

Dangerous, frightening, homely: Home experiences of those living on the goldmines of the Far West Rand¹

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Abstract

This article provides an outlook on the darker side of people's home experiences, as described by the inhabitants of Merafong, a township located on the Far West Rand, South Africa, where goldmining companies have had an immense impact on the region for more than a century. The mining industry has extended its influence everywhere, framing and re-forming the area, and in so doing, the perceptions of home and homeliness have changed radically. When the people of the Far West Rand describe the meaningful features of their home region they do not hesitate to talk about its negative side. They speak of illegal immigrants, drugs, criminality, arson, kidnapping, and sexual violence. They talk about dangers that lurk in the natural environment, such as sinkholes and the pollution of water and soil. Furthermore, they talk of the problems inherent in the political system, of illiteracy, corruption, inefficiency, and the long shadow of colonialism. They also speak at length about their experience of danger and fear. The Far West Rand, exemplified by Merafong, is by no means pictured as being perfect. In many aspects it is unpleasant, ugly, and even dangerous. But nevertheless, it is home. The data presented here was collected in the period 17–20 November 2015. The method followed and discussions held are examined below. These were followed by two written assignments. The six data collection sessions were attended by a total of 31 participants.

Keywords: Homeliness; Sense of home; Experiential theory of home; Mining enterprises; Sinkholes; Fires; Tailings dams; Corruption; Environmental destructions.

“Home” leaves all kinds of traces

The concept of “home” has been opened up for investigation in the last twenty

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years.² Home in a general sense is a place, usually a house or a room, where personal belongings are conserved, where leisure time is spent and where family members live together. Not all people necessarily have this kind of home. We do not all have relatives, or perhaps our relatives do not live in the same place as we do. All people do not necessarily possess property and if this is the case, they do not require a place to store their movable possessions.³

One can live one's entire life "on the move" as a migrant, a derelict, homeless person or a vagabond. Nights can be spent in hotel rooms, in sleeper cars, or under the open sky. Home in the meaning of a house, apartment or a room does not then exist. But all people – even derelicts and migrants – have personally important places and events of which they have processed their own interpretations: familiar landscapes and meaningful memories of events. In these physical and mental landscapes one feels at home, at ease, even if we cannot show others a physical, limited place that carries the label of home.

According to David Morley a person is at home in the rhetoric of those with whom they share a mutual understanding of life. Home is where you can be recognised by others. The extent of the space in which a person may feel at home can vary – from the space of a house to that of a street, a neighbourhood or an entire country. feelings of belonging and relations with others can be connected to a nation – or even to a park bench.⁴

When home is understood experientially, it is more than an apartment or a house, more than your family and kin. It is the whole entity of the things that make you feel homely, the place you live in, the people you have around you, important places, meaningful doing. At home you don't need a map, you know how the people who live there react, how they speak, how they look.⁵ Home is everything we are longing for in a world of uncertainty.⁶

When we talk about our home experiences, we usually think of positive aspects: of love, shelter, safety, relaxation, ease of life, happy memories. At home, wherever I focus my attention, I see familiar landscapes, precious memories come to mind. In reality, not everything is beautiful, acceptable and agreeable at home. I remember my

2 C Morse and J Mudgett, "Longing for landscape: Homesickness and place attachment among rural out-migrants in the 19th and 21st centuries", *Journal of Rural Studies*, 50, 2017, pp. 95-103; p. 101.

3 S Riukulehto, "Touristic attraction as part of multi-scalar home experience. Case: Aalto Center, Seinäjoki, Finland", S Agarwal, A Ranjan, V Kumar and N Chowdhary (eds), *Rurality, ruralism and rural tourism: Challenges and coping strategies* (New Delhi, ANE Books, 2019), pp. 189-203; pp. 194-195.

4 D Morley, *Home territories: Media, mobility and identity* (Abingdon, Routledge and Psychology Press, 2000), p. 48; A Blunt and R Dowling, *Home, key ideas in geography* (Abingdon, Routledge 2006), p. 29.

5 S Riukulehto and K Rinne-Koski, *A house made to be a home* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. 13-25.

6 G Eichmanns, "Introduction: Heimat in the age of globalization", G Eichmanns and Y Franke (eds), *Heimat goes mobile: Hybrid forms of home in literature and film* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 1-12.

first kiss but I also remember how I fell off my bike on a certain street corner. There are some places and memories that are stark and negative. Those closest to me smile, laugh and love in my fond memories but they also make me cry, make mistakes, and die.... A car accident and a graveyard are examples of particular events and places of home, my fortress, that make it even more deeply my home. Although we do not often say it out aloud, the sense of home covers the whole spectrum of emotions from love to disgust and even hate. Home leaves all kinds of traces.⁷ Usually, the harsh, unpleasant features of home play a relatively small role in the research of homeliness. In this article, dark sides of home come into focus.

“Home” framed by the Far West Rand mining industry

The mining industry is the major employer among the people of the Far West Rand and has a particular status as the key factor in the “home experience” of all the close-by communities. It is easy to see that it is one of the most important institutions that frames and forms the perceptions of “home” – in the wider sense – of those who live in Merafong and work on the mines.⁸

Geographically, Merafong is located in the Far West Rand about 65 kilometres from Johannesburg. The fertile soil in the vicinity of the Vaal River attracted permanent settlers in the nineteenth century. Later, development expanded, driven almost exclusively by the rich mineral deposits deep below the surface. Merafong is the site of several of the most productive gold mines in the world. They tap the West Wits gold ore vein, which stretches in the form of an arc from the eastern reaches of Johannesburg (alias eGoli) westwards towards Merafong, and then curves back towards Kroonstad, south of Johannesburg.⁹

In the first half of the twentieth century, the influence of foreign mining companies in the Union of South Africa was particularly significant in the Far West Rand. Goldmining expanded there despite the costly environmental challenges, such as cementation processes and the progressive de-watering of the dolomitic Central Basin. Shortly after the end of World War II, British companies invested heavily in a

7 LC Manzo, “Beyond house and haven: Towards a revisioning of emotional relationships with places”, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 23, 2003, pp. 47-61, at p. 51; T Suutari, K Rinne-Koski and S Riukulehto, *Juuret juniorille: Maaseudun lasten ja nuorten kotiseututietoisuuden rakentuminen* [Rooted Juveniles: Constructing the consciousness of home among rural children and youth], (University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, 2022), pp. 75-76.

8 For more contextual details, see ES van Eeden and S Riukulehto, “Recognizing traces of colonialism and coloniality in a South African mining region: Surfacing the past in regional, ethnographic and wellbeing research”, *Cultural History*, 12(2), 2023 [forthcoming].

9 ES van Eeden, “Exploring 21st century regional history in ecohealth and wellbeing research”, S Riukulehto (ed.), *Between time and space* (Finland, Cambridge scholar, 2015), pp. 45-66.

total of five mines that had opened on the Far West Rand, with a value calculated at well over £50 million, resulting in the rapid development of the region.¹⁰

The mining companies have had an immense impact on the region¹¹ – both good and evil. The operations of the gold mining industry improved the local economy. It offered jobs and financial benefits. Right from the beginning, the income earned from goldmining was also expected to improve living conditions of the people.¹² Yet, goldmining did not automatically mean upgraded social facilities such as schools and a better healthcare system. It transformed the places, landscapes, and attitudes associated with mining activity. It involved a flood of migrants from rural areas and even from abroad and there were population shifts, environmental destruction, cultural infusions, infrastructural development ... and with these came class and racial divisions.¹³ Environmentally, socially, and culturally there have been changes. It is true to say that the mining industry has had a profound influence on the people who live in the area. It has impacted upon their experiential home in the Far West Rand in a multitude of ways.

Experiential home research in Merafong, 2015

Since 2011 the University of Helsinki's Ruralia Institute embarked on various research projects in developing the theory and research methods for "experiential home". A multidisciplinary group of researchers at the Institute have studied the spatiality of home from apartment level to regional and extra-municipal levels. The Institute team has also collected data from different age groups. The temporality of "home" experience has been studied in terms of concepts such as events, memories, and temporal institutions (traditions and cultural heritage and norms). We have analysed the phenomena of home on natural, built, socio-cultural as well as on virtual levels. We have utilised and developed multiple

10 RM MacNab, *Gold their touchstone: Gold Fields of South Africa, 1887-1987: A century story* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1987); JA Galloway, "The History of Westonaria 1927-1991", Report, University of Johannesburg, 1995).

11 Elize S Van Eeden has produced several informative publications on the historical developments of Far West Rand, with emphasis on the role of the mines. See for example: ES van Eeden, "Die geskiedenis van die Gatsrand vanaf die vestiging van die Trekkergemeenskap omstreeks 1839 tot die proklamering van Carletonville in 1948" [Also translated in English] (MA, PU v CHO, 1988); ES van Eeden, "Ekonomiese ontwikkeling en die invloed daarvan op Carletonville, 1948-1988: 'n Historiese studie" (PhD, PUvCHO, 1992); ES van Eeden, "So long gold mines – long live industries. Carletonville's battle for economic survival", *South African Economic History Journal*, 12(1-2), 1997, pp. 103-127; ES van Eeden, "Whose environment? Whose nature? – a trans-disciplinary discussion on some inhumane actions in the destruction and construction in nature – case study, the Merafong municipal region", *The Journal for Transdisciplinary research in Southern Africa*, 2(2), 2006, pp. 409-430.

12 With acknowledgement to the several Africana references used by ES van Eeden in her deepened research on the Far West Rand, such as J Oxley, *Down where no lion walked: The story of Western Deep Levels* (Cape Town, CTP Books, 1989), and the sources referenced in footnote 10.

13 L Thompson, *A history of South Africa* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2016).

conceptual instruments such as historical and regional consciousness, multi-scalarity and multi-locality, the sense of belonging, and the oasis, corridors and loci of home.¹⁴ Since 2015, such methods of experiential home research have also been launched in societal studies carried out by the North-West University in South Africa.

In this article, attention is paid to the entire spectrum of feelings linked to and woven into a sense of “home” and the influence of business enterprises in creating a feeling of homeliness. In this particular South African study, the focus fell on the mining environment and its impact on livelihoods. When “home” was being discussed, the informants in Merafong talked about the influence of the mining industry. The main body of data was collected in 2015 and became identified as the Merafong (HoMe) project.

HoMe was a joint project, a collaboration between the University of Helsinki and the North-West University. Each university undertook the study making use of its own researchers. The methods and theoretical framework of the research were based on the experiences of the University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, where Sulevi Riukulehto works as the principal researcher.

The principal researcher of the Vanderbijlpark unit of the North-West University was Professor Elize S Van Eeden, a historian, an expert in the history of the Far West Rand. North-West University was responsible for selecting the research area, arranging the required contacts, and taking care of the practical arrangements. The research team included a research assistant, Eric Stoch, a social scientist with knowledge in sociology and an active interest in Risk and Disaster studies. His diverse knowledge proved to be invaluable at the fieldwork stage. As a local inhabitant, he knew the area of Merafong, had knowledge of its people, and knew its local history and geography like the back of his hand. Most importantly he has perfect command of the major languages in use in the area – Afrikaans and Tswana.

Data collection was undertaken in November 2015 with the elicited discussion method and two written assignments. The six data collection sessions were attended by a total of 31 participants. The discussants comprised planning officers employed by the Merafong City Local Municipality, coloured men from the Khutsong township, pupils of the local De Beer Primary School, immigrant workers employed at the fire station, and a group of discussants selected by the *Carleton Herald* newspaper.

14 S Riukulehto, “Homely sites and landscapes as elements of regional identity”, F Kuhn (ed.), *Identities, cultures, spaces: Dialogue and change* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2013), pp. 41-56; S Riukulehto and K Rinne-Koski, “Historical consciousness and the experiential idea of home”, S Riukulehto (ed.), *Between time and space* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2015), pp. 115-134; K Rinne-Koski and S Riukulehto, “Multifaceted sense of belonging. Discursive conceptions of home by third-age residents in rural Finland”, K Foster and J Jarman (eds), *The right to be rural: Citizenship outside the city* (The University of Alberta Press 2022), pp. 141-156.

Apart from the elicitation discussions held with the respondents (reported below) we arranged another six discussion sessions in the municipality of Tlokwe, located in the vicinity of Merafong, and also a few background interviews. In these talks we made use of the same material with slight modifications. However, in this current article, the information gained is used as a secondary reference only.

The principal method of the “Home” research project in Merafong was an elicitation discussion. It was implemented in such a way that the participants were shown stimuli on a screen. These were selected words, questions, pictures, or groups of several words. The stimuli were presented one by one. A discussion was held following each stimulus to gauge the respondents’ reactions. The verbal stimuli were presented in three languages, namely English, Tswana, and Afrikaans. When necessary, they were also explained in other African languages.¹⁵ Of the discussants, 22 were males and 9 were females. The average age was 29.6 years. One participant did not mention his/her age.

Home: A place of concern

The first stimulus provided for the experimental group of respondents was an eight-photo sequence of aerial photographs of Merafong. For the most part, aerial photos invoked positive ideas. Every now and then the discussants identified some important living area or significant detail in the photographs that struck a chord for them personally and then explained it. Attention was given to the “greenness” and the gardens of Welverdiend, for example. Some of the informants tried to identify their dwellings in the aerial photos. Important memories were recalled.

For example, an attractive landscape evoked a pleasant memory, a place called Padda Dam (in the Fochville area) was mentioned although it was not actually shown in the photo. It was described as a “nice river with nice trees.” The discussant verbalised that it was a pity that this pleasant spot had fallen into neglect – it had not been taken care of.¹⁶

... [H]ow beautiful it was [before]. The place is no longer as beautiful – it is overgrown with alien trees and plants that are not wanted. I wish it could go back to the way it was when it was taken care of. We used to have a place to call our own resort, but at this present moment it is a dilapidated area.

15 The methods are reported in detail in S Riukulehto and T Suutari, “Studying processes and experiences: Ethnographic tools for experiential field research in communities”, ES van Eeden, I Eloff and H Dippenaar (eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa: Histories, methods, theories and practice* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 2022), pp. 457-474.

16 North-West University (NWU), Vanderbijlpark Campus, Home Merafong (HoMe) project, Discussion 2, Khutsong township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

One would imagine that descriptions of restful, pleasant places and memories would be used frequently when speaking of home. But, in Merafong, it was surprising how often South Africans expressed negative thoughts of their home environment. They spoke of the many risks, dangers, and scary details that “home” evoked. This was despite the fact that the researchers gave no lead in this regard. Negative talk was by no means sought or prompted by the researchers.

For example, the softening of the landscape by the profusion of trees in Welverdiend – surely a positive, important feature of the landscape for the residents – evoked concern or even a feeling of danger in some. These respondents felt the trees might shelter “dangerous” animals:

It makes me scared because of the view of the trees. I am thinking of a lot of [the possibility that the trees might harbour] snakes, and I hate snakes. And I can[’t bear to] even ...walk beside this view.¹⁷

However, dangerous, threatening animals such as snakes and poisonous insects were not dismissed or put aside. Instead, they were integrated into their imagery as one of the component parts of “home”. This is a simple example of how the sense of home includes the whole spectrum of emotions.

Dangerous tailings dams

The bigger picture of the mining industry caused most concern. Although the details could not strictly speaking be seen in the photograph, the people in the group could identify the areas where there were mines. Some of the discussants were surprised by how large a proportion of the area is reserved for mining. In one discussion the impact of the mining industry became the focus of attention for a considerable time. The biggest concern was the effluent from the mining process and the resultant storage and tailings dams in the area. Over the years the mining companies have accumulated their partially processed waste into enormous mine dumps that are a very visible element in the landscape.¹⁸

The participants of the first discussion reported that these mine dumps, the artificial mountains are “a disaster waiting to happen.” The heaps still include precious minerals and heavy metal residues, which inevitably spread into to the environment, when the dumps are exposed to wind and rainwater. The water systems and soil in the area are in danger of being fundamentally polluted. This topic was a familiar one to the discussants, because the tailing dams have already caused a great deal of concern. Apart from the official, stilted archive terms, in everyday chatter the hills

17 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

18 See ES van Eeden, “Whose environment? Whose nature? – a trans-disciplinary discussion on some inhumane actions in the destruction and construction in nature...”, *The Journal for Transdisciplinary research in Southern Africa*, 2(2), 2006, pp. 409-430.

also have a range of familiar names:¹⁹

Where is Old Smokey? Where is that infamous dump?

It's called number 6 tailings dam.

I must admit I have no passion for looking at that photo because we have never worked in the mines. For us, they only cause problems.

I agree. I only see problems.

All groups discussed the issue of dumping – most of the participants commented when elicitation Number 10 was shown. It included a picture of a tailings dam. One discussant wondered – obviously as a joke – whether it was actually Ayers Rock in Australia and answered his own question: “No, that's red”.²⁰ In his view the high tailings dams do not belong to this landscape at all. The storage of soils was seen as “discordant” in the landscape being so high and unnatural. It also “destroys” the natural vegetation with its dust. Another said:²¹

The tailings dam takes away the natural look of the environment. Before the tailings facility it was a flat plain area, and there is also a visual obstruction – you cannot see the area beyond. And it's not vegetated [planted] enough to protect [us] from the dust that will arise from this place. So, it is not good. And even the vegetation is too dry around it.

The hills are also referred to as “cyanide mountains” because the crushed ore that is dumped there also includes residues of the chemicals used in the refining process. Furthermore, there is a risk of radiation because of uranium [pollution.] All this makes us [the discussants] question the policies of the municipality. It zones land for housing far too close to these “hills of waste”:²²

The picture of the tailings dam indicates mining and that [in turn] indicates health problems, especially cyanide poisoning. The new extension the municipality [is] ... building is not even a kilometre from a ‘cyanide mountain’ [a tailings dam]. The fire security system in this town is very, very poor.

Despite all these problems, some discussants identified tailings dams as being an inherent part of their home. The “slime hills” follow the mining, which after all is the basis for region's economy and wellbeing:²³

Where you see a tailings dam there is an industry – which is mining. If you don't see these it means there is no industry, and if you can check, most of the people here in SA, they depend on mining, so if there is no mining the rate

19 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

20 See for example, NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants. Comment on unsightly mine-dumps.

21 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

22 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

23 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

of employment will go down. Unless measured controls can be put in place.

At present, the storage of soils in enormous mine dumps the interviewees viewed as part of home, because the mines are in the very heart of “home”. At the same time, they are an example of changes from what was previously a “homely, welcoming environment” – a change difficult to define. Many discussants would like to get rid of this environmental “darkness”, entirely and finally.

Entangled social problems

A considerable amount of concern was expressed. The discussions about “home” revolved around problems of a social and political nature. Long speeches ensued on the perceived incompetence, corruption and dominating influence of the mining companies.

Participants verbalised on what appeared to be a very complicated relationship towards the governing African National Congress (ANC) party. There were no strong defenders of the ANC among the discussants but there were many loyal voters present. Loud criticism and even accusations were voiced. The ANC was respected for its achievements, such as the democratic election process and that state schools were open to all. But only a few participants appeared to be satisfied with the ruling party and its policies. No local, regional, or national politician was mentioned by name when informants were asked to mention anyone who had made a positive contribution or evoked satisfaction – a positive feeling of home or homeliness – or had done something important for the region.²⁴

The government was strongly criticised for some of its policies, for example on immigration, housing and inequality. Numerous societal threads were connected so that informants seemed to discuss all of them at the same time. Problems appear to be interactive and entangled. Discussion on illegal immigration soon led to mention of unemployment, drugs, and criminality. For example, a drug called Nyaupe raised much concern:²⁵

There is a very dangerous and illegal drug called ‘Nyaupe’ that has been brought in by illegal immigrants from other African countries, and they sell it to our kids in our neighbourhoods. This leads to addicts stealing anything from anybody to sell in order to buy this substance.

The discussants thought that government was partly guilty for the problem because it allowed people to enter South Africa with illegal drugs. More than one informant talked about drug sellers who pay bribes. It is alleged that it is of very little use to call

24 Compare for example with the responses in NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6, November 2015, all informants.

25 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

the police: "... When the police get there, they just get a bribe and they leave. You will find youngsters continually during the day going there to buy".²⁶

Another participant said that the same tangles (problems) could be laid at the door of the mining industry. An example was cited that on the Blyvoor mine (which is now closed) there are unemployed miners, "zamazamas", who continue to search illegally for traces of gold, causing pollution, crimes, and corruption:²⁷

The [old] Blyvoor[uitzicht] mine is ... [now] being mined by illegal miners. The [previously employed] mine workers were not compensated when the mine closed down, so you find a situation where there are a lot of illegal activities and the crime rate is very high, eg theft, rape, murder; but the police is not investigating the[se] crimes because there are [police] officers who are [themselves] part of the crimes. So, all of this affects us when the crime spills over into our townships and homes.

Many social problems were aired, and these were linked to corruption in society. For example, some discussants suspect that all donations made for good purposes do not find their target. The mining companies, once again, are "part of the game":²⁸

You will find [that] the municipality ... is very corrupt – the mining industry sometimes donates money to the municipality through the LED Offices [Local Economic Development Office], but when that money reaches the offices, it is not channelled to the community to pay for their social responsibilities; [instead] it go[es]... to some politicians' pockets.

The pre-narrative explanations of environment

The sixth stimulus presented for discussion was a sequence of four photographs representing a natural environment. All the photographs were taken in Nurmo, Finland. The purpose here was that none of the discussants could recognise and identify precisely the places shown in the photos. Pictures were merely given as examples of "a natural environment" but did not guide the discussion towards particular events (and related memories) that occurred on the Far West Rand. The discussants were not told where the photos were taken – nor were they told that they were from Finland. The aim was to allow the pictorial stimuli to act unrestrictedly.

The experiment using the Finnish photos worked very well. They guided the discussion towards local events and landscapes on the Far West Rand, conditions that were familiar to the participants. Donald Polkingthorne calls this phenomenon

26 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants. Comment on crime and illegal mining at an abandoned mine.

27 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Comment on bribery, crime and criminality.

28 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Statement on illegal activities in the Merafong area.

pre-narrativity.²⁹ People invariably pay attention to the subjects that are meaningful to them. Curious and unknown details are interpreted and explained in relation to their own circumstances.

None of the Finnish natural-landscape photos got full acceptance in Merafong. The discussants were unable to relate to them directly. A photo of fields with several farmers' barns did not evoke any sense of home whatsoever. Reactions were predictable:³⁰

I just feel like it doesn't connect with me in any level. Like I don't know where... Like it doesn't say anything to me because I've never been in such environments.

This kind of a comment was to be expected of course. But interestingly, it was not the general reaction. Instead, the informants did not express confusion, but tried to interpret the photographs in accordance with their own pre-understanding. Thus, some informants found their pre-narrative explanation from the apartheid era. In Potchefstroom one discussant was absolutely positive that the barns in Picture 1 were old dwellings (hostels) where black labourers were housed. He announced to the group that he had visited the very place himself. The effect was so strong to him that he had to be calmed down when assured (after the discussion) that this was NOT the case at all and that the Finnish researcher and his photographs taken in Finland had nothing to do with Africa.³¹

Another reaction to the photograph of fields and barns in Finland was one of apprehension: "The ... picture scares me ...because its open area and a lion can come and eat me or somebody can come and attack me".³²

The reaction of fear of open spaces was repeated with Picture 3, a photo of a swamp landscape in Finland at the Paukaneva Nature Park with its duckboards and birdwatching tower. Participants suggested there should be "more shelter". The spruce forest in Picture 4 was "too thick" and African women were afraid because the forest evoked suspicion and danger lurked among the trees:³³

I also don't like the one with the lots of trees. It reminds me of a serial killer who has killed a lot of women and then threw them into the trees. So, I am scared when I look at them.

29 DE Polkinghorne, "Narrative psychology and historical consciousness: Relationships and perspectives", J Straub (ed.), *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness: Making sense of history* (New York, Berghahn Books 2006), pp. 3-22.

30 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 5, *Carletonville Herald* Office, 20 November 2015, 5 informants.

31 NWU, HoMe project, The discussions held at Tlokwe City Municipality have not yet been transcribed. The recordings are however archived in the North-West University, Vanderbijlpark Campus.

32 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 3, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

33 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 5, *Carletonville Herald* Office, 20 November 2015, 5 informants.

Another participant characterised the same photograph as the milieu from a horror movie: “Horror movies like to use this kind of picture”. Another even mentioned the name of one such movie – *The Wrong Turn* – and added: “You cannot walk alone thereIt’s not safe”.³⁴

But a woman from Tzaneen, a town located further away, disagreed. She liked the photos with trees: “I like two of the [photos] and [particularly] this one with the pine trees. I like pine trees because in Tzaneen where I come from [near] Pietersburg ... There [are] pine trees all over”.³⁵

All the others judged the forest in the photograph as a “scary place”. A tree “may hide something bad”. One participant mentioned an unpleasant memory, a story read at school, in which some creature came [out] from a tree and grabbed a woman.³⁶

In another discussion session, all the informants noted the damaging effect of human habitation and mining. The Finnish photographs of unspoiled wetlands and fields. They were supposed to be former mining area.³⁷ No discussant in Tlokwe liked the swamp landscape. The duckboards and birdwatching tower evoked talk on the bad conditions left behind when abandoned mines were closed down. More than one saw “A lonely mining tower [birdwatching tower] and no landscaping at all. All dead”.³⁸

The warmest welcome – although still a hesitating one – was elicited by the photo of a riverbank and a jetty. It evoked a memory in one discussant of sitting on a riverbank in Durban. “It remind[s] me of the beach there at Durban where you sit on the river bend”.³⁹ But the photo also included frightening elements. Discussants found it impossible that the child could be on his own on the polluted riverbank:⁴⁰

I am asking myself whether the kid is alone there or what? She might drown.

The kid that is fishing could be doing so in contaminated water.

I’d be scared to fall in[to] the dam.

The mining industry was, again, seen as the force behind the photographs: the dam was probably constructed by the mining company, and the water was presumed to be contaminated because of the mining industry.

34 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

35 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015. Positive reaction to an image with pine trees as a familiar “homely” sight.

36 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

37 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

38 NWU, HoMe project, An informal discussion held at Tlokwe [Potchefstroom], (Nov 2015).

39 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

40 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Statement on possible dangers of pollution in open river water, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

The same kind of pre-narrative interpretation continued when South Africans discussed another set of Finnish photographs. This time they were shown photographs of a built environment. For the most part, the homeliness of Finnish buildings was evaluated from geographic perspective – the geography of fear. The buildings that had strange outlook and those that remained without explanation were interpreted as dangerous and unsafe.

Unpleasant aspects of homeliness tended to be excluded. The pictures were deemed bleak and unfriendly. They were not homely because they were “too open, too empty, too cold, or too crowded”.⁴¹ Again, the discussants told something meaningful from their history and the every-day reality of their own homes. The problems of mining, pollution, their own roots in the South African past and the ever-present reality of violence and crimes came to the fore. All this had to be taken into account when living at home, and how it might impact on the unfolding history of any space in a specific time.⁴²

Dangerous fires

Danger and fear were debated at length when Picture 10 was shown. The montage depicted threatening situations: a sinkhole, a tailings dam and a raging fire. It is important to note that all these themes that represent danger had already been discussed without any picture of them.

The photograph showed a fire at a public library in the neighbouring municipality, but it was not recognised as such. Instead, the idea the image evoked was of memories from the discussants' own experiences. One participant had lost everything when his own home was burnt down in a dreadful fire. Again, the discussion took on a strong political tenor. He was convinced that the “officials” were unwilling to help him without the payment of bribes. The house was destroyed and the man was determined to sue “the government”. Kind of sarcastically he explained:⁴³

And I did take the government forward ... thinking maybe I will be helped by the ‘neutral’ court. The court that has the right to persecute even the government, but they failed and it’s not because ...they didn’t have the facts; they failed because I never had the money to bribe them because one of the government officials did bribe somebody that was presiding over my case.

The fire evoked much discussion. It may well have been a topic of general conversation previously or discussed at school because the schoolchildren said they often think about the risk of fire at home. One said: “I am very scared of fire, so

41 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

42 Compare for example with: ES van Eeden, “Exploring 21st Century regional history in ecohealth and wellbeing research”, S Riukulehto (ed.), *Between time and space* (UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 45-66.

43 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

that picture makes me scared. I am very careful with our gas stove, and I do not like working with the toaster". Another discussant mentioned that in the area of Welverdiend, the risk of fire is very real. "The picture with the fire makes me think of Welverdiend, our home district, because there is always a high fire danger, especially veld fires and on the farms".⁴⁴

Most of the participants took it for granted that the picture was one of a nearby fire. But in one group the photo was presumed to be in the neighbouring municipality. "The other one looks like Thokhozi's municipal offices burning. So, this is home, hey!"⁴⁵ Fires like this are often set intentionally.

Wildfires are also a dangerous problem. Because of drought and wind, wildfires spread rapidly in the veld. Several participants had family-related memories of a fire. One said: "There are a lot of fires on my aunts' farm and their house burnt down once. So, I am very scared of fire, even a candle in the house".⁴⁶ Rural arson and murders are also a problem in South Africa. In the Merafong discussions accidental and wildfires caught the main attention.

One discussant remarked on the poor standard of fire-fighting equipment at the local fire station. "Our local fire station does not have a running vehicle, so I am not surprised that there is no fire engine on that picture to put out the fire".⁴⁷ Many of the discussants took it for granted that the fire in the photo was in their region.

Sinkholes: Typical of the region and its history

A picture of a sinkhole is also relevant in any discussion of the dangers that arise in a mining community. One respondent said: "The last picture looks like a sinkhole related to the mine".⁴⁸ Because of the dolomitic soil, sinkholes are typical in the Merafong area. Dolomite can easily be dissolved by acidic water, causing a ravine, cave or a sinkhole. More than 90% of the sinkholes in the region are culturally-induced. They became increasingly common when the groundwater level was lowered artificially to make mining easier. The illegal mining with faulty water systems has accelerated the erosion and has drained enormous amounts of water to dolomite ground.⁴⁹ In Merafong, the veins of unsteady soil cross several residential areas such as the township of Khutsong. Sinkholes are visible elements in the landscape.

44 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 3, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

45 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

46 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 3, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

47 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

48 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

49 RM MacNab, *Gold their touchstone*.

Most of the discussants thought that the sinkhole shown in the elicitation picture was very dangerous. One said:⁵⁰

In the sinkhole picture, I don't know if this is a tourist, or ... people [sent] to fix this, or [maybe] ... the people just playing, because if they are just playing, I think there is a lack of education and awareness.

Sinkholes were hardly of any concern for school children: "The top picture [sinkhole] makes me think those people are looking down from a high area".⁵¹ She commented as it were a kind of exciting play under way in the photo. Although extremely dangerous, playing by the side of sinkholes is something children really do in Merafong. The risk of falling down was raised a bit later: "... maybe somebody can give them a fright and they can then slide in and get hurt". One discussant saw another risk: "They can quite easily fall into there or insects can bite them in the grass with the way they are lying".⁵²

Human lives can be lost in sinkholes but material and pecuniary losses are more common. Unstable soil has a direct link to housing programmes and social construction. In the discussions, a recurring theme were the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses.⁵³ "Where I live the government [is] building RDP houses. They built about 50 houses on a known sinkhole-prone area and those houses were all lost due to the sinkholes".⁵⁴

One informant said they he first-hand experience of the problem; they had lost their RDP house because of unstable soil.⁵⁵ As he puts it:⁵⁶

Things are going from bad to worse. Previous government provided people with better houses – houses went from being four room houses to 1 room houses. People are also being moved to unsafe areas, eg. next to tailings dams.

In one of the groups a discussant formulated a title to connect the three photos of danger (fire, sinkhole, tailings dam): it was the disruption of the equilibrium of nature. The discussant pointed an accusing finger at mining. Both the government and mining companies had obligations:⁵⁷

50 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

51 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 3, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

52 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 3, Comment on the dangers of sinkholes, Laerskool De Beer, 18 November 2015, 4 informants.

53 C Amoah, T van Schalkwyk and K Kajimo-Shakantu, "Quality management of RDP housing construction: myth or reality?", *Journal of Engineering, Design and Technology*, 20(5), 2021, pp. 1101-1121.

54 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

55 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015. Written assignments were called for as an added source of evidence.

56 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

57 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Statement on the dangers of slimes dams, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015.

I see these three pictures as a balance of nature. The mine has to take responsibility for the slimes dam. After mining they should rehabilitate the environment. The government must take responsibility for the fire departments.

Controlling the space

As we have seen, the experiences of danger and fear featured frequently in the Merafong discussions about “home”. This does not mean to say that the Far West Rand discussants do not value the necessity for safety in their lives. In Merafong, as everywhere it seems, safety is one of the top considerations when people define their home.⁵⁸ The desire to create and control one’s own space and privacy was one expressed by all the informants.

Some of the immigrant workers wanted to draw a distinct line, a difference, between work and home. In the discussion held in the local Fire Station, one participant explained that “home” should be a comfort area, but for them the elicitation picture of fire, sinkholes and tailings dams all meant “work”: “I want none of that at my home where I feel [at ease and] comfortable.”⁵⁹

The same idea was presented in another group as well. One discussant thought that in general, it is a good thing to have some distance between your workplace and home. He also regards the feeling evoked by the photo as unpleasant.⁶⁰

I will feel so uncomfortable to be staying around where there [are] all these [dangerous, discordant] things. I agree the working area should be far away from the residential area. There should be a big buffer to separate them.

Obviously, this is not always possible [and most people] have to live, rest and work in the same region. Work plays a part in home experiences.

At the end of each elicitation discussion the respondents were given two written assignments. In the first (on Stimulus 14), the participants were asked to name three important matters in their representation of “home” and to motivate their choice. Consequently, it was a “what-where-and-why” type of assignment.

The most common family of words in the written assignments was safety.⁶¹ Homeliness is felt, in the first instance, if there is safety. The same thing can also be said of the need for security. Home is a refuge. For example, one respondent began

58 On safety and privacy as a common factor of home, see Riukulehto and Rinne-Koski, *A house made to be a home...* pp. 50-55.

59 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 4, Fire Brigade Headquarters, 20 November 2015, 6 informants.

60 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

61 NWU, HoMe project, “Safe, safety, feel safe”, 5 discussions were held at Merafong from 15 to 20 November 2015. A total of 31 people participated. Written assignments were called for and these provided valuable additional information.

by listing the most important things immediately – without further explanation: “home, urban, safety and security”. Safety also includes peace and an opportunity to relax.⁶²

Control of space covers various kinds of overlapping elements. It is about independence and the fluency of things related to living, that you can control your environment and are free to do everything you please. It is about freedom to make one’s own decisions. It is also about the absence of financial constraint: “no financial limitations, no noise”. Home is one’s own space. “[In my home: ... I know I can do everything that I want to do”.⁶³ It is where my rules and orders prevail; I organise the things as I wish to organise them and have my own way there; I am responsible for them but if necessary, I can also ask for help should I need it...”.

When people were asked to take one photograph of their home in its larger meaning the overwhelmingly most popular choice was a picture of a fence around their house. For a Westerner this may sound curious – a fence reminds some of a prison. But, not in South Africa. A fence represents safety and the sphere of freedom. Inside the fence one can breathe freely and feel safe. In South Africa almost every dwelling is separated off by fence. People’s eyes have adjusted to see them everywhere. It is not easy to get insurance for an unfenced property.

Here are some descriptions of “homely” photographs from Discussion 2:

Fencing around my house.

Fencing also – it shows your family is protected.

Fencing and family.

Structure of my house, type of house and [a] fence.

Being surrounded by family was another favourite subject for a “homely” picture. Father, mother and children were commonly included in the photograph of home. Sitting in a close-know group, smiling and happy meant “home”. A drum was the object most commonly mentioned. It implies hobby, communality, the culture of music and dance. But, far ruder, almost brutal or ugly pictures were taken as well. Such as a photograph of the sewerage pipes that can be seen in and around the streets between the homes, the community. One participant told us that sinkholes are dangerous but for him they are a familiar sight. He took a picture of sinkhole because he argued that they too, are part of what “home” means to him.⁶⁴

62 NWU, HoMe project, Information gleaned from the written assignments.

63 Written assignments.

64 Discussion 5, *Carletonville Herald* Office, 20 November 2015, 5 informants.

Behind it all there is a mine

Mining is the most visible (yet historically deep) underlying structure in Merafong. Its influence is ever-present in good and evil. Because of the presence of minerals, the region has a vibrant community that inhabit the area. Mines provide employment, give the people jobs. The mining companies have created the local basic services, such as schools and markets. People are proud of their mining companies but there are plenty of side effects too: contamination, sinkholes, corruption, crime and the illegal use of closed mines.

Needless to say, mining companies were the first in line for criticism when local people were asked if their lives and homes have been changed, improved and/or been destroyed:⁶⁵

I blame the mines for not rehabilitating when they close down, because they contaminate our water, which affect not only the people but also the livestock, and that inhibits progress for us in life. You will find radiation in the water, but most people – even if signs are being put up – do not know what the signs mean, and they go fishing there or kids play in the water.

The second in line for the residents' unpopularity "award" was the "government". It was blamed for countless shortfalls and inefficiencies. The accusations are relentless: corruption, poor service delivery (or none at all) incapacity, disregard. Grievances are abundant and one often mentioned is: "When this current government took over, they kicked out all of the knowledgeable people and replaced them with political appointees".⁶⁶

In the eyes of our informants, many other of the government's faults are linked to the ravages of the mining sector. In their view, it is the mining industry that lies behind problems such as water pollution, sinkholes, tailings dams and illegal zamazamas, for example. Some discussants reminded us that government also has economic and political links to mining: via taxes, common interests and income from capital.⁶⁷

The government has about 30–40% stake in the mining industry, but nobody wants to fork out the money for rehabilitation. The politicians are supposed to serve the community, but they do not, they are serving their own families.

The mining industry has extended its effects everywhere, framing and changing the closest perceptions of home and homeliness. Some of the informants would have liked to deny and restrict the unpleasant dangers and lack of security outside but others, interestingly, are prepared to accept them as part of their home. In the Merafong discussions, a wide range of data was

65 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015, 6 informants.

66 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 2, Criticism of the government's inability to provide adequate services to the community at large, Khutsong Township, 17 November 2015.

67 NWU, HoMe project, Discussion 1, Merafong City Municipal Offices, 17 November 2015, 5 informants.

collected on the Far West Rand, which cannot be pictured as a perfect place. It may have drawbacks; it may be unpleasant and even at times dangerous or ugly. But for the community it “serves” it is still home.