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**Performing the (un)inherited: language, identity , performance**

by

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## DECLARATION

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## INTRODUCTION

I will examine how language usage in Post-Apartheid South Africa is central to identity construction and discern in what ways this construction informs my approach to creating performance. I use this paper to offer a frame as to how a relationship to language is socially and historically constructed in post-apartheid South Africa, how this construction affects questions of cultural and linguistic identity, and finally how those identities are performed. This is achieved by exploring how vocal work, text, language and the physical body are integrated to use as material in creating my individual performed vernacular modalities.

My research has employed various methodologies to navigate and engage issues of language and identity towards creating a performance. First by using Neville Alexander's research into the history of language and language policy in South Africa, I briefly outline the manner in which languages in South Africa gain dominance and in turn how this affects individual attitudes towards English, Afrikaans and other official vernaculars. As my practice as a performer-creator has been central to the research use the paper to unpack the relationship between notions of language, identity and performance and reflect on my bilingual isiXhosa/English training at The university of Cape Town. I interrogate the manner in which this training is central in shaping my understanding of how the inheritance of, and affiliation with languages, informs identity. I make reference to my own linguistic repertoire as explored through three projects produced within the period of the Masters research conducted at the University of Cape Town (UCT): The Minor Project *As Yet Withheld* (2011); The Medium Project *Four* (2011), my one person show created over the December-January period and performed in March 2012. The thesis production *There was this sound* which at the time of writing is still in production. In my reading of linguistic theories, the use of the terms 'mother tongue', 'home language' and 'first language' are used almost interchangeably to describe the language first learned and used in the home as the primary language . In this research, however, the 'mother tongue', 'home language' and 'first language' are recognised as three different linguistic proficiencies in accordance with linguist Sinfree Makoni's(1998) understanding of how one engages with language on three levels: inheritance, affiliation and expertise.

Thesen's (1997) use of Bakhtin (1988) in relation to identity, is significantly useful in this investigation as it appears to be the most flexible use of Identity Theory taking into consideration, as it does, "life histories and biographies" (Norton, 1997:417) and "seeks to

give greater prominence to human agency in theorizing notions of voice” (Norton, 1997: 417). Norton identifies this theory as *speaking consciousness*- “the individual speaking or writing at the point of utterance, always laden with language of others, from previous contexts and oriented towards some future response” (Norton, 1997:417). Through interviews conducted with black female creator-performers I use their biographies as a means to engage notions of identity and language.

Finally, I explore processes of creating the final thesis production *There was this sound* informed theoretically by the work presented in this paper and produced for the stage by utilizing the actors four major tools “emotion, intellect, body and voice” (Mills, 2009:9) to engage all the languages I have at my disposal as well as learned performance tools, towards creating a new vernacular of performance.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ENGLISH AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Both inside and outside the theatre, language is a powerful determinant of social identity, for it is in language, and primarily in spoken language, that all the complex terms of personal identity are negotiated and articulated (Banning, 1998:401).

Dr Neville Alexander's research has concerned itself with multilingualism in relation to the hegemony of English in the public sphere in Post-Apartheid South Africa. He is concerned with how language policy informs use of language and how this affects the use of multiple languages in a multilingual society. Alexander's theories take into consideration how the socio-historical make-up of South Africa instigates the dominance and power of English and Afrikaans. A proclaimed advocate of linguistic diversity Alexander has argued through his work that there are two central sources from which language cultivates power. The power lies in whether an individual or group is able to communicate their intentions effectively by means of language used in that society. The languages in which the production process take place becomes the languages of power and so it can be understood that if one does not command the language of production one does not have power.

In this chapter, I will offer a brief outline of how controlling powers and legislature have informed the way in which language operates in the South African context historically, and how it currently operates in a post-democratic South Africa both for the individual and for the collective.

In his analysis, Alexander (2009) argues that language does not develop naturally but is manipulated and made into policy to suit a small sector of society. Languages are planned by governments in as much as cities are planned and as such, legislature prescribes how and when they will be used. Tollefson further states that the dominance of English is not "merely tolerated in the developing world, it is considered a legitimate model for society" (Tollefson, 1991 in Alexander, 2009:2). He makes us aware that those who control state power are a small elite group operating in terms of the colonial language, which in the case of South Africa, is now the language of the British, English (Alexander, 2009).

In the 1970s, Pierre Alexandre demonstrated how languages constructed 'cultural capital'. Those who possessed this were automatically catapulted into positions of power. Bourdieu's

'linguistic markets' theory outlines the price value for colonial language acquisition (Alexander, 2003). If we consider both Alexandre's 'cultural capital' and Bourdieu's 'linguistic markets' ideas, we can understand how it is beneficial to acquire the language of those who hold power and economic wealth.

Language becomes an instrument of control and demand in colonial societies, which are almost always multilingual, or of a mixed language disposition (Fleishman in Banning 1998). For reasons that date as far back in our history as slavery, colonialism and the role of the missionaries, English has become a language of dominance and of aspiration. An article published in *The Economist* claimed that English placed other South African languages under threat ([www.economist.com/node/17963285](http://www.economist.com/node/17963285)). Linguist and Professor at the University of Cape Town Rajend Mesthrie, suggests that black languages may go the way of the six Indian languages first brought to South Africa by the indentured Indians which are now seldom spoken. South African Indians no longer speak to their children in the languages brought over by their forefathers. Unlike their forefathers, who passed on their languages to their children both at home and through education, more recent generations have chosen to speak to their children in English viewing it as 'the best way forward' ([economist.com/node/17963285](http://economist.com/node/17963285)). English was brought to South Africa by the British colonialists and entrenched in education by the missionaries. Today it maintains its position as the most spoken language in the country whilst only 10% of the population indicate English as their home language and only 1% of Black South Africans state English as their first language. Black South Africans learned English because they understood that as Fanon observed with regards to French, "mastery of language affords power" (Fanon, 2008:9) which would support why English has retained its position as the language of liberation and black unity by black South Africans.

South Africans have historically viewed their identity through the lens of race and consequently language and race in South Africa are hardly inextricable (Alexander, 2003). These tensions create the kinds of violent eruption as seen, for example, in 1976 when black learners protested against the use of Afrikaans as the primary medium of instruction.

In the Union of South Africa, the Afrikaners secured the votes of the Afrikaans speaking elite who have their strong hold in agriculture and mining. In the same Union of South Africa, the black man was disenfranchised by his lack of proficiency in the language of the oppressor during a time of brutal 'pigmentorship' (Alexander, 2000). South Africans have historically

viewed their identity through the lens of race and consequently language and race in South Africa are hardly inextricable (Alexander, 2003). These tensions create the kinds of violent eruption as seen, for example, in 1976 in which black students in Soweto protested against the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. Post-Apartheid, the democratically elected ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), pressed for English as the only official language on economic and political grounds. For the ANC and other liberation struggle leaders, there was an implicit belief that a command of English held the promise of facilitating liberation, unification and empowerment. During the liberation struggle, leaders of colour revered the English language. Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), supported the use of English in meetings above the use of Afrikaans when the movement grew beyond the bounds of the Eastern Cape in spite of the fact that his constituents were more proficient in Afrikaans. English was seen as most neutral and unemotive, whereas speaking Afrikaans meant speaking in the language of the oppressor. The added benefit of the use of English in the discourse of The BCM is that it offered access to support for the liberation struggle from across the border (Biko, 2004).

In light of the language research conducted around the world, the ANC back tracked on their decision to allow English to serve as the only official language and developed a policy that included African languages. International research indicated that language is a resource rather than a hindrance, can be used as a tool towards achieving social cohesion and offers the multilingual individual greater understanding of, and mobility between, cultures (Alexander, 2003). In my view, South Africa seems to have initiated an enlightened language policy as many other African countries appear to pretend that African languages do not exist or attempt to force a policy of monolingualism. As Tollefson observes “(L)anguage is built into economic and social structures of society so deeply that its fundamental importance seems only natural. For this reason, language policies are often seen as expressions of natural common sense assumptions about language in society” (Tollefson, 1991) However, how language operates in South Africa is not revealed in the expression of policy itself, rather, language usage is informed by the way in which policy is executed.

“It is not enough to say that European languages were imposed, although true, because African language whilst famished and shut out of power never really suffered linguisticide” (Wa Thiong’o, 2009:55). ‘Linguicide,’ the idea that languages can be exterminated is an idea that premises itself on the notion that a language is a rigid unchangeable entity which when

tampered with begins to decay and finally die off. If that were true, adapted languages of the former colonies, like Creole would cease to exist.

Languages that were meant to die have simply refused to. Languages pushed to the periphery have refused to stay on the periphery. But their survival has not been without trauma of the great divide between the majority of black people who speak and use the languages to express their everyday needs and conception of the universe, and the black educated elite who distance themselves from these languages, often taking this distance, consciously or unconsciously, as a measure of their advancement in the modern world (Wa Thiong'o, 2009:xi).

Fanon argues “[...] historically, it must be understood that the negro wants to speak [English] because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred fifty years ago” (Fanon, 2008:26). Here I want to demonstrate the culture clash by drawing on a personal example, that of my uncle who spoke five languages and was forced into exile. On his return from exile, he encouraged my father to send my siblings and myself to a school where we prayed for our Sister School in England whilst he pumped his fist and told us to stay black! These motley understandings of identity are not always easily discernible. Fanon writes “and the fact that the newly returned negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation” (Fanon, 2008:14). English and Afrikaans still operate as the major players in political and economic structures. Laws (although available in other official languages) are written in English first and English is the official language of business (Alexander, 2003).

English Education and English usage in South Africa is a fraught and deeply complex issue. English is entrenched as the major language of both cultural dominance and cultural resistance among second-language English second speakers quite as much as among native English speakers (Banning, 1998). The introduction of the English language to black South Africans demonstrates how a language can have power ascribed to it, as Bown observes “[...] the English language was the official medium of expression in the British colonies, an African moved by nationalist impulse tended to use English to express it” (Bown, 1981:8). That so many black South African engage their lives in the English language demonstrates how much English is valued and is considered to be the language that drive economic systems. People in society understand quite quickly how language can offer access to a means of production and how the command of that language empowers one with a bargaining power. It is important to understand how languages gain power and how they operate in society as Tollefson observes that “(Language) is built into economic and social structures of society so deeply that its fundamental importance seems only natural. For this reason,

language policies are often seen as expressions of natural common sense assumptions about language in society” (Tollefson, 1991: 2).

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## CHAPTER TWO

### INHERITANCE, AFFILIATION, AND EXPERTISE

In the context of South Africa which is fraught with linguistic complexities, it is useful to view language through a socio-linguistic lens that invests its analysis in the different engagements people have with the languages they operate, inheritance, affiliation and expertise (Makoni, 1998). Makoni's definitions are as follows: Inheritance- refers to the ways in which a person can be born into a language tradition that is prominent within the family and/or community setting, whether or not they claim expertise in or affiliation to that language, Affiliation-refers to the attachment and identification a person feels for a language, whether or not nominally belonging to the social group customarily associated with that language, Expertise- refers to proficiency in language (Makoni 1998:54). The theory of bilingualism refers to the ability to perform in two languages and although making allowances for the ability to speak the two languages with varying degrees of proficiency, predominantly focuses on individuals who are equally fluent in two languages. Bilingualism struggles to contain all the permutations with which people are bilingual and the levels of comfort with which people engage with those languages. Considering emotion when engaging in the discourse of bilingualism, is an idea championed by Pavlenko. According to Pavlenko, the role of the emotional feeling of the speaker is crucial to the expression of the vocabulary (Pavlenko, 2007). Makoni's theories of inheritance, affiliation and expertise provide a language through which to engage the discourse of multilingualism that is not limited to an understanding of how an individual engages with two languages.

My mother is isiXhosa and my father seSotho and as a consequence of my being born and raised for the first three years of my life in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal, the first language I learned to speak was isiZulu. isiZulu is a common language between my parents and consequently my first language of inheritance, affiliation and expertise. A shift in province and school from Kwa-Zulu Natal to Gauteng saw my inheritance, affiliation and expertise change accordingly. When I started my formal education at an English medium, multi-racial Model C school, English established its place as the language of daily conduct. Soon English had solidified its dominance at school and at home. Whilst I have a good grasp of other languages, I read, write and speak English more fluently than any other and consider my expertise in English and Afrikaans to be superior to my expertise in isiXhosa, seSotho and isiZulu.

English is therefore my chief language although it is not the first language that I learned to speak nor is it the only language with which I have a cultural affiliation. It is, however, the language in which I conduct my daily life and by implication of my lacking fluency in vernaculars associated with my isiXhosa/seSotho inheritance, I am, by classification, a *coconut*.

A *coconut* is a derogatory labelling of a black South African who speaks English as a first language and the mother tongue (assumed language of inheritance) as a learned language, if at all. A *coconut* by popular definition is one who is black on the outside and white on the inside; one whose mind has been colonised and who rejects African cultural inheritance in favour of blanket western idealism. The conversation about the *coconut* dilemma has been largely one sided with those who are bilingually fluent choosing to mock and look down on those who struggle with the 'mother tongue'. *Coconuts* are perceived as black elitists who actively choose not to engage with their mother tongues, rejecting the vernacular languages in favour of English. There is another perception and one that is truer for me: as English entered the home and was introduced as the primary language of the home, the vernacular left the home quietly without a fight and almost unnoticed until it hardly existed in my vocal gestures and exclamations. It was not an active choice on my part. Phewa writes that

[...] I would suggest that I had agency in that matter. I did not. I do however bear the brunt of that decision (made by my parents) ... calling me a coconut would suggest that I have secret longing or want in earnest to be white. I do not ... I cannot cry or complain or celebrate with being part of some discourse as to what's happened to our children an indication of how much I hate my blackness or revere the white world (Phewa, 2007).

.Children in the townships whose parents fear for their safety keep them close and when they can afford to; send them to schools outside of their communities to the suburbs where most Model C schools are located. At their new schools they learn to speak English and carry that English back with them into the communities which immediately distinguishes them as the group of people who are able to 'get out'. The *coconuts* straddle then the dilemma of being both inside and outside of their cultural experience. A parent's decision to educate their children in schools outside of the communities in which they live, renders the *coconut* 'privileged' by a political choice that would assumedly aid in their economic advancement and other life challenges. Children must commute daily between home and the educational institutions thus shifting between township landscapes and suburban living. Secondly they are disadvantaged by the loss of connection to their community and their heritage. This so called

'privilege' is disadvantageous to them at home as they are called 'mama's boy' and 'cheese kid' and 'inside child' (Stemela, personal interview 2012). Spending lots of time at school, the child is out of the community for a considerable portion of the day. The African language is usually spoken well but with less confidence and fluidity as the now adopted first language, English. The term *Coconuts* seems to set itself up descriptively as a critical naming that implies quite strongly that a black person has identified his/herself as white. To add to the *coconut's* disadvantage is the threat of violence. One community interviewee articulates his response to *coconuts* "if they do not give us money, he's got a problem, he's got a big problem, we beat him". Because the subject does not sound like his community members, his language affiliation identifies him and others like him in the community in which he grows up and its economic value is revealed both in his home and irritates his aggressor. The acoustic boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are established and cannot be erased. As a consequence of this language acquisition and the usurping of a visible African identity, the *coconut* fails the identity test imposed by some in his community. This test can take the form of a violent act which although not grievous, poses a threat of physical harm and marks him as 'othered'.

In an interview, director and theatre maker, Asanda Phewa describes an episode when she was in a taxi full of women on her way to work in her play *A Face Like mine* (2009), a play ironically about the coconut syndrome. On reaching her destination she shouted 'sho't left please driver.' This elicited much laughter from the other passengers who exclaimed 'hawu besingaze kuthi sehlele nomlungu lana' *we didn't know we were sitting with a white woman here* (Phewa, 2009). *Coconut* is the term that has been constructed and given to black people for whom the speaking of English has allowed for an upward economic mobility in society due to their access to a particular sound of English. Although the term *coconut* carries an insulting undertone, it speaks precisely to a South African linguistic experience that is not just in the particular way in which black South Africans engage with English, but also the command and accent in which they speak it: the terms English and whiteness appear to be inextricable. One may imagine *coconut* to be a compliment offered to those whose parents through some effort and perhaps some luck, could afford to educate their children in the previously classified English medium Model C school outside of the township and rural area local schooling system.

When I realised that my vernacular had weakened, it became embarrassing to attempt to speak it and I found refuge in the English language. At the point of adolescence, I realised that my linguistic identity did not match my cultural one. Stemela emphasises a point when she reveals in her interview: “I remember learning English but I don’t remember unlearning isiZulu” (Stemela, personal interview, 2012). On asking my parents why an African language was not the language of the home, my father, Seabe, responded that if one can speak English one can live anywhere in the world and communicate across a large cross section of cultures. He seemed to echo the opinion of the struggle leaders that the mastery of English offered an international advantage. As far as he is concerned, no matter where one finds oneself on the globe, someone who speaks English can always be found. “Where is seSotho going to take you?” he questioned, emphasising the differentiating linguistic value of language, suggesting that seSotho and perhaps all African languages were weaker currency. Having grown up in the townships and attended an Afrikaans medium High School, he could speak five languages fluently including English. He witnessed the Soweto uprising of 1976 and recognised the advantageous currency of the English language in an unequal society. Understanding the value of English was for him an embodied experience Wa Thiong’o was right that “language shifts are sown first in the parents” (2009:50).

For a child who has simultaneously inherited and uninherited language due to a decision by my parents to offer the best possible opportunities in life and entrench a love for the English language, the consequence has been alienation from my affiliated culture and cultural identity. On her English affiliation Phewa says this “[...] you know our parents did what they thought was best and I can’t hate them for that. They thought that offering us access to the world would be the best thing they could do, but all we want is to be home” (Phewa, personal interview, 2010). Speaking mother tongue language at the equivalent level of a second learned language has severe emotional registers which cannot be captured in their full complexity and nuance in a linguistic questionnaire. These can be explored and documented in the theatre. The *coconut* state of being could be described as dancing between aspirations to a cultural monolith and the expression of the emergent identity, always threatened by outside forces. While fleeting and transitory, performance illuminates the relationship between language and identity and gives form to linguistic ambiguities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TRACING IDENTITY THROUGH LINGUISTIC BORDERS

The use of a European language in preference to an African language is not just a question of language acquisition and the loss of the African Language, it is navigating oneself through a multi-cultural, multi lingual context. There may be (although not always), issues of guilt and shame associated with an affiliation with the European language currency that affords one access to economic freedom. It is the politics not only of the language but of the sound of the language, the circumnavigation of selves made up of multiple cultural and linguistic indices in a society that claims to celebrate difference and yet evidences itself as a place seeking unilateral identity (Kodesh, 2006).

Actress and theatre-maker Thenjiwe Stemela grew up in the Johannesburg township of Soweto and attended a private girl's school in Waverley in the Northern Suburbs of the city. She commuted by public transport every day whilst the majority of her peers were picked up by their mothers in new cars (Stemela, personal interview, 2012), to drive comparatively shorter distances to their houses in the surrounding suburbs. Stemela's journey out of the township into the suburb and behind the white walls of her school grounds and back home again to Soweto was a daily journey not just of space but a negotiation of shifting selves. At school they would engage their world through an English lens and at home she would deal with their realities in isiZulu. For the first time Stemela was exposed to the idea of her home language as an academic subject to be studied and learned, encountering books that were written in isiZulu, the language taught to her by her white teacher. Stemela excelled at her new school and learnt her home language out of books written by white men taught to her by a white woman. She notes "I didn't think of Zulu as an academic language, it was the language that brought me home" (Stemela, personal interview, 2012).

Stemela was recently cast in a play where the question of language was central to the concept of the production and spoke candidly about her experience. Stemela played the only English speaking character whilst the other characters spoke in Afrikaans. She was cast in the role after participation in an audition process in which approximately 30 actresses were considered. During the process Stemela's accent became problematic for the director. The white director offered this note to express how the character was different from how Stemela

sounded “she’s a real South African girl. She doesn’t speak the way you do. She’s from the Kasi” (Stemela, personal interview, 2012). This observation astounded Stemela who had grown up in the Townships and to an extent also considered herself a ‘kasi’ girl. She wondered if this questioned her authenticity. The director makes a curious assumptive association between a particular sounding English and the location of a person. The director expects the black actor to produce a sound for the character that may not be within the vocal expertise of the actor. I have often auditioned for a role and been requested by directors to ‘un-refine’ and ‘ruralise’ my accent suggesting that the accent I carry as a first language English (L1E) speaker was not fitting for the character auditioned for. I have then imposed a generic sound which matches a sound perception with which the director may be satisfied. Stemela observes that “there is a dangerous assumption here from some directors. I fear they think that we are just putting on our accents that the accents can be switched on and off. I refuse to do that, I don’t want to come across as disrespectful. It’s like I’m dumbing down” (Stemela, personal interview, 2012). In my view, one needs to be vigilant against simple notions of identity which overlap neatly with the language of location.

### ***Language and accent***

Just as, at the level of relations between groups, a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it (Bourdieu, 1977: 652).

In his article on language, identity and performance, Bauman begins with a quote from the Bible which describes a fatal interaction between the Gileadites and the Ephraimite fugitives at the passage of Jordan. On failing the identity test based on the articulation of the word ‘Shibboleth,’ the Ephraimites are killed. Their accent exposed the Ephraimites as non-native speakers of the language of the Gileadites issue out the ultimate penalty, death (Bauman, 2000:1).

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Shibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12: 6 ).

What Bauman demonstrates with his observation through this text in the Bible, is the value attributed to accent. The value of accent and pronunciation has a history that extends back to biblical times. An interview with Peggy Tunyiswa, an actress, revealed that her relationship to a good performance was based on her English pronunciation. Tunyiswa is a first language

isiXhosa speaker trained in the UCT's Drama department 2003-2007. Her perception of what good performance sounds like is opposite to her heavily accented isiXhosa articulation. A 'good performer' sounds, in Tunyiswa's words, 'white,' 'model C' and 'polished' (Tunyiswa, personal interview, 2011) with no trace of her vernacular pronunciations. It is worth noting that Tunyiswa despite being a student within the Department, did not go through the 'voice as material' teaching under Elizabeth Mills, the then head of Voice at the same Department whose own research into the complexities of voice teaching in a multilingual society revealed that "[...] power relations in respect to sound (language and accent) can be felt in voice practice" (Mills, 2009: 84). Mills emphasised in her own teaching that all languages and accents are welcome on stage in an effort to empower students in their approach to sound making.

Practicing theatre in South Africa immediately raises questions of the particular political and cultural hegemony not only of languages but also of particular accents. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the actor who is black can accomplish the accents associated with a language affiliation which is not the same as their own. The actors experience of voice in the practice is the experience of the cultural and social acoustic foundations of their being (Mills, 2009:11)

The UCT Drama Department was initiated by teachers from The Central School of Drama in London and as a result 'Received Pronunciation' was fundamental in the processes of teaching voice (Araujo, 2009). Whilst the direct link to the British teachers who first brought voice practice to South Africa no longer exists, Tunyiswa's response to value of the sound of an accent is indicative of the historically Eurocentric emphasis in voice training and performance at UCT (Araujo, 2009). Tunyiswa stated that she often felt jealous of her Model C classmates who seemed to have a more fluid relationship with language and as a result navigated their way through acting with much greater ease than she was experiencing.

To cope with her insecurities, she developed what Araujo calls a 'schizophrenic voice' attitude (Araujo, 2009). In her English performances Tunyiswa actively adjusted her speech to mimic her teachers' accents which she felt was the 'correct' method of speaking whilst in her isiXhosa performances found a joy and an excitement due to the agility and freedom with which she could engineer her performances based on her language expertise in isiXhosa (Tunyiswa, personal interview, 2011). For myself, performing in isiXhosa made me aware that I was speaking the language assumed by society to be my home language but only as proficiently as a learned language. My accent and lack of expertise in the vernacular exposed me as a border crosser without validity on this side of the language border. Similarly Stemela

experienced a physiological change in temperament when walking into her bilingual Nguni classes which were conducted in isiXhosa (Stemela, personal interview, 2012). In describing the experience Stemela says

Walking into that bilingual class my heartbeat would change. Getting the sound of the language wrong would stress me out. When I spoke the expression was not coming from a place I could locate inside of me. Seeing others do it so well and not fitting in made me feel like *impimi* (a traitor)

Stemela identifies her vernacular articulation as equal to being a traitor; whose betrayal in tongue and race could be equated in her estimation with double agents during Apartheid who fed information to the security police, the enemy of liberation struggle.

Cook explains that the naming of the language is crucial in understanding how language, culture and ethnicity are compounded. He explains that the South African apartheid regime christened the relationship between language ethnicity and culture in a very specific way so that the language used by different groups became “metonyms” (Cook in Makoni, 1998). Stemela deregistered from studies in the bilingual stream and elected to continue her acting training in the Mono-lingual English stream. Stemela felt much more at ease in these classes and exclaimed “the year I quit was the year I won the class medal” (Stemela, personal interview, 2012). The class medal is an award given at UCT to the top achieving student in a subject for the given academic year. In her second year Stemela won the award for the English Acting course. As a top student Stemela watched as students were cast in lead roles with the experience that she craved but it was her perception that it was out of her reach because she was black. So whilst the experience of re-actualizing oneself in life may well be acceptable, the complexities of the relationship between skin and speech, which creates an identity perception, must still be interrogated, unpacked and reimaged on stage.

Acting in isiXhosa during my undergraduate training at UCT, I was forced to navigate my way through relearning my mother tongue, a language which until my bilingual studies was cluttered, underutilised and for the most part quite simply forgotten. The struggle to communicate meaning through the language I was supposed to know, but around which I struggled to wrap my tongue, made me feel like I was failing a self-prescribed identity test which rendered me not quite black enough. Kabwe warns against adopting the attitude of “the black trap” (Personal Interview, 2011), an approach to identity in which the black child sees herself as inferior, broken and depressed by self-loathing and preoccupied with a sense of loss of ‘authentic’ identity, adopting the belief that speaking fluent confident English is equal to denying ones blackness and assimilating whiteness.

The conundrum of language is not one of loss but of a multiple inheritance of culture and sonic expression which is a rich theatrical playground for theatrical expression and sound-making towards creating a new personal vernacular of performance. “In theatre performance, however, there is evidence of a different and pragmatic solution to the question of English hegemonic dominance in a multilingual environment” (Banning, 1987:403): Banning suggests that the languages used in the theatre are dependent on the languages of the audience and that Western Cape audiences are largely middle aged and white. We are reminded that “when more than two languages meet they fall into a hierarchy of dominance” (Banning, 1987:403) and, if the logic follows, into a hierarchy of accent.

These kinds of hierarchical systems are not only present in spoken English but also in African languages. ‘uziyenancono?’ asks *are you making yourself better than* and continues ‘awuyithei isintu?’ *Do you not speak an African language?* African languages are seldom if ever named in the language in which this question is expressed (Makoni, 1998). Embedded in this is the question ‘awuyithethi isintu?’ is the question of your value of being. Are you human or other than human? What is spoken is attributed to the language of the human in contrast to the language of the animals or that of the ancestors. The black speaker when conducting her/himself in English can be viewed as a person with access to economic benefits and a person of no human value (Makoni, 1998). In my view, this is also about perceived class differences.

‘She speaks so well’ is a compliment I have often heard offered to black South Africans by white South Africans- mastery of the language in which he “speaks like a book” (Wa Thiong’o, 2009:18) should not be confused with praise for eloquence. In what seems to be a compliment, we are actually being interpreted as ‘she sounds like us’. In Phewa’s play *A face like mine* she interrogates this loaded compliment and reimagines herself in a role where her English pronouncements would be lauded if she were as a maid. “I’d be one of those maids who did the special things like French cooking and how to lay the table” (Phewa, 2007). In this imagining, her translocation is validated. The whites applauded her English as an achievement and her uniform is a badge of identification that allows her a place in a community. Her ability to learn the ‘madam’s’ English garners her status within a community of women that stretches across time and who understands that her English affiliation is a passport to economic opportunity, and not synonymous with a dissociation from her African cultural heritage. In this imagining, her in-betweenness offers her both social mobility and pride for her eloquence. She is not seen as substituting ‘blackness’ for ‘whiteness’ by

engaging in English. In the maid form she is able to distinguish her blackness and validate her use of English without having her identity questioned.

Language is the “god gone astray in the flesh” (Fanon, 2008:9). “[...] we cannot die with this still inside us”(Ojo-Cole, 1931 in Mphahlele, 2001). Through the projects created over the process of this explication, I have worked to find ways of performing the absurdity, dynamism and multiplicity of my language experience which, for a long time, has existed as just feelings of guilt and shame. What can be achieved in performance is foregrounding form-function-meaning interrelationships through verbal display (Bauman 2000, Hymes 1975) in which an “act of expression is put on display, objectified, marked out to a degree from its discursive surroundings and opened up to the interpretive scrutiny and evaluation by an audience” (Bauman, 2000: 1). I have discovered that language creates the space to forge new realities. For example the use of “Pretoria Sotho by people who have migrated to urban areas enables them to conceal or distance themselves from their rural past” (Malimbe, 1990:13 in Makoni 1998). Published research suggests that the mixed African-pan-ethnic varieties are now being used in the classroom not only as a last resort by teachers; pupils themselves frequently use these varieties as the unmarked norm for interaction within the classroom (Makoni, 1998:55). “Xhosa has many spoken varieties as does Northern Sotho and so does Zulu, non-standardized Zulu differs so much from standardized Zulu that Zulu students can feel alienated from a language which has been attributed as their mother tongue” (Makoni, 1998:245).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CULTURAL COCKTAILS AND APARTHEID BABALAS

#### *Performing Identity*

Travelling to visit my grandmother in the Eastern Cape we would stop at the Transkei border and cross into another country where I did not speak the language. During apartheid we would have to stop the car to have our bags checked and my mother's passport stamped for the approval of our coming and going. Post-1994, the border post still exists as a physical structure but we no longer have to be issued permission by border control to visit the Transkei. That border is a physical construct that marks the point of arrival and my stomach still sinks to the floor every time we pass the Orange River because on this side of the border I am a foreigner in my own land. We made similar trips to the Vaal where my father grew up. That journey is now marked by traversing the Grasmere plaza. The sound of the people would change. As soon as I was old enough to realise that speaking three languages in ways that were not quite fluent was not sufficiently acceptable, I constructed a well formulated lie that would save me from needing to engage in the languages of my new territories. That my parents had differing linguistic ethnicities would serve to my advantage. When holidaying in the heart of isiXhosa land I claimed my seSotho heritage and convinced my cousins with whom I would play in rural heat that my tongue operated better in Johannesburg, where I speak through my lineage. The same lie was told to my cousins in the Vaal whom I convinced my seSotho was so poor because we spoke more isiXhosa at home.

The value of language in various territories can still be felt. In 2005 my family took a trip to Vredevoort to visit my paternal ancestral graves. As my father, Seabe, was brought up by his mother who was Sotho, seSotho became the language of the house and Tsawana became the language of ceremony. In articulating his language inheritance Seabe says 'Ke moTswana ya pampirire' *I am Tswana on paper only*. Seabe, as the eldest man, is also the family spokesperson. Seabe is also the member of our family whose Afrikaans is fluent having attended an Afrikaans medium school. Despite the stigma towards Afrikaans, my father has always had a rich love for languages, describing Afrikaans as the language that says what it means. When we arrive in Vredevoort Seabe speaks Afrikaans when requesting direction to a

farm believed to be the final resting place of my great great-grand parents. In this language for which he has reverence, Seabe's voice changes and his status diminishes. On this side of the Vaal border my father is not the learned Doctor celebrated by the township community in which he grew up. Here he is a black man searching for his past on someone else's land. The land is not owned by our family even though they tended it for two generations.

Searching through the maize fields my uncle fell into graves of the ancestors. The names of our forebears had been engraved in stone that began to disintegrate over time so that the names could not be read with the naked eye. Our ancestor's names, in that moment, were lost to us. Carefully we poured mercurochrome into the grooves then photographed them to reveal the names of our family members whom we had never met. We stood over their graves and spoke to them in English. I wondered if they recognised us. The crossing of the borders here baffles me: seSotho speaking moTswana, in an Afrikaans dominant area speaking to their ancestors in English. All the rituals of introducing the family members present were conducted and I questioned whether the ancestors could understand what we were trying to communicate. My aunt then sang a hymn in seSotho which was then followed by a prayer, I felt that to be more appropriate and believed that they had heard us that time.

Languages do not need to be fully understood by listeners. It is not the words that are important but the sound of the voice on the chords. In a radio interview with Nouveau Jazz group the *Muffinz*, lead guitarist Keke composed a song for their debut album called *Have you Heard* (2012). The track *Djouni Kopou* has no specific meaning; the title comes from the invented language sung in a familiar jazz scattling which Keke has called African Scattling or Keke Lingo. On careful listening you can hear the lyrics almost sound familiar as if you have heard this language before. Sound has travelled through East Africa and has remnants of those sounds as well as others. The sound although seemingly original and not communicable in that it is not spoken by at least two people in the world, it is not entirely original.

During the interview the band performed the track live to which the radio host commented that he was moved by the performance even though he did not understand the words, but felt Keke communicate a spiritual feeling that was beyond language. Keke admits that he only started to sing this way after his mother died. What this seems to imply is that Keke was compelled to sing in a language that no one speaks in order to express profound loss, what seems unspeakable, what words are inadequate in expressing. What do we do when language fails, when we are faced with the terrifying inadequacy of words? Do we fall silent or do we

begin to make sounds that may seem weird and funny, create songs with no meaning but a whole lot of feeling? This is not a new discovery, it is common practice in rituals of keening, mourning, babble and existential theory. Keke Lingo is informed if not constructed by everything he has ever heard or that has ever touched him. Layers of language can coexist to create a song of joy or one of mourning. As a performer I was afforded a lab in which I could utilize text, voice, silence and physical imagery in disjuncture and all working together in identity forming that is subjective, unstable potent and revealing.

Johannesburg based choreographer Gregory Maqoma is described by Kodesh as creating work that is a “cultural cocktail” (Kodesh, 2006). Unlike Maqoma who thrives in creating choreography fuelled by the multiplicities that make up the multifarious complexion of South Africa, I have felt trapped by my multiple cultural and linguistic inheritances, affiliations and expertise. I am not the cocktail that Kodesh describes; I am the headache of apartheid babalalas (Kodesh, 2006). The headache that forces you to think back and think what did I drink last night, to recall the shots of seSotho, Afrikaans and isiXhosa which interspersed the long gulps of English, drunk down into a dizzy euphoria creating temporary rainbow dreams of freedom’s children who all sang and danced together in the same language where race did not matter because we were all part of the same rainbow. I become my own babel, speaking so many languages that I cannot communicate appropriately with my ancestors because my English voice is too loud.

In all the interviews I carried out, the subjects said that their parents came from different linguistic groups. Consequently English was spoken in the home as opposed to one of the parents’ languages. Traditionally African families follow a patriarchal lineage and speak the father’s language as the language of the home. In a case like my father’s, his father was absent from the home so the children spoke seSotho, their mother’s language. It can be deduced therefore, that speaking English at home is considered to be the neutral ground. This approach becomes evident when the parents switch to the vernacular when they do not want their children to hear what they are discussing.

This approach appears to be taken in South African politics as well. We do not often hear the leader of the country speaking in his or her native tongue as it is seen by some as being a threat to open dialogue. Choosing one language over the other in an official setting gives that language authority. English is seen as a language of business, of academia and of neutrality. I remember being reprimanded for speaking isiXhosa with my friends at school, being scolded

and told that it made the other children feel left out. The ranking of languages is made clear institutionally which has profound implications on identity formation; on this idea Stemela remarks “I can remember learning English but I can’t remember unlearning isiZulu” (Stemela, personal interview, 2012).

The Medium Project *Four* was based on the experience of the death of my maternal grandmother. The key discovery in that project was made when I uncovered the possible mechanisms on how to perform the personal babel. I experimented with the idea of the crowded voice which tries to accommodate and then articulate all my languages, inherited and affiliate, in a single utterance. I had a moment where I tried to speak all of the languages that exist in my vocabulary simultaneously in whatever shape they existed. It was the embodying of the fractures in my voice that I found to be the most effective: the potency of the instability of the multiple selves to push against the need to form narrative when utterances do not make sense. What language cannot hold is the suffocating distension of what is possible which allows me as performer to immerse myself in the image evocation of acquisition. When we go beyond language into the inarticulate, the expression of the colonised is confronted. In the confrontation the voice is so discordant it is close to insanity. That violent multiplicity of heritage and language cannot ever be articulated away.

As I was going to direct, design and perform the final thesis production, I was enthusiastic about working with an already existing text that resonated with me. My criteria in searching for texts were clear, the play or text had to be written by a black woman and the content had to be about the complexities around being a black female in contemporary South Africa. I found none. This is not to say that the plays do not exist, I would say there are very few and these are highly idiosyncratic works created in the last five years that deal with issues of blackness, language and identity: *A Face like Mine* (Phewa, 2007), *She opens her Mouth as if to Speak* (Mahali, 2009) are two examples of work which fit my criteria. These plays deal primarily with a disconnection between cultural and linguistic identities. Issues around language arose as a consequence of other identity based issues- Phewa’s piece grew out of a tussle with the perception of beauty whilst senses of migration were at the centre of Mahali’s work. There is also the internal voice to consider: a voice which seeks to be determined by all accounts in all its representations, whose different parts may be difficult to distinguish and may be completely accurate in its individual complex manifestation of multiple sound making. Whilst appropriate for the proposed thesis project these texts inspired me to create original material inspired by my personal experiences.

My own experience is of having multiple contexts of reference, one of which is a *coconut*, I am cognisant that the situation, is in fact, much broader than that. To reference identity through multiple frames as a theatre maker and performer, is to present those frames as a declaration of where I am and with what I am dealing. Accepting that ‘multiplicity’ is a key term and perhaps impossible to pin down to a singular definition, what I am trying to do with the work is to engage all those multiple different voices and varying sides. , As soon as I try to express these multiplicities in a traditional narrative structure do this, I tie the experience it down to that of *coconuts*, gender, blackness --- all of these things. I am not starting with the narrative, but looking for a structure that will engage all of these procedures. Vocal markings cannot be fixed and the questions of language identity and multiplicity struggle for resolution often offering even more questions than answers. However, I do find that in the language of my work, these questions are engaged, fragmented, struggled over, resisted, rejected, varied, wrecked, centrifugal and even incommensurable with each other.

### ***Considering Kennedy and Konile towards the final : There was this sound***

The final thesis production is a culmination of all the research I have carried out over the last two years and an unravelling of the tangled space inside my stomach, which I identify as a ‘hot space’. I make use of three texts *There was this Goat* (Krog et al, 2009), and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*(1967) and *People who led to my plays* (1987).

When I began experimenting with the possibilities of creating performance that engaged multiple languages to probe multiple cultural inheritances, I created my own interpretation of Adrienne Kennedy's writing process for *Funnyhouse of Negro* as described in *People Who Led to My Plays*. As outlined by Kimberly W Bentson in her article Rehearsing Blackness (Benston, 2000:228), Kennedy employed a process which is described as using the “self as supplement” (Benston, 2000:230). *People who led to my plays*, is a book Kennedy collated as a way to trace the people and experiences that influence her writing. The scrap book style book is rich with images and photographs. It notes her travels and the people by whom she has been influenced as well as various plays and the archetypes who would become very important in her writing, for example, Queen Victoria. Using Kennedy's process as a guide and myself as site, I began to jot down events that I thought contributed to my multiple inheritances. This process offered material to write my own version of a psychological underworld which I inhabit, navigating my multiple cultural inheritances, which sit tangled

and hot, competing for individual representation- the entanglement that threatens the credibility of my black identity. This space is inspired by Ben Okri's writings in *The Famished Road*(1991). This underworld is a space where a fragmented sense of identity is played out in the imaginings of in-between worlds that are simultaneously unfamiliar and new; a liminal space where my multiplicities come up against each other. Ultimately, the minor, medium and solo performances archived my bitter tragedy of dislocated identity.

Actors are constantly being called upon to interpret the lives and worlds of characters that challenge a point of view or even an entire value system to which the actor subscribes. *Funnyhouse of a negro* exemplified the complexity that is involved in living as a black woman with a cultural multiplicity that is constantly being defended, subverted, rejected and owned uncomfortably. In 2010 I took on the role of Sarah the Negro in Adrienne Kennedy's best known work *Funnyhouse of the Negro* directed by Mwenya Kabwe. It was the first time I had been challenged with the task of playing a lead role. It was the first time that I had played a character that felt close to my personal experience. The play chronicles the last hours in the life of Sarah, a young black woman troubled by race and identity. Kennedy's depiction of Sarah's struggle with self-hatred, race hatred, and alienation are played out as her hallucinatory subconscious manifested in the other characters: The Duchess of Hapsberg, Queen Victoria, Mrs Conrad, Patrice Lumumba and her Father. The sub-conscious composition is a locus of voices competing for presence and self-authorization, even from beyond the grave. Seen in this way, the subject is not in essence a commentary on self-discovery, but a process of invention arising in relation with itself that is mediated by time and circumstance. It is an infinitely open semios, a body and a ghost all at once, a maddening interchange of repetition and substitution (Benston, 2000).

Sarah the Negro experienced her dislocation in a waking nightmare in which she states "[...] it is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my statue of Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano and oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table" (Kennedy, 1965: ). I imagined my dreamscape as a post-mortem waiting room where the dead bide their time until their ancestors arrive to claim them and usher them to a heaven. On arrival in the waiting room, I search for my ancestors and call out for them in a broken isiXhosa. As a consequence of a lack of expertise in the vernacular, my ancestors do not understand my call and I am left to linger through the liminal space, unaccounted for, because in this imagined world I do not have the agency to explain my linguistic predicament; my private school English has no currency here. In broad terms the

minor, medium and solo projects sought to investigate two things: firstly to probe my complex linguistic past and observe how this has shaped my unsettled sense of identity and secondly to investigate how this experience can be performed. I have inquired how the construction of the dramatic reality through language can offer the possibility of reflecting shifting dynamic identities through that construction (Banning, 1989:12-37) “Practicing theatre in South Africa immediately raises the questions of the particular political and cultural hegemony not only of languages but also of particular accents. This is further complicated by the recent political changes and the effects of these on theatre practice” (Mills, 2000: 23) Central to the work is a questioning of the implications of the preferred use of English over the presumed Mother Tongue vernacular languages by black actors.

In Kennedy’s work as well as in mine, there are religious references as my work concerns itself with communication between ancestors, and the border between life and death is used to create a liminal space- a border, and to test the value of languages across that border. Kennedy describes the religious tone evident in the meter of the play, measured by the evangelical style of the Bible. “I often read psalms. I read them many times, not only for inspiration but because I sensed that the characters in my stories yearned to speak of the world on the levels of the psalms. Often years later when I would hear an actress speaking the monologues from *Funnyhouse of a Negro* or the *Owl Answers*, I saw a mystical connection” (Kennedy, 1987:102).

Notrose Nobombvu Konile is a mother to Zabonke John Konile, member of the armed forces unit of the ANC, *Umkontowe Sizwe* and of an anti-apartheid activist group known as the *Gugulethu Seven*. The members were slain by security police in 1986 (Krog et al, 2009). Mrs Konile was the last of the mothers who gave testimony at the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) in which she described the last days in which she had contact with her son. She was also the only one of the mothers who chose not to give testimony in English and elected to speak in isiXhosa, her evidence then interpreted into English (Krog et al, 2009). Her testimony and the levels of interpretation that it needed to go through before it were understood, are for me the perfect laboratory in which to investigate the very questions about language which are pressing to me (Krog et al, 2009).

Like most of the witnesses of the trial, their only access to testimonies was through the interpreter and the interpreter’s voice (Krog et al, 2009). Politics of the dominance of language are seen here. The TRC hearings were interpreted into English and not any other

language which raises a question as to why the testimonies were not translated into Afrikaans which is more widely spoken than English. If we agree that English is a sobering and less emotive option available for personal testimony, I question whether in the effort to mute emotions, we lose meaning in the languages in to which we interpret our experience. On the other hand, one can argue that English is used above Afrikaans because it does not seem appropriate for the victims to express the violent experiences lived through during apartheid in the language of the oppressor.

Mrs Konile exercised her right to offer her testimony in her chosen official language, the language in which she has the best expertise. She spoke an isiXhosa so rich in imagery that the interpreter's version articulated Mrs Konile's testimony in a fragmented narrative that left listeners confused. Mrs Konile's experience demonstrates my submission that the idea of there being authentic versions of language is problematic (Makoni,1998). Mrs Konile and the interpreter speak the same language, but Mrs Konile's handling of isiXhosa was inaccessible to the interpreter and by extension inaccessible to the witnesses who relied on the interpreter's English translation to understand Mrs Konile. The question of fluency makes me query whether we are as fluent in our speaking as we are in our listening and understanding and we are reminded that "power relations in respect to sound, language and accent may be felt in voice practice" (Mills, 2009:8).

Whilst we can accept that the interpreter is fluent in two languages, the fact that the testimony is being interpreted into English, that the witnesses who rely on the English interpretation can only hear Mrs Konile's experience through the ear phones, in the interpreter's voice, not in Mrs Konile's, reminds us that "It is strange how many voices testified. But it is the interpreter's voice that stays with you" (Krog et al, 2009:114). In order to unpack Mrs Konile's testimony, a psychologist, journalist and linguist took on the project to analyse her statements through the lens of the various source materials in which her statement was available. Mrs Konile's original recorded isiXhosa testimony and the simultaneous interpretation in English were considered during this analysis. In her analysis, journalist Antjie Krog used the English transcript of Mrs Konile's testimony as her source material because its "dream like incoherence" (Krog et al, 2009:85) appealed to her. Krog is not an isiXhosa speaker so her access to Mrs Konile's experience was through the interpreter. In the interpreter's voice, her use of imagery, pause and phrase was able to make sense meaning of Mrs Konile's expression of events (Krog et al, 2009). Krog justifies her choice of source material by the role of the interpreter "Mrs Konile's testimony exists with the precise

intonation, pauses, cadences, tiredness and rhythm with which it was delivered by the female interpreter” (Krog et al, 2009:85). Krog was engaging with the translated language as understood by the interpreter Mrs Konile’s TRC experience as documented in the book *There was this goat*(2009) served as a guide when making the production *There was this sound*. The fragmented nature of her testimony was the same as the fragmented structure I use to perform the multiplicity of being. The audience members serve as the interpreters in this sense as they read the performance through the multiply performance codes in which they try to make sense of my trying to make sense. It is not just a navigation of selves but a dialogue of meaning making between performer and audience member. Just as Krog was interested in the fragmented nature of the interpretation, Mrs Konile’s testimony reminds me of the monologues in *Funnyhouse of a negro* which are thick with imagery that can be difficult to interpret on first reading.

Dreamscapes, personal testimonies and interpretations of linguistic intersections are the conceptual tools informed by my considerations of Kennedy and Konile .These viewpoints provide wonderful spaces in which to guide my explorations with language. “The voice as sonic image signifies meaning in performance, when the making of vocal meaning and the signifying of vocal meaning are held central to the act of theatre then the voice can be considered as having multiple sonic possibilities” (Mills, 2009). I locate myself in my work both as victim and as agent and attempt to use the work not only to probe the complexities of a multilingual, multicultural experience and the subsequent negotiation of that multiplicity, but also to interrogate the loss of language, the feeling, the hot space as I describe it, can best be demonstrated in the theatre where more language signifiers contribute to languaging oneself.

It becomes apparent quite quickly that in the space of performance, when I speak of language I am not only referring to the spoken language, though that is the initial starting block, but that I am referring to the language of performance which takes its form into theatrical semiotics. The language of the body, of costume and of lighting and visual art culture, combined with a vocal sound-making in reference to a physical articulation, enter the conversation and begin to create their own vernacular.

*There was this sound* is really a fourth instalment that builds on the explorations first performed in the practical projects produced during the MA course work. The work is made up of a series of self- reflective monologues performed in a self- designed installation style

space in the Little Theatre on the UCT Drama School campus. The space is presented as an 'exhibit' which includes paper in various forms, recording devices (typewriters, radios, a Dictaphone and a gramophone), a grass mat and alternative light sources. Included in this exhibit are books written by white men, which contained stories with which I had grown up but which did not speak to my cultural identity. Conversely, the streams of paper available for writing on cannot record the experience I am going through in the moment of the performance as the typewriters are broken and out dated. The costume was inspired by visual artist Mary Sibande's *Long live the dead Queen*, a series of sculptures in which we find a sculpture of a woman dressed in an iconic maids' outfit that has been given a colonial treatment . The sound was created by designer Gideon Lombard. In previous projects, Lombard and I decided to work independently of each other using only the visuals of Sibande's work as our meeting point. We then regrouped a week before performance to see if our visual and sonic interpretations of the music would integrate. They did.

The most potent of the tasks set by Professor Mark Fleishman was the writing of a poem, entitled 'the theatre of my death'. That poem, came out in isiXhosa, a language I do not often even speak. The mere thought of death could only be expressed in a language I once knew, the one that carries all of my emotions. The inclusion of that monologue is as important as it is funny. It is funny that the language in which one locates disconnection to culture is the language that most adequately expresses the emotions I am trying to evoke. In this case the feelings are guilt, shame and loss. The lack of proficiency in my mother tongue serves as a benefit to the performance. To the untrained ear, the speech in question was in fluent isiXhosa, other signifiers in movement and in the quality of my voice signified some kind of rapture. To the proficient listener, the ill-formed sentences and accent expose me as a second language speaker and so they hear me and locate the distress and attach loss in a slightly different context. Mills explains

the voice as sonic image signifies meaning in performance when the making of vocal meaning and the signifying of vocal meaning are held central to the act of theatre, then the voice can be concerned of as many sonic possibilities when we speak of sonic possibilities they include sound image as well as spoken text and vocal gesture (Mills: 2000: 34)

The monologue *Ndivuke* is also ironically in isiXhosa, my mother's language , the language I never learned how to read or write and so the inclusion of the paper that never gets written on and the recording tools that are out of use and out of date that cannot capture this moment and the strained throaty performance of the piece is indicative of the "actor's experience of the voice within the practice is the experience of the cultural and social acoustic functions of her

being” (Mills, 2000:34). That episode comments on the problems involved in the passing down of a language and the difficulties found in resolving cultural identity when one feels that there are missing elements. It tests Wa Thiong’o’s assertion that one is at liberty to express oneself in any language desired, including the languages of the former colonies. However, one should be aware that by articulating oneself in that language, it is the culture of that language that you enriching and, by implication, this divorces you from some aspect of the African experience. If you are African and you write about the African experience in English you cannot call your work African. It becomes something else. Euro-African (Fanon, 1981). There is a coupling that occurs. Mother tongue is coupled with race and pitted up against colonialism which seems to be a South African predicament which is a painful one. I want to poke holes in the validity of that well established predicament remembering that “There is no religion, no culture no nation today that has not been affected by colonialism and its aftermath”(Wa Thiong’o, 2009:xi).

Attitudes towards language stand the risk of creating artificial borders for authenticity. Speaking mother tongue language at the equivalent level of a second learned language has emotional implications which cannot really be captured in a linguistic questionnaire but can be explored and documented in the theatre. There is a fertile creative playground in which to discover new ways of subverting and speaking to a language loss and language acquisition.

## CONCLUSION

In developing this explication for my final thesis performance, I have examined my own as well as other personal relationships to language as a means towards understanding my approach to voice practice and performance. I located this practice within the contemporary multi-lingual South African context in which I live and out of which I create performance. I have used the paper to investigate how language can form the basis for identity construction, informed by, if not as a direct result of, legislative policy. Language policy in South Africa makes an effort to represent all of the eleven official languages equally but due to the complex political past, English and Afrikaans still operate in South Africa as the dominant languages. I have interrogated the manner in which languages gain dominance and concluded that it is not an accidental occurrence. Rather, it is a strategic consideration implemented through policy to suit those who hold power. Dominant languages invariably pit themselves against the indigenous vernaculars which challenges ideas of value and currency in terms of linguistic expression.

I have further argued that the decision to use one language over the other is not simply a socio-economic politically motivated choice, it is an active component of identity formation. How languages operate in South African sectors points strongly to their economic and political value and poses a conundrum for linguistic and cultural identity for Black South Africans. I have tried to describe this conundrum from the perspective of a black South African relative to a relationship to English and at least one other African language. I considered the language conundrum as comprised of a unique mix of languages inherited, and affiliated with, and in which one holds expertise.

Gathering evidence to probe the thesis took on varied forms. I looked at offering a brief outline of the history of dominate languages in South Africa and current linguistic policy to form the landscape and context for these discussions. Diving into linguistic, cultural, and voice practice discourses offered a vocabulary with which to examine complex issues of language and cultural identities that were formed in a post-democratic context. I looked into the personal biographies of young black actresses to investigate how it is that they considered identity and language. I drew conclusions from the discrepancy between how in acting practice, linguistic identity is experienced, negotiated and exposed in the work performed as opposed to work created. I discovered that it is not just in the language affiliation, inheritance and expertise that identity is marked, but is also in the sound of the various languages spoken

that value is attributed. 'Sonic envy' exists on all sides, some wanting to sound more European and others aware of the advantages of sounding less so, each viewing the other as having a more valued sound. In other art forms like dance and fine art the expression of multiple identities seems to have more room to manoeuvre.

It is my perception that in contemporary dance there is more space available for a navigation through and between cultures. This multifaceted, hybrid approach is less apparent in the realm of voice and those rules are treated differently. Contemporary choreographer Gregory Maqoma, for example, uses his mixed cultural identity as a tapestry, weaving together all his cultural intersections to create something new. In voice practice however, language is less fluid and more defining, making credentials clear, revealing where you grew up, which languages you speak and how you associate with those languages. The manipulation or weaving of language unlike in dance, can sound at first as though one is endangering the language as opposed to using it to create something new.

In this short thesis I can only present the beginnings of my theoretical and performance theories that may help to uncover the complex identities in South Africa, not as the popularised idea of the rainbow nation made up of impermeable established cultures coexisting side by side, but that of varied intersections confronted by individuals in processes of establishing complex, fluid identities.

I offer that engaging language complexity and the sound of their utterances offers more access to South African identities than the perceived imaginings of language as rigid forms. Performance can penetrate impervious and potentially dangerous stereotypes and offer richer, more complex utterances of black identity in performance in a dynamic sonic and physical expression. Performance is the place where languages and sounds can interact freely and idiosyncratically: where the performer creates a liminal space in which she transgresses geopolitical and cultural borders and confronts the spaces between and within linguistic and performance codes, to reveal a rich and complex multiplicity of being. In creating my thesis production, *There was this sound*, I am made aware that this performance is a small space for conjecture, a moment that affords a vestige for expression that is confrontational, revealing, interrogative and celebratory.

Ultimately I submit that dynamic interaction between linguistic and cultural identities in theatre practice may yield more complex identity structures in multiple hybridised forms

presented here as theatrical expression and sound making, and I offer these considerations towards the creation of a new personal vernacular in performance.

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