

# Celebrating Althea MacQuene

## Response to Community House Heritage Site for Activists

Why do we remember some and forget others? **Trudy Wagenstroom** tries to understand what influenced the decisions of the organisers of *The Community House Heritage Site for Activists* to exclude from their memories Althea MacQuene and her activism.



**T**he Community House Heritage Site for Activists was launched on 3 May 2012 as 'A space of memory and healing.'

This is a story about my sister Althea MacQuene who worked at Community House for many years and was excluded during the recent commemoration. Why should Althea be commemorated one might ask.

Her friends and comrades say: Althea is a forgotten heroine. She lived and breathed Community House. She worked at the International Research and Information Group, an international labour research organisation that focused on research on feminist issues and had several publications in this regard and also at Sweat, the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy organisation as an advocacy officer and did novel, groundbreaking work on decriminalising of sex work.

These are organisations which have offices in Community House. Then she also worked at the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) as the provincial education officer and was a programme officer at the Ditsela Western Cape office. Both these latter two organisations frequent Community House. Why therefore did the event crafters exclude Althea?

Professor Es'kia Mphahlele says that African philosophy is a philosophy of humanism that promotes the value of honesty, sincerity, humility, respect, dignity and openness, as well as critical consciousness and awareness. These are the values Althea strongly upheld and stood for.

Moreover, African humanism is about a deep spirituality of care and togetherness of community, ancestral and worldly. It is a communication with others and also with the inner self.

Why can we not open our eyes, heart and mind to this beautiful and wonderful existence of being and connectedness? The personal is spiritual, the personal is social, and the personal is political. Thus the pertinent question, *what does it mean to be human?*

### MEMORY SPACES FOR SAFETY AND HEALING

Scholars have used French thinker Michel Foucault's ideas to talk about spaces of 'otherness' as safe spaces. The original understanding is from anatomy and refers to parts of the body that are 'out of place', incompatible, spaces of otherness.

A heritage site, I would argue is a safe space of the different faces of suffering. Our democracy provides an environment for openness and reflection. In



*Mural at Community House in Cape Town.*

fact our society has become a confessional. More and more spaces are being created for memory, to reflect on our pain and trauma and suffering. We can celebrate the safe spaces to commemorate those who have departed from this life and for the healing of those left behind. Yet, why is it that some spaces are made for some and not for others?

### IS MEMORY, THE MEMORY TO FORGET?

The institutionalisation of memory has its effects of forgetting through not recalling and on the other hand resistance to keep the memory alive. Indeed our corporeality is one that the more it remembers the more it (wants?) forgets by pushing into the unconscious, the store house of memory.

It is in this light that I wish to respond to the Community House Heritage Site for Activists launched on 3 May 2012.

It was in February 2011 when I first heard about the heritage site to be established at Community House to celebrate known community activists. This was excitedly told to me by the person assigned to set up the project.

I was told that the families, including mine, would be contacted to participate in this project. For my family this was an opportunity to talk about the life of Althea MacQuene.

Surprisingly, I did not hear from anybody from the project coordinators or others. But when I visited Community House in January 2012, I saw this beautiful artefact of a white woman's face and writing, and was a bit baffled.

Then on 4 May 2012 a friend mentioned this wonderful heritage site launch held at Community House and showed me the programme. I was stunned, perplexed, angry, sad and hurt and I cried. I asked myself several questions.

Why was a decision made to exclude Althea?

What were the criteria used to include some and to exclude others. Is it about the nature of struggles, or the sectors the person was involved in or just one life stage or all life stages? I asked these questions because Althea fitted all criteria and represented the diverse societal interests, conventional and unconventional, and most importantly, lived those interests.

We need to know why our family was never contacted and why we got no explanation.

Why is it that some faces of suffering, especially the spectacular, are performed? Why is it that faces of suffering of the very ordinary, personal experiences of pain and suffering, which primarily were effects of political experiences of suffering, and which intimately connected those very beings who crafted the project, yet distanced themselves from the memory of their own suffering and to what end?

Why are human beings so cruel to the self and to the other? Why is it so difficult for human beings to face their own inner pain? Why do we run away in denial?

The Community House Heritage Site for Activists, a heterotopic space, a space that is meant to be free from domination at one by the other, a space of safety and healing, now already spawns the experience of harm, unhappiness and suffering even if not intentional.

There is a space which has been cut out and off and that will be my experience of memory, and family and many of Althea's comrades and friends as well, when visiting Community House. Because there was a possibility of an opening of the heart and a loosening of the mind that I argue would have been of immense value in the process of healing and forgiveness. But comrades failed to rise to the occasion and yet continue the legacy of the reiterative chain of significance of power (i.e. the private link between individuals) and suffering. The question thus begs an answer, what does it mean to be human? ■

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