

REFLECTIONS 6

“WITH WRITING, YOU ARE NOT EXPECTED TO COME FROM YOUR HOME”: DILEMMAS OF BELONGING

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Lucia Thesen has been working in academic writing development at the University of Cape Town since the mid 1980s. In that time the institution has changed profoundly in some ways, providing access to historically excluded students, but not in others. The complexities of the shift from apartheid to a democratic South Africa underpin Lucia's practical and theoretical work and are reflected here in her exploration of the meanings of transformation.

TRANSFORMATION FROM A SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE

What does the transformative agenda in Academic Literacies look like from a cluster of neo-classical buildings that cling to a mountain, facing north, from the southern-most university on the African continent? My starting point is the quote in the title: “With writing you are not expected to come from your home.” These are the words of Siphso, a student (quoted in Gideon Nomdo, 2006) who is reflecting on his university experience.¹ As a first generation working class black student in a historically English speaking, white, elite university,² a profound political transformation has created policy space for him that was not possible under apartheid. But for students granted entry through new policy spaces, formal access does not easily translate into what Wally Morrow calls epistemological access (2007). After a false start as a student of economics, he leaves the university, returning later to major in drama where he finds a disciplinary shelter, if not a home, from which he goes on to become an accomplished actor and director.

His words have stayed with me since I first read them in Nomdo's piece. The modality is strong, conveyed in the present tense as a statement of fact and generalized to “you.” Is this true for the universal “you,” or is it more of an expression of a particular moment, for a particular person? What about the expectations of writing that he refers to? How negotiable are they? Is there something necessarily estranging about the semiotic act of writing? Or is it only academic writing that he is speaking about—what Kate Cadman (2003) calls “divine discourse”—a project

of the Enlightenment that claims the capacity to be neutral, to be able to generalize and speak across contexts? Is it possible/necessary that in the act of academic writing we feel that we belong? What would we belong to, which places, histories, conversations? Does belonging matter for the academic literacies stance and does a better understanding of how we (both students and academics) might see ourselves as belonging contribute to its transformative agenda?

Academic literacies continues to offer an important academic shelter in my life as a teacher-researcher as it values situated practice. In the introduction to our book, *Academic Literacy and the Languages of Change* (Lucia Thesen & Ermien van Pletzen, 2006) we reflect on how our work at a South African university has been caught up in wider circles of context, foregrounding the political transformation from apartheid to the democratic era. The word transformation is widely used in all areas of public life in this country and it is always sharply loaded and contested. It is strongly associated with the historical break with apartheid, following the “elite pacting” (Linda Chisholm, 2004) of the early 1990s. There is no doubt that we have undergone a profound political transition from a pariah state to a nervous but so far resilient democracy where intense processes of negotiation between competing values and practices are the norm. It is hard to describe just how significant this shift has been at the symbolic level; at the same time, it is important to acknowledge how incomplete, uneven and problematic aspects of this transition remain, many of which are still the subject of on-going contestation. The gap between symbolically impressive policy and practice on the ground is particularly important. There are no easy answers about the role of education in these processes: all decisions seem to require a deep engagement with a series of dilemmas where superficial answers will surely let us down.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES: LAYERS OF MEANING

I think of academic literacies as theoretically informed activism to change practice. My understanding has been honed through years of convening a master’s level semester-long course that focuses on academic literacies. Students who register for this course are typically academics from a range of disciplines, school teachers (the term academic literacy has recently made its way into schooling) or adult educators with an interest in language in the educational process. I tell students my value system regarding student text: I am not interested in hearing whether this piece of writing is wrong or right: I want to hear you say, “That’s *interesting*. Why does it look like that? Has it always been like this? What is the writing/drawing/text doing? Is it fair? How might it be different? What would we need to know and do for it to be different?”

Through working with students I have identified three different intersecting, sometimes competing, angles on academic literacies. First is academic literacies as

a *shorthand for academic literacy practices*: this is a descriptive term for the vast and changing history of how the academy comes to value some forms of communication above others in different disciplines. These practices were there long before us, and they will remain long after we have gone, in forms that may be hard to imagine now. For now, writing is most strongly caught up in assessment and how the university communicates research. It hasn't always been like this. At times the oral has held sway over the written (William Clark, 2006). The written form is paramount, but digital literacies are escalating changes in both written and oral forms, shrinking the academic world in some ways but widening rifts in others. There is a geographical as well as historical dimension to these changes, as the anthropological tradition in Literacy Studies has shown so clearly. From a southern African perspective, time and space meet in colonialism and the end of apartheid, and the processes of postcolonial emergence are what shape us most strongly, as I shall expand on later. This foregrounds the dilemmas that come with writing and is what makes the student's comment about writing and home so resonant.

The second meaning of academic literacies refers to a *form of pedagogical work* that has a direction towards some ideal notion of the conventions of "good writing" in English. While we know from Meaning 1 that there is no settled unitary version of good writing that can be taught once and for all, there are many aspects of convention that can and must be taught if we are to embrace the access challenges of massification. We can't open the doors of learning and then let new students fail. Academic literacy/ies as work responds to the institutional refrain that "students can't read and write." This is the meaning that defines a crisis, that creates a problem to be solved, that raises state funding and pays my salary to do the kind of work that we do. In South Africa, this work has been tied to a political project of the transformation of higher education since the mid-1980s, to admit historically excluded working class black students to the university, and to make sure that although the playing field is not level on entry, we do enough to make sure that they graduate strongly enough to make meaningful choices at the end of the degree, some joining the university as the next generation of academics. This meaning is sustained by the myth that writing problems can be fixed (Brian Street's 1984 autonomous model). A distinguishing feature of academic literacy/ies locally is that it also involves systemic policy work. Our group helps shape policy, create flexible routes through the degree process, and in a recent language and academic literacy implementation plan, commits to working in partnership with academics in the disciplines. Academic literacy/ies is everyone's responsibility.

The overarching meaning of Academic Literacies (with capital letters) as *epistemology and a methodology* (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007) is a cluster of tools and methods (and people), an emerging sub-discipline that takes a critical stand on communicative practices (particularly writing) in the changing university. It does not look only at induction to high status academic literacy practices of the day, but

looks at practice and how notions of reading and writing are expressed in particular time/place arrangements. Crucially, it is also interested in alternative, more socially just, innovative practices where new forms of hybrid writing can take hold. This meaning is most effective as a research-in-practice lens that ideally brings the first and second meanings of the term academic literacies into a productive relationship with one another.

And here I want to reflect on the student Sipho's words through the Academic Literacies lens to argue that a key part of transformative practice is a *process of engagement* that asks questions about belonging. This belonging refers to both global and local elements. It doesn't aim to settle these questions of belonging. If we are to take transformation further, we have to understand how students (and academics) engaged in knowledge-making weigh up their commitments to what they bring along, and where they hope to go, and what they want to be. Transformative practice calls for deep conversations about hopes and fears and attachments. This conversation needs openness to risk and risk-taking (Lucia Thesen and Linda Cooper, 2013). I begin by situating the quote from Homi Bhabha below in analysis of writing practices in the post-colonial university. This foregrounds the dilemma that underlies the comment about writing and belonging. You have to engage with academic writing, but if you succeed, you may have sold out or lost out on something valuable and defining that will also have implications for what counts as knowledge.

“ANGLICISED BUT EMPHATICALLY NOT ENGLISH” (HOMI BHABHA, 2004, P. 125)

Homi Bhabha explains the concept of the mimic man, how colonialism makes subjects who are almost the same, but just different enough for the difference to matter, to need “civilizing.” The phrase “Anglicised but not English” signals the importance of postcolonial studies in trying to understand what transformative writing practices could look like. While speech is a universal human capacity, writing is not. Its materiality as inscription played a key part in colonialism. As Adrien Delmas writes, “Writing was the medium by which Europe discovered the world” and in the process it took on a range of “top down” technical, administrative, religious, scientific, and educational functions (2011, p. xxviii). The state of being ambivalent, torn between discourses, is what the postcolonial subject has to come to terms with. This ambivalence has arguably been relevant for a long time, and is certainly relevant since the inclusion of working class and women students in the academy. If the postcolonial situation is the condition of the majority of students now participating in higher education globally, it may be a perspective that has far more global relevance than either the Academic Literacies or composition studies traditions have thus far acknowledged.

The idea that writing pedagogy takes place in multilingual, diverse, contested, and congested “contact zones” (Mary Louise Pratt, 1999) is beginning to take hold in many settings. The contact zone is increasingly the norm as universities become more diverse with massification. Examples are Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry (2010) in academic publishing and Xiaoye You’s (2010) history of English composition in China, which argues that writing in what is locally called the devil’s tongue (English) is actually writing in *our* tongue, as nobody “owns” a global language like English. You’s history of composition is one way of making academic literacy work more “ethically global.”

Bhabha argues that if we want to understand the global, we need to start with the local. The term “local” resonates in Academic Literacies, with its connections to the New Literacy Studies. The “second wave” of research (Mike Baynham & Mastin Prinsloo, 2009) in the literacy studies tradition with which the Academic Literacies position is associated pushed for studies of local literacy practices. As a South African writer, I have always struggled with this: on the one hand everything we do is so strongly situated in the local context. If one backgrounds context, reviewers and readers often ask for more local setting. But the more context is given, the more likely one’s research is to be read as exotic, tragic, or lacking. We want to “come from home” but also to be read as contributing to global conversations. Achille Mbembe helps to explain this ambivalence in his thought-provoking piece on African “self-writing”: discourses on African identity force people into “contradictory positions that are however concurrently held” (2002, p. 253). The shadow side of the Enlightenment has ascribed to Africa a meaning that is inferior—“something unique, and even indelible ... and has nothing to contribute to the work of the universal” (p. 246). This inferiority bleeds into territory. African identity is translated in local, territorial, terms, but always in a racist discourse that creates the dilemma for writers: I am in/from/of Africa but I am also part of the world.

So “to come from your home” is not a straightforward matter of belonging. It points to territory, an earthing that gives one some recognition, but at the same time it racializes identity. So belonging is for many writers in the postcolonial university a space full of contradictions and dilemmas. Using Bhabha’s concepts of “unhomed” and “hybridity,” Bongi Bangeni and Rochelle Kapp (2005) have explored the experience of black students in a historically white institution looking at their state of being in-between, and how it changes over time, as they make their way through the undergraduate degree in the social sciences. The data for their paper is drawn from the richness of conversations generated by the question “What was it like to be at home during the vacation?” While the interviews they report on in this paper do not focus specifically on writing (they focus more on students’ non-academic lives), there are moments where one of the students, Andrew, talks about how writing reflective pieces in various courses helped to

achieve some kind of integration and sense of a coherent self. Similarly, Sipho in Nomdo's article also finds a form of writing that he feels more comfortable with. This form is achieved through a combination of his writing and performance in Drama:

I try to create a new form, even to recreate my own self because I feel I've been clouded by other things. There's a lot of things I need to unlearn. Writing actually gives me that opportunity. The pen, I don't use it that much, I use it in point form, this is the situation Drama gives me the physical ability to recreate myself, for example, playing somebody else that I'm not everyday but that I might be inside. (Nomdo, 2006, p. 200)

This is a different view of writing not as alienating, but as a tool for the project of the self, an exploratory, reflective and reflexive form of writing that is low stakes, and may or may not be part of assessment practices. It is also interestingly secondary to the primary means of communication, which in the discipline of Drama, is the body. Most importantly, it is feeling towards new forms, experimenting, imagining. Insights such as this remind us of the importance of hearing what projects of the self students are busy with, and how they bring their histories to the academy. The concept of "risk" and "risk taking" can help open up this kind of discussion and insight (Thesen and Cooper 2013).

A final reflection on my own theoretical belonging: the three angles I identify that make up Academic Literacies—changing practices, pedagogy, and emerging discipline—sometimes work together, and sometimes don't, and I'm comfortable with the tensions between them. I find them risky, but productive. I suggest that by belonging to the community of teacher-researchers in the Academic Literacies field, I am also able to belong to other theoretical conversations, in particular in this piece, to conversations about postcolonial ambivalence. Given that practices are so strongly rooted in historical and geographical (including translocal) contexts, it is important to keep the academic literacies approach alert and responsive, through deep conversations with others who are interested in the possibilities of the transformative "acts" in *practice*.

NOTES

1. The dilemmas experienced by the student Sipho (a pseudonym) are described in Nomdo (2006) who uses Bourdieu to show how issues of class, race and language work for different students participating in a US-funded scholarship programme for black senior undergraduates..
2. The terms of racial classification, central to apartheid's project, are still relevant in public life, 20 years after democracy.

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