testament to its continued cosmopolitan nature. Meanwhile, the greater inclusion of women as main performers of the klopse has been hailed interestingly as both a positive and a negative. Overall, there is a distinct modernizing trend away from the initial inspirations from American slaves and minstrels to create a “Kaapse Klopse” that continues to evolve and reflect changing tastes of the times and of increasingly-undefined spaces.

## **PART II: TIME WARP, MIND WARP**

In discussing the growing disconnect of klopse from many of its American minstrel roots, we move away from a discussion about some of klopse’s more immediately apparent changes (notably: demographic composition, dress, and music) to one about the changing consciousness surrounding the engagement with and within klopse. These perceptions and beliefs of the mind are not merely mistlike cerebrations within some psychic dimension; they hold consequences for the way klopse is performed.

Not only do the presentation and performance of klopse seem to stray farther from its roots, its younger participants are also apparently less aware of its history and its place in the development of the creole, Coloured community in the Cape. Uncle John bemoans the flagging knowledge that the klopse’s roots are in slavery. He says that the klopse is about “rejoicing the freedom of the slavery. The Coons come from the slavery...The first day [of January] there was no more slaves. The second day it’s like a road march through the streets.”

In fact, Queen Victoria decreed the emancipation of slaves to take place on 1 December 1834, although the effective date of emancipation was in 1838 after a four-year “apprenticeship.” In both 1834 and 1838, ex-slaves promenaded the streets, many attended by bands of amateur musicians. Historians Nigel Worden and Achmat Davids assert that 1

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<sup>15</sup> Martin 138.

December became the unofficial holiday of the slave descendents as a day to celebrate.<sup>16</sup> This day was eventually shifted to coincide with the growing popularity of the traditional “Tweede Nuwe Jaar” (the Second New Year) on the second of January.<sup>17</sup>

While Uncle John’s dates may have been wrong, his insistence that the klopse is rooted in slavery is not—emancipation of slavery was one (although not the only) reason that the Coloured people celebrated klopse. He says that the klopse is “for the memory of our forefathers. How they were released from slavery.” But the young “don’t know about it. They only play for the fun of the game...Youngsters made of stone seems to me. Doesn’t understand where the Coons come from. They only enjoy when in front of them. They do not understand.” While Uncle John’s dates are inaccurate and he does overemphasize the contributing role of emancipation, his statements represent the perception that klopse is not serving its function as a vehicle for connecting youth with their rich heritage, their slave roots, and their Coloured identity. The role of the klopse as a transmitter of cultural heritage seems to have been forgotten under the greater fun and entertainment of the sport.

While the youth of today may not rally around klopse as a means of remembering their heritage—something Uncle John believes is very important—klopse also no longer appears to command as high a respect as it did before. Or, at the very least, the methods by which one would display respect has changed. This can be gleaned both in the changing nature of celebration and victory, and in the treatment around one’s gear.

Victory in klopse is important because it vindicates all the hard work by the community over the last year. It makes all the scrambling and struggle worth it. It inspires the youth to continue to practice their instruments, and bolsters their confidence. However, compared with the past, victory is no longer as sweet. In days of yore, “if the one klopse did well, they give you a table and they feed you well. You speaking about that table for the whole year. Those were the old times.”<sup>18</sup> In this case, the table mounted with food and drink is a very tangible way of expressing gratitude and feeling a sense of accomplishment. It is not only observable through one’s eyes, the kudos and honor embodied in the food can literally be consumed. That table that remains in the memories of the participants is raised again and again over the course of the year, each time reaffirming the cohesion and industry that brought about that victory.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin 33-4.

<sup>17</sup> Martin 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gloria.

Second, with the loss of a table of food and drink, there is no longer any monetary reward: “We never win money. Only trophies and medals.”<sup>19</sup> While a pot of gold is obviously not the driving motivation to participate in klopse, money is a (metaphorical) currency for respect. The uncomfortable truth in this world is that money commands respect – the provision of hard cash represents a definite value to the recipient. Trophies and medals are token gestures, but they do not convey the message with quite the same strength. Both the table and the money are not the primary incentives for participation in the klopse, but they represent the respect with which people gave the klopse, with which both “insiders” and “outsiders” valued the klopse and all that it stands for.

The gear of a klopse member is also important. With the declining practice of blackface, the gear is the main thing which marks a klopse member. It is also the main means by which any given klopse is able to call a person one of theirs—the way to announce one’s affiliation, loyalty, and membership. However, people no longer dress or treat their dress the same way. First, there is less consistency and uniformity around dress. Fatima says, “We all say klopse isn’t like it was before. The way people dress there are lots of changes....All must look the same [before]. Now, they make uniforms different. Everyone must look the same to get prize for it. Must be dressed neat.”<sup>20</sup> She gives the example of people wearing a T-shirt in place of a collared shirt, of people wearing coloured shirts instead of a true white, of people wearing the wrong type of shoes instead of white tekkies. I myself witnessed all of such transgressions the day of the competition in which I joined as a participant observer. For example, one young man wore bright red, Nike-brand tekkies. While one can point to such strict adherence to uniformity as nitpicking, it is exactly the little aspects that contribute to greater picture. These little aspects matter; they are consequential—to whether the team feels like a unified group, or whether the team wins “Best Dressed.” If people are not as compliant about their presentation, it is not unreasonable to say that they care less about the klopse than someone who is.

Second, the gear is no longer used exclusively for klopse. Gloria says, “it’s just like church clothes and some people even sleep in the klopse gear and people wear it in the street, they wear it out, just so. In the old days, we treasured our gear.” By comparing klopse gear to church clothes, she indicates how much respect she gives to the clothing—and by extension, to the event that it is worn to. Later, she talks about how the klopse gear is “on a special hanger” in her wardrobe. It confers a significance and sacredness to the clothes, in

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<sup>19</sup> Fatima.

<sup>20</sup> 3 March 2010.

sharp contrast to others who treat it as just another article of clothes. In demoting the gear from the sacred to the everyday, one demotes the practice of klopse. Why would attending klopse be any different from attending school, if you're wearing the same thing for both? In Figure 4, Ealenor and her granddaughter hold up the uniform and parasol from a previous year's klopse. She asked that I wait so that she could fetch the gear to show me. She was obviously very proud of it, and I could tell that she stored it in a special place, away from her everyday shirts and pants.

In addition to its decreased efficacy as a form of cultural education and the decreased level of respect accorded to it, klopse has also become more commercialized as a profit-making venture. In Uncle John and Gloria's experiences, the regional board overseeing local klopses would help pay for the material for your gear as long as you've become a member. Then, it would get paid back according to revenue reaped from the gate fees, and you would get paid by the board if you win. Sometimes, the gate fees would be insufficient, in which they would come back to you for money. However, usually the board would contribute to the fundraising. Gloria says, "When I was growing up the Board was paying out. If your klopse won then they gave a sum of money. But now, it's full of skelems [thieves]." Instead of being an ally, boards become a burden, demanding money instead of giving money. Uncle John says, "[Now] they doing it for the business. They don't celebrate anymore. They make profit on the clothes. And still there are gate fees." Martin writes that because the costs of running a klopse have risen, klopses now search for sponsors and carnivals become real businesses. Entrepreneurs enter the game, intent on making a profit from the competitions, and members of the klopse feel exploited.<sup>21</sup> The idea was circulated that "those who could advance funds to pay for the costs of a troupe and book the stadiums could make easy money from the Coons."<sup>22</sup> The higher costs of running the klopse then get transferred to the participants. Abigail, Esther's daughter, says, "Klopse is very expensive. I can't put the children there."

Such commercialization of the klopse and search for profit has translated to decreased access to the enjoyment and participation in the klopse. Uncle John says that now, people "don't care if you have the money" – notably they don't care if you don't. "Now they charge more at the gates. Now not everyone can go. Then money was more worth it. Now there's more money but can't do anything with it. Before, people work on farms. Bosses bring them by bus two days before the new year. They sleep in the streets. Malay choirs. Now people

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<sup>21</sup> Martin 142.

<sup>22</sup> Martin 144.



can't afford it." The idea that klopse should be able to be enjoyed by everyone – if not to participate in (if, say, you cannot purchase the gear), then at least to watch – no longer holds true. Even though it is a working class festivity eschewed by the Coloured elite, some poor Coloureds still cannot afford to see it. Commercialization has restricted access to the enjoyment of klopses. More importantly, the search for profit undermines the very spirit of klopse: community-building, welcoming, universal.

Klopse no longer features in the consciousness as it did before. As a vehicle for reliving and celebrating the successes of their forefathers, it is perceived to make a lesser contribution to the cultural education of the youth. It also commands less respect when examined through instruments of reward or treatment of gear. Neither money nor tables mounted with food and drink is given as reward when the klopse wins. The table and the check are representative—their absence is a message to both participants and observers that they are not worth the table or the money. People are less attentive to their gear, and furthermore, the gear is no longer worn exclusively for the klopse. Not only do people not wear non-gear-appropriate clothing to the klopse, people wear their gear arguably inappropriately for everyday occasions. Finally, the commercialization and profit-making now rampant in the “business” of klopses sabotages their core principles of solidarity and openness. Boards are “skelems” instead of allies, and klopses are no longer accessible to everyone. In contrast to the first argument I made surrounding the more concrete, observable changes in klopses from past to present, I now attest that the very ways in which people consider, value, and treat klopse have changed. While the changes are arguably ambiguous and any characterization of the changes as positive or negative may be criticized for being normative as opposed to simply “what is,” such changes do seem to be more negative than positive. I leave the reader to make her own decision.

### **PART III: STRENGTH IN THE STRUGGLE**

I have tried to wrestle with whether the changes that I have documented – in dimensions both tactile and psychic – are good or bad. At times I have advanced my own predilections, although they are only that. Instead of attempting to impose some kind of a final judgment, I would like to dedicate the last section of this paper to the struggles that Auntie Gerty's klopse faces today that were not the case in the past. However, I will conclude with the incredible strengths and hope that shine through and convince me that Auntie Gerty's klopse will go on.

First, the klopse has declined in popularity relative to the past. Previously, klopse was *the* sport. As Gloria states, “When I was a child, most of the children were really interested in klopse. We were all children of klopse. And, hell, we loved it.” From the conversations with klopse participants, it does not seem like the decision to enter the klopse as a young child was much of a decision at all – it was almost as if you were assumed to enter the klopse. As such, “more people were part of the klopse.”<sup>23</sup> Today, however, not everyone is interested in the klopse. Fatima says, “the youth, not most of them are interested; some are playing pool and all that.” There is the perception that klopse is not “cool” enough for the youth to attract them to join. Gloria says that “as soon as these boys become men, then they not interested in the klopse anymore. It’s the drugs, women, big things in life and klopse is too small for all these young men in these twenties.”

Without the same expectation that everyone will join the klopse, people have been pulled to alternative “sports.” For Uncle Charlie’ son, Hilton, soccer is his sport. While the decreased membership for klopse is problematic for Auntie Gerty and directors, in some ways, the increased array of choices is positive for the individual in question – why force someone to engage in music or dance when he may be the next Michael Jordan? However, in many ways, the decreased interest in and membership in klopse is bad not only for the group but for the individual as well – if he or she becomes lured into drugs and gangs as an alternative leisure activity to klopse, for example. While I wrote about the greater inclusiveness of klopse today because women now get to become singers as well as men, in a certain way the klopse is also less inclusive today because of its smaller membership.

The klopse is also facing more difficult financial challenges than klopses of the past. As referenced already, the costs of running a klopse are higher than before. Uncle Charlie says, “Now the clothes and the material is so expensive. Yahhe yoh!” In addition to higher clothing costs are higher costs around the choir and band. The coach, Toya, is paid R120 for each time that he arranges and directs music. He is paid at the end of the year in a lump sum, although sometimes he asks for parts of it when he is short on money. Furthermore, the band also costs money. Martin writes, “Musicians would no longer accept to play for free gear and a *tafel* at the end of January – they wanted money. Funds needed to pay soloists, musicians and groups delivering the special item increased the financial burden the captains had to bear.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Uncle Charlie.

<sup>24</sup> Martin 142.

This applies to Auntie Gerty's klopse: the band that played for it for the competitions asked for R40,000, with a R10,000 deposit and R20,000 paid during the performance. In addition, Auntie Gerty must also provide them with food and the gear for free. Fatima says, "it's all a money-making thing." This is why Auntie Gerty wants to assemble her own band. As of now, only two children in the klopse, Laetitia and Shireen, have their own instruments, and Gerty was the one who bought them.<sup>25</sup>

As a means to find the money and donations, Auntie Gerty's klopse has tried to apply as an NGO "but we don't know what is going wrong."<sup>26</sup> The lengthy list of fundraising activities undertaken by the captains is truly impressive—and just a little daunting. Fatima says, "We all go to the klopse. I take my children, my in-laws, my daughter's in-laws we sell tickets and we go. Nineteen or twenty come from my side. But you can lose money if you don't sell the tickets." Later, she says, "We need help. Just to cook rice and dhal [braised lentils] that goes far." Uncle Charlie says that he has been asked to be a captain of Auntie Gerty's klopse,

"But I don't want to be. [He laughs.] It's because of the money. I have always helped klopse but now with being a captain and the money...you see the directors put their hands in their own pockets and the captains have to raise the money and we must do work, stalls, karaoke, roti and all that. We are a few Captains but not all of us have money, old people don't have money. There are not lots of money in the klopse."

Faced with such hardships as recruitment and outreach, as well as fundraising, Auntie Gerty's klopse is nevertheless one that exemplifies the tenacity and community.

Three different women, faced with the same question: "What would happen if Auntie Gerty's klopse dies?" answered with the same emphatic answer: That will never happen! Mariam said, "Gerty moet altyd staan. The klopse mote altyd hier in Valhalla staan." That translates to, "Gerty must always be there. The klopse of Valhalla must always be there." Ealenor said, "As long as I live I would like the legacy to go on. If Gerty is not there, Zaida must take it on. She must inherit it." And Gloria expressed it most succinctly: "They must go on!"

The attachment to the klopse is so strong that at times, it is expressed vividly and viscerally. Gloria says, "I will get sick if I'm not there." She invokes physical consequences if she is unable to attend the klopse. It is still a very particular description that expresses just how much klopse means to her—that she would fall physically ill. The other woman who

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<sup>25</sup> Esther.

<sup>26</sup> Fatima.

invokes visceral language was Mariam, who has life-threatening asthma and was once so sick that her room was packed with people to pay their last respects. She says, “I will go mad just lying here and being sick. When I hear the klopse, I run after them until my chest closes.” What an interesting contrast: Gloria would fall physically ill if she doesn’t go to the klopse, whereas Mariam is willing to invite sickness and arguably death in her pursuit of her love for klopse. As juxtaposed as the two statements are, both express with such clarity the passion that both Gloria and Mariam have for klopse. They are the warriors of Auntie Gerty’s klopse—fervent and ready to do battle for it.<sup>27</sup>

One reason for which Gloria, Mariam, and the rest of the klopse members are so in love with klopse is as the one bright star that they get to look forward to all year. As Martin cites from an article in *The Cape Herald*, “For them the ‘big days’ are a time to live it up, two or three weeks into which to cram as much pleasure and excitement as possible, enough to compensate for dull year after year of a dead-end job on dead-end pay (if there is work at all these days).”<sup>28</sup> Fatima says, “I’m excited for klopse. Always. Home is boring.” Ealenor says, “After the Coons are gone then this place is so boring. We must wait for September month, till they start practicing. This place is as dead as a dodo.” The klopse thus becomes a way to celebrate the year—to mark it and remember it. It is the one time all year that they are completely liberated from their everyday struggles and where they can see many of their struggles bear fruit.

One final, and obvious reason, for which people decide to join the klopse is to find and build community and relationships. Martin writes:

“Rites of renewal offer occasions for re-establishing and strengthening social bonds. They very often include house visits, serenades, and gifts...old friends are invited and welcomed, neighbors are greeted, new acquaintances are made...In short, communities are cemented.”

Fatima, Mariam, and Ealenor all speak about finding community in and through klopse. Fatima says:

“Sometimes feel I can learn for [to be] a doctor because everyone comes to me, I wash the babies mouths and all that. The whole community knows me. I’m proud of how together we are. Everyone knows each other and we work together and we tell each other that we must win...The community becomes closer to one another because of the klopse.”

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<sup>27</sup> Yes, I do realize that Gloria and Mariam employ hyperbole...I thus respond in kind.

<sup>28</sup> Martin 158.

Through her role as a director of the klopse, Fatima acts as a mother to all of the community's children. Mariam says, "When I get the pension in the middle of the month then I keep some for my gear. That I can't live without. It is mine. It is my family, my people, everything, it's all mine." Here, Mariam literally extends her family to all the members of Auntie Gerty's klopse. Klopse is indispensable for her; she absolutely must be able to go. Finally, Ealenor says, "It [The klopse] uplifts the community. It is our heritage. It uplifts people because we must do something as a community, for our people in this place." In this way, Ealenor obliquely references the notion that, defined residually through their mixed race, Coloured people are widely believed to not possess their own "culture" or "identity." However, Ealenor repudiates that belief, situating klopse both as a community center and as a centripetal force. The community center can represent the victories, the relationships built, the triumph of the Valhalla klopse over neighboring klopses. But it is also a dynamic force encompasses all the buffeting winds of everyday struggle, laborious fundraising, and collective frustration that—though painful—are able to pave the roads leading to the community center, to the light and the victory.

## CONCLUSION

I have examined differences in the presentation and performance of klopses past and present. Women are now welcome as part of the main singing and performance troupe whereas they were previously the tailors and sideline dancers. This new mixing between the sexes has given rise to gender interactions worthy of further study. Dress from a tailcoat, topcoat, stick, and blackface are now replaced with suit, panama hat, parasol, and still blackface—but just less frequently. Music has also changed. String bands have given rise to brass bands. Klopse songs are no longer set to their traditional tempoos with the adoption of modern pop songs. And live instrumentation has been replaced with pre-recorded backtracks. Many of these changes can be seen from the lens of growing disconnect from roots in the American blackface minstrel troupe and the embrace of modernity. The second part of this paper has examined changes not in presentation, but in the psyche, of the klopse. First, klopses are seen as less effective vehicles for reconnecting the Coloured youth with their slave roots. It has also been seen to command less respect in consequential ways – such as the loss of monetary reward and tables of food and drink, as well as the changes to dress: both through inappropriate dress for klopse and in inappropriate use of klopse's dress. The principles of community and brotherhood in klopse have also been undermined by increasing commercialization and profit-making which decreases access to its enjoyment and makes

fundraising more difficult. The final part of this paper juxtaposed struggles in the klopse with its successes. One gives meaning to the other. The struggles in recruitment and fundraising give meaning and life to the successes for the continued operation of the klopse. On the other hand, the successes and sweet enjoyment are what drive the continued struggles to maintain the running of the klopse.

Now, at the end, we circle back to the initial, encompassing questions of the making of meaning and memory. I believe that my research has shown meaning to be both a fundamentally individual as well as social construct. There were strong parallels in many of the responses of the eight interviewed klopse members. They frequently supported the claims of each other, and there were similarities in their stories. On the other hand, their particular memories made each story unique, and thus each individual assembled meanings from different aspects, different meanings from the same aspects, and different meanings from different aspects. The experiences between one natural matched pair, Uncle John and his daughter Gloria, are vastly different—separated as they are by gulfs of gender, geographic, and temporal differences. Memory influences meaning in a whole host of ways. It shapes what is important, what rises to the surface, and what is deemed to be “meaningful.” At the same time, meaning also influences memory. Very importantly, it shapes the articulation of the memory. How does the very tactile memory of holding onto a cello as one marches give rise to a different meaning of klopse than singing over pre-recorded instruments? On the other hand, how does one’s belief that klopses are lamentably losing its faithfulness to authentic klopse history shape memories of adorning a top hat instead of a panama hat? Ultimately, the intersection of meaning and memory gets lost in the eddies, exploratory tendrils, and still pools that creates a never-ending and never-quite-replicable pattern.

## FIGURES

Figure 1



*Playbill for George Washington Dixon as "Zip Coon."*  
*New York, 1830's, Harvard Theatre Collection.*

Figure 2

BOWERY AMPHITHEATRE

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MONDAY EVENING, FEB. 6, 1843

first night of the novel, grotesque, original, and surpassingly  
 melodious Ethiopian Band, entitled

THE VIRGINIA MINSTRELS

being an exclusively musical entertainment, combining the ban-  
 jo, violin, bone castanets, and tambourine, and entirely exempt  
 from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have  
 hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas.

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*The first announcement for the Virginia Minstrels by the New York Clipper. The Clipper championed the Virginia Minstrels as the earliest organized minstrel troupe.*

**Figure 3**



*Sheet music published in Boston in 1845 showing The Harmoneons, a white troupe playing the instruments of a minstrel troupe orchestra and positioned as the Virginia Minstrels did in their first performance.*



Figure 4



*Ealenor Adams and her granddaughter show off the gear from a previous year's klopse.*

**Figure 5**



*A photo taken from one of Uncle John's klopes.*

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<sup>29</sup> All citations attributed to Fatima Moolajee are assumed to be dated 20 January 2010 unless noted otherwise.