

Ethics Now: White Woman Goes to Africa and Loses Her Voice

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In 2001, I was one of three US academics invited to serve at the University of Durban- Westville in South Africa (UDW), School of Educational Studies, as a consultant in the development of research capacity for what was termed an historically disadvantaged university. Funding came from a USAID program and it was clear that my background in critical and feminist qualitative work in education was the reason for the invitation.

Such a brief brought me face to face with the contradictions of white expertise and the necessary complicities and forms of dominance involved in addressing someone as a subaltern. This was particularly complicated in that many at UDW, I discovered, had originally thought I was Black as I deal with issues that, in the words of someone who interviewed me, “do not really concern a white woman.”¹ Thrilled that my work was so resonant but bothered about whether I had misrepresented myself, I was, mostly, disoriented by such a response. Were such issues not, exactly, mine as a white woman well schooled in US anti-racist politics? Was I performing myself out of “the assumed and unremarked whiteness of feminism” that Handel Wright noted in my work on critical pedagogy? (Wright, 2002, p3) Why did Wright read my work as “perfunctory, indirect, several times removed” (p22) in dealing with race while I was read in a South African context as Black? “What’s going on” here, to echo Patricia Hill-Collins echoing Marvin Gaye in her writing on Black feminist thought and the politics of postmodernism? (2000)

Losing my voice at the end of an intense week, my title for anything I write, I joked, must be: “White woman goes to Africa and loses her voice.” This was not at all because I was unhearable in a Spivakian “can the subaltern speak” sort of way but quite the opposite: I talked so much and so loudly, over the excitement in the room, I like to think, that for the first time in my life, I was unable to speak.

Three moments stand out for me from this short time in South Africa: 1) a late week tour of the township in a mercedes. 2) the lived experience of how I could not but be the face of neo-colonialism in post-apartheid South Africa, and 3) what it meant to try, nonetheless, to be of use, particularly to the twenty or so doctoral students I talked with about their research projects.

Witnessing the greatest disparities of wealth in the world was the intended itinerary of my mercedes tour. From the shanty towns, both organized and not, to the gated communities that spread to the ocean, surrounded by shopping centers so fancy they put those of Southern California to shame, I moved between shattering poverty and gross wealth. Chauffered by a faculty member who lived in a house of great beauty, I was lost in trying to make sense of how she managed to teach students of whom she told tales of breaking rules to let those who lived without electricity into classrooms

¹ From “Interview with Patti Lather,” conducted by Rubby Dhunpath and Juliet Perumal, November 21, 2001, Durban, South Africa, unpublished.

at night to study for exams. Countless such stories of ever present jarring disparities could be told, even from a week. But I want to focus on what losing my voice might be made to mean in terms of the ethics of engagement in “the zone of postcolonial cultural contact” (Sanders, 1999:13).

This focus on ethics emerges out of the turns of critical theory across the textuality of the 70’s and the historicism of the 80’s until, in the 1990’s, we have the “ethical turn” (Buell, 1999:7; Garber, Hanssen and Walkowitz, 2000). Inspired by Levinas and Derrida as well as Foucault, responsibility became a major theme and not knowing what to do became the grounds for rethinking the “ethico-political,” a concept that comes from both Derrida (1988:97) and Foucault (1984:343,376-77). In Derrida’s case, writing of anti-apartheid rhetoric as exemplary of the limits of humanism and human rights discourse (1985), he appeals to a force that lies “outside the totality of this present” (361).

In the address of another, summoned by another, categories must be examined, opened to its others in a way that is a letting go/getting lost. Never quite reaching appropriation, relations are on the way to being something other. Calling on the Zulu concept of ubuntu that under girds the South African Peace and Reconciliation hearings, Sanders delineates how “a setting to work of ubuntu” (13) exemplifies the disappropriation that is designed “not to repeat the more violent impositions” of colonialism, while, “yet, no matter what happens, they cannot help but do so” (13). Ubuntu then gets used by whites, speaking the Zulu language “without ever understanding it, making it one’s own but never rendering it into one’s own language” (13). “Doing without foundations; doing, without foundations”: the subject, agency or identity as the grounds of action become displaced out of the disappropriation by another (Sanders, 1999:6-7).

Banally translated as “‘people are people through other people,’” expanded to “‘one is a person through others’” (13), radical disappropriation is at the root of the concept of ubuntu. Antithetical to individual rights yet insisting that responsibility begin with singularity; making an ethical self through the exercise of claiming rights and performing duties (Spivak, 1993:27); unsettling community hierarchies: collectivity is historicized, contingent, against any authority of identity or essence. Taking the place of something absent that may never have existed, such community is promised in being named, posited, a “foundationless basis for ‘reconciliation’” (Sanders, 1999:14). A kind of miming or “as if” is enacted in such dispropriative address: compelled to address oneself as an other, speaking or being heard to speak in a language not one’s own. Identification is fractured and displaced; positional stability is disrupted, there is more, much more to tell here in such a scene of testimony where we speak or are heard to speak a language we do not understand. A radical exile of self is at work where we allow ourselves to be transformed by being split, lost, doubled across radically uneven social spaces, zones of unequal access to hegemonic language.

How does this help me understand my experience in South Africa? As a white woman, I live in a perpetually strange time where whatever authority I have is grounded in the prejudices of the historical context. Whether my recognition of this strange time authorizes or de-authorizes me, the danger is to claim the present as a state of knowing the difference in a way that leads us to think we have arrived in terms of interrupting the progress narrative in the “new new” of the “indigenous dominant to which Spivak refers (1999, pp67-68).²

Rather than some angst of displacement, this might be the effacement that I have been trying to track across Derrida for years. This is a demastering: “a work without force, a work that would have to work at renouncing force, its own force, a work that would have to work at failure, and thus at mourning and getting over force, a work working at its own unproductivity, absolutely, working to absolve or to absolve itself of whatever might be absolute about ‘force’” (2001:144).

This is a getting lost as a way to move out of commanding, controlling, mastery discourses and into a knowledge that recognizes the inevitable blind spots of our knowing. Here the trajectory is from the unknown to the known, with an inversion that returns to the unknown (Bataille, 1988/1954, pp. 110-11). Derrida (1995) argues that knowledge that interrupts or derails absolute knowledge is knowledge that loses itself, “gets off the track” in order to expose itself to chance, “as if to the being lost” (p. 289) in order “to learn by heart,” knowledge from and of the other, thanks to the other.

In such a place, is it helpful to think of us all as a little lost, caught in enabling aporias that move us toward practices that produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently? But who is this us, white girl, and how might this scene be read for Spivak’s “scrupulously differentiated” positionalities?

Working with research students had exemplary value for me in asking such questions. In this epicenter of the world’s most lethal pandemic, the something to be heard here was very much rooted in the preponderance of their research projects being so much about HIV/AIDS.³ Where one in three adults are infected and the problem of AIDS orphans overwhelms the social services, a steady stream of students sat in my office dazed, impassioned, exhausted. For both coloured and black students, the points of paralysis seemed unlike more typically Western problems of advocacy research. Their distress was not so much worries about imposition, fantasies of usefulness and tensions between the demands of science and the demands of the field. These troubles I could speak to. But

² From a February 15, 2002 talk at OSU by Elizabeth Povinelli, based on her book, The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterity and the making of Australian multiculturalism (Duke University Press, 2002) where she explores how multicultural forms of recognition work to reinforce liberal regimes rather than open them up to alternative social imaginaries. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Australian indigenous people, she argues that the multicultural legacy of colonialism perpetuates unequal systems of power, not by demanding that colonized subjects identify with their colonizers but by demanding that they identify with an impossible standard of authentic traditional culture, producing in the process a new melancholic form of indigenous citizenship.

³ According to Newsweek, September 17, 2001: 500 deaths a day, with projections of up to 16,000 a day by 2005 (p46).

advice of “bracketing” their desire to remediate seemed off center. What they needed was a way to negotiate the pressing urgencies in the field while taking care of themselves if the research were to be finished. They also, quite starkly, needed comfort and resources. I spoke to them of support networks and resource structures, but I could not position and situate them in familiar ways.

The press, instead, seemed to be to situate the complexity of their position that includes not being able to say while trying to unsay, trying to speak, as Trinh notes, “for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said” (1989:80). In this, it was surely they who kept me on course in losing my voice as they wrestled with how to work with what history has given them.

This is a sort of situating me in relation to them (Bosman, 1996) that is made present in Ruth Beecham’s work with Nolwazi Mpumlwana. Nolwazi was recruited into the speech and hearing program at UDW, a profession where, four years into democracy, 1.5% of its members are Black South Africans. She and Ruth co-published a piece about the six to seven years it took her to finish the four year professional degree (Mpumlwana and Beecham, 2000). The piece was entitled “The Monster of Professional Power,” with Nolwazi as first author, and it is a harsh indictment of a Black student’s experience in professional training in the university. The Monster is the profession as it has defined itself in fear of the “black other” where the Monster “knows that it does not know what it is doing in South Africa” (537). Resisting being eaten by the Monster, Nolwazi speaks of a dawning understanding grounded in her repeated failures in the program where “I have to give back to you the way you think” (539). Positioned in an alien system of knowledge construction and transmission, Nolwazi’s voice is presented “as told to” Ruth and her address is included at the end with a “Now you can write to me” message. Beecham has as well written a second short piece, this time about her experiences in a hospital setting with a woman with a dying baby (Beecham, 2000). This is a story of the shattering of the ideal of a training that claimed to be politically neutral. It is as well a story of helplessness and a realization of how Blacks are “truly foreigners in their own country” (129).

Spivak writes that under conditions of subalternity, “the effort [is] to be able to be in a situation where *she* can use *me*—“ (Bahri and Vasudeva, 1996:72). This is not to speak for, nor about, but to speak “very close to” or “up against.” “When you get that close, the point is not that you’re really speaking for the right thing; it is always also against. The writing itself is an act of violation” (ibid). Unless we recognize this, we end up commodifying and monumentalizing those we write about.

In my case, here, these students, that trip in the Mercedes, being taken for Black: this was the site of my unlearning. The tourist gaze upon their lives, the shifting meanings of whiteness where Foucault has taught me to ask: what does whiteness do, bring about, let come about? I am still trying to learn from this experience. There is a lot of work to do. Learning to read out the social position of privilege and force, I am trying to find some place of getting lost versus being told to get lost in seizing the historical day and the timeliness of our critical moment.

Prior to departure, in an edited collection on South African feminisms (Daymond, 1996), I read of debates between black and colored women and white women. White women who investigate and theorize black women's experience are taken much to task as "theory-hunters" and "academic vultures" (Maqagi, 1996:30). "What can we do for them" attitudes are part of the "would-be-benevolent intervention" that reproduces colonial relations (Arnott, 1996:85). Toward the end of "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak writes of "a circumscribed task" which cannot be disowned "with a flourish." That task is "participating in" within a recognition of inevitable epistemic violence in "so fraught a field" (quoted in Arnott, 1996:85). The key is to learn "to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman" (ibid). In this, "the postcolonial intellectual systematically unlearns female privilege" (ibid). Constantly alert to the working of uneven power, the testimony of the subaltern can possibly not be misrecognized as authentic voice of fully subjective consciousness IF it is heard by the transnational intellectual from a position as the other, unlearning privilege as loss.

Here disappropriation is about being compelled to address oneself as an other, speaking in a language not one's own that we don't understand, lost, split, doubled, an exile of self: this is the demastering, effacing that I experienced in relations on the way to being something other. This is the "obligation of vulnerability to the other's gaze" that is at the core of Levinasian ethics and a kind of politics of rigorous accountability to that gaze (Radhakrishnan, 2003, p. 35).

To take seriously these powers of privilege-defined differences is to risk thinking otherwise, not to find an innocent place, but to use the tensions as a way of learning how to live in de-authorized space. As a white academic trying to unlearn her privilege in a South African context, losing one's voice foregrounds subject positions that are exceeded, interrupted and dislocated in transcultural space. Here my (un)learning moves me toward the productivity of simultaneous tension and reparation in solidarity efforts. As Spivak writes in The Post-colonial Critic, "I think as long as one remains aware that it is a very problematic field, there is some hope" (1990:63).

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