



## ***A Curious Confusion in the Fynbos: Taking Shape and Sound***

by Penelope Allsobrook

This contribution begins by returning to the memory of a garden gathering, and to how “[i]t was the hymns, the lifting up of voices that touched us most keenly. Every so often, someone stood up to relate a story which connected them to Liz, uMaJack [...]” The sense of belonging in another language which is and which can become one’s own, already alluded to here, now continues.

“Masibonisane ngale nto sisi, let us discuss that: You know, to discuss, ukubonisana, it literally means to show each other. So, ujonge phi namhlanje, sisi? What is your intention today, sister?” Phelewe Mbatyoti’s question rings through from Fort Hare University in our weekly lessons. I want you to test me, I say: Ndifuna andivavanye. Ndixelele, tell me, ndibonise, show me. I want to speak about loss surfacing on the shingle, with the push and pull of the sea. Instead, I state the banal: Injongo yam ukufunda ukuthetha isiXhosa kakuhle. Kuza kuthatha ixesha elide ukuba ndithethe gca, kodwa kufuneka ndibe nomonde. My intention is to speak and to understand Xhosa to a reasonable degree, although I find myself listening out more for what surprises me in our dialogue, the ambiguities and the contradictions. Motivating me during this process is a notion made apparent in my PhD proposal, where I maintain “that white South Africans unwittingly perpetuate not only others’ but also their own domination through not speaking other South African languages and this is part of what keeps the land divided.” And while I sit at my desk in Cologne, revising the Xhosa noun classes, the words of a Southern academic from the Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa – those of my brother, Christopher Allsobrook – repeat: “Dominance of Euro-American epistemologies? Epistemic biases? Here are my two cents: The Northern Academy does not brutally and systematically neglect subaltern knowledge through prejudice. They suck it up like a baleen whale.”

The whale gets fatter and fatter in the process – and what is to be done?

“Well, it’s not much of an abstract thing, is it? The connection to the present moment is very tangible, very physical. I’ve been re-reading Levinás, and find I am understanding him better. I try to apply him to what I do.” Folkwang University of the Arts professor Brian Michaels’ words resonate after our informal meeting in Stadgarten to discuss the idea behind this year’s production of *The Taming of the Shrew*: the ninth of the university’s Shakespeare Festival productions which collaborate with international drama students. Having come to Essen-Werden this April from the Drama Academy Ramallah, the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki, as well as the Durban University of Technology, they staged their own interpretations of the play in German, Arabic, Finnish, English and Zulu, culminating on the last two evenings with a multilingual performance. “It’s really about creating a common language through theatre,” adds Michaels, “about showing what can happen where there is no need to categorise or manipulate.”

A memory returns of Liz's funeral mentioned above: finding a child, a young boy who had run off with the gathering dusk to play hide-and-seek in amongst the thicket of bitter aloes, blue cycads, and ericas. The delight in being hidden with the monkey beetles! But then, not being discovered? "It is more than keeping a watchful eye", suggests his elder brother, who is with me; "Is it not also about wanting to see, being inquiring, keeping the wonderment close to your heart? Good thing we found him now, it looks like the rain is finally coming."

Imvula, the word for rain, I learn, is derived from the verb ukuvula: to open; the rain opens the ground for ploughing. Being open, the challenge is in remaining vulnerable enough to be touched and to touch each and the other, as seen in Breyten Breytenbach's (2009) dialogue with a fellow poet in his Voice Over: A Nomadic Conversation with Mahmoud Darwish:

here in the verged north  
where earth is gleaned green  
right up to the dreamt coast of longing  
and the blind singer fingers the wind  
for the mating call of domed dead whales  
I can still hear you. (8)

but who am I  
to make of the void an embarrassed verse? who?

who am I to animate this conversation  
with you? Who am I?  
the Whisperer could have not forsaken me  
and the Whisperer is the lost one's guide. (10)

Breytenbach's homage to his friend Mahmoud Darwish, as he mentions in his end note, after learning of his death, is presented here in the form of a collage – his own work interwoven with verse by that of Darwish. The intensity of their engagement, their continued encounter in Voice Over, cuts to the quick, leading me to a potential conversation between the South African Nontsizi Mqgwetho and the Lebanese-American Etel Adnan: two women between whom local and global knowledge connect in true form. Mqgwetho, pioneer and the only female poet to date to have produced a corpus of such significance in Xhosa, published her writings in the newspaper Umteteli wa Bantu between 1920 and 1929 (Opland, 2007:xvi). Her conversation partner for now, Adnan, is a contemporary poet and visual artist born in 1925:

**Nontsizi:**

Halahoyi! Ma Afrika, something stinks like the river snake, fouling the air (2007:150).

**Etel:**

Where are we? Where? There is a where, because we are, stubbornly, and have been, and who are we, if not you and me? Who are we, a race, a tribe, a herd, a passing phenomenon, or a traveller still travelling to find out who we are, and who we shall be? (1997:1).

**Nontsizi:**

I'm excited to tell you [...] We'd do well to buy land: / the government raps for silence. / It's time for us to be alert: / We'd do well to buy land (2007:88).

**Etel:**

Do we have a land? Are the balconies ours, did we dangle our legs over the balustrade, were you a child with curling hair and me, impatient to grow? (1997:38).

**Nontsizi:**

Shu! The death of a nation's painful! / Why seek the why and the wherefore? / We're just a dispossessed rabble, / fit to be stripped for thrashing [...] Compatriot, let's cast out envy [...] / Envy sets us squabbling, / King Solomon also says so: / envy outweighs a rock (2007:170).

**Etel:**

But things are always impossible, what of the possible and why the absence? Is the sea forgetting its epic tales? (1997:19).

**Nontsizi:**

The sense of a nation? / A land of crane-feathered warriors? / [...] There's nothing of value: / all that we once had is gone! / Will the years all roll by? / Will you mark time through this year too? / I'd better stop: I get too angry. / Truly, these people from overseas / [...] rob us of house and home (2007:268).

**Etel:**

Where are we to go when the lights will go out and we'll look similar? We demand a reprieve from the drought but we're so afraid of the water that the rain stops when it comes and we return to the sun (1997:5-6).

**Nontsizi:**

We've been barking for ages, / confronting those who pick us clean. / what nation is this whose milk / lacks strength to reach the milk sack? / There's little indeed we can take for the truth. / This 'Let's build for each other' on earth / is a clarion call to the people (2007:204).

**Etel:**

I'm telling you, anger dies while fires survive, and before my family tree produces the olives you'll eat, there, in the heat the anger and the dust, stones will turn into leaves (1997:14).

the stones turn to

leaves take

leave

of the hardened

becoming

fynbos leaves

cannot

feign hoarse

the leaves

o

u

n

d.

**Penelope:**

May I mention your name in my text?

**Pheliwe:**

Yes, I suppose no harm would come of that. Even better, though, I am thinking, is if we write a joint article which incorporates my own PhD research with yours. So, if we can work together for the next article?

**Penelope:**

Yes, why not? Good idea. What was the sentence from yesterday about the hands washing each other - izandla ziyahlambana, right?

**Pheliwe:**

Now you are applying what you learn, yes.

*eli bali liyaqhubeka, nangomso*: this story continues, even tomorrow.

**References**

- Adnan, Etel. 1997: *There – In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and the Other*. Sausalito CA, The Post-Apollo Press.
- Breytenbach, Breyten. 2009. *Voice Over: A Nomadic Conversation with Mahmoud Darwish*. Brooklyn NY: Archipelago Books.
- Opland, Jeff, ed. 2007. *The Nation's Bounty – The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

**Acknowledgments**

My sincere thanks go to Brian Michaels and to Christopher Allsobrook, for your inspiring conversation related to the topic of this Voices issue. Enkosi, sisi, to Pheliwe Mbatyoti, my Xhosa tutor. Many thanks to Anne Storch, for introducing me to the work of Etel Adnan. Thank you to Andreas Hammer, for feigning hoarse. And enkosi kakhulu to the Jack/Keke family, for continuing to remain my extended family.