Oral Testimony Into Text: A Critique of Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng*[1]

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Summary

As an introductory reading which addresses the notion of testimonial narrative, this essay offers a critique of Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng (1991)*. A central issue highlighted is Bozzoli's view that the testimonial text presents hidden forms of "consciousness". However, it will be shown that "consciousness" is not something textualized when testimony is given, but is constantly developing in terms of its articulation. Key issues related to testimony, such as "evidence", "subjectivity" and "knowledge" will be discussed in relation to the Bozzoli text. The essay will also attempt to identify some similarities to the confessional text. The article relies theoretically on the work of Spivak, although other theorists are drawn into the argument. Finally, the article will make the claim that the testimonial text sets itself up as a construction of reality and presents itself as a special case.

Opsomming

As 'n inleidende lesing wat die konsep van 'n belydende narratief aanspreek, word daar in hierdie essay gekyk na Bozzoli se *Women of Phokeng* (1991). 'n Sentrale gedagte wat Bozzoli uitlig is die siening dat die belydende teks verborge vorme van "bewustheid" presenteer. Daar sal egter aangetoon word dat so 'n "bewustheid" nie iets getekstualiseerd is wanneer die getuienis afgelê word nie, maar dat dit voortdurend ontwikkel in terme van sy artikulasie. Sleutelbegrippe wat verband hou met die getuienis soos "bewys", "subjektiwiteit" en "kennis" word bespreek met betrekking tot die Bozzoli-teks. Daar sal ook in hierdie betoog gepoog word om ooreenkomste met die konfessionele teks te identifiseer. Die artikel berus teoreties op die werk van Spivak, hoewel ander teoretici by die argumentasie betrek word. In die laaste instansie word betoog dat die belydende teks sigself voordoen as 'n konstruksie van die realiteit en aangebied word as 'n spesiale geval.

1 Introduction

In recent years, scholarship involving oral history has had an important impact on intellectual development and historiography on a global level. Essentially a response to orthodox academic history, it intended to offer insights and perspectives on communities who would have been otherwise excluded by the historian who displays a bias towards archival records. Nathan Wachtel points out in this regard that one of the main aims of oral history

> is to elaborate a counter-history "from the bottom up", and to reconstruct the version of the "conquered" – ethnic or cultural minorities,[2] women or mothers. (Wachtel 1990: 2)

We may, therefore, read oral history to be a challenge[3] to the academically oriented researcher who is primarily reliant on archival material such as documents and records, while ignoring the *voices* that constituted and bore witness to the very event that he wished to frame.

Wachtel's notion of the "conquered" highlights three possible scenarios: Firstly, it implies that communities may have been omitted from previous records due to the forces and power mechanisms that have subjected them, therefore,

also marginalizing them politically, socially and economically. Secondly, his category of the "conquered" includes a collective species represented by the so-called "group" at the grassroots level. Thirdly, he also implies that by *listening to the version of the conquered* one may possibly "reconstruct" – an apt word, since its predicates include a preference to trace the past by piecing together evidence. Although one may argue that the oral historian takes oral evidence as his point of departure, we should also note that archival records are used only insofar as they may be useful evidence for a particular project.

What seems to be operating here, is an attempt to isolate subjects who possess "knowledge" of events that have hitherto either been omitted and misrepresented by historians. It is possibly at this point that oral history makes its intervention, but the project itself extends beyond a mere preoccupation with isolating factual evidence. The term "subject" is employed since it "foregrounds the relationship between ethnology, psychoanalysis, and semiotics" (Silverman 1981: 130). "Subject" as opposed to "individual" enables us to conceive the compelling nature of human reality as "a construction – a product of signifying realities which are both culturally specific and generally unconciousness" (Silverman 1981: 130). According to Silverman (1981: 131), a cultural model has precise historical and economic determinants. Although the oral project prioritizes the latter, it fails to assess the impact these cleavages have on the delimitation of truth, because it does not read culture in semiotic terms.

The term "subject" may further be extended to include what is termed the "subaltern".[4] This term is borrowed from Gramsci, who in turn extended the class-position and class-consciousness that Marx propounded in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to the "subaltern classes" by criticizing the intellectual's vanguardistic position in the subaltern context. Put simply, the term is employed under circumstances in which individuals may be marginalized or put into subordinate positions under a "determined and defining established authority" (Hawthorne 1992: 97).

This article takes as a point of departure the notion that oral history is not simply used for its *factual* content to reveal what really happened. For in as much as oral history is dependent on empirical data, however, its own procedures and methods open themselves up for questioning, thus implying that the history to be documented may be closely aligned with literary[5] and philosophical practices. More importantly, the way in which researchers have imputed "qualities"[6] to these texts have vast implications for the manner in which they have utilized the "raw data" from witnesses. This article, by way of an introductory reading, will localize this issue in relation to Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng* (1991). I will examine how the Bozzoli text came to be fixed in its present form by scrutinizing her imperative that conventional sociological methods such as the structured attitude survey, the questionnaire or the rigid interview seems to be all dependent on the notion of "consciousness". Furthermore, "consciousness" in the oral project seems to be closely associated with the notion of "testimony". Such a procedure also brings into question the descriptive features of a testimonial project.

The article examines these issues in relation to the Bozzoli text which treats the life stories of Tswana women as "texts", as well as her premium on "context" as opposed to the written narrative. The article focuses on the features attributed to *Women of Phokeng* (1991) which emerges from an oral context to its present form, and it will use "testimony" as a point of departure in order to address the notion of "consciousness" in terms of *how* it is framed and interpreted in narrative. It should be stressed that my focus is not on narrative theory and psychoanalysis, although I will be employing aspects of these procedures in this project.

Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng* (1991) documents the lives of twenty-two Tswana women who were born in the early twentieth century, and the study attempts to reconstruct the community of Phokeng through the eyes of these women. The study's aims are threefold: firstly, to examine the problems and events that shaped the experience of these women as black South Africans; secondly, the way in which gender has influenced their lives; and thirdly, to study the forms of consciousness as reflected in their experience.

2 Testimony and Consciousness

For the purpose of this article, the last aspect is isolated since the "testimonial" quality of this text, according to Bozzoli, is dependent on the *evidence* that "consciousness" supposedly reveals. In this sense, testimony may be read as a form of *evidence* constituted by a *witness* who testifies to a *real* event as opposed to a *fictitious* one, and someone who has achieved a *status* by circumstances which have shaped his/her experience. By "status" I refer to the text which (re)inscribed the *women* as participants in a process which was hitherto "unknown", thereby making their "voices" heard by an international audience.[7] Fabian (1991: 53) for his part, in reflecting upon "Genres of Jamaa Discourse" isolates "testimony" as a generic category, and he identifies three salient features: (1) personal account or dialogue; (2) emotional delivery and (3) content: personal experience. Despite Fabian's (1991: 54) emphasis on the intimate and private, he makes the point that accounts which are less personal may also be included in the category of testimony, thereby extending its "generic" potential.

We may argue that Bozzoli's study reflects these properties – especially if we interrogate her consolidative role. In Gramscian terms, the function of the intellectual (or the expository agent) is one who will ultimately "determine the production of history as narrative (of truth)" (Spivak 1988: 283). Foucault, however, takes another stance by arguing that the intellectual's role as "adviser" should be underplayed, and an emphasis should be placed on him as "facilitator":

> The intellectual no longer has to play the role of an adviser. The project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis and at present this is the historian's essential role ....
>
> (Foucault 1980: 73–74)

These "testimonies", to use Bozzoli's (1991: 7) terminology again, may be seen as "unsurpassed sources for revealing otherwise hidden forms of consciousness". In this regard, one could argue that Bozzoli favours the Gramscian stance and as an intellectual and expository agent, acts as a kind of delegate or guarantor of her participants' "consciousness". Testimony, therefore, seems to be operating as a structure of address for several audiences (Auerhahn & Laub 1990: 447–462). Essentially the relation between the intellectual (Mmantho Nkotsoe)[8] and the women (the subalterns) is built on the possibility and expectation of empathy, in terms of the recognition and acknowledgement of the self in the other. In order to "resurrect an empathic tie" the women are forced to interrogate their inner complexities, by engaging in a dialogue, which, according to Auerhahn and Laub (1990: 449), seems to be characteristic of a "mother-child dialogue", for it is apparently here that the opportunities for empathy are born. Such a procedure is verified in the Bozzoli (1991: 6) text where she indicates that some women viewed the interlocutor (Nkotsoe) as "a kinswoman, a young girl, a child", and were reasonably comfortable with her.

3 Speech and Dialogue

One of the strategies utilized in oral testimony to reinstate empathy, is speech. A similar observation is echoed by Fabian (1991: 53), who catalogues "testimony as an event" which emerges from a "communicative situation" and is distinguished by its emphasis on "privacy and personal discretion". Also working within an epistemological paradigm, Coady (1992: 25) conceives testimony within a speech act model by isolating Austin's illocutionary act as a distinguishing feature of the testimonial text. Classified as an "expositive", the illocutionary act for those with a "textual bent" can be identified in reporting, swearing, conjecturing, and, more dubiously (Austin's manuscript has queries at this point), doubting, knowing, and believing. More recently, Hansson (1992) offered a complex discussion of testimony according to the Reception Theory approach, to assess the "*effect* of language on receivers, or receivers' responses to language". Perhaps the greatest flaw of this study is her opening sentence which immediately limits the testimonial field and misinterprets the concept of a "text":

> Readers may be surprised at first to discover a chapter on the reception of testimony in a book which deals mainly with the reception of text.
>
> (Hanson 1992: 163)

To return to the rule of speech: Bozzoli's study emphasizes that it is essentially through the medium of speech that "consciousness" may help the women to develop an improved sense of identity. She maintains that the women's stories are "repositories of different fragmented components of consciousness and identity" (1991: 12). By implication, to simply talk about their experience to an empathic listener may provide a renewed sense of identity. It would seem apparent that "consciousness" is used in a very specific sense in the Bozzoli text. "Consciousness" here has a historical

specificity aligned to it, a point which Spivak (1987: 203) makes more clear in her reference to "subaltern consciousness": "For consciousness here is not consciousness-in-general, but a historicized political species thereof".

Moreover, in returning to my earlier remark concerning speech, it is even more apparent since the Bozzoli text displays an implicit phonocentrism, a "presupposition that speech is the immediate expression of the self" (Spivak 1987: 213). In this sense the Bozzoli text appears to postulate that a desire to uncover repressed memory, is informed by an epistemological underpinning, which must not only be seen as an investigation into "real" cognitive problems, but a desire to process these dynamics in order to pursue and corroborate a rational foothold for the knowledge that informs testimony. (This point will be taken up later).

3.1 Dead Voices

Since speech is the vehicle through which "consciousness" is able to furnish *evidence* of experience, the subaltern's fragmented consciousness has the capacity to be invigorated in order to include "absent" or "dead" voices into history. This exercise possibly advances a responsibility towards the dead, and by including aspects which could have been erased, it also (re)introduces the voice/s of the dead. In Bozzoli's (1991) text, one such example could be cited. In the testimony of Mmadiate Makgale, it appears that the figure of Paul Kruger seems to occupy a central place in Bafokeng mythology. Makgale indicates that her paternal grandmother's parents were forcibly removed from their land by Kruger's subjects and she highlights the conditions under which her forefathers were treated. I isolate her words in its entirety:

> Paul Kruger used to inspan people. My great-grandparents used to be inspanned in ox-wagons; they then physically pulled them. When the babies cried, Paul Kruger used to say "Let them keep quiet, they will suckle afterwoods". I mean, that is what they narrated to us .... He used to persecute them, they drew those ox-wagons. They then escaped and crossed over down to Steinleter [sic].
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 40)

Several issues are raised in this excerpt. Taking the notion of "listening" and "telling" further, it would seem that an inherent dialogic structure enables the subaltern to not only speak to an interlocutor (Nkotsoe), but also *for* and *about* someone, thereby advocating an apostrophic exercise that reincites both the dead and the self (Auerhahn & Laub 1990: 452). For Auerhahn and Laub, an apostrophe is a trope that invokes an absence (the lost), in order to reconstitute the self that searches for the "thou" (Nkotsoe) that is addressed. But even in taking this to be the case, a revival of the dead in testimony also implies that "telling" provides a temporary "presence" for them, and upon completion of the testimony, "an acceptance of loss" is inconceivable to the subaltern. More importantly, the testimony in the excerpt also highlights the importance of a narrative structure as one of the features of a testimonial text. The words "I mean, that is what they narrated to us" could also be interpreted as a form of justification; the manner in which the "story" was told to the

women functions as a form of evidence. It would also appear that the words of Paul Kruger are identified, but they are not the words as Kruger may have said it to Makgale. Here the oral text is perhaps unconsciously revealing its own limitations.

For instance, Bozzoli's text argues that "consciousness" discloses evidence of a past that is supposedly absent in written records. In this regard, Bozzoli is implicitly cathexing the subaltern consciousness, but she fails to indicate that "consciousness" is "effaced even as it is disclosed", thereby implying that it is "irreducibly discursive". This is an issue Spivak (1987: 203) takes up in her article, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", where she argues that subalternity is "irreducibly discursive" and should therefore be framed in terms of differences[9] rather than in terms of identity. The Bozzoli text displays a bias towards the latter and, therefore, fails to see that "consciousness" in the subaltern programme is not "given" when textualized, or put colloquially, not exhausted, but is constantly developing in terms of its own articulation as Spivak has shown.

4 The Spivakean Imperative and the Problem of "Consciousness"

Take note of the following remarks which draw attention to the use of the term "consciousness" by other theorists, as well as its significance to subalternity:

> For readers who notice the points of contact between the Subaltern Studies Group and critics of humanism such as Barthes and Foucault, the confusion arises because of the word "consciousness", unavoidably a post-phenomenological and post-psychoanalytic issue with such writers. I am not trying to clear the confusion by revealing through analysis that the Subaltern Studies Group is not entertaining "consciousness" within that configuration at all, but is rather working exclusively with the second-level collective consciousness to be encountered in Marx and the classical Marxist tradition. I am suggesting, rather, that although the group does not wittingly engage with the post-structuralist understanding of "consciousness", our own transactional reading of them is enhanced if we see them as strategically adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique, within a historiographic practice that draws many of its strengths from that very critique.
>
> (Spivak 1987: 206–7)

Before I proceed to assess some of the issues raised in this passage, one should take note that the Subaltern Studies Group (hereafter SSG) is a group of Indian academics who attempt to rethink (possibly rewrite?) Indian colonial historiography from the vantage point of the irregular series of peasant insurgencies during colonial settlement. The rationale underlying the work of the SSG, is to offer a theory of change which conceives the "inauguration of politicization for the colonized" (Spivak 1987: 197). Their project too, uses the oral method.

Spivak raises several issues in the excerpt which could be read into Bozzoli's project. I isolate three major points:

1. Consciousness and discursivity.
2. A theory of reading.
3. The "second-level consciousness"

4.1 Consciousness and Discursivity

Firstly, it may be gauged that "consciousness" is not viewed as emerging in a linear way, but is framed by discursive practices. "Discursivity" needs to be given some attention in this instance, for it is closely associated to the notion of "subjectivity"[10] and "consciousness". It is evident from the Bozzoli text that subjectivity is seen in isolation from discourse. This issue is prioritized in Benveniste's *Problems of General Linguistics,* where he argues that language and subjectivity are "equally interdependent" (Silverman 1981: 45). According to Benveniste, subjectivity is never stable nor continuous, but one which is periodically activated in discourse (Silverman 1981: 48). In other words, the subject's discourse is constrained by the rules of language and other forces that may have an influence on him. "Discursive" represents here the adjective form of discourse, which is not to be confused with "round-about, meandering" (Hawthorne 1992: 47). In the Foucauldian project, the notion of "discursivity" is seen again in relation to the individual:

> It's my hypothesis that the individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements of desires, forces.
>
> (Foucault 1980: 73–4)

"Consciousness" and "subjectivity" then, are seen to be operating in relational terms, which are in turn informed by power mechanisms that constrain the individual. Silverman (1981: 52) argues that subjectivity is not an "essence" but "a set of relationships", that can only be induced in discourse, and this is activated by a "signifying system which pre-exists the individual", and which "determines his or her cultural identity". This observation also pre-empts a possible scenario for oral history: such projects must also be seen as "relational studies", for in highlighting the experiences of the subaltern, it is also obligated to take into account pre-existing historical beliefs that are represented within the group (Popular Memory Group 1982: 211). Even though Bozzoli makes mention of pre-existing beliefs in her study, she is not aware that the individual is located within a semiotic system and his (or her) subjectivity is constrained by discourse.

Furthermore the notion of "relational studies" suggests a dualistic intention: in reconstructing the experience of the subordinated, oral historians need to take cognisance of the dominant memory and oppositional forms, including those in the academic territory. Bozzoli (1991: 14) could be credited for her positivistic remark that despite the policies of a white minority government and industrializing power-brokers, the women were also subjected to the policies of their own chiefs and elders. In fact, this observation draws attention to and confirms that even within the oppositional vision that

the Bozzoli text would hope to represent, the group is subsequently constrained by contradictory forces even within itself. This is a problem that infiltrates subjectivity and would seem to confirm an earlier observation that "subaltern consciousness" ought to be situated in the territory of "difference", rather than "identity" (Spivak 1987: 204).

One of the features of the subaltern location is its displacement and dislocation. An interesting observation in this regard, which may also be extended to the notion of testimony, would be the preference for *territory* and *location*. Here, the title of Bozzoli's book may be called into question. In providing a detailed map of Phokeng, the text itself reveals that the notion of subalternity is, therefore, closely associated to *place*, which reveals itself to be a site of ideological struggles. This "geographical discontinuity"[11] which is representative of the subaltern territory, possibly provides one of the reasons for Spivak's belief that the inability of the subaltern to speak effectively must be seen to be largely brought about by a displaced territory[12] – an issue which can be inferred from her article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) – since the subaltern figure represents an identity marked by differences which many First World[13] theorists fail to legitimate. The Bozzoli (1991) text is aware of some of these problems, but she fails to see its differences in semiotic terms, as indicated earlier in relation to language. She cites an example of a "Mayibuye" woman who also reveals aspects of her identity as a tribeswoman, churchgoer, wife, mother, daughter. The aspects of identity revealed here are for Bozzoli (1991: 12) a result of "social interaction" and "ideological creativity".

4.2 A Theory of Reading

Secondly, the passage seems to suggest that subaltern studies, inasmuch as it may critique the notion of a sovereign subject by examining its relation to the Third World subject, is also advancing a theory of reading. As mentioned earlier, oral history, in taking the "voices" of subalterns as a point of departure, is perhaps unconsciously asking us to read (analyse/comment upon) the *experience* of the Other. Such a strategy is perhaps significant, given the fact that the SSG advocates a theory of change, which Spivak (1987: 205) reads to be posited at a point where (a) periods of change are "plotted as confrontations rather than transition" (therefore seen in terms of exploitation and domination); (b) changes are initiated and designated by a "functional change in sign-systems". Bozzoli's study does not see change in semiotic terms, and the question arises: where/when does the historian/sociologist intervene to redress these misrepresentations? We could further question why Bozzoli specifically chose to *(re)present* the women of Phokeng? What is more peculiar about the women from Phokeng than those from Namakwaland or District Six? My point in an earlier footnote regarding the way in which the "writer" has imputed "qualities" to these texts, would seem to confirm that it also has vast implications for the way in which such a study is to be read.

4.3 The Second-Level Consciousness

Thirdly, the "second-level consciousness" that Spivak talks about, is one which discards the structural model of the family, but one which displays a "patronymic" inclination within the framework of representation as *Vertretung*.

In moving her discussion to Marx, Spivak (1988: 276) describes his notion of "class" as a "descriptive" and "transformative" concept which prioritizes the "dispersed and dislocated class subject". "Class", as Spivak (1987: 205) interprets Marx, is not an "inalienable description of a human reality". In the Marxian project, "class-consciousness" on the "descriptive" level displays a strategic and artificial rallying awareness while the "transformative" level attempts to undermine and annihilate the "mechanics which c[a]me to construct the outlines of the very class" (Spivak 1987: 205).

5 *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*

In isolating a passage from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, a distinction is drawn between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* in order to offer a clear-cut perspective on representation within a socialized framework. The former refers to the dislocated subjects that need to be represented in discourse, while it critiques the subjectivity of a collective agency. The latter according to Spivak (1988: 277) behaves as a kind of "buffer" which infiltrates the gap that is created between the "formation of a [descriptive] class and the nonformation of a [transformative] class", thereby representing the divided subject in an indirect way. In the Bozzoli project, a preference for the "descriptive" level is predicated, and the "transformative" level may be seen to be represented by the text itself, in the sense that by "deconstructing" pre-existing beliefs by extracting *evidence* from the women of Phokeng, it is attempting to "transform" (revolutionize)[14] a community, and perhaps, as mentioned earlier, to give them a particular *status*. Even if this is the case, such an agenda does not preempt a class change. In this sense, the "transformative" level is used in a very narrow, and, therefore, limited sense in the Marxian project.

Spivak (1988: 277) advises us to observe that the development of a transformative class sensibility from a descriptive one, should not be misconstrued in Marx as a "task engaging the ground level of consciousness".
The notion of "class-consciousness", however, operates with the feeling of "community" that belongs to "national links and political organizations", and not to a sense of "community" as in the familial lineage (Spivak 1988: 277). This is an issue which Bozzoli addresses cursorily, and she argues (as indicated in an earlier footnote) that consciousness is not simply manifested in organisations. Again, "class-consciousness" in the Marxian programme may, therefore, be viewed as goal-specific.

"Consciousness" in Bozzoli's (1991: 6) text, however, is historically and politically specific and yields knowledge in the process. This specificity is not co-incidental, since the focus in her project is, as she suggests, to prioritize the "context". The validity of the empirical data, therefore, opens itself up for

questioning. Moreover, it poses the question whether Bozzoli is really interested in the women's development of an improved sense of identity. (This point initiates an old debate which I will not address here). But what needs to be emphasized is the fact that inasmuch as Bozzoli critiques a positivist interpretation of history, she herself seems to be falling prey to her own criticism. This point must be seen in terms of how "consciousness" is operating in her text.

6 Evidence

"Consciousness" in the Bozzoli text displays an explicit relationship with one of testimony's determinants, namely *evidence*. To this end, she remarks:

> Of course these testimonies need to be read with a critical eye and with enough knowledge of the context to make it possible to sift the *gold* of *true evidence* from the bulk of ideology, poor memory, and wilful misleading that occurs.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 7, my emphasis)

and later:

> This book will have achieved its aim if, at the end of it, the reader feels he or she has a better understanding of the kinds of people the women of Phokeng are, and of why they think, feel, and act as they do.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 15)

Both passages seem to define and reconfirm that the testimonial text is dependent on *evidence* to make it legitimate, and the text should also reinstate empathy. "Evidence" is, therefore, an underlying precept of epistemology. "Knowledge" refers here to the facts, feelings and experiences of an individual or group. A precondition for telling, according to Auerhahn and Laub (1990: 451), is the belief that the listener will affirm the witness's experience by "really listening". The process of the testimony, therefore, proposes that "knowledge" seems to be emerging as a heuristic exercise. In assessing the development of knowledge, Laub intimates that

> in the process of testimony to a trauma, as in psychoanalytic practice, in effect, you often do not want to know anything except what the patient tells you, because what is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge – its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right.
>
> (Felman & Laub 1992: 62)

In the Bozzoli project "evidence", which supposedly constitutes "knowledge" emerges as a result of a "sifting" of so-called "facts" and is, therefore, accessed in a mechanical way.

7 Testimony and the Confessional Text

These procedures seem to display some resemblance to the confessional text. In his critique of sexual repression in Victorian society, Foucault argues that

repression operated to silence and to affirm nonexistence; in other words, it operated to eradicate the "will to knowledge", assuming that there was nothing to say about sexual activity. Yet, for Foucault (1990: 6), the relation between sex and power may yield new insights if one considers its dual imperative: while sexual practice is governed by prohibition and silence, then by simply talking about it, may indicate a "deliberate transgression". A motivation for this supposed eagerness to speak about sex, is sustained by a need to challenge the powers that inform it, and hopefully to generate some "truth" about the "powers that be" (Foucault 1990: 7). An interesting point that Foucault develops in *The History of Sexuality* (1990), points to the fact that literary discourse too, has undergone a "metamorphosis", in that it is framed by an individual who attempts to extract "in the self-examination", the "basic certainties of consciousness". In this regard, the "obligation to confess", is inherent within us, so that we may not perceive it to be the "effect of a power that constrains", but a "secret" truth that "demands only to surface" (Foucault 1990: 59–60).

Aspects of Foucault's confessional project may be read into the oral programme, since both discourses are in a sense emerging from a discursive territory. Both are in a sense offering a counter-critique of an otherwise repressive field. Both are reinscribing and representing subjects that have been predisposed to power mechanisms. Moreover, knowledge-making seems to underpin both projects. If this is the case, we could also make a further observation regarding Bozzoli's text. Although the text emerges from a discursive territory, is it not so that Bozzoli has funds at her disposal to finance such projects? The question of economics, therefore, opens up new possibilities in terms of how readers should respond to such studies. In this regard, any researcher who is generously funded would be more than willing to write a historical *bio*-graphy of "dynamic lives" even if he (or she) has no interest in the people to be "represented".

Furthermore, in highlighting confession's dualistic claim, Foucault (1990: 66–77) argues that, in order for confession to gain scientific cogency it must do so through a hermeneutic relationship. He maintains that the confessor is obligated to the hermeneutic subject who would determine whether the confession is truthful or not, and who in turn will frame a "discourse of truth", to be interpreted as a "sign", thereby facilitating its progression into and operation within a scientific discourse. It should be mentioned here that in confessional discourse the reader or listener is viewed as a judge. Thus, in both Bozzoli's project and confessional discourse, the text sets itself up as a judge, requiring the reader (or listener) to "interpret" it before making a judgement. This strategy would seem to move closer to Spivak's view that the oral text is advancing a theory of reading. And of equal importance in testimony is that the narrative operation allows for the periodic insertion of the participants' voices within the structure determined by the author. The opening lines of Bozzoli's study could easily be misinterpreted for an Alan Paton novel: at once a challenge, at its best a confession.[15]

8 A Humane and Democratic Society?

Another aspect which could be tackled in the oral project and could be seen as one of the descriptive features of testimony, is the notion of a "humane and democratic society". Bozzoli makes the following observation:

> If a work of sociology can achieve (anything), it will have made a small contribution towards creating that most elusive of all things – a humane and democratic society, in which all are respected for who and what they are, and in which "liberation" refers to the freeing of subjectivity as much as to the altering of structure.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 15)

If one accepts that the testimonial text proposes a "rehumanization" which is realized through a "shared recognition of the individual's subjectivity", the question remains as to whether the freeing of subjectivity is not rather part of constituting the subject within a structure given by the facilitator?

Bozzoli's observations or pleas, seem to confirm that the text in testimony is advocating itself as a special case that can only be truly constituted as testimony if it is accepted by an "empathic" receiver. In this instance the testimonial text, therefore, appears to manipulate its audience by presenting reality as a truth construction. "Truth" refers to the quality of being genuine, actual, factual in representing some aspect of the world. One could make a further claim that the testimonial text is, therefore, setting itself up as a structure of address. Significantly, this rule is observable in Bozzoli's project, since it places the *premium on presenting* testimony as a conscious attempt to recall empathy by establishing connections with the world through the shared experiences with others.

9 Framing an Absence

Taking the preceding discussion into account, we could make the further claim that the underlying focus of the oral project is to frame an absence. "Absence" in this sense does not imply that an event is non-existent. Laub (1992: 57) argues that the victim who bears witness to trauma searches for "something", an event that is temporarily "absent", to an event that has yet to come into existence. The narrative, according to Laub (1992: 57), emerges when it is listened to (and heard), a process in which the "knowing of the event is given birth to", by further ensuring that the listener (or reader) becomes a dual witness, both to the trauma witness and to himself. Laub's observation here is particularly relevant since the private, repressed memory of the victim is publicly exposed, and thus takes on a new epistemological significance for both the witness and the listener (or reader).

The issues raised so far seem to indicate that oral history is carefully governed by a narrative construction which emerges in the recollecting process. The strength of the narratives is dependent on the way in which it enables the "reader" to follow events as they unfold (Rosaldo 1980: 89–97). It should be noted, however, that the narratives may often omit and dismiss certain aspects of the events (Farris 1980: 159–180). Such a problem confirms that the subaltern operates within a field of cognition which is "irreducibly discursive".

In her major work on testimony, history and psychoanalysis, Laub (Felman & Laub 1992) uses an interesting example from the Yale University Videoarchives on trauma victims to illustrate the point. In a particular account of a woman who witnessed "four chimneys" blow up in Auschwitz, historians later discovered that in fact only *one* chimney blew up. This "distortion", for many historians meant that her testimony was incorrect. For many oral historians and psychologists, however, memory construction does not imply that empirical evidence is given primacy; rather precedence is given to the event that has framed the witness. To this extent, Laub (1992: 62) maintains that the victim's "silence" (which I will read to be "distortions", "historical inaccuracy" and "ommissions"), should be seen as an integral part of the testimonial process, and by extension, "an essential part of the historical truth [she] was precisely bearing witness to".

In other words, gaps and silences may be seen as a challenge to the interviewer's prior assumptions. The "distortion" of facts, as represented by the memory, may also have other implications. While "facts" may be seen to be a rich source of information, it may further be argued that memory does not constitute pure recall, since memory construction is a fragmented exercise. Cognition functions within a discursive context, and is, therefore, externalized in patterns of behaviour, institutions and general processes.

10 Conclusion

Despite the strength of *Women of Phokeng*, a major criticism that could be levelled against it – an aspect which this article has not addressed – is that the "mystery" or "myth" of the alien Other is valorized to such an extent at the expense of crucial factors such as race, class and gender. By cathexing "consciousness" in the study's economy of signification to reveal "life strategy" "migrancy" and "identity", while ignoring the equally important representation of the "oppressor" (to use the easy binary), results in the production of a narrative which is blurred. Given this trend in anthropological, sociological and literary discourses in South Africa, it is not surprising that many white academics have failed to legitimate and acknowledge that they themselves are also absorbed into, and are part of the dialectic we label as representation.

Testimony then, is not appropriated to simply deconstruct social disruption in order to textually reinscribe active agents who were "absent" from history. In fact, testimony also operates to reveal more about the author than it does about history, even if we acknowledge that the two are not mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, is Bozzoli willing to extend the criticism to herself when she claims that

> it is the unsuccessful intellectuals who confine their vision of popular consciousness within the straitjackets of theoretical determinism, and who find themselves resorting to more-or-less subtle forms of social coercion, perhaps, when people do not respond to their overtures.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 230)

If she views the "individual self" to be defined by the "family" or the "village", is she not propagating a humanist reading of history which is complicit with very traditional and utopian ideas about culture and human societies?

Notes

1. This article is an edited version of a paper presented at the SAVAL conference at Potchefstroom University during March 1993. I am grateful to my supervisor, Prof Reingard Nethersole for her useful comments on an earlier version of this paper, as well as Ulrike Kistner for her comments during an informal conversation at the conference.
2. Nathan Wachtel's notion of "ethnic or cultural minorities" may not be easily applied to the South African scenario. In our context, the marginalized and oppressed represent the majority of the population. On the other hand, "minorities" who are also oppressed (such as gays), could be included in the subaltern category. See note 4.
3. I use the word deliberately since some readings make constant reference to oral history as "radical history", which says something about its content. See for example Callinicos (1986: 2).
4. I use the term "subaltern", not because it is fashionable, but because it problematizes discursive constructions and constructed silences in the field of historiographical studies. Thus, rather than describing the limits of social space by classifying the women as the "colonized", which would reveal the colonizer/colonized binary, the term "subaltern" leads us beyond the "stable" categories of the binary into a more complex and intriguing reconceptualization of cultural signification. Moreover, colonialism in the South African context, is seen to represent a "special type", thereby also creating terminological problems for a straightforward application of the term to our context.
5. Bozzoli argues that the life stories of the women have been treated as "texts", and she also maintains that

   > while the "texts" have been given full priority over the "context," in poststructuralist fashion, literary methods of analysis have certainly been brought to bear upon them.
   >
   > (Bozzoli (1991: 6)

   These claims do, however, resemble an interesting trend in contemporary anthropological and sociological writing. In describing what he identifies as a "current" in "postmodern anthropology", Said (1989: 208) notes that anthropologists are keen to pay more attention to "textuality". Although he focuses on anthropology, his observations could be read into interrelated fields such as sociology and historiography. It is also impressive to me that few of the anthropologists who are read outside anthropology make a secret of the fact that they wish that anthropology, and anthropological texts, might be more literary or literary theoretical in style and awareness, or that anthropologists should spend more time thinking of textuality and less of matrilineal descent, or that issues relating to cultural poetics take a more central role in their research than, say, issues of tribal organization, agricultural economics, and primitive classification.
6. By "qualities" I refer to the interpretations and significance that researchers (including those reviewing oral works) have attached to these studies. From the readings it is evident that critics constantly employ interdisciplinary terminology in describing and analysing such works. This would imply that oral history not only

gains recognition for providing new insights, but is also influenced by its audience.

7. Take note of Bozzoli's intended audience:

> This book addresses a wide audience, but a good deal of it is directed to sociologists of Africa in general, and of South Africa in particular.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 12)

8. It should be stressed here that although Bozzoli was responsible for writing the published text, the interviews with all twenty-two women were conducted by Mmantho Nkotsoe, a university graduate who was also trained at the Oral Documentation Project (University of the Witwatersrand). Bozzoli (1991: 5) also indicates that this book began as a research into the lives of women from Potchefstroom, Kuruman, Vryburg and Phokeng; but because Nkotsoe developed a "particularly striking rapport with the Phokeng women", possibly also due to her relative ease with her native Setswana language, the project took a specific focus. Also of importance here, in relation to my use of the terms "subjects" and "subalterns", is Bozzoli's (1991: 38) view that the women emerge as "subjects" in the text. See, for example, Said's (1989: 209–210) discussion of the term "interlocutor".
9. It should be pointed out that in a recent article Spivak (1991) responded to her critics who claim that she has shifted towards "universal humanity", given the fact that she has always emphasized "difference".
10. Bozzoli makes the point that subjectivity is not only manifested in organisations:

> We should not assume that subjectivity only exists, or is important, when it is manifested in organisations. The raw material of "common sense" comes to be shaped and moulded only at particular times into the finished product of social ideology. We need to ask: what have the forces been that have shaped experience, how have they been expressed as consciousness, and at what points has that consciousness coalesced into ideology.
>
> (Bozzoli 1991: 2)

A little later in her introduction she makes the following remark: "[The book] examines the evolving subjectivity of informants, usually the domain of phenomenologists" (1991: 3–4).

Is it not absurd that Bozzoli (1991) seems to view ideology as a neatly "finished" and tangible product? Her exposition highlights that ideology is something specific, as if one may offer a cut-and-dried explanation in terms of the way in which it infiltrates "consciousness". It would seem that the two aspects are never mutually exclusive. Moreover, is it possible to pinpoint when the two coalesce? The issue to address would rather include an emphasis on how ideology shapes consciousness and vice versa. Again, it is evident in this book that Bozzoli gives consciousness primacy and views it positivistically. "Subjectivity", too, is aligned with "consciousness" and is furthermore used loosely to refer to *experience*. Bozzoli fails to see that subjectivity is something that emerges in discourse – an issue which Benveniste makes more clear in his *Problems in General Linguistics*.

11. In reference to Foucault's critique of Marxism, Spivak points to the former's interpellation of "geographical discontinuity", where he describes the international division of labour as a determining factor of displacement. However, Spivak argues that Foucault employs the term to distinguish between exploitation (extraction and appropriation of surplus value) and domination ("power studies"), as well as to emphasize the latter's potential to resistance based on an alliance politics. In this instance, Spivak's scepticism towards Foucault's remarks is based on the premise that any measure or conception of "power" has to be initiated at some stage of exploitation (an issue which Foucault ignores, according

to Spivak), and she suggests that his vision of discontinuity is therefore geopolitically unique to the First World. For a more detailed discussion see Spivak (1988: 289–291).

12. The point Spivak (1988: 284) makes here, concerns the disparities in the subaltern location while the quandary posed for narration is the one Said and Guha take up. Spivak insists that although the representation of the Other is dominated by a privileging of colonial subjects and certain varieties of the colonized elite, the colonized subaltern is "heterogenous". She isolates Guha's stratification grid which describes colonial social production, and argues that the third level represents a buffer zone, which in Derridean terms is seen as an *"antre"* – a place of in-betweenness:

    1. Dominant foreign groups [elite].
    2. Dominant indigenous groups on the all-India level.
    3. Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels.
    4. The terms "people" and "subaltern classes" have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "elite".

    (Spivak 1988: 284)

    The problem of dislocation is addressed in relation to Guha's observations:

    > Taken as a whole and in the abstract this . . . category . . . was heterogenous in in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area. The same class or element which was dominant in one area . . . could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle class peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of subaltern studies.
>
> (quoted in Spivak 1988:285)

    Spivak (1988: 285) mentions here that where the Foucault-Deleuze discussion (the subject of her article, "Can the Subaltern speak?") masks an essentialist programme, the subaltern imperative will utilize a "radical textual practice of differences" in order to conceptualize the violence evident in its location. As such, it advances an interest to the third level of Guha's grid, which Spivak calls "the regional elite subaltern", in so far as it may display a "deviation from an ideal" (p. 285). This difference, inaugurated in the Spivakean project, emerges in relation to the Foucault-Deleuze interchange in that their "text articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility" (Spivak 1988: 285).

13. Even though Bozzoli is operating within a Third World context, I view her as a First World critic, given her priveleged upbringing as one of the determining factors. Furthermore, she ultimately writes the "grand narrative" of a marginalized community, with all the "authority" at her disposal. See note 8.

14. Said (1989: 209) echoes this point in reference to the way in which contemporary anthropologists approach the "postcolonial" field. The underlying factor which guides this approach is the political nature of the terrain. Here he observes that some anthropologists have "utilized anthropological discourse as the site for constructing models of social change or transformation".

15. As Bozzoli puts it:

    > White South Africans do not know the small town of Phokeng, which is situated outside Rustenburg in the Western Transvaal. The most they may

know is that they will pass it as they make their frantic trips between Johannesburg and the decadent pleasure resort of Sun City, for it is just over one of the many "borders" between South Africa and Bophuthatswana.
(Bozzoli 1991: 27)

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