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Piecing together a girlhood:  
(Re)visiting memories of site using nostalgia as a catalyst for coping with atopia

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of MA in Theatre & Performance (Theatre Making) (DRM5018W)

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Photograph of *Katuntu (...and you too)* by Karabo Maine.

*Piecing together a girlhood:  
(re)visiting memories of site  
using nostalgia as a  
catalyst for coping  
with atopia<sup>1</sup>.*

Alude Mahali

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<sup>1</sup>It is not clear to me who first used the term atopia. I use the word as defined by Arturo Escobar in his article *Culture Sits in Places* (2001) where atopia is used to define placelessness or quite literally “without place” (140).

## *Abstract*

My research has been preoccupied with the playing of memory with reference to narratives of loss. This loss has been represented by a loss of language, place and family, resulting in the playing of unnerving memory fragments. The primary driving force of this loss has been the notion of a disrupted or uprooted childhood. The subject of this enquiry is black girlhood; in particular, the relationships between black girls/women. Consequently a large part of 'piecing together a girlhood' involves engaging with what Quashie (2004) calls the 'girlfriend aesthetic'. Quashie's 'girlfriend aesthetic' offers a methodology for re-membering by providing a reflective surface; you see in the experience of the girlfriend other something that triggers or incites your own memory that aids you in working towards completion of self.

This explication traces my interest in this subject matter as a direct result of feeling that black girlhood as a topic is under-represented, explores my development of a viable creative methodology for this kind of work, interrogates the meaning of 'site' in this context, maps out the origin of nostalgia and how it affects the afflicted in relation to lost 'site', unpacks the girlfriend aesthetic as a practice and reveals how the nostalgic searcher's obsession with the irrecoverability of the past manifests in corporeal ways. Whether or not completion of self is possible, what is discovered is theatre's ability to aid in coping with a feeling of placelessness or atopia. Although nostalgia may indicate a fixation with the past, it can also be a valuable and restorative way of emancipating oneself from it.

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# Introduction.

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My research is concerned with memory. In particular I am engaged with the concept of “playing memory” through narratives of loss of language, place and family, brought on by disrupted or uprooted childhood. Playing memory suggests in the first instance, an actual active playing of personal recollection and remembrance that attempts to stage that which has passed but exists in and out of my mind, albeit in pieces. I view the former as a function of the past and the latter as a operating in the present. What this means is that the “in” represents a time gone by, a time which is previous to the present and the “out” represents the “now” or the present. Playing memory in the second instance, is an exploration of how one might go about re-membering in order to recall oneself into being, that is, recapturing a lost time, lost place and lost childhood in order to put oneself together. Piecing together a girlhood examines how one can go about “doing memory” as a way of ‘articulating that which is unspeakable’ and how one might use ‘imaginative power to locate, realize and play an unconscious connection to the past’ (Parker 2001: 2).

There is something disquieting about re-visiting something which has already past that holds both painful and sentimental memories. The question then becomes ‘why are you looking back’? What am I looking for in my nostalgia? The reason why I am interested in this notion of nostalgic longing and recall is because of my own need to fill the gaps of my own fragmented memory. It is a yearning to bring to remembrance that which has been lost or forgotten to me, culturally, personally, historically, linguistically and familialy and the need to search for a theatrical methodology that might assist me in coming to terms with this irrecoverable loss. I want to look to the past in order to function in the present. Memory is not fixed or definite, therefore, I am not looking back in order to play memory as a way of reifying it or with a certainty that the gaps can ever be filled at all, but rather, my exploration is concerned with the spaces of possibility found in these gaps. Thus, the gaps come to represent spaces of dramatic discovery.

Salman Rushdie notes that humanity is haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim and to look back. His answer to being unable to reclaim what has been lost is to create fictions- imaginary worlds. This is precisely the discourse with which I am engaging. Rushdie uses a ‘broken mirror’ metaphor to explore fragments

of the past or of memory that have been irretrievably lost (Rushdie 1991: 12). He points out that:

The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as one which is supposedly unflawed...sometimes it is precisely the partial nature of memory, its fragmentation, which makes it evocative. The shards of memory acquire greater status, greater resonance because they are remains; fragmentation makes trivial things seem like symbols and the mundane acquire mysterious and divine qualities (Rushdie 1991: 12).

For Rushdie the 'broken glass' is not merely a mirror of nostalgia but also a useful tool with which to work in the present. This broken glass metaphor becomes a helpful means of working with the idea of (re)visiting site. The *re* indicates a return to a previous condition, a withdrawal from, but it also implies the rebuilding or renewal or repetition of something.<sup>2</sup> This definition is applicable in this case where re-visiting site points to the return or withdrawal to, but also the repetition or restoration of my lived and un-lived experience of, site. Here, re-visiting site requires that the searcher take hold of whatever remnants and shards of memories she has of site and use theatrical discourse to return to the places of old in order to exist within and understand the present site she finds herself in. This site is language, is homeland, is family- this site is an indelible marker of who she is, but more importantly, who this nostalgic searcher could have been.

I make constant reference in what follows to Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1997) and Gcina Mhlope's *Have you seen Zandile?* (1988) to underpin my enquiry. These texts are seminal to my enquiry because they are essentially narratives of loss and, moreover, the extent of this loss is experienced in different and yet equally potent ways by the protagonists. The protagonists in these texts are also dealing with the loss of place, language, family and memory but the way that this loss affects them is different from case to case and in some cases loss becomes corporealized. The subjects of these texts are black girls and more importantly, what is explored in each of these texts are relationships between black girls/women. Consequently a large part of 'piecing together a girlhood' involves engaging with what Quashie (2004) calls the 'girlfriend' aesthetic.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Re' as defined in The New Collins Concise Dictionary. Emphasis my own.

Quashie's argument is this: through a discourse of otherness some Black women scholars represent selfhood as the dynamic relationship between one woman and her other, her girlfriend.

The selfhood offers an instability occurring via two levels of identification between self and other; identification *with* and identification *as*. The constant movement between with (in which a subject materializes comparatively) and as (in which the subject materializes metonymically) also represents (dis)identification, because the subject is always being dislodged and dislodging herself from a settled identity with her other (Quashie 2004: 16).

I will discuss this concept in greater detail below. I will also set out to argue how I came about such a research topic, talk about my exploration of a workable methodology, seek to discuss and explain my understanding and use of the term 'site,' as well as unpack the symptoms of uprooted childhoods which include nostalgic tendencies, disruption or the fragmentation of memory and language which, at times, summons a visceral response. I will also investigate how the nostalgic searcher might, through theatrical processes, revisit memories of site as a way of dealing with placelessness.

### **Exposing Dissimilarity: why *not* black girlhood?**

This quest is exploratory by nature, there are no fixed answers. I begin from what is familiar to me: an exploration of my disjointed memory in connection with black girlhood. When I began my investigation, I looked to *Beloved* (1997), *Have You Seen Zandile?* (1988) and *Nervous Conditions* (1988) as a groundwork but my insertion of 'self' and thus black girlhood was mainly autobiographical. I found the exclusion of the voice and representation of black girlhood as a whole to be increasingly problematic if I was to operate under the rubric of 'black girlhood' which implies a universal inclusion of black girlhood in its entirety. However, I did not feel as though I was being entirely inclusive of 'black girlhood' as a whole, in relation to myself and came upon Quashie's 'girlfriend aesthetic' that allowed an entry point for the inclusion of black girls, as a representation of shared experience and a shared idea of selfhood. Upon researching this terrain, I became gradually frustrated with the lack of

documentation concerning black girls' experience of girlhood. The assumption has been made that a white girl's experience of girlhood is the same as that of a black girl and as a result, this has led to the under-representation or misrepresentation of black girlhood. A black girl's experience of girlhood would surely differ from that of a white girl and the effects on memories of the experience of girlhood vary culturally, historically, economically and linguistically. It is this lack of distinction and representation that prompted theorist and feminist cultural critic bell hooks, to write her memoir *Bone Black: memories of girlhood* (1996). In the preface to her memoir, hooks draws attention to this lack of documentation and mentions this rejection from history as her main purpose for writing her story that traces her experience of black girlhood. hooks writes from the premise that in the 1990s feminism began taking great interest in studying girlhood but most of its conclusions were based on the experience of white girlhood (Shockley1997: 552). She does not offer her story to place herself as the representative for black girlhood, because she is aware that black girls' experiences are diverse and vary according to class, geographical location and other factors (Ibid); rather, she writes to document some of these perhaps, shared experiences. Similarly my exploration is not meant to serve as a model of all black South African girls' memories of the experience of girlhood. It is, rather, an attempt to locate, trace and play my own understanding of the effects and remains of memory on my self as a black South African female in hopes that it may resonate with a shared memory of the experience of black girlhood. hooks's *Bone Black* is as much a dreamscape as a landscape and she moves through the passage of her memory, lingering only where her memory is arrested (553).

Ruth Rosenberg in her article *Seeds in a Hard Ground* writes that, in America, black girls have been guided by, and taken lessons in self-authentication from autobiographies of such artists as Mahalia Jackson, Maya Angelou, and Bessie Smith, which explain how, in spite of great obstacles, one might find inspiration in fashioning a sense of self (Rosenburg 1987: 435). Rosenberg goes on to cite African-American poet and social critic Sherley Anne Williams who writes of how when she was a troubled twelve-year-old in the fifties, she searched, unsuccessfully, through the shelves of her junior high school library for some fictionalized depiction of her

own problems (Ibid). Rosenburg contends that black girls did not exist as far as the publishers of school anthologies were concerned. Author Barbara Dodds Stanford writes that 'Whites Only' could have been stamped on almost every literature series for high school students published before 1965 (Stanford & Amin 1978: 3). Stanford's assertion is verified by literary critic Nancy Larrick, who studied 5,206 children's books published between 1962 and 1964. She claims that only 349 of those thousands of books include even one black child either in the illustrations or the text (Larrick 1965: 84). It was this absence of fictionalized characters, with whom she could identify, that encouraged Sherley Anne Williams to become a writer (Williams 1980: 195). Many black woman writers make similar admissions when asked why they became writers, that they could not find the books that they needed- the books that spoke to their problems. Alice Walker is one writer who has made this admission. In *Saving the Life That is Your Own*, she writes that she was forced "to write all the things I should have read" (Walker 1979: 151). Asked why she had written *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison responded, "I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn't know if such a book existed, but I had just never read it in 1964 when I started writing *The Bluest Eye*" (Cited in Parker 1979: 252). Thus, working out of her memory of what Lorain, Ohio, had been like in 1940, she reconstructed her own childhood. Just as these writers write to insert themselves into a history that has neglected, marginalized them and ignored their existence, my enquiry concerns itself with filling the gaps of my perforated memory through the creation of nostalgic worlds through theatre. Walker speaks of 'writing the things she should have read' whereas I 'play the memories I should have experienced' as a result of being uprooted.

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison's protagonists are three little girls: the book's narrator, Claudia Macteer, 9; her sister Frieda, 10; and their friend Pecola Breedlove, 11. The girls are forced to rely on each other for information, because adults make themselves so inaccessible. Adults command reverence and respect and the child's intense curiosity is not responded to verbally; instead, the adults ward off questions (Rosenburg 1987: 437). Claudia says, "Adults do not talk to us they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (Morrison 1970: 12).

This reliance on each other, on the girlfriend 'other', is indicative of just how important the 'girlfriend aesthetic' is in the construction of a sense of self. What the 'girlfriend aesthetic' does is to offer a dialectic between self and other. This complex relationship between black females manifests as an alternation between identification 'with' and identification 'as' (Quashie 2004: 16).

Much like American society, in South Africa race has a significant effect on a black girl's psyche even though socio-economic and class-related factors also surface as considerable features of self-definition (Gaganakis 1997: 364). Fundamental everyday discourse is interceded through the lived experience of family, neighborhood and education. Black South African girls negotiate between several identities and realities- local, national, racial, class, gendered. All identities are active in one way or another and memory and certainly one's experience of selfhood within childhood would differ under these circumstances. As a result, black South African girls' identities emerge as fluid and adaptive, developing over time (Gaganakis 1997: 364). In the texts that I have selected, we see how these shifting identities occur. For Nyasha, in *Nervous Conditions*, the struggle lies in coming to grips with the realities of patriarchy, the complexities of gender classification and a Western education. She must refigure her identity and a large part of this lies in her relationship with Tambu. Zandile is grappling with the loss of childhood and issues of gender, finding herself thrust into premature womanhood when she is still a young girl. Beloved's experience differs from the two because she is the collective representation of the severe consequences of the marks of slavery on a race, a class and gender group: black girls/women.

This is black girlhood; we are multiple bits working against loaded historical signifiers, omnipresent influences and each other whilst furiously battling to piece together and re-construct a composite whole. This was a significant feature in *Katuntu (...and you too)*<sup>3</sup>, this oscillation between self and other and the mirroring, merging and splitting of incomplete identities working as a dichotomous push and

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<sup>3</sup> *Katuntu (...and you too)* was written, devised and performed by Alude Mahali and Injairu Kulundu. It served as the practical component of the thesis submission for the degree of MA (Theatre and Performance). *Katuntu (...and you too)* will from now on be referred to as *Katuntu*.

pull. This emphasized the multifaceted nature of this ‘girlfriend aesthetic’ relationship which emerges as dynamic, particularly because the “boundaries of self and other, metaphorically but also literally, are disrupted, severed, transcended causing the self and her girlfriend to become adjoining and sometimes indistinguishable subjects” (Quashie 2004: 16). In *Katuntu*, the mirror is not only used as an object but also as an action that indicates exactly what the ‘girlfriend aesthetic’ proposes. Quashie’s ‘girlfriend aesthetic’ offers a methodology for remembering by providing a reflective surface; you see in the experience of the girlfriend other something that triggers or incites your own memory and aids you in working towards completion. Whether or not this completion is possible lies at the heart of my enquiry and was also a significant feature in the development process of *Katuntu* in attempting to revisit memories of site using my girlfriend ‘other’ and nostalgia as catalysts. Rather than completion, perhaps what it is, is a step towards dealing with the incomplete in hopes of healing, which is, in its own way, some form of completion. Trying to find a way to work that would aid this healing was imperative during the *Katuntu* process. Using existing creative methodologies, our ‘girlfriend’ relationship and nostalgic memory Injairu Kulundu and I searched for a practical methodology that would help us realize our vision for *Katuntu*.



The mirror seen here as object and as propeller of action.





Not only does the mirror provide you with your own reflection and in turn, that of your girlfriend 'other', but it also provides a surface through which the past is revealed by the 'other' figure in *Katuntu*. It is a portal through which to view in order to see something else.



## 'Girlfriend Play': a search for a practical methodology.

Some questions that arise in this quest for a practical methodology are: what am I looking for in my nostalgia? Is it a host of lost objects and lost experiences or for one in particular that underlies them all and how might I begin finding the material to help me play memory? A helpful starting point was accessing personal, cultural, familial and historical remains of memory and pairing those remains together with tactile objects and sensory stimuli (certain people, songs, smells, sensations, visual images, letters, journals) which I could then translate into visual images and this, in turn, assisted me in my process of beginning the open-ended course of 'doing memory.' An example of this method of retrieving memory can be seen in the development of Myer Taub's production of *Lekker Faith* in 2003 which he writes began with memory; memories of stories he heard as a child. As he began to write them down, he experienced a charge, a flurry of memories, of people, of smells. And as he began to formulate the structure of the text, he became more alert to his own memory that was not only being used as a tool to recover fragments from his past but could be used as an imaginative instrument in order to transfer the facts that he could not remember. Thus he was able to use childhood memory to play with/in history (Taub 2004: 39).

Performance mimics memory and thus, doing memory extends to my participation in my autobiography. Artist Betye Saar describes her artwork as a 5-step process (an approach that has been useful in my process of creating): imprint, search, collecting and gathering, recycle and release. In her attempt to gather and create works of autobiographical memory, Saar makes use of Jungian psychotherapist, Ira Progoff's 'Intensive Journal Method' that he developed in the 1960s and 1970s. As part of his research he had his patients keep journals. He trained participants to keep closely controlled and private journals with noted details of any wishes, thoughts, dreams and memories (Dallow 2004: 82). Progoff's rationale for the use of journals was that "when a person is shown how to reconnect himself with the contents and the continuity of his life, the inner thread of movement by which his life has been unfolding reveals itself to him by itself" (83). Progoff's stream-of-consciousness technique compares to Betye Saar's approach to creating assemblages of the original objects she finds attractive. These objects could be old photographs, collectable

miniatures, dried flowers, gloves- these personal objects are interwoven in her work and when combined become autobiographical symbols. Like diary entries, she collects and combines fragments of memories together to form a narrative. Only when she gathers all these fragmented objects and materials in one space or box for her installations, does she feel that they come together to form a story (Dallow 2004: 83). During the working of *Katuntu*, we did not have very many personal objects, using instead remnants of childhood memory and song as object. The objects we later introduced were endowed with personal meaning supported by written and practical exercises that we did.

The creation of a play-world has been imperative in the development of my practical style of working. According to *The Viewpoints Book* (Bogart & Landau: 2005), a play-world is a “set of laws belonging to your piece and no other” (167); it asks that you carefully consider the way time operates, the colour palette of your world and gestural language. Above all, this is a way of discovering the landscape of the world you have created and asks that you assume nothing and question everything and invent your own rules in making a unique play-world. This became a necessity in the creation of the visual landscape and nostalgic world of *Katuntu*. As Injairu Kulundu and I developed *Katuntu*, we found the use of viewpoints to be a vital way of framing the piece and the way in which we worked. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau describe viewpoints as:

A philosophy translated into a technique for 1) training performers; 2) building ensemble; and 3) creating movement for the stage. Viewpoints are a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage. Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working (Bogart & Landau 2005: 7-11).



This opening section performed at the Egyptian Building on the Hiddingh Campus, UCT came out of a series of improvisatory viewpoints exercises. We worked with the viewpoints of time (tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition), space (shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, topography) and composition.

As we appropriated these various creative methodologies, one thing that stood out as essential in the development process was engaging with what Richard Schechner calls 'dark play'. Schechner holds that:

Dark playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games and competition, chance and strength, in the modes of simulation such as theatre. Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing (Schechner 2002: 24- 25).

Dark play demands that you take risks as unpredictability is part of playing's thrill (Schechner 2002: 27). Dark play may be done consciously or unconsciously with the players unaware (at times) about what is play and what is not. This play is explosive, sometimes sudden, taking hold of the player, then, settling again. It is frenzied, sometimes dangerous, a jest, threat or hallucination. It is this very shift in and out of

different states full of discontinuity and disruption, both in the process and presentation of *Katuntu* that make it apparent that dark play is at work. The point is that dark play works against order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed but it need not be explicitly angry or violent (36). Dark play is physically risky and involves intentional confusion or concealment of the frame (38). Dark play may continue actions from early childhood but only occasionally demands make believe. Dark play plays out alternative selves.

This kind of play forms the foundation on which *Katuntu* was created, play as a methodology has been the source of immense discovery. We take turns with play, at times oscillating between play and reality. Whether we are mocking one another playfully through song, engaged in a dance with one another, at once becoming the exumed spirit of the alternate other, screaming in agony or hollering with laughter or becoming the witnesses of each other's purging, "the play frame may be so disturbed or disrupted that the players themselves are not sure if they are playing or not- their actions become play retroactively: the events are what they are, but by telling these events, by reforming them as narratives, they are cast as play" (Schechner 2002: 39). The playing is continuous, playing with a sense of imbalance, constantly twisting, winding, reconfiguring, transforming and turning on itself. It is a flash of all-pervading eruptive and disruptive energy (43). This play is creative and destabilizes action; it is a mood, an attitude, a force. This kind of play implicates the audience in *Katuntu*, at times casting them as witness or voyeur, then participant, sometimes alienating them completely- what is imperative is that they become a part of this dark play, that they are physically moving in and out of memory with us, the performers, where "the realities of fantasy can become trajectories into the world of demons, illness, and pain" (42).

The audience is required to shift location three times during *Katuntu*, creating a sense of discontinuity, disruption and motion that is necessary not only for the movement of the piece but also as a device for reinforcing the sense of discord, disconnectedness and disorder experienced by the ever-shifting figures. In the third performance space, the audience is confronted with writing on a wall that speaks to this device:

*Keep walking...the journey does not stop for her, all the time she is unsettled, unrooted, moved to a new place. She is compelled to move...sometimes run, I cannot catch up with myself, I cannot take all my things. I collect what my feet land on...I collect the earth under my feet. You must move with me (Katuntu 2009).*

*Katuntu* uses song performance as a site for the creation of shared girlfriend memory through incantatory call and response, summoning the voice of memory, albeit fragmented, into being.<sup>1</sup> Call and response is the pattern of communication. In African and African American culture, call and response is pervasive as a pattern of musical, social and political expression. An example of such expression can be seen in the weekly gatherings of African-Americans in the Clearing in *Beloved* where the entire community responds to Baby Suggs' 'call' (Su 2005: 27). The gatherings blend elements of Christian revival, celebration and group therapy through the traditional African-American "call and response" patterns. Call and response can also be place-bound (Ibid). The social structure established by the 'call and response' model proves to be easily broken and dependant on the 'caller' for continuation. Even when Baby Suggs' refuses to continue the call, the Clearing still has significance for Sethe and in going back there she still hears the "longago singing they left behind" (Morrison 1997: 164). The Clearing becomes a 'primal place' for Sethe. Perhaps Su uses 'primal place' in the very same way that Injairu and I use 'memory hotspots' (Su 2005: 30). For us, these memory hotspots are memory bubbles, exact memory places where we erupt and flow into memory. We are unexpectedly stirred by the hotspots and on them we are moved, hear, remember the feeling of what it must have been like to have been there- in that memory. "The image of the Clearing provides Sethe with a concrete sense of what 'claiming ownerships' of oneself might look like" (Su 2005: 30). Individuals can shift which place becomes 'primal' or even identify with several 'primal places' (Ibid). Sethe continues on to re-imagine the call and response at the Clearing "with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (Morrison 1997: 261). In *Katuntu*, as the audience you enter a

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas taken from Bilinda Straight's article *In the Belly of History* where she writes about adornment and song performance amongst young girls of the Imurran tribe (2005: 87).

gendered world, a world where the voices belong to girls and to women with voice forming the primary performance modality. We created a nostalgic play-world in an openly visual and aural landscape. We played ourselves as well as each other, seemingly like each other and then very different, seeing each others 'selves' around us, in us, through us.

*Katuntu* is a story of loss and journeying. The figure has banished herself to this open landscape in a desperate attempt to find what she has lost and she is searching, searching in hopes of fixing, of repairing and most importantly in hopes of healing- she is in exile, albeit in her mind.<sup>5</sup> *Katuntu* as a process also serves as a sense of renewal, acceptance and forgiveness seen through the eyes of the girlfriend 'other' that is also so much the self.

What became valuable in the creative process, in light of this mirroring, was Augusto Boal's mirroring sequence exercises. There are several detailed exercises in the mirroring sequence and the exercises are designed to help participants: "develop the capacity for observation by means of 'visual dialogues' between participants; the simultaneous use of spoken language is excluded" (Boal 1992: 129). Boal describes these exercises as a loving search for one's self in another. He says part of the idea of these exercises is that we seek ourselves in others, who seek themselves in us (Boal 1992: 134-135).

Combining these various artists and practitioners methods of working, we found a style of working that was both critical and revelatory in our process the making *Katuntu*. The process of remembering: introspection, self-analysis, claims of affiliation coupled with play and reflection in the form of intensive discussions, practical exercises and written exercises was a helpful approach in developing a workable methodology. The creation of this imaginative nostalgic world can be viewed as a type of re-membering that provides crucial experience without necessarily preserving an accurate replica of a lost homeland (Su 2005: 112). It is a fixation with this lost homeland that causes the nostalgic to view home through rose-tinted glasses.

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<sup>5</sup> See Meenakshi Mukherjee's definition of 'exile of the mind' in 'Unrooted Childhoods' p30.



This opening section was performed at the Egyptian Building on the Hiddingh Campus, UCT. Here, we see the figure's body moved by the call of her 'other'. Unable to 'see' (memory/the past) she can only hear and respond as she attempts to make sense of the calls.



**The unbearable beauty of her  
nostalgic dream of home.**

University of Cape Town

## Ground that will remember you: understanding home, place, site and landscape.

In order to understand my use of the word site, I will first discuss various theorists' understanding of home, place and landscape because all four concepts are interlinked. According to Anat Hecht, home is where you find yourself. Our material possessions and thus an accrual of memory associated with these, is what transforms our houses into homes. Our 'things' and keepsakes become objects we use consciously to thread memory (Hecht 2001: 123). Home is this private space that houses our memories and belongings of past times. Our homes offer a connection between our past and our present and our possible futures, in this manner framing and reflecting our sense of self. To lose a home is to lose a private museum of memory, identity and creative appropriation (Ibid). Furthermore, to lose a childhood home, our first secure place in the world, is to lose a fundamental part of ourselves and our history (Ibid). The memory of a childhood home is the remembrance of childhood, and thus the remembrance of a lost part of ourselves. Consequently re-visiting this lost site with which we come to affiliate ourselves, becomes complicated when we realize that this place we have for so long dreamed of, only exists in our mind. Remembering a bygone home or landscape is then an act of returning and of weaving symbolic roots into a lost world (Ibid).

Discussions of place as home are somewhat contentious. Theorists have different ideas of what constitutes home, landscape, site, place and how these concepts relate to one another. Lorraine Dowler in *Women Place: Gender and Landscape* (Dowler et al. 2005) mentions that "traditionally private spaces have been associated with home and designated as feminine" (Dowler et al. 2005: 3). Looking from a historical point of view she finds that landscapes have often been "exempted from moral responsibility due to their imagined nature" and that places are endowed with value through lived experience, while landscapes are seen as reflective scenes or fantasy, in this manner, depicting places as experienced and landscapes as imagined (3). In this sense, landscape requires a purposeful act of looking and this act engages strategies of consideration (3). Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place* (Tuan 1977) expresses

how ideas concerning place are multifaceted in adult human beings because they grow out of life's unique and shared experiences. He sees place as a pause in movement that makes it possible for us to endow place with value (Tuan 1977: 6). Tuan also explores how young children understand place, communicating how children see places as 'spaces' that stay put; even though they might travel, a place is always there, always something to go back to. Tuan observes that as the child grows older, she becomes attached to objects other than the important people in her life until eventually she is attached, even to place. Place, to the child, is a great and to some extent, inert type of object (29). Place then begins to acquire profound significance for the child through the steady accrual of sentiment over the years. Every item in one's bedroom, or even a stain on the wall tells a story. This is how home becomes a personal and intimate place (Ibid). We think of the house as home and place, but for Tuan, captivating images of the past are evoked not so much by the intact edifice, which can only be seen, as by its workings, parts and fixtures, which can be touched, heard and smelled as well. Memory entwines its charms in lesser, more recognizable things. The meaning of home then, must surely be "a place where everyday is multiplied by all the days before it" (144). Place is an archive of loving memories and grand realizations that awaken the present. Landscape is personal, familial, ethnic and tribal history made visible (154).

Tim Ingold supports this view of landscape as the accumulation of memory and history. In his analysis of the temporality of landscape, he attempts to move beyond the clean opposition between the "naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activity" and "a more culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space" (Ingold 2000: 189). He argues, that as a substitute for both views, we should take on what he calls a 'dwelling perspective' according to which the landscape represents a permanent record of- and is indicative of- "the lives and work of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there, something of themselves" (189). This notion of dwelling was recognized before by Yi-Fu Tuan who talks about the Aranda people, who are one of the Australian Aboriginal tribes. Tuan asserts that the "native's identity is in the rocks and waterholes that he can see and touch... he finds

recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of the immortal beings from whom he himself is descended...the whole landscape is his family tree” (Tuan 1977: 158). Whitehead affirms: “landscape is a site that has been modeled by history” continuing on to state that “landscape contains pieces of memory that act as a redemptive counterforce against the crisis of remembering” (Whitehead 2004: 48-50). She contextualizes the interconnectedness of place, landscape and site by stating that the:

The course of viewing landscape is a carefully constructed one through which the indifferent or unaccommodating *space* of a site or environment is transformed into a *place* which draws the viewer into its territory (48).

Schama suggests that landscape is the slow collection of memory and is therefore always a cultural construction because we read landscape through a combination of inherited memory, factual information and personal politics (Schama 2004: 61).

Borrowing from these varied theorists, my use of ‘site’ is a combination of these mixed ideas. Landscape has been an important word throughout the creation of *Katuntu* mainly because the piece happened outside. The decision to work in the spaces I chose was a creative one based on the architecture and structures of the chosen locations, in this manner, *Katuntu* is more site-responsive than it is site-specific. What is imperative is the milieu of the world we create and for this reason landscape is an imaginative site. What resonates most with *Katuntu* is Dowler’s depiction of landscape as “reflective scenes or fantasy”. It was important to create a sense of vastness of the landscape in *Katuntu*’s play-world. During one of our writing exercises concerning the landscape of the piece, I wrote:

*The landscape is a slipping in and out of memory-scape. A withering thread. A clear and vivid hallucination- blurred vision, blurred faces, blurred voices- faces stuck in laughter then ripped and torn apart by pain. It is far...we see far ahead...there is a long way to go, the feet are always moving in our world. When are we arrested? When do we linger? What are we searching for? This place is open emptiness. I sometimes feel as though I am a drop in this landscape, as though I am the only one here who hears me and my other. Sometimes this landscape feels like all the places I have lived that have lived in me. Faces make themselves known in this place-familiar faces, fragmented faces, appearing in pieces.*

Place is always changing in *Katuntu*, literally and metaphorically. The actors and the audience are required to change location and the figures are always journeying from

place to place, both in their minds and in action. Home, rather than being a whole edifice becomes a disjointed idea, an evocation, a feeling in *Katuntu*.

For me site is a convoluted yet intricate arrangement of my occupation, experience and memories of home, place and landscape. My use of site is more than just location, setting, or locale; it also encompasses all the factors that come with the 'ground' itself. These factors can be as precise as remembering a childhood birthday, my first experience at the cinema, a taunting childhood game, my first Halloween or my first day at school in a new country after being uprooted. Therefore re-visiting site is not merely going back to some place but going back to what endowed that place, that home, that landscape with meaning to begin with. It is recalling some lost thing, space or time because for the uprooted, place is constantly changing and the notion of home is ever-shifting.

### Uprooted Childhoods

The uprooted is always foreign or the 'other'. Uprooted children attempt to absorb rootedness through ritual and personal connection. Family, religion, language and the memories carried within become the home these children seek to revisit (Eidse & Sichel 2004: 180). Nina Sichel writes: "there are bits and pieces of me that belong everywhere, and just as many that belong nowhere" (Ibid). The journey to self-discovery can be an extended one for the uprooted child. In developing an integrated and whole identity, the uprooted child must learn to piece together selfhood in other ways. Nina Sichel, found (in adulthood) that she was pulled by nostalgia to revisit the important places of her youth, this was her way of making an attempt at piecing together a selfhood by incessantly probing for symbols and memories to secure her (183). Feeling nostalgic she searched for the keystones, landmarks of girlhood in hopes of triggering or settling memory. She needed symbols to act as attachments and as some sort of reification or fixture of her childhood. Sichel's was a literal revisiting that saw her physically returning to these places of her childhood. Mine is a metaphoric revisiting, a looking back rather than a physical return to these landmarks. The only way it becomes a physical return to childhood places is through re-imagining

and re-enacting through theatrical exploration but even this does not always suffice as looking back can prove to be unsatisfactory and unsuccessful for the nostalgic. Yi-Fu Tuan notes how an introspective return to our own childhood can be and is often disappointing, “for the bright and dark landscapes of our early years tend to fade while only a few landmarks such as birthdays and the first day at school remain” (Tuan 1977: 19). Despite being obsessed with trying, I am, for the most part, often unable to recapture the mood of my own childhood- always attempting to locate these highly charged moments from my past. Tuan mentions how these moments are sometimes held effectively by poets: “Like candid snapshots out of the family album their words recall for us a lost innocence and a lost dread, an immediacy of experience that had not suffered (or benefited) from the distancing of reflective thought” (20). Poet, William Wordsworth, writes of ‘memory places’ where particular sites and landscapes raise a prearranged consciousness. In recalling or describing past states of feeling, Wordsworth is perpetually concerned with situating these feelings within particular places or locations (Whitehead 2004: 49). Another poet, Virgil’s first eclogue is a conversation between two shepherds, Tityrus and Meliboeus, concerning their home. The poem looks at the loss of home, and the woe of Meliboeus at being driven out. This eclogue is dripping with nostalgic tones: “The beauty of home is seen through the eyes of loss” (Lerner 1972: 41).

For hooks, the feelings attached to home are those of refuge and solidarity. Home is the height of rootedness and it is outside of this safe space that she felt most unrooted and exposed as a child. She combines home and place and talks about ‘homeplace’. Homeplace is a place often constructed by black women that becomes a safe place for black people to affirm one another and in doing so, repair many of the wounds exacted by racist domination. She clarifies that the task of making homeplace, of making home a community of resistance and struggle, has been shared by black women worldwide, especially black women in oppressive white supremacist societies (hooks 1990: 42).

For Shishir Kurup, this conflict over home and place left him with the feeling of having to tread softly, of not being on stable ground, of being the outsider looking in, despite always being present. He describes it as the feeling that at any particular

moment, any of the rightful citizenry could say ‘Go back to where you came from’ and yet to ‘Go back’ is confusing. There is no going back. This idealized ‘home’ you’re supposed to go back to is precarious, because it really does not exist anymore (Kurup cited in Ugwu 1995: 39). This dream of returning home is exactly that: a dream. Going back would mean undoing time, because where you are is when you are and who you are (40). One can simultaneously be an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in a place but the way one becomes an insider is more meticulous; it means learning a new way of performing, a new attempt to assimilate to and understand a new found culture in order to perhaps, eventually become an ‘insider’. It is through involvement in these daily performances that we get to know a place and feel part of it. It also suggests that those who do not know the routine will appear clumsy and ‘out-of-place’ simply through their body practice (Cresswell 2004: 34).

I engage with the kind of clumsiness experienced by the outsider who is constantly out of place (even in their own country) in my piece, *The only thing I collect is memories*<sup>6</sup> (2009) when I use the word *ixelegu* which is isiXhosa for ‘slob’ or ‘clumsy’. This is how I felt upon my return to the ‘home’ I had been eager to return to. Nothing can prepare you for how ‘clumsy’ you feel when you exchange one culture for another and are thrust back into the culture you have abandoned. This is the complicated dichotomy of home as place which constructs a clear ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ split. Cresswell mentions that the kind of place at the centre of much humanistic geography is very much a place of rootedness and legitimacy. As long as place signifies a firm and relatively inert connection between a group of people and a site then it will be constantly implicated in the construction of ‘us’ (people who belong in a place) and ‘them’ (those who do not). In this way outsiders are constructed (39). This must mean that for the uprooted- who are always coming upon new sites- feeling like an outsider (at least for some time) is a regular and expected experience.

As an uprooted child I have had five different childhood homes in two different countries. My idea of home is ever-changing and is rather elusive. An uprooted

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<sup>6</sup> *The only thing I collect is memories* was performed in 2009 at the University of Cape Town in the Arena Theatre on Hiddingh Campus.

childhood leaves one with a nostalgic sense of time and place that we can reflect on, long for and dream of. All that I have left are my memories and the ability to narrate and transmit them no matter how fragmented. The practice of recollecting and retelling our past and in particular our childhood years, is therefore seen as an important action in linking past, present and future, enabling us to structure and reflect upon our experiences, as well as resolve certain conflicts and events in our past (Miller 2001: 123). Memories can act as the recovery of lost experience; memories are the altered recreations of our own childhood, our continued efforts to make sense of our lives, to combine the past and present so as to face the future (Rose 2003: 363).

Language, place, family and community shift for uprooted children with each geographical move and, as a result, uprooted children become composites, bits and pieces added and perhaps taken away with each relocation and with each new cultural influence (Eidse & Sichel 2004: 2). Uprooted children absorb fragments of the many cultures they are exposed to and develop kaleidoscopic identities- sometimes replacing their own culture with another- or in the case of Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga: 1988), ending up with a complex combination of two different cultures that force her to deal with the repercussions of her own biculturalism (Gorle 1997: 188). Entering new cultures young, eager and vulnerable often exposes children to a new journey and danger. To leave the security of one's home culture is to risk psychological exposure among strangers. There can be drama in every new move, excitement at discovering new places to go, new people to meet and to be. For the uprooted, identity is always shifting and developing; with every new move there is the possibility of becoming a new person. But there can also be intense pain in severing the familiar, in the physical and emotional distancing of loved ones. In my research this lingering pain and inexplicable longing is translated through the ever-searching nostalgic, me.

When the nomadic child returns to her parents' home country, she is expected to integrate smoothly, to assimilate a culture she has been taught is hers, to conceal the various cultures she has accumulated while living abroad (Eidse & Sichel 2004: 4). For many the shift is difficult. The assumptions they have made about their home

community may only partially fit reality. Certainly for me the transition from my new found culture to my old one was difficult as it is for Nyasha upon her return to Zimbabwe. Nothing can prepare one for the culture shock and the adjustments that need to be made to one's life. Nyasha's disrupted childhood has marked her permanently and as a result Nyasha becomes a victim of linguistic deracination on her arrival at home in the then, Rhodesia. Nyasha tries to explain the rift between her and her parents, she tells Tambu:

We shouldn't have gone [. . .]. Now they're stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it. [. . .] They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them. [. . .] I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. But it offends them -I offend them. Really, it's very difficult (Dangarembga 1988: 78).

Nyasha's deracination leads persistently to social alienation and a deep sense of personal powerlessness, thus, internal exile is taken to its extreme position of self-exile, almost self-annihilation which manifests itself as acute anorexia nervosa followed by a nervous breakdown (Gorle 1997: 187). Accordingly the uprooted child might experience the phenomenon, which Meenakshi Mukherjee calls, "the exile of the mind". This form of exile is experienced by writers and/or their fictional characters who "without being physically away from home remain outsiders in their own country due to certain circumstances in their history, language or education" (Mukherjee 1988: 8). This "exile of the mind" is the plight of the uprooted child because children raised as foreigners often question the whole concept of home, never feeling that they quite belong anywhere. As an uprooted child, I am always searching for some kind of anchoring or rootedness but the only permanence I seem to be able to find lies in memory (however fallible it may be) and in the stories I tell through theatre. When memory fails me, I turn to nostalgia which appears to be an unavoidable symptom of being uprooted. For me, nostalgia is the most imaginative and effective means of dealing with this condition of finding myself to be 'empty in places where I should be full'. Nostalgia is a 'social disease'<sup>7</sup> and thorough "engagement with the past assumes its fullest ethical dimensions when it draws upon

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<sup>7</sup> Coined by Susan Stewart cited by John Su in *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005: 12).

not only memory but also nostalgia, when they claim to recover not only what should have been remembered and preserved but also relationships and communities that could have been” (Su 2005: 12).

### **The Nostalgic’s search for home: recovering lost experience.**

Despite being somewhat neglected, nostalgia is hardly a new concept. Even with the surge in topics relating to memory in the humanities over the last two decades, critics still accuse nostalgics of being sentimental, escapist, and inauthentic claiming that nostalgia simplifies, if not, falsifies the past (Hodgkin & Radstone 2003: 83). In *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005), John Su highlights how nostalgia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in academic discourse, has been characterized as a form of amnesia, which tends to associate nostalgia with passivity, self-deception and reactionary ideals (Su 2005: 66). Indeed, the analysis of nostalgia has been largely neglected to the extent that when it enters such discussions, it is typically thwarted. Of course there are different forms of nostalgia and one cannot claim that nostalgia is necessarily always ethical but the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary society across the globe demands greater attention and one cannot disregard nostalgia as a necessary and often productive form of confronting loss and displacement (3).

Nostalgia summons the imagination to supplement memory. In *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism* (1997), Pickering and Kehde describe nostalgia as a sort of homesickness, a pain (algos) or longing to return home (nostos) or to some lost past. The distress that inclines one homeward uproots the relation to the present by drawing one toward where one remembers feeling a sense of completeness and belonging. For Zandile this place is represented by Durban, for Beloved it is with her family and for Nyasha the idea of home is so abstract that she occupies a liminal space. Gcina Mhlope’s *Have you seen Zandile?* is loosely based on the playwright’s own experience of childhood. It is a nostalgic longing for the stories and games of

childhood felt by both the title character and the author, brought to fruition through theatrical exploration (Delisle 2006: 389). Mhlope also laments the loss of childhood and tells the nostalgic story of Zandile's disrupted childhood. According to Delisle, nostalgia is a shifting word, it can be both experiential- based on one's personal memories or it can be cultural- based on collective memories or cultural myths (Ibid). In Svetlana Boym's terms, it can be 'restorative', meaning the nostalgic is centered on the past (Boym 2001: 18), or it can be 'reflective', meaning that the nostalgic is centered on the loss of and inability to recover the past.

Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrecoverability of the past and human finitude while restorative nostalgia is the return to the original stasis...Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory. The two might overlap in their frames of reference, but they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity. They can use the same triggers of memory and symbols but tell different stories about it. If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space (Boym 2001: 49).

Mhlope is both a reflective and restorative nostalgic in that, by writing this semi-autobiographical play, she is able to restore her own childhood, to revisit it on stage and on the page, even in a somewhat fictionalized framework (Delisle 2006: 389). I think my work, in particular, *Katuntu* is more concerned with a reflective kind of nostalgia although restorative nostalgia also features especially through the re-enactment of past experience and memory. Perhaps it can be said that *Katuntu's* process was highly reflective while the performances served as a kind of restoration.

In *Have you seen Zandile?*, Mhlope is preoccupied with the traumatic rupture between past and present. *Katuntu* also points towards this rupture between past and present, at once attempting to reflect and then restore. Mhlope's protagonist Zandile presents this in the way in which her memory becomes ruptured when she is moved away from Durban to the Transkei. She comes to associate her grandmother and their loving relationship full of storytelling, games and life-lessons with her idyllic landscape (Durban). She is kidnapped by her estranged mother and moved away from her loving grandmother with whom she shared a strong bond.

Drawing on Schama's theories, Mackey has developed an interest in the making of memories in and partly because of the landscape rather than recollecting history. Mackey expresses specific interest in collective memory and the importance of childhood in the making of memory. She looks to collective memory as a feature of a shared culture (Mackey 2002: 19). As with all cultures, some members remain on the fringes while others, for reasons of their own, connect with the very heart of the blossoming culture and fiercely uplift, protect, extend and care for it. The myths and traditions become deeply embedded and these memories act as impenetrable and significant layers of their biographies that may be recalled for use later in their lives (Ibid). This way of seeing has been connected with a lost stage of living, and the:

association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a convention, in which not only innocence and sanctuary but peace and abundance have been imprinted, permanently, first on a particular site, and then, on a particular time of the past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relations and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, nature (Mackey 2002: 19).

Zandile's idyllic and innocent childhood is shattered when she is brought to the Transkei to fulfill her daughterly duties of hard work and marriage and she must grow from a child to a strong-willed young woman (Delisle 2006: 387). Mackey notes how often an idea of the country is an idea of childhood: not only the memories of home, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood, of cheerful absorption in our own world from which, eventually, in the course of growing up, we are distanced and alienated so that it and the world become things we watch. This is the plight of Mhlope's protagonist, Zandile, who longs for an idealized childhood but is quickly alienated from it and thrust into a grown-up role. Childhood memories are formative, absolute, and unambiguous. They act as indelible markers and sources of some form of metaphysical wisdom in our belief systems. These memories are probably more idealistic and nostalgic representations of reality more than they are accurate (Mackey 2002: 20).

The homeward pain of nostalgia assumes that one's present place is somehow not homelike. Nostalgia therefore is generated by a sense of having lost a wholeness only vaguely recalled (Pickering & Kehde 1997: 9). The indistinctness of the

recollection often inspires the idealization of this past. Because nostalgia necessarily relies on a distance- temporal or/and spatial- separating the subject from the object of its longing, the imagination is encouraged to skim over forgetfulness in order to fashion a more aesthetically complete and satisfying recollection of what is longed for (Pickering & Kehde 1997: 9). Such a glossing over in the interim relieves the pain by emitting a nostalgic image that has been purified, clarified and simplified in order to replace the elusiveness of the imperfect recollection through aesthetic intervention. In a sense the nostalgic image is torn from its temporal and spatial possibilities as it is introduced to and appropriated for an alien time and space (9). The unrepresentable loss, painful as it may be, is thus transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form. It must at the same time be admitted, however, that this view of nostalgia as an imaginative forgetfulness perfecting memory with its supplement does not offer a complete representation (9). While longing is universal, nostalgia can be divisive. How can one be homesick for a home one never had or does not remember? Overcome by nostalgia, you can forget your actual past. Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is the reaction to loss and displacement but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy (Boym 2001: xiii).

The image of nostalgia has often been set-up as a double disclosure or a juxtaposition of two images- of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. Nostalgia depends on unpredictability and nostalgics find it difficult to locate exactly what it is they are yearning for. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of rapidly increasing rhythms of life and historical disruption; it is a longing for stability in a fragmented world (Boym 2001: xiv). Nostalgia goes beyond individual psychology. At first glance nostalgia is a longing for place but actually it is a yearning for a different time- the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. Nostalgia is not just a defense mechanism but also a coping strategy for the nostalgic who is dealing with disruption. The nostalgic desires to do away with history and turn it into private or collective mythology- to revisit time like space- refusing to give in to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition (xiv).

Nostalgic re-enactments are based on imitation; the past is remade in the image of the present or a desired future. Nostalgia is not a property of the object itself but a result of an interaction between objects and subjects, between *actual landscapes and the landscapes of the mind*<sup>8</sup>. Being uprooted means that you are always oscillating between actual site and the sites that operate only in the mind; it means that you also have to turn to other ways of filling the spaces in-between. For me, this comes through re-visiting site, images, conversations and personal connection with and through other black women (this is why I write about a black girlhood and not just girlhood). Sharing experience of memory with other black girls in whom I look for and recognize aspects of myself, is not only about the relationship with the individual biography but also with the biographies of groups or nations, between personal and shared memory (Boym 2001: xvi).

Referring to the interconnectedness of memory and nostalgia, Su points to *Beloved* as the perfect marriage of these two concepts. Sethe's reflections exhibit the sentimental and selective characteristics of nostalgia, she experiences nostalgia throughout the novel and there is no indication in the novel that Sethe should be condemned for longing or that her longing is even stoppable. Her nostalgia constitutes a significant part of her memory and experience; we understand who she is, her behaviour and the claims she makes, with reference to her nostalgia (Su 2005: 2). Her nostalgia feels legitimate to her just as my nostalgic condition feels legitimate to me as an extension of my broken memory- it is a condition I accept. "To view one's surroundings nostalgically means to interpret the present in relation to a lost or inaccessible past" (5). Su cites Stewart's dehistoricized characterization of nostalgia as "sadness without an object [...] the desire for desire" (5). This rings true for me in light of the figure I play in *Katuntu*. Here is an example of sadness without a clear referent. Longing with no clear evidence of what exactly she is longing for, what is unmistakable is that she is longing and that this longing comes from an innate place, a place of not knowing. Nostalgia provides a mode of imagining more fully what has been and continues to be absent (9). James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is another example of a novel about nostalgia and home. In it, his protagonist

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis my own.

Giovanni, recognizes that “you will go home and find that home is not home anymore. Then you will really be in trouble” (Baldwin 1956:154-155). “More than a retroactive effect, nostalgia is an effect which, unable to name what it experiences as lost, can only misrecognize the object it desires” (Ginsberg 1996: 230). Although this misrecognition might at first glance, seem unethical and sentimental, it is what lends nostalgia its creative and artistic qualities. It is through this imaginative filter that you are able to re-visit site. Notions of home, landscape and place are affected when paired with nostalgic inclinations. Having discussed home, place and landscape earlier; let me now examine how the nostalgic tends to re-visit these sites.

### **Imagined homes in imagined landscapes.**

Just as memory becomes a performance of selfness that cannot possibly exist but which must exist, the same can be said of site. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym states that: “The dreams of imagined homelands can not and should not come to life” (Boym 2001: 354). But they do come to life in re-imagined and re-figured ways; they must come to life in order for the nostalgic to cope with loss. Cresswell talks about the importance of a ‘sense of place’ for the nostalgic. By ‘sense of place’, he means the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place (Cresswell 2004: 7). This evokes a feeling of what it must be like to ‘be there’ so that even when we are not we can still incite imagination. Places have spaces in between them; they have gaps that are filled by imagination. However, for Cresswell, landscape, unlike home or place is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it while places (like homes) are very much things to be inside of (Cresswell 2004: 10). According to Cresswell, we do not live in landscapes- we look at them (11). Contrastingly, Ingold, drawing on James Gibson, rejects the division of landscape as an inner and outer space. Instead, he asserts that landscape is not just a picture however real or imagined but a space we occupy. “In the landscape of our dwelling, we look around” (Gibson cited by Ingold 2000: 202). Through living in it, the landscape is part of us just as we are part of it (191).

Steven Rose recalls his earliest childhood memory of landscape, looking out of his window at the night sky and he goes on to describe what seems to be quite a vivid recollection of a memory. He says:

No one else has invented these memories for me, because I see them clearly with the peculiarly scaled down version of a child. And like many childhood memories they are not linear, not a series of sequential events, but more like pictures, truly 'photographic' memories, even if the photographs come with feels, sounds and smells attached (Rose 2003: 41).

Rose sees his memories in his photographic landscapes. He adds:

Obsessed with the attempt to see how far back in my childhood I can remember, I have taken out these internally filed photographs, redeveloped and reprinted them, cropped them a little differently, made them matt or gloss, black-and-white or colour, enlarged them to fit a new frame. Every time I remember these events, I recreate a memory anew (Rose 2003: 42).

Ingold believes that Rose's view of landscape is how modern society tells us to describe our understanding of landscape as though we were viewing a picture (Ingold 2000: 202). Ingold expresses the view that landscape is also in our bodies, "landscape is incorporated in our bodily experience" (203). Ingold cites Merleau-Ponty in saying landscape, is not so much the object as "the homeland of our thoughts" (207). But by revisiting his photographic images, Rose is able to see the landscape of his childhood memory in different albeit imagined ways.

It would be wrong, however, to romanticize this sense of place as always rosy and 'homelike' (in the idealized sense of home). Some places (real and imagined) are evil, oppressive and exploitative. In *The only thing I collect is memories*, I express some of the difficulties experienced by an uprooted child living in an oppressive place. For me, this oppressive place was a small town in Texas where I was not only an 'outsider' but seemingly an 'outsider' among other 'outsiders'. I was living amongst African-Americans who were a minority and also marginalized within their own country. In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu comes to realize that Nyasha is caught in a double-bind, trapped by both language and gender. She is exiled not only because her years abroad have taught her to think within English frameworks but because she was born female. She has presumably come home, but she can never be at home as

long as her society continues its old tradition of assuming male superiority and female submissiveness. Nyasha relinquishes any notions she may have had of an idealized home and comes to see home as a repressive and malevolent place (Gorle 1997: 188). This brings me back to how bell hooks, comparatively, writes about home as a place of resistance. To hooks, home and the behaviors that go into making a home can have significance as forms of resistance in an oppressive white world. Home becomes a shelter away from white subjugation, a sanctuary where black men and women can repair their spirits and recover themselves (hooks 1990: 46). Home may indeed act as a particular kind of safe place where (some) people are relatively free to create and construct their own identities. Whereas Nyasha is forced to conceal and suppress her identities in the home, hooks sees homeplace as an empowering place (26). Both notions of place are still informed by the way that we experience the world- through and in place. And perhaps it is because place is so primal to human existence that it becomes such a powerful political force in its socially constructed forms (Creswell 2004: 50). Place and home (real or imagined) are critical for the nostalgic except, nostalgia is never accurate but imaginative. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one.

For Nyasha whose family left the then, Rhodesia for England when she was five years old- returning to her home with a complex combination of English and Shona beliefs and ideals becomes increasingly problematic. It seems her disrupted childhood has marked her permanently (Gorle 1997: 180). Zandile's abrupt and forced departure from home results in her constantly living in her own nostalgic memory in order to cope with her present situation. Beloved's experience differs from the other two because she longs for a home and a childhood that she never had the opportunity to experience. She becomes a haunting and destructive presence that is nostalgic for a past she has never had. For all three figures, this unwanted departure from a familiar 'site' causes great feelings of longing and pain, a longing and pain that is not always identifiable for the nostalgic. Evidently, the loss of home, sense of place and the landscape associated with home causes the nostalgic to seek other ways of coping with inexplicable yearning. Laurence Lerner questions if perhaps nostalgia is not the basis of all art (Lerner 1972: 49). He says: "perhaps longing is what makes art

possible” (52). My work certainly concerns itself with the imaginative and longing characteristic of nostalgia.

University of Cape Town

**The 'girlfriend' aesthetic.**

University of Cape Town

Kevin Quashie in *Black Women, Identity and Cultural Theory* (2004), introduces the 'girlfriend aesthetic' phenomenon that I have been referring to thus far. He infers that the 'girlfriend' relationship is complex because not only does the subject identify with but she is also being placed against. In this context subjectivity is an "ongoing unsettling process" (Quashie 2004: 16). If the practice of subjecthood manifests as an alternation between identification "with" and identification "as", then the narrative construct that correlates to this shifting is the girlfriend, the other Black woman who is a subject's girl. Quashie is talking about sisterhood: woman-centered engagement, two bodies in meeting and grip. The girlfriend is the other someone who makes it possible for a black female subject to bring more of herself into thought, to imagine herself in an untamed and undomesticated safety. A woman is encouraged by her girlfriend to be herself completely even as the weight of doing so might be too much for their connection to bear (16). This fierce yet effortless relationship is reflected in Nyasha and Tambu, in *Sethe* and *Beloved* and in the relationships Zandile has with her Grandmother and her girlfriends. The complexity of this dual relationship is implicit in *Katuntu*; this double bind was articulated in one of our writing sessions:

*This other someone brings promise of tearing through to reveal what I have already forgotten. She takes me with her, at times we are arrested, at times we are moving. She pulls me in and out, sometimes I pull myself out. I feel disoriented, I get angry at her...at me when she can not fulfill this promise. When she pulls me into something so familiar only to leave me to navigate on my own- I get so angry, I want to slap these memories out of her. Then she coaxes me into another and I am pacified again.*

hooks isolates the 'girl' in 'girlfriend' and uses the word in the way that it is used in traditional African-American culture as an indication of powerful womanist affection, not as an insult. "It is an evocation to, and of intimacy, based on proud recognition of gender" (hooks 1990: 100). Women in Xhosa culture use the word *ntombi* in the same affectionate way. While hook's recognizes the importance of black-woman centered identification, she acknowledges that it is not necessarily the case as there is sometimes a lack of sisterhood and feminist solidarity among black women (hooks 1990: 100). While she supports the notion of the girlfriend 'other' she does not romanticize it and understands that it must be approached and understood as a dual relationship. For me, this relationship is complex just as Quashie describes it. It is a

meeting of 'selves'- having to embrace or negate a part of oneself that you are ready to see or acknowledge set against that which you are painfully and painstakingly trying to hide or reveal. This is the self that Quashie speaks about. It is not just the 'other' you recognize in 'girlfriends' or 'mothers' or 'grandmothers' but an 'other' within you. hooks writes a beautifully poetic passage about her childhood home and her grandmother in the chapter "An Aesthetic of Blackness" in *Yearning* (hooks 1990). In this passage, she tells the story of how she was taught to see the beauty that surrounds her and in her 'self' by her grandmother. Otherwise meaningless objects and spaces were endowed with meaning and emotion when she began to see the beauty that surrounded *her* home. She writes:

This is the story of a house. It has been lived in by many people. Our grandmother, Baba made this house living space. She was certain that the way we lived was shaped by objects, the way we looked at them, the way they were placed around us. She was certain that we were shaped by space...Her house is a place where I am learning to look at things, where I am learning how to belong in space. In rooms full of objects, crowded with things, I am learning to recognize myself. She hands me a mirror, showing me how to look...Do you believe that space can give life, or take it away, that space has power? These are questions she asks which frightened me. Baba dies an old woman, out of place. Her funeral is also a place to see things, to recognize myself (hooks 1990: 103).

hooks, in the face of her grandmother's death still sees beauty, the beauty that she was taught to see by Baba. Even though this house was ugly, she found meaning and value in the space. She is a part of her grandmother even in death; she carries with her the beauty of space, their space and their spaces. Baba is the other part of her 'self'. "Remembering the houses of my childhood, I see how deeply my concern with aesthetics was shaped by black women who were fashioning an aesthetic of being, struggling to create an oppositional world view for their children, working with space to make it livable" (hooks 1990: 112). Without her grandmother in this place that they had filled with memory, hooks found that this home could no longer shelter her. "At times home is nowhere" (Ibid). The idea of home as being one place began to change for her. Home became ever-changing perspectives, locations and a different way of seeing reality and difference. At times, home is only estrangement and alienation-atopia. This home that she shared with her grandmother was a container for stories

and a place where histories unravelled. The disruption of her relationship with her 'other', her 'girlfriend' manifested itself as an interruption of home and place (152).

One thing that connects you to your girlfriend 'other' is language. Language is the most transportable cultural landmark. It informs the senses and secures one's place in the world. It is also through language that one creates an identity. With words as their intermediary, children create memories, ideas, and selves. Like collage, they stitch their lives, story by story, binding together various experiences with the thread of language (Eidse & Sichel 2004: 245). More than just a collection of words, language roots its speakers in a common cultural understanding. Language reflects values, humor, history, pride- all the unspoken suppositions that form a sense of self and identity- and leads to bonds between speakers. In using a particular language the speaker is also expressing affiliation. For an uprooted child, learning the language of the new found culture is how you assimilate into that new culture (Eidse & Sichel 2004: 245). In *Uprooted Childhoods* (Eidse & Sichel 2004) some tell of lonely childhoods lived on the border of language, with confused identities that are not secured until adulthood (246). The crisis of living on the margins of language is one that I could identify with strongly upon my return to my home country. Similarly, in his article *Inbetween Space*, when commenting about his command of his mother tongue, Malayalam, Kurup quips:

I have now effectively lost all my adoptive languages and am solely an English speaker. It's like a kind of stroke, where I can visualize the words but can't translate into language. What has been lost and what has been gained he asks? (cited in Ugwu 1995: 46).

As an uprooted child, girlfriend connection became crucial for me if I was to exist to myself and to others. It became a way of coming away from the margins of language after realizing how alienated I felt as a victim of linguistic deracination. This girlfriend connection became necessary if I was to remember who I could have been and longed to be. It became a prism through which I could see aspects of myself that I was too ashamed to reveal and almost became a way of living vicariously through others. Nostalgia demands this kind of vicarious living because you can not directly return to a lost past. Even though my mother tongue was lost to me, I still found a

powerful affinity and pride in Xhosa-speaking black girls. Without language what are you left with? How do you find it again? Language is performative and language has become a part of the unspeakable disorder that I am trying to articulate. In other words, the disruption of language is also something that I 'play', for it also remains in fragments. I could not articulate it; yet, I still resonated with the attitudes and beliefs that were immersed in the Xhosa language as though they were coming from me.

It is precisely because of this black-woman-centered identification that encompasses the 'girlfriend aesthetic' that I was able to find an entry point into my lost culture. Accordingly when I talk about black girlhood, I am talking about myself and 'others' but most importantly I am talking about myself in an 'other'.

It is an (un)becoming, a gathering and scattering of affiliation, an arrival at and refusal of one's own. Girlfriend subjectivity oscillates between states of claim and abjection, of connection and disarray. In such self-fashioning the other is an/other, both a 'me', a 'not me' and a 'part of me'. This practice of pairing with an/other and oscillating between states of (dis)identification gives way to a liminal identity, a subjectivity that is material and corporeal but which also transcends the limits imposed by corporeality, visual culture and colonization. This is a selfhood that disputes the normative constructions of "self", this liminal subjectivity is not exactly an achieved state; instead, it is a series of uncoverings (Quashie 2004: 40-41).

Nyasha's dilemma is one of (dis)identification; she reacts against and rejects colonization (by challenging the patriarchal structures in place) as well as her very own corporeality (she becomes anorexic in order to purge herself of her liminal subjectivity). What is uncovered is not a new identity but, instead, a self that was always there. The girlfriend subject in her complete humanity had always been a multiple subject of inconceivable depth and her practice of coupling with an/other (in Nyasha's case, Tambu) is subjectivity as revelation. "These revelations mark an/other part of the 'waiting' self, the self that was and is always there, a self that was, is and (un)becomes" (Quashie 2004: 70). This uncovering is a revelation but it is a revelation of old. It is not a becoming but an unbecoming because you have always 'been'. This is how the mirror as object gains power and significance in *Katuntu*, because what is revealed is not a new 'self' but a self that has always been there, however disjointed.



Photographs for *Katuntu (...and you too)* by Karabo Maine.

Therefore the 'girlfriend aesthetic' is not just companionship with another but companionship with yourself. In Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) we see Sula and Nel's process of subjecthood. These two women are dancing others, girlfriends who love each other under the heading of an 'always'. Their meeting occurs in an instant of unconscious twoness:

It was in dreams that the two girls had first met. Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened...they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream (Morrison 1973: 51).

This presence, this someone, is the girlfriend, the other who is so much the self that the boundaries between the two become fluid and sometimes collapse (Quashie 2004: 19). This is like being in the company of one's own self, one's other self. In *Katuntu*, the figure struggles with her relationship with her 'other' (played by Injairu Kulundu). She is torn between exploring the magic of being able to navigate through her own memory-scape recalling all things forgotten, and waiting to hold her other

accountable for her unknowing. This text below was developed in one of our writing exercise and part of it was used in the actual production. The figure confronts her 'other' in saying:

*I find her haggard and tired, has she suffered what I have suffered? Has she held up a mirror to find no one there? Is she not the deserter? I cannot care, I will not care. She promised refuge and then...nothing. It is settled then, I will live in her! She holds my language and home in her. I will live in her. She must avail herself. The time for court is over, I will set up home in her. Edifice, holder of my place, container of my thoughts, dreams, memories. I will live in you (Katuntu 2009).*

What is apparent is that the figure's separation from all the things she wishes to remember makes her hysterical and physically and mentally unwell. It is her nostalgia and her longing that drive her suffering.

### **'The body in bits and pieces'<sup>9</sup>: Corporealized memory and site.**

Boym looks at nostalgia as an individual sickness and goes on to question how it would not occur to us to require a prescription for nostalgia. She points out that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, similar to the common cold. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the passing illness turned into the enduring modern condition. Nostalgia is distinct from melancholia, which limits itself to the locale of individual consciousness. Nostalgia is about the relationship between the individual biography and the biography of groups or nations (Boym 2001: xvi). Beloved represents the illness of collective memory (for black America dealing with the emotional repercussions of slavery) and personal memory (for Sethe who lost her daughter because of slavery). Nostalgia was said to fabricate "erroneous representations" (the word was coined by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688) (xvi) that caused the distressed to lose touch with the present. Yearning for a lost past or native land became the nostalgic's single obsession. The

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<sup>9</sup> Taken from *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Ed.) (1996: 230).

patients acquired “a lifeless and haggard countenance” and “indifference towards everything”, confusing past and present, real and imaginary events (Boym 2001: 3). In tracing the origins of nostalgia, Shaw and Chase mention a case whereby “a sick man of Europe had taken to his bed dreaming of a childhood that he had never had, regressing into a series of fictitious imaginings” (Shaw & Chase 1989: 1). If you were to trace the historic roots of the word, locating it in medical history, you would find that “it had originally been regarded as a disease with physical symptoms that were the result of homesickness: a physician found the lungs of nostalgia victims tightly adhered to the pleura of the thorax, the tissue of the lobe thickened and purulent...to leave home for long was to risk death” (Shaw & Chase 1989: 10). Returning the ‘homesick’, the ‘nostalgic’ to their origins, it was believed, was the prospective cure for the ‘disease’- its restorative ending. “Since no *actual* turning back and return in time is possible, nostalgia became an incurable state of mind, a signifier of ‘absence’ and ‘loss’ that could in effect never be made ‘presence’ and ‘gain’ except through memory and the creativity of reconstruction” (Hodgkin & Radstone 2003: 82).

One of the early symptoms of nostalgia was the ability to hear voices or see ghosts (Boym 2001: 3). This is precisely what happens to Sethe who, when confronted with the pain of her loss which is represented by the rebirth of the ghost of Beloved, is oblivious and indifferent to everything around her, allowing herself to slowly deteriorate. Nostalgia, the disease of an afflicted imagination, incapacitates her body and her mind. The nostalgic is possessed by the mania of longing, so much so, that she also has an amazing capacity for remembering sensations, smells, tastes and sounds (4). Nostalgia remains unmethodical and unsynthesizable; it seduces rather than convinces (13).

Sethe in *Beloved* experiences all of these symptoms of nostalgia and her particular sites of memory have corporeal qualities because of their power over her mind. Consider Beloved’s possession and how black corporeal memory manifests itself through her. Furthermore, consider how Beloved’s wild resurgence causes Sethe to ail, making her increasingly ill. The vividness and reappearance of her dead daughter’s memory is troubling enough to make her unwell. Beloved is a fixed presence (even in absence), a palpable flesh to be/ held and beheld. She is irrefutable

(Quashie 2004: 102). But as much as she exhibits memory's precision and irrepressibility, she also articulates its ambiguity and fluency. She fades and evaporates as much as she crystallizes and endures. These competing characteristics constitute Beloved's identity, her Black and female body, and the permanence and impulse of her flesh is the essential identity that can only be articulated through memory (102). Morrison's novel theorizes memory not only as an embodiment but as a Black and female body with sisterly inclinations (Quashie 2004: 102). Morrison's novel helps flesh out the nature of memory's corporeality as well as its subjectivity.

*Beloved* also examines historiographic discourse and memory. It is in this novel that Morrison mentions the notion of 'rememory' that she comes to define as an individual experience, as a trope which suggests the 'interconnectedness of minds, past and present' (Rody 1995: 101). This prefix 're' (usually used for the act, not the property of consciousness) suggests that rememory is an active creative mental function. For Sethe- Morrison's protagonist in *Beloved*- rememory describes a natural or a supernatural phenomenon. For Sethe as well as for Morrison to rememory is to "use one's imaginative power to realize an unconscious connection to the past" (Rody 1995: 101). Rememory thus functions in Morrison's history as a way of remembering. In *Beloved* memory is elevated and given almost supernatural power that again speaks to the inability to fix memory. This notion of memory possessing mystical abilities is inherent in my own preoccupation with playing and staging it. Morrison's protagonists in *Beloved* suffer from hysterics: they are subjects haunted by the past and become characters who instinctively utter repressed memories of traumatic histories and psychic trauma through physical symptoms using a corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable; disorder (Parker 2001: 1). Fragmented and repressed memories manifest themselves in the body and are transformed into bodily symptoms such as coughs, fits, limps, linguistic distortion and convulsions (Parker 2001: 2). Similarly, Nyasha, in *Nervous Conditions* develops acute anorexia nervosa and literally suffers a nervous breakdown as a result of social alienation and the memory of her disrupted childhood. For Nyasha it is atopia (literally 'without place') that results in a visceral hysteria.

My enquiry also expresses an interest in how playing memory might manifest itself in the body and from the landscape in which you are playing. Rather than taking existing bodily symptoms and investigating them, I explore the terrain which might then evoke bodily reactions which I then reconstruct or translate into visual images. This was a useful tool in *Katuntu* and we called these memory sites ‘memory hotspots’. These are exact locations that hold such lucid memories and are such ineradicable markers, that a figure’s passing over them incites an involuntary corporeal response. This response is a physical language in and of itself, it is a way of articulating a corporeal discourse and the symptoms of our loss speak on our behalf when language fails us (Parker, E 2001: 15). In *Katuntu* this language is at times non-verbal, gestural and seldom uses a recognizable vocabulary. These conversations and responses include murmurs, muttering gibberish, melodious harmonies, screeching cries, piercing laughter, shattering wails, sporadic uttering, screams, grunts, panting and heavy breathing. Sometimes the language is held in a look, a sideways glance, a penetrating stare, a rolling of the eyes, eyes open wide that cannot see or just vacant eyes. There is something fierce about the vocal and gestural language, almost feral (particularly the final section of the piece in the pit) – fierce protective love and fierce unaccepting hate. We become sound-makers, barely understood, except by each other. We are bits for so long that we are only whole when we are together and, even then; the strain of this dichotomous relationship becomes almost too much for us to bear.

‘Memory, as this [in *Katuntu*’s case *two*] black female body, destroys and is susceptible to destruction. It is past and present and even future. It is dead, alive and ailing, palpable, incomplete and immaterial. It is unwavering and collapses; not easy to trust yet impossible to ignore, elusive and allusive’ (Quashie 2004: 105). These contradictions personify memory, at once characterizing how memory works and also imbuing and endowing memory with dynamic lifelikeness. Memory as a Black and female body is essential, is muse, artist and art and must be occupied toward the attainment of a self-defined voice, toward the meeting of the memory of one’s own body- the girlfriend memory (110).



Injairu Kulundu and Alude Mahali seen here in the second section of *Katuntu*. The second section was performed in and around a tree. The tree served as a memory 'hotspot'. A rooted and fixed holder of memory juxtaposed with the ephemerality and inability to wholly recall in the figures navigation of this 'hotspot'.

Memories are carried into places by the bodies which hold them- it must then be said that our memories enter a site, place, landscape and home just as we (the containers) do.

**To reflect as a  
mirror does.**

University of Cape Town

## Reflections: A discussion of my early work.

I would like to point to my early projects because they all have similar themes and motifs, the culmination of which is *Katuntu*. My early project, *As she her mouth opens to speak*,<sup>10</sup> focused on the loss of language but also explored the visceral reaction of the body to this loss of language. For the figure in the piece, it is not the voice that is obliterated but, the ability to speak a language and communicate in a way that is understood by others. Language among children does not hold the weight it does as one grows older. Children have their own language, their own methods of communication: the language of childhood is one of song, games, play, rhymes, riddles and chants- this is how children communicate with one another. It is in the creation of this flight-of-the-imagination world that the piece began; in this space of liminal fantasy, on the edges of danger before the moment of linguistic disruption. It opens with the figure playing by herself, or perhaps with her friends, real or imagined. She calls out to her friends and she is struggling to be understood; she is calling out to them but they do not respond or their responses begin to fragment. The more anxious and frenzied her cries grow to get them to play, to hear her, the further away they drift. Eventually, she is no longer understood and she is talking to someone/something that does not respond. She grows increasingly frustrated because even she cannot understand herself. This is linguistic deracination experienced early in childhood. This linguistic deracination is variable and manifests itself differently according to the individual. For the figure, linguistic deracination leads to social alienation- this results in the figure dwelling alone in a sort of cavern, primitive, beating her stones- she does not come out and when she does, she is ugly, she is deformed, her language is distorted and it is a struggle to hear her. She is completely estranged. In *As she her mouth opens to speak* I am also calling to myself in childhood, calling for my language to come back.

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<sup>10</sup> *As she her opens her mouth to speak* was performed in 2008 at the University of Cape Town outside the Rosedale Building on Hiddingh Campus as my Minor project.



*As she her mouth opens to speak.*



In *You can't see yourself in puddles*<sup>11</sup>, I wanted to work with the perception of reflection and looking through or at or to something (glass/mirrors) in order to find or discover something else. I also wanted to investigate the idea of framing memory and trying to contain it, or finding containers that might incite remembering. Stirred by Rushdie's 'broken glass' metaphor, the glass becomes a mirror of nostalgia, a mirror of wistfulness or longing that comes when something is shattered or forgotten. In this project I wanted to go deeper into the world of black girlhood and how childhood memories are carried through to adulthood. I also tried to articulate the unspeakable, not necessarily the loss of language and the words that cannot come out because they have been forgotten, but using the imagination to articulate what I have forgotten.



*You can't see yourself in puddles.*

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<sup>11</sup> *You can't see yourself in puddles* was performed in 2008 at the University of Cape Town in the Playroom on Hiddingh Campus as my Medium project.



*You can't see yourself in puddles.*



Through the imagination, I explored the dreamscape/dream-world of my memory narrative. I played on operating on the edges and the outsides of reality, oscillating between fantasy and reality, delving into an imaginative world of mystical memory-happenings that are both imagined and real. In *You can't see yourself in puddles*, I turned to imagination, hallucination and dream if and when I did not or could not remember. I also looked at imagination as a form of individuated experience, that is, realizing the imagination's ability to conjure images of absent or non-existent objects through fantasy, therefore evoking images, words and memories that are not there or that come back again in various forms.

The concept of home, in all its idealized and romanticized form was one of the themes in *You can't see yourself in puddles* and I carried this through to my next project, *The only thing I collect is memories*<sup>12</sup>. I was lead by Shishir Kurup's comment about his command of his mother tongue: "I have now effectively lost all my adoptive languages and am solely an English speaker. It's like a kind of stroke, where I can visualize the words but can't translate into language" (Ugwu 1995: 46). I experienced a similar feeling and say in *The only thing I collect is memories*:

Somehow I had fooled myself into thinking that, 'going home', returning to this idyllic landscape that is 'home' would somehow bring back my mother tongue, that language is imbedded in the landscape, that you somehow inhale the language of the site and you are able to speak, it is no longer lost to you, you don't just visualize for it is there, teetering on the tip of your tongue, waiting to spill over and land on this charmed land you have, for the longest time, called 'home'.

John Henderson in *Memory and Forgetting* (1999) talks about how certain events seem to stand out in our memories for one reason or another, usually because of their weight and these seem to challenge the forgetting processes. These memories he calls flashbulb memories and usually have a special kind of personal significance (59). "Because of this when the event occurs it is often accompanied by a heightened emotional state on the part of the learner who may variously experience feelings of surprise, great tragedy, extreme happiness or a feeling of much personal consequence" (60). Such emotions may contextualise the memory in a particular sort

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<sup>12</sup> *The only thing I collect is memories* was performed in 2009 at the University of Cape Town in the Arena Theatre on Hiddingh Campus.

of way, possibly leaving a more enduring 'imprint' of the event in memory (Henderson 1999: 60). Childhood imprints of memory was the premise of *The only thing I collect is memories*. What is evident to me as a recurring trend in all my work is a strong emphasis on the image, the body (in particular a gendered body) both as a site of loss and pain but also as a mode of articulation, vocality (call and response), the rupturing and loss of language and the dilemma of atopia often resulting in playing out my obsession with what constitutes 'home'. This is the plight of the nostalgic searcher- an enduring condition of illogical homesickness.

## Conclusion

A sense of placelessness or atopia is a modern condition. Arturo Escobar understands place "as the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however stable), sense of boundary (however permeable) and connection to everyday life even if its identity is constructed and never fixed" (Escobar 2001: 140). Escobar recognizes that place, body and environment integrate with each other- "that places gather things, thoughts and memories in particular configurations, and that place, more an event than a thing is characterized by openness rather than by unitary self-identity" (143). Site and memory then, are inevitably intertwined. Particular sites may supply an excess of possible meanings for a researcher. At the same time it is site's very same assault on all ways of perception (sight, sound, smell, touch and taste) that make it powerful as an underpinning of memory, as a thread where one strand ties in another (Creswell 2004: 86). A site can act as a container of experience that contributes effectively to its inherent memorability. An attentive and alive memory connects impulsively with place, finding in it features that support and correspond with its own activities. We might even say that memory is naturally site-oriented or at least site-supported (Ibid). Furthermore memory is a home and home is memory (memory is a site and site is memory). Nostalgia becomes a way of connecting to an irrevocable past and therefore my personal journey of re-visiting site becomes a memory narrative of loss.

Harnessing my exploration of the 'girlfriend' aesthetic, nostalgic discourse and personal memory narrative was the driving force of my thesis production, *Katuntu*. In collaboration with Injairu Kulundu, we journeyed through the various paths of our nostalgic memory. In a collage of sound, visual and narrative passage, we put into practice a methodology that might better articulate how one can play memory through individual and shared experience. Using song performance, old photographs and letters, childhood images and iconography, language and 'girl' friendship we investigated disrupted girlhoods, loss of home and re-imagined site as we organized our 'selves' into sisterhoods. Shaw and Chase, in an attempt to locate the conditions for nostalgia, ask if it is possible to specify the situation in which nostalgia will develop (Shaw & Chase 1989: 2). The conclusion I have reached is that being an uprooted child makes nostalgia almost inevitable- nostalgia that is an unavoidable symptom of this condition. The conclusion they reach is that a clear division between past and present is crucial (2). Another requirement is that images, artifacts, objects from the past should be available and these become talismans that link us concretely to the past. For me these objects (real and imagined) become triggers in the creation of my work and the work itself is my attempt to cope with loss and experience some sort of purging in order to heal. What we are nostalgic for is not the past as it was or even as we wish it were, but for the condition of having been.

No one ever experienced as 'the present' what we now view as 'the past', for hindsight can not clarify today as it does yesterday; the past as reconstructed is always more coherent than when it happened. We have to interpret the ongoing present as we live through it, whereas we stand outside the past to view its more finished forms, including its *now* known consequences for what was *then* the unknown future (Shaw & Chase 1989: 30).

Injairu Kulundu articulated this point in one of our writing exercises for *Katuntu* by saying:

*As your [referring to me] custodian I have the benefit of hindsight, of predicting, even knowing what will happen when this inevitable disruption*

*will occur. I am the one who will hold the memory when you cannot name the rupture. I am the marker who already knows the consequence and when you too realize it, when you jump out of your own skin, you will come back and lay a flower on the places where you died little deaths.*

This journey feels almost cyclical as you continue to revisit these 'places where you died little deaths'. This was the nature of *Katuntu*'s ending. There is no real ending, no sense of coming to some closure because memory is always active, always unsettled just as nostalgia is always placed in opposition to something else: past/present, reality/fantasy, there/here. The nostalgic can never recapture a desired whole but can always work towards filling those gaps where memory should be in an attempt at mending what has been broken. *Katuntu* as a process and production was working towards filling those gaps where memory and experience of 'site' should be, towards restoring what has been shattered, it was working towards healing the longing experienced as a result of an uprooted childhood. Perhaps then, Injairu Kulundu was accurate when she referred to the process of *Katuntu* as being a 'healing salve'. In *Katuntu*, the audience is left, not with a sense of knowing but rather left wondering where the journey will go. The figures themselves do not know where they will be led next, whether they will continue to pick up from where they left off or create another beginning, a threshold that they might cross again even if that might again lead to an inevitable split. In the spirit of dark play, they might also surprise themselves.

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## **Performance Pieces by Alude Mahali**

*As she her mouth opens to speak...* (May 2008)

*You can't see yourself in puddles...* (November 2008)

*The only thing I collect is memories...* (March 2009)

*Katuntu (...and you too)* (October 2009)

