Language, Person, and Place: Echoes of Religion in Minority Literatures

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Abstract

Minority literature, whether produced by prominent authors writing in marginalized languages or marginalized authors writing in dominant languages, raises questions of human identity and alienation, human location and dislocation, which resonate with characteristically religious strategies for negotiating what it means to be a human being in a human place. This essay suggests that we can find traces of "religious" themes in the work of authors of minority literature who operate on the margins and at the creative intersections between the living and the dead, between home and diaspora, and between singular and multiple realms of meaning.

Introduction

According to biblical authority, in the beginning was the word, spoken by God, speaking the light of spirituality, "let there be light," and speaking forth the world of materiality. But what language was this? God's language, of course, but where does that leave us, human beings, in our struggles to speak and write in broken tongues?

If we remain, for the moment, in the biblical narrative, we find the dramatic contrast between Eden and Babel, the contrast of Adam's secure and confident naming of things in the Garden of Eden with the chaos of confused languages and dispersed peoples at the Tower of Babel. Although we might feel some primordial nostalgia for the original Adamic language, with its transparency of words and things, we might also recognize Babel as a liberating moment. We might find, perhaps heretically, that Babel liberated language from the tyranny

of Eden. Only with the breakdown of a centralized, dominating order of words and things could we begin the world of creative, infinitely complex, and inherently contested relations between people and words. So, as human beings, we can speak and write and create infinitely, like God, as if we were producing Jorge Luis Borges' *Book of Sand*, an infinite text without beginning or end, but we always speak and write and create fragmented texts, disseminating words that are always situated, always located, always at risk at the intersections of intercultural contacts, relations, and exchanges.

The articles in this collection move between Eden and Babel, between dealing with the force of centered assertions of power, enunciated in languages of imperial authority, national mandate, or demographic majority, and exploring the vitality of marginal creations of alternative possibility. They are not primarily interested in religion. They focus on minority literatures on the margins, at the intersections, between dominant languages and other voices. They explore the sound and sense of writers speaking, otherwise, in marginalized languages in new places and in dominant languages through displacement. Tracking dynamic relations between centers and peripheries in minority writing, these articles give us a profound sense of relations between speaking and place; they enter the situated human struggle to give life to words in location, especially when that struggle is carried out under the critical and creative conditions of dislocation, dispersion, and disorientation.

As literary investigations, these essays do not focus on religion. But they illuminate revealing instances of creative writers working on being human, in and through the material and spiritual resources of language, in a specifically human place.

Over the past thirty years as a historian of religions, I have worried about my keyword, "religion." As a fuzzy set, the term might refer to beliefs, practices, experiences, and social formations in relation to transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns. It can be formally institutionalized or radically personalized; it can be extraordinary and ordinary; it can be profoundly humanizing in advancing personal aspirations, mutual human recognition, and social cohesion, while also being profoundly dehumanizing. Over the years, I have proposed various working definitions of religion, for my own analytical purposes, but they all come down to the resources, strategies, and tactics used by human beings in trying to be human in a human place (Chidester 2005: 15-19). In my reading, that is what this collection of essays is about. Accordingly, I find, without necessarily foregrounding "religion," the authors in this special issue on minority literatures nevertheless bring insights that are important to the interdisciplinary, intercultural study of religion. By way of introduction, I can only point to some of the religious themes that percolate through these explorations of writing on the margins.

Nigerian English, Algerian French

English and French, we might think, are not "minority" languages, but they are resources for minority literature by writers displaced or alienated from their homes and their home languages. The first two articles, examining the work of the Nigerian author Biyi Bandele and the Algerian author Assia Djebar, explore literary worlds produced in and through the dislocations of person and place evoked in Nigerian English and Algerian French. In her analysis of Bandele's novel, *The Street*, Brenda Cooper shows how imperial power, with its apparently stable classifications and orientations, can be destabilized through literary strategies of "magical realism" or "animist materialism" (see Cooper 1998). As everyday objects come to life, becoming the "material manifestations of the gods and spirits" (Garuba 2003: 267), conventional classifications of divine beings, human beings, and subhuman objects are creatively tested and subverted. In the process, human beings move through the cityscape by negotiating multiple realities, maneuvering between ordinary life in London and the spirit world of dreams and death. Bandele devotes special attention to the lives of the disoriented people of the streets he calls the "Undead" who maneuver between these parallel universes. One character, known as the Heckler, is characterized as straddling these two dimensions, like a trickster or a shape-shifter with "a foot in the land of the living and a foot in the land of the spirits" (Cooper, this volume). As Cooper shows, Bandele's characters reveal important features of migrant experience emerging at the intersection of parallel universes. Here we find new negotiations of what it is to be a person of "multiple, splintered and changing identities" in a city that is being remapped as a place of "porous boundaries" between material and spiritual words.

Language plays a crucial role in charting this terrain. As Cooper observes, the dominant trope is not metaphor, with its meaningful depth, but metonymy which moves along surfaces, tracking contacts, contagions, unexpected juxtapositions and strange displacements. While any metropolitan centre might be policed with "loaded metaphors," the streets of Bandele's London are crackling with what Cooper calls "detonating words," strange, startling terms and phrases that recall the "nonsense" of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. On the streets, however, the nonsense, incoherence, and disoriented muttering of the Undead can also recall the extraordinary language event of glossolalia, speaking in the multiple tongues of all nations and the fiery tongues of spirit. As this street glossolalia explodes any fixed relation between words and things, language enacts the dislocation and disorientation of people on the street. But it also signals the interplay of spirit and materiality, dreams and reality, the dead and the living. Religious ritual, which might be engaged in connecting these realms, is profoundly redundant; spirit and matter are already in lively but unpredictable interchange. Perhaps this is one implication of the "mock funeral" that is performed for one of the characters of the novel, with its traditional Yoruba elegy

marking the loss of the loved one by the traces remaining in the objects and people left behind. Apparently, this is a "mock funeral" because the deceased is still alive but also because such formalized religious language and ritualized action could never fully capture that dynamic interchange between the living and the dead in the everyday life of the streets.

In her discussion of the Algerian author Assia Djebar, Annedith Schneider focuses specifically on the funeral as a site for negotiating ongoing relations between the living and the dead. In *Algerian White*, Djebar writes about the death of colleagues during the violent civil war of the 1990s, but she links those personal losses directly with a collective loss of national possibility in Algeria, with "yesterday's funerals, those of the Algerian utopia" (2000: 230). As Schneider argues, Assia Djebar adapts patterns and processes of traditional elegy in writing about personal and collective loss, grief, and mourning. Traditionally, funereal elegy is a rite of passage from loss to consolation, proceeding through formalized stages in praising the deceased, expressing sorrow, and providing consolation for the living. Elegy, like any ritual, links the subjective and the collective, in this case transforming private grief into public mourning. Reflecting on the violent deaths of friends, Djebar intervenes in the traditional elegy by refusing to let them go, observing, "I don't believe in their deaths; for me, their deaths are works in progress" (2000: 218). As Schneider observes, this refusal to relinquish connection with a loved one and seek consolation in public ceremony might be a distinctive way in which women have participated in traditional elegy. But she also stresses Djebar's political project in embedding her personal grief within the loss of the "Algerian utopia."

As perfect place, but also as no place, utopia is always lost. But Assia Djebar locates her specific sense of national loss in terms of language. Personally, her education in French, under the guidance of her father, created a degree of alienation from her Arabic "mother tongue," so that "writing in French already involves loss and mourning" (Schneider, this volume). But her sense of loss and grief for the death of the "Algerian utopia" is also configured in terms of language. Islamist singularity, observes Djebar, waged religious war on the human multiplicity of languages, lifestyles, and paths to truth. Under the banner of unity, Islamists attacked any person on "the path of many languages, many lifestyles, the one who stays on the fringe, who walks, unconcerned about himself or each day invents his own truth" (2000: 200). The lost Algerian utopia, according to Assia Djebar, was this "lost space of multilingualism" (Schneider, this volume) that promised to open up multiple human possibilities.

Jewish Diaspora

As the first two articles suggest, the study of minority literatures pays special attention to displaced, dislocated, or dispersed people and languages. Diaspora,

therefore, is crucial to the field. The next three articles directly engage the Jewish diaspora in Brazil, South Africa, and the modern state of Israel as sites of literary creativity. Poet Riva Rubin begins by invoking the South African author, Lionel Abrahams: "The literary endeavour places one where individuality and society intersect" (Abrahams 1996). Language, culture, and religion, in different ways, effect that intersection between personal subjectivity and social collectivity, language through generating shared capacity for telling stories, culture through preserving shared resources in sustaining community, and religion for providing shared symbols that connect what C. G. Jung called "the vast outer realm and the equally vast inner realm" (Jung 1978: 137). However, as other authors in this collection observe, minority literatures are situated in the marginal, in-between spaces not only at the intersection between individuality and society but at the intersection of individuality and multiple societies, languages, cultures, and religions. Poised in this interchange, as Rubin observes, the authors of minority literatures are confronted with the dilemma of language dominance, forced either to assimilate a dominant language or be translated into a dominant language. Globally, English has been playing that dominating role, assimilating and translating and thereby shaping, for Rubin, what Lionel Abrahams called the "aesthetic transmutation of experience." In the modern state of Israel, Hebrew emerged as the dominant national language for translating and transmuting experience. Like Assia Djebar, however, Riva Rubin sees and hears a multilingual national space, in a multilingual Israel, observing that when the Israel Federation of Writers' Union was formed in 1975 it represented authors writing in Arabic, Yiddish, English, Russian, Rumanian, German, Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, and French, who in many cases not only wrote in these "minority" literatures but also translated texts into Hebrew. While translating and being translated, moving across languages, Riva Rubin implicitly challenges any dominant singularity by calling attention to this multiplicity.

As Assia Djebar found in Islamist Algeria, however, a project based on the singularity of language, culture, and religion does not engage multiplicity as multiplicity but as a binary, as an opposition between "us" in our implied unity and "them" in their dangerous diversity. In South Africa, a diaspora Jewish community took shape, as Veronica Belling suggests, in and through a binary opposition between the sacred language of Hebrew and the vernacular language of Yiddish, which she identifies as the "quintessential minority language, a stateless language, which was marginalized even in the Jewish state" (Belling, this volume). According to historians of Jews in South Africa, early twentieth-century community formation was a political project in transmuting Eastern European immigrants into a mainstream Jewish identity that could be characterized as white, English-speaking, middle-class, urban, and upwardly mobile (Shimoni 1980: 8; Krut 1987: 137). In 1955, this basic story was enshrined in a collection of historical essays, *The Jews in South Africa* (Saron and Hotz 1955). The following

year, however, Leibl Feldman published an alternative history of the Jewish community in South Africa that directly intervened in vital questions of language, culture, and religion.

By writing in Yiddish, as Belling explains, Feldman was already engaged in a dramatic intervention with a South African Jewish community that had been defining itself by Hebrew in the synagogue and English in the world. In his account of Jews in South Africa, Feldman attacked both the English language of secular assimilation and the Hebrew language of religious worship. By writing his history of South African Jews in Yiddish, Belling proposes, Feldman was deploying the "quintessential minority language" against a particular religious politics, specifically attacking "fanatical" Zionists and their love of the "holy tongue" (Feldman 1956: 198-200). Feldman's history of the Jewish community is premised on what might be called binary oppositions from below. Hebrew is the language of the elites, Yiddish of the masses; Hebrew is Zionist, Yiddish is Socialist; Hebrew is the "holy tongue" of the Bible, the synagogue, and religious authority; Yiddish is the worldly vernacular of cultural defiance to any totalizing, homogenizing political programme of domination. Although his history of Jews in South Africa uncovered Jewish fights over religion and alienation from religion that were ignored (or erased) in mainstream accounts, Feldman's writing in Yiddish, as Belling suggests, already entailed an alternative position in the Jewish diaspora in South Africa.

Moving to the Jewish diaspora in Brazil, Nancy Rozenchan examines the work of the creative author Cintia Moscovich, a writer of Jewish origin writing in Portuguese. Although her work is not limited to Jewish themes, Moscovich has nevertheless placed Jewish religious concerns and religious creativity within a Latin American context. Here we see local Jewish concerns, especially in her fictional writing about mixed marriage, or "out marriage," as a dilemma of negotiating between personal desires and community. But we also see invigorating creativity in her contextual mediation of Jewish sacred texts and ritual performances in Latin America.

In one story, focused on the annual celebration of Purim, Moscovich develops a remarkable exchange between words and things, between a sacred text and a ritual object. Purim, certified by the biblical text of Esther 6:1-3, celebrates the survival of a people. Retaining this traditional frame of reference, Moscovich expands its scope by mixing the biblical text with the "sacred book" of the "wizard" Borges, *The Book of Sand*, which truly explodes all rules of writing by having no beginning and no end and an infinite number of pages in between. Moscovich has her character, Shmil, trade a ritual object—the grager, the clapper, the noise-maker that is used in Purim celebrations—in exchange for this sacred book. Since this book contains everything, and everything in between everything, Shmil find the entire story of his people, in every detail, including a picture of the ritual object that he had given away to obtain the book. Certainly,

this "sacred text" would be perceived as dangerous diversity by anyone trying to establish a singularity, since it contains everything. Although Shmil worries that he might have a religious obligation to burn the book, he realizes that he cannot destroy it without destroying the world. So, instead, he cuts out the picture of the grager that he finds in the book, a picture of the ritual object that he had exchanged for the sacred book, which is now restored to him as an image, a word, a representation that nevertheless still moves him to prayer. These are profound reflections on the intersection between personal subjectivity and social collectivity, which is transacted in ongoing negotiations between words and things, in a Jewish diaspora that is dispersed everywhere but also always situated somewhere in specific constraints and possibilities.

Afrikaans between Wound and Suture

Afrikaans, as a language in South Africa, has also been a situated political and religious project. Organized language movements in the 1870s and again in the 1910s cultivated Afrikaans for literacy, education, and cultural mobilization. Building on that base, an Afrikaner political movement, coming to power in 1948 under the banner of apartheid, tried to capture the language as a "holy tongue" for church and state. Throughout its history, Afrikaans has been a "minority" language, spoken as home language by no more than 15 percent of the population, but since 1925 it has been established as an "official" language in South Africa, along with English, and since 1994 as one of eleven official languages constitutionally acknowledged in a democratic South Africa. The diversity of language, culture, and religion, according to the South African Constitution, will be not only protected but also promoted in a democratic dispensation. The next two articles explore recent attempts to think about what it means to protect alternative pasts and promote alternative futures for writing in Afrikaans.

Looking back, as Chris van der Merwe shows, Afrikaans authors are vigorously rethinking the Afrikaner nationalist narrative of a chosen people, in covenant with God, who suffered defeat, denigration, and dehumanization at the hands of the British in the Anglo-Boer War as a prelude to collective redemption in the victory of the National Party, in 1948. In this particular narrative of power, Afrikaners lost power to the British in 1902, regained power in the all-white elections of 1948, but lost power again after negotiations led to non-racial, democratic government in 1994. Actually, this is a story that someone might have believed, at some point, but no one believes anymore. Therefore, writers must tell other stories. Nevertheless, even if the overarching narrative of Afrikaner loss, redemption, and loss is not generally believable, the narrative structure of suffering and redemption still resonates. As I write, the former Minister of Law and Order for the apartheid government in the 1980s, Adriaan Vlok, has just engaged in a personal ritual of contrition, showing a sign of repentance,

and evoking hope of forgiveness, by washing the feet of one of his many victims, the Rev. Frank Chikane, in trying to reposition himself in this structure of suffering and redemption. So, even if no one any longer believes the story, some people might still live in it.

Recalling the background of oppositional writers in Afrikaans, van der Merwe focuses on the novel, *Niggie*, by Ingrid Winterbach, which creatively re-imagines the human dynamics of the Afrikaner "wound" represented by the Anglo-Boer War, the South African War, of 1899-1902. In this novel, we are introduced to characters who have already realized that the war is lost. They are waiting, in an in-between time, and in-between space, for orders that will never come from a Boer general who is no longer in command. Within this time and space of waiting, they bear wounds of painful loss, but they also explore signs of hope for a new life in and through their interest in the natural environment, their caring for others, and their inventive word play and language games. Once again, the play of language sparks new possibilities of living. As in Bandele's London, however, this playful teasing of language results in no easy resolution. Instead, it opens a linguistic space for the trickster, who hurts and heals. In Winterbach's novel, the trickster moves into this ambiguous space, shape-shifting from female to male, as a "trickster woman" who turns into a man, and from white to black, scrambling any stable classifications of gender, race, or identity in human relations. In the end, as Van der Merwe observes, the trickster appears as a supernatural force, destabilizing any efforts to center and secure a human identity in a human place. "May God help," is a recurring refrain in the dialogue of the character, Niggie, in this novel. But God's sovereignty does not seem to extend over the ambiguous world of the trickster.

In relation to any centered, stable, and serious domain of language, satire is a problem. The romance of any nationalism, including Afrikaner nationalism, must give us what Robert Scholes called "superhuman types in an ideal world" (Scholes 1974: 39). Satire, however, as Erhard Reckwitz observes in his consideration of Afrikaans writing in post-apartheid South Africa, gives us what Scholes called "subhuman grotesques enmeshed in chaos." Here, again, is the dynamics of religious classifications, as human beings try to find themselves by negotiating between the superhuman and the subhuman, and the dynamics of religious orientation in which human beings find themselves navigating in a space between ideal order and dangerous chaos.

Although Reckwitz does not address religion directly in considering recent Afrikaans writing, he is interested in exploring satire and the sacred, the ways in which a new "satirical animus is largely directed against the once sacrosanct ANC [African National Congress] and the government recruited from among its ranks" (Reckwitz this volume). Dwelling in irony, Reckwitz ironically invokes reference points of religious stability by highlighting allegations that the ANC, which once held the "moral high ground," has now entered into an "unholy

alliance" with business interests. South Africa has long been a fertile field for irony, satire, and the laughter arising from the stark recognition of incongruity. During the nineteenth century, European Christian missionaries were dismayed that their sermons often evoked African laughter (Chidester 1996: 225-30; 1999). During the 1980s, under hopeless conditions, irony was commonplace and laughter reverberated through opposition movements in exile or underground. So what does Reckwitz mean by calling attention to a new "satire on the wild side"?

The Afrikaans author Breyten Breytenbach, who suffered imprisonment under apartheid, recounted in his *Season in Paradise* (1979), ironically echoing in his title, as Reckwitz notes, Rimbaud's *Un Saison en Enfer*, "Season in Hell," is invoked to represent the extremes of superhuman aspiration and subhuman degradation in South Africa. The aesthetics of satire, irony, and perhaps even humour depends upon juxtaposing, inverting, or scrambling up any stable position that might be adopted between such extremes. Under the apartheid regime, even in the suffering, torment, and inferno of prison, Breytenbach maintained a healthy sense of irony by juxtaposing heaven and hell. Now, in a post-apartheid South Africa, as Reckwitz argues, Breyten Breytenbach has moved from irony to satire, writing within a new "wound" of resentment at the "betrayal" of the struggle for freedom by the very movement that led that struggle. This claim raises difficult political questions, which are currently being vigorously debated in South Africa. As an intervention in these debates, Reckwitz invokes Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of the "suture," stitching across the gap between signs and subjectivity. This "suture" does not appear to be a therapeutic intervention, because the gap between words and things remains. In the case of Breyten Breytenbach, who is cited as an agent of satire and suturing, we are only left with the opposition, articulated by a writer committed to "vigilant opposition" (1996: 86), between the old regime that was a living hell and the new regime that is not quite paradise.

Person and Place

The final two articles in this collection explore the creative space of marginality. Hennelore van Ryneveld focuses on the Spanish-Andalusian poet José F. A. Oliver, who writes in German, to show how "minority" writing in a "major language" can come from the margin and write not *against* the centre but *into* the centre of the dominant language. Like Biyi Bandele in English, Oliver in German creates explosive words, neologisms that stretch the mainstream language to engage the multiplicity and dislocation of people on its margins. Two examples discussed by Van Ryneveld are particularly striking, especially because they deal directly with marginal meanings of person and place. In capturing the ambivalent identity of the migrant, Oliver coins the word, *Gastling*, which can be rendered "one who is a guest," but the suffix *–ling* echoes the German word, *Fremdling*,

"one who is a stranger or a foreigner," evoking the marginal identity of migrants who are both welcomed inside as a guests and kept outside as aliens. Addressing the ambivalence of being simultaneously placed and displaced, Oliver alters the German word for "home," *Heimat*, by the simple addition of another "t", so that *Heimatt* can mean both "home" and homeland" while evoking the word, *matt*, suggesting weakness, weariness, or lifelessness in relation to home and homeland.

As historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1987) has observed, "home" is a difficult word to translate, since it bears such varied and complex local significance in different languages. Although often regarded as a sacred space, whether sanctified through ritual or recollected through nostalgia, "home" is not an easily transferable term. However, as Van Ryneveld argues, a minority poet like José Oliver, writing on the margins, has effectively transferred an understanding of "home" from the periphery, the boundaries, or the migratory to the centre of German language and literature. Minority literature, therefore, moves within the space that Homa Bhabha has identified as "in-between". As Bhabha proposed, "it is the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (1994: 38-39). In her concluding article, Azila Reisenberger explores this in-between space of intercultural contacts, relations, and exchanges as a zone of creativity. Reisenberger highlights important aspects of the creative process in this in-between space, identifying practices of literary reciprocity, symbiosis, and linking that move across the seams that both separate and connect different languages, cultures, and religions.

Although these transactions are not limited to religion nor mediated by formal religious institutions, I find that they echo basic patterns and processes of religious negotiations over the meaning and power of being human, especially under dehumanizing conditions, in a human place, especially under conditions of displacement. As I have proposed elsewhere, these negotiations of identity and location entail an inherent ambiguity:

> Religion is a generic term for ways of being a human person in a human place. I define religion as discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person in relation to the superhuman, but also in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman. Since being a person also requires being in a place, religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone of inclusion, but also as a boundary for excluding others. Accordingly, religion, in my definition, is the activity of being human in relation to superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, which inevitably involves dehumanization and exclusion. Religion, therefore, contains an inherent ambiguity. (Chidester 2005: vii-viii)

Minority literatures, as explored in this volume, uncover ways in which creative writers on the margins, moving through languages of an in-between space, have been turning such ambiguities into opportunities for renegotiating new terms for being human.

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