

# **National Issues: A Comparative Exploration of the Perceptions of National Issues in Creative Fiction Written in Indigenous Languages of Zimbabwe (Ndebele and Shona)**

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to demonstrate the extent to which creative fiction written in Ndebele and Shona, which are the two major indigenous languages of Zimbabwe, succeed or fail in dealing with issues that concern the whole nation. It focuses on this topic because the researcher believes that literature, especially in the third world or developing countries, should be a tool for social and economic development. Every writer, therefore, should be a writer in politics, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o says. For fiction written in indigenous languages to gain status and relevance in the eyes of society it must be seen by that society to be tackling national issues. As long as the fiction appears to be dealing with village issues whose importance does not seem to go beyond that village, then such fiction will always be sidelined and hence the producers of such fiction will also remain insignificant in the literary arena.

It is on this basis that this comparative analysis is undertaken in the hope of conscientising the writers for the purpose of making them have a broader perception of issues that affect their communities. This will help to situate the problem within the national perspective and thereby make their works relevant in the development of their community and country.

It must, however, be stressed that literature does not provide answers to the problems that face society, but if it is well focused it draws society's attention to those problems. What is important is for society to be aware of its problems and to understand their origins because only then can society begin the process of solving them. One poet, Chirikure Chirikure,

writes a poem which he entitles “Nhasi Hakurarwe” [We Shall Not Sleep Tonight]. The words of this poem are spoken by the community that is facing problems and the community is saying no one will sleep until a solution to the problems is found. The poem helps to make the reader or the audience realise that when the community is facing a problem the community must come together and discuss the problem and find a way out of the problem. That is what I mean when I say art must be a tool for development.

The comparison also hopes to make the writers aware that they should begin to see more in their societies than one or two ethnic groups. They ought to see the interaction of all the ethnic groups of Zimbabwe as they struggle for survival in the new socioeconomic order. The country can only move forward if it makes use of its diverse society and does not see the existence of many ethnic groups within one country as a problem and a weakness, but sees it as a strength. Art can play an important role in demonstrating the strengths in diversity.

Do we find this diversity in our art? When we read a novel that is set in Harare, for example, do we get the impression that we are in a city populated by a multiplicity of ethnic groups or do we see on reading the novel only one ethnic group? If we see one ethnic group, what impact does this have on the reader? What about the issues that the work addresses, how will the readers view them? All these are the issues that this paper hopes to highlight.

In order to make the comparison understandable to an audience that is not familiar with the literature written in the local languages of Zimbabwe it will be necessary to give background information that explains the birth and growth of that literature. It is hoped that the brief background will enable you to appreciate what could have given rise to the type of literature that is before us today.

### **The Rise and Growth of Literature Written in Ndebele and Shona**

The birth of literature written in Ndebele and Shona cannot be discussed outside the old and established acceptance of the power of art on the mind of the receiver of that art. This then explains the desire of the colonial regime, and even of the subsequent government that took power at

the attainment of independence, to want to control the production of that literature. They wanted to make sure that what people were going to read was not going to instil in their minds the desire to rise against the government of the day.

This literature was born in 1956 with the first two historical novels, one in Ndebele, *Umvukela WaMaNdebele* by Ndabaningi Sithole, and *Feso* by Solomon Mutswaiyiro. The two novels were published under the guidance of the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, a government department which was created to oversee the production of literature in Ndebele and Shona. The two novels experienced the influence of the control that the government of the day had on the new literature. Sithole was forced to change the title of his novel from *Umvukela WaMaNdebele* (*Ndebele Uprising*) to *AmaNdebele KaMzilikazi* (*The Ndebele of Mzilikazi*) the title under which the book was published in 1956 until it was banned in 1961. The colonial government was not happy with Sithole's original title because it believed that that title would incite the readers to take up arms against the colonial government. But they changed the title without changing the content of the novel which was just as inciting as the original title. It came as no surprise therefore that, when the regime banned the book in 1961 because it started linking the story of the novel with the activities of its author, Ndabaningi Sithole became involved in politics. Sithole's book was only allowed to resurface, now under its original title in 1980 at the attainment of independence.

Mutswaiyiro's book experienced a similar fate in that the writer was forced to remove a large portion of his story, a portion that dealt with how the people of his home area, Chiweshe, had lost their fertile lands to the white settlers. The book was thus published without that part of the story which the writer regarded as central to his theme. He agreed to do that because the alternative was to have nothing at all to publish.

The implications of what happened to these first two novels was to sound a warning to the future writers that the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau was indeed serious when it put guidelines to be followed by the writers. Thus when presenting their stories, including the choice of the stories they were expected to tell, writers had to abide by the rules of the Bureau. The Literature Bureau made it very clear to the aspiring writers that their stories must not focus on politics and must not present the government

of the day as being cruel to the black people. This meant that the stories should not touch on socioeconomic matters experienced by the blacks because all those problems, if they were to be told would point to the government of the day as being responsible.

The Literature Bureau encouraged writers to focus on village affairs. This explains the abundance of stories dealing with witchcraft and its attendant problems in society; polygamy and the misery it brought to the families concerned. The aspiring writers were encouraged to portray white people as carriers of civilisation and these, therefore, were to be presented in a positive manner while the black societies were regarded as people living in the dark. Black peoples were thus being encouraged to abandon their ways and adopt those of the white men. This explains why the novels of this period portray African traditions and customs in a negative way: polygamy, arranged marriages, payment of *lobola* or bride-price, traditional healers and African medicines were all condemned. The truth about all these traditions and customs referred to here was never told. The stories were one-sided. This view is corroborated by Emmanuel Chiwome, when he says:

Colonial education encouraged the creation of images which are distant from reality or which are superficial portraits of reality. There was little grappling with experience to come up with a new meaning and new possibilities. (Chiwome 1996:10)

The Literature Bureau also discouraged writers from saying any negative things about the church. The church was seen by the colonial government as playing an important role in making the black people accept their position as God-given as stated in the Bible. The works thus condemned African religion and all its attendant practices such as traditional medicine. However, there is one exception in this regard; E.M.Ndlovu's novel *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni (The Offspring of Ngodlweni)* (1959) which portrays the church in a negative way. Ndlovu reveals the hypocrisy of the church when, during Sunday service, the ministers preach about loving your enemies and yet in the towns where there are whites and blacks we never see the whites and blacks living together. Whites are also never seen worshipping in the same church with the blacks.

It is regrettable that E.M. Ndlovu had to use a roundabout method to register his protest against the regime in such a way that readers tended to

see Mzondiwa, one of the main characters who did not go to school, as a failure. Yet careful reading of the story makes him the hero of the story. As a result of this interpretation of this novel many readers tended to see the novel as an attempt by the writer to encourage the readers to embrace colonial education and culture. I consider this to be a narrow and limited interpretation of this novel because when you examine the characters that have adopted colonial education and culture, their seeming success is short lived; a careful scrutiny of their action reveals that the writer is ridiculing them and not praising them. Nkanyiso, the educated character, is promoted to a new position because his employer regards him as “a good boy”. A “good boy” is a worker who surrenders his rights and allows the employer to do whatever he wants with his life. Besides, Nkanyiso thinks that his new position where he shares the same office with white employees, places him on an equal footing with the white employees except for the colour of their skins; but the writer thinks otherwise because he compares Nkanyiso’s new pay-cheque not with that of his white work-mates but with that of a black policeman.

The presentation of Nkanyiso in this novel contrasts with that in *Nzvengamutswairo (Dodge the Broom)* (1957) by B. Chidzero. Chidzero makes those characters, Tikana and Matigimu, who were opposed to colonial rule and way of life, reform at the end of the novel. The characters realise that the course they had chosen was wrong, hence at the end they say “were it not for this progressive young man I would be a beast” (Chidzero 1957:84). In *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni*, it is the uneducated who triumph. Sibanda, the traditional healer, leaves white employment to become a prosperous healer who becomes very rich.

The impact of the control exerted by the Literature Bureau on the Ndebele and Shona writers was to channel their creative powers into writing about village conflicts. What trivialised these conflicts is that the writers never searched deeper for the causes of the conflicts. For example, in the novel *Oilindini (Notorious Cheat)* (1974) by B. Makhalisa, the central character, Zikhali, secretly kills his sheep and those of his neighbours in an attempt to get magic to enrich himself; and when he is eventually caught the reason given for his actions is greed. He wanted to get rich by the quickest method possible. The writer fails to make the reader understand what motivated Zikhali to take this course of action. The writer does not explore

Zikhali's environment to see what chances he had in getting rich using the conventional methods to enrich himself.

Also, as a result of these controls exercised by the Literature Bureau on the writers, the literature produced became monotonous; most of the novels start with the central character in his or her rural home and, because of bad influence, the character would be attracted to move to the city, to experience pleasures in the city, get corrupted by these pleasures, and eventually experience hardships before finally returning to the rural home to die. This is the pattern of both the Ndebele and the Shona novels of the 60s and 70s.

In these novels that dealt with rural-urban migrations, the writers trivialised the push factors, i.e. what made the young people go to the city; some of them even without the permission of their parents. All the writers give as reasons the moral degradation of these characters. In *Gara ndichauya (Wait I will Return)* (1967) by P. Chakaipa it is the weakness of Muchaneta's family that causes her to go to the city. Her mother has a high appetite for European goods such as sugar, tea and bread. She encourages her daughter to divorce her rural husband who fails to give her these goods because he is not working in town. A similar view is echoed by S.O. Mlilo in her book *Lifile (It Has Been Destroyed)* (1975). The central character, Lifile, is influenced by a corrupt neighbour who has been to town to abscond and go to Bulawayo. Lifile runs away from home at a time when her family was expecting her to get married to a local rich young man. In both these novels the focus is on the moral worthiness of the character.

The two writers just mentioned fail to focus on the factors that have caused changes in the behaviour of their characters. The establishment of settler rule and its impact on the people is played down. There is no mention of the introduction of the payment of taxes which were expected to be paid by each household. If there was no son in a household then the girls were expected to fend for that household. The introduction of European education and European culture and how these have changed society's outlook on life are not highlighted. For example, the school imposed new values on the community, the dress code changed, eating habits were also influenced by both the school and the church which worked hand in hand; sometimes both were united in the same institution. If these factors had been attended to, the writers would have realised that there were very powerful forces that

compelled the black people to change their way of life. It would have been clear that these changes did not affect the people of Mhondoro only, which is the setting of *Gara ndichauya*; nor did they affect only the people of Sizinda, the setting of *Lifile*. Mhondoro and Sizinda would have been seen easily to represent what was happening in the whole country. In that way the writers would have been exploring national issues and trying to find solutions to the new problems brought about by colonialism. In this way their literature would have played an important role in society. As A. Zis (1985:22) says: "Literature should actively influence the way in which life develops, contribute to consolidation of more pressing trends, help to solve pressing social problems and settle conflicts arising in life".

Furthermore, when the characters in the novels referred to above arrive in the city, they indulge in immoral activities such as prostitution and illegal marriages. The writers do not discuss or give the background to their characters' indulgence in such activities. It is as if to say that this kind of life is what they were looking for when they ran away from the comfort of their rural homes. They were looking for freedom to do as they pleased without the parents restricting their actions.

The writers therefore direct the wrath of the readers towards those characters. When these women are beaten by their boyfriends for double-crossing them, the reader is supposed to say they deserve the punishment. The focus is again on the morality of each individual character. The issues being pursued continue to be directed at personal level without using the individual to represent society at large. This approach limits the concern of the works to each individual family. We are therefore forced to see the problem as emanating from the failure of each family to discipline their children.

The writers of this period could have enhanced the concerns of their works by examining the factors that led to the transformation of these African girls into prostitutes. Throughout the country the new towns that were emerging experienced problems of accommodation. The colonial governments had a deliberate policy of restricting the black people to the rural areas. It was their deliberate policy to make the dwelling places of the black people in towns as uncomfortable as possible to discourage them from making the town their permanent home. Furthermore, the colonial governments were not keen to employ a female labour force; therefore there

were limited opportunities for women to get jobs. Without a job one had no accommodation and so women were forced by these conditions to survive by any means possible. Yet by this time the countryside was no longer able to sustain the blacks living there because their fertile land had been taken over by the settlers and the blacks were confined to unproductive land with erratic rainfall patterns.

These were the push factors that the early writers ignore completely when focusing on women leaving their rural homes because they wanted to indulge in immoral activities. In *Lifile*, for example, when the young women arrive in Bulawayo the reader is never allowed to see them searching for employment. They are seen with boyfriends or in the rooms of their boyfriends while the boyfriends are at work or have gone to their rural homes. By denying the reader the chance to see these girls looking for employment the writer emphasises the point that their purpose in town was prostitution and not to look for proper employment.

Villagisation of the concerns of these novels is further enhanced by the writers' choice of characters. The settings of these novels almost always start in the rural areas. Ndebele novels always have their settings in rural Matebeleland while the Shona novels have theirs in rural Mashonaland. This means that the central characters automatically come from the ethnic groups of those regions. So a Ndebele novel will have a Ndebele person as the central character and so will the Shona novel have a Shona person as the central character. This is logical and is to be expected. However, when the settings move to the urban areas one expects the characters in the story to reflect the new setting.

The urban areas are a meeting point of all the ethnic groups of Zimbabwe, especially the big cities such as Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru and Mutare. Therefore, a writer who is open-minded and is concerned with the issues that affect the nation as a whole should take advantage of such a setting to explore the issues that are of national concern.

The rural urban migration was, and still is, a national concern as has been pointed out already. However, the writers of the 60s and 70s failed to make it a national issue by focusing on the moral aspect of the characters. The writers also failed to make visible the problems faced by blacks, and women in particular, in the urban areas, by focusing again on the moral

issues rather than examining the impact of colonial policies on the blacks in the urban areas.

The writers failed to capitalise on the urban settings by limiting their characters in their novels to one ethnic group and also focusing on characters who come from the same rural area. They missed the opportunity to demonstrate that what was happening to the black women when they arrived in the city, had nothing to do with morality, let alone with women of a specific ethnic group. But once confined to one ethnic group, the problem could easily be associated with immorality on the part of a particular ethnic group. Once the problem is seen in that light it ceases to be a national issue. It is even made worse if all the characters come from the same rural area as is the case in the novels of the 60s and 70s.

Furthermore, the works of these writers supported the colonial policies that were designed to ensure that the urban areas should remain the home of the white people while the rural areas were the home of the black people. In the Shona novel *Murambiwa Goredema* (1959) by Solomon Mutswayiro, Murambiwa, the main character of the story returns to his rural home in Chiweshe, tired and disillusioned but enlightened that he should remain in the rural area that is his natural home. The same sentiments are echoed by S. O. Mlilo in her two novels, *Lifile* (1975), and *Bantu BeHadlana (People of Hadlana)* (1977). Sifelani, a character in *Lifile*, tells her home boys that she cannot cope with life in Bulawayo and since she is still keen to remain alive she is returning to her rural home Sizinda. It is in Sizinda that she belongs and not in Bulawayo. Silobile does the same in *Bantu BeHadlana*. Silobile even goes further than Sifelani by appealing to her ancestors to prevent even her own grandchildren from ever going to Bulawayo. These works, therefore, do not give the reader an opportunity to confront the new environment and find new solutions. Instead the characters run away from the problems. Such an approach does not help anybody because the problem does not go away by running away from it.

All these problems emanated from the policies of the Literature Bureau but were also boosted by the Christian churches through the establishment of the spheres of influence. People were grouped according to their Christian denomination and the writers seem to have followed the same approach in looking at their characters.

The Ndebele and the Shona novels have not changed with the advent of independence. The Literature Bureau has continued to exert the same influence as it did during the colonial era. However, it must be pointed out that the writers themselves have failed to see how their works can play an important part in instilling a sense of nationhood in their readership.

The novels that deal with the Zimbabwean War of Liberation, for example, have failed to instil a sense of belonging to *one* nation. You read a Shona war novel, and you find that all the freedom fighters have Shona names, they interact with Shona villagers and Shona youths. What impression does this have on the reader? Obviously, the reader will think there were no Ndebele freedom fighters and the Shona freedom fighters selected Shona-speaking areas only and this has serious consequences on ethnic relationships. It can actually divide the nation and make one ethnic group feel that they were the only ones who contributed to liberation of the country while other ethnic groups did nothing.

The writers of the period of the Liberation War had ample opportunities to pick their characters from the whole spectrum of Zimbabwean society because the freedom fighters invariably visited boarding schools where the scholars in those schools came from all over the country, representing the whole cross section of black Zimbabweans. Therefore for a writer to see only one ethnic group reveals the writer's attitude. In my view, such character selection can make the reader feel that the problems that were experienced during that period were experienced by only one section of the community. A writer, in my view, must write for Zimbabwean readers and not for the people of one ethnic group only. A reader who is not Ndebele or Shona but a Zimbabwean should be able to read a Ndebele or a Shona novel that speaks about Zimbabwean issues and feel that the work is addressing his or her concerns. However, if all the characters in the story come from one ethnic group this may affect the reader's views about such a work.

This also is true about Zulu novels that I have studied. You read a Zulu novel set in Johannesburg, for example, *Mntanami Mntanami (My Child My Child)* (1961) by Sibusiso Nyembezi and you find the characters that you meet in that work are Zulus, because that is what their names suggest. There are also Indians, English-speakers and Afrikaners, yet you get the impression that the blacks in that city are Zulus only. However, when

you visit the city you discover that there are other ethnic groups besides Zulus, such as Sotho, Venda, and Pedi. Why do the writers not acknowledge their presence? Acknowledging them does not create division but it makes those groups feel that they are being accepted as being part of this important black community that is struggling to survive in the new environment.

The post-independence literature has not changed either. Herbert Chimhundu has written a novel, *Chakweshu* (1991), that examines the post-independence disillusionment. While the novel is regarded as a breakthrough in so far as the writer analyses the problems of post-independence Zimbabwe, the writer falls into the same trap of thinking that Zimbabwe is made up of one ethnic group. His setting moves from a popular government boarding school to the capital city of Harare and ends up in London; yet in all these settings the writer fails to see any other ethnic group besides the Shona people. The question to ask is, is the writer saying the Shona people are the only group that is affected by these problems? Or are they the only people who have the guts to take a risk and express these problems? Why does he fail to acknowledge the presence of other ethnic groups in the capital or at the popular government boarding high school?

Such writings have serious consequences in respect of perceiving solutions to the problems. The solution to the problems is likely to be looked at from the point of view of that section that is represented in the work. The reader who is not Shona will not be able to identify with the work because the work is not inclusive. It is important to encourage writers to create works that make the reader feel that he or she is part of the community that is being addressed.

During the colonial period Ndebele and Shona writers were notorious for portraying people of Malawian and Zambian origin as underdogs. Whenever they appeared they played a negative role. Such a situation led the Zimbabwean population to look down upon these people. No parent was happy to have his or her daughter or son marry someone Malawian or Zambian origin. The literature that the Ndebele and Shona people read affirmed these attitudes. In that way the literature was not a tool for national unity, instead it strengthened ethnic animosity.

In conclusion I want to stress that in my reading of both Ndebele and Shona novels in the past twenty years, I have found one novelist who has acknowledged the presence of both Ndebele and Shona ethnic groups in

his work; this is J. Sibanda in *Kusempilweni (It Happens In Life)* (1982). When you read it you have the feeling that you are dealing with Zimbabwean life in its fullness.

In my view, literature tends to create attitudes in the minds of the readers which could be negative or positive. If we want our literature to be a tool in building positive attitudes in our readers we should try hard to create a literature that creates positive images of the various ethnic groups that make up our communities. This can be done by creating literature that makes each ethnic group feel that it has a role in building the state of which they are a member. They must not feel left out. The selection of characters that is involved in the writer's story is based on a critical decision which must, therefore never be taken lightly by writers. The inclusion or exclusion of certain characters can make a difference between a good work and a bad work.

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## **Multiculturalism, the Urban Public University and Comparative Literature**

Given the theme of this ICLA conference, "Transitions and Transgressions in an Age of Multiculturalism", I thought it might be useful to look in a rather pragmatic fashion at Comparative Literature as an undergraduate degree programme in a major urban university, particularly one like UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) that has become highly multicultural in the past decade. What I am going to do today is start with a few facts and figures about UCLA's student population, then I will turn directly to the development of our undergraduate major.

To begin, let me suggest the transition that UCLA's undergraduate domestic students have undergone in the last decade. In 1990, approximately 46% of students were white, about 16% were Chicano and Latino, almost 7% were African-American and about 28% were Asian; 1% were native American and approximately 3% are identified as other or unknown. In 1999, the white population dropped to 35%; the Chicano and Latino remained relatively constant at 15%, while the African-American population has dropped slightly to about 5% and the native-American to about .06%. Asian students have increased to 38%, and the other/unknown category has risen to almost 7%.

Now let me remind you that in California we had a bitter political battle over affirmative action in 1996 which, from my point of view unfortunately led to the elimination of special minority admissions. This has resulted in a drop of under-represented minorities from 23% in 1990 to 21% in 1999 in terms of overall undergraduate enrolment. Even more significant, the underrepresented minorities in the entering class of 1999 were down to

15% (the university picks up the remaining 6% in transfer students). This loss is particularly significant in Los Angeles where there is a large Hispanic population and the majority of children in public schools are non-white. Sadly, the California and Los Angeles public school system has suffered for the past decade or more from cuts in public funding based primarily on disinterest and indifference on the part of the politicians. This means that California public schools have fallen from the top ten in the U.S. to the bottom 20. There is a major effort now to correct this disastrous slide, but that will take many years. In the meantime, students who have gone to private schools or public schools in wealthy or socially conscious areas have tended to get better educations and therefore had a better chance of getting into the University of California system. (The UC System is composed of eight campuses: UC Berkeley and UCLA are the two largest and usually considered the most prestigious; other campuses are at Davis, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, Riverside, Irvine, and San Diego.) The university as a whole is working very hard to reach out to underrepresented minorities, but it isn't clear whether or not the actual percentage will get back up to the 23% of 1990 in the near future. Certainly, UCLA's Chancellor Carnesale has made a public effort to increase recruitment of underrepresented minorities. I should also mention one other transition: the increase in female undergraduates. In 1990 the student body was divided equally between males and females whereas in 1999 there were 55% female and 45% male, in other words, there are now ten percent more women than men at the undergraduate level.

Just to give you a quick idea of how UCLA's 1999 student population compares to a private university. In the academic year of 2000, Princeton University's undergraduate population is 67% white, 13% Asian, 7% black, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Native American. In brief, Princeton with its entering class of approximately 1100 students has a significant multicultural population of about 28% and an underrepresented minority population of about 15%. That underrepresented group compares surprisingly well with the 16% underrepresented minority in UCLA's approximately 4000 entering students in 1999. However, whereas UCLA has no one group with a simple majority, Princeton has a two-thirds white majority. These figures tell us only a limited amount about the differences between Princeton and UCLA. I suspect that an economic breakdown of the

family background of the two student populations would tell us a good deal, but for the moment the only comparison one can really make is to note that Princeton and UCLA have approximately the same percentage of underrepresented minorities, but that Princeton has a two-thirds white student population while UCLA has no single majority.

What I am concerned with today is how UCLA's change from an institution with a near majority of white students to a multi-ethnic and multicultural student body where white students constitute only about one-third of the student population might relate to a specific undergraduate programme. In other words, how does the above transition relate to Comparative Literature at UCLA? We have had a graduate programme for some thirty years and we have prided ourselves on the range and diversity of our students. For instance, besides language areas such as Russian, Chinese, Spanish, etc., we graduated a number of PhDs with major or minor fields in African languages and those students are now teaching in universities from Kenya and Addis Ababa to the University of Virginia and the State University of New York.

In terms of an undergraduate programme, however, there were administrative reasons not to mount one: basically, we had limited support from the administration and very few faculty; for many years we struggled along with six or seven faculty, all of whom had 50% split appointments between a home department and Comparative Literature, and who taught and ran the graduate programme and a related undergraduate group of courses in which our graduate students served as Teaching Assistants. Besides the lack of faculty and money, I think there may have been an underlying feeling that the undergraduate student population would not have the one or two foreign languages necessary for a Comparative Literature BA.

A number of things changed our minds: first, we began to get more support from our new Dean, Pauline Yu, and it looked like we could become a department with the possibility of more faculty and more support; second, as the above figures suggest, the student population had changed and it seemed clear that there were a substantial number of bilingual students on campus as well as students who had studied languages in high school. As embarrassing as it is to admit, a number of years ago UCLA lowered its

foreign language requirement from two years to one, so many students can test out of the requirement altogether. As all of you know, Americans historically have been averse to learning other languages and with the predominance of English throughout the world, that reluctance has not really changed. What has changed is the population of Americans in major cities: there are so many languages spoken in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, that one hears and lives the possibility of learning and speaking a variety of other languages. This is I believe a genuine change in American culture.

Given the changes going on around us in Los Angeles, and at UCLA, we put through a proposal for a degree that required an advanced knowledge of one foreign language and encouraged study in another language. (I realise this may seem minimal for members of this conference and we do have quite a few majors who know at least two foreign languages.) As for the degree itself, UCLA is run on a so-called Quarter System in which there are three ten-week sessions during the academic year. Students are expected to take between three to four courses a quarter. A BA requires approximately forty-five courses and eighteen of those must be upper division. Students spend at least their first two years completing General Education requirements and requirements for their intended majors. Most majors at UCLA are composed of thirteen upper-division courses. These courses can only be taken after students have fulfilled the preparatory requirements, in our case two years of a foreign language and at least two literature survey courses. Our basic requirements for a major are four courses in Comparative Literature, four courses in one language area, three courses in a second language area, and two elective courses. These electives can range from Classics or East Asian courses in translation to Art History, History, or Film and Theatre. We also put through a Minor—these normally consist of seven upper-division courses and ours require four Comparative Literature courses and two upper-division courses in language/literature departments and one upper-division course in a different language department.

We anticipated approximately twenty-five to thirty students within the first two to three years of the programme. We did little to advertise the programme, but we did try to inform as many relevant administrative offices as possible about our new degree programme. Indeed, let me say

straightforwardly that one thing of the things we did during the period when we were making the transition from a programme to a department and having our undergraduate major put through the various university committees was to have as many of our faculty involved in university committees as possible. We joined virtually every committee that might have something to do with approval of our undergraduate major and of our departmental status. This effort to make ourselves available to inform as many people as possible about who we are and why we wanted both this new degree and departmental status paid off in what was by university standards a remarkably rapid and easy transition. Our requests were approved by a number of separate faculty committees and the university administration supported us. The only opposition we experienced came from a couple of foreign language departments that felt our new status might threaten them. We were shocked at the opposition of our colleagues, but we understood their fears at a time in which student enrolments in some language areas are declining. To jump ahead a bit, let me say here that we think our new degree programme has not hurt enrolments in language departments and, indeed, we think it has probably increased them. In the past, students who might have wanted to take a few courses in a department, either because they were interested in the literature and culture of the country or because of their ethnic heritage, couldn't really find a reason to do it. UCLA students have a certain number of elective courses outside their majors, but they use these carefully. With our major and minor programmes in place, students can and have taken two or three courses in a department in order to use those courses for either their second field or their two electives.

Given the preparation and organisation that went into the proposal, within an approximately two-year period (a short time for the bureaucracy of our university system) our major was approved and we also officially became a department. This gave us a more stable funding structure and allowed us to hire faculty directly into the department, something we could not do as an Interdisciplinary Programme. The number and nature of our student population quickly surprised us. We reached our goal of 25-30 students within a year and by the end of the second year we had some 50-60 students who were majoring or minoring in Comparative Literature. This is a modest number, but it compares favourably with many other

language/literature departments: French has 100 majors, Italian 40, German 30. Spanish has 160 and East Asian Languages in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean has 115 with another 50 in an Interdepartmental Programme called East Asian Studies. English of course is the monster department with 1400 majors. So the 60 majors we have is modest in comparison to English, but falls in the middle range of comparable departments; not bad for what is now a three-year-old major.

Why have we done so well? While I think there is an underlying intellectual reason why many of our students join our programme, there is a whole string of practical reasons. The first may be UCLA itself: it offers a tremendous range of languages and literatures; at one time, we had seventy-five languages, though I don't think we have as many now. The practical reasons run from flexibility and languages spoken at home to UCLA's study abroad programme and the possibility of double majors.

1. *Flexibility*: we discovered of course that students genuinely like the flexibility that we offer them; they love being able to take course work toward a degree while working in several different departments.
2. *Language*: students realise that they can use either or both the languages they have studied at school and the language they speak at home for academic purposes. For many students, this is a genuine surprise. As undergraduate adviser I have had a number of conversations with students in which I tried to find out if he or she had a second or third language and only after subtle questioning would he or she admit that he or she speaks Korean or Armenian at home. Once students realise that they can use this family language many become excited at the possibility of studying the language and literature of their parents while at the same time studying the Spanish or French or German that they have taken in high school.
3. Another crucial value of our programme in relation to UCLA as a university is our extensive *Education Abroad Programme*. Students can obtain student loans to go abroad for as little as a few weeks and as long as a year, so a substantial number of students choose to do

this to improve their knowledge of the language and to experience another country and culture. When they return from their three, six or twelve months abroad, they are changed students. Even if they are not forever addicted to the particular country and culture, as are those who go to France or Italy, six months in Germany, Sweden, or Mexico changes them in profound ways.

4. Finally, in terms of practicality, many of our students want as wide a range of *job prospects* as possible. By definition these are not students who want to major in Engineering or Biology, though supposedly more than eighty percent of the students who start UCLA as freshman want to become medical doctors. By the end of the first year, many of these have changed their minds. Let me admit, however, that we do have a number of students who double-major in fields such as Microbiology.

Comparative Literature allows students to double-major or major and minor with relative ease. At UCLA, a student can overlap five courses in a degree programme. For instance, for their major field students take four courses; these courses may be counted toward another degree, so a student could take the requisite thirteen courses in say French and German and five of those could be counted toward a Comparative Literature major. Almost a quarter of our students are doing such a double programme. Some choose language/literature areas, but others take Art History, History or even a science. It is of course easier to find courses that overlap by period or theme between History or Sociology and Comparative Literature than it is to find a course in Microbiology, so some students have only one or two courses overlapping and some, those who are particularly well organised and ambitious, complete all the requirements for two separate majors.

Other practical reasons that students give for majoring in Comparative Literature include possibilities of becoming teachers or entering Graduate School or Law school. Many of them plan to go on to Law School and Comparative Literature provides them with a fine general education for their Law studies. As for the more serious intellectual reasons

why students have chosen to enter our major, I think our courses are a primary reason.

The range of courses we teach varies widely reflecting the diversity of our faculty, although I must admit there is a heavy bias towards nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature in them; this range however goes from Asia to Africa, from Latin America to Sweden. Our courses begin with some standard literature survey courses at the lower-level-division level. These have a typical Western and European bias from the Greeks to modern times, but they always include some non-European texts, and we have a course which is devoted exclusively to Great Books from the World at large, including texts from East Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean. Students are encouraged to take one or two of these classes, but any two literature survey courses, such as those offered by the English, French, or Scandinavian satisfy our preparation requirements.

At the upper-division level, students are required to take an introductory course that introduces them to some of the basic concepts and schools of literary criticism and theory. This class initially terrifies students since the reading, dense and demanding, usually involves essays by major theorists. (We have been using a volume edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin called *Critical Terms for Literary Study*.) Students give oral presentations of the essays and write papers applying some of the concepts and theories to short stories, and later a novel and a play, assigned in the class. The class is taught as a seminar, however, and students are required to participate in discussions of essays. The heavy reliance on theory in this class prepares them for the other three or four Comparative Literature courses they take. All of these classes mix theory and literary texts, though the balance obviously shifts depending on the instructor. The classes range from Classical Traditions: Tragedy and Satire to French Symbolism and English Decadence, Colonial Encounters, the Holocaust in Literature, Female Voices in Contemporary Literature, Chinese Immigrant Literature and Film, Post-Modernism and the Third World or more purely theory-oriented courses such as Walter Benjamin's Literary Criticism or Heidegger, Language and Literature.

It is I think the intellectual richness and range of these classes in addition to the classes in the other departments that has attracted students. They become fascinated by the fact that they can read and understand

literary theory, that they can understand the debates that go on within it, and that they can begin to learn to apply some of those ideas and theories in their own work. Once they become excited about all this, they tell their friends.

So who are these students? We have a number of what you think of as typical Anglo-and-Jewish-American students; young men and women who want to go to law school or to graduate school and who studied French, German, Spanish or Hebrew in private school or high school. But many of our students fall in other categories. Naturally, we have a number of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean-American students, but we also have quite a few Hispanic and Chicano students. One of the surprises for me has been the discovery of Los Angeles's and therefore UCLA's substantial Armenian population. I think we now have five or six students studying Armenian as one of their language/literature areas. We also have a number of Iranian and Middle-Eastern students. Most of our students with identifiable ethnic backgrounds are second or third generation; their parents or grandparents came to the U.S. as immigrants and have prospered. Many of these students speak one language with their families and English with their friends. Finally we have a number of students who have come directly from another country; Italy, France, Argentina, China.

At the heart of all our classes, and what many of the students come to love about the major, is the illuminating discovery of cultural and literary similarities and differences. Besides our serious focus on texts and the stylistic and narrative issues connected with literary analysis, students get to confront openly issues of race, gender, class, and culture, realities that they confront in everyday life. They are provided intellectual tools to help them compare and contrast the narrative techniques of different genres and to think about how the literary representations of one culture in one time and place have both remarkable similarities with and surprising differences from literary texts from another culture and time.

It is this intellectual stimulation and debate that our students seem to enjoy about their major with us. As I have attended the graduation ceremonies in the past two years of our first graduating classes, I have enjoyed seeing the students describe enthusiastically to their parents this or that teacher's class and, in their terms, the "awesome" stuff they read. We hope they take that sense of the "awesome" with them and that they use the

critical and theoretical tools we have modestly tried to provide for them. Right now, it looks as if our major is still growing, presumably because students are telling their friends. Thank you.

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## **Comparative Literature in an Age of Multiculturalism: The Case of Southern California**

In Southern California, multiculturalism is a crucial reality. Our undergraduate population at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) no longer shows a Caucasian majority. Asian-American students, Latino and Chicano students, African-American, native American students, and students of middle-Eastern descent create one of the most diverse student bodies in the world. Many of our students themselves constitute cases of multiculturalism; they are from mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds and must learn to balance their multiple identities in a society that constantly wants them to declare themselves to be from one group. In the midst of this diversity, Comparative Literature takes on a special role as a discipline whose purpose is to compare cultures and to juxtapose different literary, cultural and ethnic traditions.

In some ways Comparative Literature at UCLA has thrived because of this; we have created a new undergraduate major that has grown rapidly to be twice the size we envisioned. We have moved from programme to departmental status, thus ensuring our budgetary security. But in other ways, Comparative Literature and literature as a whole have come under attack. Our earlier arguments about moral and cultural values being conveyed through literary studies are now met with scepticism and with hostile questions about the economic viability and value of literary studies. Why do we need so many departments of literature? Couldn't we just lump them all together? Given these attacks, national literature departments come to fear Comparative Literature as a totalising imperialist enterprise out to swallow them and their long-established traditions. On the other hand, English Departments have been clever enough to claim the ability to teach "World

Literature" entirely in English translation, thus obviating the need for Comparative Literature as well as national literature departments of any kind. This kind of contention and suspicion among humanists has not helped our common cause.

As an associate dean in the Graduate Division at UCLA, I have attended meetings where the discussion has been swamped by the metaphors of the business school and economics (such as "economies of scale"—meaning the bigger the department, the better, and "resource-centred management" meaning every department must be economically self-sufficient—a clear impossibility in the arts and humanities). At *best*, business schools see our study of other cultures as a way to refine their business practices in a global economy. We live in an age when the metaphor of the "bottom line" has replaced that of the "moral high ground". This pragmatic (or even ruthless) economic attitude is coupled with an attack on attempts to create equal opportunities for all ethnic groups through America's Affirmative Action Programmes. I would like to examine how these two postmodern pressures of the dominance of economics and a growing resistance to affirmative action have effected the discipline of Comparative Literature and its place in higher education. I will use UCLA as my case study.

In 1996, California voters passed a proposition called "209" that billed itself as a "prohibition against discrimination or preferential treatment on the basis of race, sex, colour, ethnicity, or national origin by state or other public entities".<sup>1</sup> The one exception to the law would be made if federal funds would be lost by abiding by it. While this sounds deceptively fair minded, the effect of the proposition was to wipe out all state programmes for supporting underrepresented minority groups on special funds. In effect, we could no longer recruit minority students by offering them targeted fellowships because this was considered preferential treatment.

Many of our established minority fellowship programmes had to be redefined as serving students who had overcome some personal or economic hardship in pursuing their education or who wanted to serve minority communities when they completed their degrees. Such criteria did not

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the language of the proposition as it was recorded on the California Ballot in 1996.

produce the same pool of underrepresented minority students as the original programmes had. In addition, we were forced into creating the “queen-for-a-day question” by asking students to create narratives about how miserable their lives were in order to get fellowship funds. One student quite rightly protested that that was none of our business.

Our state’s newly gained reputation as being “anti-minority” and the university’s inability to use fellowship funds for recruitment resulted in a drop in some minority-group applications to UCLA’s graduate programmes as well as a drop in new students. African-American applications dropped by 11.5% between the pre-“Prop 209” (Fall 1996) and the Fall of 1999. The number of new African-American students to enrol dropped by 9.8%. American-Indian numbers (always small) dropped even more—by 22.7% for applicants and by 58.8% for newly enrolled students between 1996 and 1999.

The numbers among some other minority groups actually climbed; but those groups are the fastest growing component of the California population. The demographics of California is shifting so quickly that growth in these populations in higher education should actually be higher. Chicano applications went up by 6.6% and new enrolments went up by 26.2%; Latino applications went up by 56.6% and new enrolments by 40.3%; Filipino applications went up 4.5% and new enrolments by 14.3%.<sup>2</sup> We made gains in diversity among the fastest growing segment of the population but actually lost ground among African-American and Native-American students. Our Law School fared much worse, showing declines in new enrolments in every minority category—including a decline of 84.2% for African-Americans and 74.2% for Chicanos.

At the same time, the regents of the University of California continued to mandate that the UC system foster diversity and ensure equal access to the university among all ethnic groups. Many of us felt this to be a schizophrenic position. On the one hand, we could not use financial resources such as fellowships to recruit underrepresented minority students, on the other hand, we were supposed to ensure that those students came to a

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics are taken from an internal report about graduate school admissions generated by the Graduate Division at UCLA.

university system famous for launching the anti-affirmative action campaign. As you can imagine, recruitment remains difficult.

Higher education in the United States has long relied on various national examinations as part of their assessment of applicants to college and graduate studies. We have also long recognised that those students who are educationally disadvantaged early in their schooling—who are by the large part minority students in inner-city schools—are less likely to score well on such examinations—or indeed to have prerequisites necessary to gain access to the university or even encouragement to seek such access. We can no longer attempt to assist those minority students by targeting fellowships for them. The only route left to us was one we had already been travelling—i.e., attempting to reach out to students in high school and grade school to ensure that they would have a better preparation and more encouragement to compete for slots in college and graduate school. While this strategy helps, it has not yet made up for the loss of targeted fellowship funds in recruiting the desired numbers of minority students.

In recent years, we have found that Comparative Literature as a subject has helped us in our efforts. Students wanting to study East-Asian and Asian-American literatures, or the African Diaspora or Latin America or North America are often attracted to graduate studies in Comparative Literature. On the graduate level, Comparative Literature at UCLA has a healthy minority student population—including about 25%-30% Asian-American students, and about 2% each African-American, Chicano, Latino and Filipino students. In addition, 8%-10% of our students are International scholars from Europe, East Asia and Africa and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> These students have been very successful in the job market.

We would like to do better, however, in creating an ongoing, stable stream of students of diverse backgrounds. The expansion of Comparative Literature in recent years to a truly global discipline as well as conferences such as this one should help us realise this goal. The currently booming economy in the United States—especially in Silicon Valley in Northern California—have helped to respond to a second issue—the economic climate of higher education in the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics are derived from Departmental Profiles of Comparative Literature generated by the Graduate Division at UCLA.

During the economic constrictions in the 1980s, when American universities were in dire circumstances and deeply in the red, they began to look for departments that could be cut or consolidated. The rush to adopt "Resource centred management", an administrative model which dictated that each unit of the university should be economically self-sufficient, aggravated the problem. Among the prime targets for such cuts were language departments. Teaching language is labour-intensive; it requires many teachers and cannot be lumped into huge lecture groups. University administrations looked for weak language areas that could be dropped or for groups that might be consolidated. The traditional western and northern European languages, the old guard of American universities, were most threatened. Their response was not to form alliances of their own, but rather to stress their unique individuality. Thus national literatures became even more nationalistic, resisting larger configurations such as "Romance Languages" or "European Languages".

This threat and response made many of the language departments suspicious of Comparative Literature, which seemed to be a conglomerating activity. Ironically, Comparative Literature became the *bête noir* of individual language departments under attack. I say ironically because Comparative Literature has always been quite clear about its dependence on strong language departments and its insistence on reading texts in the original languages. Comparatists cannot operate without strong foreign language studies.

During this time, the demographics of Los Angeles and California dictated growth in new areas (East-Asian, Latin-American, Middle-Eastern Studies) without succeeding in eliminating increasingly less popular language areas. We would applaud the latter, but we must acknowledge that this means that already underfunded language and literature areas are faced with increasing divisions of a pie that hasn't grown any larger. We were rescued partly by the economic upturn of the 1990s. The underlying issues, however, have not been resolved.

In the global climate where profit defines one's worth—as a business or as an academic department, the Humanities—and particularly literature—will remain vulnerable. We have, to some extent, tried to turn this to our advantage by pointing out that business will not succeed abroad

without some knowledge of the culture and language they are entering. But this is not enough. We are competing for funds with areas of campus like computer science and biotechnology or nanotechnology—all of which can turn an actual rather than a cultural, moral or psychological profit.

But leaving the economic argument aside for a moment, the realities of an increasingly global world make a discipline such as Comparative Literature inherently attractive. It has always been our business to think about different cultures in a comparative mode while trying to retain the uniqueness of those cultures. This seems to me to be a skill that is indispensable in our current world. American universities are launching new initiatives for interdisciplinary work that crosses boundaries—both disciplinary and geographic. While administrators usually have the sciences in mind in such enterprises, I believe that Comparative Literature should figure prominently in that effort. If UCLA is any indication, I think we are doing so. We are currently growing in faculty, undergraduate majors and prominence. We are seeking to create a faculty and student body that is diverse in ethnicity, culture and gender. Despite the challenges I have outlined here, I believe we are on our way to doing so.

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## **“Comparative Literary Perspectives on Globalisation”: A Test Case**

In 1998, a high-profile “strategic area”, focused on globalisation, came into being at McMaster University. Directed by a political scientist, with a historian and a sociologist as associate directors, the Institute on “Globalization and the Human Condition” was created to promote interdisciplinary research into globalisation as an economic, political, and cultural phenomenon. The mandate of this academic initiative is to investigate contemporary globalising processes and to examine their impact on human lives and social relationships. An exciting and highly charged venture, the Institute has brought together a strong team of faculty members from a wide range of disciplines; we meet regularly to share our ongoing research on topics relating to globalisation, to debate and develop our collaborative research agenda, and to plan courses for students enrolled in a programme of undergraduate study called “Globalization, Social Change, and the Human Experience”. As a core member of the Institute, I have been preparing a course entitled “Contemporary Literary Perspectives on Globalization”. Through the careful study of literary texts, recognised in the prospectus for our research project as providing “a different order of insight into social phenomena” (Frye 1999:2) students will engage in a critical exploration of the effects of globalisation on human life and society.

In the first year of the undergraduate programme (1998-1999), only the introductory course was offered, but as the initial cohort of students advances, other courses, including mine, are gradually being introduced. These are taught by colleagues from a number of different departments: Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Music, English, History, Philosophy, and Anthropology. Not only does the variety of disciplinary

perspectives represented here indicate an innovative approach, but the “self-directed-learning” format, which we are encouraged to use, has emerged as a distinctive feature of the programme, consistent with its goal of empowering students to become critically aware and active citizens in the globalising world in which they live. Although I was slated to offer my course in the coming academic year, my recent appointment as Acting Director of the newly autonomous Comparative Literature programme at McMaster has necessitated a postponement. (This development, needless to say, is good news; Comparative Literature has been made a “major academic programme” within the Faculty of Humanities.) Rather than report, then, on a course which I have not yet had the opportunity to teach, I will speak today of my experience generally as a comparatist within the research Institute and, more specifically, as a guest lecturer in the introductory course of the undergraduate programme. Arguing for the indispensable role of Comparative Literature in an educational venture of this kind, I want to suggest something of the particular contributions our discipline might make in the timely study of what has now become a ubiquitous concept. The term “globalization”, indeed, is invoked on a regular basis, without there necessarily being consensus as to its meaning. In the Institute, we begin with Malcolm Waters’s definition of globalisation as a process “in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (Waters 1995:3). The “boundaries and imagination of social relations become more autonomous from physical location, time and distance become less of an obstacle”, and new international connections “have an increasing impact on conditions in which human beings live” (Frye 1999:1). The effects of globalisation are notoriously uneven, advantaging some, while making life more difficult for a great many others. As in earlier periods of significant international change, globalising processes “destabilize existing centres of influence and security, while giving rise to new global and local centres of power and authority” (p.1). Such processes thus profoundly affect the autonomy of individuals and collectivities—their capacity to determine the conditions under which they live—and new patterns of social relationships develop in response to the often harsh and bewildering imperatives of the emergent international economic order. For evidence that concerns about the impact of globalisation have come to preoccupy not just economists,

political scientists, and sociologists, but literary scholars as well, one only need turn to Edward Said's recent Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association of America (the MLA), which puts forth the following critical position:

Today globalization has introduced and imposed the concept of a single deregulated market economy, which has in turn produced new disparities in wealth, entitlement, and the distribution of goods that bedevil the very idea of human development and provoke complex struggles of resistance against injustice. Intellectually, however, a search for new alternatives [...] is mercifully under way. (Said 2000:291)

As I have indicated, even in our small corner of the world at McMaster, considerable intellectual energy is being devoted to this search for new alternatives, as our research and teaching initiative promotes a critical engagement with globalisation from a number of diverse disciplinary perspectives. This is not to suggest that our approach is ideal. While courses in the undergraduate programme ask questions about economics and politics in the new globalising era—about the changing role of nation-states, for example, and developments in the recent history of world markets and trade—and while explorations of cultural identity and topics in mass communication, literature, and music have their place, very little is contributed from the perspectives of Indigenous Studies, Peace Studies, Religious Studies, the visual arts or drama, to name just a few, fairly obvious, albeit unintentional exclusions. There is, moreover, no language requirement for the programme, the tacit assumption being that English, “the lingua franca of the TNC [transnational corporation] era” (Miyoshi 1993:742), is all one needs in today's monocultural world. Even sharp critics of the often devastating effects of globalisation tend to rely on similarly erroneous assumptions, as in the following rhetorical questioning, designed in fact to support an argument against the passive acceptance of “so-called free markets”: “Where in the world can you not get a coke? A long-distance phone line? Dallas reruns? A loan from the World Bank?” (Allen 2000). In plenty of places, of course, can one—can millions— not get a drink of clean water, let alone a Coke, although presumably there are places where the latter rather than the former would be available, the relationship between the two being complex indeed.

I have found that some of the blind spots in critical approaches to globalisation can be exposed from a comparative literary perspective, even as the insights of others have helped to improve my vision and clarify the frequent contradictions in my own position. In the undergraduate programme on "Globalization, Social Change, and the Human Experience", for example, two courses other than mine also focus on literary texts which represent changing notions of global relationships, but each of these courses has a syllabus restricted to contemporary works of fiction in English. As a comparatist, I have worked with my colleagues in English to problematise the notion, widespread in popular and academic anglophone discourse, that such texts constitute "world literature". This astonishingly presumptuous categorisation gives even greater pause when one considers that its proponents would as a matter of course contest the many exclusions of an identical rubric if it were Eurocentric, part of the familiar legacy of Goethe's misunderstood concept of *Weltliteratur*. As Sylvia Söderlind, discussing some rather alarming developments in postcolonial studies, puts it, "the British empire recolonizes the world in the name of difference and literacy becomes increasingly anglicized" (1997:4). In the ongoing work of the Institute thus far, I have been struck by the fact that my interventions often take the remarkably basic form of providing simple but persistent reminders of the absurdity of an exclusive focus on literature and criticism written in English.

As for the contemporary focus of the other literary offerings in the programme I have, in contrast, signalled my intention to include texts such as Virgil's *Aeneid* in what we have envisaged as a collective examination of "how texts articulate resistance to, or subversion of, the neo-imperial movements of globalization" (Coleman, Howard & Rempel 1997:4). In the current, somewhat paradoxical situation of growing internalisation but also mounting global conformity, a comparatist orientation can be invaluable in helping to refuse the replication of colonialist patterns such as we see in the anglicisation or even Americanisation not just of global culture, but also of discourses that would critique this very process of cultural homogenisation. In the context of undergraduate teaching, it is, I would argue, crucial to study texts from a diversity of linguistic and cultural—which is not necessarily to say national—traditions and from a range of historical periods. The reality is that these must be read in English translation, but in

my view this is infinitely preferable to not reading them at all. At the same time, students should be made aware not of “what they’re missing” by reading in translation, but indeed of the opposite: of what they’re missing by not reading in translation, by reading only contemporary fiction and criticism written in English. A Comparative Literature course would, furthermore, investigate the relation of globalisation to such matters as literary production, distribution, and reception; the politics and economics of translation; and the processes of canonicity from empirical as well as theoretical perspectives.

In his Nobel lecture, Günter Grass, winner of the 1999 Prize in Literature, speaks of the potentially subversive power of literary texts in the context of an unimpeded capitalism, which has “turned the free market into dogma, the only truth. Globalization is its motto, a motto it proclaims with the arrogance of infallibility; there is no alternative” (Grass 2000:299). Grass concludes that perhaps there is hope “that if not politics, which has abdicated its decision-making power to economics, then at least literature may come up with something to cause the ‘new dogmatism’ to falter” (p.299). In the same address, he mentions his novel *The Flounder*, which “deals with the very foundations of human existence, including food, the lack and superabundance thereof, great gluttons and untold starvelings, the joys of the palate and crusts from the rich man’s table” (p.300). Such attention to what Northrop Frye calls “primary concerns”—food, sex, property, and freedom of movement—which are creatively and critically modelled in literature, with its fundamental impulse toward “more abundant life” (Frye 1991:6,29; 1990:42-44,6,307-13), becomes particularly significant in an age of globalisation.

Oscar Arias refers to the latter as a “Janus-faced beast, offering unimaginable prosperity to the most well-educated and well-born, while doling out only misery and despair to the world’s poor” (Arias 1999:2). For some, to be sure, “the new economic system means being able to make investments with a worldly perspective, minimising labour costs and maximising profits” (p.2). For a good many others, it signifies devastating exposure to the destabilising effects of the free market and little prospect of the basic security that rests on the fulfilment of primary concerns. All through history, Frye maintains, secondary concerns (political, religious, and other loyalties) “have taken precedence over primary ones” (Frye

1991:6; 1990:43). We waste life in the waging of war; we disallow permitting the exploitation of others and ourselves. But in the nuclear age, an age also of global, truly borderless pollution, which threatens the supply of clean air and water, the need to reverse this emphasis becomes urgent. And as Frye argues, though it “incorporates our ideological concerns, [...] devotes itself mainly to the primary ones”, its fictions “show human beings in the primary throes of surviving, loving, prospering, and fighting with the frustrations that block these things” (1991:16).

The particular literary text that I discussed with students in the introductory course on Globalisation was, I confess, a contemporary work written in English, but the fact that I do not always practice what I preach will not, I hope, detract from my argument, for any number of works could just as well have been selected. The piece I did choose was Barbara Gowdy’s “Disneyland”, a chapter from the Canadian writer’s novel *Falling Angels* (1989), which was previously published as a short story and can therefore easily be read on its own. Time does not permit me to analyse this text, but only to suggest how and why it led to reportedly one of the most intense and productive sessions in that introductory course. The most basic explanation has to do with the fact that, to quote Frye again, literature “is at once a world of relaxation, where even the most terrible tragedies are still called plays, and a world of far greater intensity than ordinary life affords” (Frye 1991:16). Gowdy’s text provides a brilliant parody of the American dream, exposing with great economy the self-defeating consequences of the privileging of secondary concerns. The year is 1961. Intending to holiday in Disneyland, a Canadian family of father, mother, and 3 daughters instead spends their two-week vacation in another location privileged by consumers of mass culture at the height of the cold war; they descend into their very own bomb shelter, where they rehearse the escape Jim, the father, sees them enacting in the event of nuclear war. This change of plan is really not so surprising, when one considers that in both getaways—whether to the peace of mind allegedly afforded by the cellar in the backyard or to that promised by the Disneyland adventure—the family is simply following the dictates of exported American culture. Initially enjoying “the notoriety and security of being the safest children in the subdivision” (Gowdy 1989:54), the children soon discover the realities behind the imperatives of a cold-war mentality more concerned with perceived threats and manufactured crises than with

actual assaults on the well-being of those supposedly protected under the nuclear umbrella. When Lou, the middle child, is reduced to lapping water off the floor, a result of her father's having miscalculated the amount they would need and then clumsily spilling the last of what he had allowed; when Norma, the eldest, gets her first menstrual period; when Sandy, the youngest, becomes feverish with chicken pox; and no one is permitted to leave the so-called shelter, it becomes clear that the real danger is not so much nuclear war as the nuclear family.

The father's obsessive and obstinate propagation of the dominant cultural mythology—"There's radiation out there," he barks. "Well, there isn't really, Jim," counters his wife gently (p.56)—reflects the dynamics of the larger, paternalistic social order. Indeed, the mother's short-lived, futile attempts to deflate her husband's illusions of father knowing best often assume a form that validates the oppressive and arbitrary social structure they all have internalised, as when she announces her resolve to take Sandy out of there if the child's temperature rises "one more degree" (p.67). Thus, a frighteningly absurd situation becomes normalised, the mother's resignation exemplified in her lying passively on her bunk, supplied with cultural sedatives such as the TV Guide, plenty of cigarettes, and a coffee mug continuously filled with whisky, which she frequently shares with her daughters in a compassionate gesture of maternal concern. One of the girls, after the family finally emerges from this hellish confinement, wonders why she didn't simply "escape" from the shelter (p.70); what kept them there, locked in a delusional scheme which almost killed them, where everything turned out to be its infernal opposite, from so-called "free" time (p.63) to the very notions of safety, self-reliance, security, and protection. What keeps them in the bomb shelter, of course, is what keeps them in the "home, sweet, home" of the subdivision to which they return, as after any "long car ride or [...] holiday" (p.79). In this particular homecoming, however, a highly ironic odyssey, the father's eyes, "triumphant, crazy, miserable" (p.79), betray the fundamental insecurity and lack of autonomy of the one charged with ensuring the welfare of all the others within his domain. The narrative exposes his extremely tenuous position as traditional authority figure and upholder of familiar, but outmoded and frankly lunatic conceptions of human freedom and safety. Against the illusory forms of escape provided by a trip to Disneyland, refuge in a fallout shelter, a bottomless mug of whisky,

or even the TV Guide, Gowdy’s text points to the necessity of true cultural transformation, the building of a culture of peace, in the place of one whose axis joins the twin poles of oppression and escapism. In its implicit critique of conventional notions of security, “Disneyland” exemplifies what Christa Wolf has in mind when she speaks of literature as “peace research” (Wolf 1993:185). The text offers an alternative view, a timely one, as we enter a new era of economic, political, and cultural internationalism. It suggests, as many are now arguing, that global human security,

in contrast to the traditional concept of security linked to military capacity and economic power [...] represents the degree to which human beings are protected from ignorance, sickness, hunger, neglect and persecution. It is the standard that dignifies human life. (Arias 1999:2)

There are “two closely linked concepts” here: “common security”, the notion that one’s safety depends on that of all people, and “comprehensive security”, the idea that “non-military factors such as social inequity, poverty, environmental degradation, and migratory pressures are at least as important as military ones in determining the potential for conflict” (Renner 1999:17). The vast majority of wars currently being waged around the globe are civil wars—within rather than between states—and result from the failure of nation-states to respect the human rights and meet the fundamental requirements of all their citizens. Thus, there is a growing recognition that global human security “rests on social, economic and political conditions that serve the needs of people rather than the needs of particular regimes” (Regehr 1999:3), that

peace must be nurtured rather than guarded; that stability requires the reduction of threat and elevation of trust; and that sustainability depends on participatory decision-making rather than on exclusion and control.

(*Annual Report 1997:1*)

With the competitiveness of the new global economy contributing to increased insecurity worldwide, and with threats appearing in the form of not only nuclear missiles, but also, in an era of borderless culture, sweatshops, genetically modified food, hormonally enhanced beef, widespread environmental devastation, and the eradication of “local

knowledge, cultural diversity, traditional skills and systems” (Stackhouse 1998), the necessity of resisting the imperatives of globalisation—and the discourse of inevitability that accompanies it—becomes evident. And literature, with its creative and critical attention to primary concerns, has a significant role to play in the forging of alternative social relations and cultural practices. As Said reminds us, “a new and in many ways unfamiliar landscape stretches out before us”, but this produces “major occasions for vitalising the humanities, [...] for making them, in the deepest sense of what they should mean, a reengagement with knowledge, critique, and freedom” (2000:291).

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## Let's Level the Playing Fields

### Introduction

Education in South Africa is currently under reconstruction—throwing out the apartheid baggage and trying to make meaningful change in the “new-democracy” as we hurtle into the new millennium. The major problems facing educationists in South Africa today, may be summed up as follows:

- the aftermath of apartheid education
- mass illiteracy which is a remnant of the use of literacy by the apartheid government as a tool of power and privilege
- the use of English as the medium of instruction at tertiary educational institutions when the majority of the students speak English as a second or third language.

To use a well-worn sporting metaphor, if the starting blocks for some people are farther down the track than others, then evaluating their performance in a particular field against those of the advantaged group is discriminatory and unfair. The runners farthest from the finish line will always finish last, unless they can run substantially faster than their advantaged competitors. True equality implies that in open competition all competitors start from the same point. (Sarakinsky 1993:7)

Why is there only emphasis on the written test and examination in assessment? When students enter the working environment, more often than not, they are called upon to think on their feet, to talk within and about their field of expertise—they are not asked to write down all their responses. So,

conversation and face-to-face communication is a very real, essential and sometimes very daunting experience for the graduate. Shouldn't our teaching and therefore our assessment strategies prepare them for their vocational life or their life after tertiary education?

In this paper, I am going to put forward 3 arguments:

1. that existing assessment practices do not cater adequately for the second-language learner;
2. that post-apartheid policies on languages and languages-in-education have not been translated into the practical realities of classroom life;
3. that oral assessment offers an authentic and equitable strategy for dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom.

In most parts of the world (Boud 1990; Freeman 1995; and Chang & Warren 1991) the current process and form of assessment in higher education is primarily traditional, summative and teacher or institution directed. There is, however, an increasingly recognised need for change in assessment so as to enhance professional accountability and to involve learners in assessing themselves. South African tertiary institutions are at present on a massive drive to sort out/structure assessment to meet the South African Qualifications Authority deadline which is 2003.

Many educators are battling to cope within the multilingual and multicultural classrooms as this is where cognitive, racial and all other divides become apparent. Instead of a rainbow nation of harmony, there is dissension in the classroom because the EFL (English First Language) students get bored and fed up with the pace of work in class. I have noticed that EFL students are increasingly faring badly simply because of their lack of interest.

Schools have become integrated and under democratic rule, no one may be denied access. But this integration comes at a price: how does one assess fairly without compromising someone else? How does one cater for: the bright or intellectually superior child; the intellectually weaker child; the child who is very proficient in the language of instruction and testing; the educationally disadvantaged child who has come from a background that was impoverished in terms of resources and language instruction?

The EFL and ESL (English Second Language) students are assessed using the same written tests and examinations throughout the academic year. No differentiation is made in terms of time required for translation of the questions and the answering thereof in two languages: read in English, translate for understanding, recall notes, formulate the answers and then write in English.

In my experience, I have found that using the same tests and exams for the EFL and ESL student immediately disadvantages the ESL student for the following reasons:

- even though they might understand the content of the subject matter, they are unable to answer the questions, because they cannot understand the instructions;
- cultural bias in the material used further disempowers them;
- the ESL students like any other experience examination stress, have to deal with their own inadequacies, time-management, memory/recall, etc..

*ADD* to this the other problems of the ESL student:

- interpretation of the question compared with the way in which that section was taught in class; thinking in the mother tongue, translating this to write down the answer in English, ... and you realise the odds against which the ESL student has to succeed;
- since the ESL students have a problem expressing themselves in English, we are further trapping them in the medium of writing. As Ong (1978:3) states,

in a written piece of work, students make assertions which are totally unsupported by reasons, or they make a series of statements which lack connections [...] in conversation, if you omit reasons backing a statement and your hearer wants them, the normal response is to ask you for them, to challenge you. For the writer, the situation is totally different. No one is there to supply a real communicational context, to ask anything [...] The writer has to provide all the back-up or fill-in [...] (Ong 1978:3)

In oral communication, on the other hand, one can measure how much information one should provide and whether one is answering the question fully or not, by the verbal and nonverbal feedback that one receives.

Assessment is further compounded in the multilingual and multicultural classroom. How then do we assess adequately without disadvantaging anybody (and especially the previously disadvantaged student)?

Some institutions are currently considering setting exam papers in two languages, that is, English and the dominant second language of the group. But, my question is: how do we accommodate the minority language groupings in the class? Some say that we should allow the students to answer in their mother tongue—But, how practical is this? Imagine the kind of manpower that will be required to mark these exam scripts if there are 7 different mother tongues in a class? An administrative and financial nightmare!

My proposal is to assess students orally by allowing them freedom of speech. In other words, we should not rely solely on a written examination to test knowledge of the subject. I am saying that the examination should be divided into an oral and a written component. The oral exam will test knowledge of the content and not proficiency in any language. As in the written examinations, questions will be posed and these will be answered verbally instead of in writing. The students can express themselves freely with the aid of an interpreter and thus be freed of the shackles that writing imposes. Because it is my view that it is only during oral assessment that the examiner can re-phrase or adapt the question so that it is understandable without “diluting” the information in any way. Also, the candidate may be guided as to exactly what type of information is required and if the candidate “strays too far” from what is expected, s/he may be “brought in line”. The candidate may be asked to motivate/substantiate or explain further where necessary. The presence of an interpreter or bi- or multilingual assessor would further facilitate communication and understanding.

These oral assessments can be part of the examinations only or they may be built into the continuous evaluation courses. The oral assessments can take different forms and will have to be course-specific. Some courses

may be suited to individual testing, while others may favour paired or group testing.

The assessments will have to be conducted in an environment free from bias, for example, in terms of gender, language, age, race, culture, choice of examiners.

No longer will we be assessing who can *write* better, but we will now be focusing on: *knowledge of the subject matter*.

Each faculty can decide on a format that best suits its course, for example: a typical oral examination would have two examiners, an interpreter and the student. Paired testing is based on two candidates and two oral examiners.

One of the major advantages of the paired format is the use of two examiners to assess a candidate which adds to the fairness of the assessment. (Saville & Hargreaves 1999:43)

In the case of group testing, the focus group technique may be adapted.

### **Advantages of Oral Assessment**

1. *The communication skills of the students are enhanced.* They are given the opportunity to talk about their field of work. In preparation for the oral exam, the students have to read and comprehend the information. The oral exam enhances the students' conversational skills in their respective fields.

After all, you are a social being and whether you are a lawyer, doctor, social worker, educationist, MD of a company or a secretary, you are a constant contact with people and you therefore need to be able to converse with and engage others in conversation either directly or indirectly about your knowledge of your field. Especially in South Africa, where quality of service and attitude are constantly being criticised, communication skills need to be urgently addressed. So, the preparation for the oral exam also plays an important role.

For various reasons, many students learn by rote and then regurgitate this material in the written exam regardless of whether they are answering the question or not and the marker has to sift

through all the information to find the answer. The oral exam, however, will force the student to understand and assess the study material. In the oral exam, if the student “goes off at a tangent” or is “padding”, he will be duly informed by the examiner.

2. It encourages students to become *more confident* and to *work as part of a team*. They are able to “chat” to each other and “argue” points because they would have read widely and thoroughly (in their preparation for the oral exam).  
Everyone knows that one cannot exist in isolation in the corporate world. So, learning to be a team-player is definitely an advantage. This is inculcated in the students through their interaction with and participation in group projects and group assessments.
3. *Students can ask for clarification* if the question or task is unclear. If the question is not clearly formulated or there is ambiguity, the student may ask the examiner to re-phrase without being penalised. The presence of an interpreter allows the candidate to code-switch so that s/he does not spend valuable minutes trying to think of the English equivalent of what s/he wants to say. Of course, the student will have to speak primarily in the code of testing.
4. *If the examiner does not understand* what the student is saying, be it his language or style of communication or the information itself, s/he can ask for clarification either from the student or the interpreter—this cannot be done in a written test.
5. Students are given “real life experiences”, e.g. in law, medicine, social work, education, etc. where they role-play and impart much of their knowledge orally and as everybody knows, there is no substitute for the real experience/thing.

#### Problems that May be Encountered and Some Possible Solutions

1. Rowland-Morin et al. (1991:169) found that regardless of the content of a student's responses to an oral examination, *evaluators are strongly influenced by how well the student communicates*. The

student's level of proficiency in the medium of testing will therefore influence the assessment or mark obtained.

But, if the student is not answering the question or talking nonsense, s/he will be penalised. Many years of experience in teaching second language students has brought me to the point where I listen for communication skills rather than grammatical correctness and flawless English. Commitment, evidence of research, thought and planning far outweighs flawless accents and enunciations.

2. *Bias on the part of the examiners:* Being a social being, man is sometimes influenced by external factors. Proficiency in the language of testing, appearance, etc. may introduce prejudice into the assessment and influence it. Evaluators must therefore be trained in oral assessment and made aware of the possible pitfalls or biases that can influence their assessment so that they can "focus more sharply on the content of the presentations" (Wigton 1980:427). An appropriate or stipulated dress code can help to set the scene for the assessment and will also ensure that the candidate does not try to shift the focus of attention from what s/he is saying.
3. *Make-up of the panel*—if the panel is not carefully selected, the whole assessment procedure will fail. The following factors must be taken into account when selecting the evaluation panel: gender, age, culture, race and language. Cultural and racial sensitivities must be taken into account.
4. *Length of time* taken to complete each session. The biggest criticism levelled against oral assessment is the amount of time that it takes. Exams may be set up in sessions and students are given X amount of time to answer each question. Included in this time, would be a few (exact number will be stated) seconds/minutes to sort out/plan their responses as they would do in a written exam. In this way, a uniform time can be stipulated for each session. As I stated in the course of the paper, oral exams may follow the individual, paired or group format of testing. Even in a written examination, the student has to answer the question within the allotted time.

Also, apart from a written report, there is no marking to be done, so, the time that would have been spent marking may sometimes be equal to the amount of time spent to assess orally the students.

5. *Late-comers*: if the student arrives late, how will s/he be handled? The same rule that applies to a written exam will be followed, namely that the student will be given the remainder of the time to respond to the question on the table. The student will have to bear the loss of time.
6. Will the interpreter interpret verbatim or will he ad-lib thus be affecting the true response of the student? To prevent this, a neutral interpreter should be appointed, who is neither a student nor a member of the department.
7. The *possible lack of validation* of the oral exam. Examiner-mediated examinations usually involve at least three facets: the ability of the candidate, the difficulty of the case and the severity of the examiner. The problem is how to measure candidate ability objectively when examiners, with their individual perceptions, are a necessary part of the examination (Lunz & Stahl 1993:174, 176).  
In the multifaceted Rasch Model analysis, candidate ability measures are calculated once the severity of the selected examiners and the difficulty of the selected cases have been calibrated (Lunz & Stahl 1993:176).
8. In the group testing format, the concern often raised is: what will happen to the "shy" student? Does it mean that the first student to respond to the question will get the most marks because s/he will dominate the discussion?  
My response to this is, obviously the discussion will have to be controlled and students will have to be made aware of the rules governing such an assessment. The focus group technique would be very useful in this regard as it will allow the facilitator to "draw out" the shy student and to control the discussion so that one student does not dominate.

9. *Moderation* of these assessments. The second assessor takes away the element of subjectivity because s/he is counter-scoring every candidate. These examinations may be audio- or video-taped thereby allowing anyone access to view what had occurred during the examinations. The taping of the session serves as a useful reference when answering queries.
10. The question of *anxiety* is often put forth as an objection to oral testing, but as Otto says (1993:11) (translated) that depending on a person's physical and psychological resistance, anxiety or stress will differ from person to person. The same is true of written examinations. The simple truth is that students are not being educated or trained to spend the rest of their lives in a feathered nest or as a student in a classroom. Stress and anxiety are part of the examination process and students will also realise that these facets form a major part of their working lives.

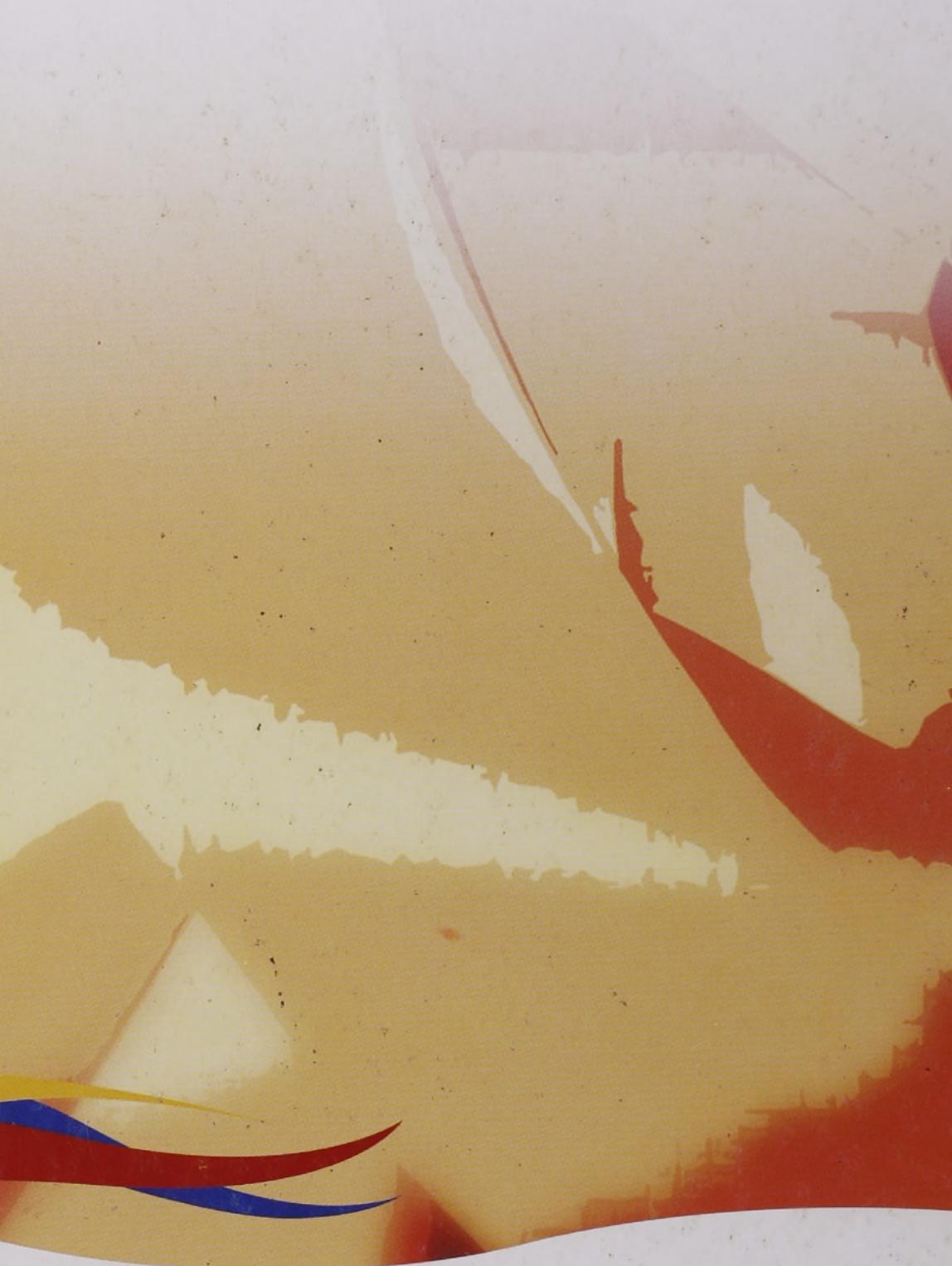
## Conclusion

I believe that the use of oral examinations specifically tailored within the South African context could result in tremendous benefits for assessment in particular and education in general. We will finally be addressing the real brass tacks—the issues of “pass” and “fail”. Because, no matter how innovative our methods of teaching are, it is the method of assessment that ultimately determines the future of a student.

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