Isitya esihle … (asidleli)

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Abstract

This fine art project looks at my life story through exploring memories of growing up in Grabouw, a rural apple farming community outside of Cape Town. This community is marginalized due to socio-economic circumstances as a legacy of apartheid.

I argue that autobiography has mostly been associated with written text, but the memoir and story of someone's life can also be told visually using visual imagery. I take the stance that autobiography is a tool in which my story - and that of my parents and community – connect and do this by drawing on objects and materials that are specific to my memories of growing up in the area. I unpack my life story through the family photo album. I elaborate on the absence of family photographs and how this has enabled me to find imaginative ways of retelling my past. I expand on how the community has mostly been represented, through journalistic reports, often presenting people in vulnerable and tragic positions. I state that my desire is for the community not to be presented in such ways, as it further perpetuates negative stereotypes about workers, and takes away their agency.

I write about my mother who was a farm worker, her friend, and some of our neighbours who still live in the area and retell parts of their stories in imaginative and performative ways in the photographic studio, mining memories of my childhood. I describe some aspects of the artwork, such as photographs, installation, video, and books, elaborating on the narrative and themes behind them and their significance to me and the people involved in the project. I use the blue workers overalls prominently throughout the project, which are worn on the farm and are a marker of a person's social class.

The overall aim of this project is to represent the community in a way that dignifies them. I am using art as an expressive tool to talk about pertinent issues. I aim, through this artwork, to bring awareness about the lived experiences of the Grabouw community, to shift mindsets about how the farming community and marginalized people are seen in broader society.

This document is presented from a story-telling perspective and often incorporates everyday isiXhosa words to connect the project to a personal experience.

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Introduction

"Ngumntana wasemaplasini lo, akhonto ayaziyo!" – *She is from the farm, she knows nothing!*

These words were said to me quite often by my classmates in standard four (grade six). I had just moved from Grabouw, about 70 kilometres outside of Cape Town, to a township school in Khayelitsha and did not know most things about township life. My classmates eventually warmed to the 'new girl from the farms', and I was soon the storyteller in the class. When the teacher was out, I used to stand in front of the class and recount *iintsomi* (Xhosa folklore) that I remembered being told by my mother, as well as some of the stories my father used to read to me when I lived with him in the Eastern Cape. I recounted[1] stories my father used to read to me. I survived my first year in the new school by reciting stories.

The first few years of my life were spent in Butterworth in the Eastern Cape, with my father as my primary caregiver, but as a child I lived in Grabouw, where my mother worked on the apple farms. In Grabouw our home was made from pine wood and plastic, called shacks or *amatyotyombe* in isiXhosa. The first shack I remember had two rooms: a kitchen and a bedroom. In the kitchen we had a cupboard and a stool to sit on, and in the bedroom were two beds, one for me and one for my mother. We lived next to St John's Church, where my mother was a dedicated member.[2] We rebuilt variations of this shack on the same spot whenever we had to. Our area had frequent fires, because there was no electricity and people used paraffin stoves to cook and candles to light their shacks; sometimes they made fires in small tins (*imbawula*) to fight against the cold. If left unattended or forgotten, the stoves and candles would cause fires that spread quickly through the settlements, which were made from easily flammable materials. The last shack I remember living in was in Site View – it was another two-room shack made from pine wood, with thick black plastic to cover the roof. It was similar to our previous shacks but was built on a more spacious stand. We had a flushable toilet outside,

[1] *Udyakalashe nomvundla, usilumko nodengana, urowzibhadi*, etc

[2] The St John's Apostolic Faith Mission is an African indigenous church founded by Mother Christinah Nku in the 1930s (Masondo 2013).

and there were rumours of getting brick houses from the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).[3]

I begin my project against this backdrop, a part of my life that I hold close to this day. The period when I lived in Grabouw is precious to me, because these were the last years I lived with my mother before her passing. There was a big contrast between where I lived on the outskirts of Grabouw and the houses in town made of bricks, with their big yards and trimmed hedges. At the time I did not know what this meant in terms of our social standing and positionality or a socio-political dispensation, but I became aware that something was different.

I have always wanted to tell more than stories, to talk about the experience of growing up in the farming community and to find ways of extending this aspect of storytelling that I grew up with. I found this visually in my art practise, in which I feel that I am no longer citing *iintsomi* but am digging into lived experiences – mine, located mainly in the past, and the experiences of those still resident in the community.

The people in this community are more than just labourers. Through this project I aim to represent them fully, not only through their labour but through the fullness of their humanity – their family connections and community. While my initial impetus and primary interest in this project was to look at the broader life experiences of my childhood community, I realised through this process that I was also searching for myself. By retracing my past and working with my own body, I found I was able to bring into focus some of the autobiographical stories that connect me to the community I come from.

In the first section of this text, I unpack what autobiography is and use Irene Karpiak's (2010) definition of autobiography as elaborated in *After life review: Autobiography as "art of the future"* where they discuss that autobiography is assembled scattered memories. In a similar spirit, I piece together memories and aspects of my life through images and objects that remind me of where I come from. I employ these objects and materials imaginatively in the studio, recreating and reinterpreting stories from my lived experience and from those still living in the community.

I consider the work of visual artist Pam Skelton, whose themes and ideas echo some of my own concerns. Skelton's methodology is similar to my own in that she revisits places she has

[3] RDP houses are provided to the poor by the national government post 1994.

connections with and because she creates to make sense of the past and understand the present. Skelton's work is particularly focused on the (Jewish) self as subject in history and on interactions between Jewish genealogy and memory. This memory is triggered by "places that call up the past and are locations of collective memory. In making work through memory, the artist's own position becomes a site of contemplation, a contradiction about feelings of a past that still entraps them" (Betterton 1995: 176). Skelton's works trace the self and others through spaces that were once occupied and through places that the historical self had a strong presence in. This is evident in her work *The X mark of Dora Newman,* which I discuss in section one.

In section two, I look at the family album and self-representation and what it means to have an archive to refer to when talking about past events. Martha Langford considers the family album as an object situated within configurations of family and community (in Kuhn & McAllister 2006). Reflecting on this, I acknowledge that my photo album does not exist in the conventional sense: it is not tangible, is mostly fragmented and exists in my memory, and it is reliant on the memories that others share with me. I do not have a photo album at all: neither of my parents took photographs of our family or owned a camera. Langford refers to albums as social performances that are made sense of by talking through them. In my childhood, this happened when my father told me about his family history, who his mother was, his clan's name and why he did not grow up in his father's family.

This absence of a family album motivated me to research more about its presence and significance in black households. In Santu Mofokeng's *Black photo album,* I look at the positive representation of those who have been historically marginalised. I also write about photographer and activist Zanele Muholi, whose work deals with the representation of the self and the LGBTQI community in various townships in South Africa. I am particularly drawn to their latest and ongoing series, *Somnyama Ngomnyama,* in which the artist performs different characters, including their mother.

I also look at the work of South African artist Senzeni Marasela and unpack how she revisits and reframes memory through performative photography in the *Theodora comes to Johannesburg* series. I explore the autobiographical approach Marasela uses to tell her mother's life story and, in the process, talk about her childhood experiences.

Section three contains more detailed information about my project, explaining the influences behind some of my artistic decisions and why I chose to work mostly with photography. I elaborate on my artmaking and talk through my non-tangible 'album', making visible that

which exists in memory only. Through an act of imagination, I draw on specific objects and materials that I consider significant to my memories of growing up in Grabouw – but at the same time, through the present experiences of those still resident in the area. My album is about family and community held in memory, a narrative that involves collective memory and is more than just my story. I explain how photography can be used as a tool for remembering and include a discussion of a few examples of my work, explaining the context and background behind some of my staged photographs.

In addition to the photograph, I discuss two video pieces which are shot on location, where I am performing and calling on people to take note of the community. Wearing a blue overall with red strips and using a bell as an alarm. I discuss three A5 books that are letters to my mother and father, talking about our family life using archival images and images that I have recently taken and narrate to them about my mother's neighbour and friend and about the community.

Section 1: Autobiography

My practise is a constant writing, evaluation and unpacking of my past. I look at things that have happened and actively remember, hoping that the future can be better. I do this by taking an autobiographical approach, looking within my own life story while ensuring that those who share similar experiences are never forgotten or ignored. Discussing autobiography, Irene Karpiak (2010: 47) writes that "autobiography assembles the scattered memories of the past into a unified whole that becomes 'the story of one's life'." My artmaking is a construction of images from memory that tell my life story. It begins with me as the entry point and as a primary subject and extends to a larger collective community. Having my artworks seen by different audiences gives visibility to those who are often ignored in society – the working class, such as domestic workers, farm workers and cleaners.

I draw inspiration from the words of Carlo Gebler, who said that "one cannot change the past, but with understanding one can sometimes draw the poison out of it" (in Karpiak 2010: 48). Drawing the poison out of my own past required me to confront some harsh truths about the life I once lived. This is even harder when past situations live on, their poison still creeping into the present. In my work, this poison is deeply entrenched in the socioeconomic, racial, and gendered experiences of a marginalised community. Visiting the farming community of Grabouw after so many years and realising that life there had not changed much – and that for some had become worse – awoke an uncomfortable confrontation in me and made me question what it means to be born and raised in such circumstances, that give people little to no chance of improving their lives. Not only for the people of Grabouw, but also for other farming communities, who are among the most exploited workers and are some of the most marginalised people in South Africa. Their marginalisation is a legacy of apartheid, especially the 1913 land act which left many Black and mixed-race South Africans without land. The act restricted black people from buying or occupying land except as workers of white employers[4]. A portion of the land (7%) was set aside as 'reserves', places where workers could reside in while they were employed. Ruth Hall describes the legacies of the land act as "the material legacy of poverty and inequality in the divided countryside but also the displaced legacy of urban poverty and inequality; the social and spiritual legacy of division, invisibility and failed

[4] *1913 Natives Land Act centenary* (no date) *South African Government*. Available at: https://www.gov.za/1913-natives-land-act-centenary (Accessed: 12 October 2023).

reconciliation (Hall 2014:1)". This legacy is still prevalent in many farming communities across South Africa, not Grabouw only.

Karpiak refers to autobiography as "self-life-writing, a self-portrait, an archaeological dig, a voyage of discovery and even as lying down on a couch in public" (Karpiak 2010: 48). My work speaks to most of these descriptions; it is a never-ending journey of laying myself bare in public to make people aware of my presence and of the farm workers of Grabouw. I present myself through a series of portraits and installations that narrate stories about me and those who have spoken with me about their lived experiences. I revisit the past by visiting Grabouw and engaging with community members, and through memories sparked by my conversations with people there. I no longer have a physical home in Grabouw, but when I recall memories of my time there, I still see our shack in my mind. When I look at the stand where our shack used to be, I can work out where our table was, where my mother's bed was, how we moved from one room to the other, on which corner she prepared food, and so on. I know that memory is not precise, being fragmented and layered, but it is the best tool for me to use in the making of this work, as it is my primary repository in place of the absent family album. Helsel (2011: 366) writes that

> Although memory may be inherently unstable, narrative effectively gives a person a claim on a memorialised past and an anticipated future. In so doing, it enables action in the present. Thus past, present, and future are essential to the development of agency.

Through remembering, I reconstruct scenarios and envision how things might have happened, creating images that seek to heal my own self and the people I talk to and about.

The artist Pam Skelton was a major influence on my work, especially her work *The X mark of Dora Newman*, which reproduces "a trace of her great grandmother, who signed her daughter's birth certificate with the letter *X*" (Betterton 1995:26). Skelton uses the letter *X* as a marker of her great-grandmother and as a visual code to identify and locate her in history, making her erased presence visible. Analysing Skelton's work, Rosemary Betterton (1995: 26) states that

> The work explores the relations between memory and history, reflecting on the anonymity of fragmented lives and seeking to give some configuration to the past through explorations in the present. Remembering becomes a form of power which not only recalls events but gives to them shapes and meaning.

Skelton never met her great-grandmother, but she is nonetheless a part of her life in the signature *X* on the birth certificate of her daughter, Skelton's grandmother.

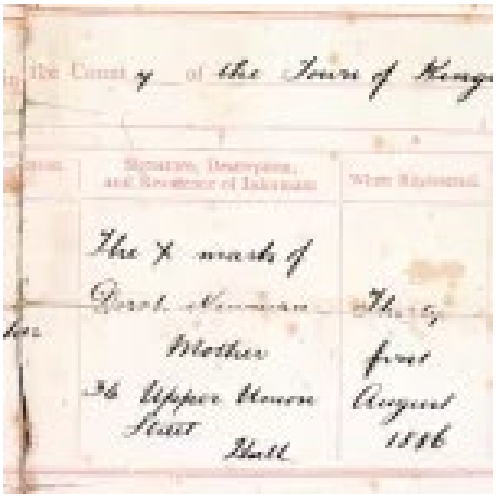

Fig. 1: Pam Skelton, 1995. *The 'X' mark of Dorah Newman* (close-up).

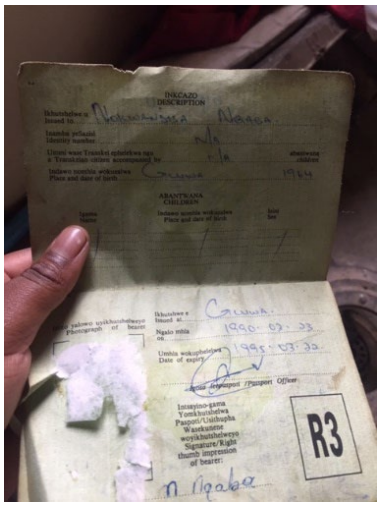

Fig. 2: My mother's travel book.

By recollecting the past and revisiting the places that her great-grandmother settled after fleeing from Ukraine to the United Kingdom, Skelton gives meaning to the past. This reminded me of how I began this project by revisiting what exists of my past, especially my mother, of whom I have no pictures. She only exists in my memories and in a travel booklet issued to her by the apartheid government. In that green, A6 booklet my mother's name is legible, but the official portrait of her has been torn out. Next to the missing portrait is what I assume to be her signature. This document prompted me to revisit my past and make my mother and others visible by creating an archive of memories to work through.

Betterton (1996) emphasises that by using autobiography a person tells stories that build up a sense of self. Our lives become stories, which take on various aspects from birth, childhood and adulthood and are constantly layered and complex. Betterton writes about the self as an identity that is 'in process' and is never complete. This identity is mapped from childhood and is carried through to the adult self, its path varying from person to person. This mapping happens in two ways in my project. First, by recreating memories and situating myself in the community through the creation of three A5 books that talk of lived experiences from a documentary photography perspective. Second, in an imaginative act or interpretation of the

past and present through staged photographs in the studio, as well as through installation and video. I elaborate on these works in section three.

Skelton's work focuses on the position of women as belonging to marginalised groups, and Betterton (1996) notes that the female subject is the product of both oppression and of resistance to that oppression. Skelton's work is particularly focused on an aspect of her identity, her Jewish self, as "subject in history and interactions between Jewish genealogy and memory" (Betterton 1996: 173). This memory is triggered by

> Places that call up the past and are locations of collective memory. In the process of making work through memory, the artist's own position becomes a site of contemplation, a contradiction about feelings of a past which still entraps them. (Betterton 1996: 176)

Skelton's ideas and concepts speak to my own concerns. Her work traces the self and others through spaces once occupied and that the self historically had a strong connection to and presence in. Like Skelton, a childhood space is central to my project. My memories are embedded in Grabouw, where I lived at a very important developmental stage of my life. The layout of the streets of Site View in Grabouw are still the same, and I recollect more memories each time I visit, from Trisha's[5] home at the bottom of the street right around to the top of the street as if going to Mamqwathi's[6] house. Each visit recalls my past, each walk is a site of contemplation of where I have been and where I am going and is a conscious remapping and writing of the self.

Kate McLean et al. (2007) describes the narrative aspect of the self as one based on autobiography or the situated self. They write that "situated stories emphasise the fact that any narrative account of personal memory is created within a specific situation, by individuals, for particular audiences, and to fulfil particular goals" (McLean et al. 2007: 262). They elaborate that situated stories encourage people to create connections between their experiences and their selves. My studio practice is situated in stories of the self and of those with shared experience. The stories are of growing up in an area where my mother (and other women) worked three-months in a year and struggled to make ends meet for her family. Here poverty was prominent, and only a few could thrive. The stories are of women who were once my mother's friends and

[5] Trisha is one of my childhood friends. She lived towards the end of the same street as me, on the curve that leads to the main road.
[6] My mother would send me to stay with her friend Mamqwathi when my mother was away or when we did not have food to eat, because Mamqwathi always had food. Her children were all adults and had their own lives, so she lived alone.

neighbours, who still remember how things were back when I was a child. There are narratives from people I grew up with, who still grapple with unemployment or who work on the farms earning very little and have to survive in the harsh economy.

McLean et al. (2007) propose that situated stories cannot exist without an understanding of the self-concept and the life story. They describe the self-concept as an evaluative and descriptive consciousness about the self, while the life story is a selective autobiographical experience that provides purpose. The autobiographical story is subjective, often selective and is not absolute. It is told from the standpoint of the individual's interpretation of their experiences.

Section 2: The family album and self-representation

"There is no such thing as a family album, but only personal albums concerned with, or situated within, a particular configuration of family and community." – Martha Langford in *Speaking the Album* by Kuhn, A. and McAllister,2006

When my mother passed away, I had been living in Greenpoint Khayelitsha[7] with her friend for almost a year. The friend had taken me in towards the end of 2001 to ease the burden on my mother, who was struggling to make ends meet and was not able to fully take care of me. At her home, this friend had photo albums from when she was a young girl, photographs of her in Johannesburg and in Cape Town, photographs of her at her workplace (she was a domestic worker) and photographs of family members of various ages. A small A5 album was dedicated to her first grandson, filled with images of him from birth to age eight. Each jumbo print had a note on the back stating the year the photograph was taken, the boy's age and the occasion. They were all informal photographs, none taken in a studio. This was my first encounter with photo albums, and I asked myself why I had no such photographs. I was often filled with jealousy as her family paged through the images and reminisced about particular events, speaking about the photographs as they went from page to page, narrating each captured moment.

I had just joined this family and did not feature in their family repository of memories. As I grew older, I kept going back to remembering, trying to locate some of my childhood experiences. Many of my experiences were etched in my mind, and I remembered things, occurrences, and spaces, perhaps selectively. The images were there, but they were not tangible.

My artmaking arose from this curiosity, from wanting to recollect and tell stories from my past while working with the present. By revisiting the past through conversation and active recollection via my memories, I created my own visual archive to address the lack of a personal physical archive, which in turn formed the basis of my artmaking.

[7] Khayelitsha township is about 25 km south-east of Cape Town in the Western Cape. The name is of Xhosa origin and means 'new home'. Khayelitsha has many sub-townships/-sections, which include Greenpoint, Makhaza, Town Two, Site B and Site C ("Khayelitsha township").

I started this project by revisiting what exists of my past, especially of my mother, who only exists through my memories and a travel booklet issued to her by the apartheid government, and later through her official death certificate from the South African Department of Home Affairs. Physical traces of her only exist on paper, and it was this paper that prompted me to revisit my past and make her story visible.

Martha Langford (in Kuhn & McAllister 2006) describes photographic albums as "instruments of social performance … they are remembrance actions that exceed autobiography or personal memories, and they help to preserve them through ways that are not always very clear." Langford elaborates that from a sociological point of view, photographic albums "encode memories and camouflage them behind social rituals or psychological screens" (in Kuhn & McAllister 2006: 222). Photo albums need oral performativity to make sense of them as social instruments. Without textual or oral explanations, they are simply records of a few moments frozen in time. I use the photographic medium in the present to retell the past, working with my unusual archive.

In Butterworth, where I was born, there were no photographic studios – and even if there had been, it is unlikely that my parents could have afforded to take the family to one. My parents never owned a camera, so there are no photographs of me and my family from when we were young. My father worked on the mines in Johannesburg before I was born, but he was retrenched when he got tuberculosis (TB). After recovering from TB, he resorted to selling firewood from Emkhombe, our village's nearby forest, and my mother washed clothes for other people to earn money. We were one of the poorest families in the village, and food was our greatest need. Having a camera or going to a photographic studio did not enter our minds.

I remember things, scenes, and occurrences, but there are no frozen, captured moments for me to refer to. My recollections are often triggered by smells, objects, and spaces. Working imaginatively while using my body to perform is paramount in my image-making. Many things I know of my childhood I know from what others have told me – hearing older people narrate stories about me growing up, how I looked, what I liked and so on. These images of myself exist in what I call "the third party", because they are not from my own recollection – I was too young to remember. This "third party" image goes beyond what others remember of me to how my community has been recorded, such as journalistic reports and newspaper articles detailing our community's life and tragedy, as when fires destroyed our homes, for example. Seeing photographs of damaged homes and people sitting and waiting to be helped depict this

community as vulnerable, helpless, and powerless. Although these archival images relate to various tragedies, they also position the community in a space of disempowerment. It was not what my family would have wanted, or how I (and my community) want to be seen or represented. We became known for our state of vulnerability more than for our strength, aspirations, desires, and dreams.

In his essay 'Reframing the black subject ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African representation', Okwui Enwezor (1997) writes about the control and representation of the black body politic, symbolically, and literally. This body politic is an ideological one that hinges on power relations divided along racial lines. Enwezor references South Africa's apartheid past, which systematically and enforced whiteness as the 'superior' race, often speaking for and on behalf of the 'other'. This marginalised most of the country's population, who had a different skin colour, and rendered them powerless, voiceless and without an identity. This, he argues, can be seen in artworks where the black body is erased, nameless, ghosted out or morphed to make it invisible. For many years, the black body has been represented without consent by artists whose positionality is historically one of privilege and power over the black body. However, what interests me in this article is the idea that the black body is more generally than not portrayed as 'abject', and that I am able to attempt to shift this narrative in my work. I also take ownership of my representation in trying to change how the working-class people of Grabouw have been portrayed, looked at or perceived. I am not speaking *for* the people of Grabouw but am working *with* them, as my story is part of the community. I relate strongly to Rashedur Chowdhury's reference to civil rights activist W E B DuBois, that "self-representation involves a consciousness and understanding of one's soul and the collective context in which such understanding of self-resides" (Chowdhury 2021: 524).

I am interested in how black artists present themselves in front of the camera and how they depict personal and collective lived experiences through imagination, performativity, and the interpretation of tangible family archives. Santu Mofokeng's *Black photo album* is a meditation on black desire and what it means to be black under colonial domination (Enwezor 1997: 30). The album contains photographs from 1890 to 1950 that were given to Mofokeng by black families. Mofokeng in turn presents the photographs as he received them, not altering or reworking them for aesthetic purposes. Dreams, desires and aspirations are recorded in the captions, giving the people an identity and a history – making them visible. To accompany the photograph *Ouma Maria Letsipa and her daughter, Minkie Letsipa,* Mofokeng provides comprehensive information about where Maria was born, her employment, what her family

owned and where he acquired the photograph. He recorded such information for most of the photographs in the album.

Fig. 3: Santu Mofokeng. *Ouma Maria Letsipa and her daughter, Minkie Letsipa.* Albumen print.

Maria was born to a family of 'inboekselings' in Lindley, Orange River Colony now called Orange Free State. Inboekseling loosely translated means forced juvenile apprenticeship in agriculture.

Her family became prosperous livestock and grain farmers at the turn of the century. The image belongs to the Ramela family of Orlando East. This information was supplied by Emma Mothibe.

Photo: Scholtz Studio, Linley. Orange River Colony c. 1900s. (Enwezor 1997: 30).

I also find the work of Zanele Muholi inspiring. Through their image-making and production, Muholi has worked with portraiture and representation of the self and others in dignified ways, without further marginalising the black body. In their ongoing project "Faces and phases", Muholi presents portraits of individuals from the LGBQTI+ community. The photographs are accompanied by the names, dates and locations of the individuals depicted. Muholi states that "collectively, the portraits are at once a visual statement and an archive, marking, mapping and preserving an often invisible community for posterity" ("Zanele Muholi's brave project…" 2022).

In "It's work as usual: Framing race, class and gender through a South African lens", Gabi Ngcobo writes about a work in which Muholi references their mother, Bester Mayote, who was employed as a domestic worker.

Ngcobo (2010) writes that

> Muholi is trying to come to grips with their mother's story by locating themselves within it, even if this does not bring them close to their experiences. Their mission is to historicize, to put into context the invisible figure of their mother and many other black women who were under a system that to this day continues to control black female labour.

Muholi entered a conference pretending to be a domestic worker looking for her 'madam'. Once inside, Muholi asked the conference attendees to thank the workers who had cleaned their toilets that morning, highlighting the visibility and invisibility of the black female domestic worker (Ngcobo 2010). In this sense workers are visible as labourers through their uniforms but are invisible because they are not acknowledged. They have no name attached to them: their labour is foregrounded, rather than who they are.

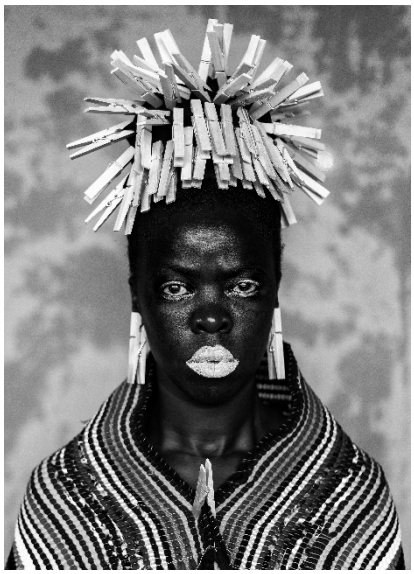

Fig. 4:
Zanele Muholi, 2015.
Bester I, Mayotte.
Silver gelatin print.

I am particularly drawn to the photograph above by Zanele Muholi, which is titled after the artist's mother, Bester Mayotte. The figure fills up the frame, adorned in a blanket joined by washing pegs, which are also used as earrings and to decorate her hair like a crown. Their lipstick contrasts her dark face, making her lips stand out.[8] I am drawn to these pegs because I associate them with labour – the washing of clothes as performed by my mother, or any other domestic labour. The pegs are used outside of their common usage, beautifying them, and

[8] I acknowledge that others may associate this with black face, but it is not what I see when I look at the photograph.

imagining her as someone who has taken control of how they present themselves and are perceived.

In my practise I attempt to take ownership of my narrative and how I want others to perceive me and the community I come from. In the absence of a pre-existing family album, I represent myself through portraiture and by performing the stories of close family, friends and events in imaginative ways.

My approach to this project is also influenced to some extent by the early work of Senzeni Marasela, both through an autobiographical and photographic lens. Marasela "revisits and reframes memories, processing those experiences in different ways to seek transformation and empowerment" (Prestholdt 2019: 222). Reframing the past can be a way of making sense of, reconciling with, and processing it, and of accepting some things and rejecting others. Staging and performing are at play when one reframes the past, as it no longer exists objectively in its integrity but is present in fragments of what was once a lived experience.

I greatly admire Marasela's *Theodora comes to Johannesburg* series, in which the artist embodies her mother and wears her yellow dress. Given the circumstances in which her mother chose to wear or discard clothing, it is remarkable that Marasela had the opportunity to use her mother's dress. Marasela elaborates:

> My mother had this habit of wearing dresses obsessively and then discarding them. So, in 2003 I decided to take one of her dresses, a yellow dress. I wore it and I went to the places she and my father remembered having been – I tried to retrace their steps as part of that project to create work about Theodora's experiences in Joburg. (In Tyilo 2021)

By wearing her mother's dress, Marasela embodied her mother and, as Theodora, retraced spaces familiar to her parents to insert herself into her mother's narrative.

Although I do not have my mother's clothing, I have overalls that most women on farms wear, and I wore them while performing various characters. The overalls are a marker of the labour that most women in Grabouw are engaged in. My mother wore the overalls when she was alive, and Mama Nomkhitha still wears them five times a week. They are a marker of the labour and social class the women belong to.

Christa Clarke describes Marasela's use of autobiography "as a means to investigate and reclaim gaps in her personal history and as a lens through which to consider the larger cultural and political history of South Africa" ((Prestholdt 2019: 222). Although Marasela's focus is on

her and her mother's experience, she also taps into a collective history. By performing the character of Theodora, she explores the effects of her past and of her mother being absent from her childhood, and she locates her by visiting places that her parents visited. She traces and reframes her mother's journey in and around Johannesburg, presenting a series of performative portraits that speak loudly and potently about absence and loss.

Fig. 5: Senzeni Marasela, 2004. *Theodorah comes to Johannesburg.* Photographic series.

Section 3: *Isitya esihle… (asidleli)*

This project's title, *Isitya esihle… (asidleli)*, is a Xhosa idiom "used to express condolences and respect to a highly regarded person who has left the world of the living" (Ngcelwane 2012). I have heard this said at several family funerals: first at my mother's funeral, then my father's, my uncle's and my two aunts' funerals. I assume the same phrase was said at my grandmother's funeral and that many Xhosa families use this phrase to comfort those mourning a loved one. The phrase emphasises that those who are respected and are considered people of integrity are often taken away too soon from the living, and most notably that individuals seem to get the most recognition after their deaths. The people that this project reflects on were and are all hard-working people who laboured the land who deserve to be valued and respected in their lifetimes.

I dedicate this project to the working-class mothers and women of Grabouw in general, and more specifically to those who live and work on the apple farms. I got in touch and formed relationships with many women while undertaking this project. One woman who was instrumental in this journey is Mam'Nomkhitha, who was our neighbour and a friend of my mother's. She welcomed me into her home with warm eyes and introduced me to other women who live on her street. Even in the conversations I had with the youth, we spoke about how hard their mothers work: taking care of the family, working on the farms and always being there for their children. I am in no way dismissing the role of men in the community, but this research organically put the spotlight on women. My experience of my mother's work in Grabouw and with Mam'Nomkhitha made it seem appropriate to focus on women.

Photography as a tool for active remembering

In the book *Rituals of remembrance: Photography and autobiography in postmodern text* Christina Ljungberg (2006: 246) writes that photography is a

> Vehicle for moving between past and present and for thinking photographically, as the image of a fleeting moment in time and space is allowed to dissolve into a multitude of possible takes, conflating various viewpoints and space-times of the past, present and future.

My photographs go beyond fleeting moments to contemplative spaces that offer the multiple viewpoints Ljungberg suggests. Elaborating on this, Ljungberg (2006: 246) describes photographs as narratives that provide "special access to experiences that may have been forgotten or unknown". People tend to forget as times goes by, and as inevitable as this forgetting may be, I am trying to avoid it as far as possible. Having left Grabouw ninenteen years ago, I want to look back and retrieve some of my memories and experiences and reflect on the lived experiences of these farming communities. By remembering through staged photographs, I hope to help myself to not forget. I also constantly check myself and my current positionality.

This questioning of positionality came about after I visited a farm and was given a soft white coat to wear while there. On my way from the office to the orchards I saw a sea of green and blue, all the women sitting outside on their lunch break in green overalls and blue caps. I passed them in my white 'visitor's' coat, marked as an 'other'. I felt uneasy and uncomfortable, and feelings of guilt started to overwhelm me, and at the same time this coat felt like a reminder that whether I was in Grabouw or not there, life had to go on for people, as it did when my mother passed away. I am part of the community, yet I am also in some ways removed from it because of where I live now, and my living situation is not the same as when I lived there.

Fig. 6: *Ndiyafuthaniseka.* 2022. Photograph.

Figure 7: Ekho engekho. 2022. Photograph

My late mother, Ntombiyethu Nokwandisa Nqaba, who was a farm worker and is an important entry point into the project. She did not live long enough to see her children grow.

Fig. 8: *Ukuba ndandikhona.* 2022. Photograph.

I was ten years old and staying with her friend in Khayelitsha when my mother passed away. My brother was living alone in Grabouw, while my younger sister, who was three years old, was living with my mother. My other two sisters were staying with my father in Butterworth. My mother died alone, because my little sister's father had taken her away for a few days. Neighbours say my mother died in her sleep. A whole day went by when she was not seen by anyone, and then neighbours went to her shack to check up on her. They found her lying in bed, resting her head face down on one of her arms. Mam'Nomkhitha says she did not move when they tried to wake her, and that is when they realised she was as cold as ice.

I often think about her last days and her last night. Being alone, with all her thoughts and no one to distract her as my younger sister would normally do. Sometimes I feel guilty that if I had been there, she would not have let her thoughts roam so widely to the point that her heart

stopped beating. If my younger sister and I had been there, we would have distracted her and kept her busy. I feel guilty for not being there and not finding her the next day. I only found out a week later that she had died, on the day her body was to be sent to the Eastern Cape to be buried. I never held her, never said goodbye. I saw her in the casket, boxed, eyes closed and resting peacefully on her back. She looked like she was asleep, and she still looked beautiful. I remember that moment like it was yesterday. Looking at her resting face, I wanted her to scold me and ask me where I had been, why I had left her behind. I wanted her to say something. Her peaceful, sleeping, dead face haunts me to this day.

In *Ukuba ndandikhona*, I imagine being with her on those final days, those final hours. Maybe things would have been different. This is my possible closure – that I can imagine I was there, that I held her and said goodbye. In my imagined image our roles are reversed, and I am the adult holding and soothing my mother.[9] The act of holding my imagined mother is a way of grieving and working through the emotions of letting go of her.

From my conversations with Mam'Nomkhitha I discovered that many farm workers must leave their children and risk their health to work at night. This is true even when they are sick, because they need the money, they earn to feed their families. Some have older children who take care of the younger ones, and in some instances these children take care of the entire family. This is the case with my best friend from junior school, Xolelwa, who I got in touch with during this project. She lives in the new shacks along the N2 known as *Siyanyanzela.* Xolelwa is now a mother of one, and her parents have retired. She works as a security guard at the local supermarket and sells beauty products on the side. It is her turn to take care of her parents and her siblings. Although she does not work on the farm, her parents did and so do most of her neighbours. We connected over stories of being in standard three at *Umyezo wama-apile combined school*. Xolelwa told me that nothing had changed much, except that now they had electricity, so fires did not happen as frequently as before. She said there were few job opportunities available for the youth, and often she heard about them too late. We talked about religion and staying grounded, and she was surprised to learn that I was no longer a practising Christian. Xolelwa finds refuge in church. Hers is St John's Church, where they wear a green uniform made of the same fabric as the workers' overalls. She starts her day at a prayer group and then goes to work. She is dedicated to her morning routine, and I admire that about her.

[9] In retrospect, the image bears some resemblance to the famous Hector Pieterson photograph, where Mbuyisa Makhubu holds him in a similar position.

My conversations with Xolelwa, Mama Nomkhitha and others are very important for understanding the lives of those who live and work on the farms in Grabouw. Each of their stories is unique, but they also make up the story of a community that has been forgotten. They have dreams and ambitions in life, but they are caught up in a continuous cycle of disempowerment and exploitation. Women's labour does not end with the farm work but continues in the household or in a second job, like Xolelwa. Even when they are meant to rest, they must perform labour in many ways, never taking off their overalls.

Fig. 9: *Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo I.* 2022. Photograph.

Most of the works in the exhibition are re-enactments and interpretations of what I heard in my ongoing conversations with women from Site View. Often an image came to mind after my visit, and the studio became a contemplative and performative space in which I imagined how to illustrate a particular anecdote.

The books

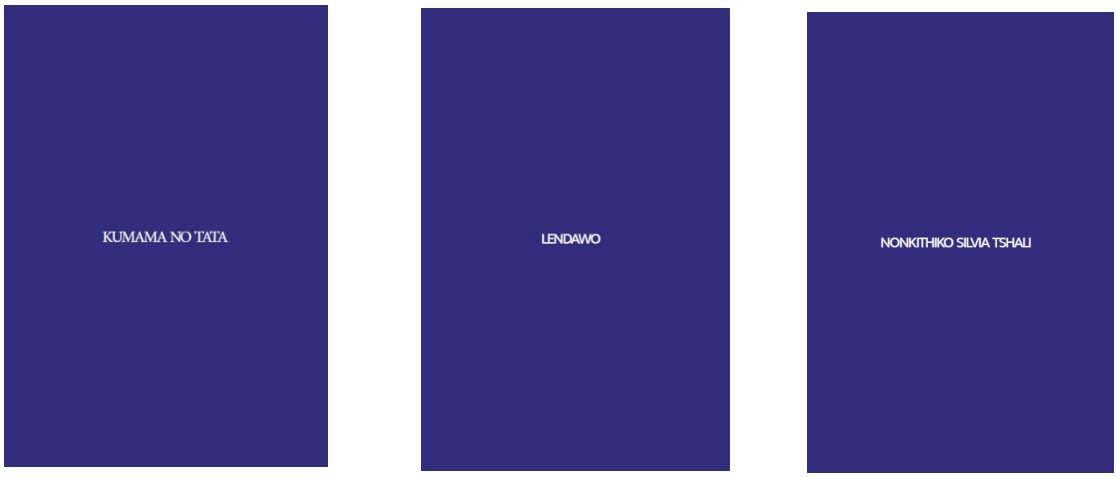

Fig. 10: Collection of books 2021 and 2022.

For this project I made three A5 paperback books. One is titled *Kumama no Tata* (For my mother & father), another is *Nonkithiko Sylvia Tyali* (after Mam'Nomkhitha) and the third is titled *Lendawo* (This place). In *Kumama no Tata* I converse with my parents Nokwandisa Nqaba and Zimele Nqaba (nee Mandla), telling them about the happenings since they passed. I go into detail about what my sisters have been up to, incorporating photographs of them between the texts. I tell my parents how we have been trying to live life, and I emphasise our successes so that they can be assured that we are doing okay. I mention places and spaces, especially about our village, because they evoke memories of being with my parents. I remind them of how much I miss them, and how I wish I could talk to them again.

In *Nonkithiko Silvia Tyali* I continue the narrative tone, as if writing to my mother about her friend and neighbour Mam'Nomkhitha. I have come to know Mam'Nomkhitha more since beginning this project, and she was instrumental in helping me remember aspects of my past life in Grabouw. I only knew her then as Mama ka Nosiyambonga, and in the book I write her full name, where she comes from, what her clan's name is and so on. I narrate her life since I left Grabouw, and I describe her living and working conditions. I provide my mother with photographs of Mam'Nomkhitha in her work uniform and at home with her family. Although it is addressed to my mother, this book is more about Mam'Nomkhitha. I assume my mother

knows about some of the things I wrote about, but I heard them for the first time from Mam'Nomkhitha.

The book *Lendawo* (This place) focusses on the broader community of working-class Grabouw, from Pineview to Site View. Working on this project caused me to visit places I had forgotten about, like passing the general dealer shop in Pineview and remembering how the back of the shop was used as a makeshift community court to punish criminals, and by non-governmental organisations to serve soup to the local community. I walked from Pineview to town, past the clinic, and remembered walking this stretch with my mother. I tell my mother about our street in Site View and that there are RDP houses now – which I think would excite her, because she was looking forward to having a brick house. This book sheds more light on current life in Grabouw, on the expansion of new settlements or shacks along the N2 and on my concern about whether living conditions will ever improve for the people who live and work in Grabouw.

Writing about the significance of locating family in cultural memory studies in *Memory in culture*, academic and author Astrid Erll (2011) finds that sociologist Maurice Halbwach's theory of social frameworks is an indispensable prerequisite for every act of remembering. Erll (2011: 305) writes that social frameworks are "thought patterns that steer our memory in particular directions", and she concludes that memories are socially formed and are unthinkable without collective memory. I am particularly interested in this aspect of collective memory, because although the books are written from a personal viewpoint, they are aided by other peoples' recollections – from my family, Mam'Nomkhitha and other women from the street I used to live on in Grabouw.

Figure 11: Photograph from *Kumama no Tata*. 2021.

Fig. 12: Photograph from *Nonkithiko Siliva Tyali*. 2022.

Fig. 13: Photograph from *Lendawo*. 2022.

Video work: *Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*

The video work is a double-screen synchronised projection titled *Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*, a Xhosa proverb meaning "wisdom is learnt or sought from the elders". When I visited a pack shed on one of the farms in Grabouw, I met Mam'Nomakholwa, who had worked on the farm for more than 20 years. She came to Grabouw from the Eastern Cape when she was still a young girl, and she has worked with apples all her life. She knows how to plant, care for, harvest, clean and package apples. Her everyday routine at work involves packing, packaging, and boxing, from Monday to Friday. She knows a lot about the farm and can assist new workers, but her wisdom goes beyond her work routine, as she is knowledgeable about life in general. She welcomed me in the pack shed with a big smile and told me her story in a short space of time. After my visit, I kept thinking about the wisdom of women like Mam'Nomakholwa: their words of encouragement and their joy when they hear about what I am doing. I sometimes wondered how often these women have a chance to share their life stories and wisdom with others, and I guessed it was probably not often.

One of the videos takes place on the N2 national highway and reflects on the journey of women who have come to Grabouw – women like my mother, and her journey to the farmlands. In this video I am dressed in a blue overall with strings of red wool coming out of its pockets – on one of my early visits to Grabouw I went to town on a pay-day weekend and saw many people, mostly men, waiting by the ATM wearing blue overall pants and red t-shirts. It looked like they had mostly come from the same farm, but the colours stood out from what other people were wearing. And while visiting one of the farms I noted the debt books at the farm shop, which are used to record worker's debts. These were black A6 books with a prominent red strip along the spine. As I continued my visits, I saw more blue-and-red colour combinations, often worn by people or on washing lines. I decided to work with these colours in the video. The red wool is soft and delicate, contrasting the harsh material of the overall. This contrast works with the idea that women are generally considered to be softer and more obedient, but in the context of the farm they are expected to be hard at the same time. Circumstances force them to exist in such a way that they are expected to be strong, work long hours and maintain gender roles – strong and resilient but obedient and passive.

I want to scream and shout to be heard, but my voice is swallowed by the sound of the cars. This blue and red outfit makes me noticeable on the side of the road. People drive by on their way to work or coming back from work in the city, others on their way to holiday houses in

nearby rural and coastal towns. To substitute for my not-so-big voice, I carry a bell that I ring to raise the alarm to passersby. Before the latest technologies, a bell was rung to alert workers to the start and end of the workday, tea breaks and lunch breaks, so this is a reminder of control and scheduled labour. It also reminds me of studying at a rural school in the Eastern Cape, when one could not ignore the sound of a bell, as it indicated the start or end of an activity. The cars drive by at full speed, trucks driving over the yellow line, endangering me. I sometimes lose my balance as I ring the bell. I ring the bell continuously, blurring the line between the start and end of an event, because the farm workers' experience seems never-ending. Things are continuous and stay the same, and I want to raise the alarm to make people notice.

The video that is presented on the opposite side of the room was shot on the farm. The first shot is of my feet and the farm's red soil, the soil that is fertile and is worked repeatedly. I am wearing the same blue and red overall as in the video shot along the N2. I walk slowly and then run, walk, sit, and stand amongst the trees in the orchards. At one time I shuffle through the debt books as if they are playing cards, raising the question of how many people are indebted to the farm store and whether they are ever able to fully pay their debt. These books are symbolic of the cycle of debt that children and other family members of farm workers are born into and inherit – again a matter of circumstance, not of choice. The books in the video are empty, waiting for the next generation of migrant workers.

At the end of the video a clipboard can be seen hanging from a tree branch. The clipboard is used by the manager on the farm to record the number of trees pruned by each worker, who have to reach a specific target. If they do not reach that target, they owe the farm. The dangling clipboard with a record of people's names and daily work eerily recalls images of lynching. On the clipboard I have repeatedly written my mother's name, trying to evoke her working conditions on the farm. Did she reach her target?

Figs. 14 & 15: Video stills from *Inyathi Ibuzwa kwabaphambili*. 2022.

Installation: *Umndilili*

Umndilili is an isiXhosa word that means “average”. In conversations the idiom is reinforced by saying “*sukuwulandela umndilili”* loosely meaning “one must not just follow or look at the ways of everyone”. It encourages one to step outside of the ordinary and to be unique. But I ask myself how likely it is for a girl child brought up on the farm to step out and follow a different path when the odds are against the progress of those who live or work on the farms?

Fig. 16: *Umndilili*. 2022. Installation.

Umndilili is an installation of approximately twenty women’s blue overalls, stiffened with a liquid fabric hardener, that the viewer moves through and around. The overalls have become

solid, sculpted to rigidity and holding their shape. This speaks to women's conflicting status and role in the farming community, where they are generally seen as 'soft' and 'weak' but are also expected to be 'strong', to take care of their households and to work on the farm. Although the fabric of the overall is hard and solid, the overalls hang from the ceiling and twist and turn.

This work is a response to my continued investigation and reflection on the life experience and future of the women who work on the farms in Grabouw. I think of all the women who have worked the land and packed the apples, and of how many have fallen or died without their livelihoods improving – the many silent, marginalised voices mostly only seen as labour by their employers. *Umndilili* honours these women and their daughters and asks who is next in line for farm work. It is a monument and a sad realisation of how unpleasant the situation is for most women farm workers. Walking around the installation, the viewer is confronted by the harsh sound of the overalls as they move and brush against each other, making them impossible to ignore.

Conclusion

Let your voices ring
Soft and strong
A million rainbow tongues
Pushing our songs through the wind
Let our stories dance out in step with the moon
…
Whatever the languages of our imaginations
Let our voices never stop ringing

- Extract from a poem *Let our voices sing* by Efe Paul Azino

This poem captures the essence of what I want to achieve through my work. It is challenging having to research and put creative work out that deals with the lived experiences of other people. There are a great number of complex issues and a risk and fear of not being able to effectively communicate the issues that matter. In the essay "Seeing ourselves", Tandazani Dhlakama (2020:15) writes about African artists that "their narrative gives rise, ring and boom using myriad of languages of their imaginations". These are artistic languages that look at black joy in radical and political ways, and investigate aspects of identity, home and belonging. I think that my work is in some way a response to Azino's call to never stop talking about the farming community, and about marginalised people. To carry on, and not necessarily be a voice, but to work with them as if through song, letting our joined voices be a constant reminder that things are not okay and there needs to be a shift towards positive change, through fair compensation acknowledgment and recognition of the value that each worker has in broader society.

My project is most importantly about recreating my memories and placing myself within the community of Grabouw by writing about individuals from that community, as well as to imaginatively narrate these memories and stories through photographs staged in the studio and using installation and video. I aim to represent the community in their wholeness, beyond their working status. The language of my narrative and imagination is photographic and

performative and uses materials closely connected to the community I am in conversation with. I am aware and acknowledge that imagination and narrative can only go so far – no measured outcome will come from this research, but I hope that it will shift mindsets and change perceptions about farm workers. I hope that audiences will pause and reflect on the life of apple farm workers in Grabouw, and of all farm workers and marginalised workers in other professions.

Art is a language that I understand, and through it I can talk about and make creative comments about issues that I find troubling and that are close to my interests. My voice emerges through the language of recollection, conversation, photography, installation and video. This project is not just about me. It is about and for my mother, my father and the farm workers of Grabouw.

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List of illustrations

Exhibition checklist

Mama, 2021

Ukuba ndandikhona. 2022

Utata yena?,2021



Imihla Ngemihla I,
11 & III

Ngokuphazama kweliso 2022



Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo I, II & II

Ekho engekho. 2022

Ndiyafuthaniseka. 2022

Enkomeni. 2022

Umndilili 2022

Nomkhitha, 2021

Inyathi Ibuzwa kwabaphambili. 2022.