
Introduction

NGICELA UXOLO

I stand before the class, telling the students who I am, where I come from, and what brings me to the school. I notice as Mr. Nzuzza, who is standing at the back of the classroom beside my desk, discreetly opens the book in which I have been taking notes. Although I am not exactly another pupil, he is the teacher and he has every right to examine my notes. He sees that I see him. I continue to speak. Maybe he wants me to have seen him—to be aware that he is watching, but also to know that he is curious to read what I have written. I cannot know whether this is what he intended. Yet my guess at it—which is already shaping the memory—leaves me with a twofold awareness: he is reading, and he is watching.

It is within the influence of this awareness that I embark on this book. I have to trust the reader. I have to trust that the one whom I picture as watching me as I write would like to think that he, or she, is reading something I wrote while he, or she, was not watching. If, for the reader whom I picture, to want this is to want the impossible, to imagine writing for such a reader, that is impossibility itself. Yet there is no writing without that step. Not for me, not with this book.

Our text is *Ngicela uxolo*, a play by Nkosingathi I. Ngwane,¹ an author I have never heard of. I am provided with a copy of the book on my first day. How uncanny that, only a few weeks before, I was reading an old radio play by D.B.Z. Ntuli with exactly the same title: *Ngicela uxolo* (I beg forgiveness). Like the puns that came to me as I took my first steps back into learning Zulu, as I worked with my teacher Eckson Khambule in New York City a few months before, the words *ngicela uxolo* had become a text for transference, a way toward finding myself in the language. “Finding myself”—it is easy to say, and to say, dismissively, of the one learning Zulu: he is finding himself, he is still finding himself. But there is more to it: in speaking a language, one appropriates the language, makes it one’s own. One becomes a “self” by virtue of speaking that language—by assuming the position of “I.” *Ngi- . . . ngicela . . . ngicela uxolo*.

The assumption of this position is, for me, not without inhibition. To speak is to bite one’s tongue—such was the first coded sentence when, with Eckson, I began to play on words. To assume the position of speaking subject was to as-

sume guilt, and to inflict punishment upon oneself. Although I have translated the expression *ngicela uxolo* as “I beg forgiveness,” on its own the word *uxolo* can mean peace or calm. In uttering the plea *ngicela uxolo*, one takes up the position of speaking subject. One makes the language one’s own as one speaks, but one also declares oneself guilty—of having committed a wrong, of having failed to do what was expected, of having, by some act or omission, broken the peace.

Mshazi—as Mr. Nzuzza is usually called by the other teachers, who use his *isithakazelo*, or clan praise name—rouses his Grade 12 Zulu class, which, despite my rudimentary command of Zulu, I have been invited to attend. His powerful voice commands the entire classroom in a call and response in which the students answer his questions, and are expected to finish his sentences. Introducing the play, Mshazi utters a series of words, of which I catch only a few, but which includes the word *iphutha* (error, mistake, wrong), then *ucela* (you ask or beg). There is a pause, upon which the pupils conclude in one voice: *uxolo*. Will this imprecation keep following me, as if they were my first words, another version of speaking as biting my tongue? Of course, *ngicela uxolo* is probably not the first sentence that one utters when one learns a new language; Mr. Fani Ntombela, a senior teacher, puts forward *ngilambile* and *ngomile*—I am hungry, I am thirsty—as likelier candidates. One learns the sentence *ngicela uxolo* later, perhaps too late, long after one has found reason to utter it by stating a hunger and a thirst that, because they are in excess of sheer need, are experienced as greed, as a taking away from others.

It is April 2008, and I have come to Jozini to learn Zulu. You reach Jozini by driving up the side of a mountain. Down to the left lies the vast Jozini Dam. Formerly known as the Pongolapoort, the dam is one of South Africa’s largest. The dam is a tranquil expanse of water cradled between the peaks of the Ubombo, fields of sugar cane stretching from its shores into the fever trees and scrub. Having reached the high point of the drive, you descend along the narrow and winding road to reach the town center, which is built on the hillside south of the dam wall. To the north lies Ingwavuma, and the border with Swaziland is not far away. To the east stretch the plains of Makhathini and eventually the sandflats of Mhlabuyalingana, up to Kosi Bay and Manguzi on the Indian Ocean, and Mozambique.

Eckson has helped to arrange my visit with Mr. N. H. Mkhwanazi, the principal of Sinethezekile Combined School, where Eckson taught before he came to Teachers College, Columbia University, for his Ph.D. When I reach the turn-off from the N2 highway, having driven through Mpumalanga from Johannesburg, I stop and call Mr. Mkhwanazi. I am to drive to the BP garage, where Mr. Mthembu, his vice-principal, will meet me to show me the way to the principal’s house, where I will be staying. I am introduced to Nokuthula, Mr. Mkhwanazi’s wife, who is waiting for us. She greets me warmly and shows me to the spare room, where I unpack my things. Later, Mkhwanazi arrives, and Nokuthula

serves us dinner at the table. It gets dark, and candles are produced; there has been no electricity for a week, not because of the load shedding that Louise and I have become used to in Johannesburg, but thanks to a damaged transformer. Being without electricity is clearly frustrating, especially for Nhlanhla, their adolescent son, who enjoys watching television. Spirits seem low as a result, and everyone is early to bed.

The following day I drive to the school, which lies on the plain down from the dam wall to the east. I am introduced to Mshazi, who takes me to his office, where I receive from him my books: *Ngicela uxolo*, and an A4 counter book, of the kind with the black cover and red ribbon down the spine that we used in high school. I write my name in the relevant space, and in the space below that I write “isiZulu.” My Zulu book—the one that Mshazi will discreetly open when I rise from my desk to speak in front of the class. My Zulu book, but also his Zulu book, for it is the book that he has given me.

Mshazi takes me up to the Grade 12 classroom on the second floor. Worlds, seemingly distant, connect. The students have chalked on the door the words “Wits University,” evidently reflecting their aspiration to study at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

A few weeks before, when, as I sat with Eve Mthibe (MaSimelane) reading Ntuli’s radio play in her office at Wits, the sentence *ngicela uxolo* became a sign for what it would take for me to learn Zulu. I would be making reparation. This would mean overcoming an inhibition of learning arising, as I saw it, from unconscious fears of retribution for a wrong that I imagined myself as having once done, but did not consciously remember doing. In framing things in this way, I am appealing to Melanie Klein, whose psychoanalytic work with young children from the 1920s and ’30s elaborated and revised the theories of Sigmund Freud. She shows how, if one’s guilty feelings lead one to fear retribution, one can also behave destructively toward the object one seeks to repair and toward which one endeavors to “make good.” Her word for reparation, in German, is *Wiedergutmachung*—literally, to make good again. The object toward which reparation is made, according to Klein’s theory, is, in early life, the maternal part-object: the breast.² Tradition tells us—and this applies in Zulu too, in which one speaks of *ulimi lwebele* (language of the breast, or mother tongue)—that it is from the breast that one’s language comes, as does mother’s milk. The figure we call the father is, for Klein, secondary, deriving from the maternal object. His penis, as part-object, thus gains the phantasy attributes of the breast. Metonymically, *words* displace the breast and its derivative paternal part-object.³ It is thus that *language* becomes the focal point for reparative as well as destructive tendencies. There is greed, and there is possessiveness. Some of the more complex of these tendencies are those that, in professing to make reparation—and appear thus to the one doing so—actually attack the damaged object over and over again. Such is the power of the unconscious. Melanie Klein calls this manic reparation, while her follower Hanna Segal terms it “mock

reparation.”⁴ Because feelings of persecution are still strong, and paranoia predominates, reparation cannot succeed. The object, in phantasy, cannot be appeased, and it continues to attack me. In classic paranoid style, I thus “defend” myself against it. When endeavors at reparation falter, learning comes to a halt. The dynamics of infancy—the time when one is learning one’s first language—unconsciously repeat themselves in different forms in later life. And, I would maintain, they repeat themselves with a vengeance when one learns another language.

D.B.Z. Ntuli’s *Ngicela uxolo* is about a man whose father appears at his door one cold and stormy night to ask his forgiveness for abandoning him and his mother forty years before. Ignoring the pleas of his wife, the man gives his father no chance to explain. Offered no roof over his head, the old man goes back into the night and freezes to death. Before departing, he leaves behind a letter explaining how he suffered ill health, even spending several years in a mental hospital. The letter also bequeaths to his son all his savings.⁵

The play touches a raw nerve. I would be turning forty in ten days. My biological father has never made himself known to me. I cannot help asking myself what I would do were he to appear at my doorstep.

Eve has asked me to make up sentences using words from *Ngicela uxolo* that are new. I am tongue-tied from the start and decide to tell her about the parallels I perceive between me and Malusi, the character in Ntuli’s play. I do so in English after things become too complicated for me to explain in Zulu. Once I have told her, I begin to construct my Zulu sentences. They end up forming a narrative about my late adoptive father. How he enjoyed telling *izinganekwane* (my translation of *bobbemeises*, Yiddish for old wives’ tales) about the circumstances of my birth; how, as a traveling salesman, *wayehamba izinkalo aphantswe amakhaza* (he would travel over hill and dale and suffer from the cold) in Cape country hotels; and how, when I was growing up, *wayenyamalala izinsuku ezine maviki onke, wayonga imali ukuze ngifunde eyunivesi* (he would disappear for four days every week and save money so that I could study at university). Quite a transposition. From Ntuli’s Malusi to me. From the bad father to the good. From the bad son to the son who makes good—the name *uMalusi* ironically evokes the Good Shepherd. Something has happened. The unconscious employs the language newly being learned in order to work its way through and around inhibition. In this way, the repressed returns. At the time, it is something of an answer to the question: Why are you learning Zulu? Not a reason, but the coming clear of a convincing motivation.

I connect less readily with Nkosinathi Ngwane’s play of the same name. First published in 2003, the world of his *Ngicela uxolo* is of the present day. Its Zulu is more difficult than Ntuli’s; it is syntactically more complicated, with inflections of the verb *ukuba* (to be) and *ukuba khona* (to be present) in the negative, in the past tense, and in relative clauses—which a student of Zulu cannot simply look up in a dictionary or grammar, but must slowly absorb through frequent

encounter in speech and print. I remember spending an entire Saturday laboriously reading twenty pages of the play at the Mkhwanazis', with MaGumede bringing me a cup of tea and a pear as a snack so that I would not have to get up and interrupt my reading.

In Mshazi's class, when the parts in the play are assigned for reading aloud, I am asked to read the stage directions. Attempting to approximate the change of tone from the characters' speech that reading stage directions would require in English, I come across as stilted. I sense the pupils—or “learners,” as primary and secondary school students are now called in South Africa—listening for my pronunciation, especially for my articulation of the clicks that distinguish the four so-called Nguni languages from their neighbor tongues. When Mshazi tells a boy in the class that he needs to go home and *practice* reading aloud, I can only nod my head and tell myself the same thing.

My reading comprehension is better now, so perhaps I can discover why I did not connect. Ngwane's play is aimed at youth, and is outright didactic, even if it professes “not to preach to anybody.” It is against witchcraft: “Kanti buhle yini ubuthakathi?” (Tell me, is witchcraft good?)⁶ As a literary theme, the question of witchcraft is somewhat hackneyed. Ngwane breaks no new ground, and as a writer he has none of the economy of D.B.Z. Ntuli, whose radio play of the same title, in a mere fifteen minutes, sets the scene, stages the confrontation, and reaches its unsentimental denouement. If the greats of Zulu literature—B. W. Vilakazi, H.I.E. Dhlomo, R.R.R. Dhlomo, Sibusiso Nyembezi—and their celebrated successors—D.B.Z. Ntuli, C. T. Msimang, among others—have begun to make way for new authors in an effort at keeping up with the times, then it is a shame that such undistinguished writing has taken their place. Such was my impatient sentiment then. But what do I discover on a second reading?

Ngwane's play is set in the “developed countryside” (*emakhaya aphucekile*).⁷ The place is Dududu, inland from Scottburgh on the South Coast, and about fifty kilometers from Durban. Although the setting and circumstances evoked by the play bring back memories of Amaqongqo, near Pietermaritzburg, where I went later in 2008 as part of a group of Fulbright scholars studying Zulu—the codes of hospitality; the robust religiosity; the migration of women to work in factories in nearby or distant towns; the ubiquitous signs advertising *amabhulokisi* or simply *ama-blocks*, the cinder blocks used to build houses—I still struggle to locate the core of this play. (Perhaps teachers like Mr. Nzuzza did too, for, as far as I can see, the play was not prescribed again after 2008.) It is clear enough that, as the plot unfolds, witchcraft brings woe upon those who fall victim to it, as well as to those who practice it. Mkhwanazi, the thrifty wage earner with whom the play opens, is poisoned by medicines purchased from a well-known *inyanga* (healer or herbalist) and secretly given to him by his wife, MaBele, in an effort to help them have children. As a result, Mkhwanazi can no longer work, and his project of building a new house is unfulfilled. MaBele, having left Mkhwanazi and their newborn child to find factory work, is left with

nothing in the end, and Mkhwanazi withholds from her the *uxolo* for which she pleads: “I don’t know” (*angazi*).⁸ Two local *abathakathi* (wizards), MaMthethwa and Zulu, witness their own house burn down just as, beset by envy, they call down lightning on Mkhwanazi’s new house. They are rescued, but because their charms have been discovered with them, they fear the reprisals common against suspected wizards and witches, and disappear from the community under the cover story (supported by the police and by the Reverend Mbambo, a local minister) that they perished in the conflagration and that their ashes are to be buried in the government cemetery. Their whereabouts are unclear—perhaps Swaziland, where Zulu has a brother—but they continue to appear in dreams to Zinhle, their estranged daughter who lives at her uncle’s house in Umlazi, near Durban. They tell her that they are dead, having deserved to die for their deeds, and call upon her to ask forgiveness on their behalf from victims of their wizardry. This Zinhle does, while she prepares to write her matric examinations and plans marriage with the mysterious Sizwe, a lawyer, whom she suspects of having a hand in the fire that destroyed her parents’ house. Although several characters in the play ask *uxolo* of one another, there appears to be no clear pattern except to affirm that asking and granting it do not come easily, although doing so is a good thing.

But perhaps there is another layer to Ngwane’s play. I see that the Senior Certificate exam for 2008 asks: “Which character is the hero or heroine [*iqhawe*] of this play? Why do you think so? (6 points).”⁹ Although the play begins and ends with Mkhwanazi, who goes back to Thobe, the mother of his child Dumazile, in order to make a new beginning after his failed marriage to MaBele, my choice, and perhaps that of many Grade 12 students, would be Zinhle, who, like them, is readying herself for the end-of-year examinations that mark the completion of high school. Zinhle overcomes the misfortune of having *abathakathi* for parents, writes her matric, and is going to marry Sizwe, whom she loves even if she does not entirely trust. It is she who is the messenger of *uxolo* more generally, atoning one by one for her parents’ crimes—but, at another level, she is also the bearer—and perhaps the beneficiary—of the crimes of infanticide to which her parents confess.¹⁰ According to the conventions of Ngwane’s play, characters who are absent (but not necessarily dead) appear in dreams in order to deliver messages that they could not deliver in person. The dreams are a way of bringing characters on stage absent with reason, without contradicting the reason for their absence. As a dramatic convention, it is well worn. But psychoanalysis teaches us to *interpret* dreams beyond their manifest content.

When we begin to interpret Zinhle’s dream we can see how she is the heroine of the play because she is the bearer of guilt: she has agreed to atone for a series of crimes of infanticide that she did not commit, but from which she, ultimately, has gained—education, a husband with prospects—by virtue of being an only child. As MaMthethwa explains in the dream, “[t]here were two brothers of yours as well as a sister whom we agreed to wipe from the earth because we

pursue our unrighteous purposes.” (*Wawunabafowenu ababili kanye no-dadewenu esavumelana ukubasusa emhlabeni ngoba sihuba izinhloso zethu zokungalungi.*)¹¹ If a dream is, as Freud wrote, the presentation of a wish fulfilled, then Zinhle’s dream may be interpreted as a sign of murderous sibling rivalry—a wish, on her part, to be the only child (infanticide is the only sin to which MaMthethwa confesses in the dream), which is then displaced onto her parents. Projection is in play. When she apologizes for what her parents have done, she is actually apologizing on her own behalf. When Zulu, her father, appears to her in a dream in the final scene in which Zinhle is on stage, he counsels her not to hold a grudge against Sizwe—and the play itself ends with Ma-Bele citing the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.”¹² Zinhle is not free of guilty feelings—she is, after all, visited by nightmares, which her friend Velephi calls “this demon of dreams” (*leli dimoni lamaphupho*),¹³ and seeks to drive away through prayer—inviting the thought that the challenges with which life will present her have only just begun, for the victim herself carries guilt.

This is something to which I can relate: the victim of the sins of the fathers—and mothers—who wrought a system in which learning Zulu was made difficult for me (let that be a metonymy for much else), I am also the beneficiary of that system, and guilty for what it wrought and continues to perpetrate in what Jacques Derrida, following Walter Benjamin, described as the reiteration of a founding violence.¹⁴ I can make reparation by learning the language, but, at any time, I can also lapse into a paranoia in which I feel myself persecuted by the language itself—and, to be sure, by its speakers. The language becomes my persecutor and prosecutor for wrongs that, although I am an accomplice, because they are not mine, but those of a multitude dead, living, and unborn, I can never set right on my own. Zinhle in Ngwane’s play, despite being the bearer of a name that declares her beautiful and good (*-hle*)—one of, or the last of, the beautiful and good girls (*zinhle*)—is in an analogous position in relation to her parents’ *izinhloso zokungalungi* (unrighteous purposes). If I make reparation toward the language, it is on account of such a crime, which is inexpiable because it is not over with.

These thoughts, as they come to me on rereading Ngwane’s play, are not as immediate (or as raw) as those that arose with Ntuli’s radio play as their catalyst, when a dedicated teacher guided me, without my quite knowing and understanding what was going on, toward an owing to myself of a father’s *ngicela uxolo*: No, me, “*mina ngicela uxolo*,” I beg forgiveness; since I need to have this “peace” in order to learn the language that I am learning; I want you to leave me alone, already. It is through such unexpected events, which I take to involve an unconscious repetition of dynamics of reparation from early life, that I understand the secret history of language, and language learning, that I am writing about. Historical wrongs may be nameable, and will indeed be named in what

follows, but it is through this repetition as experienced by the language learner that they gain their meaning.

A SECRET HISTORY

The most recent inheritor of this secret history is the migrant, who, coming to South Africa from countries neighboring and farther abroad, learns Zulu out of economic necessity, and in response to the pull of community. Zulu, the first language of about 11.5 million South Africans, living mostly in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, and Gauteng,¹⁵ is also an important common language among black African people in the two latter provinces, the economic heartland of the country, to which many migrants gravitate. When, in May 2008, as in preceding years, some of those migrants were attacked, and some of those attacked were forced, under threat of violence, to pronounce shibboleths in Zulu, they may not have realized what history they were inheriting.

The fact that Zulu shibboleths were used suggests that, in South Africa, the signifier “Zulu” had come to have a unique and privileged status. For the xenophobes it functioned as a password, not only for identity as indexed to language—and this identity was no longer ethnic but national¹⁶—but also, and this was more important, for access to property and its rightful ownership: a house, a job, a shop, a plot of land on which to build. In short, to be able to speak Zulu entitled the speaker to the prerogatives of residency and citizenship.

The privilege of “Zulu” can be traced back to its elevation, dating from colonial times, into a sign for being African scarcely rivaled by any other name for an African language or people, and struggles, lasting more than a century and a half, for possession and control of that sign. In Europe and North America,¹⁷ the symbolic power of “Zulu” has its beginnings with the defeat of the Redcoats by Cetschwayo’s army at Isandlwana in 1879, whereas in South Africa it also comes from the figuring of the Zulu as quintessential African enemy by Afrikaner nationalists, who consecrated a national holiday to the defeat of Dingane by the Boers at Blood River in 1838. One could add to this the consolidation—through the migrant labor system that brought African men from all over the subcontinent to the mines of the Witwatersrand—of a Zulu ethnic identity beyond Zululand and Natal.¹⁸ One could also mention the Zulu cultural nationalism that took political shape in the KwaZulu Bantustan, under the leadership of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and the attempt, subsequently, by Inkatha and the Inkatha Freedom Party to identify black South African political interests with Zulu interests.¹⁹ Although the attempt failed, this unique and unprecedented example in South Africa of black ethnic-nationalist mobilization reinforced, at least for whites, over a century of assimilation of being Zulu and being African in colonial and apartheid literature and popular culture, from the novels of H. Rider Haggard in the 1880s and ’90s, to the theatrical spectacle of *Ipi Tombi*

in the 1970s. The fact that colonial- and apartheid-era elevation of “Zulu” involved intensive white appropriation and translation means that when I refer to the Zulu language in English I do not use the word “isiZulu,” which an increasing number of English speakers in South Africa prefer to do because it is the name of the language in Zulu. Similarly, in contexts in which the Zulu word *isiZulu* refers not only to the language but also to Zulu ways,²⁰ I usually place the Zulu word in brackets.

Running concurrently with the readily observable identification of “Zulu” with being African is a history of language learning. For a white South African of my generation to learn Zulu is not simply to learn an African language, but rather, because of the privilege of Zulu for which I have provided a brief genealogy, to learn *the* African language. Learning it has perhaps, for some, been a way of becoming African. One could certainly write interesting books entitled “Learning Xhosa,” or “Learning Sotho,” but those would be rather different books. Perhaps “Learning Afrikaans” would, albeit in other ways, set the stakes as high.²¹ But this history of learning Zulu, despite its significance, remains a secret history, in the sense that it has not been recorded before, save in fragmentary form. Whereas the more- and less-alienating effects on Africans of colonial language teaching have been well attested, accounts of which are justly canonical,²² the meaning of learning an African language, for colonials of European descent and their descendants,²³ or by those of Indian ancestry,²⁴ has scarcely been explored.

What *Learning Zulu* shows is that when missionaries in mid-nineteenth-century Natal, the most famous being Bishop J. W. Colenso, standardized the Zulu language by writing grammars and compiling dictionaries, they also made Zulu—in its “pure” or correct form—a yardstick for being good, both morally and politically. For them, learning Zulu thus became reparative, a method for Europeans to make good the ill they and their kind had done in Africa and to Africans, and to forestall its repetition. In the process, they, as well as their African converts, stigmatized the pidgin known to them as Kitchen Kafir (and later as Fanagalo) and broken forms of Zulu spoken in the workplace, along with their speakers. Even the producers of the practical manuals in Kitchen Kafir and Fanagalo that appeared later, although admitting the pidgin as a necessity, are apt to decry it as a “wretched . . . jargon.”²⁵

This way of seeing and of evaluating—which may well have resonated with older African attitudes in which social status was linked to dialect²⁶—was taken up by some of the Zulu intellectuals who succeeded the missionaries and surfaces in the didactic commentaries and language textbooks they authored. This is where my own experience of learning Zulu, in which transference and repetition come to the fore, becomes a provocation to the secret history and a lens for exposing and scrutinizing the “hidden matters and motives” that, ever since Procopius of Byzantium published his *Secret History* in the fifth century, have defined the genre, distinguishing it from ordinary historical chronicle.²⁷ Be-

cause, in our time, psychoanalysis is the method par excellence for gaining an inkling of hidden human motives, it is what I employ to identify and describe what I call the psychopolitics of language. My inhibition in learning Zulu, which I have begun to describe, brings to light two interlocking trends that, working at different levels, both involve reparation and its attendant complications—first, at a psychical level, an unconscious repetition of dynamics of early life, which can affect the learning of other languages more generally; second, a politics of language learning that has, for more than 150 years, made learning an African language (specifically Zulu) a making-good for historical wrong. *Learning Zulu* shows that this psychopolitical nexus, which presents a different face depending on the context, is by no means unique to the author. If, to some readers, my use of psychoanalysis might from time to time sound hyperbolic, that is deliberate. I write in the mode of the familiar essay, and psychoanalysis works as a brake on the authority of the “confessional” or “personal,” of the truth claims of the stories I tell myself about myself. At the same time, although psychoanalysis allows a definite pattern to be discerned in my wish to learn Zulu, which I go on to discover among learners of the language more generally, the sheer contingency of some of the events narrated in turn challenges the final say of psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework.

When the non-native speaker enters the schoolroom built by missionaries and the Zulu teachers who take up their project—the classroom at Sinethezekile, by contrast, was built for a different purpose, meaning that I was out of place—it is with the assumption that, as the pupil learns the language, he will undertake reparation, “making good” in at least a symbolic sense. If he uses the language manuals of Sibusiso Nyembezi, who was also a celebrated novelist in Zulu, then the pupil will have to give up Fanagalo. What he receives in return for careful study of Nyembezi’s *Learn More Zulu* is entry into a humble, mostly rural world in which the effects of apartheid are subtly registered through understatement. He also has an opportunity to see himself differently, perhaps even to *be* different. What might then ensue is a curiosity about one’s teacher: Who is he? What are his motives? There are no definitive answers to such questions, although the suspicion, when one reads Nyembezi’s novels, is that his professed linguistic purism may stem from conflicts between the generations, especially between Zulu fathers and sons. But the teacher remains more than devoted to the pupil, and generous in his corrections. This is especially true when Nyembezi translates Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* into Zulu as *Lafa elihle kakhulu* and must translate its Zulu-language-learning scenes from English into Zulu. Close analysis of Paton’s novel shows that a wrong lesson is being taught to a small white boy. This Nyembezi silently corrects. What also emerges from these scenes of instruction is that, for the young white learner as imagined by the adult author, a paranoid fear is associated with learning the language, which revolves around not knowing it, or not knowing it well enough. At another level, this is linked, in phantasy, to the primal scene, in which the

parents do things that the young child does not understand, and may also believe they deliberately keep secret from him or her. In the genealogy that I explore, language learning includes powerful feelings of jealousy and possessiveness, as well as feelings of guilt that arise from the aggression acted out, in phantasy, in response to those feelings.

You might ask: Isn't this infantile? As much is readily acknowledged when, remembering my role as a young boy in a junior-school production of the 1970s musical *Ipi Tombi*, I recall my puerile investment in "Zulu" as a phallic signifier. Although a great box-office success, *Ipi Tombi* drew criticism for being a hodge-podge of African song and dance reckless in its disregard for the integrity of its sources. Like Fanagalo, it seemed destructive, even as it professed to celebrate African performance. Viewing it retrospectively, I connect this destructiveness to an ambivalence toward the feminine condensed in the name of the show, which is usually translated as "Where Are the Girls?" or "Where Is the Girl?" I also contrast *Ipi Tombi* with the achievements of Johnny Clegg, who, famous for his mastery of Zulu music and dance, became known as the "white Zulu."

Pervasive symbolic over-investment in "Zulu," and its heavy identification with masculinity, has reciprocal effects on native speakers. These effects reached a pitch with the trial of Jacob Zuma, who became president of South Africa in 2009, for rape in 2006, and with the confident assertion, by those taking sides for as well as against him, of "Zulu" as a unitary signifier of African maleness. But a little more investigation—meaning a consideration, as far as possible, of the original Zulu of Zuma's testimony—shows that when he testified at trial to his state of mind, he alluded to his boyhood training in Zulu ways (*isiZulu*). The complainant in the trial, by contrast, testified to her choice not to follow Zulu or black African ways in the adjudication of the matter. There was thus, if one knew where to look, a fissure in the name "Zulu" between men and women, and between generations. There was, above all, contrary to the assumption that "Zulu" ways were immutable and compulsory, the hint that male as well as female conduct—like language—is learned, and can thus also be learned differently. Zulu has an expression, *umuntu ufunda aze afe*, a person learns until he or she dies; or, you are never too old to learn.

The parallel emerging in my mind between my learning Zulu, and one learning it as his or her mother tongue, led me to the larger question: What would it mean to generalize the idea of learning? This question seemed urgent in the shadow of the violence of 2008 and its death-dealing shibboleths. Although the white learner was no longer the central protagonist of the secret history of language learning that I was writing, perhaps his or her trajectory could be a guide to the psychopolitics of language involved. If migrants were reading the Zulu-language newspapers that I was reading, instead of the grossly xenophobic *Daily Sun*,²⁸ what would they have discovered? They would have found a struggle, by turns super-erudite and satirical, over what the eminent Zulu writer and public intellectual O.E.H.M. Nxumalo called "refined Zulu."²⁹ In this struggle of

words, in which rights to settle, to work, and to trade are never far from the center, the actual learner of Zulu surfaces mainly at the margins—where she can be bitterly ridiculed, or, alternately, made fun of through mimicry. It is as if the endeavors of such learners had always been at issue, but also always a secret, if indeed an open one. I began to see that if the migrant, in a perverse sense, by dint of the shibboleths she is forced to produce, was being perceived as a learner, then in a sense any of the protagonists involved, including the native speaker, could be thought of as a learner.

If, by demanding a saying of the shibboleth, the xenophobe seemed at first to declare to the migrant *I have it, you do not, so you must go*, then perhaps there was a subtext, indicative of fears of dispossession, that, save for the conclusion, was precisely the reverse: *You have everything, I have nothing, so you must go*. This all-or-nothing idea is what theorists of relative deprivation seem to point to when they explain xenophobic violence.³⁰ Linguistic purism is, to be sure, not the same as the shibboleth. But I see enough of a connection between them to wonder whether a generalization of the idea of learning might not help to loosen zero-sum notions of property, proprietorship, and appropriation that, as much as they laid claim to exclusive possession of a language, betrayed fear of its total loss through theft by others—the *amakwerekwere*, the ones said not to “frame to pronounce it right.”³¹ “Because there is no natural property of language,” Derrida reasons in *Monolingualism of the Other*, playing on different senses of *propriété* in French, where it can mean selfhood or something one owns, “language gives rise only to appropriative madness, to jealousy without appropriation.”³² When channeled into nationalism, Derrida argues, the political consequences of this “appropriative madness” can be violent. The events of 2008 seemed to confirm this. In that year some appealed to the past in order to show that migration and diaspora are as much part of Zulu history as stable settlement. Could a generalized idea of learning, likewise, be a condition of possibility for a different hospitality? Never quite having arrived, always under-way—is that not what learning is?

One would surely wish to answer in the affirmative. Yet, a learner of a language—any language—always follows a pattern of making mistakes and accepting correction. This is perhaps why—although as I drew more actual Zulu words into my mouth, loosening my investment in the *name* of the language, and thereby lessening the feelings of guilt and paranoia that stemmed as much from my own background as from a history I shared with others—the words *ngicela uxolo*, and the way in which Mshazi explained them to the class, continue to resonate: *uma wenza iphutha* (when you make a mistake), I imagine he must have said, perhaps adding a phrase about remorse, *ucela uxolo* (you ask forgiveness). In receiving help, from him and from others, to correct the errors of my tongue, in being given a chance to make good, have I not been granted something like forgiveness? If learning a language is a highly regulated instan-

tiation of the shibboleth—since the native speaker determines what is correct—it is also a perpetual process of reparation, of undoing of error.

To correct a learner of one's language is laborious, and it takes time. It also takes trust. The necessary time, but above all the trust, was generously given by Mshazi, and by the other teachers I got to know at Sinethezekile, just as by Eckson Khambule in New York City, Eve Mothibe in Johannesburg, and Audrey Mbeje in Pietermaritzburg. It is, first of all, to them, my teachers, that I confide this book.