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"Home is Where the Heart Is": Black South African Identities and Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* (2003).

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Abstract

Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre are a successful South African dance company, based in Durban, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, that developed in 1994 out of a dance education and training initiative led by a state-funded arts organisation. This article offers a close reading of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* (2003) in order to uncover how this dance piece explores the correlation between the construction of black South African identities and the notion of home. The National Arts Festival - the annual major South African arts festival - originally commissioned Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* for performance at the festival in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape in 2003. The performance was next staged at the Durban Art Gallery, KwaZulu-Natal, in late 2003. Both installations were composed of various 'rooms' of a home and included Jay Pather (as choreographer) collaborating with South African artists such as Jo Ractliffe, Greg Streak, Milijana Babic, Thando Mama, and Angela Buckland. This article analyses two key sections of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* (2003) - 'Hostel' and 'Kitchen' - in order to uncover how Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre explore black South African identities and their experience of home.

South Africa: A Place of Home?

In 1913, the Union of South Africa, the government composed of the four British colonies in South Africa, passed the Native Land Act that resulted in black South Africans becoming strangers or homeless in the land of their birth. According to A. J. Christopher (1994, p. 12), 'some 8.9 million hectares were defined as Native Reserves' and land could not be bought by black South Africans unless in the Native Reserves, or the "Cape

Province."' This Act also prevented other methods of land acquisition by black South Africans through 'squatting, leasing, share-cropping or labour tenancy' (Christopher, 1994, p. 32). It is interesting to note that there was resistance to the injunction on labour tenancy from white landowners, as a shortage of labour was feared. During the Apartheid government regime (1948-1994), forced removals as a direct result of the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the formation of the quasi-independent black homeland states provide further examples of home in South Africa as a politically charged concept and location. The Group Areas Act 'was to effect the total urban spatial segregation' (Christopher, 1994, p.105) of the various South African races. People were removed by force from their homes if their racial classification did not comply with the Act's proclamation of the area's racial signage (Christopher, 1994, p. 122).

Just under a century later, land access remains a highly charged issue in post-Apartheid South Africa with land claims and redistribution projects serving as, amongst other matters, reminders of the sensitive issue of the relationship between identity politics and the physical location of a place to call home. Young (2005, p. 150) rightly warns that it is dangerous to 'project an ideal of home', as home is often experienced in many complex and conflicted ways. Henceforth, land access and the home site were clearly linked to constructions of South African national identities, specifically, in this case, black South African identity. If home allows the 'construction and reconstruction of one's self' (Young, 2005, p. 153), then black South Africans' experiences of home produce identities associated with the loss of choice of where the home can be located because of racial legislative policies. To extend Young's analysis, the destruction of people's homes no doubt frequently had commensurable destructive effects on black South African identities. This article offers a close reading of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* (2003) in order to uncover how the dance piece explores the relationship between the construction of black South African identities and both the perception and experience of home.

At Home with Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre

Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre 'brought the lives of the townships and the rural communities of South Africa onto our stages and infused them into their dance' (Machen, 2006, p. 88). The dance company 'emerged from a training and development programme for Black dancers with no access to training opportunities, initiated by The Playhouse Company in Durban in 1994' (*http://www.siwelasonke.co.za/siwelasonke history.htm*, no date). Jay Pather and Alfred Hinkel designed the curriculum for the eighteen danc-

ers on the training and development programme, and 'in July 1995, ten dancers were offered full-time salaries to form a company that served as a performance vehicle for the programme, and in 1996 Jay Pather was appointed Artistic Director of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre' (*http://www.siwelasonke.co.za/siwelasonkehistory.htm*, no date). Durban, where the company is based, is an industrial harbour city of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and it faces the Indian Ocean on the east coast of South Africa. Its history as a trading post and its geographical location are reflected in its demographics; it is a bustling urban environment with South Africans of Indian, European, and African descent. This heterogeneity is to be found in all aspects of the city's culture, throughout its food, fashion, and contemporary art practices, such as contemporary dance. Siwela Sonke dancers are drawn from different dance backgrounds, providing a wealth of movement languages for choreographic use, including South African dance languages with their roots in traditional dances such as *Ngoma*, *isipantsula* - a popular township dance style - ballroom dancing, tap, contemporary dance, and ballet; 'much [dance] work involves moving through cultures in order to explore and celebrate [South African] polyculturalism' (Friedman, 2012, p. 10). Pather (2006: p. 14) extends this concept of a polycentric culture, and stresses the contested character of South African contemporary dance; '[t]hat we might ultimately not have a set, neat body of African aesthetics.'

Sustainable funding of dance companies remains a constant problem for Siwela Sonke and other dance companies in South Africa. In 1999, due to a National Arts Council decision, which led to many companies based at the state-funded Playhouse having their funding withdrawn, Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre was 'retrenched' (*http://www.siwelasonke.co.za/siwelasonkehistory.htm*, no date) by The Playhouse Company. Currently, Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre reside in their own dance studios in central Durban, a few metres from The Playhouse where they began in 1994. Part of the success story of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre is that Ntombi Gasa, Neliswa Rushualang, and the late Eric Shabalala, who have been involved with the company in its short life since its first training days, now head the company's educational and outreach projects and are in their own rights distinguished and respected choreographers. In 2006 the late Shabalala formed his own company, Mabhongi Productions, and this company was involved in a variety of community development projects in KwaZulu-Natal.

The National Arts Festival - the annual major South African arts festival - originally commissioned Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* for the festival in Grahamstown, South Africa in 2003. It was later staged at the Durban Art Gallery in the same year. Both installations were set out

as various 'rooms' of a home: 'a bedroom, a kitchen, playground, a solitary uncluttered space, a migrant worker's cubicle and a lounge' (*http://www.artthrob.co.za/03sept/ listings_kzn.html#dag3*, 2003). 'The audience move[d] with [the] performers from "room" to "room" through an "exploded" or deconstructed house' (Van Rensburg, 2004). Jay Pather, as choreographer, collaborated with South African artists such as Jo Ractliffe, Greg Streak, Milijana Babic, Thando Mama, and Angela Buckland. *Home* 'revisit[s] the paradox of the desire for security and freedom, restlessness and the aching need for rest'. ((*http://www.artthrob.co.za/03sept/ listings_kzn .html#dag3*, 2003) In this article, I analyse two key sections of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* (2003) - 'Hostel' and 'Kitchen' - in order to uncover how Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre explore black South African identities and their perception and experience of home.

The Hostel: A Place of Rest?

In the section entitled 'Hostel' in *Home* (2003), a bare-chested male dancer, Mdu Mtshali, emerges in panic from a troubled sleep. The stage silence is punctured by his sharp intakes of breath as his torso folds over. His arms move out to either side and he rotates his arms to behind his back. Suddenly he runs to the front of the performance space and stands as if he was called to attention. His arms explore the space surrounding his torso and he moves backwards quickly and directly and stamps his feet repeatedly on the floor. Mtshali's pathway through the space is direct and the choreographed movement of his arms appears regulated; meanwhile his stamping of the feet is performed with a frenetic energy. The dance movement qualities suggest that Mtshali is under duress. His performance space is confined, and mirrors the space used by the slides projected behind him on a rectangular screen. These slides show images of migrant worker hostel beds and other sleeping accommodation. 'These are numbered as if catalogued, and come loaded with implications of ownership' (Small, 2003). The personal items that compose these sleeping arrangements, from the bedding to other small objects, such as a hair comb, a crucifix necklace, offer hints of the bodies that reside in these spaces and own these material objects. The slides rarely show a migrant worker resting on a bed, and if shown, he too, like the personal items, is recorded and catalogued. He is part of an industry that relies on a continuous supply of working bodies.

The history of migrant labour in South Africa is awash with poor living and working conditions, the absence of human rights and responsibilities, social disruption and upheaval. 'The construction of the hostels, and the regulations governing such accommodation, were provided for under

the Natives (Urban Areas) Act 21 of 1923' (Ramphele, 1993, p. 1) and this migrant labour 'became the basis of a cheap labour system that left deep scars' (Walker, Reid, and Cornell, 2004, p. 62) throughout the nation, and today, migrant labour remains a major source of employment by the mining companies and other manufacturing industries. 'Within a twelve-kilometre radius of Durban […] there are at least seven men's hostels with an excess of 43 000 officially registered beds, one women's hostel with over 1000 beds and one mixed hostel with 11 000 beds' (Walker, Reid, and Cornell, 2004, p. 69). There are many South Africans who have to migrate either temporarily or permanently away from their families and homes and take residence in accommodation that is primarily constructed for boarding a work force of bodies. *Home* focuses on the migrant worker's experience, and highlights these various social factors and their effect on the black male body of a hostel-dweller.

In 'Hostel', the movement Mtshali performs appears constricted and frantic. He opens his arms outwards and then closes them using movement qualities that reference control; a disciplining of the migrant worker's body to serve as labour. He does a handstand and then collapses to roll and jump into the air. He uses the space that is immediately surrounding his body, only his immediate kinesphere. When he rolls over to standing, his pathway is exact - there is minimal space to move. His breathing pattern is irregular. It seems that the space around Mtshali is confined and oppressive - his body is oppressed by the space. He strains and moves through this closed space as if the air around him is thick and difficult to move through. Although he uses all his strength to execute his movements, his body appears scarred. This is evident when his back is towards the audience; slides beam onto his back, and his flesh appears cut up and divided by the slides as he curls his spine and ribs and folds over, giving in to the gravity pull of the floor. His restricted movements parallel the slide of a tightly made bed. Both are disciplined by the system that produces them. The industries that rely on this migrant worker and other migrant workers are dependent on asymmetrical power relations between the industries and the labour force.

The male-only hostels cultivate dominant highly sexualised and macho-masculinities, as these living spaces, these homes away from home, where there are many male bodies living together without women, are seen as a threat to the dominant discourse of South African masculinity. According to Morrell,

> South Africa, until recently, was a man's country. Power was exercised publicly and politically by men. In families, both black and white, men made decisions, earned the money, and held power. The law (both cus-

> tomary and modern) supported the presumption of male power and authority and discriminated against women. But the country's history also produced brittle masculinities – defensive and prone to violence. For white men, the uneven distribution of power gave them privileges but also made them defensive about challenges (by women, by blacks, and/or other men) to that privilege. For black men, the harshness of life on the edge of poverty and the emasculation of political powerlessness gave their masculinity a dangerous edge. Honour and respect were rare, and getting it and retaining it (from white employers, fellow labourers or women) was often a violent process. (Morrell, 2001, p. 18)

Migrant men's working and living conditions (and separation from their families) have generated aggressive masculinities, which have impacted negatively on men, women and children in South Africa. 'The long-term separation of migrant men from their wives and families, along with the ever-present dangers of mining work and other high-risk, low-paid jobs (such as in foundries), helped foster aggressive masculinities and sexualities among migrant labourers' (Walker, Reid, and Cornell, 2004, p. 64). Belinda Bozzoli (2004, p. 59) writing about housing in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg in the 1970s, states that hostels 'were huge thrusting concrete monuments […] in which iron gates which could be lowered at any moment were indeed built to separate corridors from one another in case riots erupted; in which communal facilities allowed little dignity or privacy'. Hostels are prime examples of physical structures that display 'the way space can be constructed as a physical arrangement and a discourse of control' (Panelli, 2004, p. 171); and as a choreography of space designed to oppress and constrain black South African masculinity.

Mdu Mtshali moves through a sequence that references movements that are common to Zulu war dances. He flicks his wrists and kicks his legs high into the air. It is an aggressive movement quality; however, it is not aggressive enough to liberate him from this oppressive space. Ramsay Burt's (1995, p. 61) focus on fighting sequences in western theatrical dance is relevant to my discussion on black male South African identities, and Burt's emphasis on the hyper-masculine movement qualities of displays of fighting movements parallels the performance of traditional warrior preparation dances in South Africa. In Zulu war dances, usually male dancers perform powerful movements involving spectacular displays of skill. These dances, with their roots in preparation for battle, would ensure that the male form is represented as an active and dominant subject, ready to do battle with the enemy and win. The dancer's movements are constructed as active and technically powerful in order to

prevent homoeroticism and portray (the construction of) a hegemonic masculinity. Here too the fighting movements evoke a ritualised or ceremonial re-enactment of fighting against a generalised evil. Through their focused and serious performance of the warrior preparation dance, there is never any suggestion that these men are weak. Yet, this construction of masculinity is shaped by the space it is performed in and the space of the hostel dweller fosters this aggressive movement quality. The hostel space is constructed to contain and oppress the hostel dweller and therefore this aggressive movement quality will be continuously repeated.

Hostels are not secure areas and have a history as places of violence and abuse. This is emphasised when Mtshali picks up an enamel bowl and flicks its contents around his space, crying out incantations in isiZulu as mournful cello music fills the stage. He practices the exorcising and anointing of the space, calling the *amadlozi* - the ancestors - to bless the home space. Thorpe (1993, p. 103) highlights how the ancestors in isiZulu culture have a 'continuing, effective involvement […] in the lives of their relatives'. He explains how "balance and congenial relationships must constantly be maintained between living members of the community and between the visible and invisible realms of the known universe" (2003, p.103). Tied around Mtshali's wrist is a thin bracelet of animal hide from a previous animal sacrifice to the *amadlozi,* possibly performed earlier in order to appease them. The bracelet and the anointing of the hostel space suggest that this ritual of appeasing the *amadlozi* and blessing this home space of the migrant worker has to be constantly performed thus highlighting the instability and volatile nature of this location.

To the left of Mtshali, three black female dancers appear dressed in white skirts with veils covering their heads. They dance slowly swaying their hips from side to side but remain in a fixed position with their feet rooted to the floor. As they sway, they repeat creolised hand gestures that have evolved from the *hastas* of Bharata Natyam. Mtshali never makes any acknowledgement of their physical presence. There is an enforced separation between Mtshali and the female dancers. This alludes to the forced separation between men and their female partners as a result of migrant labour. The swaying movement is dream-like and suggests that he is dreaming of physical contact and receiving comfort from these three women. The colour white in traditional South African belief is associated with the ancestral realm, and the wearing of the white costumes by the female dancers also suggests proximity to the ancestors, and of course, ghosts. Their dance is of a gentle and hypnotic quality which suggests that Mtshali has successfully appeased them by his ritual anointing of the space and his previously performed sacrifice. After a substantial period

of time, the female dancers slowly move out of the performance area swaying and repeating the hand gestures as they go.

There is a regular motif of Mtshali opening and closing the space surrounding him with his limbs, and an on-going pull of his body to either the floor or the sky above. Even when he increases his movement speed, he never seems to break the status quo. It is like he is trapped in and tied to this space, and even his relationship to the floor when he performs headstands or jumps are not one of support. When he crawls to the rear of the stage in the final moments of the dance piece, he drags his heavy body across the space as if resisting and then succumbing to the pull of the floor. He curls up on the floor in a foetal position and goes to sleep. It is likely that his sleep will be troubled and he will wake again in panic, as there is a constant state of danger in this home.

Earlier, when he was attempting to fly this space by jumping, the slides of the catalogued beds marked his body, thus visually making the link between the body and the home as an extension of each other. In the final moments, as he falls asleep, the slide numbered 522, depicting a pillow and old mattress is projected. There are no clues to the body who sleeps here and how it takes part in homemaking as a meaning-making activity. The bed and mattress are stripped of any personal detail and are simply objects with a specific function in a space, similar to the migrant worker number 522 who, despite his attempts at individuation and preservation, is oppressed by this hostel (hostile) space. Although a bed is functional, this cataloguing of bed numbered 522 ignores that the bed is also a personal and intimate space moulded by the migrant's body, stained by his body fluids, and perhaps is a space where he has dreamt of or had some comfort.

The Kitchen: A Place of Sustenance?

In the section of *Home* entitled 'Kitchen', gender relationships and their connection to the values of home are visible. A female performer - Nelisiwa Rushualang - takes out from her basket an enamel bowl and lights the *imphepho* in it. The herb's powerful smell anoints the space and she calls on the ancestors. Her body becomes a vessel for the ancestors to speak to the household, and to speak in the home, as the dancer's torso flicks from side to side and her mouth sneers. She pins paper money to a make-do sash and begins to move around the kitchen space. Like the male dancer in the hostel section, she moves through a movement motif that references traditional Zulu warrior preparation dances stamping her feet with great force on the performance floor. She adopts the performance of a type of masculinity in the face of the violence ever present in

her everyday life. Although empowering, her performance of a motif that is usually associated with men illustrates how she has to be prepared for any threat outside and inside the home. It is she that is the first line of resistance in this home against any malicious forces, both internal and external. It is she who serves as both the carer and the guardian of this home space. It is she that maintains the spiritual and physical defences.

Whilst the female performer anoints the home space and convenes with the ancestors, the male performer - Siyanda Duma - dances armed with a *knobkerrie* - a traditional crafted walking stick that, if need be, is a weapon. His movements are also similar to the hostel-dweller's in the previous section, but he is not restricted in his range of movement. He jerks, calls out in fear and in anger, waves his knobkerrie, and threatens an imaginary foe. However, he appears to be losing control, and is off-balance. The movement pathway of his limbs is unstructured, chaotic and free-ranging and is distinctively different in choreographic quality to the hostel dweller's confined use of space. The character performed by Duma is not residing in a hostel building structure designed to control its occupants, but Duma's character's home is located in a township. Townships are a legacy of the Apartheid regime that were designed to segregate South Africans along racial lines.

Rushualang begins to go through the cupboards that are empty besides two lines of pilchard tins. Opening and closing the cupboard doors, she works herself up into frenzy, with the cupboard doors being worked so hard that they begin to fall off. This kitchen, like its occupants, is fractured and is breaking apart. It is not a place of refuge. It does not provide enough food or sustenance. It is under threat from external forces, be this threat physical or spiritual. The dancers' bodies embody how this home is a violent and fractured space; it is under threat from the outside forces of the history of South Africa and its economics - as portrayed by the sash of money and the lack of food - and from the inside forces of uneasy gender roles and relationships. There is a strong sense of tension and a possible threat of violence both inside and outside of this kitchen. Kosta Mathéy in 'Violence Prevention in a South African Township' (2006: p. 264) states that 'tensions and conflict between men and women are an integral part of life' in South Africa.

In a concluding duet between Rushualang and Duma, Rushualang performs the majority of the supporting and lifting movements. She is technically skilful and demonstrates great strength and ease. This partnering is powerful and provides Rushualang with a strong position of authority. Although Duma, like many other male South Africans, is socially constructed as the head of the home due to South Africa's dominant patriarchal culture, but without Rushualang's labour Duma is not

able to protect himself from negative outside forces. It is literally Rushualang that supports Duma. bell hooks (1991, pp. 46 – 47) refers to how the Apartheid system thwarted the black home place where 'women and men can renew their spirits and recover themselves'. And although this dance work occurs in post-Apartheid South Africa, the legacy of the Apartheid state's negative impact on the home place remains. hooks (1991, pp. 48 – 49) calls for the renewal of home as a site of subversion and resistance 'where we can heal our wounds and become whole.'

In the 'Kitchen' section of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home*, the performance illustrates how home in South Africa is a fractured space and so too are the bodies and their identities that make this space their home. This fractured state is mediated in the performance by the frenetic movements of Duma as he tries to defend himself against an imaginary foe. Rushualang's lighting of the *imphepho* in order to convene with the ancestors and therefore maintain the balance between the community of the living and the community of the dead is another signifier of how this space is fractured. *Home* as a performance work depicts various sites of home from hostels to hotels, and the concept of home as a fractured space is made evocatively clearer when the 'Kitchen' section overlays several spaces: the domestic kitchen where Rushualang goes through the cupboards looking for food to comfort and sustain the bodies occupying this home; the church as is suggested by the crucified man as performed by Denton Douglas; the countryside or rural areas as illustrated by Ntombi Gasa sitting on the chair with her hands in her lap; the invisible and visible realm of the ancestors; and the space outside the home as illustrated by the film showing the inside of a commuter train packed with bodies or a road cutting up a hillside. This juxtaposition of rural and urban spaces, and traditional and Christian belief systems, is significant as it illustrates the fractured and complex reality common to the experience of home in South Africa.

During the 'Kitchen' section a female performer - Ntombi Gasa - dressed in a traditional fashion that hints at rural life, with her face painted in red clay – *efute* - is seated just outside the kitchen performance area. For most of the performance she sits and waits patiently with her hands clasped in her lap. After the partnering between Duma and Rushualang, Gasa stands and gracefully moves over to her female co-performer. Though physically different in terms of body size, and dressed in costumes that suggest that they are based in dissimilar surroundings, the female dancers move through a partnering where both female dancers lift and hold each other.

This staging of both the partnership and Gasa's watching from the outside, hints at the complexity of the relationship between women in

South Africa, specifically those that reside in urban areas with those that are based in rural environments. Migrant labour practices have resulted in their economic and social competition. 'Absent husbands who got involved in relationships in the city often did not send remittances back to the rural areas' (Walker, Reid, and Cornell, 2004, p. 70).

'Kitchen' ends with Gasa proudly walking to the back of the performance area, where she picks up a bundle of firewood draped in translucent fabric, and leaves the 'kitchen' area balancing the firewood on her head; again referencing a common practice whereby some South African women transport items such as firewood, bags, or other large items balanced on their heads. Rushualang kneels and Duma lies down placing his head on her lap. It is a gesture of comfort and security, a moment of respite from the negative forces outside of the home, and a momentary pause of conflict in this home.

Conclusion - Home: A Safe Place?

Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's *Home* explores black South African identities and their experiences of home, and this article has analysed two key sections from this choreographic work; the home space of a migrant worker and a home in a South African township. Both these sections illustrate the fractured identities of many black South Africans, and how this splintered state has a direct correlation with the very real instances and effects of Apartheid and its legacy. For many black South Africans, the experience of home has been - and remains - a site of conflict. There are moments of respite; however, these are few, due to the internal and external threats posed to those that live in them.

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