

## **Telling Tales: The Politics of Language in Oral Historiography\***

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This paper is concerned with the linguistic specificity of 'truth claims' in South African historiography, the politics of language in the production and analysis of 'oral' texts and the practice of teaching 'oral history' research techniques in a multi-lingual context. Most historians of South Africa assume that the language of the colonial metropolis (in more contemporary parlance, that of globalisation) is the appropriate vehicle for historical narratives. Moreover, the choice of a European language as the language of 'academic' analysis and critique is usually left unexamined. Of course (and as my choice of language in this paper demonstrates with obvious irony), the dominance of isiLungu itself makes it harder to present papers and research results multi-lingually or in another tongue - white-dominated academia is hard-of-hearing and largely inarticulate with regard to indigenous, African linguistic registers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many academic historians in South Africa have yet to take cognisance of the ways in which 'the field of linguistic translation' has been 'opened up ... to questions of the political', to questions of translation and 'the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism' and of 'how translation functions in the postcolonies'. (Niranjana 1992, 2; 1998,1).

In spite of the multi-lingual profile of students, the dominance of English (to a lesser extent Afrikaans) at South African universities also inhibit the exploration of multi-lingual teaching techniques. The implications of this linguistic hierarchy goes far beyond the question of accessibility and choice of audience for the 'histories' we write, or questions of effective communication between teachers and students, and to the heart of the conceptualisation of research projects, the relationships of power involved in the production and presentation of knowledge in a post-colonial context.

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\* This paper is written for my colleagues of three years at UWC, whose apparently inexhaustible capacity for variations on the theme of the multiple author helped inspire these reflections on 'People's History'.

<sup>1</sup> In order to distinguish between Afrikaans and so-called 'Bantu languages' without categorising the former as non-African, I have used the term 'indigenous' African languages. *Isi-Lungu* shares the same root form with *um-lungu* or 'white person' in isiZulu and isiXhosa, but specifically refers to the English language. Of course, adopting the word 'indigenous' might itself be problematic in the context of this paper, if taken to connote fixed, authentic and clearly delineated constructions of 'native' knowledge. I

What prompted this paper is the three years I co-ordinated and taught an under-graduate (third year) research project at the History Department of the University of the Western Cape. I have sought to weave together critical reflection on existing academic practices of writing history with an interrogation of my own practice as a teacher of research techniques to undergraduates and the 'histories' produced by myself (as course co-ordinator) and my students. It is thus that I hope to explore the possibilities for, and implications of, the multi-lingual production of historical narratives.

### **1. Iilwimi zesiNtu<sup>2</sup> in South African oral historiography.**

In much of South African historiography, a hierarchy of languages persists. Academic historians are commonly well versed in English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans. These are the languages for conceptualising research projects, for the analysis of texts and for constructing historical narratives. Of course, there are historical reasons for this. English, Dutch and Afrikaans were the languages of governance, of judicial and also cultural domination in Southern Africa. These were the languages that colonial subjects had to negotiate in order to fend for themselves in the colonial domain. While the linguistic nature of South African archives have yet to be systematically explored, European tongues and Afrikaans are certainly dominant.

For the purposes of this paper and as a prelude to interrogating my teaching practice, I have chosen to mainly examine the use of 'oral testimony'<sup>3</sup> by a few key social historians who sought to give voice to 'the direct words of informants' as 'an antidote to distortion or silence' (Bozzoli 1987: 9-10). In spite of their focus on the lives of black South Africans who spoke a variety of languages, they mostly worked with English translations of the narratives they (more often, their research assistants) had recorded. Except for the occasional flavoursome refrain or culturally specific phrase, African languages were rarely included in the 'histories' produced. The status of English as vehicle for the 'democratised' historical narrative was accepted as self-evident and unremarkable. For the most part, the authors displayed little interest in the

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leave my readers to deduce the identity politics played out in my choice of terminology.

<sup>2</sup> In its common usage this isiXhosa phrase ('izilimi zesiNtu' in isiZulu) refers to 'indigenous' South African languages. However, in recent debate it has also been used more expansively than formerly to include Afrikaans (not English). I am indebted to Vukile Khumalo for this point.

<sup>3</sup> See Hofmeyr (1995, 18) for a critical discussion of this term.

linguistic registers of their sources, and their production as 'conversational narratives' and transformation into written English remained largely unexamined.<sup>4</sup>

In *Women of Phokeng (1991)*, the archived absence of vernacular transcription authenticated the text, as did occasional, decorative fragments from songs in Setswana and isiZulu.

However, Belinda Bozzoli was somewhat more explicit about some of the choices involved with regards to interviewing and translation. For her, interviews 'in the vernacular, preferably without the presence of a translator or any other interviewing party', facilitated communication with 'rural people, often barely literate and unfamiliar with the English language'. In her introduction, Bozzoli explored the interaction of researcher Mmantho Nkotsoe, at once 'university trained historian and sociologist' and 'almost a kinswoman, a young girl, a child' with interviewees sharing her home language. In terms of Bozzoli's approach, Setswana was valued primarily for facilitating cultural access, and the creation of transcripts that 'rang with intimacy', with 'authenticity, richness and depth'. Bozzoli did recognise some of the limitations of analysing translated text, from which 'only broad generalisations can be made about the meaning of particular statements'. But her very admission that 'more intricate, subtle, idiomatic and nuanced expressions' are lost assumed that the broad thrust of analysis retained its validity.

Bozzoli anticipated the appearance of 'a new generation of fluent Bantu-speaking sociologists ... able to convey to the English-speaking world what insights they gain from the analysis of

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<sup>4</sup> The volume *Class, Community and Conflict* (Ed. B. Bozzoli) contains some examples. While Jeff Peires included a few choice phrases from Afrikaans and Xhosa in 'The legend of Fenners-Solomon', he was content to provide English texts marked as 'translated from' these languages. In 'A Forgotten Corner of the Transvaal': A reconstructing of the History of a Relocated Community through Oral History and Song' Patrick Harries did not explain or discuss how or why sources were translated and presented only in English. Although William Beinart used written and possibly oral sources that were originally rendered in Xhosa in 'Women in Rural Politics: Herschel District in the 1920s and 1930s', these were also presented in unproblematic English. Afrikaans texts received better treatment. In 'Maar 'n klomp 'factory meide': Afrikaner Family and Community on the Witwatersrand during the 1920s', Elsabe Brink uses quotes from Afrikaans and provides English translations. Luli Callinicos' popular history series produced on behalf of the History Workshop, *A People's History of South Africa* was probably aimed, amongst others, at African workers and scholars. But volumes in the series such as *Working Life 1840-1940*, also feature African languages as occasional phrases and refrains. According to an article by Callinicos, the 'burgeoning of popular history writers' in the late 1980s did involve some production of African language texts. Aimed at adult literacy classes or trade union members, and written 'for those who prefer to read the histories in the vernacular', these were apparently translations from English. In *Facing the Storm (1988)*, Tim Keegan also tells the life stories of rural South Africans entirely in English.

the words of ordinary speakers of their own tongues' (6-12). The implications of this statement may be clarified by considering Niranjana's (1992) critique of Euro-American 'translation studies' - that it fails to confront the ways in which 'practices of subjectification implicit in the colonial enterprise' operate through various scholarly discourses (such as, for example, history). 'The colonial 'subject'', argued Niranjana, 'constructed through technologies or practices of power/knowledge, is brought into being within multiple discourses and on multiple sites. One such site is translation'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the way in which Bozzoli articulated the 'fluent' sociologist/historian's task has intriguing parallels with traditional, European/North American notions of translation as 'the quintessential humanistic enterprise' of 'bridging the gap between peoples' and with ideas once prevalent in social anthropology of 'inter-cultural translation' as providing a western audience with 'a body of knowledge about unknown peoples'. In this respect, the 'obsessions and desires of translation', its use to 'underwrite practices of subjectification, especially for colonized peoples' is left unexamined (Niranjana 1992, 6, 9, 47). In Bozzoli's scenario for the future, English remained the linguistic site for scholarly 'analysis' and communication - after all, this was the language inhabited by one's audience. Scholars fluent in 'own' and academic tongues would 'English' speakers of those other languages, thus rendering them subjects in 'history'.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, one could argue that Bozzoli's own enterprise was expressly 'anti-colonial', indeed also 'feminist' in its objectives. She aimed to explore the ways in which 'working people... experienced history', and 'the lives of [a small group of ... women] as black South Africans'. Committed to exploring 'the specific ways in which their gender has affected' their lives, she also writes against histories of South Africa that elided black women's presence. Moreover, her book is 'an exploration of one of the more intimate private domains with which power is fought over, and consciousness born - those of personal life, family, community and experience' (1-3). But if Bozzoli's book points 'to the more complex and less coherent forms of identity and agency collected through peasant testimony' (Minkley&Rasool 1998, 95), the

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<sup>5</sup> Niranjana argues that efforts to 'give an institutional character to translation' coincided with but remained 'largely unmarked by the rise of post-structuralism and literary studies'. ( She also discusses critiques of anthropology and ethnography's approaches to translation and complicity with colonial projects from within the disciplines).

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am drawing on Niranjana's discussion of a quote from a poem by Chapman, 17<sup>th</sup> century translator of the Iliad, where the ghost of Homer tells his translator that '... thou didst English me'. Niranjana argues that 'in this phrase we see a foreshadowing of the nature of translative acts performed more than a hundred years later by early

dynamics of inter-lingual translation as subjects are constructed into an English-centred analytical framework ordered by such concepts as class, race, age and gender are not explored. Moreover, relations of power intersecting the sites of research/ translation/author-ity of the book itself remain unresolved, and have implications for questions of subjectivity and agency. *Women of Phokeng* was attributed to 'Bozzoli with Nkotsoe' - dividing the labour of its production between 'native' interviewer-translator and English-speaking analyst-author. In fact, as Rasool and Minkley have argued (1998, 264) of this and similar 'authorship designations, the relationship 'with' does not imply co-authorship'. They also note that this ambiguous wording have begun to result in the omission of Nkotsoe's name from references to the work.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Nkotsoe - who was constructed as someone inducted into areas of academic knowledge ('she was introduced to modern feminist scholarship...and to the history of women in South Africa' (Bozzoli 1991, 5)) - never commented upon or articulated her own acts of translation. Instead, she featured as another (African, female) subject of analysis.

In this way, questions around the relationships of power between those who are 'researched' and interviewer-translators who 'speak' them into English were also muted. It was Nkotsoe, negotiating different languages, who could explore the ambivalences and potential of her position as linguistic/cultural interpreter and intermediary and the relationship (or disjuncture) between her own project and that powerfully mythologised figure in South African history – the (often female) interpreter as political and cultural emissary/ victim/ spy/ traitor and (more recently, symbol of 'settler' hybridity/African ancestry).<sup>8</sup> The English 'trans-late' and Afrikaans

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Orientalists associated with the East India Company. (53).

<sup>7</sup> A recent example of 'oral testimony' provides a contrast to such authorship designations and compares interestingly to other examples of ambiguous 'co-authorship' such as Elsa Joubert's *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (discussed more extensively below). As sole author Mpho M'atsepo of *Singing Away the Hunger* (1996) explains, her *motsoale* (which she translates as 'very close friend') - the book's editor Kendall - convinced her to tell her life story. The latter's inability to master Sesotho was one reason why she did so in English. M'atsepo elaborates on why she could 'tell these better in Sesotho' than in 'Sekhooa, the white people's language', and on what telling the stories in English was like. A brief post-script by the Kendal attempts to problematise projects 'using black women as a front for their own white voices'. She discusses the collaboration between M'atsepo – expert story teller, sole author and responsible for all the 'artistic activity' involved - and herself, 'rather more than a typist' in her role as listener and scribe with her own history of performing stories.

<sup>8</sup> In 'Krotoa remembered: a mother of unity, a mother of sorrows' (1998) Carlie Coetzee traces some of the ways in which one such figure has been remembered. Coetzee does not discuss any instances of Krotoa/Eva represented by black writers or in anti-colonial discourse – indeed, her emphasis is on performer Antoinette Pienaar's refiguring of a figure of derision into a fore-mother of Afrikaners. For another celebratory reference to a female subject who translated herself into colonial society, read the

`vertaal' ('trans-language') fairly neutrally suggest 'movement across' and a process of transformation. By contrast, indigenous language equivalents tend to suggest processes of trans-mutation - indeed, the power struggles and potential for acts of silencing and distortion more strongly. Thus `guqula' (isiZulu, isiXhosa) could also be rendered as 'change' or, in certain contexts, a 'turning inside out' that signifies, possibly, moving beyond one's community (since at least the 1950s, `ukuguqula ibatyi' or 'to turn [one's] coat' has signified 'becoming coloured' in isiXhosa - an act that could involve 'forgetting' one's home language<sup>9</sup>). Another intriguing term in isiXhosa is `ukukumsha', or to speak a language other than your own - the word is often used in a context where people feel obliged to switch to English for the benefit of somebody who does not speak isiXhosa. It may also, with (sardonic?) admiration, indicate fluency in isiLungu. `Ukukumusha' (isiZulu) is conventionally rendered into English not only as 'to translate' or 'to interpret' but 'to deceive', 'to entice', with `ubu-humusha' rendered as 'deception' (Dent & Nyembezi 1999, 308).<sup>10</sup> By suggesting the ways in which translation as an act of representation may involve (in Spivak's sense) both `Darstellung' ('signification or staging... speaking as'), and `Vertretung' (representation in the political context or speaking for) (Niranjana 1992, 168-9), these ambivalently negative connotations also begin to provide a historical context for understanding the politics of translation in South African historical studies.

In somewhat narrower terms than Bozzoli, Van Onselen (1993) has commented on the issue of language in a 'multi-cultural' context in a paper reflecting on the research methodology involved in writing *The Seed is Mine*, his biography of sharecropper Kas Maine. For Van Onselen,

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references to 'Maria van die Kaap' by Antjie Krog in *My Boer War* (Mail & Guardian, Oct 8/14, 1999) against those discussed by Leslie Witz (1997). My un-researched guess would be that the particular position and role of court interpreters have much to do with the various meanings of 'humusha'. It is interesting to consider the fraught position of interpreters at TRC hearings (who explicitly refuse the label translators) who provided running interpretations (they refused the label 'translator') of testimony by victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. In *Country of my Skull* Antjie Krog observes the particular tensions involved in this labour. In *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, a fascinating dramatisation of extracts from 'victim hearings' has wooden puppets 'speaking' in the vernacular, and an actor in a glass 'interpreter's booth' (which also doubles as a shower for the Vlakplaas perpetrator/Ubu after his bombing expeditions) providing the English version.

<sup>9</sup> 'Interview with Mr. [Rhayi] by D. Matunda, in 'Remembering the Pass Laws', PHP research extracts.

<sup>10</sup> My analysis runs parallel to that offered by Niranjana (1992, 8) Niranjana explains that she uses 'the word translation not just to indicate an interlingual process but to name an entire problematic. It is a set of questions, perhaps a 'field', charged with the force of all the terms used, even by the traditional discourse on translation, to name the problem, and to translate translation'.

concerned to analyse 'the behaviour of a single person within an appropriate class context', an interview is a 'knowledge transaction' during which 'data' is 'collected' (498-506). Minkley and Rasool were not concerned to analyse hierarchies of language when raising questions about 'the practices and processes of authoring and translation of memory' through oral text. But their criticism that for social historians like Van Onselen, memory remains transparent, and its validity dependant 'on the reliability of remembrance' helps explain social historians' general lack of interest in questions of language/s. Social history 'continues, within finely textured accounts, to collapse oral interviews into historical realist narrative... Oral history becomes a source, not a complex of historical narratives whose form is not fixed' (1998, 99-100). In terms of this approach, the particularity, play and power of the languages in which these narratives are constructed also become less relevant. As texts are translated, analysed, explained and entered into the conceptual frameworks of the author-academic, matters of linguistic specificity may seem peripheral. In fact, meticulously cross-referenced and verified to sieve out the inconsistencies of oral narrative, drawing on a variety of documentary and archival sources, Van Onselen's narrative becomes more 'real' than the archived conversational narratives spoken in African tongues.

Van Onselen (1993) sketches a fascinating set of linguistic interactions between Kas Maine, who 'straddled' Sesotho and Setswana when speaking to interviewer Mkadimeng - the latter had grown up speaking Sepedi. Moreover, Maine also conversed in Afrikaans, 'the highveld's language of conquest and domination', with Van Onselen himself. But with the goal of extracting 'sociological evidence from the spoken word' in mind, the variation of 'dialect, accent and pronunciation' is not itself a matter of intellectual interest. In fact, with the conversational exchange of interviewing conceived not as the construction of knowledges but as 'transactions' of information, a multi-lingual context becomes 'a problem of formidable proportions' that threaten to obscure and distort. As Van Onselen explains, 'the possibilities for distortion are endless' given the process of transcription and translation from variations of language inaccessible to himself. Fortunately, diligent referencing and cross-referencing between texts help to 'clear up misunderstandings' (Van Onselen 1993, 508-9). As with Bozzoli, translation remains a 'technical' matter that - correctly performed - transfers meaning from one language to another. In line with traditional 'Western' approaches to translation, meaning is assumed to remain intact once transferred to another language. Writing about Euro-American translation theory, Niranjana (1992, 58) argues that the notion of 'fidelity to the original' holds authors back from 'thinking the *force* of a translation',

`the intimate links between, for example, translations from non-western languages into English and the colonial hegemony they helped create'. In spite of his own characterisation of Afrikaans as implicated in local practices of domination, Van Onselen's approach ignores the dynamics of conducting research whilst using this language (including the way his own subjectivity is constructed in and by Afrikaans), the `historicity' of the acts of translation involved in researching and writing his book, and the `force' of English as the vehicle for re-presenting Kas Maine - someone who often articulated his memories in those *other* tongues - so incontrovertibly impenetrable to this author.<sup>11</sup>

Given this approach, it is hardly surprising that Maine is Englished into seamless prose in *The Seed is Mine* (where no methodological issues pertaining to language are raised). Material from interviews (whether extracts from informal conversation or fragments of praise poems) are all presented in English. The switching of, or slippage between linguistic registers by participants in the creation of conversational narrative is completely elided in Van Onselen's presentation. As with Bozzoli, readers of this narrowed text who understand Setswana and Sesotho cannot explore the meaning of (or make their own meanings from) Kas Maine's and his interviewers' words, the difference of `histories' articulated in African languages and the dynamics of ukuguqula/humusha when evaluating Van Onselen's analysis. Words in Afrikaans and Sesotho/Setswana do punctuate the text. Interestingly, those from the latter languages often refer to specific farming tools and machinery - the particular process of authentication performed by shards of indigenous language thus confirm a narrative in which Maine's class status is central. Finally, while Bozzoli made visible - albeit in problematic ways - the interviewer-translator who participated in her project (she does include Nkotsoe's questions in extracts from interviews), Van Onselen's co-workers merit only peripheral acknowledgement, and their part in the conversational narrative is absent from his text.

Bozzoli and Van Onselen are certainly not unique in their approach to questions of language and translation - a perusal of historical work on South Africa confirms that their brief discussions of issues pertaining to this was more interrogative than most. In fact, even scholars who understand and/or speak indigenous languages have preferred to publish translated text (Mager 1999, Delius

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<sup>11</sup> Here, I am drawing on Niranjana's understanding of `historicity' as `that part of the past that is still operative in the present', as incorporating `questions of translation/re-translation, how the translation/re-translation works, why

1996). However, alternative approaches are to be found beyond the institutional boundaries of 'history' or 'sociology'. Isabel Hofmeyr is one of few South African scholars critical of 'much oral historical scholarship' for 'reinvent(ing) the world in English' and failing to 'discuss issues of translation in any depth' (Hofmeyr, 1995: 18). In *We Spend Our Lives as a Tale that is Told* (1994), she demonstrated an approach sensitive both to historical context and the 'literary form' of her particular interest, oral historical narrative - whilst paying particular attention to 'the mutually shaping influence that orality and literacy have on each other' (Hofmeyr 1994, 3). As with Bozzoli and Van Onselen, Hofmeyr's analysis is located in, and privileges English - with extracts from interviews almost entirely presented 'in translation'. Her use of Setswana words and phrases could arguably be (mis?)read as 'authenticating' her text in ways similar to the social historians' narratives (as signalling that they are anchored in archived, 'originary' texts). But if she makes her own choice of which words are 'untranslatable' into direct English and have meanings important for her argument, these function to explore a diversity of narratives, conversational and written. She also provides extracts from transcripts - in the original language and juxtaposed with the corresponding translation - in an appendix. Hofmeyr thus provides, albeit still in a peripheralised text, readers with a place from which they can examine and unpick some of the linguistic decisions and transmutations that her research and writing has involved.

I have indicated some of the limitations to the ways in which historians of South Africa working in the field of oral historiography have negotiated their multi-lingual research contexts. Of course, Hofmeyr has cautioned against the privileging of 'orality' and the valorisation of 'oral' sources as pure and uncontaminated by written words. Insofar as historians have presented and/or analysed translations of texts printed in an indigenous language or (as with many some court records) 'originally' written down in translation, failing to examine histories of translation and the historicity of particular translations - my criticism clearly has wider application. For example, indigenous language texts have been cited in translation by some historians drawing on indigenous language newspapers. Others - especially historians fluent in African tongues - have at least integrated the original extracts from documents (usually together with translation) into their English-language discussions. For Sifiso Ndlovu (1998), this involves engaging with the work of earlier African historians who chose to write in an African language. Moreover, scholars institutionally situated in (for

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the text was/is translated, and who did/does the translating'. (1992, 37).

example) the field of linguistics have done interesting work on aspects of language in some of these genres.<sup>12</sup>

But what, exactly, are the consequences of monolingual approaches to writing 'history'? What alternatives to the privileging of English could one explore with regards to the place of African languages in historical research or writing? Would such histories incorporating 'different' tongues indeed diverge from those written in English - and how? These questions and my preceding discussion also beg another question. So far, I have dealt with the 'problematic' of translation as integral to processes of 'othering', emphasising unreflexive practices of 'Vertretung' and 'Darstellung'. But what of the liberatory possibilities of translation (linguistic and 'cultural') claimed by various authors writing from the 'hybrid spaces' of post-coloniality? (Bhabha, 1994; Niranjana, 1992). In this paper, questions involving co-operative research, and the teaching of research skills - with teachers and learners often differently placed with regards to the 'academic tongue' - are also a central concern. When I began working as research co-ordinator with the People's History Programme, it was almost a decade old and had changed considerably since its inception in 1987. Its institutional history and the merits of its teaching practice have already been chronicled and debated in previous papers.<sup>13</sup> Here, I reflect on the dis/continuities of another 'phase' of the programme and interrogate my own practice as a teacher of research techniques to under-graduates. It is thus that I hope to explore questions as to what possibilities historians could explore beyond the present monolingual and Anglocentric linguistic conventions – both in our teaching and in our own research and writing.

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<sup>12</sup> Iain Edwards (1996) quotes from both Ilanga lase Natal and interviews in English translation. Jeff Opland's excavations of Xhosa literature published in 'vernacular' newspapers stand in sharp contrast, as does his and P.T. Mtuze's edited volume of extracts from Xhosa literature which more than a century and is published entirely in isiXhosa. Some recent contributions from the field of linguistics include S. Makoni, 'African languages as European Scripts: The Shaping of Communal Memory' in *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa* (eds S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee); R. Mesthrie, 'Words Across Worlds: Aspects of language Contact and Language Learning in the Eastern Cape, 1800 - 1850', *African Studies* 57, 1998. For historical research that draw on letters from mission archives written in Zulu, see also V. Khumalo, *Ekukhanyeni letter-writers: Notes towards a social history of letter writing in Kwa-Zulu/Natal - South Africa, 1890 - 1900*.

<sup>13</sup> See M. Fullard et al, 'Transforming the Cutting Edge: Report on the People's History Programme, University of the Western Cape, 1987-1989', *Perspectives in Education*, 12, 1 (1990); A. Odendaal, 'Developments in Popular History in the Western Cape in the 1980s', *Radical History Review*, 46/7(Winter 1990); Gary Minkley and Nicky Rousseau, 'This Narrow Language': People's History and the University: Reflections from the University of the Western Cape, *South African Historical Journal*

## 2. Widening the language: teaching 'People's History' multi-lingually

In 'This Narrow Language: People's History and the University: Reflections from the University of the Western Cape' (1996) Minkley and Rousseau suggested that those concerned with 'oral and people's history need to take heed of Isabel Hofmeyr's taut observation that surprisingly little listening has gone on in oral history' - instead, they have interpreted written, translated texts. But although numbers of tutors and many students of the programme were certainly fluent speakers of African languages, the authors did not discuss the dynamics of the spoken word, transcription and translation in their teaching of People's History. Discussion focussed on academic discourse, interrogated 'the relationship of people's to academic history, and of memory to academic historical narratives' and explored the 'craft as authoris(ing) a set of power relations that privileged the academic site' (191-195). However, that 'narrow language' was not named as English.

Their relative disinterest in the issue of language is hardly surprising, given prevailing teaching practices at South African tertiary institutions. In spite of mission statements that emphasise their importance, indigenous African languages remain peripheralised.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, academics accept the dominant status of English as a medium of instruction and that the pedagogic task involves facilitating second language speakers' efforts to improve facility in the academic tongue. While universities are now formally required to indicate how they will promote African languages, the linguistic shortcomings of most academic staff and their assumptions about English ensure the continued marginalisation of African languages.<sup>15</sup>

### a) **The People's History Programme in 1996: 'English is Best to Accommodate Everyone'**<sup>16</sup>

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34 (1996).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the broader context of 'neo-colonial language policy and practice' in South Africa as well as elsewhere in Africa, see N. Alexander (1999), 'An African Renaissance without African Languages?'

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, 'Xhosa in the English Tutorial - Bridge or Barrier?' and other articles in AD Dialogues 4, 1995 on the theme 'Language and Development' edited by B. Leibowitz and T. Volbrecht. For an interesting discussion that problematises the hierarchies of language at UWC to a greater extent, see AD Issues 4,1, 1996 which debates 'Multilingualism at UWC' as well as AD Issues 5,1, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Student evaluation of the People's History Programme module, 1996. I have used extracts from the word students did as part of the People's History Programme and commented on our classroom activities with some ambivalence, not least because doing so was not negotiated before or during the course. However, partly because the issues I raise are relevant to 'junior' researchers, I decided to compromise myself and go ahead. I have tried to focus on my teaching and to highlight student perceptions of the

In my first year (1996) of teaching at UWC and in 'People's History', my inability to speak and understand indigenous African languages was a source of some discomfort. Perhaps because of my Afrikaans background and extensive use of Dutch/Afrikaans texts in my own research (I wrote in English and provided quotes in 'the original' together with translations) I wanted to confront the issue of language/s in the course. Indeed, the composition of the class made this difficult to avoid: most students spoke isiXhosa at home, only one student had English as her first language and a minority was Afrikaans-speaking. In my own assessment at the time, 'promoting the use of languages other than English was central to my teaching approach'.<sup>17</sup> I encouraged students to 'conduct interviews in the home language of their informants and to make use of their skills as first language Afrikaans or Xhosa speakers'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, because many students (working in groups) wrote scripts for radio documentaries instead of traditional essays, English did not dominate their research presentation - which was mainly in isiXhosa and Afrikaans.<sup>19</sup> However, while Xhosa-speaking students workshopped their ideas with a radio journalist fluent in isiXhosa, discussions with myself could only happen in translation – unlike students supervised in Afrikaans. Students themselves also had to find ways to deal with the presence of different languages in their planning sessions.<sup>20</sup>

How did students evaluate my efforts? While they responded enthusiastically to other aspects of the course, participants were more ambivalent with regards to its linguistic dynamics.

According to one student, 'nobody felt that they could not speak a particular language and often they broke out into another language if they could not express themselves adequately which was OK with all of us.' This student spoke English at home - a speaker of isiXhosa had a contrasting perspective: 'because we use English as a medium of construction, and we did

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course - instead of over-analysing student work and responses. Discussions and debate that took certain turns because the course was perceived as a 'safe' space have either been left out or presented in very abbreviated form. Whether I have succeeded in at least 'anthropologising' myself as much as my students whilst discussing hierarchies in academia remains an open question. A more detailed analysis of the texts produced by myself as well as participants in the course remains an interesting project - perhaps for former students of the programme.

<sup>17</sup> Du Toit, M. 'The People's History Project: exploring multilingualism in a research course', *AD Issues* 5,1, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Twelve out of sixteen students chose to do group projects, which involved combining extracts from their interview transcripts into 'radio scripts'. The rest worked individually and in the traditional essay format. This project is described more extensively in 'the People's History Project: exploring multilingualism in a research course'.

not use any other language as we have different languages, I think that way everybody was comfortable. One cannot say languages were accommodated, nevertheless, there was no language exclusion.' 'Sometimes it did happen that some of us spoke to others in the mother tongue language and that made the others feel uncomfortable' explained one student, who also complained that members of her 'multi-lingual' group excluded extracts from her Afrikaans transcript from their collective script through lack of understanding. Her conclusion was undecided: 'I think English is the best to accommodate everyone, but what will happen in the case, like our project, when we worked to show the multi-lingualism and multi-racialism of the society we dealt with.' Another student commented that while he 'would like many languages like Xhosa', this would create 'practical problems... it would be difficult to cater for all languages at the same class, so English should be used. The English speaker was more optimistic about the use of different languages: 'I think the class should decide whether they feel comfortable with such an arrangement or not. From the response of the class, options such as having the class in other languages, can be considered...' But the irate-sounding comment from a classmate was more in harmony with majority opinion: 'English only. We all understand English.'<sup>21</sup>

The course evaluations made clear that if I had aimed to demonstrate the validity of using African languages in a research context I had (to put it gently) limited success. They also affirmed what other studies conducted at UWC had concluded - the importance to students of honing their skills in English and that few saw a place for African languages in the classroom.<sup>22</sup> The following two years became an experiment in developing multi-lingual teaching techniques as I tried to push the boundaries of what I could do whilst learning the African language spoken by the majority of students - isiXhosa. While I wanted to respect and support students' need to negotiate the academic *lingua franca*, I was critical of approaches that saw the promotion of African languages simply as a step towards better skills in English. Here, I describe and discuss the course I constructed.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Student evaluations of the People's History Programme module, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> A survey of 'Language attitudes amongst first year students at UWC' in 1995 indicated that a 'massive 99%' of students who spoke an African language at home 'felt that English should be the language to study in'. Also, more than 70% of the students surveyed 'rejected the increased use of their

**b) The People's History Programme, 1997-8: 'it is also fruitful to go vernacular'** <sup>23</sup>

Since 1993, The People's History Programme had functioned as a research option focussing on the history of greater Cape Town and on the 1940s and 1950s - with students researching the 'life histories' of particular individuals through interviews. Previous lecturers/research supervisors of People's History had also argued that this thematic shift from political histories of the 1980s opened up new questions 'that had not been asked within the historiography of Cape Town'. The life histories explored 'the boundaries between urban and rural' space, destabilising assumptions about 'gender and racial identities' (Minkley & Rossouw 1996, 190-1). Retaining this thematic focus seemed to hold interesting possibilities. It was also an appropriate starting-point for students who had just completed a survey course on twentieth century South African history focusing on the work of social historians, and generally had no experience in historical research.

A variety of languages were represented in my classes of 1997-8. Most students spoke isiXhosa at home – other home languages were Sesotho, Seswati, Setswana, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English. With the exception of English/Afrikaans students, all students were fluent, or able to communicate well in isiXhosa. Home languages had wide 'unofficial' usage in class. While students would usually switch to this language in small-group discussions or when chatting to each other, I wanted to assert the legitimacy of all Southern African languages in class. I did so by trying to switch between languages inside and outside the classroom – various of the written questions for introductory classroom exercises were also in Afrikaans and isiXhosa. I also had to find ways to assert the presence of 'minority' languages. In an early workshop which generated a lot of excitement, students were 'given maps to allocate our places of residence in class in order to get a sound understanding of Cape Town'.<sup>24</sup> Working in groups, they also marked past and present townships and informal settlements on topographical maps of the Peninsula. Again, linguistic diversity was highlighted. Figuring out what to do from the instructions meant negotiating the various languages of all participants ( '...Namatisela lezinto etafuleni nge-prestik/Plak die sleutel (map-key) vas regterkant onderste hoek/Nceda ufumene apho iilokishi ezihlukileyo/Nyaka mafelo ao batho ba go dula ka mekhukung mo ba lego gona

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own language at university' (AD Issues 1996, 4/1).

<sup>23</sup> Student evaluation of the People's History Programme module, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> AT, Report on research planning.

lehono...') For once, the linguistic skills of Sesotho/Setswana/Seswati speakers were in great demand as students hunted for translators.

In the first half of the course we read and discussed material relating to Cape Town's history through the prism of social historians' texts. We also debated methodological issues relevant to 'popular' and 'oral' history'. If the 'histories' we read were conventional in their linguistic approach, students were sometimes innovative in their response. In a class on the history of 'racial' segregation in Cape Town before 1948 students had to present their case (concerning actual and desired levels of segregation) to an imaginary commission of enquiry, with myself as the commissioner. Parodies of racist city councillors, ACVV *tannies* and ANC representatives haplessly clinging to 'passive resistance' involved choice Afrikaans phrases - the hilarity had a sharp, cathartic edge as students seemed to address not only a 'commissioner' but also the one 'white, Afrikaans' person present. Isabel Hofmeyr's work (1994) proved a springboard for intense discussions as students analysed the gender dynamics and historical content of stories they were told (or not told) as children. In one class, students started sharing their family stories of land dispossession, migration and the consequent 'loss' of stories. Some male students were passionate about having missed out on their grand/father's tales hence 'culture' or family history - 'we only got the mothers' side'. Others emphasised the historical content, moral importance or anger about female experience contained in Xhosa *iintsomi* more often performed by women. In 1997, a paper on 'squatter culture' was used to generate discussion about the making of popular urban cultures.<sup>25</sup> However, its tendency not to interrogate the complexity of 'African' culture in favour of easy opposites - rural/urban, western/traditional - seemed to encourage students to embrace these categories uncritically. For example, at a tour of District Six (led by staff from the District Six Museum), students identified strongly with tales of forced removals and added their stones to the cairn marking Hanover Street with resounding *mayibuye's*. But in a subsequent discussion, Xhosa-speaking students seemingly claimed an 'African' identity for themselves whilst dismissing photographs in the District Six museum as examples of 'western' and 'white' culture. The small minority of Afrikaans/English students from families classified as 'coloured' under Apartheid, a number of whom had links to District Six, were to some extent marginalised. The following year the essay culture

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<sup>25</sup> Kandiwe M. Kondlo, 'Aspects of Culture among the squatters in Cape Town, 1946-1960', [unpublished paper, Cape Town History Project].

amongst squatters was replaced by extracts from Elsa Joubert's *Die Swerffjare van Poppie Nongena* and discussions on the concept 'hybridity'.<sup>26</sup> To some extent, the previous years' binary opposites were avoided – instead; students enthusiastically declared Poppie and themselves cultural 'hybrids'. But if I intended to use the text in order to destabilise any set ideas about language, region, ethnicity and identity, I had only partial success. In discussions and assignments most agreed that if Poppie was most at home in Afrikaans, she *was* 'Xhosa'. She had a Xhosa name, meals were cooked in a three-legged pot. Most importantly and unequivocally, you belonged to your fathers' culture.

In the next class, students were introduced to a multi-lingual version of 'conceptual analysis'. 'Our lecturer organised class group discussions where people with similar themes in their research had to discuss the meaning of the words used to describe particular themes. For example, in my group we were familiarised with the basic words used for explaining culture'. 'As a collective, we tried to find out possible definitions of culture and all it involves...'<sup>27</sup> Participants were asked to find equivalents for the words 'culture' and 'tradition' (in some classes, also 'custom' or 'identity') in their home language/s or language of preference and to write out definitions and explanations in those languages. Many students evidently enjoyed this exercise, writing detailed explanations and providing a variety of examples (although their ability to provide detailed written explanations varied). Having completed this task on their own, students joined small groups to compare and explain their definitions. Students were interested in choices of words and spellings (for example comparing words in Seswati and isiXhosa, and to explain to each other aspects of

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<sup>26</sup> Elsa Joubert, *Die Swerffjare van Poppie Nongena, Tafelberg 1978*. Presented as autobiography, Joubert tells the story of a woman who grew up in Upington and a west coast fishing village, married a Xhosa man from Herschel in the eastern Cape and spent some time in her husband's village - eventually her efforts to survive led her to Cape Town's squatter camps I also used an extract, in Xhosa and English, from Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children/Kubantawana Bantwana Bam* which recalls the strong sense of 'a place to which I belonged', defined as 'less a geographical locality and more a group of people with whom I am connected...' ('asinguwo umhlaba lo umiweyo koko ndithetha ngabantu endinonxulumano nabo nendilunge kubo...') and asked students to relate this to Joubert's Poppie. In her introduction, Elsa Joubert explains that Poppie Nongena was based on extensive interviews with an informant who remained anonymous for her protection. Poppie is presented as a seamless narrative with Joubert as the author, but as if 'Poppie' tells her story and in idiomatic Afrikaans with a smattering of Xhosa phrases. Most students read the English translation, some chose the original Afrikaans version. The translation was by Joubert herself and to some extent glosses over complexities in the original – classroom discussion involved comparison of the texts. For example, the novel opens with Poppie's description of her people as 'boorlinge' (longtime inhabitants) of Gordonia in the northern Cape. In translation, this reference to region is jettisoned in favour of an assertion of 'Xhosa' ancestry.

<sup>27</sup> Reports on research planning.

`traditions' etc. written down.) They then reported back on similarities/differences in a plenary session. In the 1997 version of this class, much of the small-group discussions took place in isiXhosa. Students no longer switched back to English when I joined a group to listen (as they had done in the first seminar.). In one class, I had to do *ad hoc* translation, as students were slipping into isiXhosa when discussing the definitions of words. 1998, students were asked to read out their definitions at the beginning of the plenary session. Ensuing conversation spontaneously moved between isiXhosa and English. In another I was forced to remind speakers that a fellow student didn't understand isiXhosa and call for pauses in which to provide translation, in another everyone was able to converse in isiXhosa. One student read his definition and gave verbal explanation in his native Sesotho. Several students probed him on his answer (some speaking isiXhosa) after which they translated for non-Sesotho speakers such as myself.

Students were expected to develop their own research proposals – some had entered the course with clear interests or had been quick to formulate a topic:

At first the research started with myself interested in exploring a few things about migrant labour system and Cape Town. I listed all research questions that I wanted to explore. They were based on my interests and I wanted to ask a few things about them.<sup>28</sup>

During our lectures after we were introduced to what people's history is all about it came to my mind that I must do research about African-Coloured people who once came forward with their complaints concerning effects of the pass-laws. Three of the people I met were from the eastern Cape. They used to tell me about the pass-laws `miracles', like changing of surname, buying other people's surname and all that.<sup>29</sup>

Most were content to respond to broad themes suggested by our reading and discussions. Perhaps because many students were from rural backgrounds and the eastern Cape, and others had parents who had been migrant labourers from the eastern Cape or settled in the Peninsula some thirty or forty years ago, issues around migrancy, urbanisation and cultural identity, and the impact of the pass laws were popular topics for research. Various students also wanted to find out more about forced removals in the 1950s and 1960s – for example, from District Six to areas in the Cape Flats and from informal settlements to newly established townships. A number of students also had a strong interest in issues of gender, and specifically wanted to explore these themes with attention to women's experience. With my encouragement, most opted to choose interviewees who shared

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<sup>28</sup> M.D.M. Report on research planning.

<sup>29</sup> A.M., Report on Research Planning.

their home language - although some speakers of African languages other than isiXhosa opted to use the latter. After I did a presentation to students about the main research themes that had emerged from individual discussions and research proposals, students worked together, using mind-mapping techniques to plan their interviews.<sup>30</sup> According to various participants, '(w)e formed groups. For example those who would be dealing with the same theme for instance culture or forced removals gathered together and discussed about all the possible questions they would be questioning their informants.' '(t)his was the brainstorming step which prepared us for questions which may be possible in our research'. 'We had before anything seriously consider each informant's demographic status so that each informant be treated and research itself be treated in her/his own language (the informant's language) so the question of language, gender and one's culture seemed very influential in our research....' 'I have constructed my questions in isiXhosa because my informant was Xhosa speaking person'. Students also had discussions on 'interview skills', which by 1998 included extracts from previous interviews (in isiXhosa and English translation) that discussions about (for example) the 'cross-cultural dimensions' of interviews as 'speech events'.<sup>31</sup>

After completing their interviews, we discussed 'power dynamics in the interview', with students analysing the impact of age, gender, language/dialect, perceived 'racial' or cultural identity etc. on the dynamics of the narrative constructed through their questions, and the extent to which they directed this process. By now they were also engaged in the 'very long and tiresome exercise' of word for word transcription.<sup>32</sup> While some students, contrary to instructions, selectively wrote

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<sup>30</sup> The first session involved students working on questions they could ask about childhood, using a child's *stokmannetje* (stick-figure) in the middle of the page, and drawing branches designated as representing different themes radiating outward - each of these branched off with more and more detailed questions - all written down in the language/s of students' interviewees. Students could then asked to decide whether these questions were 'leading', reasonably time-specific and explored both male and female experience.

<sup>31</sup> See H. Slim and P. Thompson, *Listening for a Change, Oral Testimony and Development*, London: Panos 1993. A number of interviews in 1997 clearly suffered from dogged following of the interview questions drawn up beforehand. In one excellent interview where the student had developed a more flexible approach. In his own description: 'The flow of information made it difficult for me to follow my questionnaire. I then resorted to a new strategy of asking questions according to what comes out of his mouth. That served a good deal because I managed to cover up all my questions ... some of the information was not on the list. In that way, I had to get more information. I had to control him but in a cunning way that I make him not feel tired and bored'. (MDM, Report on research planning.) In 1998, we discussed different interview styles more explicitly than previously, using student interviews as examples. The result was a far larger number of interviews where students, having worked through possible questions, worked these into free-flowing 'conversations'.

<sup>32</sup> T.D.R., Reports on research planning. Students were instructed to transcribe in the original language,

down 'important themes', others transcribed 'the details word for word, these included laughing, gestures etc.' and 'swearwords... it was not easy to write such things'.<sup>33</sup> I was not confident of my judgement as to what extent students who wrote in isiXhosa captured speech rhythms and dialect on paper. However, many innovatively recorded the English and Afrikaans derived phrases common to western Cape versions of isiXhosa.<sup>34</sup> Afrikaans interviews were meticulous renditions of particular accents and turns of phrase: 'Dit was interessant om die transkripsies te doen, omdat 'uncle' Sollie met 'n Kaapse 'slang' (aksent) gepraat het' ('It was interesting to do the transcription, because 'uncle' Sollie spoke with a Cape 'slang' (accent)').<sup>35</sup>

The final stage of the course involved students working on their essays and participating in seminars in which they compared their 'research results'. Students were asked to contribute passages from their interviews for discussion - I selected passages I judged suitable. Extracts were in isiXhosa, Afrikaans and a small minority in English. Setswana/Sesotho material received unequal treatment and was presented in English translation or not considered because I could not read the text or present it accurately.<sup>36</sup> The seminars were organised around key themes. First, questions of how 'oral' narratives expressing nostalgia, anger etc. should be analysed were examined.. A second session explored interviewees' experience of and response to the enforcement of Apartheid legislation; the third examined the gendered construction of identity in the countryside and as people moved to town.

So far, most written work (besides, of course, the transcripts) had been presented in English and emphasised developing students' ability to read accurately and critically. Student essays were mostly written in English (some in Afrikaans, one in isiXhosa), with liberal quotes from their interviews (most did not translate these). I also required them to make use of secondary literature and/or comparative material from the interview extracts available to them. The medium for exams was also English, although a few answered in Afrikaans (sanctioned by university regulations).

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and to translate only questions they had asked into English to facilitate my reading.

<sup>33</sup> N.B.J., *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> A first-language speaker who studied honours in isiXhosa and helped me translate was also wont to 'correct' various 'mistakes' which seemed to be verbatim transcriptions.

<sup>35</sup> H.Y., Report on research planning.

<sup>36</sup> In 1997, two (out of 24) students worked in these languages. The following year, the two (out of 28) students who spoke Setswana and Sesotho at home chose to interview in isiXhosa and English. Seswati and isiZulu speaking students also chose to work in isiXhosa.

Students often switched to another language when referring to or quoting verbatim from their interviews and sometimes chose to answer particular questions in isiXhosa. Because I made the point that Afrikaans should not be privileged in 1998, a number of students made liberal use of both English and isiXhosa (sometimes and disconcertingly switching in mid-sentence). One elected to do the whole exam in this language.

How did students assess the course as an exercise in multi-lingual teaching?

'I use my language freely' commented one student with isiXhosa as her home language. A Setswana speaker used his language to a 'limited extent' but pronounced the presentation of research in different languages 'useful and convenient... it opened my mind...' A Sesotho speaker who spoke his language 'in a limited space' explained that he sometimes participated in Xhosa conversations, 'since in group most students are 'Xhosa' and we intending to learn 'Xhosa' '. 'I feel wonderful', wrote another student, 'because sometimes even if we don't know how to put something maybe in English we feel free to speak isiXhosa because [the lecturer] understand it and others get to understand what you actually want to say'. According to another Xhosa speaker, 'it is good that she encouraged her students to take into consideration that all languages have the same standard. It encourages a smooth and lively communication during classes as well as outside it'. 'If sometimes you want to express your culture it is difficult with other languages the best way is your mother language' commented one. 'I feel very glad because most people at UWC they undermine Xhosa speaking people' said another of my efforts to speak isiXhosa. Some were bemused: 'I used to laugh when I listened to her speaking the language because the way she pronounced some words was very very laughable'. Others were kinder: 'She is a Xhosa speaker she therefore understands'.

Like his peers in 1996, one student emphasised the need to learn English. 'She is becoming right but it is my wish that she can speak English to encourage us to speak English too'. But compared to students from that year, those who had participated in the new course had radically different opinions on the possibility of, and need for, multi-lingual classes. For example, many indicated that they would have liked other classes offered by the History department to incorporate different languages. Some still wanted English to be the only tongue in lecture halls: 'sometimes it disadvantages other students who might not necessarily understand the language in which the class is conducted'. 'No, because it won't encourage me

or make me fluent in English'. But the majority of students felt multi-lingual teaching should be applied more widely. English should not be the only language because 'other people need to be accommodated'. 'It is fruitful' wrote a class-mate, 'to conduct classes in English it is also fruitful to go vernacular sometimes to accommodate other languages'. As another explained, '(s)ome things are best expressed in my home language'. Or, 'other languages should also be included so that we can learn more about those languages and understand them better'. Students were far more assertive than previously about the place of African languages at UWC. 'Multi-lingualism has to be applied in our institution'. 'Yes, not all students speak English as first language. There are 12 official languages in South Africa, they should all be used equally'. 'Since democracy, our President talk of 11 languages that we need to learn not two'. 'We are living in a democratic society therefore each language needs to enjoy same privileges as other languages'.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, my approach was pedagogically useful. Students responded positively to a course that promoted African languages and experienced its multilingualism as affirming, liberating, as easing communication and learning. But what specific import does this have for teaching a research course in 'oral history', for scholars involved in oral historiography and indeed, historical studies?

### **Beyond authenticity? Contesting the linguistic hierarchy**

My first comment is both obvious and somewhat obnoxious. Whether or not to learn another tongue is a political choice made by linguistically challenged - but institutionally and otherwise privileged - scholars who work in a multi-lingual context and as authors and teachers of 'history'. If, as Eva Hoffman (1989, 107) comments, it takes long to acquire the 'aura... the accumulated associations' of words, building relationships with 'junior' researchers who are first language speakers of indigenous tongues that opens up pathways to them, and making texts available to readers with superior skills are within easier reach even as one acquires a

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<sup>37</sup> Student evaluations of the People's History Programme Module, 1997 and 1998. The questions I asked included 'How do you feel about your lecturer's efforts to speak isiXhosa/Afrikaans in class?/And outside of class/in consultations?/How do you feel about the classes where questions/texts/exercises in different languages were incorporated?/Do you feel you benefited from this?/to what extent did you use your language in class discussions and activities/would you have liked other courses in the history department to include the use of your home language in class or ito the readings provided? Why or why not?'

`new' language. In terms of the archival holdings of the People's History Programme, at least a selection of African language texts were now readily available for use and central to teaching practice. Instead of being restricted to a particular translation (as with Van Onselen and Bozzoli), students could themselves analyse and debate the particular meaning of words - drawing on their skills as people who themselves inhabit the language of the text in their everyday lives.<sup>38</sup> More work could have been done to sensitise students to the problems and process of transforming `oral' into `written' text.<sup>39</sup> However, we could at least begin exploring and debating translation-as-interpretation - implicitly challenging the assumption of (for example) Van Onselen and Bozzoli that labour of interpretation begins *after* translation.<sup>40</sup> In a course aimed at training researchers, the important skill of consciously negotiating different languages as one interprets and analyses the text could be addressed.

We also began to challenge the linguistic hierarchy prevalent at South African academic institutions with regards to the conceptualisation of research projects. A more detailed look at our efforts at what I have called `conceptual analysis' helps clarify this point. The classroom exercises I designed involved students articulating and exploring their own understanding of concepts - rather than imposing, or having students read and analyse, my own and various `academic' explorations of words such as `culture' and `tradition'. Student definitions of culture/tradition often differed markedly from my own - which emphasised the `invention' or `construction' of tradition and cultural identity. Those who spoke indigenous African languages at home (and they dominated these discussions) also tended to agree on key points of definition, and to choose similar words for discussion. Thus participants tended to focus on the linked concepts of (to use the isiXhosa phrase) *amasiko nezithethe* (usually but

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<sup>38</sup> I experimented with this possibility in a second year history course (Africa, Race and Empire) at UWC in 1998, the theme being representations of Nongqawuse in both popular and academic historians' accounts of the `Cattle-killing' of 1856. Drawing on Helen Bradford's critique (1996) of Peires, students were provided with the original text by W.W. Gqoba, `isiZatu zokuxelwa Kwe nkomo Ngo Nongqause' (Isigidimi SamaXhosa 1888). Bradford's had questioned Peire's translation of particular words from Nongqawuse's prophesy and their apparent elision from earlier translations. In class (where central questions and concepts were presented in isiXhosa, Afrikaans as well as in English), students could themselves assess the validity of the historians' different interpretations of the texts and representations of Nongqawuse.

<sup>39</sup> See Hofmeyr *We Spend Our Years As a Tale that is Told'* on the choices confronting scholars concerned `with the spoken word' when trying to decide how to present these in writing.(pp.xi - xiii)

<sup>40</sup> This would be an interesting area of debate for work on TRC `testimonies'. TRC staff insisted that they were `interpreters', not `translators' of testimony at the Truth Commission.

interchangeably pairing them with 'tradition' and 'custom'.) For example, *isiko*<sup>41</sup> was defined by one Xhosa-speaker as 'yinto enyanzelekileyo ukuba yenzeke ekukholelwa ukuba ayenzeki ikhona into ezakwenzeka' ('something that has to be done/performed, it is believed that if it is not done something will happen'). As another student wrote (in English), it was 'something you are forced to do - if you don't that will mean you are inviting misfortune for your ancestors will be angry about it'. Conversely, 'isithethe' was 'yinto enokutshintha kungabikho nto inokwenzeka emva koko' ('something that can change and nothing will happen afterwards') or 'yinto eyenziwayo kodwa ingenyanzelekanga' ('something that is done but there is no compulsion'). '(U)ngayenza ungayenzi, akukho bubi namashwa anokwehla iyingqombo yeminyanya' ('You can do/perform it or not, no [evil] or bad luck will happen because of the anger of the ancestors') explained another student. 'Isithethe' was also associated with 'customs' that change over time: 'isithethe yinkolelo ethi ilandelwe ngabantu ekwenzeni izinto ngokwahlukeneyo umzekelo kudala abantu babekholelwa kuQamata ukanti abantu bakholelwa kuThixo, njl. njl.' ('isithethe' is a belief that is followed by people and they do this differently for example long ago people believed in Qamata now but now they believe in [the Christian god] Thixo, etc. etc.')

At different points in the course (before students planned their interviews and once extracts from transcriptions were available to the class) I tried to generate debate about whether cultural/ethnic identities could be chosen, were changeable or were givens (by implication, whether 'isiko' was indeed fixed and unchangeable as many definitions seemed to suggest). This generated fierce debate amongst students, or with students addressing me as I threw out questions. The shift towards isiXhosa as a medium for discussion in itself involved a shift to the terms 'amasiko nezithethe' and related concepts embedded in the African languages spoken by students,<sup>43</sup> in large part displacing English as the language in which meaning was made and examined, and in which research projects were conceptualised. Simultaneously, this challenged the automatic dominance of 'disenchanted' social science discourses that peripheralise, even invalidate particular constructions of knowledge, or insist on a series of

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<sup>41</sup> I-siko and isi-thethe is in singular form, ama-siko and izi-thethe are the plural forms.

<sup>42</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are by myself, from student definitions written down in isiXhosa.

<sup>43</sup> Students provided equivalents in Sesotho, Setswana etc. or used isiXhosa as a shorthand for shared concepts.

distancing mechanisms in terms of which 'belief' becomes the other, often exoticised *object* of analysis. It is unlikely that this shift would have happened without the entry of African languages into 'academic' space as a medium for research, interpretation and analysis.

Of course, if choosing not to go beyond English as a teacher of history has specific implications when students speak African languages and do research involving these languages, engaging with *iilwimi zesiNtu* as a 'white', Afrikaans/English research co-ordinator with a somewhat dubious knowledge of isiXhosa can hardly be done in a neutral fashion. Moreover, to posit a simplistic dichotomy between 'disenchanted' ('Western') social science approach - voice of 'modernity' and 'critique' - and constructions of knowledge read as examples of ('African') 'essentialist' assertions of belief would be highly problematic. The discussions themselves (and the heat generated in the classroom) made clear that while a large amount of consensus existed, the concepts themselves were neither innocent nor uncontested. The one student who did not pronounce the 'conceptual analysis' session interesting or useful for his research somewhat disconcertingly commented that because 'all of us' could communicate 'in English I did not see the point. It was like we are still practising Bantu Education'.<sup>44</sup> My understanding of classroom debates as I chaired the discussions may well have been ignorant of how students arrived at their particular convictions (and why a few students were reluctant to research anything to do with 'culture'). It is possible that if I encouraged students to interrogate other words introduced by themselves (i.e. *inkcubeko*/'culture') in more detail, discussions would have developed differently - with less emphasis on the forcefulness of 'amasiko'. The student's comment also suggests that my multi-lingual method was neglecting to explore the ways in which English has been experienced (and appropriated) as a liberating tongue. More explicit moving between different languages and discourses (including theoretical perspectives that take 'the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world... as the paradigmatic place of departure' (Bhabha 1994, 21) could have stimulated participants in the debate, opening up possibilities for new acts of translation that could inform research. In fact, an aspect of the discussions and a source of their energy that I have perhaps under-emphasised was the degree of translation and cross-over between

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<sup>44</sup> Course evaluation, 1998. These were some of the categories students could circle on evaluation forms. The same student wrote that he 'benefited' from being able to use his home language in class and liked the multi-lingual approach 'coz it does not discriminate'.

languages and discourses already taking place, as students negotiated differences and disagreements amongst themselves, and articulated their ideas to a teacher who in significant ways had outsider status.

Classroom debates - and interaction between men and women in the class - also made clear the highly gendered nature of debates concerning `amasiko nezithethe' or `inkolo yesiNtu' (roughly, `traditional African belief')<sup>45</sup>. Sometimes, students seemed to treat the classroom as a more neutral or `safe' area where prohibited topics could be raised, or restrictions on discussing certain *amasiko* with women participants (or in their presence) could at least be partially relaxed. At other times, there was some sparring and tension about these issues. In this respect, the direct entry of African languages into academic space also open up the possibilities. Students could have analysed specific instances of the contemporary, `everyday' use of concepts such as `amasiko nezithethe' - thus exploring the often gendered contestations of `tradition'.

To give but a few examples, officials from the department of Arts and Culture dealing with issues of `cultural' and `living heritage' have demonstrated a preference for `amasiko' committees. Arguably they are drawn by the weight of a word signifying tradition as unchanging and (to use a favourite expression from student debates) `forced'. Umhlobo Wenene (the SABC radio station broadcasting in isiXhosa) has a weekly programme on `Ukholo LwemVeli (Beliefs of Old). Some editions feature interviews with elderly men and women authoritatively discussing or explaining aspects of *amasiko*. A new programme discusses the relevance of `human rights' to listeners' lives, challenging notions that `amasiko' must be followed. On the Zulu and Xhosa late night radio programmes, some callers also like to debate the merits of particular cultural practices are `isiko' or `isithethe' and whether they qualify as `isiko' (and must therefore be followed). And while the Cape Times' `One City Many Cultures' project seldom indicates the ways in which `tradition' is debated and contested, the popular monthly *Bona* sometimes does better.<sup>46</sup> A revised version of the course would also

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<sup>45</sup> Here I am attempting a translation in context. `IsiNtu' (capitalised when written) seems to refer to African tradition, but the meaning of the word as currently used is by no means fixed. I am indebted to Vukile Khumalo for pointing this out.

<sup>46</sup> The latest edition features an article on the plight of widows critical their treatment by deceased husbands' families. According to one founding member of a widows' self-help organisation *amasiko*

have benefited from efforts to historicise the concepts we debated and that students employed when planning or participating in interviews, tracing their invention or changing usage in the context of Southern Africa's colonial history.<sup>47</sup> Exposure to this material could have generated interesting debates amongst students who often accepted concepts embedded in their home language as authentically African (or Xhosa, or Zulu) and distinct from 'Western' beliefs.<sup>48</sup>

But it is instructive to return to some of the issues raised by Minkley and Rousseau (p 11 above) in their assessment of previous incarnations of the People's History Programme. They had discerned some new directions in student research on Cape Town's past. To an extent and alongside discussions exploring (for example) how particular constructions of the past related to 'the present' of interviewees, or students' part in the creation of conversational narratives, research regarding pass laws, forced removals and migration to urban areas tended to follow conventional pathways. Arguably, this was because I had presented the possibilities for

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should not always be followed: ( Amalungelo abesimame angamalungelo esintu futhi angamalungelo abafelokazi.... Ngiyawahlonipha futhi ngiyawazisa amasiko esiNtu kodwa ngeke ngilubekezelele usiko oluthunaza isithunzi sabesimame...Abantu banomkhuba wokucasha ngamasiko uma behlose ukucindezela abafelokazi'. )

( 'Women have rights as human beings and as widows...I respect and I treasure African tradition but I will never tolerate a custom that degrades women... People hide behind customs when they want to oppress widows'. ) Bona, Zulu edition, July 1999. The magazine is published in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho and English. The process of translation between different editions is somewhat mysterious - it is often difficult to know in which language the original words were spoken - or which was first used by the journalist writing an article. More detailed attention and analysis in the classroom of the different and often sensitive ways in which students and their interviewees explored their chosen themes as they participated in the construction of conversational narratives would also have benefited the discussions. Some of the best interviews and essays involved the explorations of gendered aspects of 'tradition', employing a wider vocabulary than that interrogated in class ('inkqubo yesiNtu'; 'isiko nesithethe sakwendeni' etc ). Extracts from some of these, for example by interviewees David Matunda and Gertrude Makamu are included in the seminar on 'culture and cultural change'. The original transcripts of all interviews form part of the People's History Programme archive.

<sup>47</sup> See also 'Words across Worlds: Aspects of Language Contact and Language Learning in the Eastern Cape, 1800-1850'. R. Meshtrie examines the 'beginnings of literacy in African languages and the codification of what was to become standard Xhosa in grammars and dictionaries' in the eastern Cape, looking particularly at the 'rudimentary interlanguages' and 'pidgin-like varieties' employed by missionaries when trying to communicate and the role of interpreters with fluency in Cape Dutch and Xhosa. Research on missionary efforts elsewhere in Africa include 'Colonizing language? Missionaries and Gikuyu dictionaries, 1904 and 1914' by D. Peterson, *History in Africa* 24, 1997. I am not familiar with similar research in a South African context, but J. Guy refers to the Harriet Colenso's involvement with compiling a Zulu dictionary and changing definitions for particular words through different editions in 'Imperial Appropriations - a history of *iziqu*' (paper presented to the History and African Studies Seminar Series, University of Natal, Durban).

<sup>48</sup> But see Homi Bhabha's argument (1994, 33) that 'the process of translation is the opening up of another contentious political and cultural site at the heart of colonial representation'. In Bhabha's reading (with reference to India of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century) 'in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes

historical research within the broad framework of social history – and themes emphasised by that ‘canon’'s chronicle of the Apartheid years. I was also encouraging students to hone their skills in the ‘craft’ of history - an exercise that was certainly useful for those intent on academic qualifications and careers. But in hindsight, the form of the final presentation required of students and the relationship it encouraged of ‘memory to academic historical narratives’ seems narrow, to prompt disregard for the ways in which interviews themselves constitute particular ways of creating a sense of ‘pastness’, and participatory ways of ‘remembering’.<sup>49</sup> In Minkley and Rousseau's words, a set of power relations privileging the academic site and ‘History’ as a knowledge system... firmly embedded in institutional practices’ was still in operation. In terms of the *process* of conceptualising and executing research projects, in other words, I introduced a multi-lingual teaching technique that ‘takes seriously other frameworks of knowledge and modes of explanation’ (Minkley & Rousseau.) But the *product* students that students had to present for assessment were still in quite conventional. Students’ essays diverged from mono-lingual practice in their direct quotations of extracts in the vernacular. Still, course requirements tended to re-establish the traditional linguistic hierarchy in which English is the language of analysis and academic critique with indigenous language extracts – albeit present in the historical narrative - as its object. In crucial ways, writing history still involved abantu abakumshayo – speaking in a tongue other than one’s ‘own’.

### **Ngaphesheya kokukumsha: Writing hybridly**

I would like to explore the question of what alternative forms of ‘writing history’ my students could have pursued together with a question at the heart of my paper - the possibilities for writing that push the boundaries of English-centred writing by scholars in South(ern) African Studies more generally.

I began this paper by linking social historians' limited interest in the linguistic registers of their ‘oral’ sources and in questions and translation to the positivist project of mining interviews for facts and collapsing them into ‘historical realist narrative’ and a narrow understanding of

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hybrid’.

<sup>49</sup> Examples are the interview by N. Somtsewu with S. Rhwayi, and S. Mahangu's interview with N.A. Mnyatheli. People's History Programme archives.

translation as a mimetic process. More obliquely, I suggested that critics of such approaches had themselves not pursued the implications of their questions about 'oral transcripts, their construction, and their re-representation in history' (Minkley&Rasool, 99) for questions of inter-lingual translation. In this respect, it is useful to pause and consider the terms in which I articulated social historians' approach to questions of language and translation. I wrote of absences, elisions, silences in a historical narrative -implying that the particular practices of representation that is *gugula* involves being 'spoken' and trans-muted. In crucial ways, the terms of my argument could be said to mirror the project of a social history that searches for and gives voice to 'hidden histories' from 'below', emphasising 'the primacy of voice in ending silence'. This last phrase is from a recent reflection on directions in Southern African Historical Studies (Woodward et al, 1999) which opens up ways for thinking beyond the 'sedimented trope' of 'voice', and easy equations of voice with 'the empowerment of the speaker, whereas silence/the silenced speaker is equated with disempowerment, the danger of silence being that 'you will be said' (1) Their argument also opens up more ways of thinking through questions hierarchies of language in colonial contexts.

The writers propose 'a theoretical move beyond the unquestioning and undifferentiating use of the voice/silence binary ... we need to scrutinize how we situate manifestations of voice, silence, and what lies in-between along the axis of empowerment.' (1). They argue that 'gendering figures' in practices of ignoring 'silences of empowerment' (2). Validating speech over silence involves 'a neglect of (apparently private) silence over visibly public speech' whilst endorsing the gendered split of 'public space of power, politics and language as the male preserve' and and the 'private space of domesticity, caring and the body represented as the female equivalent'. This 'manichean oppositon' neglects

the heterogeneity of both public and private and what lies in-between. Gossip, scandal and rumour are all discourses that function in both these spheres; they publicise what is, apparently, secret, and point to a spiralling continuum, a genealogy of voices and voicing, rather than adhering to clearly demarcatable private and public spaces'. (2).

Woodward et al' argue for the need to theorise 'hitherto unrecognised forms of voicing' that might enable one to trace a 'different genealogy of voices... more graduated and proliferating', and their emphasis on the voice/silence as a dichotomy that involve particular practices of

gendering, question the parameters of this paper in intriguing ways.<sup>50</sup> But thinking through 'the discursive location of the speaking or silent subject' with the questions of language and translation in mind also hold interesting possibilities. Woodward et al suggest that Sindiwe Magona's novel (1998) dramatises 'another undertheorised aspect of the voice/silence duality: if a voice speaks who will listen?' (7)

In perhaps obvious but frequently ignored ways, scratching the surface of 'silence' might well reveal 'not listening' to other tongues, especially in colonial/post-colonial contexts where the boundaries between linguistically and racially delineated public and private spaces have more often been crossed by the colonised than colonisers.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, choosing or being forced into 'silence' is often not a 'blanket' decision on the part of the 'silent' one, but involves 'silence towards', and silences in particular private/public spaces - whilst 'communicating' in others. Here, I am also drawing on Vivek Narayanan's discussion (1999) of various accounts of the '1949 riots' in Durban. He argues that '1949 can be read as a parable of the flow and divergence of information through... restricted colonial spaces'. 'Non-Europeans' are allowed into a shared public space 'as long as what they say remains within the limits of what can be said in the context of colonial logic'. As one moves toward 'more private racialised spaces - a range of accounts emerge which are not admitted into the public space'. The boundaries 'are mediated, in the South African context, always through language. To enter fully into the shared central public space, one needs to speak and write English well; in order to enter fully into the African private space in natal, one needs, at least, to speak Zulu.' I would add that often, such mediation happens through the trans-mutation of translation.

As my account of my teaching practice should have made clear, a central reason for my interest in a practice of writing history that moves beyond the dominant monolingual/Anglo-centric approach is that African languages (and here I should include Afrikaans) remain the languages of rural South Africa, of urban townships and informal settlements. If English dominates universities, the formal economy and government, this arguably involves a gap

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<sup>50</sup> Applying 'Foucault's notion of the proliferation of power in various locations to theorising hitherto unrecognised forms of voicing' include considering the power of 'performative acts' such as play, mime dance and visual signifying practices such as painting.

<sup>51</sup> In this respect, Magona's choices as a writer is interesting. Her first novel, 'To my Children's Children', Kubantwana Bantwana Bam, was written consecutively in English and isiXhosa. She chose to write her latest book in English.

between 'outsiders' and 'elite': opting for anglocentric writing (and Bozzoli's 'English-speaking world' as audience) is therefore necessarily a political and problematic choice. To return, for a moment, to possibilities for teaching a research class in 'oral history', one way to address his issue would have been to return to the possibilities for 'popular' history - the radio experiments of my first year of teaching come to mind as an interesting medium for exploring different genres of 'speaking' history. This could provide an alternative framework within which a course such as People's History could encourage students to forefront the conversational narratives of interviews whilst exploring the issues of multi-lingual presentation. But as recent work on the remaking of collective memory in 'public' spaces has shown, visual re-presentation and spectacle has been central to the public representations of pasts. (Minkley et al, 1996).<sup>52</sup> A more ambitious departure for a course that has hitherto focussed on spoken and written words would involve a shift from a more or less exclusive focus on orality, to include explorations of visuality. Thinking about visual memory, the 'translation' of images into (which?) tongues and the possibilities of multi-lingual exploration of visual images offers exciting avenues for teaching and research. Expanding academic historians' critical engagement with current attempts to revise public and 'official' depictions of pasts to include questions about the politics of language could also yield interesting results. In 'Who Speaks for South African Pasts', yet another configuration of UWC thinkers (Witz et al, 1999) discuss limitations of adding racialised categories of people into histories where 'the main actors are firmly set in their leading roles'. In similar fashion, current museum 'revisions' involve the 'adding on' of indigenous language phrases to existing exhibitions with little revision of the content. Moreover and as exemplified by the TRC's official publications, the 'nation's' past is largely remembered in mono-lingual, English narrative.<sup>53</sup>

But such ideas so not really address the question of mono-lingual or anglo-centric practice in *academic* writing. One choice could of course be to write history entirely in one or more indigenous languages. On a purely personal level, this is not an option easily available to myself (beyond writing in that other African language, Afrikaans). Moreover, it is the hybrid

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<sup>52</sup> See also various contributions to Nuttall, S. and Coetzee, C. (eds), *Negotiating The Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*.

<sup>53</sup> I have yet to find out the dynamics of the TRC's reduction of a multiplicity of tongues to English transcripts – apparently using interpretations provided during the hearings. Apparently, the original recordings of victims' own testimony in an African language have not been transcribed. Ironically, the

possibilities of our post-colonial context that seem to offer other interesting choices. Witz et al discuss 'new types of history' being written in the academy that 'experiment with the boundaries of the historian's genre' - for example by transgressing conventions of the authorial voice and the borders of 'history' and 'fiction'. It is the possibilities suggested by this play that open up ways to think beyond the 'essays' written by my students (and tutelage in academic authority this involved) to new ways of writing inter-lingual histories. Notions of languages as repositories of unitary tradition and culture, and accessible locations of authentic/native/subaltern speech have been convincingly criticized. But the practice of 'writing from' languages other than English - languages long transfigured by colonial encounters and practices of *guqula*, *humusha*, *kumsha* - still hold interesting possibilities. Some of these are difficult and dangerous, as Marlene van Niekerk demonstrates with her searing account *Sophiatown's* destruction and the rise of *Triomf* in the racist Afrikaans of a white working class beneficiary. Feminist writers have also long explored the particular ways in which languages construct gendered subjects, and allow – or prevent the easy articulation – of certain ideas. In this respect, and as current contestations of gendered identities transform the contours of South African languages, choosing (for example) isiZulu as one medium for feminist history hold interesting possibilities. Of course, 'writing from' English may also be done in different ways. Many for whom English is a second language (alternatively, who inherited or made it their own) have long moved beyond *kumsha-ing*: the language of Empire has been appropriated, hybridised and transformed in a variety of colonial and post-colonial contexts, including South Africa.

It is outside 'the academy' that another such possibility has been explored. In 'Afrikaans' fiction, writers and poets have long made forays into other languages, knitting together hybrid texts.<sup>54</sup> The work of contemporary musicians, for example Kwaito artists, draw on the hybrid languages of South African cities for complex linguistic crossovers (with voices switching between or simultaneously speaking different languages and 'street' dialects) that demonstrate

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popularised, English version of its findings is being rendered into African languages.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Breyten Breytenbach's *Lewendood* whose poems combine (for example) Afrikaans, Zulu, Latin, Spanish, Vietnamese, English. In *Vir 'n Pers Huis*, written both in Afrikaans and English, different languages allow particular expressions of sexuality. In *Post-Colonial Translation* (ed. S. Bassnett & H. Trivedi) Sherry Simon (1999) discusses poetic experiments in bi-lingual texts, translation and re-translation in 'Border-writing in Quebec'. Another interesting example in multi-lingual writing by a feminist academic is 'Le sacré et l'autre Parole: selon une voix féministe' by Monique Dumais (1989)

possibilities for linguistically hybrid texts and the power of playing with languages that carry the weight of colonial pasts. The issue at hand is therefore not simply which language/s should be used for 'historical narratives' but the nature of the interaction and cross-overs between languages spoken in South Africa. It is in the spaces 'between' and 'across' languages – perhaps akin to Homi Bhabha's 'third space' of 'innovative energy', 'of the translation of cultural difference at the interstices' (1994, 220 -224) that new possibilities for 'theorising' whilst employing and transforming concepts from different linguistic locations could open up.

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