

## Introduction

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### Background

The pre-history of this volume can be traced back to April 2018 when the Department of African Languages at the University of Pretoria, together with the universities of KwaZulu-Natal and the Witwatersrand, jointly convened a three-day conference titled *Thetha Sizwe: Intersections, Practices, and Identities*. The conference's remit was to explore and problematise contemporary and current debates circulating on the gender turn in African languages and literatures by probing assumptions and received notions with consideration for breaking out of dominant models that uncritically foreclose debate and discussion. Gender and sexualities are contested and loaded terms, encompassing facets of identities and practices that overlap and intersect in complex and varied ways. Socially constructed, they are neither identical nor entirely separable but bound up and complexly imbricated while demonstrating sociocultural and historical definitions that define the loci of enunciations from where one speaks. Our assembly of speakers included scholars of African languages and literature (as well as participants from cognate disciplines, including gender studies), whose aim lay in unravelling and contesting these constructions. Such an unravelling, which presupposes a conceptual unsettling of sedimented paradigmatic thinking, was envisioned as a catalytic tool that would facilitate unabashed theorising from the Global South and, more pointedly, theorising that is rooted in and uses the languages of those who have been at the receiving end of sustained historic epistemic harms, symbolic and physical violence, erasures and colonial oppression.

The conference title, *Thetha Sizwe*, loosely translated as 'let your voice be heard', appropriately opened up a space for active debate, discussion and dissent. As a linguistic injunction, *thetha sizwe* is not purely a communicative plea but rather about the politics of voice, silence and, indeed, the capacity to hear and listen. Acts of listening, as envisioned by the organisers of the conference, instantiate(d) processes of speaking back to colonial power, actioning the 'deprovincialisation of Africa' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018)—a deprovincialisation that unshackles Africa, her languages

and her people from the role of students seen to be receiving instruction from European masters (modernity's thinking) who arrogantly appropriated the title of 'teacher' vis-à-vis colonised people and their territories. Indeed, languages remain central to the make-up of who we are, not merely *how* we communicate but also how such relationships become possible *in* and *through* language.

Central to the remit of this conference was the idea of rethinking gender and sexualities using African languages and literature. The motivations behind such a move were precipitated by the realisation that social categories of understanding our worlds—modes predefined by colonial imposition and violence—were and are in need of new inflexions that have been historically silenced. The conference generated provocative interventions that engaged questions of morphology, syntax and the gendered meanings of prescribed texts for secondary schools. The focus on texts used in secondary schools also signals our understanding that, while these debates are being vigorously engaged in the arts, humanities and social sciences at the university level, the process of gendered socialisation begins from the very moment of birth—natality signals the moment at which the human reaches for the ontological status of 'fully becoming human'. In this regard, African languages—as a cluster within the South African university—recognise the need to engage with theory that is responsive to our local context while potentially being poised as a key contributor to fields such as Indigeneity studies, African American studies and Africana philosophy.

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Subsequently, the discussion coalesced around the gendered meanings and politics of African languages in the context of epistemologies and decolonial humanities. This engagement styles local languages as crucial to global shifts in decolonial struggles that aim to re-imagine new worlds. Importantly, the intersections, practices and identities that were treated, analysed and interrogated in this conversation highlighted the entangled relationships between various connecting points, modes of being and knowledge that connect us as human beings in complex relationships that manifest as embodied experiences of the self. To this end, the volume we have assembled contains some papers from that conference (as well as additional commissioned essays) that have been reworked into arguments that have much to contribute to current debates within African languages and their relationship to the politics of gender. These matters are dauntingly large, and we recognise that the contributions and insights featured in this volume open up further questions, and here, perhaps, we make a start.

## Focus and structure

*Thetha Sizwe: Contemporary South African Debates on African Languages and the Politics of Gender and Sexualities* takes the task of developing theory in the indigenous languages of the country seriously, which means that it heeds Nyoka's (2020) contention of the importance of getting to the business of developing decolonial praxis as opposed to merely theorising about it without doing the work. In and through this book, *ka ngangoko si thetha*, our systems of dialoguing with each other and with our audiences, wherever they might be located, are premised on an ethical feminist approach, one that attempts to align the ethical with aesthetics while delivering on the decolonial demands of our local contexts.

As such, this volume brings to the fore important feminist epistemological approaches to and critiques of gender issues, while deconstructing hegemonic masculinities through language in countering patriarchy and compulsory heteronormative cultures. In Part I, *Aesthetic Modalities of Critique Using Language as an Interrogation of Culture*, women's knowledge and understanding of traditional poetic genres and their determination to eradicate residual oppressive cultural structures is examined. The volume begins by making a strong case for the notion of our use of the aesthetic, as it facilitates a reimagination of the political using the pedagogic space—which is liberated from the traditional classroom space, as the chapters in this section demonstrate. The contention we hold is that, in contexts of cultural exchange, the polis—where there are public gatherings and meetings in full view of the polity—becomes the classroom, where ideas are shaped, contested, exchanged and used in the crafting of cultural narratives that are liberatory in their potentialities. This capacity to use these pedagogical exchanges—as they are rooted in the aesthetic object, be it in the traditional sense of the novel that is used as a contestation tool (see Chapter 5) or the music that is composed as a mode of influencing cultural change (consider Chapter 6)—is what inspires us to explore, in Part II, the act of *Theorising from the Aesthetic Critique, Decolonising Possibilities and Creating New Worlds*. In this way, our curatorial decision(s) suggest an alignment of the ethical with the aesthetic, keeping with the instruction we find in Cornell's (1995) feminist analysis.

## Part I: Aesthetic Modalities of Critique Using Language as an Interrogation of Culture

Such an alignment is best seen in the arguments presented in Chapter 2, 'Understanding Culture to Fight Patriarchy: Knowledge and Practice of *Oriki* among Yoruba Women in South Africa'. Using the analysis of poetic traditions that have been safeguarded by women over centuries, Chapter 2 draws the readers' attention to the reality of shifting the gaze of oppressive cultural practices by demonstrating how modes of critique have always been embedded in the practice of *Oriki*. The chapter demonstrates feminist struggles in action, while elegantly drawing from African feminist positions as a mode of augmenting the use of the aesthetic.

In keeping with this thematic node, Chapter 3, 'Critiquing Dominant Patriarchalised African Languages through Feminist Approaches', interrogates the shifting diversity (in the teaching and learning of African languages) beyond literacy and language artistry to incorporate larger socio-cultural contexts. This line of argument follows from the second chapter in the volume by demonstrating how feminist positions can be (and, indeed, are) used in contesting dominant and hegemonic cultural practices while allowing cultural development to flourish in line with the temporalities that define our current age. It is for this reason that the aesthetic, here, is aligned with the pedagogic—a reality that is reminiscent of Wicomb's notion of the ironic that is always embedded in power (and, by implication, in culture too). To substantiate the symbiotic relationship between pedagogy and the aesthetic, the book introduces two essays written in isiZulu, allowing for the formulation of praxes analyses, as they destabilise fixities in our reading of the social landscape(s) in which we are located.

Chapter 4, 'Ukulondolozwa Kwezilimi Zomdabu zase-Afrika Ngemikhosi Yabesifazane Esizweni SamaZulu', demonstrates the feminist struggle insofar as African feminism aligns itself with intending to preserve and cultivate pride in and an affirmation of African heritage, traditions and beliefs. In contesting the piecemeal pace at which the inclusion of indigenous languages has unfolded in the country, this chapter aligns the ethical with aesthetics insofar as a feminist politics is intended to correct the socially misaligned aspects that define our worlds. Through this chapter, the reader is invited into a space where women take control in championing the preservation and use of language, which amplifies the argument the reader finds in the previous chapter—insofar as Chapter 3 concerns itself with pedagogy. What we bear witness to in Chapter 4 is the liberation of pedagogy, when knowledge and teaching become a public affair through the public ceremonies that encode historical meaning to the place of women in the use and function of language.

Chapter 5, 'Iqhaza Elibanjwe Ngababhali Besifazane Bamanje Ukudiliza Imingcele Yobulili', gives credence to the social role and critique encountered in Chapter 2 and sustained in Chapter 4, with the focus being on pedagogy and the aesthetic in Chapter 3. In this chapter, the relationship between knowledge and the aesthetic object, with pride of place being given to the novels developed in isiZulu by women writers, aptly demonstrates what is meant by a conception of aligning the ethical with aesthetics. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how women are active participants in preserving language as active combatants in the struggle against hegemonic masculinist conceptions of society, culture and its linguistic instantiations. They allow us to mount feminist struggles and substantiate the claim made by Kunene (1992: 30) when he argues that 'when language becomes an issue of nationalism, the political authority shifts to the masses, reactivating the need for a common language to mobilise the people and to provide the mythical force necessary for national reassertion.' The combative element is unleashed and allows for the mobilisation of women, as seen in how they use language not merely as gatekeepers but as active participants in the contestations of social and political power through the act of writing.

The final chapter of this section, Chapter 6, 'Fighting Women's Cultural Subjugation using Metaphors, Euphemism and Sarcasm in Izingane zoMa Musical Renditions', highlights systems of subversion and social critique inherent in the artistic expression of women's songs and modes of creation. This ideal is cogently expressed by Zondi (2020: 3) when she contends that '[e]very society has a system of laws, social ethics and precepts to which all members of that society are expected to conform, certain obligations and codes of conduct that everyone is expected to abide by and respect.' The contestation of this reality, and its fixity, is also captured by Zondi's study, which demonstrates how women challenge these fixities in ways that are performative and that allow for social critique, demonstrating how the aesthetic allows the social conditions to reach for the ethical arrangement of the political conditions under which women exist. Akin to what the reader encounters in Chapter 5, Zondi (2020: 9) maintains that 'women perform what is commonly known as *izigiyo* (a poetic song genre that refers to specified solo dance songs), but which, within the Zwelibomvu community, is known as *ukushoza* or *ukujoqa*'. What the reader encounters in Chapter 6 is an amplification of these modes of critique rooted in music—music that challenges and contests fixities that attempt to cage women into silences of their 'own unsayable transgressions' (Morrison 1993). This amplification challenges monolithic narratives about women that silence women into being inactive participants in their own oppression and problematises perceived ideas of nationhood, predicated on cultural fixities that attempt to affix women's roles into the confines of domesticity.

## **Part II: Theorising from the Aesthetic Critique, Decolonising Possibilities and Creating New Worlds**

Part II of the volume turns to the manifestation and institutionalisation of gender and power through language and begins with Chapter 7, '*Thokoza Ngwenyama!*—Unsettling Gendered African Language(s) Using *Umsamo*'. In this chapter, the focal point is the need to regard language as an institution, in and of itself, while carefully drawing out the implications of this shift. In drawing attention to the institutionalisation of language that the reader finds in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, Chapter 7 demonstrates how this reality can and should be contested using the androgynous space of *Umsamo*, which locates the physical world in conversation with the metaphysical, in all its splendour, as ungendered and ambiguous. It is ambiguity, so the chapter argues, that facilitates the capacity of birth—that is, natality—in all its forms of creation, be it concomitant creation vis-à-vis the aesthetic or birth in the form of new life, liberated from the oppressive modes of understanding and seeing the world that defines our realities.

Continuing with exploring modes of institutionalisation, Chapter 8, 'Interrogating South African Reality and Probing the Interconnections of Language, Hegemonic Masculinities and Patriarchy', brings the case of 'language as institution' home, suggesting ways in which we can strive for an egalitarian society. The proposition of an egalitarian society is predicated on an analysis of the proverbs that are used in everyday speech, demonstrating how language can maintain systems of oppressive realities over those who are considered to exist at the margins of society.

The institutionalisation of power through language is further explored and interrogated using the realities facing women in the Xitsonga cultural practices of (re)marriage. The argument advanced in the chapter contends that, owing to the conception of culture as static and unchanging, practices that are oppressive and require substantive resistance can take root in the lives of the marginalised owing to the discourses of culture and power that are sustained and maintained without question. Chapter 9, 'Intersectionality and (Re)marriage: A Perspective of the Xitsonga Sociocultural Identity', questions these fixities and proposes new ways of seeing and being in the world that allow women's voices to flourish and find legitimacy in their own cultural topographies.

Taking this analysis further, Chapter 10, 'Unholy Unions: Analysing the Constitutionality of Levirate Marriages in Zulu Custom', illuminates our understanding of the reasons why feminist struggles are required and what they induce and unlock in their facilitation of justice and freedom under the constitutional democracy that now prevails in the country. This chapter and the preceding one facilitate new ways of seeing while inspiring questions that are too broad to be undertaken in

this volume; one is the possibility of having a dual governance system that rests on contemporary Western conceptions of democracy and traditional authority. In such a context, is it impossible to inspire ideas and ways of seeing that are epistemically racist insofar as Western modernity critiques and predefines the *Other* along with their systems of being? While this question is not taken up systematically in the volume, there are some implications and intimations to it, which we find in Chapters 9 and 10.

The final chapter assists us in answering this question—not exhaustively but rather in a circuitous way—as it demonstrates modes of subversion and the subtle resistances that women have at their disposal, even as they might exist within constrained and constraining social conditions. Using the concept of ‘verbal ungovernability’, Chapter 11, ‘Feminism and Literacy: Tortured and Traumatized Femininity in Njabulo Ndebele’s *Death of a Son*’, analyses how contemporary writers (understood doubly as the cultural workers in our country) are determined to dismantle culturally embedded social barriers, while also advancing feminist paradigms in deconstructing patriarchal hegemony. Such an approach is undertaken to work towards an ethical direction, one that aligns the aesthetic with the ethical in how we think about the social order in South Africa, insofar as the country is defined by post-trauma structural realities that we have—so far—failed to address systematically. This contestation is seen in ideas of nationhood at the dawn of democracy and how sociocultural histories consolidate nationhood and women’s representations in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Conclusion

In sum, the volume presents readers with an ability to prize the function and role of the literary figure, the poet and the musician as cultural workers, once again. The volume does this by appealing to these different aesthetic forms as a mode of demonstrating how they contribute to the formation of the polity by way of analysing the social, linguistic and cultural dimensions that define the lives of gendered and sexual subjects as they are subjected to imported ideals of culture—an importation that came from colonial imposition. *Thetha Sizwe* charts a space that enables us to begin dialoguing as a mode of creating, be it in the creation of political possibilities, aesthetic analyses that demonstrate modes of social critique against oppressive systems of existence, or pedagogical strategies (praxes) that facilitate the transcendence of bigoted and violent modes of existing in the world. It primes the canvas for a painting whose muse is the incredible richness that lies untapped in our local languages. We can only trust that the readers appreciate our attempts at venturing in the direction of creating theories that respond to the realities of our people and the

contexts wherein we find ourselves. It is an intellectual and political intervention that confirms that this task is without end and that requires ongoing engagement. We are assured that we have much more work to undertake.

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