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Being Differently Black

*By Mbali Khoza**

Difference has always been an interest of mine – the different gestures, methods and materials utilised by various post-colonial artists to question authorial identity and to "speak". In my art practice these ideas are interrogated in relation to the question "What difference does it make who is speaking?". This question is intended to expose the invisible mechanism of power that exists within authorship, raising questions such as who determines who gets to speak, how they speak, what is spoken about and who speaks on behalf of whom.

Introduction

In 2014 the concept of "difference" played an integral role in helping me conceptualise a performance work that I titled *What Difference Does It Make Who Is Speaking?* I began making the work out of my interest in the lived experience of foreign blacks who had immigrated to South Africa in search for a better life and education. Central to this body of work was the politics of language, particularly how it became utilised by black South Africans to justify Afrophobic[1] attacks against black immigrants. For instance, black South Africans addressed others in isiZulu to gauge whether someone was an immigrant. Immigrants' inability to speak the language often culminated in gruesome attacks, some of which resulted in death. This tension between black South Africans and black immigrants became a catalyst for another question: How does it feel to be what Charles I. Nero describes as "differently black"?[2] Nero characterises "differently black" blacks as being "different" from native-born blacks, the difference being that "differently black" blacks are seen as "good blacks" by non-black South Africans.[3] They are perceived to be "harder working, smarter, and/or 'better' than native-born blacks".[4]

To help me answer the question "What does it mean to be 'different'?", I began

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1. Rothney Tshaka defines Afrophobia as the "fear of a specific other – the black other". R. Tshaka, "Afrophobia versus Xenophobia in South Africa," Unisa News & Media, 15 November 2016, https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-&-Media/Articles/Afrophobia-versus-xenophobia-in-South-Africa#:~:text=%E2%80%9CXenophobia%20is%20fear%20of%20the,north%20of%20the%20Limpopo%20River (accessed 2024).

2. C. I. Nero, "Differently Black: The Fourth Great Migration and Black Catholic Saints in Ramin Bahrani's *Goodbye Solo* and Jim Sheridan's *In America,"* in *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora Visual Culture* (Eds.) Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 208.

3. Ibid.

4. C. M. Greer, *Black Ethnics: Race, Immigration, and the Pursuit of the American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 520.

https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.12-4-5 doi=10.30958/ajha.12-4-5

impromptu conversations with black immigrants from various African countries[5] living in the Johannesburg CBD, Alexandra Township and the urban areas of Gauteng province who has migrated to South African in the hope for a better life. I began the conversations purely out of interest for their lived experiences in South Africa as many of them were friends, neighbours and shop owners whom I saw every day. These conversations became my research interest when I began on working an undergraduate project centred around language, particularly English,[6] and how African writers have grappled and continue to grapple with the limitations of the English language.[7] I then extended my study to how black foreign Africans learn[8] what has become South Africa's most spoken language: isiZulu. I chose to record my conversations with five participants. I thought that more formal interviews would water down what had begun as organic conversations.[9]

During our conversations, participants spoke candidly to me about why being seen as "different" affected the manner in which they could occupy certain spaces in South Africa, and what it was like to travel and live while being black and foreign in South Africa. What I was able to ascertain from our conversations is how difficult it was for them to migrate to South Africa and why for some of them returning home was never too far from their thoughts. In his essay *Reflecting on Exile*, Edward Said describes exile (whether internal or external, forced or by choice) as an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted".[10] Those who expressed their desire to stay in South Africa, either because they wanted to or because there was no prospect of returning home, remained conflicted about the tensions between them and black South Africans, whether these could be overcome or whether they would continue to threaten their livelihood.

The 2020 Afrophobic attacks[11] have shown that the current South African state

5. Angola, Benin, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

6. It is worth noting that there are various iteration of the English language. The one I am referring to was the British English.

7. The inability of English to punctuate the African experience like African languages do.

8. Some by choice and other my force. I do think it is only appropriate to learn the language of any community you chose to live in. Studies have shown that language can help create a sense of community.

9. I also wanted the participants to feel relaxed and confident to speak freely, without feeling surveilled or under some kind of imposition from me.

10. E. W. Said, *Reflections on Exile, and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000), 482.

11. Between March 2000 and 2008, 67 black foreigners were murdered. These black-on-black attacks were spurred on by what at the time was described as 'xenophobia'. The term was used to describe some black South Africans' disdain and violence toward black foreigners from the continent. But many were weary of this narrative fabricated by the media, claiming that some attacks were the results of existing tensions amongst Zimbabwean nationals from Shona and Ndebele ethic groups. Nevertheless, what was clear is that it was

has not done enough to find out why Afrophobia continues to display itself within the black community. Further, it has not tried to educate black South Africans about the contribution of black Africans to the liberation struggle, which included accommodating black South Africans during their years in exile. However, this does not necessarily mean one should ignore what Nero has observed: that the conflict between black foreigners and black South Africans has been exacerbated by how black foreigners are perceived by non-black South Africans. Hence they are often treated far better than native-born blacks: considered to have a better work ethic, they are given first preference for employment.[12]

What Afrophobia in South Africa has brought to the fore is that blackness is not monolithic but is a complex phenomenon. More importantly, it has shown that racial solidarity is not a given. As such, it has forced black communities on the continent and in the diaspora to think critically about what they share "besides colour" and whether we could reach a point where there can be a racial coalition.[13]

The Power of Language and the Language of Power

My interest in the foreign black experiences, was particular, I was drawn to conversations in and around language, as language was one of the many reasons that some black South Africans offered to justify their Afrophobia. I began to examine what black African foreigners thought about black South Africans who insisted that if they wanted to live in South Africa then they should learn to speak at least one of the eleven official languages, isiZulu being the operative language. This prerequisite, ironically, is not enforced on white immigrants. In my conversations, most immigrants expressed their desire to learn some South African languages but wanted to do so on their own terms: they were willing to learn the language, bearing in mind that doing so would make it easier for them to move around and speak and relate to black South Africans. But others questioned why they were being forced to learn isiZulu when there are ten other official languages, including seTswana, Tshivenda, isiXhosa and Xitsonga,[14] available to them. Upon reflecting on the individual dialogues I had with participants, I eventually came to the conclusion that it is debatable whether language can solve Afrophobia. For instance, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "indigenous

black-on-black violence. The term 'Afrophobia' specifies that it is conflict between black Africans.

12. This plays a particular role considering that many black South Africans, especially unskilled workers, receive very low wages and are often exploited by employers. For example, domestic workers and farm workers, especially in rural areas, often receive wages significantly lower than the minimum wage stipulated by the government.

13. Greer, *Black Ethnics: Race, Immigration, and the Pursuit of the American Dream*, 2.

14. Others are seSotho, Afrikaans and English.

languages matter for development, peace building and reconciliation."[15] Although I can see how community language learning can help reconcile native-born blacks and foreign blacks,[16] Afrophobia as Tshaka has pointed out is much more complicated than that. What does need to be addressed is what he calls the "fear" of the "black other", a by-product of Apartheid laws that restricted black South Africans' mobility across the continent, isolating them from other African nations and by so doing cultivating a culture of fear towards black African foreigners. This begs the questions: How can black South Africans overcome this fear?

Debates concerning language are not new in South Africa. They can be traced back to the 1976 Soweto uprising when black students protested against the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This act was deliberately designed to limit the socio-economic status of black people by imposing Afrikaans as medium of instruction for all South Africans. This unfinished conversation reared its head again in the 2015-2016 #AfrikaansMustFall protests spearheaded yet again by black students at the universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria. Part of the #RhodesMustFall movement, which demanded the decolonization of university curricula, it insisted that Afrikaans be replaced by English, British English to be extract, as a more accessible language of instruction. However, the shift from one oppressive language to another rather than the use of indigenous languages has shown that the project of black emancipation remains unfinished. The British English language, I would like to argue, performs a second erasure.

To help think about how British English has a visceral impact on black Africans, I began researching black literature and scholarship, with the aim of finding out how black authors were grappling with having to write and document black lived experiences in British English. My research led to the novella *The House of Hunger* (1978), written by the Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera. For Marechera, *The House of Hunger* is a metaphor for how what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) manifested itself in a condition of alienation and double consciousness.[17] As Laurice Taitz quotes Marechera, "The House has now become my mind; and I did not like

15. K. Brits, R. Kaschula, and Z. Docrat, "Integrating Languages Should Form Part of South Africa's Xenophobia Solutions," *The Conversation*, 2 June 2020, https://theconversation.com/integrating-languages-should-form-part-of-south-africas-xenophobia-solutions-137526.

16. Linguist Siti Nurhasanah's research on community language learning, a methodology used by psychologists to improve "communicative intent" in classrooms, has shown that when the teacher used the community language to "propose[…] some topics then [the students] could explore deeply, they felt enjoyable to express their ideas". Siti Nurhasanah, "The Use of Community Language Learning Method to Increase the Students' Participation in Classroom Conversation," *Register*, 8, no. 1 (2015), 84, 94). In a similar manner, learning a native language can help foreigners immerse and integrate themselves into South African society.

17. . Taitz, "Knocking on the Door of the House of Hunger: Fracturing Narratives and Disordering Identity," in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera* (Eds.) Flora Viet- Wild and Anthony Chennelles (Trenton: African World Press, 1999), 2.

the way the roof is rattling".[18] By equating his mind to the "House," to a metaphor for not only Rhodesia but also the house in which he was raised, Marechera places emphasis on his inability to escape it. He comes to the realization that the "House" is not just physical but also psychological.

On his use of the British English language, Marechera writes: "Shona was part of the ghetto demon I was trying to escape […] This perhaps is in the undergrowth of my experimental use of English, standing it on its head".[19] In agreement with Marechera is African American writer Ntozake Shange who writes: "I cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that I waz taught to hate myself in".[20]

In her essay "Apostrophe, Animation and Abortion", Barbara Johnson proposes the notion of the "rhetorical figure".[21] She defines the "rhetorical" as "language that says one thing and means another".[22] She describes it as a "device" that is synonymous with a voice,[23] which she then equates with the rhetorical device of the apostrophe.[24] The apostrophe, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "the addressing of a usually absent person or a usually personified thing rhetorically".[25] Or in Johnson's words, it is a "direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaking".[26] If the apostrophe is a tool the writer uses to make inanimate objects animate, like "The House", Marechera and Shange metaphorically visualize the British English language as an individual, which they can attack, disfigure, dismember and reassemble to serve their own purpose. The perceptions of English which Marechera and Shange share seem in line with Slavoj Zizek's definition of the superego, which he defines as "a traumatic voice, an intruder persecuting us and disturbing our psychic balance".[27]

The choice to write in an African language is often a choice for obscurity and a renunciation of the international limelight that writing in English, French or Portuguese could offer the writer.[28] As cited in the introduction, the mother tongue

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18. Ibid, 24.

19. Quoted in C. Hart, "A Post-Modern at the Margin: Innovations in Dambudzo Marechera's Texts," in *Moving Spirit: The Legacy of Dambudzo Marechera in the 21stCentury* (Eds.) Julie Cairnie and Dobrota Pucherova (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 137.

20. Quoted in ibid, 137.

21. B. Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation and Abortion," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 28-47.

22. Ibid, 29.

23. In this context it is an aliterary voice which could either be the writer's, the narrator's or the character's voice.

24. Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation and Abortion," 29.

25, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Apostrophe," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostrophe, (accessed 2024).

26. Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation and Abortion," 30.

27. S. Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), 57.

28. P. Mlama, "Creating in the Mother Tongue," in *The Mongue and Mother Tongue:*

serves as a constant reminder of one's culture, which Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o believes the African writer risks losing as "an image of their word" if they choose to write in the foreign tongue.[29] In Penina Mlama's opinion, writers who chose to do so "belong to a class of writers who are willing to take a risk, who respond to the challenges posed by the realities of our African society today".[30] One of these challenges is that the English, French and Portuguese have become legitimized as languages of communication in most postcolonial countries in Africa, as is the case in South Africa, where English is considered one of the official languages. This is no coincidence, posits Neville Alexander, who highlights how the language of the oppressor (English in addition to Afrikaans) "became the language of aspiration and eventually the language of national unity and of liberation for the black elite".[31] In addition, Wa Thiong'o observes that

> European languages were seen as having a capacity to unite African peoples against divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicity of African languages with the same geographic state.[32]

Once these European languages were accepted as languages of communication the next step was the written format. This is how African writers began to write in these European languages. However, Wa Thiong'o finds this problematic in that by writing in the "foreign tongue" the "African writer" enriches these languages rather than enriching the mother tongue, leaving it to "rot". In support of Wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon emphasizes the importance of language by stating:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.[33]

This implies that the African writer is forced to perform what Bill Ashcroft describes as a "linguistic structure or code which can be described by the colonial distinction of 'standard' and 'variant'".[34] These are factors that are embedded or

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African Literature and the Perpetual Quest for Identity African (Eds.) Pamela J. Olubumi Smith and Daniel P. Kunene (Trenton: World Press, 2002), 11.

29. N. Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*: *The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers KL, 1986), 11.

30. Mlama, "Creating in the Mother Tongue," 11.

31. N. Alexander, "After Apartheid: The Language Question," in *After Apartheid: Reinventing South Africa*? (Eds.) Ian Shapiro and Kahreen Tebeau (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 312.

32. Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*: *The Politics of Language in African Literature,* 285.

33. F. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (Trans.) Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 8.

34. B. Ashcroft, "Constitutive Graphonomy," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (Eds.) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 300.

carried within the language that the "African writer" can fall victim to. However, what we see in Marechera's work is that the postcolonial African writers appropriate the language as a strategy to escape these structures. Fanon supports the claims of Mlama and Wa Thiong'o that language is a carrier of the experience of one's culture; and this is the power of language. But can this experience only be expressed through one's mother tongue? What happens when thoughts cannot be expressed in the mother tongue? Lewis Nkosi explains that whatever the language of choice, the writer cannot escape this problem:

> In a way, any writer always falls short of his true ideal: his struggle with his materials, the attempt to wrestle from language the true meaning of the world he seeks to depict, is always endless and incomplete. Incomplete, because in describing the true lineaments of what the writer sees with his inner eye language can only approximate the shapes and figures of his imagination. In this respect, therefore, the situation of the African writer is not unique. It is the same struggle with language.[35]

The predicament of a bilingual writer is then how to express or evoke the experience of the mother tongue when writing in the foreign tongue. James McGuire proposes that for the bilingual writer to write, they must experience what he describes as the "freedom of linguistic exile", and only then can they truly write.[36] This separation allows the writer room to express writing "between a double existence", that is, a characteristic of a postcolonial writer who is a "self translator".[37] As self translators, there is the opportunity for writers to become acquainted with the abundance of English as a language or the various English's that can be spoken. It is during this period that they can simultaneously experiment[38] with the language while having to contend with the precarious sociopolitical nature of the language. Writers can now begin to focus their attention on what is spoken;[39] or, as Nkosi explains, they can become analytical about the "shapes and figures of" their "imagination". To achieve this style of writing, writes Njabulo Ndebele in his essay "Defining South African Literature for a New Nation", black writers would need to free themselves from "white writing".[40] A characteristic he uses to described white South African writers is their tendency to write about "what happened to the

35. L. Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), 6.

36. J. McGuire, "Forked Tongues, Marginal Bodies: Writing as Translation," in *The Tongue and Mother Tongue: African Literature and the Perpetual Quest for Identity African* (Eds.) Pamela J. Olubumi Smith and Daniel P. Kunene (Trenton: World Press, 2002), 74.

37. McGuire, "Forked Tongues, Marginal Bodies: Writing as Translation," 81.

38. By breaking it, as Shange and Marechera have demonstrated.

39. It can be stylized, as Shange has shown.

40. N. Ndebele, "Defining South African Literature for a New Nation," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society and Social Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 1994), 153.

'Others'".[41] And as a result they have produced "a literature of what we have done to others, how it has affected them, and how it may have affected us".[42] For Ndebele, this was yet another method of white writers to exert their dominance over the "Others". Progressive artistic development for black writers, Ndebele explains, needs to free itself from this "crisis",[43] especially given that they are entering a "New world": the end of apartheid and the beginning of a post-apartheid South Africa. The success of this "new" writing strategy, at least for Ndebele, could be determined by writers' abilities to demonstrate a deep understanding of the intellectual and sociological condition of the new South Africa as well as its "cultural future".[44]

Differences that Matter

The solo exhibition *What Difference Does It Make Who Is Speaking?* (13 May-2 June 2016) at the Point of Order, University of Witwatersrand, was a rigorous extension of my interest in language and difference that I began in 2011. I envisioned the gallery as a studio space, one I could work in every day from Monday to Friday. In it I produced work, took part in a series of interventions and held film screenings. Each of these gestures was intentional. I spent my time thinking deeply about my practice, the material that will be used to express my ideas through visual languages, and what research-led practice could look like. I also used this time to reflect on the question(s) I was posing. I created an environment where I could revisit art works displayed in the space and rework them, or as the collective of the Center of Historical Reenactments (CHR) would say, "re-chew" them.

Most of the artworks were text based, others were sonic or videos. There were film works written and produced by me and collections of texts by other authors that I remixed and made new. I considered many of the projects as collaborative works with artists, scholars and creative practitioners who, knowing and unknowing, contributed to the making of the artworks. This has always been my approach to making, one that is in alignment with the conceptual art hypothesis of the 1960s that was critical of traditionalist[45] ways of making. Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe describe the goals of conceptual art as "intentional acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms or strategies in art making and in the process revised received understandings of the nature and essence of art".[46] A

41. Ibid, 149.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid, 152.
44. Ibid.
45. By that I mean painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking.
46. S. M. Hassan and O. Oguibe, "'Authentic/Ex-Centric' at the Venice Biennale: African Conceptualism in Global Contexts," *African Arts* 34, no. 4 (2001), 10.

crucial part of these interventions was the ability to wrestle with a myriad of crises as a bilingual art practitioner. Fundamentally, my concern was what was spoken and for whom. With each intervention, I began to muse over the blues the English language has induced in individuals whose mother tongue is not English. I became interested in the strategies that one can employ to break and stretch the language for my own personal use while still being critical of it is as a sociological phenomenon. Each of these textual artworks was intentionally made to awaken provocations about the condition of the English language with the hope that viewers/readers would reflect on their relationship with the language.

Bilingual Blues: A Collaboration with Sujata Bhatt (Figure 1) examines how bilingual speakers wrestle with living in two worlds, one in which they are expected to prioritize speaking or writing the English language over their mother tongue. *A Yoruba Proverb* (Figure 2) demonstrates how meaning can be in lost in translation. *The Slow Sound of the Tongue* (Figure 3) explores the anxiety-educing feelings that might be evoked when one tries to speak a new language or a language one is expected to know.

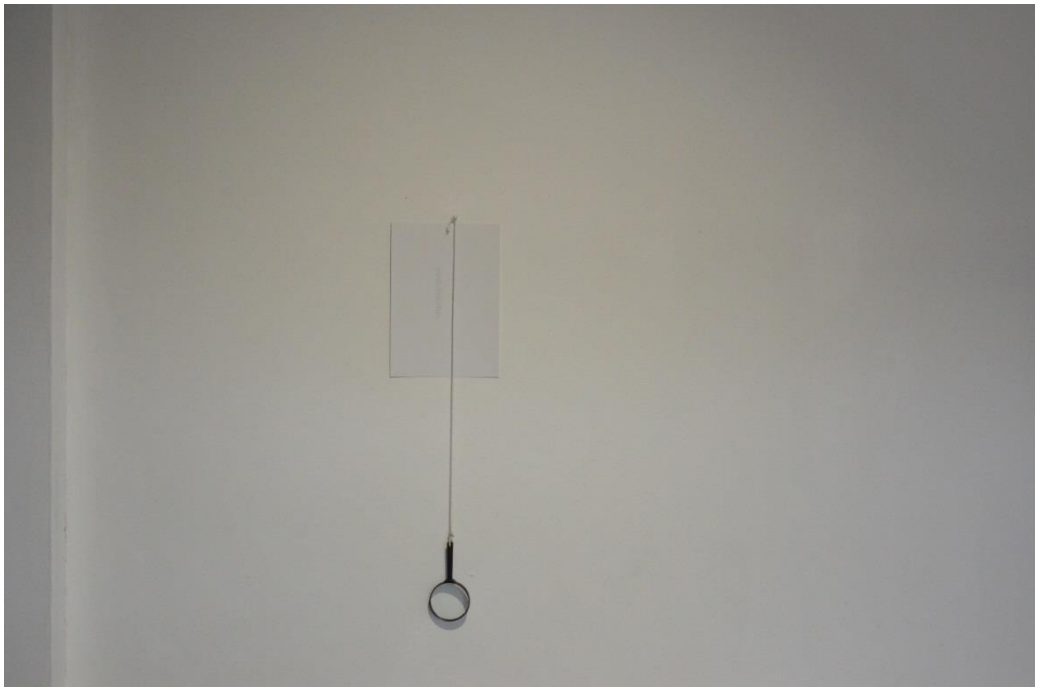

Figure 1a. *Mbali Khoza "Bilingual Blues: A Collaboration with Sujata Bhatt", 2016. Paper and magnifying glass, dimensions vary*

Figure 1b. *Mbali Khoza, "Bilingual Blues: A Collaboration with Sujata Bhatt", 2016. Paper and magnifying glass, dimensions vary*

Figure 2. *Mbali Khoza, "A Yoruba Proverb", 2016. Ink on paper, 40 x 40 cm*

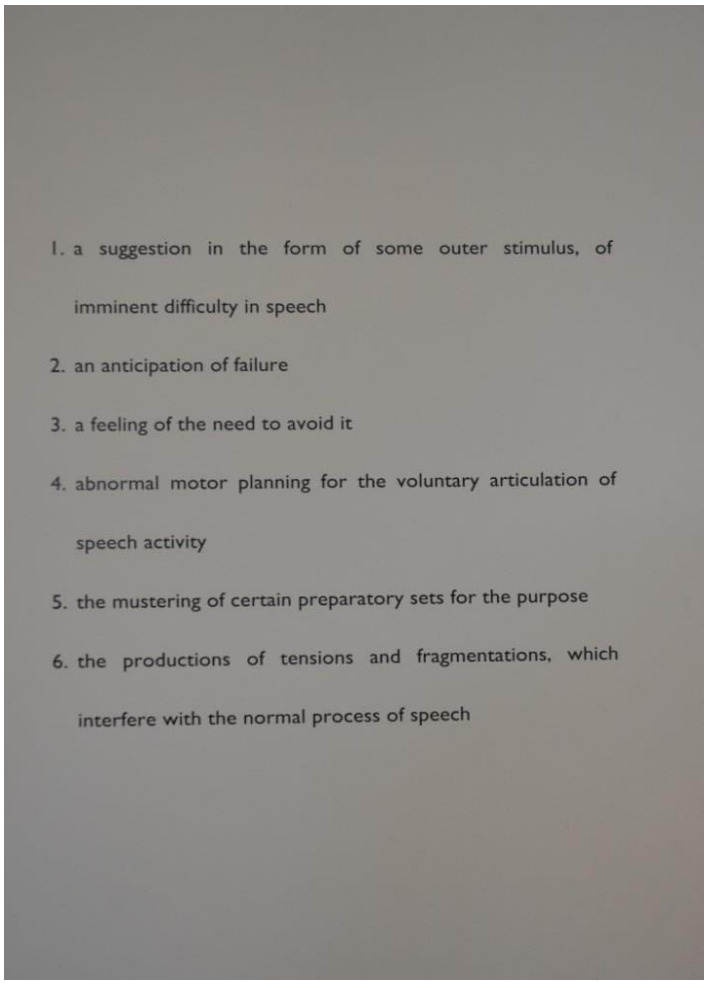

Figure 3. *Mbali Khoza, "The Slow Sound of the Tongue", 2016. Text on A4 paper*

So You Want to Learn the Language? A Fanakalo Pronunciation Guide. A Collaboration with Abri de Swardt (Figure 4) is an artwork in which alphabet cue cards are shown to the viewer in a video accompanied by a voice-over by artist Abri de Swardt who then explains to listeners how certain alphabets function and are pronounced in Fanakalo language. The wall text *Untitled (I Thought We Had This Conversation in 1976)* (Figure 5), written on the wall by a commissioned sign writer, makes reference to signs made by students during the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa. My intentions was to create a parallel with the 1976 Soweto protest in an attempt to spotlight what I perceived to be the failure of the Rainbow nation to decolonize anti-black institutions. *Context 4 and 4.1: A Collaboration with Adrian Piper* (Figure 6) invited viewers to respond to a series of questions as an attempt to shift their role from spectators to participants and co-authors. Their responses facilitated a dialogue between each other. More importantly, I hoped it would help dismantle the long-standing hierarchical relationship between artist, space and audience.

Central to each work is the notion of difference, what it may look like and how it may operate, and how in turn it may affect individuals' perceptions of themselves,

others and their behaviour. Yet, at the same time how it may unify communities as it is this encounter with difference that makes us realise how unique we are as a society. That is why, in my opinion, we should be critical of myths and institutions that want to eradicate these differences, replacing them with homogenous identities. This is a mistaken effort to erase differences that matter.

Figure 4. *Mbali Khoza, "A Fanakalo Pronunciation Guide. A Collaboration with Abri de Swardt", 2016. Video*

Figure 5. *Mbali Khoza, "Untitled (I Thought We Had this Conversation in 1976)", 2016. Text on wall*

Figure 6a. *Mbali Khoza, "Context 4 and 4.1: A Collaboration with Adrian Piper", 2016. Dimensions variable*

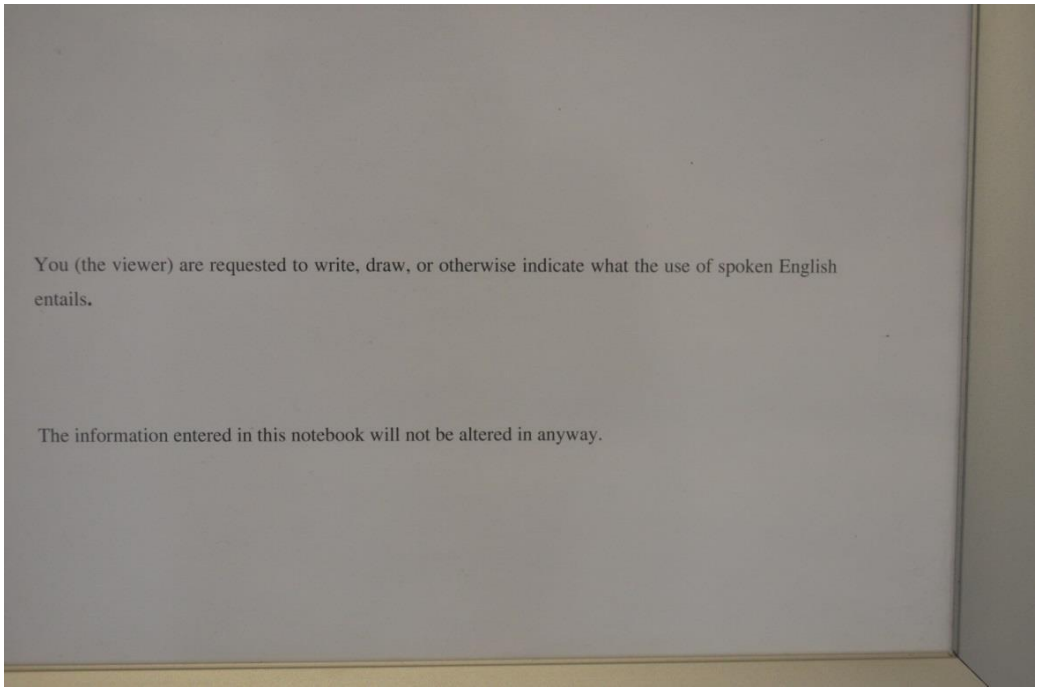

Figure 6b. *Mbali Khoza, "Context 4 and 4.1: A Collaboration with Adrian Piper", 2016. Dimensions variable*

Figure 6c. *Mbali Khoza, "Context 4 and 4.1: A Collaboration with Adrian Piper", 2016. Dimensions variable*

While the question of difference is a key component of this paper, another is the shared kinship amongst English speakers whose mother tongue is not English. I am interested in how these speakers exert power over the language and what it means to come to terms with the language's imperial identity. From Marechera's, Shange's, Nkosi's and my own explorations of the countless decolonial techniques that can be deployed to alter the English language for our own needs I hope we can take away that a language of power can not only manifest itself differently but that it could be a crucial characteristic of black liberatory literary culture.

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