Heeding the ‘corpse in the cargo’: The writing centre and the need to listen

P. Nichols
Wits Writing Centre
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: Pamela.nichols@wits.ac.za

Abstract
Transformation is perhaps an overused word. It is not written in the South African Constitution (RSA 1996), although it is used daily by politicians in the African National Congress (ANC). The eyes of many South Africans become glazed when they hear it. Yet it is crucial in a country which is still poised between chaos and progress, which still has the potential either to dissolve into race related riots or to build itself into a creative multicultural democracy. What might it mean specifically in terms of hopeful strategies at the Wits Writing Centre (WWC)? This article seeks first to describe elements of cultural stasis within the greater institutionalised culture of teaching and learning through a short ethnographic description of cultural pattern, as modelled by Jones, Lea and Street (1998). Then, using Jansen’s (2009) theorising of embedded knowledges in contemporary South African universities, it identifies types of knowledge present in this particular cultural pattern which repel change. The writing centre is understood through eco composition (De Wet 2011) as a small pocket within this macro environment which interacts with these often invisible and controlling knowledges present in the South African context. What can this pocket do to resist the overwhelming inertia of embedded knowledge and construct and maintain a space which allows for change? It will be argued that the primacy of the art of listening and the welcoming of opportunities for reflecting on dissonance, allows for the space of the writing centre to disrupt what Jansen (2009) terms ‘knowledge in the blood’.

Keywords: eco composition, ecology of the university, listening, networks, transformation, writing centres

INTRODUCTION
South Africa seems to be unravelling. Investigations into the massacre of miners at Marikana in the North-West Province on 16 August 2012, have revealed that of the 34 miners shot dead by police, some were shot in the back, some from a helicopter, and some while in handcuffs. The incident is growing in significance as a touchstone of mistrust in the law and order of the current South African state. In terms of public culture, the controversy surrounding the defamation of the painting of Jacob Zuma, titled ‘The Spear’ earlier in 2012 revealed contradictory understandings about the meaning of art and of respect for others, and perhaps also the possibility to start addressing these misunderstandings.
Universities cannot be unaffected by this unravelling of citizens’ rights and the challenge to finally form a public, or else. Universities are particularly suited for self-reflection on society and on their own self-created culture. They need to be listening organisations, aware of the troubles of the greater society, and need to ask why they have not transformed enough themselves, and exactly what it is that needs to change. The question is not just for the policy makers and the administrators. Everybody in the university is responsible for the lack of sufficient cultural transformation because all of us are involved in the daily cultural construction of university life.

Transformation is described by Coovadia (2012, 51), novelist and a professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), as a middle term between revolution and reform. In terms of literature he names transformation as ‘pure and unlimited sequence’; in terms of society he understands transformation as ‘an attempt to return the possibility of wonder and surprise to social process, devoid of racial quotas and stern socialisation, and to suggest an endlessly productive future’ (Coovadia 2012, 57). In this sense transformation is a severe disruption to a historical South African way of thinking which attempted to impose a daily cultural fabric of dividing, naming and boxing. Such a cultural shift needs effort and, initially, engineering. This article will consider what role the writing centre can have in contributing towards transformative cultural change in the university.

LEGACIES OF THE NORMAL

Jansen (2010) notes the historical creation of the ‘normal’ in universities in apartheid South Africa. Cultures through their habitual workings and interactions construct a shared sense of what is normal. This is the constructed cultural hegemonic, or the schooled understanding, of the happy world of everything as it should be. We can imagine the sun-lit oil painting in the university corridor. In the constructed ‘normal’ of apartheid South Africa, Jansen (2010, 14) describes:

The whites were in charge and the blacks were said to be happy ... The practice of teaching and learning was deemed universal and scientific, unencumbered by and unconscious of the broader politics and pedagogy of apartheid. In fact, the teachers, students, and administration inside this insulated space assumed normality; everything they did made sense to them and to those looking in.

Here, Jansen (2010), like an anthropologist, is describing a historical cultural moment of the University of Pretoria and the cultural mechanisms that ensured that historical sense of normalcy in that institution. Universities in South Africa have their cultural differences, yet all the old ones, including the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), functioned under apartheid and all need to take close account of the legacies of that period. Jansen has done us the favour of daring to start to describe cultural mechanisms which many of us find familiar, though we might not have been aware of them before his writing. Awareness of the construction of the
normal is necessary in order to see that normal as strange. As Coovadia (2012, 71) writes of contemporary South Africa, ‘normality is a product of ordinary, day-to-day practices and these are too often deformed, privatised, or abandoned, like the public spaces in the evening’. South Africans’ past normality was strange and so is their current. As Coovadia remarks (2012, 66), ‘South Africans refuse to form a public.’ But this legacy of normalcy is buttressed: not only is it difficult for South Africans to describe themselves, but also the institutions are intolerant of dissonance. As Jansen (2010, 16) observes, ‘decisions are engineered or channelled towards consensus’.

The normal, however, is less normal to those coming from outside. Jansen presents himself as a remarkable outsider when he became the first black dean at the University of Pretoria. His book, *Knowledge in the Blood* (2010), reads like his ethnography of an Afrikaans institution trying to deal with him as a black man and their leader who forces change. His book is more than a memoir, it is also a theorising of the struggle to transform in a particular historical context.

**OUTSIDER VIEW**

Jansen is brave to describe and analyse his daily life and colleagues. On the one hand, this task appears risky to the point of being taboo, but on the other hand, is necessary if we are to carry on the Freirean project of describing culture as a first step towards changing it. The outsider view is a good beginning point for this description. Not the revolutionary view, which would probably strengthen opposition, but the view of the ‘tempered radical’ (Meyerson 2003 quoted by Jansen 2010, 21), the position of the one who Jansen describes as rocking the boat while staying in the boat. The outsider status, the stance of not-being at home, yields valuable analytical advantage. It can be intellectually achieved, but it has been mine to some extent through circumstance, because even though I have been in the country since 1995 and have acculturated, I was not intellectually formed here. Many daily normal things in the university have appeared strange to me, and the beginning of the Wits Writing Centre (WWC) and its strategies have been to some extent informed by this sense of strange normalcy (Nichols 1998). The idea of the writing centre itself is strange to apartheid education culture. The writing centre as an idea came from the United States in the 1960s and from ideas of dialogue producing new knowledge and avoiding the premature closure of meaning. As an idea it is at odds with political legacies of controlling who speaks, who listens, and who is noticed.

This partially outside view point should not of course mean either feeling self-righteousness or pointing fingers at others. As Jansen (2010, 19) writes, this view cannot be a story about linearity, strong willed leaders, an overriding moral correctness of change, and muscling in on the racial and cultural order of a large university; it is rather, about the struggle for change and what that does to people.
The article is also not about either pointing fingers or observing without being implicated oneself. It is rather about observing cultural patterns and tendencies, their significance and consequences, and the possibilities for refiguring some of those patterns so as to allow the possibility of new ways of interaction, interrelation and communication. Coovadia (2012, 67) would call these new possibilities of interacting ‘entanglement’, meaning ‘points of possible agreement and disagreement’.

THE CORPSE IN THE CARGO

Though change is difficult, it must be attempted because the cultural legacies people face, do not disappear with a policy document or legislation: ‘Decades of socialisation in race essentialist thinking and in epistemological fundamentalism do not yield easily to what is in the end, knowledge in the blood’ (Jansen 2010, 188).

These cultural legacies are habitual, emphatic, defensive. People know when they run up against one. Because they are hegemonic, invisible, normal. Again in the words of Jansen (2010, 173): ‘The curriculum in this view is therefore both “tangible” (course outlines) and “intangible” (discursive patterns), but throughout it is “a shaping force” in the lives of those who teach, learn, administer, manage and lead within the institution.’

Ibsen (1875 in Miller 1957) had a memorable phrase to describe tragic history and called it ‘the corpse in the cargo’. When the wind fell and darkness settled on the ship, the sailors muttered that it was ‘the corpse in the cargo’. Ibsen understood tragedy as the secret past people trail behind them, which at some point will start to stink. This stink can lead to healing. Miller (1957) wrote that Ibsen used the past in his plays as a way of making the present whole. South Africa is still a terribly divided country with tragic gaps among people in terms of income and opportunity, with the poor trapped in increasing poverty. There are also huge gaps in understanding among people who still do not know enough about how others live or think. South Africans desperately need a greater wholeness so that they do not subside into greater fragmentation. South Africa has a corpse in the cargo, and it is currently letting people know that they have to deal with it.

Education in such an environment is different from other places. It is similar to the conditions which inspired post conflict pedagogy because the legacy of the past is present in the classroom. As Elbaz-Luwisch (2004 in Jansen 2010, 258), writing about Palestinian Israeli classrooms put it, the teacher cannot ignore ‘the body in the room’. The corpse represents collective guilt, as Ibsen observed, ‘A man shares the responsibility and guilt of the society to which he belongs’ (in Miller 1957). One form of South Africa’s corpse is a collective set of cultural practices, the tendencies to fall into existing patterns of thinking, response and action. As Boughey (2012) and others have observed, if learning and teaching in South African universities are really going to be changed, that change has to happen in the domain of culture.
PATTERN: COMFORTABLE STASIS IN THE THINK TANK

Using Street’s (1998) ethnographically inspired model, I want to offer the story of a committee meeting to illustrate cultural patterns which need to change. I realise that my observations are subjective and others will have interpreted the meeting in other ways. Nevertheless, the interpretation has evidence and exists as a possible interpretation. What was presented as normal, became increasingly abnormal to me.

The meeting was called to generate a policy document on teaching and learning in a particular faculty. I presumed that members were selected because of their representative insight into teaching and learning. So I was surprised on entering the room to find that all members of the committee were white females. This was my first problem with the committee. The second problem arose in my head when the outside facilitator asked us to identify the problems and challenges of teaching and learning in the faculty. Using South African euphemisms, such as disadvantaged students, underprepared students, students coming from rural areas, I increasingly realised that the identified problem could be translated in some minds as being the black student. Problem number three arose when we were asked to generate strategies for overcoming our challenges. I remembered a colleague saying to me that what he liked about the WWC was that we began with listening, not assuming a deficit, but first listening to where the student started from. So I piped up with the fairly mundane but workable beginning point of listening as an important strategy for working with students and collaborating with other staff. This contribution was immediately dismissed with the comment that listening was ‘a fuzzy wuzzy’ activity for which there was no longer time. Rather, we needed to tell students and other staff members what they did not know and needed to know. ‘Would you go to a colleague for advice who didn’t know more than you?’ I was asked, and silently I replied, ‘Absolutely, I would go to a peer or friend to talk and would never go to someone who thought they knew everything.’ The fourth problematic element of the committee was the formation of cliques. Through various social gestures and comments, alliances were made visible in the room: so and so is my ex-student; these two are my collaborators; I really liked the work you did on such and such; and so on. Lines were formed and cliques made apparent, to the extent that a voice which was not part of a clique was not heard. In that room I felt that my voice was that of the black student and everything I said slipped down a glass wall.

At the end of the meeting, the colleague who had called listening ‘a fuzzy-wuzzy’ activity glowed and remarked that the meeting had been very pleasant. Perhaps her happiness was intact because no dissent had been recognised. I left feeling that no communication or shared work was possible. That was until I read Jansen’s (2010) work in the field of committee rooms and his analysis of embedded knowledges. Analysing the embedded knowledges of this committee suggested an agenda for change.
OVERWHELMING INERTIA OF EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE

My initial response to that meeting was hopelessness and inertia, but by looking further, there were tendencies which could be identified and worked against.

Firstly, who controls space and policy? Who is chosen to represent? In this case it was a policy-suggesting white, female selection. Surely the meeting would have been different in what was said and what was understood if black colleagues or students had also been present? Obviously we need to be more representative in our decision making and address the tendency to be closed to different points of views and disagreements on committees. Secondly, the identification of the black student as a problem revealed a racial bias of unguarded knowledge and an embedded tendency to blame the student as the problem rather than the institution. We need to be aware of tendencies towards racialised assumptions, as teachers we should never assume anything about our students when we first meet them, nor blame the students rather than examine the greater challenge of changing our teaching and institutions. Thirdly, the dismissal of listening as a key strategy of transformative pedagogy, reveals authoritarian and defensive assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning. To dismiss listening to students, suggests that students must receive rather than interact, and that learning is not about building on what they already know, but about having the truth imposed on them by the teacher who knows best. This tendency suggests fear of contradiction and impatience in learning from others. It also suggests a direct link to the philosophy of fundamental pedagogics which erased the possibility of critical thinking, itself linked to Christian National Education which gave religious approval to the racial ordering of schools and society (Jansen 2010, 180). Fourthly, the clique formation is a familiar mechanism of apartheid society, such as the forming of laagers and clubs. Cliques sanction who can be heard and this link produces a direct link between truth and status. As Jansen (2010, 20) found at the University of Pretoria: ‘It was the link between knowledge and authority that disturbed the most – knowledge graded for truth depending on who was speaking and how high up in the authority they were located.’ People who are not part of the cliques can experience a silencing alienation, become ‘todschweigen’ (silent and so do not exist). Cliques control, sanction and exclude others as a way of affirming themselves, ‘Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self certainty’ (Connolly 2002 quoted by Jansen 2010). Cliques maintained apartheid society and have to be reckoned with still, perhaps by forming alternative but more open cliques.

Of all of these barrier tendencies, the one I want to address here is the antipathy towards listening and then emphasise the importance of promoting active listening. In many ways it is the first and last aim of the WWC, it is central to all our activities within the university and explains our interest in public literary and literacy projects. It is also probably our best contribution to transformation.
A NARROWING OF PLACES IN A MACRO ENVIRONMENT

An inability to listen is part of a national malaise. Kelwyn Sole, a poet and professor at UCT, notes the insularity of literary festivals and the deafness of literature departments to contested public life when he writes (*The Sunday Independent* 2012):

There has been a narrowing of the places where cultural and literary debates are given recognisance. As our literary departments snooze away, bound to an insistence that South African literary study should concern itself mainly with the constant reiteration of canonical texts and a focus on the ‘literary’ rather than ‘history’ (as if the two were not constantly braiding), it can be suggested that there is a need for a wider, more inclusive debate than they, and book fairs, are at present providing.

Coovadia (2012, 58) laments the impossibility of a more inclusive, more capacious South African novel, because South Africans are too separated and unaware of each other:

The South African novelist for whom there will be ‘no high or low subject matters’, who will hear the English of the minibus taxis as much as the Afrikaans of the farms and the Zulu of the barracks and the parliament, who will see the refugee and the gay black woman and the mute and the orphan and the rich black man as precisely as the European liberal and the Indian doctor and the professor and the beggar, has yet to be born.

If we hope to reach a new dispensation in which positions are not predetermined, in which, as Coovadia (2012, 58) quotes Ranciere, the ‘writer is anybody and the reader is anybody’, we need to transform, change shapes, learn to live differently. We need to develop listening cultures that are receptive and able to give birth to the new.

ECO COMPOSITION

Eco composition is a theory of living change as applied to writing. Eco composition allows us to understand action in the writing centre as part of the living and changing organism of the university, and of the university in action and reaction to the micro, meso and macro environment. Through this theoretical lens the writing centre can be understood as an organism that is constantly evolving, altering and adapting. Interrelationships become generators of meaning and change. The creation of place, physical and imaginative, becomes understood as dynamic, responsive, relational and crucial for generating further possibility. Voice is understood as developing with and against others. Perhaps most importantly for the focus of the current article on transformation, presence and influence is understood as a web of connections. I developed my own small version of eco composition in a paper entitled ‘Organic dynamic’ (Nichols 2010). I tried to show that writing centres in South Africa are different from elsewhere because of South Africans’ particular, sometimes invisible, responses to outside theories. That there is an organic dynamic which will react
with change and influence to neutralise, accommodate, adapt. Eco composition’s understanding of a complex and dynamic ecology, complements Jansen’s historical descriptions of embedded knowledges. Jansen describes some of the previously invisible or unrecorded mechanisms of stasis; eco composition suggests ways of understanding impermanence and movement. Eco composition further points out that we are all complicit and so a completely outside view is impossible. Like it or not, the writing centre is part of the ecosystem, negotiates its space but is never independent of the whole and therefore contributes to the health of the whole (De Wet 2011; Nichols 2010).

**NETWORK CULTURE**

Writing centre work is characterised by webbiness and the fact that such webbiness is created through conscious mechanisms of listening. Listening and expanding networks are part of each level of our activity.

In the one-to-one consultations, the consultant has to listen actively to the client’s writing and thinking and help him or her to surface tacit knowledge and build upon it, and then communicate in his or her particular writing situation effectively. The one-to-one consultation is a replicable activity which once experienced can be reproduced by the client. The consultants are selected for, among other qualities, their ability to listen and they are required to listen to each other, work as a team, share authority, take leadership at different times, and plan initiatives together.

In the WWC workshops we frequently team teach, and teach an argument which then must be translated and applied to different disciplines. In listening to that application, that translation of general ideas about argument into good argument in a particular discipline, we hope that our listening sharpens the thinking of the discipline specialists as they make the clear thinking they need explicit. This space for rhetorical listening is further developed in the promotion of writing intensive (WI) teaching, in which we work with lecturers to help them enhance an existing course so as to make that course foreground the critical thinking skills they require and use writing to deliver course content. In the development of WI courses, lecturers develop their teaching by talking and listening across disciplines with us and with each other.

In the University Transformation projects we work with children from across the country to help them gain access to higher education. Our contribution is to encourage the children to engage and ask questions, to listen to arguments and to make their own in response. Also at the same time, to develop the student tutors of the children in an organic dynamic with the children, and in dialogue with each other and their own creatively different approaches to tutoring.

Our involvement in public festivals, such as the Jozi Spoken Word, The Wits Art and Language Experience, the Mail and Guardian Literary Festival and most recently for the last two years, the Melville Poetry Festival, has been to contribute workshops and discussion sessions; to facilitate a bridge between the public and
the university; and to help construct spaces for poetry and other writings, often in different languages, to interact.

All these activities promote listening skills and use listening as the first step towards learning, fostering creative dialogue, developing new ideas and new imaginings and expanding networks.

**2001 Consultants: Listening, willed and gentle**

Built into the WWC model (taken from the writing centre at New York University) is the weekly staff training meeting which includes reflection on the past week. In 2001, when the WWC was still located in the English Department and all the staff came from the English Department, we filmed a staff meeting with the author, and sometime black consciousness activist, Chris Van Wyk as guest listener. The recording now provides evidence of the way that careful listening helped all the consultants to learn something of the subject positions of black students from black consultants who were pioneers of talking back. It was a ‘risk accommodating environment’, an environment in which there was trust to begin with, and which was increased by the willingness of the others to listen and to be told how to listen. The presence of Van Wyk, listening hard, also sharpened the need to communicate and think about ideas.

The consultants were seated in a circle in the recently designed new writing centre and were asked if Wits needed to be more African. There was a fair amount of talk from the most confident participants and a divergence of views. After a while Pumla (not her real name), became controversial and commented that she was glad that there were so many whites in the writing centre. Pumla explained with an anecdote, explaining first, albeit unnecessarily, that she was not a student who had trouble in asserting herself. In one law lecture her hand was among the many that wanted to be heard. The lecturer took some of the answers and then turned his back to the class. Shocked that he had not asked her, Pumla the brave, summoned the lecturer’s attention. ‘Excuse me,’ said Pumla and proceeded with her contribution. She made the lecturer listen to her and it was a conscious political move. Pumla came from an academic prosperous family but she was still aware of a need to resist against a perceived slight to a perceived second language speaker, or ‘Second hand, second class’, as she said in an apparent slip of the tongue. Pumla was neither disadvantaged, rural nor underprepared, but she was angry and intent on making a point. She said she was glad that at the WWC, ‘there is a balance, that there are the kind of whites working here who you can correct’.

After Pumla’s contribution, Simon (also not his real name) contributed. He was soft spoken and came from a rural background. Simon said that he was self-conscious when he spoke, and feeling that ‘Someone is watching me, my grammar, you withdraw’. He explained further by telling us to listen to the talk shows on the radio and TV: ‘Listen to the comments about radio and TV announcers.’ No matter how good their English, there were constant complaints from the public about how they speak. I asked Simon what we should do to help self-conscious students and he
answered that we need simply to give them practice in speaking to white audiences, ‘You need to get used to speaking in the presence of first language speakers.’

Pumla and Simon were excellent students, both graduated and became successful lawyers. Yet they both needed to consider, practise and assert themselves, make other people listen to them. Their learning to be successful students involved learning to contradict assumptions and speak up despite perceiving an unreceptive, dismissive, even hostile audience. Asanda (again name changed) an older education student put the challenge starkly saying that, ‘Come to an institution like this and have your confidence deflated’. Van Wyk’s response was surprise at this lack of confidence in Wits students, especially in 2001, six years into democracy. These were the students who were thought to have made it, Wits ‘Clever Boys’ who were looked up to from the townships. So Van Wyk observed a need to engender a culture of confidence at Wits and from the WWC. He also modelled a fierce response to fears of inferiority with the assertion and reminder: ‘I am not on the fringe of history, I made history.’

From this meeting in 2001 we can get a nuanced sense of the importance of talking and listening in the classroom and among our consultants. Speaking and listening here has a heightened political and historical context. In order to hear and enable a greater exchange of views, people have to listen not only to what is being said but to who is speaking and why, and how the others are either listening or not. Learning to speak and engage in a post conflict society is a complex business and requires complex facilitation in order to allow greater participation and to heal silencing legacies.

**2012 Consultants: Colour and accent used**

In 2012, the WWC ran the film of the 2001 staff meeting for the current group of consultants and asked them if they felt Wits had moved on and if it had become more African and integrated. There was a differing sense about whether there had been progress or not. Several said there had been progress in pockets. One anthropology student went further and said everything was completely different. She was contradicted by two law students who said that language and accent still mattered but that now they were more consciously constructed. They talked about how students would speak one way in the lecture hall, another way when adopting a comrade role in political discussion, and yet another way when adopting a brother role in a social situation. In other words, as a Rwandan postgraduate consultant observed, accent and language remain an issue but are now used instrumentally. The second staff meeting was less emotional than the first, the sense of rebellion and resistance less strong. However, the issues were still there and not apparent to all consultants until they heard them voiced. In order to learn we all needed to listen and listen for ideas which contradicted our assumptions.

Listening is critical for disrupting received knowledge. Jansen is particularly aware of it, and particularly good at it, as I experienced even in a large lecture hall when he was giving a key note address to hundreds of people. Sitting in the audience
I felt that we were all listened to and that he responded to exactly what each person said to him. He seemed aware of the effort and skill needed to hear everyone and the consequent power it generated, and demonstrated the rhetorical finesse of a master preacher. Such religious insights can have secular uses:

What post conflict pedagogy demands is a very difficult approach, where the teacher has to position herself to listen; this will not come naturally, but without it there is no chance of any speaking and certainly no opportunity for listening ... the teacher has to listen to and follow what is being said, while at the same time being conscious of who spoke, what was said, how it was said, and what was not said (Jansen 2010, 263).

The point is to listen hard and carefully, and particularly to listen to those who have been silent and not to ‘normalise’ their response. As a 19th century reformer said of her work in the Workhouse the point was not to talk to the inmates, but that they ‘be made to talk themselves’ (Cobbe 1858, 278 quoted in Oldfield 2008, 323). This talk from those made reticent will not happen easily unless it is consciously solicited, and sometimes performed first. This performance should allow for contradiction and dissonance.

**PERFORMANCE OF DISSONANCE**

Dissonance happens when a contradiction is not ignored but rather has to be factored into an understanding of the possible. So, for example:

Dissonance happens when ... a white student observes a black student outperforming him in mathematics, and when the evidence is irrefutable in this subject that white patriarchs singled out as ‘not for you, the bantu.’ White doubt sets in and the process of disruption begins (Jansen 2010, 266).

There appears to be a need to *perform* an act of listening, and so create the possibility for further listening, especially for listening which disrupts, listening for that which does not fit expectation.

I want to illustrate this again through a thick description of a teaching moment. The WWC was invited to provide some training for a new writing centre that was setting up, and I went along with two black colleagues. I expected that the white lecturer, with whom I was friends, would speak mainly to me in front of her black tutors. However, I did not want that performance of white authority at this training session for an otherwise black writing centre. So, I asked one of my black colleagues to make sure that he spoke up and initiated discussion, to make sure that he demonstrated authority. Unsurprisingly the situation was as expected, perfectly convivial and sympathetic, but all the questions were addressed to me. My male colleague rose to the occasion, which was not easy because we white women were older and more senior, and to initiate discussion would be to go against the grain of cultural pattern. Nevertheless, he made an observation and asked a question. The
reply from the white lecturer was directed to my white self. I did not answer but rather turned to my colleague who replied and continued the conversation. In this deliberate resistant way the individual and collective gaze was shifted so as to identify different speakers and respondents in the conversation, to redirect the audience to who the subject, initiator and conversant are. In this small way, which was probably invisible to my white colleague, but not I think to most of the other people in the room, authority was performed, and the initiator of authority and participants in bestowing authority, were changed.

I read this above description recently to my dissonance-performing colleague and he remembered the incident as described, and added that what surprised him was how often this need to redirect assumptions of authority happens. He also said that he hoped one day to be in full control of his emotional response, and to redirect authority without confirming the slight with his anger.

Performance allows the possibility of repetition. This divergent performance of listening and speaking, which contradicted expectations, in a small way helps make the path for another unemotional, normal option.

**Investing from below, in networks of allies and expanding conversations**

The WWC work is part of the ecosystem and trying to promote a healthier more inclusive ecosystem. We understand that our strength, durability and actual interest in what we do, comes from expanding networks. If we were administratively subordinated to one department, then we could be controlled, limited in our response and kept quiet. As it is, we have mobility, not exactly on the margin so much as in the margins, we have a liminal freedom to work with many constituencies. We are constantly working with new people and new organisations. We work with individuals, from school children to professors to outsiders; we work across the university and with other universities; we work outside the university with various public organisations; we work with national and international alliances within the writing centre movement; and we work with literary festivals, various writers and their audiences and their languages. In this sense we hope to be open to the idea of change as unlimited sequence, and for ourselves to be protected and nourished by expanding public networks.

Our challenge is to maintain continual negotiation, protection and production of generative spaces within the ecosystem, and one of the key elements of being a good gardener of these spaces is the promotion and development of listening as a way to disrupt embedded historical knowledges. The corpse in the cargo might yet provide good compost, if we are aware of the legacies of the corpse and do our best to disrupt those legacies and shovel them back into the earth.
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