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'we remember  
*differently*'

Race, Memory, Imagination

EDITED BY  
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Using as a focal point the short film we *remember differently* (2005; enclosed on the inside back cover), this collection of essays addresses the conditions of cultural production in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Art practice in an apartheid context was strongly motivated as 'struggle art'; but in an environment that is more consciously informed by revisiting history and excavating the past, the imagination must feature strongly to exercise the breath of freedom made possible in a democratic South Africa. This invitation 'to imagine' is not free from the context of history, and it is the central aspect of rethinking history that informs the making of the film. Each of the creative contributors to the making of the film reflects on the creative process and how history and memory inform their creative choices.

This book then steps away from the reflexive process of producing the film as described by the cultural collaborators and shifts the focus to further addressing issues of reception and interpretation of the film. In offering analysis, these commentators describe how the imagination is still at work in hermeneutic processes, yet always subject to history and memory.

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considers Earth afresh through space travel, eloquently narrated by Mark Shuttleworth.

**Bhekizizwe Peterson** is a professor of African literature at Wits. He has held invited fellowships at Yale University and Birmingham University (UK), and he served on various editorial, statutory and artistic committees, juries and boards across the African continent. He has published extensively on African literature, performance and cultural studies as well as black intellectual traditions in Africa and the diaspora. He has been active as a writer, activist and participant in black cultural practices since the late 1970s and he was a founding member of the Afrika Cultural Centre and the Dhlomo Theatre. He is the writer and producer of internationally acclaimed films including the features *Fools and Zulu Love Letter* (directed by Ramadan Suleman) and feature documentaries such as *Born into Struggle* and *The Battle for Johannesburg* (directed by Rehad Desai).

**Nishlyn Ramanna**, pianist and composer, lectures in jazz at Rhodes University. The music he contributed to *we remember differently* is excerpted from his debut CD, *A Thought*, which was produced by drummer Jon Opstad and features veteran UK saxophonist Stan Sulzmann as a special guest. Ramanna has published on South African jazz in *Social Dynamics*, *SAMUS*, and *The Grove Dictionary of Jazz and Jazz Musicians*. He most recently collaborated with Jyoti Mistry on *Le boeuf sur le toit* (2010).

**Florian Schattauer** was born in Vienna where he went to Law School. He trained as an arts manager at NYU and the Vienna Academy of Music and Performing Arts. Before venturing into film, Florian produced off

## CHAPTER 9

# On music:

### I REMEMBER GRATEFULLY

Nishlyn Ramanna

*We remember differently* is at once an unsettling and reassuring film that veers between pasts and presents, realities and fictions. At first these worlds seem intractably different and their juxtaposition is disconcerting. But as the movie unfolds its oppositions and differences gently reconcile.

The film's visual contrasts are especially jarring. The 8mm grainy footage captures – with an erratic yet empathic eye – a vibrant world of boys and girls, men and women in Western, Indian and (occasionally) African attire. Sometimes alone, but mostly together, they sit, stand, stroll, laugh, run, dance, and play in settings that are mostly outdoors, communal and public. Paradoxically, although the 8mm footage records a real world, its archaic look destabilises its status as truth and makes that world seem surreal. In contrast, the silky digital video slips through the private, sedentary world of an infirm

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widow and her adult daughter, appraising it with clinical detachment. No other people inhabit this exclusively white, female domain, although the aura of the deceased father hovers in the background. Over-familiar close-ups – of the bedroom, bathroom, their underwear, the mother's surgical stitches, and the daughter's tweezed pubic hairs depict a world of privacy and intimacy. Although the video captures a fictional world, its contemporary setting and meticulously documentary look make that world seem hyperreal. Within the video world there are oppositions too, but they make narrative sense and are less intense. The mother is old, physically weakened and when we first see her she is asleep in her darkened room. She wears old-fashioned pyjamas and panties. Dressed in pants and an unzipped track top that frames a boob-hugging red vest, the daughter exudes a sexy, youthful physicality. Entering her mother's room, she rips open the curtains and lets the light stream in. Then she briskly mothers her mother by bossing her into taking a bath. However, two scenes later, the daughter seems more nurturing as she combs her mother's hair. The mother sits up, smiles and her eyes twinkle mischievously. Later still, the daughter appears vulnerable as she pensively appraises her own naked body in the bathroom mirror. In the final video scene she looks almost child-like as she lies in bed with her mother and snuggles into her protective, maternal embrace. As the film progresses, the differences that define the two women blur and to some extent reverse. The polarity becomes a gentler, ebb-and-flow dynamic.

The disparities between the 8mm and video worlds also gradually lessen. The earliest 8mm shots show grand landscapes of mountain and veldt that contrast drastically with the video's prosaic, static setting. The next round of 8mm footage captures the still impressive, but comparably petite environs of the Union Buildings and then an unspecified wedding location. Alongside this shift from public to private locations, there is a subtle lessening of overall

kinetic activity as the focus shifts from the frenetic play of children to the studied actions of the wedding congregation. Viewers who recall the film's opening video shot (of the outside of the mother's home) may feel a sense of closure, when in the last 8mm scenes we see an ordinary, suburban yard and its sporadic, listless activity. This sense deepens in the closing shot, where 8mm and video images of the women's backs superimpose and meld into a deeper unity. Having let us into their fictional hyperreality, the women turn their backs on us and return us to ours.

Thematically and structurally, Emanuel's script similarly proceeds from discord to accord. Expectedly, this movement is overtly recognisable, particularly as the film's dialogues progress. The terse opening dialogue depicts the two women in dichotomous terms: the daughter is the brusque nurse; the mother is her wincing patient. During the second dialogue, this mother-as-daughter/daughter-as-mother dichotomy overturns. And when they bicker in their third interchange, and the mother scoffs at her daughter, the daughter becomes the more subdued interlocutor. In the final dialogue, they both banter and debate, but ultimately the daughter becomes the questioning child and the mother the wise matron. In concert with the video world's other elements, the dialogues convey a flow of mother/daughter, self/other oppositions that gradually diminish and meld into a supple unity.

In its narrative content and its conflicting relations to the visuals, the first monologue seethes with discord. In this reminiscence, the cramped microcosms of the car and the even punier world of Barbie in her cellophane box loom large. Both worlds are vividly detailed right down to the colours of the vomit that splatter across them. The vast world outside is sketched only cursorily as 'road', 'game park', and 'dry, faded bush'. Reduced to hot air, it ultimately transmutes into an extension of the car universe.

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While the monologue evokes the confined world of a little girl, the accompanying 8mm footage focuses on hyperactive boys at play. In one shot, they play ball; in another they sit gleefully on (not in) a car as it reverses with its doors wide open, across a field.

To add to the disjuncture, the alienated and obsessive girl in the reminiscence seems worlds apart from the sexy, self-assured woman who smiles as she cradles a souvenir in the sunlit passage of her house. Moreover, souvenirs conventionally trigger happy associations; they mask rather than incite unsavoury memories. This is why we keep keepsakes: they allow us to romanticise our realities a little. However, this fictional holiday memory of boredom, frustrated desire, sunburn, and carsickness is so hyperreal that it even refuses reality's necessary fictions. In the second monologue, the words and images relate more realistically, and the tension subtly eases. The visuals – feminine and personal – work in concert with the tale of a young girl whose fascination with her mother's womanhood withers as she grows up. Her candid reflections on her mother's and her own mortality mirror the candid images of her appraising herself in the mirror. Whereas the distress detailed in the opening monologue comes as a shock, this wistful account of attrition is prepared in the earlier dialogues' references to ageing skin, early adolescence and the father's blunt assertion that those who 'ripe young ... rot young'.

The undertones of disillusionment in the daughter's second monologue where she discusses the significance of her mother's underwear drawer are carried over and intensify during the mother's reminiscence, where she reminds us not to mistake the fictions captured in wedding pictures with the wearying reality of marriage. In this monologue, we start to recognise that despite their surface differences, mother and daughter are uncannily alike in their stoic realism. At a structural level too, the differences that define the monologues and dialogues



ease as the mother dialogues with herself: 'or is it my fancy?' she muses, 'what will her face show?' But as the mother questions herself, she unconsciously invites us to query her utterances too. Why peruse wedding pictures if all they signify is ignorance and pretence? If pictures are fictions why would their collation in albums sandwich, cover, box, and coffin real memories? Why the semantic overkill?

As the signifiers of containment and disappointment amass, we realise that the women cannot contain their disappointment. We recognise that their hyperrealism overcompensates for their loss of the real in the form of the father's death. Confronted with their mortality – acutely in the instance of the mother and hence her bitterness – they too are confronted with the loss of their reality. Like the reversal of their inverted relations in the second dialogue where the daughter braids her mother's hair, this monologue marks the turning point where their unconscious repression overturns and turns into conscious expression. From here on, the traumatic aspects of their history are not displaced, but rather directly expressed and made available for healing.

Whereas the thematic content of the opening monologue relates antagonistically to its visual context, this monologue sees words and images marry. Moreover, the mother's internally contradictory commentary on the nature of fictions and realities functions as a metacommentary on the film, itself an internally contradictory metacommentary on the nature of fictions and realities. In the monologue, the film's repression of its self-consciousness also overturns. Ironically, while the mother's monologue is thematically and structurally complex, its ethos of release contributes to the film's overall trajectory from turmoil to tranquillity. Materially, the music shares similarities with the film's 8mm and video worlds. Like the 8mm footage, the music is archival and was not composed specifically for the film. The high levels of

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reverberation in the recording give it a faraway sound that complements the long-ago look of the 8mm images. But whereas the 8mm is an amateur and unscripted record of a public communal world for private consumption, the music, like the video, is a professional and scripted record of a private world for public consumption. Since music is largely connotative rather than denotative, it is hard to establish whether music's signifiers are real or fictive. In this sense, the music inhabits a third space between the real 8mm and fictional video worlds.

Thematically, the music seems to belong to both worlds at once. This is especially apparent in 'Song for my Sister', which accompanies the daughter's holiday memory. On the one hand, the first part of the piece, with its static harmony and its cramped, wriggly movements in the melody, recalls the confinement of the car. The melody's fixation on 'ti', the seventh degree of the scale (which is conventionally heard as 'desiring' resolution back to 'doh') recalls the little girl's unfulfilled obsession with Barbie. The sudden lurch – up an octave in bar 17 – and the rapidly shifting 'altered' harmonies (moving in a very unorthodox sequence of major thirds and diminished fifths) create an uneasy, curdled

tonality that underscores the monologue's themes of discomfort. On the other hand, the quick tempo of 112 beats per minute and the rollicking left hand of the piano connote a sense of motion and travel, and match the cheerful actions in the 8mm footage. The *raga*-based melody has the feel of an Indian folk tune, and it fits the cultural world of the footage. For the lay listener unaware that the *darbuka* drum accompanying the piano is Egyptian, its presence recalls the South African landscapes captured on the 8mm. The wistful minor mode of the music deepens the nostalgic associations that the grainy footage evokes.

The composition's stark separation of melody and accompaniment in completely different registers of the piano, the persistent cross rhythms (two against three in the piano left hand; four against three in the right) and the schism between the (cramped, static) first 16 bars and the next (curdled, moving) eight bars of the song rearticulate the disjuncture between the opening monologue's words and images. In keeping with the film's ethos of release, these tensions ease appreciably in the reminiscence that follows some five minutes later. Accompanying the mother's memories, the musical piece 'A Thought' is a much slower 72 beats per minute. With its long, sighing melody notes, and slow breathing accompaniment,

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the piece conveys a sense of longing. Its pensiveness contrasts poignantly with the images of communality and laughter accompanies it. As with 'Song for my Sister,' the melody and accompaniment are separated, but not as starkly. And during the mother's second memory (just as the mother says: 'It felt like I would be putting the memories in a coffin') the otherwise treble melody descends into the bass register with a chromatic sigh and almost collapses into the accompaniment. The tune's gently blurred tonality (almost simultaneously in A major and A natural minor) musically reflects the misty (un)consciousness of the monologue it accompanies. In an uncanny coincidence, the mother's words, 'ignorance is what there'll be' coincides with the melody's cadence on the note B.

In their internal structure, then, the musical excerpts echo the contrasts and oppositions that occur within and between the film's visual and language worlds. While the music is not strictly necessary, its presence opens up passages between these worlds. As it mirrors and colours the images and words, music underscores the film's meanings, easing its inexorable movement towards undifferentiation. When we realise that differentiation can denote separation, demarcation, delineation, discrimination, segregation, bias, favouritism, prejudice, inequity, bigotry, injustice – we recognise that this film's very honest exploration of femininity and intimacy actually tells a much larger story. And insofar as my musical fictions speak to this social reality, I remember gratefully.