

What about the Audience? Silences in *Voicing the Text*

Priya Narismulu

Review Article

Voicing the Text

by Duncan Brown

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Introduction: 'assumptions ... which run counter to our own'

In *Voicing the Text*, Duncan Brown examines expressions of oral literature from the /Xam Bushmen, the praises of Shaka, the hymns of Shembe, Ingoapele Madingoane's Black Consciousness-inspired 'proemdra', and the performance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. Brown's aim is to

re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen, through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianized oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s (1).

This is laudable even though I have reservations about the stereotype 'Soweto poetry' (which will be addressed later). Brown contends that 'there is currently almost no recognition of the place of oral literature in poetic or literary histories of South Africa' (31). He draws on the critics Terry Eagleton, Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias to argue that

the crucial questions for criticism become: what does the text seek to accomplish in the spheres of social and political action, and how does it accomplish this (by what rhetorical features/formal strategies)? (18).

This is an interesting position in South African literary studies and there is more

clarity in the author's statement of the 'moral purpose' of the study:

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. This study therefore has a particular moral purpose ... it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history (2f).

Despite these intentions Brown fails to deal with the fundamental question of the language of the text/ performance and the issue of the reader's/ critic's facility, and the impact these have on interpretation and analysis. Yet in the first chapter of *Voicing the Text* Brown cites some interesting points raised by Ntongela Masilela in 1987:

[T]he arrival and construction of South African literature in English on the cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literatures in African languages, which had been in existence for millennia in South Africa. At the moment this literature exists in a state of temporary defeat. It is a literature whose natural evolution has been disrupted and momentarily sidetracked. As the hidden consequences of the present political and social crisis are beginning to indicate, especially on the cultural plane, the relationship between our literature in English and our indigenous literature in the African languages will have to be re-examined and redefined in post-revolutionary or post-apartheid South Africa (37)

However, Brown seems to be unaware, even in the post-apartheid state, of the issue of language that is the focus of Masilela's argument. Brown does not deal with the problem of language difference that is central to the study of South African literature and inescapable in the study of oral literature. Nowhere in this scholarly work does the writer address the challenges and limitations of working with translations (with a glancing exception early in the third chapter). Instead, the position and operation of an English-speaking critic on African language literature is treated as being natural and unproblematic. The author's failure to register the significance of such an issue is of concern to any reader and particularly to scholars. As a person who uses English as a first language although it is not my mother tongue, it is perhaps easier for me to be alert to the assumptions involved in such a practice.

The silence around language difference is quite interesting considering that Brown is in agreement with Barber and Moraes de Farias' position regarding the interdisciplinary nature of oral literature:

my concern is to combine a sociology with a poetics of oral literature, as Barber and Moraes de Farias suggest, and I read the textuality of *izibongo* as integral to its social function (80).

It is curious how a scholar may be alert to the need for dialogue between discipline but be unaware of the need for dialogue between languages (which are structured as disciplines at universities), even as various texts are being used in translation. Given the history of colonial and settler language policies and practices in South Africa this is even more surprising. And, to take the author at his claim, how can one argue that he reads 'the textuality of *izibongo* as integral to its social function', while avoiding the medium of language altogether?

The silence around the issue of language is intimately linked to the question of audience. And this is the crux of the problem. The question that has been haunting South African literature for decades is that of the identity of its audience. A few poets and critics of the 1970s and 1980s attempted to deal with the issue, but their work was largely marginalised. Even today the question of audience tends to be part of the unconscious contradiction of critical texts that try to remedy some shortcoming or travesty in academic practice. *Voicing the Text* demonstrates this through a deep-rooted failure to engage with this question at all, as the century tries to close on the effects of our divisions as a society.

In the Introduction Brown informs the reader that the second chapter examines 'how Zulu praise poetry of this kind speaks to us now' (28). This is an important issue. However, the author does not query his own position as a reader. He seems to assume that 'we' are homogeneous. Who 'we' might be is problematic, particularly in a text that steadfastly fails to acknowledge the writer's specific subject position but instead universalises it by default. Further, the word 'we' does not only privilege the author's position but also echoes the hegemonic 'we' of academic discourse. Given the structure of South African universities¹ this has the effect of

¹ It is the structure of South African universities that authorises Brown's comfortable use of the term 'we' and prevents him from seeing the flaw in his argument. I have written elsewhere about the widespread assumption among intellectuals [who think] of themselves as the 'natural' audience of literature, as exemplified by Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community' (1980). Such a position is produced through the tactical delimitation of the noun 'community' as the conservative liberals tried, in Bourdieu's terms, to impose the norms of their own perception, i.e. to be perceived as they perceive themselves (Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:19). In this way, questions regarding the source of interpretive authority are circumvented, and authority devolves as if by default upon a tiny intellectual coterie which constitutes itself as 'universal', transparent and ahistorical, but which tended to be white, male, middle-

marginalising the African audiences that receive the praises in performance and privileging white professional readers. Whether intended or not the argument has the effect of hijacking the oral texts. The absence of reflexivity and the neutralisation of the role of the professional reader have become so entrenched in South African academia that such practices have to be challenged even in the post-apartheid context.

The issue of the audience of literature is one that is contentious in itself. Yet, although the question of audience comes up several times in the text, the writer does not seem to notice the deficiencies in his construction. In the second chapter Brown refers to the poem "'Shaka", in the form that it has reached us' (83). That there is no homogenous 'us' in this case makes the claim more disconcerting than the issue of difference. A related problem is apparent later in the same paragraph when Brown makes the following argument:

Unless we are prepared to acknowledge that in spite of the 'instabilities' of transmission, translation, and reception, we can still recreate something of a speaking voice, we are in danger of arriving at an impasse: a blocking of communication which is not inevitable but ideological, and is a legacy of the Romantic myth of essential truth that is supposed to flow directly from the artist's own individual mouth or pen (84).

The problems are more basic. Academics who work with texts in translation need to expose the operations of their disciplinary power and not mystify it through hegemonising elisions. To have credibility as intellectuals in a complex society a modicum of frankness regarding our subject positions and our limitations and challenges as readers of South African culture is necessary.

The contradictions and ironies in the following passage from the second chapter seem to escape the writer. While some of the writer's intentions are laudable, they tend to be stymied by contradictions and a failure to follow through:

The title of this chapter ('Poetry, History, Nation') is intended to reverberate against present circumstances, as the question of how we read 'Shaka' at this juncture in South African history extends beyond the problem of its

class and Anglocentric. The presumption of a fairly homogeneous audience represents a tactical disregard of the deep divisions in South African society (Narismulu 1998b:193).

While Brown tries to go beyond the ideological horizons of the conservative liberals, his treatment of the questions of language and audience suggest that he still has to deal with the cognitive challenges.

referential specificities. Placing a poem such as 'Shaka' at the centre of literary study in South Africa makes available articulations of history by those who participated in and shaped that history (113).

Given the deafening silence on the issues of language and audience the use of 'we' is curious. The challenge for progressive intellectuals at this juncture is to ensure that they do not undermine their projects through old habits of thinking. In the same paragraph Brown makes the following point:

Zulu history and social formations—particularly the kingship and aristocracy (*'amakhosi'*)—have recently been mobilized by conservative organizations such as Inkatha in the cause of political power based on ethnic-separatist tactics (113).

A casual reader of the press will realise that while this may have been the case up to a decade ago, the issue is more complex in the 1990s, and Brown does a disservice to literary studies by not updating his reference base. The reader is left with the question of how Brown can claim to offer 'a more inclusive and coherent understanding of southern African literary and historical life' (36) when he has little to say about many critical issues.

Earlier in the second chapter Brown draws on an interesting point made by Jeff Opland about the office of the *imbongi*:

The *imbongi* is not paid by the chief or king, does not come from a separate caste or class, and is not designated as a poet through heredity: he (the office is reserved for men) has to earn the acclaim of the people (89).

Later, when Brown refers to the 'recitation of praise poets was featured at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President, and praises were delivered at the opening of South African's first democratic parliament' (115) the reader is intrigued, especially as there is the picture of Zolani Mkiva on the front and back covers of the book. However, Brown has little to say on the subject beyond:

There appears to be a real and continuing role for *izibongo* to advise, to criticize, and to deliver praise in modern circumstances, particularly as we seek socio-cultural institutions which are appropriate in South Africa to our changing imperatives, responsibilities, and identities (115).

And the reader wonders why the young man who has become Mandela's *imbongi* is not referred to in the text. Brown could tell us how Mkiva's role developed, the

extent to which it diverges from tradition, who engaged, legitimated and sponsored Mkiva's appearance at the inauguration, and so on. All of this is interesting but Brown misses the chance to draw the reader into the question of how the office of *imbongi* travels in modernity. It seems as though Mkiva's presence on both covers of the book is just a marketing ploy by a publisher who had a better understanding of readers' interest than the author. Brown doesn't do much justice to the *izibongo*, that 'unique form of social and aesthetic expression' (115), for the level of engagement is gestural. This is similar to the fascinating paragraph on the differences between the *imbongi* on the east and south east coasts (90), which offers no examples to consolidate the case. These are regrettable omissions.

Such gaps raise the larger problem of the second chapter, which is a good summary of other people's ideas, but there is little that is fresh, independent or insightful. There are more contentious issues in this chapter. Brown makes the point that

many Zulu speakers in KwaZulu-Natal can recite the *izibongo* of Shaka from memory because they were taught them at school as a bulwark against the 'subversive' aspirations of modernizing ideals (113f).

But Brown is conflating intention with affect while the history of the region in the last two decades suggests that a significant number of people have not subscribed to the conservative ideology propagated by the apartheid state and its allies.

Oral literature is a dynamic expression intimately connected to its audience. Its value in the field of South African literary studies is immense because it raises the question of who is the audience, an issue that has not been adequately addressed in colonialist and settler constructions of literature. Making sense of the literary production of our society requires a sensitivity to the audiences of literature and their significance. The mainstreaming of oral literature makes it difficult for literary/cultural scholars to abstract/extract literature from its material bases in the manner that other natural resources have been exploited. Academics are challenged to reorientate themselves and develop a critique of the narrow, ideological self-serving way in which literature has been constructed by some minority scholars with minority agendas. By engaging with such literary expression scholars are challenged to 'unlearn their privilege as their loss' (Spivak 1990:9) so that they can reconfigure the terrain. Brown is doing part of it, to the extent of valorising his own position but not risking it. As we participate in the broader processes of social change we learn that our literature is not to be divided along linguistic, racial or other lines. And scholars who want to make a contribution have to make the effort to learn other languages, particularly if they wish to make a serious contribution and to be taken seriously.

The deficiencies in Brown's conception of the audience of oral literature suggest a disregard not only of the significance of the audiences at the performances but a disregard for the emerging audiences of readers and critics that publicly funded academics and intellectuals are meant to be developing. Brown tends to restrict his readers to the solipsistic world of academic critics, most of whom are removed from the subject of oral literature through ideology, language, class and race. Brown fails to grasp the impact that the absence of black voices has upon his analysis. Even if colonialism clarifies the rest, has nothing happened since 1990? In Brown's writing on the *izibongo* of Shaka there is no attempt to bring English and isiZulu and black and white scholars into dialogue. The voices of black people tend to be present principally as some pre-text mediated through colonial/settler records. In Brown's representation of it, Zulu culture seems to have existed long enough to have its *izibongo* recorded by colonial figures and then became extinct. So the praises of Shaka end up telling the reader more about colonial and settler orthography than about the subject. But even that is an issue waiting to be addressed by a South African critic who has a substantive understanding of isiZulu and Zulu culture and political history up to the present.

As a scholar at the turn of the century does Brown not feel it is time to redress the historical silence in academic discourse of the people closest to the performances of the poetry? Where are the voices of such audiences and why has Brown not accessed them? Again, the flaw is in the research method that homogenises, diminishes and marginalises the African audiences of the oral performances to privilege the white/minority academic audience. And the chasm between the social and intellectual contexts of reception remains unnoticed and unvoiced. By confining himself principally to the work of intellectuals in the field Brown is restricting himself and his readers to people who are mainly white.

Some of the limitations in Brown's position regarding audience seem to be entirely analytical. In an early endnote Brown defends Ruth Finnegan against Leroy Vail and Landeg White's criticism that only her first book 'relate[s] in any detail the literature to the society that values it' (31) in the following terms: 'However, I would argue that a careful reading of her work reveals her constant concern to historicise the oral forms she discusses' (31). Without going into the merits of Vail and White's argument it is evident that Brown misses the sociological issue that is being raised. Given the intentions expressed regarding the purpose of the book in the introductory chapter (cited earlier) this is disappointing.

Shembe

The third chapter focuses on the hymns of Isaiah Shembe which

occupy an unofficial space beyond the mission churches and the institutions of colonial governance, where they speak in new ways about the experiences of colonization, economic dispossession, and social decay (129).

Brown draws on Karin Barber's work on popular art forms to characterise Isaiah Shembe's hymns as being popular. It is true that Nazarite churches have long resisted the mission and established churches and constitute powerful and syncretic religious forces. Millions of people have been attracted to these churches (a fact not missed by the political parties who show great devotion to the Zionists at election time). However, although these churches represent the largest organised groupings in the country, this does not necessarily mean that they can be characterised as popular. Questions regarding the mode of organisation and power relations within the organisations need to be addressed. Shembe is a messianic figure to his followers and his movement tends to be dynastic and patriarchal, but Brown does not seem to notice how that stands in contradiction to the popular. Further, he offers no understanding of how Shembe's hymns may be characterised as popular expression, given that, as with most religious movements, participation and performance is prescribed, and there is little room for spontaneity, innovation and experimentation. Whether the performance of the hymns may be considered popular, or how they relate to the lives of members remains unaddressed.

The reader waits in vain for the socio-literary analysis that Brown makes a gesture of addressing in his introductory chapter (25). Why, for instance, are millions of people attracted to the movement? What community of interests are served/articulated/negotiated by and through the hymns? Do performances of the hymns deviate from the hymn book, and how and why does this occur or not occur? Brown does not tell us. Despite Brown's claim to want to 'open up a new area for literary study' (166), he does little service to the development of oral literature in an account that tends to be unconvincing and lacking in rigour. It is evident again that the analytical shortcomings are located in the writer's construction of the audience of this study. It is also evident that the writer hasn't thought it necessary to do any field research.

It is not possible for a scholar of oral performance just to rely on a hymn book (and other critics) for his information, particularly when the majority of followers of Shembe have not had the benefit of literacy. Given Brown's reliance on the hymn book of 1940, the question arises: how is his construction of the hymns to be construed as oral literature anyway? In Brown's conception oral literature is a loose, flaccid category. A potentially interesting area of exploration is weakened with scholarship that leaves the reader wondering whether the powerful movement has been isolated and abstracted from political reality and can only offer the poor and downtrodden a brief escape from reality. Clearly there is much more to it but that is not available here.

Although Brown uses the category 'popular' and draws on the work of theorists of popular literature like Karin Barber, he displays no understanding of the complexities of the term and its application to South African society. Instead, he sets up the popular as a straw category and then dismisses it for trumped-up reasons. Brown's manipulation of the construct is apparent in the following passage:

The idea of cultural forms 'talking back' to the colonizing power in fugitive and often irreverent ways is an attractive one, particularly in view of the current concerns of colonial and postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, what these forms actually say may be intensely conservative. A full engagement with the popular in literary studies requires neither a valorization of 'the people' nor a dismissal of them for expressing 'false consciousness', but a frank consideration of the structures of belief which these forms articulate, an analysis of their implication, an understanding of the conditions which produce them and a recognition of the undeniable appeal which these forms hold for large numbers of people (129)

Despite drawing on Barber's work, the first sentence sounds like the voice of an accidental tourist, unfamiliar with the history of struggle and suffering in South Africa not just under colonialism but during the long and harsh period of settler colonialism. This impression is reinforced by the conclusion of the first sentence, which is responsive not to history or the social conditions but makes concessions to the current intellectual fashion. The middle sentence is also quite curious: of all the examples in South African literature Brown chooses to characterise the hymns of the Shembe movement as being 'popular'. Then he contrives to point out that 'what these forms actually say may be intensely conservative', without clarifying that he has set up this questionable construction of the popular. The long last sentence cannot be challenged, and Barber (1987:7), Cabral (1983:207) and Mattelart (Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:18,25) make the argument well. However, the inclusion of such a point in Brown's argument is questionable for Brown and his intended audience are in no danger of such an error, as evidenced by his choice of example. Whether consciously or unconsciously, through such assertions and scholarship Brown undermines a construct that has had a powerful resonance in the history of South Africa. That South Africa is free of an oppressive system, that degraded not only the majority but also the beneficiaries of that system, is due in no small measure to the popular will and actions of millions of ordinary people over decades of struggle. There is no recognition of that immensely powerful articulation of the popular and the democratic in Brown's analysis. Such a silence is interesting given the criticism he feels moved to offer.

While the hymns of Shembe may represent an expression of the popular in

South African literary culture they represent a type, a populist variety, and cannot be confused with the popular-democratic forms, which cover many of the resistance poems. If Brown wished to examine the impact of populist leaders, the most sophisticated and ironic of them is Nelson Mandela. But there is no analysis even of Mandela's *imbongi* Zolani Mkiva, as remarked earlier.

To return to the construct of the popular, the question arises: what might the popular be, besides the conceptual ghost in Brown's narrative, paralleling the ghost of an audience written off by his argument. Brown's ambivalence towards the construct of the popular is suggested in his statement 'Karin Barber's theorisation of 'popular' art forms in African societies is useful here, and may provide a conceptual framework for the literary forms discussed in the next three chapters' (127). The cautious 'may' proves to be the operative word: while the construct is misapplied to the Shembe hymns, in the remaining chapters it is used mainly in passing, while in the chapter on Black Consciousness the term is used quite negatively.

Any construction of the popular is accompanied by a range of complexities and ambiguities. The construct has a variety of partly overlapping, partly incompatible meanings, which is the consequence of being a heavily ideological term (Barber 1987:6). As Mattelart recognises, popular space 'is not a space given *a priori* ... a constitutive definition of the popular is itself at stake in the struggle' (Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:18). V.N. Volosinov's argument that a word 'is determined by *whose* word it is and for *whom* it is meant' (1973:86) offers an important means of checking on the validity of any construction of the popular. Volosinov's statement resonates in the work of postcolonial writers like Wole Soyinka (1975), Karin Barber (1987), Trinh Minh-ha (1989), Gayatri Spivak (1990) and Edward Said (1993), all of whom use it in ways that are productive for the construction of the popular-democratic, such as Barber's (1987:5) generative formulation:

We need to ask by whom and by what means, in what circumstances, under what constraints, in whose interests, and in accordance with what conventions, these arts are produced.

That which is popular, in a democratic sense, is always in the making and always up for contestation. The popular-democratic is constituted through the process of struggle. Popular-democratic literature has been important in the political struggle, the more so as other spaces were either marked off or closed off. Such literature offers a record of the political and cultural development of people who reject having to be the object of politics and who insist on their right to become empowered subjects. The links with the political project of liberation are most evident where literary works construct new speaking places to enable people to speak to, for and of each other. Popular-democratic literature constructs spaces where voices that have

been marginalised, fragmented, dislocated, excluded and otherwise silenced can be seen in relation to each other. This does have overtones of redress, for in South Africa such voices tend to represent an overwhelming majority.

Given the context in which popular-democratic literature arises it necessarily has to participate, as Mattelart argues in an 'unequal, but dialectical, exchange with the dominant cultural grid with its norms, values, models and signs connected to ruling power' (Mattelart and Siegelaub 1983:17). This is most evident in the Black Consciousness poetry and indeed in most of the resistance poetry.

Owing to the precarious political situation, expressions of popular-democratic culture tend to be makeshift and contingent, work in progress, necessarily provisional, experimental and hybrid. But Mattelart asserts that this does not imply that the popular-democratic is a flaccid, catch-all category (that Brown seems to think it is):

Admitting that the space of popular concepts and practices is a space under construction and thus open to debate does not mean that it is an empty bottle into which everyone pours their own meaning (Mattelart & Siegelaub 1983:24).

Writers and composers of popular-democratic literature have been alert to the fact that literature represents the most complex embodiment of persuasive language, even as they recognised that the relationship of literature to politics is highly mediated. They used their hard-won public voices to challenge the dominant political and cultural discourses, opening up new possibilities in literary form and language, as they reconceptualised the relationships between power, communication and art.

Many of the resistance writers had a clear grasp of the creative, critical and communicative functions of language and literature under apartheid, which makes the confusion of later scholars of South African literature all more puzzling. For instance, Brown draws on Charles Olson's work, published in 1950, to make the case that

one of the most important allies which the poet has in attempting to return to poetry its oral and aural dimensions—the 'breathing' and 'listening' of its creator—is typography (189).

Olson's enthusiasm for typography as a means of recording oral performance is understandable at a time when the tape recorder was just entering public use (Hiller 1974:674). Five decades later, a critic should register the technological innovations of audio- and video- tape and their effectiveness as recorders of oral performance, and indeed Brown's final chapter examines the work of Mzwakhe Mbuli, which was

disseminated partly by tape recordings. But perhaps this is the dilemma of literary critics who would study oral performance: there is a weddedness to the print medium, as in Brown's attempts, in the third chapter, to restructure the transcript of Ingoapele Madingoane's oral poem 'black trial/ seventeen' (190f).

Diverted by such technical issues Brown completely misses the link between the resistance literature and popular communication. Although he refers to Brecht who 'emphasized ... economic imperatives and historical dialectics—the human subject who acts within and upon society to bring about change' (200), Brown fails to recognise that the literature acted as a mode of popular communication under the oppressive state. But he is confused about the meaning of popular, as evidenced in his inadequate gestures at Barber's work instead of grasping the richness of her argument. Brown's grasp of the popular is reactive. For instance, he does not understand what is creative about these forms of expression. Again, the problem is to be located in the neglect of the significance of the audience. Contrast this with the practice of a poet like Wally Serote more than two decades ago. In a range of poems for performance Serote offers several reflexive examples of human subjects who act within and upon society to effect change (1972; 1978; 1982).

In the third chapter, on Black Consciousness poetry, Brown draws on Fanon to point out the danger of 'culture put into capsules' (172). However, Brown himself is in danger of presenting the Shembe movement as 'historically "encapsulated" and "static"' (173), gesturing to a 'return to the sources' (196f), apparently unaware of Cabral's (1983:207) critique of this postcolonial manoeuvre decades ago:

'return to the sources' is historically important *only* if it involves both a genuine commitment to the fight for independence and a total, definitive identification with the aspirations of the masses.

Later, Brown's discussion of Ingoapele Madingoane's treatment of history carries the formulation, 'As part of his return to the source, Madingoane evokes the leaders of a heroic past' (196f). However, Brown seems unaware of Cabral's correction of Senghor's position. Cabral's (1979:207) cautions against the gesture of a 'return to the sources' by elites who use commodified and partial versions of the past to preserve and celebrate their power, and to gloss over their failure to make any effective contribution to the popular struggles for national liberation.

'A pedestrian exercise'?: the poetry of Black Consciousness

The fourth chapter addresses the ways in which the black consciousness movement used oral forms and focuses on 'the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression' (166). The state was not the only source of repression

experienced by the resistance writers. Some forms of repression, such as stereotyping and marginalisation, were cultural. Brown's use of the constructs 'Soweto poets' and 'Soweto poetry', as though they were not contested years earlier by the poets so described, is evidence of this. The term comes from Michael Chapman's collection of essays *Soweto Poetry* (1982a) and the anthology *Voices From Within* edited by Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor (1982b). The inaccurate but internationally recognisable term was applied to the poets Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala and Siphosiphopho Sepamla, when only one of them, Sepamla, actually lived in Soweto for a time. Despite various objections by the poets, e.g., by Gwala, who lives in Mpumalanga township, Kwazulu-Natal, (Gwala 1989:70), the term continues to be used in some academic circles (Narismulu 1998b:195-197). The resistance poetry had as much connection with that particular township as any other. Perhaps its cachet among an 'international' audience explains its persistence.

Brown focuses on Ingoapele Madingoane's *africa my beginning* (1979), which was banned shortly after publication. However, since Madingoane had performed the material

extensively in the townships before the poems appeared in print, he just continued to recite the poems after the banning of the book (165f).

Addressing scholars' treatment of the resistance poetry in the same chapter, Brown makes a point that is unwittingly reflexive:

perceptions of Soweto poetry have remained largely page-bound, and discussion of this period has tended to focus on the influence of orality on print forms rather than on poetry which was performed at large gatherings (181).

Given that he knows better, as is clear from the last two quotations, Brown still errs a few pages later. Discussing Madingoane and other members of the Medupe cultural group, Brown comments that 'the poets transformed poetry from a printed phenomenon into a performance event' (184). Indeed, Brown's earlier chapter on the Shembe hymns offer few insights into the performative context and could have benefited from such an insight, although the last chapter, on Mzwakhe and Qabula, is better.

Despite the reservations noted above I concur fully with Brown's (178f) critique of Stephen Watson's diatribe on BC poetry (Narismulu 1998b). However, as Watson tends to receive more attention than his work warrants, I will leave it at that for now.

It is Brown's analysis of gender that has more immediate interest. Brown

makes the points that BC 'maintained and promoted the institution of patriarchy' (172) and that 'Madingoane's 'black trial' is unable to grant women status as social agents' (203). It is true that in a time when patriarchy was not openly contested, except in a few feminist circles, the discourse of BC expresses affirmation of the supposedly generic black man subjected to apartheid. But this cannot be conflated with the promotion of patriarchy as a whole. For instance, BC was quite rigorous in its challenge to the paternalist masks of apartheid and the liberal intellectuals. Brown offers a reasoned analysis of Madingoane's situation and an allowance that 'one may risk historical anachronism' (205). He also points out that 'none of the contributors to Michael Chapman's casebook *Soweto Poetry* (1982a) raised any significant questions about the presentation of women' (205). Perhaps not, but Brown should not rest his case so lightly. There is Fatima Dike's play *The First South African* (written and performed in 1977 but published in 1979), and various articles in *Staffrider*: Boitumelo's article (1979) which includes the contributions of Winnie Morolo and Ntombiyakhe kaBiyela kaXhoka and Manoko Nchwe; Lindiwe Mvemve (1980), Amelia House (1980) and Miriam Tlali (Seroke 1981). There is also Wally Serote's poetry from the late-1960s.

It is interesting that Brown raises the issue of attention to the interests of women in BC but not in the chapter on the Shembe hymns. He challenges a movement that existed two decades ago but does not raise the issue in relation to a movement that has a vibrant existence today when questions of gender and power are an integral part of public discourse. And women form the majority in the Shembe movement. The inconsistency in the analysis suggests less of a commitment to the interests of women and more of a need to challenge the BC movement's focus on racial oppression.

Earlier in the book Brown makes the interesting point that 'we should beware of turning criticism into a pedestrian exercise of tracking down references' (111). Such defensiveness in an 'impeccably researched' 'scholarly work' (blurb) is a little anomalous. The chapter on Black Consciousness (or 'black consciousness', as Brown prefers) proves quite enlightening. Brown draws on an article by Tony Emmett to make the following point:

The younger poets in fact often regarded established poets such as Sepamla and Serote with hostility and mistrust, accusing them of having 'pulled their punches' for the sake of their white publishers (183)².

² In the endnote Brown makes the unreferenced assertion that 'The poets of the Medupe group regarded Sepamla's position as a capitulation to 'white standards'' (210).

The extract is taken from Emmett's article 'Oral, Political and Communal Aspects of Township Poetry in the Mid-seventies' (first published in the journal *English in Africa* in 1979 and then reproduced in Chapman's *Soweto Poetry*):

What did the younger generation poets, to whom Sepamla refers, think at the time? A discussion with a group of them suggested that the main purpose of their poetry was to put across a message, the substance of which was 'black awareness They suspected the published poets like Sepamla, Mongane Wally Serote and Mafika Pascal Gwala, who they maintained 'pulled their punches' (1982a:181)

It is not clear who Emmett is referring to in the words 'a group of them'. Emmett offers no source or reference for the supposed remark³. It is not, as the reader may infer, from Siphso Sepamla's article 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas', which is also in Chapman's *Soweto Poetry* (1982a). Emmett offers no inkling of the identity or number of the 'younger generation poets' whom he cites at great length (in two paragraphs of about 400 words). Where these statements were made, when, and in what context is not explained. That the omission undermines the argument seems to have escaped the attention of the writer, Tony Emmett; the editor/s of the journal *English in Africa*; the editor of *Soweto Poetry*, Michael Chapman; the thesis writer, Duncan Brown; 'the supervisor of the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based', Michael Chapman (ix); the author of this book, Duncan Brown and the editor/s at Oxford University Press.

How have such oversights occurred, and what do they suggest about the nature and standard of South African literary scholarship? Perhaps the ideological value of the statement accounts for the oversight on the part of a chain of scholarly authorities. Given the loaded nature of the statement, did none of them want to know the source or think that their readers would be interested in such information? Did they assume that their readers would be as satisfied as they presumably were with the assertion that some young Black poets, never mind whom, were critical of the leading resistance poets?

The question of audience that has haunted South African literary studies is no less trenchant here: in the late 1970s and 1980s those who might have raised an objection were too busy challenging more palpable sources of contention, such as the state. But *Voicing the Text* has been written in the post-apartheid period and scholars no longer have the luxury of taking their audiences for granted. But little caution is drawn from this. It is evident that the author's neglect of the audiences of oral

³ Brown himself expresses some reservations about his source: 'Emmett's conception of African poetry and performance seem somewhat limited and static' (184).

literature has a parallel in his presumption regarding the audience of this text. This is regrettable, especially when the scholar is publicly funded and the society is at a critical stage of its development.

Although apartheid may have refined the imperialist tactic of 'divide and rule', when were the author or his literary ancestors and editors compelled to offer themselves as heirs to such a strategy? This curious mode of argumentation, of making vague and unreferenced gestures at objections by unnamed black people to the work of the resistance poets is also used by Stephen Watson, who claims the responses of some of his black students to support his argument (1990:87). Such a tactic is rash given the longstanding challenges to the authenticity of the 'Native Informant': Chinua Achebe pillories a District Commissioner's inept attempts to gather strategic information about 'the natives' in the framing passages of *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Wally Serote mocks the assigned role of the 'Native Informant' in 'The Actual Dialogue' (1972:9), as Peter Horn does in 'A Vehement Expostulation' (1991:75). Trinh Minh-ha (1989:67) and Gayatri Spivak (1990:66)(4) also tackle the issue in their critical writings. How different is Watson's argument from the apartheid government's attempts to co-opt Black people to justify its policies? For instance, the homelands were made viable by the instalment of tokens to act as authorities. And even they had names and were not ciphers like the nameless 'Native Informants' in Watson and Brown's arguments. When Watson or Brown want to argue that there are Black people who have been critical of the work of the resistance poets they should not offer racial stereotyping in lieu of the necessary research. This is unacceptable on the part of publicly-funded South African intellectuals. Such scholarship also undermines the development of literary and cultural studies.

All of this is interesting given that the fourth chapter is meant to focus on BC's mobilization of oral forms, particularly on the possibilities of performance poetry under apartheid (166). What is even more interesting is Brown's recognition that the influence of 'jazz and blues music ... is common in Soweto poetry' (186), and that Serote's 'oral [and jazz]-influenced narrative poems', such as *No Baby must Weep* (1975) and *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978), have 'not been the subject of significant study' (166f). However, Brown does not deal in any depth with Serote's work, which offer the most powerful examples of how BC (and post-BC) poems mobilized oral forms, drew on blues music, and what is most significant, focused on the issue of audience. It is as if Brown lost sight of his stated project:

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. This study therefore has a particular moral purpose ... it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to

retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history (2f).

Brown's quotations from Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial' (200, 201, 202) also suggest that it would have been more fruitful to have dealt with Madingoane's poems in the context of the Serote's work, particularly as Serote addresses the issues that Madingoane raises earlier and perhaps more successfully.

Through the struggle resistance writers like Serote and Madingoane realised that they had to offer more than a language of critique, and explored the constructive and liberatory capacities of their medium as they committed skills and other resources to the political resistance. At the same time the struggle served to rescue culture from its colonial dependencies, from being fragmented and marginalised; giving content and materiality to that which had been inchoate. In turn the popular-democratic literature of the 1970s and 1980s helped inaugurate a determinedly post-colonial culture, which struggled to free itself from the accretions of history, willed its psychological independence and went beyond the existing configurations to address and try to serve the interests of its emerging audience:

South African writers have begun to forge a genuine literature of the people: a literature in which the spectator and the reader have acquired an importance that is perhaps unprecedented in the history of literature: a literature which reflects back to its readers their struggle for emancipation, and at the same time reinvigorates them for that very struggle: a literature which has abandoned the universities and the comfortable living rooms of the intellectuals in favour of the streets (Watts 1989:37).

Given the challenges and obstacles that they faced, the volume, range and depth of the work produced by resistance writers in the 1970s and 1980s is surprising and largely unacknowledged as a corpus except in such inaccurate and reductive appellations as 'Soweto poetry'. Instead the construct of the popular-democratic helps make sense of the volume, range, depth and character of this material, and to begin a systematic account of it. Some of the most powerful expressions of the popular-democratic are in the medium of poetry, oral and written. As Jeremy Cronin pointed out:

In the last decade ... poetry has been marching in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land (*Weekly Mail*, 13.3.87:19).

Characterised by a sense of urgency that the oppressed in South African society speak among themselves as well as for themselves, Serote's poetry articulates a

powerful affirmation of the emerging audience of South African poetry in English. Serote's experiments with the construction of the speaker chart his intensifying political involvement, from the 'I' (uppercase) of *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and most of *Tsetlo* (1974), to the 'i' (lowercase) of *No Baby Must Weep* (1975), 'Behold Mama, Flowers' (1978:11-61) and 'Poem: on Distances' (1978:66). As the resistance grew Serote ceased to use the literary device of the singular persona, for it suggested an artistic transcendence of reality while the majority of South Africans lived under the threat of the state. Serote gave up the class-based privilege of distance/abstraction in literature, the better to represent and develop his identification with ordinary people. In this way he affirms the cultural and ideological significance of ordinary people.

Forced into exile like thousands of activists, Serote dealt with his severance by creating the conditions for speaking community in his work. Serote gave up the lyric form and his experiments with long autobiographical poems, and began to use didactic and rallying forms that eliminated the distance between speaker and poet.

Far from indulging his audience Serote places great responsibility upon ordinary people as active participants in the production of meaning in a society that had to liberate itself. Serote showed an inclusive sense of the role of the artist as a co-developer of his/her society. He used an innovative set of structural devices to engage his intended audience in the *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978) collection. He fused the techniques of jazz music and the oral traditions, as is evident in his use of a declamatory style and formulaic statements. Derived from the local oral tradition, the formulaic statements comprise particular refrains, choruses and chants that serve as repetitive structures to give coherence to the performance poems.

The experimentalism that characterises the work of the resistance writers of the 1970s and 1980s is linked to their conviction that literature could change their audience's 'perception not only of reality, but also of art—of what it is and what its potential role could be' (Brett 1986:10). Serote offers a very simple and effective demonstration of the scale of responsibility that rests upon the audience in the conclusion to 'When Lights Go Out' (1978:69f), which was written years before the mass marches of the mid- and late-1980s. The challenge in the poet's concluding statement suggests that what the reader derives from such a (necessarily) cryptic statement has to do with what the reader is prepared to put into it:

only if we know how, can we harness time—
can you hear the footsteps.

Poems such as these depend upon the response of the audience for closure. The poet eschewed the writer-reader hierarchy, and affirmed his faith in his audience as comrades in the struggle to produce a more equitable society. This is a public and mobilizing form of art, that closely involved and represented its audience. Far from

homogenising the oppressed, as the construct of the mass popular tends to do, the popular-democratic takes risks to invoke and render the complex community of interests. The literature serves as much more than the fetish of a class or subculture. By relating cultural practices to other forms of social and political activity, and by challenging the cultural apparatuses themselves, such works tend to challenge and transform the ruling concepts of literature⁴.

Popular-democratic literature does not seek to be objective, neutral, trans-historical or trans-geographic, for it takes its bearings from its temporal and spatial location as well as from the history of repression and marginalisation of the majority. Based on the recognition of power as the basis of all social practice, the popular-democratic represents a counterhegemonic project. Collective forms of organisation are invoked to change established structures. Just as literature has been used by the dominant to maintain hegemony, many resistance writers/composers have conscripted it into the service of the oppressed. Activist writers and composers have used their texts strategically to intervene in various discourses of power and to exert pressure that was otherwise impossible given the conditions of repression.

Poems like *Behold Mama*, *Flowers* constructed spaces for voices that had been fragmented, dislocated, marginalised and silenced, in this way anticipating the developments in the labour and the mass democratic movements in the 1980s. Through the poem Serote shows how literature can be invigorated and directed by the struggle for political and cultural freedom: 'a communication which is not just content to bring communication to the masses, but seeks to liberate their speech' (Getino in Matelart & Siegelau 1983:22). It is apparent that Brown's conception of the popular, which is limited to the notion of the mass popular, has little of the complexity of the democratic notion of the popular.

Dealing with the issue of BC and gender sensitivity Brown, conceding that 'one may risk historical anachronism' (205), feels moved to argue that 'popular forms often reveal intense conservatism' (203). While part of this issue has been addressed earlier, what is interesting at this point is Brown's failure to notice the significance of the popular-democratic in the resistance literature and his inability to see anything of value in popular cultural expressions. This is quite interesting position given his choice of subject and period. It is even more interesting given that Brown set out to offer a socio-literary analysis: 'I shall aim to relate literary form to societal function' (25). Yet he is patently unable to locate the literature within the major social movement of the time.

⁴ The construct of the audience is key to the power of some of the most innovative literature of the 1970s and 1980s that drew on the oral tradition and the English and isiZulu languages. For instance, refer to Mbongeni Ngema's early play *Asinamali* (1985) (Narismulu 1998a).

There is an early assertion that clarifies the writer's assumptions

In particular [this chapter] is concerned with the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression especially when the challenges of modernity are met by invocations to, and evocations of, a mythologised African past (166).

Brown uses Madingoane to address such issues when this was scarcely typical of most resistance poetry. However, such a choice strengthens the impression gained from the Emmett quotation that Brown uses BC only to dismiss it. This makes the reader resist the equivocation in the following statements: 'Soweto poetry (like the hymns of Isaiah Shembe) was a popular, fugitive form speaking in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces' (175). The counter argument is that these cannot to be equated because the resistance poets had to deal with the notoriously repressive actions of the apartheid state.

Such arguments confirm the reader's wariness at the early equation of the role and content of Serote's poems with that of Livingstone's:

I shall be reacting against the established line based upon the printed word, which begins with Thomas Pringle and ends with Douglas Livingstone or Mongane Wally Serote (1).

While the comment does not clarify Brown's position and makes, at best, a gesture of being radical, it is disingenuous to suggest that the South African literary canon ever equated the poetry of Wally Serote to that of Douglas Livingstone. Any student of one or both poets would realise that this is not how their work was received by the literary establishment.

In the final chapter Brown deals with the poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. He refers to Michael Chapman's important 1988 essay 'The liberated zone: the possibilities of imaginative expression in a state of emergency', but seems unaware of Liz Gunner's 1986 article 'A dying tradition? African oral literature in a contemporary context'. That he was unfamiliar with Gunner's article disadvantages his analysis. For instance, Gunner (1986:33) clarifies the socio-political significance of the *izibongo*, which

represent valuable 'property' in any ideological struggle. The usage of *izibongo* by opposing groups points up the struggle for control that is being waged.

Gunner (1986:37) also pointed out that the trade union poets used powerful cultural symbols to

show how a working class culture can show inheritance of, rather than

dispossession from, those nationalist and popular symbols so vital to a people's contemporary self-image.

This depth of analysis is lacking in Brown's argument. One of the most trenchant points for the analysis of the relationship of praise and worker poetry (Brown's second and fifth chapters) is the argument that worker *izibongo* show

workers defining their own culture. Perhaps most important of all, it shows the seductive symbols of the Zulu past being lured away from an aggressive ethnic nationalism and put to the service of a wider, more egalitarian cause (Gunner 1986:37).

What is apparent throughout this book is that although the author begins with a set of interesting ideas, he fails to follow through on them. The argument lacks clarity about why oral literature is important, and what impact does this have on the way in which South African literature is constructed. While his basic thesis shows an openness to the centrality of oral literature, his position turns out to be an abstraction. The analytical limitations in Brown's work are evident in the valid argument that 'during the 1980s, critics were for the most part unable to engage constructively with the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula as oral texts, and I argue for relocating this poetry in the discursive field of orality' (29). However, what he does not attend to is the question of the audiences who did respond to the work of resistance poets such as Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. His analysis would have been the richer for paying attention to the contexts of performance and to the responses of people who did understand and/or value the work. And from the evidence of the last chapter, the poetry of Mbuli and Qabula do not seem to speak to the author at all, which may clarify the lukewarm nature of the project.

School of Languages and Literature
University of Durban-Westville

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