

# A role-play (x and y)

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## Abstract

In an almost schizophrenic dialogue between the writer and herself, this text gives voice (or a number of voices) to the possibility and limitations of situated speech. Through an incessant mélange of associations and references the text asks: As we try and imitate the language of others, what are the effects and affects of this mimesis, upon our own identity and the space of comprehension around us?

The truncation of the single-voiced narrative is the result of a global pooling of ideas streaming from countless springs. The forays into uncertain but connected waters are what the adventure of our contemporary text creation is about. However the narrative behind us, the passage of history, often determines the speed and smoothness of our sail, the flow of the river thus far. Arguing for a new sincerity concerning the kind of provincialised way in which we interpret and enunciate the everyday, the text proffers what Jyoti Misty calls, the "Vocabularies of the Visceral" (2009) and Mbembe and Nuttall, "the provisional and contingent". These guide our traces up and down the tributaries, which "irrupt" in front of us.

And, like the antics of Huck Finn and Jim, the inevitable coincidences and "wrong" turns along the routes we travel force us to masquerade as those we are not, take on the voices of others – developing into, what Jan Verwoert called a "conspiratorial mode of mimicry that modulates the identity of the speaker; or finally a mode of tentatively attuning oneself to one another" (2009:43). This attuning opens the floodgates of ways of speaking and writing which can stay afloat amongst the rapids of worldliness and situatedness.

**X:** There's a bad joke they used to tell on South African radio

**Y:** You know, you're never supposed to try telling jokes when they're only funny within the context they came from, and won't be understood elsewhere, or they will have to be explained so much, that the explanation kills the humour.

**X:** Ya, but I'm going to, it's more illustrative than funny anyway.

Okay, so you know that white South Africans have a very particular accent. Supposedly. And there's a kind that even South Africans make fun of themselves, because of its class and education connotations. So here we go. A guy with one of these accents calls into the radio, and on the other end is someone who sounds like he got straight off the boat from Cambridge. Cambridge United Kingdom we're talking here.

"Right," says the English scholar, "Mr Van der Merwe, if you could spell the word 'air' for me."

"Eerh?" says the caller

"Yes, air."

"Ay-eiy-aaarrrrr."

"Very good. Now spell, 'hair'."

"Haich-ay-eiy-aaaarrrrr."

"Well, yes. Now one last word. Could you spell, 'lair', Mr Van der Merwe?"

"Yes, I think it is, el-ay...uh...ay-eiy-aaaarr?"  
he says, unsure of himself.

"Excellent. Now if you could put those words all together for me, and say them aloud."

"Eerh, heerh, leerh...erh, herh, lerh, eh, heh, leh, air hair laaaaair." [final words produced in perfect Queen's English]

**Y:** Okay, okay, I get the idea. Now you're going to do the this-is-what-happens-when-centres-impose-cultural-codes-on-the-periphery shtick, I suppose.

**X:** What gave you that idea? I was merely using this as an example of accented speech. The way we are understood and misunderstood because of the specificity of our accent – not the vocabulary itself, though there is often a very specific lexicon that develops to meet certain needs under particular conditions, but how the same words are pronounced, which often makes for completely different impressions. There are so many assumptions about where someone comes from, their status in that place, how well-travelled they are, and how much they actually know, based on if they spell "colour" with or without a "u" or whether they say "aftermath" or "aftermath".

**Y:** You can't hear if someone is spelling "colour" with or without a "u" in regular dialogue.

**X:** Exactly. Thank you for pre-empting my punchline.

**Y:** [A]nd you don't know anything about linguistics or the study of accents, the politics of language. What makes you an authority in this case? Just because you're the token African in the room doesn't mean you have the right to speak for a continent. Particularly you with your strange mix of International school education, your American childhood confusions. You're white, which means you've always had one foot out of Africa, and don't forget you have 'Alien' stamped on the ID card from the country of your birth.

**X:** I'm not here to be an authentic African. Whatever that means. I'm here to be an Afropolitan: speaking more broadly about the worldliness possible when people are mobile, when they can traverse cultural

territories, visual vocabularies and make themselves understood in how they relate all these things.

**Y:** Ah, you're talking about this new label African intellectuals living away from the continent are giving themselves, trying to feel better for leaving.

**X:** Yes, and no. I think there's something much broader to this idea Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, first wrote about in 2005. He said:

What distinguishes [the Afropolitan] and its like [in the West and at home] is a willingness to complicate Africa – namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy; and to sustain our parents' cultures.

(Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu: 2005)

This doesn't only count for Africans, or Afropolitans, but any group in a context grappling with a mess of histories and chaotic presents, which is everyone. The idea of producing creative thought around this now, as it happens, in its tense and changeable ways, means that we don't rely completely on old ways of speaking, or wait for knowledge to be produced about the times we live in. Instead, we find ways of articulating what Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall call "indeterminacy, provisionality, and the contingent", which I would argue constitute daily experience in many contexts. And, as Mbembe and Nuttall agree, are 'hardly the object of documentation, archiving, or empirical description – and even

less so of satisfactory narrative or interpretive understanding'. (Mbembe&Nuttall, 2004: 349)

**Y:** But I think you're underestimating the power of known narratives, of understandings we think we possess. Whether in South Africa or Serbia, we've theorised about Modernism. We know the effects of cultural imperialism from the supposed 'centre' of art and literature.

**X:** A centre that was in fact different for Serbia and South Africa.

**Y:** Whatever. Even the joke you opened with alludes to all the linguistic stereotyping and access to 'culture' brought about by what Huckleberry Finn would have called "sivilisation" (spelt with an 's').

**X:** And Huck Finn is an excellent example of how, even in the new hallowed spaces of contemporary culture, there is space for chance, misunderstanding, accented freedom of expression. As Mbembe and Nuttall also remind us, "Africa like, everywhere else, has its 'heres', its 'elsewheres', and its interstices (emplacement and displacement)". And these thresholds, like Huck Finn's Mississippi, represent "a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points". (Mbembe&Nuttall, 2004: 351)

**Y:** Well, if we're going for the Mississippi as a metaphor here, then we should talk about New Orleans. That place has been, and still remains, a cacophony of intertexts, references, appropriations from a gumbo of cultures and colonisers.

**X:** The city held its first biennial last year, Prospect 1. Sans Gold Rush connotations, the show was of course overshadowed by the city's recent trauma,

but also by the tension that accompany most new biennials: lying between “civilized” contemporary artistic presentation and the sprawling vernacular culture surrounding it. How do you tell or translate the one to the other? In dialogue with the curator Dan Cameron, a once-local artist, Willie Birch stated that “the challenge lies with writers to use a different vocabulary, to find ways of speaking about art from this city.”

**Y:** Perhaps the only hopeful example of that was Lolis Eric Elie's text in the biennial's catalogue: *Still Live, with Voices* (2008).

**X:** Here Elie constructs a beautiful montage of interruptions by the spirits of slaves, authoritative, colonial interjections, and the confused thoughts of the contemporary journalist searching for clarity, as he calls for “more voices”!

**Y:** Rather than paraphrasing, read some of it already...

**X:** Elie and his many voices begin:

I would like to tell the story of my city.  
I would like to do so in simple, declarative sentences. I would like my narrative to be neat and linear, like I learned in school and on television. Do not think me unequal to the task. In fact, I have already started a draft:

*We were founded by the Europeans. They taught us to cook and to speak French and to look down on the Americans. We were built by the Africans. They had tremendous talent for dancing and singing and following European instruction. We were saved by the non-Native Americans. They taught us to work*

*hard and to honor the dollar and to cherish the word freedom even more than the condition itself. Then the gods of misfortune stirred the winds of disaster and left us clinging, Noah-like, for dear life in the flooding of three years ago. As you can see, my city has three parents, not counting the gods and the winds who have shaped us as surely as any DNA. I myself have two parents – a kind, sweet mother and a most unruly father. The neatness of every draft I compose is ruined by these five voices, voices that suddenly pop out like the wild hairs that have escaped the barber's scissors unclipped. So we Africans, the Africans in you, are nothing more than dancing beasts with wild hair? No one is anything yet, father. It is a draft and we are all in a state of becoming. In a state of becoming sold down the river again. Excuse me, Kemo Sabe, but when the Europeans were doing their founding, they founded us already here. Put that in your story. More voices, you must have more voices. I will have more voices, I'm sure, invited or not.*

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*For much of the 19th century, New Orleans was the economic powerhouse of the southern United States. The city has spent millions to recapture that greatness. The investment may one day pay off. But in the meantime, we are known principally for two things: our food and our music. They grow so naturally here as to be deemed by our city fathers as hardly worthy of investment. In the matter of food we were instructed by the French, whose reputation for culinary genius is time-tested and well earned. Subsequent Europeans - the Spanish, the Sicilians, the Germans - have all left their culinary mark. Black cooks, with their innate sense of seasoning, have also lent their peculiar je ne sais quoi to our culinary*

heritage. Do not blame us for your food, monsieur. Your poisson meuniere is deep fried; your remoulade is red and has no anchovies; your 'French' bread has a crust like phyllo dough, not like a proper baguette, and you put that slimy okra in your bouillabaisse. Your food is good, peut-etre. Peut-etre. But Francais? Jamais! Okay, it's Creole. It's our version of French. It's France in America, plus 300 years, plus black cooks. Why do you insist on crediting the French with everything? That bouillabaisse is neither bouillabaisse nor French. It's okra soup. It's soupa konja. It's west African; just like jambalaya. And can you imagine Creole food without rice? We were growing rice in Senegal before the French knew how to plant it. And these vague 'Africans' you refer to had countries – Senegal, Benin, Cameroun, etc. It's been documented. Have either of you read the books about our food? They all say the same thing. Genius French chefs. Talented black cooks. Don't blame me. I hate to darken your narrative again, Kemo Sabe, but the filé in your gumbo is the sassafras leaf powder we introduced to your people. If I might please continue... You might, but you will be the only one pleased.

(Lolis Eric Elie, 2008: 1-2)

**Y:** So through mimicry we come to a better understanding of the complexity of individual and collective expression? We're talking about food, not art, here.

**X:** Well, both. These traditions, like ways of speaking, cooking, dressing, constructing cities, are clearly not the property of any one society. The contingency, as spoken of by Mbembe and Nuttall, returns here, where we begin to see what might have been, what could still be, and the danger of presenting any text or comment as finished because of the ongoing

creolisation of every aspect of daily life.

**Y:** But we can't be all things to all people. What you're proposing is a kind of ultra reflexive Lingua Franca artspeak – a romantic and dangerous notion if you ask me – where we attempt to cover an issue from all possible sides, incorporate every layer of history, and generally drive ourselves mad.

**X:** But there are limits. Elie's text only includes the voices in his own head. He's not speaking for Dan Cameron or Willie Birch. He's not incorporating the thoughts of the jaded international art viewer. If anything, he's circumscribing his text more to the location, not less. By situating his language, its references, and specifying the lines of flight from countless origins to where he is now, we hear his accent more clearly than ever before.

We see the beauty and possibility of language limitations in the work of Katarina Zdjeldar.

Generally in her work, she seeks to amplify the power and disempowerment of accented speech. As we try to imitate the language of others, what are the effects and affects of this mimesis, to our own identity and the space of comprehension around us? In her piece, *A Girl, the Sun and an Airplane Airplane* (2007), she films a number of Albanians who remember living under a communist government and she gets them to recall and repeat certain fragments of Russian songs, expressions and greetings that they once learned. They say 'Good morning' and 'My mother works at the textile factory'. The juxtaposition of these phrases, the way the game is portrayed – for indeed, it's a game: one of those memory ones, like a brain twister – constructs an incredibly nuanced background for the somewhat lonely

or awkward actors on screen. In another piece, with a Scandinavian relevance, *Everything is Gonna Be* (2009), she takes a group of amateur singers learning (or at least sort of singing the words to) the Beatles' Revolution. These middle-aged people, in pastel colours, sit in their pine and book-lined setting mouthing the words uncertainly, adapting their voices and tones to each other as they go. Waiting for the revolution was never so pretty.

**Y:** But that's not really a fair interpretation. Zdjelar is being ironic but not about the actors and their social situation...it's the frustration of collectivity. The finding of one voice. It's quite utopian in its ambition.

**X:** Exactly! But you can't miss the sardonic undertones. This idea of singing or speaking in unison is taken to an extreme in one of the same artist's more recent works where she sits with an immigrant student in Oxbridge in the UK, with a speech coach. In the video piece, *The Perfect Sound* (2009), the coach takes on a Henry Higgins-esque position, using strange, almost dance-like gestures as he conducts the phonetics of his student, who obviously thinks he'll be employed after gaining some kind of social camouflage via attaining flawless Queen's English. They carry on in this strange ritual of student following teacher, copying and placing vowel sounds and vocal techniques. It's the perfect enactment of the transforming power of voice. And yet, as you say, there are limits. What happens to the traces? There will always be traces.

**Y:** Traces of what?

**X:** Well, like Elie, and the Albanians in Zdjelar's film, the other voices can still be heard. In the seminal text, *The Restless Supermarket*, by South African author, Ivan Vladislavic, he creates this character,

Aubrey Turle, who is a self-described "incorrigible European", living in one of the shabbiest areas of the new Johannesburg (the story takes place in the era just proceeding the end of apartheid). Turle spends his days in the Café Europa, originally opened by a Greek woman (who's since left the expatriated), and is currently occupied by has-beens and down-and-outs, (left-overs of the new "Rainbow Nation"). There's a wall in the café painted with a kitsch mural, which Aubrey calls Alibia. Alibia (which literally means elsewhere), that is a hodge-podge composite of apparent idyllic postcard scenes that the painter blurred together to form a panorama: The French Riviera, Dickensian cobbled alleyways of London, "while in the east", writes Vladislavic, "a clutch of onion domes had been harrowed from the black furrow of the horizon. A Slav would feel just at home there as a Dutchman. It was the perfect alibi, a generous elsewhere in which the immigrant might find the landmarks he had left behind." (Vladislavic, 2001:19)

This character, Aubrey Turle, with his assumed sensibilities and almost forced sense of cultivation, regards the world around him in an obsessive linguistic sense, trawling the telephone guide, looking for types of surnames, where they're living – all of this to gauge, in his compulsive way, the dramatic socio-political shifts of the South African interregnum period. He knows Alibia is not his home, and he has no illusions about the real language of Café Europa.

**Y:** Yet, there is a yearning for some space of emulation, such as that provided by the idea of Alibia, or New Orleans, or the civilization on the banks of the Mississippi, a kind of continuity with the time of inhabitation by Europe, when there was an obvious line of progress, and a clear voice one

could adopt in order to be heard.

**X:** Like Foucault writes in *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) in the chapter "The Unities of Discourse", it's the semi-silence that precedes the articulation of knowledge, underwritten traces where truths are always already formed. It's this same silence that gradually overtakes Vladislavic's protagonist, when he holds a spelling competition as a last ode to Café Europa before it closes down and the Alibian wall is erased. The grammatical structure of the text itself begins to break down and we are left, uncertain of anything. As one character states, "I can't believe you're so upset this joint is closing down. It's not the end of civilization, you know." (Vladislavic, 2001:300). Huck Finn would be pleased.

It's this idea of breakdown which is embodied when Elisa Dolittle in *My Fair Lady*, having gained the education of Henry Higgins, is declared ready to be a lady with her flawless English pronunciation and fancy getup, and taken out on her first test run at the horse races. In the heat of a heated race she lets slip one of her voices and yells above the crowd in working class drawl, "Cam on Dowver! Moove ya bloomin arse!"

**Y:** But these class distinctions you keep referring to, and standards of 'civilization', are so passé. What of Modernist idea of the nation state, the working middle class, and the exploding of these notions as Coca Cola was brought to the masses? There is now less limited access to information, to some kind of discursive platform regardless of location or education (particularly, virtually), there is mobility in the cultural world both physically and in status.

**X:** And yet following 2001, the imposition of national identity through a unified accent gains

dominance. It's what builds cohesion, conviviality, it makes us the same because we can understand each other. At least we think we can. In a moment of supposed 'post-globalisation' there's actually a shrinking back and a tuning out of 'Amero-philic' or 'centred' sounding speech. We're anxious to align ourselves in how we say something more than what is said. We are after the perfect euphony, like Zdjelar's linguistic student.

**Y:** Though Zdjelar's student doesn't always get the pronunciation right. We don't know if he ever gets the job, the fancy car, the life he always wanted in Oxbridge. He's still an immigrant, like Aubrey Turle will never be a European.

**X:** It's this impossibility, or truncation of that narrative of a single accented voice, which brings us here, to this point. Foucault reminds us that the seemingly natural progressions and "universal unities" (1972:41) presented by the immediate framing of gestures or expressions – be they artistic, political, both – are anything but sensuous. When we listen to the convergence of the references, the texts and voices that have informed our conversation today, and the strangeness of this conversation itself, we see the necessity of regrouping and re-association when speaking and writing about the contemporary everyday practices. Foucault would call this the forming of a 'locus of assignable exchanges' (1972:32). A comment, an outburst, a moment of slippage that disrupts supposedly natural orbits of discourse, and triggers all kinds of polyphonic collisions between cultures, traditions, methods, lexicons.

**Y:** This is all very easy to achieve in the dramatics of role-play between you and yourself. But what is the

method when writing for a multiplicity of audiences, when not all of them are going to sigh and say, "Ah well, only in the art world"? You need to formulate an entirely new set of parameters, categories, canons, by which you judge and represent the artist, the speaker, their expression and the discussion it generates. How do you intend to incorporate all this in a single text without sacrificing rigour for relation, or comprehension for some schizophrenic altermodernity?

**X:** But we're on the Mississippi right? We're on the self-made raft. The drift away from 'sivilisin' has already begun. I can't masque my own accent and I don't wish to. I can't tell you when we've reached the destination because there is no X and Y route to finding linguistic or textual liberation. It's not a simple journey. Huck Finn wasn't the only soul on the homemade raft. There was also Jim, a black slave who'd escaped at the same moment as Huck. They find themselves haunting each other's steps, and must negotiate a loyalty to each other that's born out of necessity and could bring them to a deeper understanding of the circumstances that threw them together.

These surprising groupings and forays into uncertain, but connected waters are what the adventure of our texts is about. While the narrative behind us sets up material markers for the passage of history, the flow of the river thus far (what Jyoti Misty calls, the "Vocabularies of the Visceral" (2009) and to return to Mbembe and Nuttall's, "the provisional and contingent"), guides our traces up and down the tributaries, which 'irrupt' in front of us, (to paraphrase Foucault). Like the antics of Huck and Jim, these coincidences and 'wrong turns' force us to masquerade as those we are not. Take on the

voices of others, creating what Jan Verwoert, when looking at Katarina Zdjelar's singing Scandinavians, called a "conspiratorial mode of mimicry that modulates the identity of the speaker; or finally [results in] a mode of tentatively attuning oneself to one another." (2009:43). This attuning opens the floodgates to ways of speaking and writing, which can stay afloat amidst the rapids of worldliness and situated-ness.

**Y:** And through this, our voices become empathetic to each other.

**X:** And through this, our voices become empathetic to each other.



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