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Routes/roots: reimagining the owl house

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INTRODUCTION

You could say that the idea for this research began when I was 7 years old. Driving along what seemed at the time to be a never-ending road from Gauteng to the Cape, my parents decided to take a detour to the small and isolated town called Nieu Bethesda. After bumping along a sand road to the point of ringing ears and slight nausea, we pulled up outside an old house. Gazing up, I was accosted by forewarning eyes and strange shapes. We had arrived at Helen Martins's *Owl House*, and I was never going to forget it (see Figures 1 and 2).

Years later, backpacking in India with Helen Martins in the cobweb corners of my mind, I longed to create a film about travelling, with all its unique experiences, strange situations and breath-taking wonders. But I could not make a film just about India. It needed to be about South Africa, my home, too. Tracing the landscape of South Africa in the landscape of my mind I tried to find parallels between the two countries.

The urban city with all its manic sounds, people and smells was the most obvious connection. However, my mind wandered further into the countryside, thinking of places I had travelled to, starting from my earliest memories. Swishing away the cobwebs, there I found it, the Karoo; a strange and other worldly landscape, and within it, the dusty town of Nieu Bethesda. And therein lay a fascinating home which had made my sister laugh, and my mother cry – the *Owl House*.

In combining my travel in the east with the *Owl House*, I had finally discovered the subject matter for my film, which is entitled *Routes/Roots*. Initially, *Routes/Roots* was about juxtaposing two very different worlds; Helen Martins's imaginary east, and the real east that I travelled to. But the film could not solely be about Martins. In order to understand her better, interactions between other characters was necessary.

In beginning my research much of the literature followed a similar structure. It detailed the life of Martins, from having a troubled childhood with a difficult father, to a failed marriage in her twenties and returning back home to her ailing parents,

nursing them until their deaths. She then began transforming her parents' home into the *Owl House*, with the help of a number of collaborators. The most prolific collaborator being Koos Malgas, a coloured itinerant sheep-shearer. The texts would then explain some of the symbolism at the *Owl House*, and end with a dramatic account of Martins's suicide.

It was when I read Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* (1985) that I became fascinated by Koos Malgas, and how little had been written on him. In the play, Malgas is simply the husband of Martins's domestic worker, and is described as being an abusive alcoholic. Fugard's Malgas never speaks, but is only spoken of, and in a deprecatory way. I began to wonder why Martins would employ such a loathsome character in real life, especially for as long as twelve years.

It seemed that both Martins and Malgas had fallen into a conditioned apartheid stereotype; Martins as the white recluse and town's 'witch' who created strange things in her garden, and Malgas as the coloured alcoholic assistant and rumored 'lover'. In the research, I aimed to go beyond these categories and attain an understanding of the complexity of these individuals and the lives they lived.

I ordered Malgas's biography, written by his granddaughter, and came to discover a different side of the real-life Koos Malgas. I realised that Malgas was one of the very few people that the solitary Helen Martins would have interacted with. In fact, he was probably the person she saw the most often for the last twelve years of her life, which means he would have known her like no other person did. *Routes/Roots* is thus an exploration of their relationship, but more importantly, it is a story *about* Helen Martins *told* by Koos Malgas. Malgas therefore becomes the conduit in which we try to understand Helen Martins, and they are both given a voice.

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE: MEDIATING THE MIND, FILM FORM AND HELEN MARTINS

Helen Martins

Born in 1897, Martins was brought into a world of a newly founded town, Nieu Bethesda, which by then was approximately twenty years old. In 1976, she was to die in the same home that she transformed in the last thirty years of her life. The last born of ten children (of which only six survived) Martins was close to her two sisters, Alida and Annie (Ross 1997:31). After qualifying as a teacher, Martins married the "'very clever, very good-looking and very aggressive'" Johannes Pienaar in 1920 (Annie, Helen's sister, cited by Ross 1997:33). They lived with Martins's brother in Volksrust and worked as teachers, and were also involved in theatrical productions.

The marriage was an unhappy one, marred by two abortions and Pienaar's infidelity, and they divorced in 1926 (Ross 1997:41). The period after her divorce is virtually unknown, yet sources claim she worked in a restaurant and chemist shop in Muizenberg (Ross 1997:42). This was short-lived and Martins was summoned back to Nieu Bethesda to take care of her ailing parents in 1928 or 1929, where she looked after them for a full sixteen years (Ross 1997:46-47).

After her parents passed away "…suddenly all that she had ostensibly existed for, for so many years, was gone" (Ross 1997:54). Needing new energy, life and light in her life, Martins began the transformation of her childhood home into the *Owl House*. She began with its interior, and once completed, moved to the *Camel Yard* outside (Ross 1997:80). One of her three collaborators, Koos Malgas (cited by Ross 1997:81) explains that where other women in the community planted and maintained gardens, Miss Helen (as she was known), "...did [not] have water for plants but ... grew beautiful statues!".

Making use of owls, lions, Buddhas, celestial bodies (like the moon and stars), peacocks, clocks and many more symbolic motifs, Martins created her own realm; marked by the wire phrase on her fence, stating "this is my world" (Ross 1997:16). She was deeply inspired by the postcards and gifts she received from her sister Alida,

who travelled extensively in the east. This became a source of fascination for Martins who never travelled beyond the borders of South Africa. Her interest extended further into literature, and another influence in Martins's work is Omar Khayyám's poem *The Rubáiyát*, which resonates atmospherically, with the ultimate message of *carpe diem*, to seize today for tomorrow may never come (Ross 1997:93).

Film Form

Given the explanation of the thought-process going into this film, as well as Helen Martins as subject matter, it became clear that this could not be a regimented documentary, or something that would require actors and reenactments. Instead, I approached the making of *Routes/Roots* as an internal dialogue with Martins. I attempted to explore her isolated Karoo life, and combine it with my travels to the east. Moreover, to explore her ideas of the greater world beyond South Africa which she learnt about through literature. This greater world that she never physically discovered, yet so vividly imagined and created in the only way she could, in her house and garden.

Silvio Carta (2011:408-409) presents two narrative forms for film, namely the illustrative and the revelatory film. The former "presents a high degree of epistemic authority that imparts knowledge to the viewer from a position of hierarchical superiority" (Carta 2011:408). The illustrative category of film is thus more formal and includes the documentary genre where information is presented in a traditionally factual and comprehensive way. The revelatory film, on the other hand, aims to "explore or provoke rather than teach" (Carta 2011:409). It is evident then that where the former's purpose is to educate and present facts that tell viewers what to think, the latter allows more freedom for interpretation. This freedom extends not only to the audience's open viewing of the subject matter, but also allows flexibility in the process of creation.

Understanding these two forms when creating a film marks a clear fork in the road. Neither form is regarded as better or superior to the other and remains a personal choice in the creative process. It is my choice as a filmmaker to make use of the *revelatory mode* as I wish to inventively explore Helen Martins's home and artwork.

Although a solid and powerful documentary could be made about Helen Martins and her *Owl House*, it is not my interest to solely present the facts. Additionally, an informational film by Mark Wilby (*The Owl House*:2001) has already been made and those who visit the *Owl House* are invited to watch it before exploring her home. Moreover, there are books, such as Anne Emslie's *A Journey Through the Owl House* (1997) and Susan Imrie Ross's *This is My World* (1997) that provide extensive information and detail about Martins's home.

Since my interest lies in doing something rooted in subjectivity, the *essay film* becomes a useful mode for the making of *Routes/Roots*. Laura Rascaroli (2008:24) defines the essay film as a "hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction cinema". The film thus becomes a story that is inspired by real events, yet combines with other narratives, creating a fusion of realities. With this in mind, the concept of autoethnography comes into play.

Autoethnography "is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analy[s]e *(graphy)* personal experience *(auto)* in order to understand cultural experience *(ethno)*" (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011:1). Building onto this as well as the essay film as a hybrid form of creation, *Routes/Roots* is not *about* Martins, but instead writes *to* her and her life, through *my* own experience of her *Owl House* and the Karoo.

This approach gave me a useful entry point when travelling to Nieu Bethesda to start shooting the film. I went with the knowledge of the biographical facts that I had researched about Martins's life, but I also went with an openness about what I would film. Immersing myself in her space, I began to understand things viscerally and corporeally in a way that books and articles could not fully capture or explain. Journeying through and spending time in the Karoo milieu also allowed me a deeper and more instinctual understanding of her work.

The voice of the experimental essay film "…does not propose itself as anonymous or collective, but […originates] from a *single* authorial voice" (Rascaroli 2008:35, emphasis added). It is this single voice which becomes key to the explorative nature

of the essay film. As much as the meaningful personal experience at the *Owl House* allowed me a new appreciation of Martins's work, my 'single voice' cannot reach the point that it disregards the facts and becomes alienating to viewers. The voice needs to come from a point of knowledge and understanding of its presented subject matter.

ART IN PLACE: OUTSIDER ART AND LITERATURE

Outsider Art

With the experimental film form in mind, I went on to explore Thailand and Laos, keeping Martins close in mind. While sitting on a two-day slow boat overcrowded with tourists and locals travelling up the Mekong River, I took a photograph of the thick jungle and surging river. I thought to myself that this boat ride looks far more intriguing, enigmatic, wonderful and exotic than it really is. Of course the 350 kilometers of scenery was inspiring, but a postcard would show the journey for all its mysticism and wonder, and omit the loud Californians sitting opposite me, the constant shifting to alleviate numbness while sitting on a tiny seat, and the soggy communal flip flops that one had to wear when entering the toilet.

Although a postcard would not capture these nuances of the trip, the image would conjure a sense of the atmosphere and beauty of the Mekong. In other words, travelling through looking at an image is just as powerful as it is to physically be there (and perhaps sometimes more so). By analysing an image, the conduit of meaning shifts from the *material* body to the *imaginative* mind. It is thus the combination and juxtaposition of the *physical* landscape and *bodily* experience, with the landscape of the *mind* and *imagined* experience that is a key focus in *Routes/Roots*.

It became evident that one does not need to actually physically travel in order to know the world. At the same time, one does not need to study art in order be an artist. Helen Martins qualified as a teacher, yet she committed the last thirty years of her life to creating the *Owl House* and *Camel Yard*. Martins is classified as an *outsider artist*, which in summary means that she did not receive formal artistic training. The origins of outsider art are traced to the French sculptor, Jean Dubuffet, whose interest lay in art of the insane (Maizels 1996:32). Dubuffet did not want the stigma of the ‘insane’ or ‘psychotic’ attached to this art, and decided on the term ‘Art Brut’, which translates into ‘raw art’ (Maizels 1996:33).

Martins's work is not only 'raw' in her deep self-expression, but is 'raw' in terms of the materials she made use of, such as cement, wire, glue and recycled glass. Given her financial position, where she lived in poverty for the majority of her life, she made do with the cheapest materials she could access. Dubuffet (cited by Maizels 1996:33, emphasis added) describes artists from Art Brut as "…[those who] derive everything – subjects, choice of materials, means of transportation, rhythms, styles of writing … from their *own* depths, and *not* from the conventions of classical or fashionable art".

Such is true of Helen Martins who is described as a very unconventional individual within the small and conservative community of Nieu Bethesda. Her artwork is largely symbolic, with a plethora of possible meanings, whether intentionally or unintentionally implied. Either way, Martins's home becomes a space perhaps not where she 'knows' herself best, but rather where she can explore herself completely.

It is important to note that although I am defining Martins as an outsider artist, this is not done to exclude her from the larger 'fine art' narrative. Rather, I classify her as an outsider artist due to the fact that making art was not a commercial endeavor for Martins; instead art was a way to express herself, and she did that with the means she had available. This expression is evident in Martins's use of colour. In an attempt to bring light and creativity into her life after the death of her parents, Martins began to experiment with different materials and light. Given her financial situation, Martins had access to few materials, yet she explored them in a variety of ways.

This is seen in her use of glass panes as well as colourful crushed glass, glued to her walls, that transform the atmosphere of her home at different times of the day, glowing with varied intensity, as seen in Figure 4. These colours range from red, to green and to blue. Green, for example, signifies nature, fertility and growth, as well as envy and greed (Bourn 2011:[sp]). One visitor or viewer may read the space in Figure 4 as awesome, inspiring, and spiritual, given the green crushed glass wall and window pane with an attractive praying figure. However, depending on their associations with the colour green, another viewer may read elements of malevolence, negativity and helplessness in the way they interpret the praying figure. It is this multiplicity of

meaning that makes the *Owl House* a fascinating work of art, as well as an intriguing subject for filmic exploration.

In addition to Martins's play with colour is her fascination with light, and by extension, celestial bodies. Sun motifs are everywhere; on shoe tins, painted on windows, and mosaicked with crushed glass on ceilings. This motif acts as a strong link to the representation of the east in the film, as it is a symbol in many eastern cultures, but is also, more simply, where the sun rises first. Martins's adoration of the sun is also found in her Camel Yard where she creates 'meccas' from coloured bottles and fills in creatures' eyes with richly coloured glass. Each nook of her home is cluttered with ornaments; each one of them intentionally placed creating mini theatrical stages of colour and texture.

Literature

Since I did not want full character or narrative re-enactments in *Routes/Roots*, I tried to find an emotion or mood in these mini-cluttered areas of ornaments and things. Rather than re-enactments, *Routes/Roots* makes use of voice-over that guides the reading of the images, and propels the story forward. The method thus became the finding and capturing of a composition that creates a particular feeling. In line with the notion of composition as theatre, it became evident that an exploration of Martins's space needed more depth, and a different perspective to my own, which lead me to read Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* (1985).

The play is set in the autumn of 1974 in Nieu Bethesda, where the outsider artist, Helen Martins insurgently created her *Owl House* and *Camel Yard*. Fugard imaginatively creates a vulnerable Miss Helen who is trying to cope with the increasing difficulty of old age, as well as her fading, but desperate, creative inspiration for her 'mecca'. The play is not only useful in its subject matter, but is powerful given Fugard's ability to capture the atmosphere of this small Karoo oasis town.

One major reason for this is that Fugard was born in Middelburg, only 70 kilometers from Nieu Bethesda. Fugard (1985:i) discovered Nieu Bethesda on route to a friend's

farm and was immediately impressed by its isolation and potential for a city-escape. He bought a home here and visited the town regularly. According to Fugard (1985:i) he heard of a "rather strange character who lived in the village ... Helen Niemand". He recalls being fascinated by Miss Helen and saw her working in her garden a few times, but never got to know her personally.

Two years after Fugard (1985:i) had bought his home in Nieu Bethesda, Martins committed suicide. Thoughts of Miss Helen and her story continued to appear in Fugard's notebooks over the years, but he was not yet "hooked" (Fugard 1985:ii). He found his inspiration in Yvonne Bryceland who once commented that Fugard had created interesting female characters, but was "struck by the fact that [Fugard had] never had two women together" (Yvonne Bryceland, cited by Fugard 1985:ii). *The Road to Mecca* is thus shaped on the relationship between the elderly Miss Helen and the twenty-eight year old, Elsa Barlow (who was inspired by Jill Wenman, a social worker who was very close to Martins in her later life).

Fugard portrays Martins as an individual surrounded by the vast, enigmatic and desolate Karoo. Barlow's agitation is not only caused from her 8-hour drive from the Cape or Miss Helen's fussing about, it is also the immeasurable heaviness of an other-worldly terrain and its soupy unrestrained energy which puts her on edge. Fugard, having grown up within this territory, understands this energy intimately. It comes across very powerfully in his writing, as well as in Fugard's performance in the film *The Road to Mecca* (1991).

After having travelled to Thailand and Laos, it struck me that the *Road to Mecca* is not only about the product of a time or space, or female relationships, but also that I should consider the title of the play more closely. It is not titled *Miss Helen and Little Elsie* (as it could have, if thinking of *Boesman and Lena*) or, more literally, *The Camel Yard* or *Owl House*, as Martins named it. Instead, it is refers to Mecca, a space far away from a South African milieu. Mecca is 10 549 kilometers away from Nieu Bethesda, and is Islam's holiest city. A pilgrimage to Mecca is mandatory for all able Muslims. But Martins was neither Muslim, nor was she able to travel. Yet Fugard interprets her creative journey and her sculptures' direction to the east as a quest for something holy.

So while the play is about old age and youth, oppression and creative freedom, as well as female perseverance, it is also strongly about the religious and the secular. The community of Nieu Bethesda belongs to the Dutch Reformed Church, which is known for its strict devout practice. A month after visiting Nieu Bethesda, I was confronted with a new continent, mind-space, and religion in Thailand and Laos. At a temple, a teenage monk who was practicing his English told me about suffering, meditation and the law of karma.

According to the Buddhist Society (2016:[sp]) the "Buddha warned strongly against blind faith and encouraged the way of truthful inquiry". This means that beliefs based on tradition or from a community, and teachings from elders or priests, should be challenged and interrogated. One should maintain "an open mind and thoroughly investigate one's own experience of life". I believe Martins began this path of inquiry after the death of her father (in reality), and after the death of her husband (in the play).

Fugard (1985:70) explores Miss Helen's questioning of her faith, as she says "I tried hard, Marius, but your sermons, the prayers, the hymns, they had all become just words. And there came a time when even they lost their meaning". This quote is very salient to the research, as the narrative of *Routes/Roots* is shaped around this spiritual quest and questioning. This questioning is not only done by Martins, but is also done by Koos Malgas. The film follows the dialogue between Martins and Malgas, as well as individual monologues.

Parts of the dialogue from *The Road to Mecca* pertaining to spirituality are used in *Routes/Roots*. These are however translated into Afrikaans since it was both Helen Martins and Koos Malgas's mother tongue. Different to Fugard, the use of Afrikaans becomes a more authentic linguistic expression. It, as a language, is more deeply connected to the environment and landscape of the Karoo, and communicates the mood and atmosphere of the space and its people in greater depth.

Although the interactions between Miss Helen, Marius Byleveld, and Elsa Barlow are interesting and make for compelling theatre, it is not my interest to replicate this in *Routes/Roots*. Instead, I am fascinated by Fugard's treatment of Koos Malgas, who is portrayed as an abusive alcoholic in *The Road to Mecca*. A possible reason for

Malgas's alcoholism is due to Nieu Bethesda's isolation, job opportunities are scarce. Unemployment rates are high, which has led to substance abuse in the community and has also resulted in general health issues and domestic violence (Irvine, Kepe, de Wet & Hamunime 2015:6).

Although Malgas was indeed an alcoholic (Couzyn & Malgas 2008:59), he is described as being a religious man. His granddaughter explains that, "[b]efore we went to bed he told us to pray the Our Father prayer … it sounds unbelievable for a man who drinks to be like that, but believe me, it is true" (Couzyn & Malgas 2008:59). Despite this situation, he was not, as far as any sources reveal, abusive to his family members or Helen Martins, and they kept a good working relationship together, which prospered for twelve years. His granddaughter corroborates this stating that "…he [Koos Malgas] never drank at work while he was working for Helen Martins … but I could see how it broke my grandmother's heart when Pa [Malgas] was under the influence of alcohol" (Couzyn & Malgas 2008:61).

But Malgas was aware of his weaknesses and tried many times to stop his addiction. Koos Malgas (cited by Couzyn & Malgas 2008:61) recounts "…I told her [Koos's wife, Johanna] that I was going to stop drinking, but it wasn't that easy … it is three years now since I had a drink. I'm not saying that I will never drink again, but I will tell someone who drinks, don't drink the way I did … I asked God to help me".

Fugard portrays a very different version of Malgas in *The Road to Mecca*. When Elsa Barlow asks Miss Helen about Katrina, Helen's domestic worker who is married to Malgas, Helen responds that "I'm afraid Koos has started drinking again … and making … terrible threats about her and the baby", to which Barlow responds "… there is nothing sacred about a marriage that abuses the woman … how much more difficult can 'things' be than being married to a drunken bully?" (Fugard 1985:23). While indeed Fugard writes a fictional piece, inspired by reality, his portrayal of Malgas is disconcerting and unfair. It plays to widely held notions of how non-white men behaved during the apartheid era – an idea that reinforced and maintained mistreatment of coloured people during this period.

It is for these reasons that my film portrays a relationship and dialogue between Martins and Malgas – an opportunity that is never afforded to Fugard's version of

Malgas's character. Moreover, the characters from *The Road to Mecca*, like Marius Byleveld and Elsa Barlow are no longer included in this film, so as to give more time and space to the conversation between Martins and Malgas, who in reality, produced the visuals that are shown in *Routes/Roots*.

During their twelve years of work together, despite their personal qualms, Martins and Malgas created the majority of the *Camel Yard*, which still draws hundreds of tourists every year. It is this productive relationship that *Routes/Roots* depicts as the two characters ask, search and question one another about life and religion.

In my reading of her work, and the depiction of her life, Helen Martins challenged the Christian faith that her community so blindly accepted. In this film, Martins is open to all faiths, never reducing or treating one as inferior over another. It is her questioning of faith that leads to her alienation in the village, as she is too different from her community. Malgas on the other hand, is a devout Christian whose belief is deeply rooted, yet he tries to understand Martins and her dis-ease of committing to one faith.

Martins, who battles conforming to one sole religion asks Malgas why it is so easy for him, to which he responds that his God is the only easy decision he has made in his life. This is said while a bottle maiden in the *Camel Yard* offers a man a drink, and then focuses on a collection of bottles on a table. In this way viewers can make a link and realise that Malgas battles with alcoholism (like Fugard's character of Malgas, and in real-life), yet he finds his salvage in religion in trying to be a better person (unlike Fugard's character of Malgas).

Furthermore, Martins and Malgas do not only question religion in the film, but their working relationship and friendship as a white female and coloured male adds a unique texture to the *Owl House* as a South African space. In a South Africa which is still grappling with its complex past, and moving into the future, Alexander (cited by Coombes 2003:1) asks the "…moral-historical question [as to] how to move towards understanding without ever forgetting, but to remember without constantly rekindling the divisive passions of the past". I believe that it is stories like Martins's and Malgas's that should be considered in this intricate and difficult understanding of South Africa's past; as two individuals who were indeed products of their socio-

political time, yet also different in their rare working relationship and friendship.

DIGGING DEEPER: THE LANDSCAPE, MEMORY, IDENTITY AND HOME

The Political Landscape

Marilyn Martin (quoted by Barben 2015:2), past director of the South African National Gallery, states that an understanding of art in South Africa "is incomplete without reference to the relationship between art and politics". This is especially the case in South Africa where whole artistic movements, such as protest art, were born from the tumultuous socio-political environment of apartheid.

Although the twenty-first century has witnessed a change in locations in which art is exhibited, such as street art or creating interactive works in public spaces, art still commonly resides within the museum. Barben (2015:10) claims that "museums not only reflect the societies to which they belong but also contribute to their on-going formation". Additionally, "museums are political because they stage the performance of nationhood and transmit dominant ideologies".

Barben (2015:39) explains how the politics of South Africa influenced the work that was shown in art galleries and museums. The 1980s in South Africa culminated in a peak of political conflict and instability. The 1990s on the other hand introduced a period of transition and democratic negotiations. It is within this climate that South African art was also challenged and revised. Naidoo (2010:[sp]) develops this, explaining that "colonialism and apartheid have robbed generations of black people in this country [South Africa] of their dignity".

Up until the 1990s, museums displayed predominantly white artists work, and artists of colour were impudently excluded from being part of this narrative. However the end of the apartheid saw a questioning of this practice, and exhibitions like *Tributaries: A View of South African Art* (1985) and later, *From Pierneef to Gugulective* (2010) sought to expose this grand narrative. Although both exhibitions are separated by twenty-five years, they challenge the definitions of 'fine art' by placing traditionally accepted 'fine' artworks next to works defined as 'craft' or 'outsider art'. Moreover, black and white artists are also placed next to one another, further interrogating the previously accepted notions of art and its history.

With this in mind then, Davison (cited by Barben 2015:135) argues that "museums have the potential to mediate between past, the present, and the future". Furthermore, museums "anchor official memory…[in a process that involves] both remembering and forgetting, inclusion and exclusion" (Davison, quoted by Barben 2015:135). The *Owl House* thus becomes an interesting site for analysis, because it exists as a museum in the town of Nieu Bethesda.

In beginning my research on Helen Martins there were many websites that gave an approximately similar account of a passionate and yet reclusive woman who lived in poverty in her inherited home. I was able to find literature, such as Ross's *This is my World* which extensively delves into the life and work of Helen Martins, a white Afrikaans woman. Additionally, in literature like Ross's, credit is given to Martins's three assistants who helped her in the creation of her work. These men were Piet van de Merwe, Jonas Adams, and most especially, Koos Malgas.

However, in the later parts of my research in trying to find out more about Koos Malgas, who worked with Martins for twelve years until her death, I could find very little information. Most sources give the same details of Malgas the itinerant sheep-shearer and builder, who initially did odd jobs for Martins, and ultimately became a significant creative partner in the making of the *Owl House*. But a biography of Malgas, and his life prior to this creative partnership, was less easy to find. However, a biography of his life, *Koos Malgas Sculptor of the Owl House* (2008), was published by Jeni Couzyn and Malgas's granddaughter, Julia Malgas, who felt that his story had been overshadowed by that of Martins.

Although extensive literature on Malgas is still lacking, it is significant to also note that the story of Helen Martins only entered artistic consciousness in the mid 1990s – approximately twenty years after her death. Although Martins stated in her will that she wanted her home to be converted into a museum, it took years before this finally happened. If museums, as Davison (quoted by Barben 2015:135) explains "anchor official memory", then Helen Martins clearly did not fit into this accepted memory. A reason for this is because Helen Martins, a white female, shared such a close creative relationship with Koos Malgas, a coloured male. Martins was not only close

to Malgas, but she had friendly relationships with other members of the coloured community in the Nieu Bethesda village. Jakob (cited by Reid 2012:[sp]) the local donkey-cart rider, explains that Martins was friends with a "*gogo* [an elderly lady] whom she used to visit regularly", which at the time, was shunned by her conservative village. The fact that Martins isolated herself from her 'friendly' white community, and would (although still rarely) interact with the coloured community was not acceptable within the 'official memory' of the apartheid era.

It is only when the *Owl House* began to fall into a state of disrepair that her decaying home was finally turned into a museum. The time of this was in the 1990s, the time of transition in South Africa. Within the newly forming narrative of a democracy, suddenly Martins's life became acceptable, a new piece to South Africa's 'official memory'. In addition to this, no longer was her work viewed as the creations of a mad woman, but rather entered the realm of 'outsider art', a category that now existed on the same level as 'fine art'.

At the time that the *Owl House* was converted into a museum, the *Friends of the Owl House* employed no other than Koos Malgas to help restore the damaged works. Malgas was given much praise for his help and was celebrated by the community. It is thus in a context of social change that both artists, who were considered outlandish and offensive when working together in the apartheid era, are then given recognition and acclaim in a democratic milieu.

However, this narrative only extends so far. Where Martins is celebrated as an artist, very few know of the accomplishments of Koos Malgas after his *Owl House* era. Malgas went on to work with Beezy Bailey, a renowned South African artist. Bailey commissioned Malgas to create sculptures for his (Bailey's) Art Factory in Cape Town. The commission was a successful one and Malgas was able to buy himself a truck, which relieved him temporarily of the poverty that dominated his life.

Given all this, it is evident that although Martins and Malgas are now portrayed as artists within the South African narrative, the narrative is not all-encompassing.

Martins's success overshadows Malgas in many ways, and Malgas's life and other successes are not well-known. Although I entered the making of this film wanting to explore spirituality and the juxtaposition of the east with South Africa, the additional layer of South Africa's socio-political context could not be avoided. The film attempts to capture their working relationship, and more importantly, a friendship that was unusual for its time, which was the collaborative nature of making the sculptures at the *Owl House*.

The Physical Landscape: Nieu Bethesda

Hawkins (2012:56) states that an "enduring feature of art's 20th-century expansion is a shift in the sites of art's production and consumption". Art is thus not an object that exists in itself, but is created within a specific space and context. Sjöholm (2013:507) adds to this, explaining that the artist's "studio is presented as a personal archive". Furthermore, it is "…a space where things end as well as originate or are reinvented – it is a space where things begin" (Sjöholm 2013:507). The artist's studio is therefore a dynamic workspace where ideas take shape over time.

Consequently, place is not to be viewed as a "distanced abstraction", but rather "'as a process and as in process'" (Hawkins 2012:59). Jones (2009:489) supports this, describing a "shift in the conceptuali[s]ation of space from 'absolute' to 'relative'". Space exists as a constant interaction of various environmental factors, and the art that is created in that space is influenced by these dynamics. Jones (2009:487) portrays this interaction as a "subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence, flow and stasis, into a single ontological plan upon which location – a place on the map – has come to be relationally and topologically defined".

The space that is depicted in *Routes/Roots* is Helen Martins's *Owl House* as the 'artist's studio', and is located within the greater context of the Karoo. The Karoo is a semi-arid environment and covers approximately forty percent of the geographic area in South Africa (Shenton 2012:3). It is a vast and historically rich space as it was once an inland sea approximately 250 million years ago. With gradual climate change, the water eventually evaporated leaving a rich and fertile swamp where many reptiles and amphibians thrived. The ecosystem took a dramatic change however, and calamitous

volcanic eruptions spewed molten lava all over the region, devastating all animal and plant life. What remains in the twenty-first century is an eroded landscape, displaying a once prosperous ecosystem.

Due to its harsh climate, as well as its distance from main cities and towns, the Karoo has a low population density (Shenton 2012:3). The town of Nieu Bethesda, where Helen Martins lived, is located sixty kilometers from Graaff-Reinet, in the Eastern Cape (see Figures 3 and 5). It was originally founded, like many towns in South-Africa, by a group of church-goers who wished to have a place of worship closer to home – on Sundays farmers would travel over seven hours to reach the church in Graaff-Reinet (About Nieu Bethesda [sa]:[sp]). The town's name is Biblically inspired and means 'the place of flowing water' or 'strong fountain' (About Nieu Bethesda [sa]:[sp]).

Nieu Bethesda is situated on the farm Uitkyk, which translates to 'lookout'. It was named this because "people were on a constant lookout for wild animals and bushmen" (About Nieu Bethesda [sa]:[sp]). The conflation of 'wild animals' in the same sentence as 'bushmen' is problematic, however, it is mentioned for the sake of explaining the reasons behind the name of the farm, as well as highlighting the landscape's important history. Koos Malgas strongly associated himself with bushmen as his ancestors, and was proud of this heritage.

Although Nieu Bethesda seems small, sleepy and almost forgotten, it was once a prosperous town. Shenton (2012:10) elaborates, saying that in "its heyday Nieu Bethesda boasted a water mill, a garage, leather works, a blacksmith, a clinic with full time nursing sisters, a railway station at Bethesda Road, a railway bus that came out once a week and brought the post, a manual exchange and three general dealers". The Nieu Bethesda of the early twentieth century was thus far more advanced than the Nieu Bethesda of the twenty-first century. This fruitful period did not last long however, and the town experienced a decline after the introduction of improved transport and the Great Depression (About Nieu Bethesda [sa]:[sp]).

If Martins was born in 1897, the Nieu Bethesda she grew up in, and the Nieu Bethesda after her parents' deaths was a very different place. Since this landscape is fundamental to the identity of Helen Martins and Koos Malgas, *Routes/Roots* sets out

to establish the environment and its character in the beginning minutes of the film. It is not the film's aim to depict the town in its heyday, but rather the Nieu Bethesda in which Martins and Malgas created the *Owl House* and *Camel Yard*, which was from the 1940s until the 1970s (after its decline).

The Camdeboo municipality (2016:[sp]) describe the Karoo as "mystical" and is "renowned for its pristine natural environment, rich heritage, diverse peoples and cultures". It is this unusual and enigmatic climate that *Routes/Roots* focuses on initially, moving from the Valley of Desolation, to the surrounds, then into Nieu Bethesda, and finally into the *Owl House*. This is depicted not only visually, but also audibly; through the whispering Karoo wind along the desert and through trees, singing cicada beetles, the distant sounds of animals, to evening humming creatures and the faraway sounds of children playing in the valley.

A place like Nieu Bethesda is not just a small town that exists within the vast Karoo. Instead, it is a fascinating site where the past lives in the present, where the absence of its original founders is present, and remains a town frozen in time while the rest of the world spins in an incessant cycle of demolition, consumption and ever-changing technology. Doel (quoted by Jones 2009:488) elaborates, saying that "'space is continuously being made, unmade, and remade by the incessant shuffling of heterogeneous relations, its potential can never be contained and its exuberance can never be quelled'".

In a culture of accelerated communication and travel, Nieu Bethesda stirs a unique disquietude of unhurried and gradual life. It looks much the same as it did one hundred years ago. Its homes have whitewashed walls, the streets are untarred, there are no streetlights, no ATM machines or even a petrol station. Additionally, it exists within the dead sea landscape of the Karoo, and in Nieu Bethesda's dried riverbed, one can still find fossils of creatures that once existed under water. This is not to say that Nieu Bethesda is not a space of constant transformation and continuous making and unmaking. It is. But due to its humble and steady character, change is viewed differently to bigger modern spaces.

The Owl House within the Landscape

Similar to the town in which it exists, the *Owl House* is unique in that it looks very like the way it did when Helen Martins lived in it, and acts as a moment frozen in time having been declared a heritage museum in the 1990s. Jones (2009:491, emphasis in original) declares that "objects *are* space, space *is* objects, and moreover objects can be understood *only* in relation to other objects". Objects like the many collected trinkets in Martins's home, as well as the sculpted owls, peacocks, lions, camels and Buddhas inspired by Martins and made by Malgas, share a symbiotic relationship with the *Owl House* as a space. The *Owl House* is defined by these objects, and these objects make the space entirely unique. The objects and space relationship extends further than the walls of Helen Martins's home, and is influenced by the greater landscape of the Karoo in which it exists.

Simon Schama (1995:19) explains that the landscape is a "necessary union of culture and nature". The landscape thus becomes a portal into the past, and acts as conduit for inspiration and preservation of people and their culture. Moreover, because the landscape is subtly omnipresent, analysing it may result in "…rediscovering what we already have" (Schama 1995:14). Instead of it "being yet another explanation of what we have lost, it is an exploration of what we may yet find" (Schama 1995:14).

This is the approach I have taken as a filmmaker. Having read literature on the symbolism of the *Owl House*, biographies of Martins and Malgas, and histories of Nieu Bethesda and the Karoo, it was not my aim to create a documentary of the information. Indeed, inspiration is derived from these sources; *Routes/Roots* explores not what has been 'lost', but is a rediscovery of something 'we may yet find'. An important initial step within this process is analysing the landscape, and finding the connections between the landscape, the *Owl House* and, Martins and Malgas.

The landscape, in this case the Karoo and specifically Nieu Bethesda, is not looked at from a nostalgic point of view, but rather through a retrospective lens to enable a consideration of the past in order to construct the present in a new way. As the landscape continues to exist through the centuries, certain elements remain constant

and others change. This is particularly the case in Nieu Bethesda since contemporary life is so dominated by the past and the historical. Mitchell (1994:1) builds onto this perspective, stating that he wishes to change the term "'landscape; from a noun to a verb". Furthermore, "[i]t asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a *process* by which social and subjective identities are formed" (Mitchell 1994:1, emphasis added).

With this in mind, it becomes evident that the landscape is not an entity from which we can detach; it is instead part of human make-up and identity formation. It is for these reasons that there are no 're-enactments' in the film. Instead, the voice over (a dialogue) guides the audience through views of the landscape of the Karoo, Nieu Bethesda, the *Owl House*, and then Martins's and Malgas's mind.

The landscape of the Karoo is shown at the first minutes of *Routes/Roots*, to establish the context of the film and its place in South Africa. It is also done to show the motivation of Martins and Malgas in creating the *Owl House*. In such a vast and sparse landscape of purple mountains as the backdrop, and boundless stretches of bare land in between, it makes sense that Martins and Malgas who lived in this environment would want to create a space full of variety, of different colours, shapes and light.

Moreover, the landscape is shown in its enormity and immensity, with very few shots of any people present. When people are shown, they appear ant-like within the space. This is done to portray the power of nature, in a Romantic sense, and also to emphasise Martins's isolation, and her deep loneliness that she struggled with for most of her life. In other words, you understand Martins's isolation in relation to the loneliness and vastness of the Karoo. Furthermore, Malgas and Martins are depicted as products of the Karoo on a number of levels; they are isolated not only physically, but also culturally and politically.

For these reasons, the film focuses on moving from asking what the landscape *is*, to investigating what the landscape *does*. Mitchell (cited by Pagano 2011:401, emphasis in original) states that the landscape "…is not a natural feature of the environment,

but a *synthetic* space, a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community". Taking this line of thought then, although the landscape (as 'space') has an impact on its inhabitants (as 'objects'), the inhabitants come to shape the landscape.

This extends to the political context of people residing within a space. In the 1980s in Nieu Bethesda, a township named Pienaarsig was developed for the black community under the apartheid government (Shenton 2012:11). Although this development only became official in the 1980s, segregation in Nieu Bethesda had been the norm for most of Martins's (a white female) and Malgas's (a coloured male) lives. Within this milieu, creating the *Owl House* meant that Martins and Malgas created their own landscape (albeit small), within the greater political landscape. This mini-landscape was made as a creative space, where a fruitful relationship between a white woman and coloured male could exist.

Pagano (2011:406) claims that "landscape is not only an aesthetic category, but a site where individual and collective memories are inscribed: by destroying it, we may deprive ourselves of our identities". Such a statement stands as testament to the power and significance the landscape has in every individual's life. Drawing from this, Martins's identity relied heavily on the creation of the *Owl House*. Moreover, a collective identity between Martins and Malgas took shape over the twelve years as they worked together, which one can still experience when visiting the *Owl House* as a museum, and is also captured in the film.

The dialogue and the visuals work very closely together to convey these identities. For example, when Miss Helen asks Koos how he can believe in just one god, Koos responds that one has to believe in something. While this is being said, a sculpture (seen in Figure 6) of a shepherd and his lamb is shown, and is contrasted with real sheep being herded in the landscape of Nieu Bethesda (Figure 7). The shepherd represents Koos, as he was originally a sheepshearer before working for Martins. Furthermore the shepherd also represents his belief in God. While creating this scene, I had the following Bible verse in mind "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In

His arm He will gather the lambs, And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (Isaiah 40:11). Koos is thus the shepherd, and yet also the lamb.

The sequence however also represents Helen as she commissioned the sculpture for her garden. However, unlike Koos, it represents her challenging of religion. She does not want to be one of the many sheep in the herd, following their shepherd obediently. Her ideas are epitomised in the star and sickle moon (symbolising the east) that are juxtaposed with the sheep (symbolising Christianity). In this sense then, Koos and Helen's identities are their own, yet become a collective in their collaboration of work in their garden.

But identity is also closely aligned with the landscape of the Karoo. In the pursuit of capturing this unusual terrain, I filmed the landscape at various times of the day. In the morning light, the air was clear and the light bright. This would change dramatically in the afternoon when the moaning wind picks up, and the landscape would be less calm, somewhat rattled by the shifting of the day. Late evening the light glowed, and grass and sheep would be bathed in golden nostalgic light. Evenings would fluctuate between wispy silver clouds, growing and dispersing with a cold dewy breeze, or be clear with the heaviness of the jeweled night sky. All these elements work together to remind one that these weather patterns are as old as the Karoo has been a desert, and will remain for as long as it continues to be one.

For this reason, I filmed timelapses as a recording of the timelessness of Nieu Bethesda and its surroundings. The people in the town may have changed, yet the way the sun sets in the valley or over the *Owl House* has not. These shots of the landscape, like the theatrical compositions at Martins's home, serve to create a Romantic and mystical mood or atmosphere. The landscape recorded in real-time as well as in timelapses, is thus treated as a pathetic fallacy.

A pathetic fallacy is a literary device that "…attributes human qualities and emotions to inanimate objects of nature" (Literary devices 2015:[sp]). In other words, the mood of nature reflects the mood of characters or events. In the film, the landscape is thus used to propel the narrative further, but also to emphasise certain moments in the story, ranging from clear-mindedness, nostalgia and unrest.

For example, in Figure 8, Koos is reminiscing about his lost employer and friend, Miss Helen. This is exemplified through the warm golden nostalgic light in the grass, contrasted with the deep grey blue of the mountains in the background. Furthermore, his awe for God is shown in Figure 9 which is a timelapse of a clear summer sunset in the valley of Nieu Bethesda. Time being squashed into a short moment represents God's eternalness, and our lives being a small moment within this.

Landscape as Memory

According to Schama (1995:6-7) the landscape is not only a natural vista, but is "the work of the mind". Furthermore, the landscape's "scenery is built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock" (Schama 1995:7). But like us, the landscape evolves and changes, albeit in a subtle manner. These changes are preserved in its layers of rock in a similar way that our memories are preserved in our minds and on our bodies. In this line of thought then, the landscape is integral in identity formation, as well as memory preservation. However, memory is not a one-dimensional historical archive but is instead subject to transformation in the course of one's life.

Annette Kuhn (2010:298) states that "memory is a process, an activity, a construct; and that memory has social and cultural, as well as personal resonance". It is through memory that we develop ourselves *and* understand individuals and the culture around us. Memory is also multisensorial, in that where it normally involves the visual, it can also be a particular smell, a temperature, an unusual sound or a particular emotion.

Often childhood memories are vivid, intriguing and even overwhelming in their intensity, and revisiting a space as an adult where this memory was formed is generally disappointing, transforming the wondrous to the mundane. I was afraid this would be my experience in visiting the *Owl House* in 2015, after having first visited in 1997 as a child. However, the *Owl House* proved different to my other experiences, and the immense and startling energy that emanates from it is just as powerful as twenty years ago.

It is thus a childhood memory, a researched memory, and a physically recent memory that allows me as a filmmaker to gain a connection and understanding of Helen Martins, Koos Malgas and the *Owl House*. This memory however, is not of a physical and tangible Martins and Malgas. The research is of someone who passed away forty years ago (in Martins's case), and seventeen years ago (as with Malgas). It is with this in mind that Kuhn (2010:298, emphasis added) poses the question as to how "the past [may] be re-enacted in the *present* through performances of different kinds?".
In *Routes/Roots*, the 'past' is reenacted through the landscape and the objects and sculptures at the *Owl House*. I did not want to use actors to try recreate and act out the past. Such a rendering would be too literal, and too physical, and would be unable to break the boundaries of the tangible. The film's focus lies on the ability to transcend the physical into the imagination. It thus became an important filmic choice to create a film that is disembodied.

Although Martins and my life never overlapped, her memory is preserved in her home, now converted into a museum. We may not be of the same time or generation, but there are aspects of the past in which she and Malgas lived that are still present today. Martins's and Malgas's eyes had seen the same houses I saw, and worked in the *Owl House* where I explored and filmed. It is these elements of memory that I attempted to capture while filming. My aim was to capture the physical with an additional layer of the possibility of a presence. In this sense then, the presence of absence is felt in not physically showing the characters. Martins's and Malgas's voices are disembodied, guiding the audience through the visuals, allowing viewers to tap into their own imagination.

In addition to the architecture and Martins's home being much the same, the setting struck me. Even more perpetually everlasting are the timeworn mountains and the vast landscape that stretches out below them. Martins, Malgas and I looked at not only the same houses, but we heard the same wind, we felt the same cold, we breathed the same air. The understanding of their milieu, and using it visually as a pathetic fallacy, produces a profound experience and memory of their vision. It is for these reasons, such as the linking between the landscape, identity and memory that *Routes/Roots* could not, as a filmmaker, be an illustrative documentary. The emotions

and memories evoked and provoked belong to the exploration of an essay film, which is experienced not only by myself as the filmmaker, but is shared with the audience through the film.

Home

The concept of home, like the landscape "is [also] overburdened with cultural, political, sociological, and economic meanings" (Hayes 2007:2). Hayes continues, stating that "…home as [a] place of origin, home as current domicile, and home as a personal sense of belonging, requires that the meanings of home are consciously interrogated". Given these statements, the definition of home varies amongst individuals, and becomes a question in the making of the film. In the filming and writing process the questions asked are what 'home' may have meant to Martins, especially in its transformation from childhood into adulthood and death. Moreover, what this home/museum means now in the twenty-first century.

Whether home is viewed as a place of origin, or where one experiences a sense of belonging, Rapport and Dawson (cited by Hayes 2007:5) purport that the home "…is where one best knows oneself". Although this statement seems acceptable at first glance, upon further analysis it is somewhat problematic. Such a perspective assumes a positive experience of the home, which indeed is acceptable, but often home is viewed in an ambivalent manner; sometimes as a place that one needs to get away from in order to feel 'oneself'.

Hayes (2007:6, emphasis in original) declares that home "…is no longer a place of origin, a point of departure, or a retreat from freedom, but rather is an expression of our *becoming*, our demonstration of Care, and the fulfillment of our potential". In other words, home is not a space of stasis but is in constant flux and change. As one grows and develops, so too does the home. Whether this unceasing transformation is progressive or regressive is dependent on the individual and context.

This continuous change of home is evident in the *Owl House*, which originally was simply the home of the Martins family, and their six children, with normal furniture

and a functional garden. After the death of her parents, the same home underwent a drastic change. Now belonging solely to Helen Martins, windows were changed to vividly coloured panes of glass; smooth walls were smothered in coloured crushed glass; and the garden was transformed into the *Camel Yard* with its hodgepodge of cement statues, as seen in Figure 10.

Amanda du Preez (2013:16) quotes Morris, who claims that the home "can be both 'confronting or constraining, compelling or repulsive'". Although the home has this contradictory and conflicting nature, it is also integral to one's sense of being. Bachelard (cited by Roni Brown 2007:264) describes the home as "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind … without it, man [*sic*] would be a dispersed being". The home becomes a capsule for these innately human traits, and provides a space where they can be explored. In relation to this the *Owl House* is a combination of Martins and Malgas's 'thoughts, memories and dreams' in a physical form, and serves as a focus in this film as a realm of investigation.

Brown (2007:261-285) takes an interesting angle when approaching the home by looking at the "amateur homemaker" who physically builds and creates their own home. Brown (2007:263) explains that "…designing and making the home are discursive and creative practices that are integral to the process of identity formation." In other words, it "is the *physical engagement* in the activity that is described as fundamental to a space becoming more fully integrated with the identity of an individual" (Brown 2007:267, emphasis added).

Given Brown's information, I suggest that Helen Martins lived in three different homes. The first was the home she was born into, a family home that was a space created by her parents and made to accommodate their children and their daily lives. The second home Martins lived in, albeit the same physical address, was her parents' home in their old and frail age where she had to care for them. Due to her complex and bad relationship with her father, Helen Martins began changing this home. In her mother's last few years of life, Misses Martins and Helen banished Mister Martins to an outside room, and he was not allowed in the main house (Ross 1997:48). Helen

later called it the *Lion's Den*, and painted it black. After her mother's death in 1941, she left her father inside with very little attention, and the Nieu Bethesda community bathed and took care of him until his death, three years after her mother's passing (Ross 1997:49).

The third home that Martins lived in was her inherited home, a space that was now hers, and hers alone. Having spent 16 years of her life caring for her ailing parents, she spent the last years of her youth in her thirties looking after her parents, and was then left alone in her late forties, as a middle-aged single woman. This loneliness inspired her to create a new home, and she transformed this space into her *Owl House*. It is this (third) home that *Routes/Roots* depicts as it explores Martins's imaginative creation, and her later collaboration with Malgas.

EXPLORING REAL AND IMAGINED SPACE: TRACE, MOBILITY AND THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

Trace & Mobility

With the idea of physically creating a home in mind, it is logical to state that to "live means to leave traces (Benjamin cited by J. Macgregor Wise 2000:298). Furthermore, if one is to 'leave traces' on the landscape, a marker of presence, it is evident that "identity is territory" (Wise 2000:295). The *Owl House* is a standing testament to Helen Martins's territory, her self-created home and landscape. Her belief in this unique landscape is confirmed by her wire-sign on her fence, which states 'this is my world'.

In the beginning of *Routes/Roots*, Martins and Malgas are having a conversation where he asks her why she has not been to church, to which Martins replies that she goes to church every day, in her garden. Music guides this sequence where the audience is introduced to the *Camel Yard* for the first time, exploring her uniquely created space. The sequence ends with two shots of the fence with the words 'this is my world', which leads audiences to understand that this garden is unlike any within the environment of the Karoo, which has already been established in earlier sequences.

This 'world' is a unique expression of Martins and Malgas's ideas, dreams, and by extension, their selves. Selves, Cohen (2010:121) explains "…are not fixed givens, but are always in a process and performed". Such a statement makes the symbiotic exchange between the self and home more evident; as the self transforms, so too does the home. In the twenty-first century however, individuals are finding more ways to find them-selves, away from home. In the late modern age, individuals have more opportunities for self-discovery through the use of social-technologies, such as the internet and by extension, social media, as well as increased access to air travel (Cohen 2010:122).

With this in mind, du Preez (2013:1) asks "[h]ow do we re-imagine place, home and belonging in the 'mobility turn'…?". On opposite ends of a scale, mobility can be viewed both negatively and positively. In a negative sense, many groups and communities, due to political reasons, have had to migrate and are thus forced into a life of constant uprooting and movement. For the privileged few however, travel for purposes of leisure are positive. Cohen (2010:117) describes how some backpackers travel to "find themselves".

Backpacking is different from other lifestyle choices in that it involves a "sustained physical mobility" (Cohen 2011:1535). By being mobile, it "affect[s] and challenge[s] the ways in which we experience *[one]self*, *others* and *places* over time" (Cohen 2011:1536, emphasis added). From this it is evident that notions of the self change and transform as one is exposed to different cultures and practices, which are encapsulated within differing landscapes.

In the starting stages of my film, it is this exposure to different landscapes and cultures that I wished to portray and communicate to the audience. At the beginning of my travels before entering my Masters degree, I journeyed to India not to find myself, but to experience an environment, people and culture that I had never before been exposed to. This in turn showed a part of my-self that I had not known. These new experiences could not be 'new' without a reference point, and it was home, back in Pretoria, South Africa to which I compared the new unknown to the comfortable known.

While moving and immersing myself in different landscapes, the landscape of my mind expanded, sprawled out and grew, but the point from which the growth came, the epicentre, was the metropolis – home. In this regard, it becomes evident that "moorings are often as important as mobilities" (Cresswell, cited by du Preez 2013:2).

It is necessary at this point to take ideas of mobility a step back. People are not the only things that are mobile. Tim Cresswell (2010:161) elucidates, stating that "[p]eople move, things move, ideas move". Although a seemingly simple statement, this displays a different perspective as it is not only people who physically and bodily

move, but also the many objects and ideas that move with them. In this line of thought, Martins did not need to travel to find ideas for the creation of her home, the ideas travelled to her.

Martins was not only influenced by South African iconography (such as the sun on shoe-polish or Lion matchboxes) but she also drew much of her inspiration from the postcards and gifts she received from her sister, Alida. Alida travelled extensively, but it was the aesthetic of the east that appealed to Martins very deeply. But Helen Martins did very little travelling and moving in her life, having never left South Africa and only lived away from home for approximately ten years. Instead of leaving her trace while travelling, the trace enables her imaginative travel. In other words, Martins creatively and mentally travelled through the few sources she had access to, namely postcards sent from her sister, Alida, as well as reading literature.

The agenda of *Routes/Roots* is to combine the theory discussed thus far. Firstly, it tells the story of Helen Martins through Koos Malgas's eyes, allowing them both the opportunity to speak, and for audiences to learn about their characters. Secondly, the film's focus is also on the fantastical exploration and hodgepodge combination of various cultures and symbols found at the *Owl House*.

It is for these reasons that the film is entitled *Routes/Roots*. Where Martins and Malgas did not travel, I have been fortunate enough to. Although Martins was bound and deeply *rooted* to the Karoo, she was able to travel through her imagination, experiencing different creative *routes*. At the same time, where I am rooted as a South African, I have travelled various routes in the east, and in so doing, have tried to connect the east and its symbolic imagery to the *Owl House*. While in Thailand and Laos I tried to find these visual links, and focus on objects and spaces that I think she and Malgas would have found inspiring.

I tried to reimagine Martins's trace – the trace that inspired her work. I continually looked at and filmed Buddhas, trying to get as close as I could to what image she once looked at. I also tried to find similarities in the landscape in order to create transitions from the faraway to the 'local', focusing on elements like wind (blowing the leaves of

trees) and water (moving from Thai fish in a pond, to a water furrow in Nieu Bethesda). It is this continuous exchange of seeking visual links and a pursuit of understanding that leads to the introduction of the hermeneutic process.

Hermeneutic Circle

According to Regan (2012:288) hermeneutics originates from the Greek word 'hermeneutikos' which means to "*interpret*". Gadamer (2004:2) explains that hermeneutics is fundamental to the state of being human, as humans constantly seek to know, and thereby understand. In the process of grasping an understanding, hermeneutics's capacity extends from understanding, to also misunderstanding, as a method for communication. For Gadamer (cited by Rees 2003:4) a "person who thinks must ask himself questions".

With a character like Helen Martins, understanding and misunderstanding go hand-in-hand. Since her death, much literature has been written to understand the various sculptures in her garden, their symbolism, and also detailing the biographical details of her life. However, while living, her community did not quite grasp her eccentric lifestyle and would create stories so as to substantiate her actions in their minds. Although it has never been proved, or disproved, rumor has it that Helen Martins and Koos Malgas had a love affair. Although it may be possible, Martins was already having an affair with a married man, Johannes Hattingh, which lasted approximately twenty-one years (Ross 1997:49-50).

Given the social climate of South Africa at the time, I purport that a productive working relationship between a white female and coloured male did not fit the political ideological picture, which lead community members to hypothesise about Martins's life. It is this misunderstanding in the pursuit of knowing that propels my hermeneutic journey forward.

Gadamer (cited by Regan 2012:291) suggests that "hermeneutics is not a method but a fluid set of guiding principles aiding the human search for truth in the concealed forgetfulness of language". In beginning this process, Matheson (2009:711) states that

all “understanding begins with prejudgments”. These prejudgments stem from a particular vantage point. Rees (2003:2) defines a vantage point as the “belief system, desires, and imaginings of an individual … [which] is formed by history both personal and socio-cultural”. Gadamer (cited by Rees 2003:2) introduces the next concept in this process, which is the horizon where comprehension takes place. The horizon is “…the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Rees 2003:2).

From this socially, culturally and politically learned vantage point, the horizon is something one looks out toward, which can result in it fusing and expanding, when new understanding is combined with current understanding. The horizon, Gadamer (cited by Rees 2003:2) explains, is “…something into which we move and moves with us”. However this progression to new horizons needs a catalyst. Gadamer (cited by Rees 2003:3) states that “understanding begins … when something addresses us”. In order for this ‘something’ to come to the fore, it cannot simply be the known and familiar, as it is this comfortable zone that often goes unnoticed. Instead, “it is necessary that there be an encounter with that which is strange” (Rees 2003:3).

This strange encounter addresses and challenges learnt prejudices, both negative and positive. These prejudices act as a springboard for better understanding as it gives the interpreter an expectation or working hypothesis from which further understanding can be developed (Regan 2012:296). However these prejudices cannot be one-dimensional, and while reading, one’s “eyes need to be open to the newness of the text in order to search for meaning” (Regan 2012:292). In this process though, it is important to note that the aim is not in finding the ‘truth’ the author wrote, but rather lies in finding the relevance it has for one as the reader, and how it comes alive for the interpreter.

It is at this point in the hermeneutic process that I realised as a filmmaker that I do not need to make a film that sticks to the deeply researched symbolism of Martins’s home, or her biographical details. Instead, by exploring her home, and her and Malgas’s creations, I could seek my own understanding in what these objects mean now, and not so much for then. Martins’s fascination for the east doubled up with

mine for travelling there. I wanted to initially make a film about travelling in India, and link it to the South African landscape in some way. The *Owl House* and its exploration of the imagined east became that link, and while travelling to Thailand and Laos, I sought to understand the *Owl House*'s landscape, in relation to the one in the east that I was physically travelling through.

This was a process where the "'alien' and 'unfamiliar' … run side by side until new understanding emerges" (Regan 2012:293). This was the case while travelling and trying to process all of the novel things that I was seeing, and trying to imagine through Martins's eyes what she would have thought about the landscapes, and places I travelled to. But this understanding does not suddenly appear during such experiences. New understanding, according to Regan (2012:294) is "gained through temporal distance". It if it were not for temporal distance, this film would have been very different to the way it is now.

When beginning this project, I wished to capture the *Owl House* as a real-life, three-dimensional, Vanitas painting. Although its themes have remained, over time and through travelling, my ideas for the film evolved. I began to think that Martins's exploration of so many symbolic, as well as religious entities in her garden, could be a questioning of the religion she was raised with. Her *Camel Yard* has nativity scenes, glass 'meccas', crosses, Buddhas, stars and moons, and wise men. I propose that this combination of various religions' iconography was a pursuit in understanding life, different cultures, and faith, which is what Buddhists call *The Way of Inquiry*.

Gadamer (cited by Regan 2012:297) states that "… [one] must understand the whole in terms of the detail…". But this detail and understanding is subject to change because for Gadamer (cited by Regan 2012:298) "tradition and history are never settled or correctly interpreted but understood by the interpreter's ever changing horizon". My film thus acts as a level of understanding Martins in this present moment, and as time carries on, further interpretations will be made of her and Malgas's work.

Although Martins, Malgas and I had and have mostly different vantage points, it is important to remember that "…our essence is already in this all surrounding ancient world, temporally and unavoidable not of our own making" (Regan 2012:298). In this sense then, when we are born, we are already born into a past that provides the context in which we can think, know and seek understanding.

In this sense, any text becomes a conversation between an author (even if they are dead) and an interpreter, in that history and a common interest links them both. Although I have only spent two years in trying to understand Martins and Malgas, I currently feel content with the fusion of horizon that I have achieved…for now. The hermeneutical process is something that never ends, and continues to spiral, connecting creators, makers, authors and interpreters for the years past, present and the years to come, so long as there is openness to new experiences and the unfamiliar.

Martins did not accept the life her parents had lived or the conformist nature of the people in her village. She began physically creating a world and new space where she could explore the inner workings and questions in her mind. In her world, spirituality entailed a universal truth, instead of one dictated by a single Holy Spirit. In this sense, Martins journeys on a hermeneutic path in trying to understand faith and religion, which compliments Buddhist tradition.

According to Plamintr (2007:6) Buddhism is a "religion of self-help, a do-it-yourself spiritual discipline". One of the main ideas in Buddhism is the "Way of Inquiry" where "…free thought is upheld, questions are welcome, and positive doubt is considered the first stepping stone to wisdom" (Plamintr 2007:7). This links to the hermeneutic process, which requires an interaction with doubt and the strange in order to reach a new understanding.

Martins and Malgas's creation of the *Owl House* and *Camel Yard* is a physical enactment of this path; where Martins questions her circumstance and community, Malgas, deeply rooted in his faith, attempts to understand Martins's process. The name for the film was originally *The Way of Inquiry*, inspired by this hermeneutic spiritual process. However, the title *Routes/Roots* still encapsulates this path, as the

word ‘routes’ implies a journey, and so alludes to this Buddhist and hermeneutic path that I believe Martins was exploring.

A Hermeneutic Conclusion

According to Nanavecchia (2014:1-2) our understanding of the world is divided into separate blocks, namely “the North and the South, the East and the West”. This geographical categorisation has extended to the development of cultural constructions, which in a similar way, are organised into “twofold oppositions” (Nanavecchia 2014:2). These, to name a few, include the “known/unknown, the I/Other … stability/mobility, and home/away” (Nanavecchia 2014:2). Such distinctions are developed passively, to the extent that unless interrogated and deconstructed, are generally acceptable in daily life. This is until you reach a space like the *Owl House*, a space devoid of categorisation and where these opposites exist in a symbiotic and continual exchange with one another. In other words, where stability/mobility, home/away, and East/West are no longer polar opposites, but have a relationship.

The blurring of dichotomies is highlighted in the climax of the film where Martins says that she is on her way to the grand temple. An energetic song begins to play, and intersperses shots of individuals dancing in India, Thailand and Laos, with statues ‘dancing’ in the *Camel Yard*. In this sequence, the east meets south and west, Buddhism meets Hinduism and Christianity, colours vibrate, and movement connects all these lives and shapes into the dance that is life, a life of the physical and the imagined, a life that is connected beyond borders.

Madison (cited by Hayes 2007:2) states that home is no longer seen as just place, but is now recently seen as an “interaction”. Additionally, according to Wise (2000:305), home “is always movement”. Moreover, home “is no longer a place of origin, a point of departure, or a retreat from freedom, but rather is an expression of our *becoming*…” (Hayes 2007:6, emphasis in original). Home then, like the Way of Inquiry, is also, in a sense, a hermeneutic process. Martins’s home transformed from her early childhood, to the death of her parents, and then the release of her artistic

vision. Her home, even after her and Malgas's death, transforms again in interpreters' understanding of their work and their unique space.

The film ends with an awareness of the hermeneutic process and the various attempts to understand Martins and Malgas. Malgas says that it is only now (after Martins's death) that people are investigating their work in the form of films, such as Mark Wilby's *This is my World*, theatre, such as Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, and literature, like Ross's *This my World*.

Even though a new understanding of these two artistic individuals has been reached through various media, the reasons for creating the *Owl House* at the end of the film remain Martins and Malgas's secret, forever hidden in the landscape and in their creations. Malgas and Martins's voices that have guided the film are finally embodied in the second last shot. Audiences are able to see how the real Koos Malgas and Helen Martins actually looked.

In my research I was never able to find a photograph of Malgas and Martins together. Given the socio-political apartheid climate, a photograph of the two was highly unlikely to have been taken. It is for these reasons that in this closing image I have collaged two separate photographs of Malgas and Martins to appear as if they had posed together, as seen in Figure 11. The photographs were taken approximately twenty years apart, yet in this collaged image, they appear together, at the same time in the *Camel Yard*, as they would have every day for twelve years.

The closing shot that follows this image is of two black eagles gliding along thermals at the Valley of Desolation. This is a repeated shot from the beginning of the film where Malgas is reminiscing about Martins. This is intended to be a bookend shot, as it follows straight after the photograph of Martins and Malgas. The two eagles represent the enduring spirit of Martins and Malgas that remain in Nieu Bethesda and the Karoo, even after their physical deaths. In other words, their creations will continue to be remembered, and their souls remain in the vast expansiveness of the Karoo, embodied through the landscape's elements, and its creatures.

CONCLUSION

Given the revelatory experimental essay film as its form, *Routes/Roots* rests between fiction and non-fiction. It is a fusion of realities and ideas, and depicts the intertwining of imaginations; not only my imagination, but also that of Helen Martins and Koos Malgas, and hopefully in a hermeneutic spirit, the audience's imagination. I argue that travelling through images is sometimes just as powerful as tangibly being there. The conduit of meaning and experience shifts from the *physical* body to the *imaginative* mind.

With this said however, the body within the physical landscape is pertinent to human experience. As I travelled and filmed, immersing myself in various landscapes, it was the landscape of South Africa that my internal compass pointed towards; in other words, home was my point of reference to which I compared all new experiences. The landscape is therefore no longer a noun, but rather a verb. It is not an entity from which we can detach, and is a significant part of human make-up and identity formation.

Helen Martins and Koos Malgas were deeply rooted in the Karoo landscape, and the travel they did was mostly out of necessity for employment (especially in Malgas's case) and not leisure. In such a sparse and unrelenting landscape of purple mountains and vast stretches of bare land in between, it makes sense that Martins and Malgas created a busy space full of a variety of colours, light and figures. However, given the socio-political context of South Africa at the time that they worked together, such a fruitful relationship was rare and unusual.

Routes/Roots attempts to capture the working relationship, and friendship, between Martins and Malgas. By tapping into their creative imaginations, Martins and Malgas were able to create an entirely new landscape, albeit a tiny one in the greater context of the Karoo. Here, they could as an older white female and younger coloured male, collaborate and explore *together*. The *Owl House* is often thought as the sole creation of Martins, and it is this research's attempt to show Martins *and* Malgas as artists.

Koos Malgas has been overshadowed by Helen Martins in most literature, and the film provides both characters a platform to share as collaborators. Indeed, *Routes/Roots* is still *about* Helen Martins, but it is *through* Koos Malgas's eyes. And unlike *The Road to Mecca*, Koos Malgas is given a voice. He expresses his ideas, concerns, anger, and fears as an individual in dialogue with Martins.

In the film, their collaboration goes further than race, and they question one another about life and religion. In my reading of the symbolism of the *Owl House*, and the biographical details of Helen Martins, I believe that Martins challenged the Christian faith that the conservative Nieu Bethesda community so blindly accepted. In *Routes/Roots*, Martins is open to all faiths, interrogating and exploring them through her collected trinkets and the hodgepodge of sculptures in the *Camel Yard*. It is this questioning of faith that leads to her alienation in the village. On the other hand, Koos Malgas is a devout Christian whose belief is deeply rooted, yet he tries to understand Martins's dis-ease of committing to one religion.

In theories surrounding mobility, it is imperative to note that Martins and Malgas did not need to travel to find the ideas they used to create the *Owl House*; instead the ideas travelled to them through literature and postcards. In this sense then, it is not only people who physically and bodily move, but also the many objects and ideas that travel with them.

Routes/Roots therefore explores the idea of trace. Typically, one travels through a landscape and leaves a trace, a footprint for example. However, Martins and Malgas did not have the opportunity to travel to the east. Instead, they investigated the trace of others who did travel and their documented experiences found in literature, in the form of history books, photographs, poetry or prose. So while Martins and Malgas were deeply *rooted* to the Karoo, they were able to travel different *routes* through their imagination of other individuals' trace.

Since the film does not make use of character re-enactments, a special focus is made on the various forms, objects and sculptures that are found at the *Owl House*. The film moves from the vast and expansive landscape, into the streets and homes in Nieu

Bethesda, and then into the cluttered and highly ornamented *Owl House*. Space, therefore moves from the immense and sparse, to the busy and chaotic. As the film progresses, the boundaries and slippages between the Karoo and east become more fluid and dynamic. This comes to a forte at the climax of the film where the *Camel Yard* comes to life in an energetic dance. Binaries of east and west, youth and old age, life and death, and black and white blend into one another as the *Owl House*'s static statues are emancipated, if only for a moment, to participate in a dance. This dance epitomises Martins and Malgas's imagination – taking on and exploring otherworldly routes, although always rooted to the magnetic Karoo.

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