Academic Exchanges

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The state of tertiary education in South Africa has been described in the following terms:

> Finally, higher education is beset by legitimacy problems. In general the historically white institutions (and a number of black institutions) possess little moral and political legitimacy. Contrastingly, the majority of black institutions (and a few white institutions) have little or no academic credibility. Overall, the 'system' is seen as one that perpetuates inequality, is hugely wasteful, and fails to serve the human-resource needs of the country. Higher education in South Africa fairly accurately reflects the society within which it is located (Moja & Cloete 1995:50).

Confronted with this legacy, the Government White Paper 'Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education' (July 1997) declares that the purpose of higher education in South Africa is to contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructive citizens possessed of reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas. The authors of the White Paper propose upholding rigorous standards of academic quality and these pedagogical, political and ethical goals are to be achieved in a context where the funding differences between historically white and black universities remain, and fee-free higher education for students is not an affordable or sustainable option. In short, South African universities are being called upon to become more representative in a country embracing political transformation along the lines of liberal capitalist democracy with its mixture of considerable political freedom and persisting socio-economic inequality[1].

The authors of the White Paper view the relationship between institutions and society in terms of establishing an appropriate balance between institutional autonomy

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[1]   'The economy in the South Africa continues to largely represent what it was in 1993, except that there is some growth (jobless) and a few black faces and companies that participate in it. Otherwise it is business as usual' (Sam Shilowa, *Mercury Business Report*, November 28, 1996). In the run up to the 1999 elections, COSATU has been reminding the ANC that the will of the people, expressed in the 1994 election, did not sanction the market-driven policy of GEAR. Tony Leon, neo-Thatcherite leader of the Democratic Party, has responded stoically to such 'deliberate insults and repudiations of the government and its policy' by defending GEAR and asserting that COSATU is 'arguing against the grain of history' (*New Nation*, May 30, 1997). President Mandela and Deputy President Mbeki reiterated the same to the South African Communist Party's 10th congress (see *Sowetan* July 2, 1998). Jeremy Cronin responded to the redistribution-through-growth or growth-through-redistribution non-debate in *Mail & Guardian*, July 10-16, 1998.

and public accountability. Although academic freedom is affirmed as a fundamental right protected by the Constitution, institutional autonomy is delimited by the need to redress the injustices of the past and meet the demands of globalisation. The stress on the material factors that constrict academic freedom echoes the 1990 'The Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility':

> Intellectual freedom in Africa is currently threatened to an unprecedented degree. The historically produced and persistent economic, political and social crisis of our continent, continues to undermine development in all spheres. The imposition of unpopular structural adjustment programmes has been accompanied by increased political repression, widespread poverty and immense human suffering (in Daniel *et al* 1995:234f).

The homeopathic capacity of the market to open up opportunity and the necessity of affirmative action are balanced by awareness of the pitfalls of structural adjustment, principally the (supposedly short-term) contribution of monetarist policies to the emisseration of large sectors of the population. Although education is often dependent on a system that takes care to ensure that the great majority of those with equal rights shall get only what is essential for bare existence, higher education has an unmatched obligation to support a democratic ethos and fragile civil society. The earlier 'Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of institutions of Higher Education' (1988) also addressed itself to economic factors, and stressed that:

> Academic freedom is an essential precondition for those education, research, administrative and service functions with which universities and other institutions of higher education are entrusted (in Daniel *et al* 1995:230f).

A notable continuity between the Lima and Kampala declarations is the declaration of the *right* to education rather than the *de facto* guarantee of free tertiary education. The South African White Paper reflects this thinking and, given the democratic advances and the existence of a state that can now claim legitimacy, curtails the Kampala Declaration's commitment to institutional autonomy in the face of potentially authoritarian state power.

The foregrounding of the social function of South African universities provides an opportunity to reflect on their democratising role and the contribution of academic autonomy to general freedom. In this essay I will indicate some of the challenges facing academics engaged in institutional democratisation and social transformation. Four areas will be addressed: 1) the connection between academics and democracy; 2) attempts to claim legitimacy in South African English literary studies; 3) South African feminisms; and 4) feminist literary studies.

academics and democracy

The tendentious debate on the higher education sector in South Africa has elicited a contribution from Kwame Anthony Appiah, Chair of Committee of African Studies at

Harvard. Appiah sees the university as an agent of reform that must preserve its relative autonomy *vis*-à-vis the state. Although the power of academics is limited, they can and should contribute to the transformation of society by resisting the regulation of university life according to the supply and demand of the marketplace and according to a purely technical ideal of competence. The correct recipe for South Africa is to be found in

> modern liberalism .... as the context for our reflections on the future of the
> university curriculum (Appiah 1997:79).

Liberals living in globally illiberal times can aid transformation by reiterating central beliefs:

> We believe in private property and we believe in civic equality; but we also
> support progressive taxation (Appiah 1997:79).

Appiah (1997:80,97) traces the language of liberalism to Kant, noting that 'individual autonomy is at the heart of political morality', and argues for the role of academics in 'the recreation of South African society'. The new South Africa, as the home of radical liberalism, and teachers of English literature in particular, can go beyond the utilitarian imperatives of the state and contribute to the autonomy of citizens. The pedagogical contribution to the formation of free subjectivities is envisaged in moral terms, and the study of literature can bring about the realisation of liberal ideals, primarily democratic equality, by transcending divisive ideologies:

> The study of literature, done well, teaches one to engage critically with what
> one reads; to winkle out sub-texts and presuppositions, to reflect on cultural
> and historical contexts, to ponder moral and political claims. These are skills
> beyond grammar: and they are skills that everyone needs if they are to think
> through carefully the questions that face every citizen (Appiah 1997:96).

As an answer to the interrogative acquiescence that criticism of the system invariably meets with—'Yes, it's very unsatisfactory, we all know that; but what would you put in its place?'—Appiah argues that the South African university can contribute to liberation from the external authority of a corrupt society, and literature is part of this formative, educative, political experience. What are the shortcomings of Appiah's conception of the liberating role of academics and the university?

Firstly, Appiah is repeating key elements of English literary studies; his conception of the anti-ideological role of literature is strikingly close to that of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis—minus F.R. Leavis's iconoclasm and acute sense of the vested interests manipulating institutional power at universities. Significantly Appiah elides a central problem: in South Africa the realisation of liberal ideals hinges on the viability of overlaying divisive and unjust property relations with civic values of respect, equality and autonomy. Today the constitutional declaration of equality has to contend with entrenched socio-economic inequality, and the promotion of formal democratic values coexists with the perpetuation of oppressive and unequal social relations. Here the

envisaged equity of opportunity for appropriation grounded in reciprocal contract and obligation is undermined by the persisting reality of possession by misappropriation[2]. Those working within vital centres of epistemic power and conflict like the South African university—where the social identities of academics are forcefully intertwined with the metonymic forces of political representation—are in a position to register a conception of academics at variance with the ideal of facilitators of critical thinking and autonomy. Students can have a less benign view of the social function and intentions of those employed to shape them into better citizens. Universities are not themselves democratic structures, and the vision of the popular involvement of the community within the university is not the same thing as democratic participation and control of the institution. Rather universities exercise authority over their student constituency and back this up with coercive power; authority is defended by other social and political institutions that are committed to the protection of property, and which do not necessarily share the same enlightened principles as the university.

Appiah fails to register that the autonomy of the academic committed to social justice is constrained by being located within an ameliorationist social institution that functions to both counteract *and* reproduce the inequity of existing property relations. Academic freedom is part of a broader historicisable ideology of individualism that both legitimates and challenges social inequalities. The degree to which Appiah's argument pre-emptively positions potential dissenters as anti-democratic provides a glimpse of the Janus face of the new world order that moralises capitalism in terms of progress and freedom. This effectively excludes a vital political and pedagogical question: whether, within the parameters of capitalism, the contribution of the humanities towards producing autonomous, critically thinking individuals able to see beyond current conditions and create new opportunities is best achieved by instilling consent through Rousseauistic sentiments of sociability, or by encouraging the radical interrogation of civil society (see Muller & Cloete 1991).

The possibility that factors of location and context, sites of institutional power and discursive privilege, are enacting oppressive epistemic relations haunts those who work in the shadow of 'Bantu Education'. In response South African intellectuals, and academics within English literature departments, have produced their own tradition of reflection on political pedagogy.

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[2] 'At least one person was shot dead and another stabbed on Tuesday this week, when police and 300 private security guards moved in to demolish a burgeoning informal settlement on the outskirts of Randfontein's Mohlakeng township, in terms of a court order granted last month. The South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) condemned the "brutality and heavy-handedness" of the action and accused the [ANC] council of dishing out "worse treatment" than apartheid-era councillors' (*Mail & Guardian* October 10 to 16, 1997). Which cautions against the precipitate triumphalism of such claims as: 'Today when apartheid is—still incredibly—a thing of the past' (Louvel 1997:121).

academics and legitimacy
In the 1940s Geoffrey Durrant returned to Natal after studying English at Cambridge and announced the critical task of addressing

> how thought can be made free, not only from government tyranny, but also from the more subtle and pervasive tyrannies of commercial society (Durrant 1944:1).

The role for English literary studies was 'to humanise our knowledge and to make our Universities into centres of living thought for the whole community' (Durrant 1945:19). Durrant (1948) drew attention to the historical context of the production, reception and teaching of literature, and appealed for a more democratic post-war settlement in which a revised education system could combat the problems of modernisation and foster critical attitudes in students. Responding to the state's consolidation of racial capitalism, Durrant (1955) appealed for the preservation of the humanising value of literature in a hostile ideological environment[3].

Beyond the university in the 1950s, South African radical intellectuals saw the formulation of the aim of pedagogy as the mere transmission of culture as a reactionary attempt to rob education of its potency and force. Recognising that teachers have always held a hybrid position as quasi-civil servants and that they are paid by the very agencies of the government they may seek to challenge, claims were made for the counter-hegemonic potential of pedagogy. In a vibrant and now largely forgotten debate teachers and activists beyond the university interrogated the link between enlightenment and the political task of transforming the country by political struggle. The limitations and potential of political pedagogy were delineated in the context of the principle of non-collaboration with the racist state where participation in government institutions amounted to collaborating with the oppressors[4]. Arguing against erecting the tactic of the boycott into a principle, Walter Sisulu (1957) proposed that participation in these institutions may at times be the most effective method of exposing them and struggling for more effective representation. A varied discourse of revolutionary praxis sought to address the oppressed masses with the call to challenge all existing centres of legitimacy, and transform institutions from an alien social power. Revolutionary enthusiasm was accompanied by sober warnings against overestimating the political effect of pronouncements by pedagogues in a context marked by a constricted and distorted public sphere.

By the early eighties, and then writing from outside South Africa, Durrant

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[3]   See Ndebele (1973), Kirkwood (1976), Sole (1977), Vaughan (1984), Attwell (1984), Visser (1986), De Kock (1992), and Johnson (1996) for critiques of the South African English liberal legacy.

[4]   See E.L. Maurice (1952) and the response of A.K. Jordaan. See Also Tom Lodge's (1984; 1986) accounts of the 1955 school boycotts and role of teachers in the PAC's Poqo during the 1960s, and Hyslop (1991).

(1981:28) reasserted the goal of developing 'critical intelligence' and the preservation of 'academic autonomy' against crude demands for 'relevance' and 'commitment'. This involved the attempt to 'formulate a coherent programme of humane education' responsive to changing historical conditions, an education centred on the question of literature's 'humane significance' capable of providing nourishment 'for minds struggling with the question of how to live' (Durant 1981:29,38). Within South Africa the prospect of the demise of the racial state and the challenge of creating a more representative multicultural university renewed a sense of the social mission of English literary critics aiming 'to keep alive the possibilities of debate about human and artistic issues' by means of 'a radical-liberal consideration of connections between artistic and critical response' rather than a 'revolution of the existing paradigm of literary studies':

> It is true, for example, that some tendencies within Marxism are usefully assimilable .... other tendencies are ultimately unassimilable, principally in their insistence on identifying, and taking strongly aligned positions about, conflicting forces in an otherwise observable social reality which all writing, in its content, is supposed to reflect, or even mediate .... Given the present-day responsibility of the university to a heterogeneous humanity and social structure, it seems to me that literary studies may best serve students, whatever their race or ideology, by means of searching modifications and changes within the existing model (Chapman 1985:157,159)[5].

Within the many cross-currents of debate the 'focus on moving the government towards reform' was accompanied by a felt need to counter 'an autocracy of a Marxist/Leninist kind', and the worry was

> that although ending apartheid is important, it ought not to obscure the equally important task of creating a democratic culture which will support a post-apartheid democracy (Frost 1988:15).

The shape of the anticipated dispensation continued to exorcise anxious academics confronted with a crisis of university funding that continually reminded them of their status as state employees (see Greaves 1988; Moulder 1988). Some English literary

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[5]   Subsequently consideration of 'capital surplus' and 'socialist redistribution' was shifted outside of South Africa to Ngugi's Kenya, Fanon was characterised as a cultural nationalist, and Achebe and Irele elevated as model African humanists—'the latter is even designated "bourgeois" by younger Marxist critics in his country' (Chapman 1989:23f). The ideological overtones of this manoeuvre suggest the naiveté of Doherty's (1990) claim that the failure of Marxian materialist analysis to gain instititional power in English literary studies can be attributed to its lack of pedagogical practice. Rather there was a noticeable consonance between reformist academics and pronouncements from progressive segments of capital anticipating increased accumulation from the dismantling of apartheid and calling for the creation of unifying national symbols necessary for a stable ideological environment (see Berger & Godsell 1988). President Mandela has become the fulcrum of a constellation of benevolent symbols of national unity, and the subject of academic hagiography (see Chapman 1995).

academics optimistically attributed the underfunding of education to racist policies:

> irrational government policies—military and constitutional—in defence of
> segregation and white privilege can be held directly responsible for the
> shortage of funding we suffer (Maughan-Brown 1988:48).

Concern was expressed that 'the enlightening and emancipatory powers of education and culture' would fall before the

> escape into pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric whose verbal activism often
> conceals a spiritual and intellectual emptiness (Lieskounig 1989:25,29).

Forebodings that the university will not be guided by 'the best reason but by the lowest common denominator', were accompanied for some in the humanities by a renewed sense of mission and an abiding faith in the ability of the liberal remnant of the English community to facilitate liberal democracy. English literature teachers were seen to have a role in alerting students to the prejudices of the 'common mind—be that a Nationalist mind or an African Nationalist mind' (Nicholson 1989:4,10). Others legislated in terms of the ANC's 1988 *Constitutional Guidelines*, and an ideal of reciprocity between those within the university and the broader community was seen to rest on a revindicated social contract, the removal of the toxin of racism from the socio-economic sphere, and recognition by white academics of the need 'to become for a time the European-other' (Chapman 1989:21).

Reformist academics articulated the principles of legitimism against revolution in terms of a pluralist model of democracy that respected the rights of minority groups but also recognised the primacy of the general will of the people. The hierarchies, forces and tensions of the university were viewed in functional terms amenable to modifications capable of re-tooling institutional practices (distorted under the pressure of a despotic state) for a new political environment. The duty of English literary academics was conceived in terms of reflecting the experiences of a national constituency *and* utilising the cathartic potential of education to enable students to transcend corrosive ideological interests (see Morphet 1990; Wright 1992). The fact that such conciliatory and well intentioned calls were issued from an institutional and bureaucratic space embedded within the material structures of a distributive system that oppressed the masses was not allowed to disturb the sense of the legitimacy of the humanising mission. Discourse on the liberatory functioning of the university in an era of transformative reconstruction has taken the form of a shuttling between a vision of the university as a vital organic component of democracy and acknowledgement of the élite and marginal class status of academics.

The courage of those advocating the progressive vision in the era of the state's 'total strategy', and the merit of this vision over its reactionary counterparts, should not be underestimated. Efforts within universities to counter the apartheid state by opening up the university and providing a platform for opposition were a vital contribution to the

liberation struggle[6]. But it is also important to recall that, whatever their declared principles, liberal South African universities opposed in principle to the evolving policy of apartheid did practise segregation on their own initiative before either 1948 or the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. In an era of transformation the role of educational institutions in promoting inequality and privilege remains obscured behind declarations of critical rectitude and exhortatory encomia claiming that, as

> an institution traditionally founded on principles of democracy, universalism and non-racialism, the university has a duty and a moral obligation to contribute to nation-building (Khotseng 1994:5).

When the 'principles' of the university function within the integuments of an oppressive socio-economic system, pronouncements by academics extolling the virtues of citizenship and democracy can conceal unequal relations behind a juridical form of equality. Affirmations of electorialism and constitutionalism emanating from universities employing abstract collective postulates (general will, people, nation, culture, community, etc.) are designed to serve as principles of unity and equality, but they can equally function to fix arbitrary and unequal relations between persons conceived as agents. It is notable that the reformist rhetoric of representationalism and constitutionalism of progressive university mission statements has not challenged existing property relations but rather promoted a redistribution of 'opportunity' as the key to equity[7]. Valedictorian professions of marginality aside—'academics in positions

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[6] However Vuyisile *et al* (in Fernando 1990) give an account of opposition to the apartheid state from within tertiary education stressing that the main points of opposition were black universities. Those working within the relatively high degree of autonomy enjoyed by the South African English speaking universities (Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Natal, Rhodes) produced a low intensity opposition guided by liberal ideals and a radical scholarship. For a discussion of education practices and policies in South Africa and the role of research in historically black universities see Randall (1985), Chisholm (1992), and Reddy (1992) respectively. The essays collected in Moss and Obery (1989) provide an overview of the struggle in the late 1980s.

[7] In this connection see Giliomee's (1981) rejection of Milton Friedman's economic medicine for South Africa, and Nasson's (1990:173) critique of De Lange's 1981 modernising educational reforms that sought to tune education to monetarist policy: 'there is precious little evidence that the disciplines and incentives of the market will reduce social inequality'. See also Kallaway (1984) and Davies (1984). Nevertheless Myles Holloway (1998:40) can still hope that 'English in the next millennium will ... be marked ... by a new awareness of the creative and commercial power of our commodity'. This formulation does not address the issue of who has access to 'our commodity'. A recent report on curriculum development at the University of Natal notes that the perception of the student market has modulated from 'disadvantaged', 'underprepared', 'non-fee paying' and 'second language' to 'the awareness that *all* university students could benefit from—indeed, needed—a more or less explicit introduction to university study' (Green 1998:41e.i.o.). The author omits the forces that filter access to the supposedly representative category '*all* students'.

of power are often "othered" by populist democratic discourse' (Malan 1995:22f)—the privileged subaltern continues to speak.

If the university is well-positioned historically to promote the principles of negotiated transition (inclusion, conciliation, consensus, and stability)—and so instrumental to the project of nation building that requires a wide range of symbolic and discursive interventions integral to the formation of a new national consensus—it is also true that the university reproduces the tensions, conflicts and injustices of society in the process of reflecting on these phenomena. The university is one of the circuits whereby wealth and privilege are distributed that is able to both register and subsume the fissures of the polity beneath the prospect of national unity. As well as providing a medium for the production of modernising élite, corporatist-style élite pacting and social stratification, the institution is as likely to display a 'duty and moral obligation' to itself and work to ensure its own existence.

The image of the university as the point of intersection of social obligations—a type of autonomous but responsible moral legislature mediating between the executive and civil society—obscures the position of institutions within a system of law that depends on a sanctioning power backed up by consent and violence[a]. When universities refer to themselves as 'communities', as civil societies in miniature, the divisive power relations within the institution that do mirror the civil war of society at large, along with the material interests of the academic knowledge class (centred on job security), are minimised. There can be no simple exchange of political imperatives for academic imperatives despite recent highly political calls for the depoliticisation of the university:

> Most HBUs became sites of struggle during the 1980s (and a few long before the 1980s), but this *political* project must give way to the *academic* project of the 1990s if these universities are to be reconstituted as *universities* in post-apartheid South Africa (Switzer 1998:5).

South African feminisms

In its identification of the university as a site of struggle, South African feminisms hold out the promise of critically interrogating the social function of the university and the norms of academic discourse. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the factors that frame pedagogical practice, and set themselves the task of uncovering the complex hierarchies that structure the university. South African academics have scrutinised discursive regimes and institutional practices within the often nepotistic and sexist power relations of the academy where in 1990 men constituted 73% of academic staff.

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[a]   For example, the 1997 disturbances at the University of Durban-Westville involved the university management calling in the services of an armed private security firm accurately named 'Combat Force'. Maseko's (1994) account of the UWC SRC explores the dynamics of student participation in institutional transformation.

The part that gender plays in academic power relations is difficult to ignore in a context where, in addition to the (non-sexist) possibility of their research being plagiarised by faculty members, female postgraduates can confront an abusive institutionalised power offering preferment in exchange for sexual labour. The struggle continues when those same senior colleagues act as editors with control over publication. One might expect the question:

> What would [feminism] mean within the manifold practices that constitute the university—to take only one terrain in which political struggle and academic enquiry are enmeshed? (Schalkwyk 1990:61)

to have far reaching consequences when these practices, as in other institutions, carry a legacy of autocracy. But in a manoeuvre that will be repeated by other writers, David Schalkwyk (1990:61) is able to deflect any analysis of institutionalised practices into the pathos of generalised oppression that includes

> me/n, marked, burdened for as long as the practices that constitute it are allowed to continue, with the sign of the Phallus.

The sexism of academy gets lost behind a vision of feminism as an ethical project rather than a struggle with specific power structures and their beneficiaries. The sentiment of empathy is central to Cecily Lockett's (1990:17f) proposal that feminist academics

> will have to develop a more sympathetic womanist discourse for considering the work of black women .... it is our place as educationally and institutionally privileged critics to listen to their voices as we formulate approaches to their work.

Only then might it be possible 'to bring about a necessary paradigm shift in the institutionalised power structures of English departments'. For Jenny de Reuck (1990:31) the role of academic as empathetic auditor motivated by an ethics of solidarity is reassuringly unproblematic, and she offers the following prescriptive censure of prescription:

> Clearly, within the bounds of decorum one can speak 'about' other people: one can legitimately evaluate other people's strategies, theories and practices, for example. Of course, when they are academic, such undertakings must be sensitive, searching and not prescriptive.

Ethics levels the playing-field of historical victimisation and empathy opens up the decorous possibility of understanding and community; the legitimacy of the institution and the efficacy of its discourses and personnel are vindicated. The faith is that responsible academics can work from within institutional discourse to transcend its obvious limitations; otherwise

> one would end up in a solipsistic cage where the historian would have to

abandon his or her work in favour of autobiography and the specifics of
personal history only (Walker 1990:7; and see Fouché 1992; 1994).

The composition of the personnel of the university defined in terms of gender, race and
class frames the ability of those academics to work against domination. But with careful
examination of their own practice academics can move beyond essentialist
determination by social identity to clear a space for the (self)representation of South
African women:

> We can use our positions as feminists within the academy to change current
> reading practices (Ryan 1990:28).

In a context where the university is one of the centres of the culture of imperialism as
well as the site of its contestation, attention to social identity in the form of subject-
positionality holds out the possibility of avoiding insensitivity:

> Historically produced differences between feminist academics and their
> subjects may, and almost certainly do, lead to misunderstandings, blind-
> spots, insensitivity within feminist research. Elite researchers, black and
> white, need to be acutely aware of this problem. But if difference can also be
> used creatively, to power a genuinely dialectical interaction between two
> vigilantly foregrounded subject-positions, perhaps more progress can be
> made towards understanding and changing the situation of all South African
> women (Arnott 1991:127).

Liberatory potential is dispersed into a general resource of academic autonomy and
integrity capable of subverting dominant discourses and practices. For Shireen Hassim
and Cherryl Walker (1992:83) what must be maintained is the difference between
political activism and an academic discourse that

> depends for its success on a different set of principles: rigour and clarity,
> intellectual honesty and adventurousness. These principles require a context
> of relative autonomy from the immediate political imperatives, even though
> they may be informed by broader political projects.

Sisi Maqagi countered liberal complacency by linking academic practices to
social identity and political representation in order to position academics' historically
specific interests. Recognition and reciprocity serve the ends of self-legitimation as
academics exercise the 'habit' of power; generalising their particular interests and
minimising the persisting distribution of the material means to enjoy rights. Maqagi
(1990:23) pointed to the unbridgeable experiential gulf opened by the racialised class
position of South African academics offering sensitivity:

> Privilege, with all its concomitant oppressive structures, widens the gap
> between the experiences of black and white women. How can Lockett
> understand black women and theorise about their work when she is unable to
> shift from her position?

Under a veneer of egalitarianism, academic decorum as the maintenance of self-legitimising discursive manoeuvres might regulate an oppressive group solidarity at the expense of others. The social function of the university may be to reproduce rather than challenge existing social relations, and identifying centres of power in specific historical contexts has the aim of reaching beyond the academy to use the political threads of opposition to weave together women from divergent social and historical locations[9]. This has involved distinguishing between institutional policy and the actual function of academics in order to avoid both corporatising academic work in accordance with declared institutional aims or subsuming the intra-institutional context of academic work in an ideal of transcendent individual autonomy that both enables and is the goal of academic work.

Maqagi's approach implicitly challenged the claim that academics are by vocation involved in working to realise the freedom of students, and that the progressive potential of academic discourse is signaled by the exchange of conflict and struggle for 'diversity' and 'dialogue' within the broad consensus of pluralism. Defensive accusations of racist counter-racism and the opportunities for strategic patronage secured by the screening of incoming personnel work in the interests of those retaining, but willing to modify, institutional hegemony. Those using the language of reciprocity may well be furthering their own interests and expressing the natural satisfaction of the beneficiary; the confession of a potential lack of neutrality (the problem of the 'ownership of knowledge') can be but one more ruse towards appearing more responsible. The stubborn intuition of rightful possession and the sincere intention to combat injustice do not cancel out the crisis of self-justification, the hypocrisy of a power that cannot be justified and which is perceived as usurpatory. Analysis of the power relationships sedimented in academic work is required, with the aim of transforming existing practices and concepts within the profession itself and its

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[9]   According to Belinda Bozzoli (1991:14): 'A combination of a materialist and an Africanist understanding is surely necessary for this process [of colonisation] to be adequately captured'. See those engaging with the work of sociologists, historians and anthropologists examining the structuration of social identity: Bozzoli (1983), Gaitskell (1983), and the essays collected in Clingman (1991). But the fact that materialist and Africanist analyses themselves arise within academic contexts (which are often erased by individual writers) also requires analysis. Bozzoli's (1991:1) contention that in a racialised South Africa '[l]iberal mystifications of bourgeois rule are a rarity in this stark order' underestimates the ideological saturation of academic discourse. See also the astonishing claim that universities 'are institutions that have contained within them an inherited logic of conservatism. They have no ideology. They just resist change' (Morris 1992:65).

[10]   The conference came in the wake of the Malibongwe Conference, held in Amsterdam in January 1990, organised by the ANC. See Hassim (1991); also Charman et al (1991:40) on the 'watershed for South African women and the ANC. The position and status of women within South Africa were legitimated as political issues to be addressed within the process of national liberation'.

characteristic apparatuses.

The issue of the social identity of academics and the constituencies they can legitimately claim to represent crystalised at the January 1991 conference on 'Women and Gender' held at the University of Natal, Durban[10]. The contribution of academics to general freedom and democratisation was dramatically foregrounded in a series of exchanges between black and white academics and academics and activists at the conference. Feminist academics were challenged to critically examine their social function within an oppressive and unjust historical context. Setting aside Susan Bazilli's (1991:46) fragile apologia—'There is no blame - just history'—a sense of the intensity of debate is conveyed by Kedibone Letlaka-Rennert (1991:22f):

> Two major dichotomies ensued which created a tense and highly charged atmosphere. The great divides were between black and white women as well as activists and academics .... Lame excuses about the need for academic standards to be maintained were used to deflect the substantial neglect of black and activist women alike. Ironically, the subjects of research in most of the presentations were black women but the conference did not include them. It simply commodified their suffering to generate relevant papers[11].

For Beatie Hofmeyr (1991) the 'conference was a great beginning to developing feminist theoretical debate in South Africa'. Desiree Lewis (1992:17f) also registered the opportunity for self-criticism presented by the level of dissent at the conference, and offered the following salutary diagnosis of the failure of community:

> White women's privileges are based on their dependence on and exploitation of black, and particularly black working-class women .... White feminist academics have a vested stake in the silence of black women. As producers of knowledge who have recently created a niche in the patriarchal world of knowledge production, they rely on the construct 'black women' as passive, inarticulate and representable object. Recognition of the interpretations of black women would lead to white feminists' loss of dominance in an academic domain where their hold is already tenuous and threatened, particularly since a high premium has always been placed on authoritative interpretations of the colonised, the underclass, the dominated in South

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[11] For Christopher Ballantine (1991) the cause of discord was easy to identify: 'Patriarchy. It impaled us all—female and male feminists alike—on the usual dominant continuum: concious/cognitive/rational/verbal/scientific'. More interesting is Patricia Horn's (1991) observation that the conflict was not only between academics and activists but primarily between activists aligned with newly unbanned and competing women's movements. The complex issue of academics speaking for others resurfaced at the 1992 'Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy' in Nsukka, Nigeria (see Hendricks & Lewis 1994; Daymond 1996; Meintjes 1993; Gouws 1993). Chichi Aniagolu (1998) reports that similar problems arose at the first gathering of womanists in South Africa

Africa. This partially accounts for the reluctance of some to recognise discourse as a site of power relations and to consider the extent to which their self-proclaimed interpretive mastery echoes the broader oppressive relations of racist, classist and patriarchal society.

Lewis (1992:16) detected 'some spurious wrangling about the distinction between "about" and "for"' at the conference and yet referred with approval to 'the views of prominent academics like Gayatri Spivak'. She went on to identify an alliance of '[m]ainstream feminists and neo-Marxists' who employ the tactic of undermining black solidarity by referring to the class position of black academics (1992:21). This cabal of neo-Marxist revisionism and white power is seen as the main obstruction to the opening up of academic discourse. Lewis (1992:17,21) concluded by 'locating a way out of this apparent impasse' which involved opening up interpretations 'to an expanding and non-hierarchical categorisation of positioned interpretations of women's experiences'.

Academic discourse has been central to the proposed solution to the impasse that feminism reaches 'when researchers merely reaffirm their right to represent others' (Hendricks & Lewis 1994:73), and academic exchange degenerates into an eristic contest between experiences. However a suspicion of the norms of a universalising academic 'language of decorous and professional disinterest' entails that the experiences of the oppressed are granted pre-discursive epistemological and moral priority:

there should be no need for blacks or any other marginalised groups to authenticate their critiques of structural inequalities and power relationships (Hendricks & Lewis 1994:72f).

Still, monopolisation of apodictic infallibility does not rule out the concession that many local feminist literary critics have registered sensitivity to the question of social identity (see Lewis 1993). There is a realisation that the effacement of the privileged institutional space of analysis is not simply dependent on the traditional academic posture of omniscience. Erasure can as well be achieved via positioned interpretations foregrounding social identity when, under the cover of appealing to the ethics of discourse, positional autobiographical anecdotes pre-emptively position potential critics as victimisers. At a time when universities are being called upon to reclaim legitimacy by representing society (and so secure government funding), the metonymic value of personnel and their inferred or declared experiences are clearly commodifiable. The central question, then, is not 'who should write about whom' but 'how we write about others', and whether 'academic and socially dominant feminists [are] universalising their experiences' (Hendricks & Lewis 1994:70f)[12].

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[12] See Maharaj (1994) for a theoretical discussion of gender, and Walker's (1994:91) criticisms of Maharaj's 'obscure, academically overloaded terms'.

The methodological and performative question of 'how we write about others' centres on a move away from fidelity to a 'pure Marxism' towards 'post-Althusserian and post-colonial theories' that confront 'discourse as a site of struggle' (Lewis 1993a:17). Deconstruction is welcomed because its 'emphasis on discursive practice counters the Marxist and Althusserian hegemony in South Africa', and post-colonial theory is an aid to decoding 'the persistence of the hegemonising thought in left-wing theories and practices' (Hendricks & Lewis 1994:70,71f). This perspective has intermeshed with a view of post-colonial theory that privileges South Africa and America and excludes the rest of Africa:

> In the United States, with a context comparable to the South African one of interlocking relationships of racial discourses ... (Lewis 1997:2).

The challenge of interrogating the social function of academics has been displaced by modification of the norms of academic discourse that retains an inflated conception of the liberatory potential of academic autonomy. What is obscured in this instance of the current post-Marxist collegiate mantra is the fact that the prioritisation of 'discourse as a site of struggle' as a means of countering the constrictions of an ossified Marxist orthodoxy accords with the Althusserian project of *Tel Quel*. Evidence that the term 'post-colonial' originated in the left-wing theories and practices of economists in the early seventies makes the prospect of transcending the Marxian legacy via this route equally problematic[13]. Sensitivity to the imperatives of an imperialistic academic marketplace results in an ahistorical view of academic discourses that subsumes consideration of the social function of the university and its personnel into the intra-academic question of competing theories.

I turn now to another response to the crisis of legitimacy evidenced at the 1991 Natal conference. This time the attempt to negotiate the power and privilege associated with the representational role of academics, in particular those engaged in feminist literary studies, also foregrounds the question of academic discourse. The ideal of insurgent academics is replaced by the idealisation of the mediating social function of academics and the role of the university. Like its insurgent counterpart, the realisation academic autonomy within a pluralist academe also obscures critical examination of the social function of academics.

feminist literary studies
Margaret Daymond introduces *South African Feminisms*, the 'first collection of South African literary feminist writing to be published in the United States', by reflecting on the 1991 Natal conference at which the 'researcher-theorist's "structural domination" of her subjects, making them into objects of enquiry ... exploded':

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[13]   See Larrain (1979) on Althusser, and Ahmad (1995) on the post-colonial.

the excitement of consciously being in and of history which, while it is difficult and full of contradictions, is perhaps not available to members of more settled societies (Daymond 1996:xxiiif).

Intellectual progress enables the academic to look back over the legacy of the past and shed the 'imported condescension' of traditional South African English literary studies (Daymond 1996:xix)[11]. Despite the difficulty of an

> open, symmetrical dialogue between the country's women .... there are examples of dialogue at work in the polity and of its leading to a strategic cooperation between women (Daymond 1996:xxiii; and see Meer 1997).

The goal of realising abstract rights within the material formations of social conditions is bolstered by the faith that, as an enabling institution and medium of representation, the university can contribute to the establishment of a democratic polity based on negotiation and diversity.

In this vision literature continues to represent the humanising and ethical nature of social obligations, and enables academics to be seen to be recognising such obligations rather than legislating them. Miriam Tlali's stories communicate the stoical pathos of women's lives, and Head's biography becomes an *exemplum*, a story with a moral to move and impress its readers and instruct them in their democratic obligations. The benign values located in Tlali's stories are seen as both universally valid and particular to the historical context of South Africa:

> It is a sad story about makeshift improvisations on tradition which, when read reflexively, suggests the writer's own sense of loss and isolation .... It is the humor of the story, flowing through the anger, which gives it potency—a humor coming from ordinary, daily life (Daymond 1996a:233,235).

The 'arduous process by which Bessie Head' contributed to 'new workings of the imagination' by bringing 'a special sensitivity to the stresses and conflicts faced by

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[11] Elsewhere hindsight enables Daymond (1995:565) to claim that racist legislation did not predate the Afrikaner victory of 1948: 'And this being the early 1940s, neither side in the meeting of "We-Them" is yet positioned by the weight of legislated racial difference (Daymond 1995:565). Unfortunately historians report that legislated racial difference was embodied in segregation and urban controls, the 1927 Immorality Act, the 1936 abolition of the old Cape franchise and the application of Chapter IV of the Natives' Land and Trust Act. In the nineteenth century the British influence tended to harden the hierarchies of race rather than dissolve them, and apartheid was a development of Lugard's system of indirect rule which in turn developed from the Shepstone system in Natal. See Maylam's (1994) argument that municipal influx controls in 1920s Durban innovated the mechanics of segregation and, ultimately, of apartheid.

women' has exemplary status (Daymond 1996a:223,227,229)[15]. In a gesture recalling Leavis' sliding of critic and artist into one composite figure in *For Continuity* (1933), an act of transference reshapes Head, as an outsider interpreting a rural Botswanan community, in the image of the sensitive academic interpreting Head's own writings. The individual (writer) becomes a unifying principle facilitating the mutual recognition of a common humanity or obligations, and the appeal to the subjectivity of the writer and reader effectively cuts the subject off from the forces that determine it.

Barbara Bowen, the U.S. series editor of *South African Feminisms*[16], concludes her overview of scholarship in the immediate post-apartheid years by echoing the theme of developing equity:

> Black women's autobiographies, oral literature, and ritual narrative come under discussion here, not just as rich textual performances but as complex mediations between black and white women, between State power and traditional patriarchy (Bowen 1996:xi).

Texts are conceived as 'complex mediations' between power structures, and academic discourse is the enabling site where these exchanges 'between black and white women, between State power and traditional patriarchy' are registered. The dysymmetrical form of these positions inside and outside the academy recedes behind a utopian conception of the institution as an open network of correspondences[17]. The violent

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[15] Isabel Hofmeyr (1992) has cautioned against the 'vague and ahistorical' approach of much feminist literary studies. Nadine Gordimer (1983:96) reacted to Hofmeyr's (1977;1979) historicisation of aesthetic categories within humanistic literary-critical discourse by refusing to 'swallow this (old) view of genius as a class-determined concept' emanating from 'a young white lecturer at an "ethnic" university for South African Indians'. Daymond (1996:xxxvii) commends Hofmeyr's work on oral tradition without informing her U.S. audience that Hofmeyr left a normative and ahistorical South African English literary studies for the more materialist based field of African studies.

[16] *South African Feminisms* was enthusiastically reviewed in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* 1997:23,4 (677-679) by Anthony O'Brien of Queen's College, City University of New York. Interestingly O'Brien is the partner of Bowen.

[17] Even when relationships of power within pedagogy are acknowledged literature remains a facilitator of reciprocity: 'Through exposure to alternative views and by developing the skills required to defend a viewpoint and to recognise good reasons to change one's mind when necessary, students are inducted—as full participants—into the arena of competing ideas and values' (Carusi 1998:33). The continuity of this hegemonic, moralistic view of literature suggests the need to modify Rory Ryan's (1998:22) claim that, within literary studies, there is 'no consensus ... no deep-structure assumption binding all practitioners'.

dominative history of how texts 'come under discussion'—the structuration of those who discuss and those discussed, the legacy of the discourses employed and the media of representation, etc.—remains opaque. The place of literary studies, and academic work in general, within a legal and institutional order developed during a historical process of colonial and neo-colonial expropriation is not addressed. Now the academic is prepared to listen to others but the factors that mediate interlocution are smothered by a rhetoric of reciprocity, and the anti-apartheid spirit of solidarity with the oppressed becomes a disarming platitude obscuring those repressive historical forces that continue to stand in the way of equality[18].

A vision of the university as the facilitator of mutual recognition between those within and beyond the institution, a means or instrument to mediate the transition to a new sense of citizenship, is shared by literary academics at the metropole and in South Africa. The pay-off is that the legitimacy of the university is affirmed and the validation of a writer remains the property of academics as legitimators of knowledges, revisers of canons and prescribers of texts. The chiliastic prospect of equitable exchange between imperialist centre and newly liberated periphery substitutes for the reality of exploitation[19]. In the debate on representation a normative, moralising approach to the transformative role of universities and the liberatory potential of academic autonomy obscures the fact that the existence of universities and their personnel is a legal existence dependent on the general nature of the state which is in turn shaped by the economic conditions of society, formal property relations and law. The pragmatist rhetoric of 'negotiation' presupposes mutually free agents able to contract obligations through agreement, and 'diversity' suggests naturalised variety rather than violently constructed differential stratification. The ideological resonances of such terms in academic arguments for pluralism need to be taken into account if 'positioned interpretation' is to enable academics to avoid 'reproducing the very terms and hierarchies of the institutions' (Boyce-Davies 1995:xviii). That is, if academics mobilising a moralising teleology of restitutive reconciliation wish to avoid facilitating an uncritical reconciliation with the immediate present, with the persisting forms of domination and servitude.

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[18]   Analysis is exchanged for historical arabesque in the claim that a literary text explores 'the troubles and truimphs of black women so as to bear witness to their courage and inestimable contribution to the healing process for which all South Africans long' (Coullie 1996:150). Consider the following shift in tense: 'The dangers of sweeping abstractions are especially great in apartheid South Africa where deprivation *was* so widespread that it might be robbed of its tragic import simply because the suffering *was* so general, and so anonymous' (Coullie 1997:141 e.a). So general and anonymous for who?

[19]   In terms of integration into the global economy, rather than experiencing an evolving reciprocity South Africa appears to be being further marginalised at the same time as apartheid labour segmentation is being intensified: see Padayachee (1997); Marais (1998:ch. 4); and Webster (1998).

conclusion

In a 'post-apartheid' context concerned with restitution and representivity attempts to negotiate the contradictions of academic work are producing a further impasse. Strategically reducing the value of mobilised discourses to intentionality or representivity—to the interest-determined operations of its participants, either in the form of their inferred or professed intentions or simplistically read off from the morphological code of their social identities—produces self-legitimating commodities of exchange that are readily accommodated and controlled by the institutions they claim to analyse. Positionality can disguise rather than expose the hierarchies of power and the circuits of exchange within the academic marketplace, and moralising professions of liberatory intent grounded in social identity are, like normative appeals for reciprocity and equality, part of the institutional currency. On the other hand, the gesture to inclusive pluralism and the move away from privileging social identity in the last instance risks underestimating the forces shaping the institutional site of academic production. The rhetoric of pluralism that unites a diversity of writers within the salariat can be taken to signal the containment of counter-hegemonic projects within the imperatives of professionalisation, a tacit concordat testifying to the co-opting capacities of bureaucratic systems. In this uneasy exchange the historic necessity of institutionalised representivity becomes a marginalist shuffling of personnel that legitimates rather than challenges existing institutions.

Claims to be promoting the pluralist, egalitarian distribution freedom, and counter-claims to the exclusive monopolisation of insurgent potential based on social identity both share a non-liberatory potential. The result of arguing that any academic can, with the requisite decorum, in principle speak about anybody else *or* that the social identity determines in the last instance the ability of academics to work successfully for the representation of the socially marginalised, may be the same. In either case foregrounding the autonomy of academics involves privileging a critical activity that represents the exercise of individual freedom and the realisation of discursive freedom. When autobiographical positioning functions as a kind of auto-justification or *egodicy* the institution is in turn vindicated as the site of a general resource of autonomous critical activity able to criticise other social institutions in the name of general freedom. As part of a general process of instititional self-criticism, the university thereby indirectly affirms the auto-reformist capacity of existing institutions facing widespread legitimation crises: reform is best managed from above in instrumentalist fashion by the self-critical clientele of the hierarchies of power.

Academics trying to highlight injustice by 'speaking about others' in accordance with the insistent imperative to realise what 'ought to be' run the risk of maintaining an intractable reality. This is because academic autonomy can work not only to secure the legitimacy of the university (nominally committed to the free use of reason), but also to validate the possibility of, and opportunity to achieve, freedom within the political economy that currently defines society. Performative gestures of commitment and sincerity testify to a desire on the part of academics to extirpate the legacy of victimisation. However, both the presentistic foregrounding of intention and the pathos of authenticity connoted by social identity can serve to erase the very

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