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Hearing Voices: Research and creative practice across cultures and disciplines

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Hearing Voices: Research and creative practice across cultures and disciplines

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1. Introduction[1]

My work as a sound artist and academic follows two quite different paths, namely projects which are, for want of better term, socially-engaged, like those discussed below, and projects which are more focused on site-specific installation practice, like my *Installation for 300 speakers, Pianola and vacuum cleaner.*[2] To date, I have done two projects with speakers of endangered languages in collaboration with linguists: one in Botswana and one in western Canada. Linguistically and culturally, both of these areas are among the world's few fragile and dwindling 'pockets of residual diversity' (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 38). In 2001 I spoke at a conference at the University of Witswatersrand in Johannesburg about my project with Kenyan master musician Ingosi Mwoshi. Afterwards, while visiting my friend and colleague John McAllister in Botswana (who facilitated both the Kenyan work and later the *Hearing Voices* project), I heard a Zulu newsreader on television. At that time, I knew nothing about the origins of 'clicks' in southern African languages and next to nothing about language endangerment, but as an artist who is often led by my ears, I was intrigued and inspired by the integration of sounds like glottal stops and palatal clicks in speech and decided to develop a project which eventually grew, with financial assistance from the University of the Arts London, to include a gallery installation, a half-hour 'composed documentary' for BBC Radio 3 and a CD-ROM made in collaboration with HRELP. The CD-ROM has recently been updated by David Nathan and myself and is included with this volume of *Language Documentation and Description*.

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[1] Some parts of this paper have been published in Wynne (2006) and Wynne (2010).

[2] Beaconsfield Gallery, London (2009) and Saatchi Gallery, London (2010).

2. Khoi and San Languages

Apart from a now extinct variety called Damin, which was used only during male initiation rites by the Lardil in Australia, languages with complex, integral systems of click consonants have only ever been found in southern Africa. Some of the Bantu languages (including Zulu and Xhosa) spoken by more recently arrived inhabitants of this region have almost certainly borrowed their click sounds from the indigenous Khoi and San languages. There are many distinct 'click languages' within a relatively small geographical area (now primarily defined by the Kalahari Desert), and most of them are mutually unintelligible.

The political and social history of the Khoi and San peoples is comparable to that of other indigenous groups around the world. Since their traditional lifestyle has been made virtually impossible by the fencing off of land for cattle owned primarily by the Bantu-speaking majority in Botswana, the earmarking of vast areas of the Kalahari as game reserves, and the demands of the diamond mining industry to which Botswana largely owes its modest wealth, most Khoi and San have endured marginalised lives, including forced evictions and near slave-labour conditions in jobs that have little or no connection to their indigenous culture (Figures 1-2). Poverty, alcoholism and AIDS are rife and their social and economic marginalisation further erodes the status of their various cultures and languages.[3]

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[3] See Andersson and Janson (1997: 117-119) for a thorough description of the marginalisation of the Khoisan in Botswana and its detrimental effects on their languages.

Figures 1 and 2: Tshabakgotta Igamamoo (left) and Kanokabe//nee//ee outside their huts at the Lone Tree squatter camp next to the Trans Kalahari Highway. (Photos: Denise Hawrysio)

The name San is generally thought (amongst academics, at least) to be less offensive than Bushman, though it means 'outsider' and it, along with the other terms in common usage (such as Basarwa in Botswana) was imposed by others rather than having been chosen by the communities themselves, who traditionally have no collective name for themselves. The name Hottentot (now replaced by Khoi, meaning 'person', or Khoikhoi, meaning 'real people' or 'people people') was a derogatory European invention, derived, according to an early English visitor called Edward Terry, from their language, which sounded like 'the clucking of hens or the gobbling of turkeys' (Gall 2001: 53). A similar dismissive attitude to linguistic difference was shown by an early unidentified European visitor to Papua New Guinea who spoke of the 'hideous, snapping, barking dialect that passes for speech' and noted that 'noises like sneezes, snarls and the preliminary stages of choking – impossible to reproduce on paper – represented the names of villages, people and things' (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 58). The word 'barbarian' is derived from the Greek *barbaros,* 'one who babbles'; a barbarian was simply anyone who could not speak Greek. Historically, as Nettle and Romaine (2000: 58) observe, '[b]eing linguistically different condemns the other to being savage'. Of course not all early European travellers were similarly prejudiced, but such assumptions of primitivism in relation to the language of the *other* are both insidious and resilient.

With the exception of Nama, all of the currently surviving indigenous languages of the Khoi and San are classified by UNESCO as somewhere on the scale between 'vulnerable' and 'critically endangered'.[4] The Khoi and San languages of southern Africa are highly complex: 'in grammatical and structural terms, [they] are world class competitors in structural complexity' (Andersson and Janson 1997: 168). One of the most phonetically varied of these is !Xóõ, of which there are currently about 2,100 speakers, mainly in Botswana. With its 48 distinct clicks and some 83 different ways of starting a word with a click, the phonetic complexity of this language 'represents something approaching a maximum for human linguistic behaviour' (Anderson and Janson 1997: 140). More than half of the words in this language begin with a click, and its vowel system is far from simple, as Ladefoged (2001: 167) notes:

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[4] See www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap

Even the name of this language, !Xóõ, is difficult for speakers of European languages. It begins with an alveolar click, !, which has the tip of the tongue and the back of the tongue raised for the click mechanism. After the tip of the tongue has come down and the click sound has been produced, the back of the tongue lowers slowly, so that there is a velar fricative of the kind we noted in Gaelic, and in German *Bach*, **bax**. […] The complex click at the beginning of the word is followed by a long nasalized vowel on a high tone. The vowel is written with two letter 'o's, so that the high tone can be marked on one and the other can have the nasalization mark. It is, nevertheless, just one long, high-tone, nasalized vowel.

3. Fieldwork in Botswana

I was introduced by John McAllister to his colleague Andy Chebanne, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Botswana, and together we began to plan a fieldwork trip upcountry over several weeks in 2003. My aims were to provide Andy with high-quality recordings for his own research, to gather materials for my own practice-based research, and to compile documentation that might make some contribution to the communities' struggles for rights and recognition and promote greater awareness of the value of indigenous languages.

The first recording Andy and I did took place on the University of Botswana campus in Gaborone, the only recording that was not made in the Kalahari. Gosaitse Kabatlhophane was a 17 year old !Xóõ speaker with whom Andy was working to develop the first orthography of this language (Figure 3). Although the written form can never satisfactorily replace the complex oral traditions that are integral to indigenous cultures nor accurately reflect languages which have been 'brought to their polished and idiosyncratic perfection of grammar and syntax without benefit of a single recording scratch of stylus on papyrus or stone' (Brady 1999: 67), and although an orthography is no guarantee of a language's survival, this process is an important step in promoting the continued transmission of languages which have never been systematically written down. As well as aiding in the documentation of the language, helping a young speaker like Gosaitse to become literate in her own first language also benefits her, both in terms of her general education and the esteem in which she holds her language and culture. Although to some degree it can reinforce hierarchical power structures, the interest of researchers from outside can also potentially help to bolster a community's perception of the value of its language and culture. Unfortunately, Andy has since lost touch with Gosaitse, so I do not have any updated information about her.

Figure 3: Dr Andy Chebanne and Gosaitse Kabatlhophane at the University of Botswana, Gaborone. (Photo: John Wynne)

Herman Batibo, a sociolinguist at the University of Botswana, told me of the pride and excitement with which the launch of the first Naro dictionary was greeted by the leader of the Naro community in Botswana, who said '[f]rom now on, I can see that my language is as good as any other languages'.[5] Such a statement can, of course, be seen as evidence of the insidious ideology that maintains the perceived superiority of literate cultures, but it is clear that once written material becomes available, speakers are often anxious to learn to read and write in their own language. All too often, though, 'children's acquisition of an endangered language may be interrupted at the very stage when […] grammatical complexity is being acquired' (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 50), because they are schooled only in the dominant national language. Another significant indicator of language decline is an increase in the average age of speakers as the active domains of minority languages shrink and young people move away to places where their language is of little use.

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[5] Herman Batibo, unpublished interview with the author, 2004.

Andy had worked previously with linguists Coby and Hessel Visser, who are based in D'Kar, a small village in the Ghanzi District of western Botswana, so we chose that as the base for our fieldwork. Coby and Hessel are Dutch missionaries with the Norwegian Reformed Church who started work on a translation of the New Testament in 1991 as part of the Naro Language Project. They also worked on an important Naro dictionary and the publication of various materials such as information on HIV/AIDS and booklets designed to promote literacy. The Bible translation, known in Naro as *Kabas Qae-xg'ae sa*, took more than twenty years to complete and was finally published in 2012. Despite my political reservations about the linkage between religious indoctrination and language revitalisation, I was deeply impressed by the social and personal support provided to the community by the Vissers and by their long-term and thorough-going commitment to language documentation, usage and literacy.

We met with a representative of the Working Group for Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) to agree and sign a contract describing the purpose of our fieldwork and prohibiting us from making commercial use of the materials without further consent, and were then ready to begin recording. The Vissers introduced us to Nicodemus Barkhard, who was to become our primary translator and provided us with introductions to many of the speakers we recorded in D'Kar. Nicodemus was also one of the eight speakers featured in the *Hearing Voices* installation and his voice can also be heard in my recordings of the Naro Language Choir on the *Hearing Voices: Speakers / Languages* app (Figure 4)*.* As well as speaking at least four different indigenous languages, he is fluent in Setswana, Afrikaans and English, with a smattering of German, but despite his impressive linguistic abilities and intelligence, his life has been far from easy. He readily admits his own drinking problems and spoke at length about the effects of alcohol and unprotected sex on his community: [6]

> My wife enjoys church. But I am a drunkard […]. Now, teenagers in D'Kar have changed a lot. They drink alcohol and get drunk. They do not go to church, they do not want to. But now we have the AIDS disease and young people die in great numbers. When they are drunk they do not know how to conduct themselves. They indulge in sex without protection and they get AIDS. Even a girl in her menstruations – young men just sleep with her. Also, the tarred road through D'Kar kills so many drunken young people because of high speed and drunkenness.

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[6] Nicodemus Barkard, in Wynne *Hearing Voices: Speakers / Languages.*

At the time, Nicodemus asked us not to give him his full payment for assisting us all at once so he would not be tempted to buy drink, so he was clearly making efforts to improve his situation, and I heard recently from the Vissers that Nicodemus has stopped drinking and is making a living doing craftwork and translation.

Figure 4: Nicodemus Barkard (second from right) and other members of the Naro Language Choir in D'Kar, Botswana (Photo: John Wynne).

In both my endangered language projects, and the recordings I made during my year as artist-in-residence at a heart and lung transplant centre in the UK[7], I tried to avoid bringing my own agenda to the encounters with project participants. Rather than preparing questions in advance, I set out to allow people to say whatever they thought was important or worthwhile. The

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[7] I was artist-in-residence for a year in 2006-7, at Harefield Hospital, one of the world's leading centres for heart and lung transplantation. Working closely with photographer Tim Wainwright, I recorded patients, the devices they were attached to or had implanted in them, and the hospital itself. Outputs from the project include a 24-channel sound and photography installation, a half hour commission for BBC Radio and a book. See www.sensitivebrigade.com/Transplant.htm

linguists with whom I worked (Andy Chebanne in Botswana and Tyler Peterson in Canada) had their own research agendas which I was happy to facilitate and document, but I was also keen to enable a more free-flowing encounter whereby the participants could determine the content of the recordings. I chose to work with both Andy and Tyler because of our shared acknowledgement of the value of this sort of socio-linguistic material in addition to their more focused linguistic interests. So, the recordings from Botswana and British Columbia include powerful political statements, descriptions of migrations from government settlements to squatter camps, moving and often humorous personal stories and memories, stories passed down through generations, and songs translated from other languages.

Thamae Sobe (Figures 5-6), an elderly Gǀwi speaker we recorded in one of the rooms at the mission settlement in D'Kar, speaks about the hunting and gathering lifestyle followed by the community when he was young, collecting wild melons and certain roots for water, and killing gemsbok and eland with bows and arrows. When he talks about the present, he describes visiting an ill friend who is suffering from pains in his chest and says he has not been paid for the three months of goat herding he has done. He says that he has been refused an old age pension because he cannot prove his age, and that they have been waiting for two months for overdue government food rations due to the two orphaned children he has been looking after since his wife's sister died and her husband disappeared. When I enquired to the Vissers about Thamae in July 2012, I received the following reply:

> Unfortunately we buried him last Friday. He was very sick with TB. Was for a long time in the hospital. He was back for 6 weeks and had to go back to the hospital again. We feel very sorry for his wife Ntcisa.

Figure 5: Thamae Sobe outside the kind of housing provided for some by the government some following relocation. The hut is where another project participant, Qgõcgae, lived and where we recorded and photographed her (Photo: Denise Hawrysio).
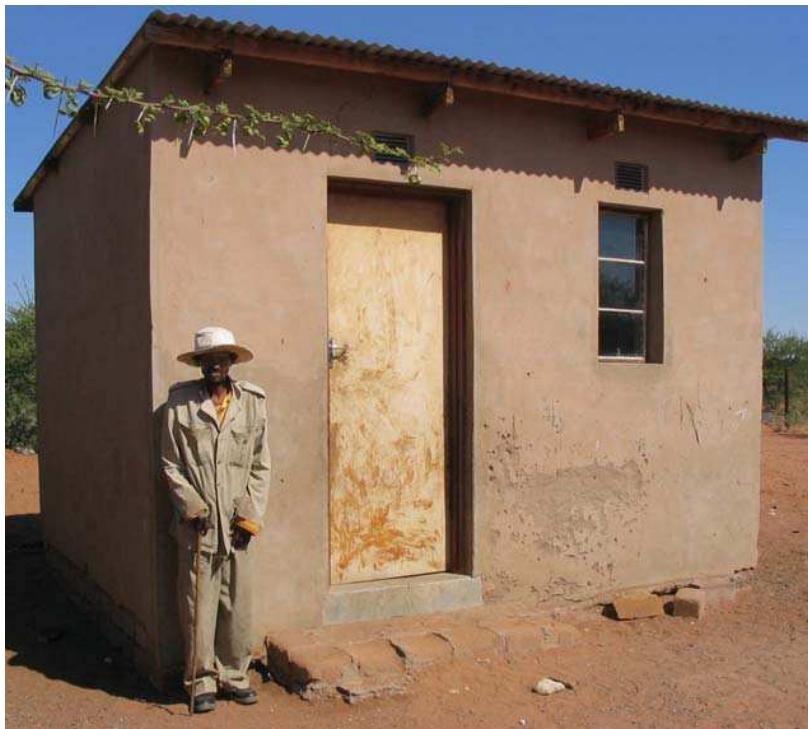
Figure 6: Portrait of Thamae Sobe as used in the installation.(Photo: Denise Hawrysio)
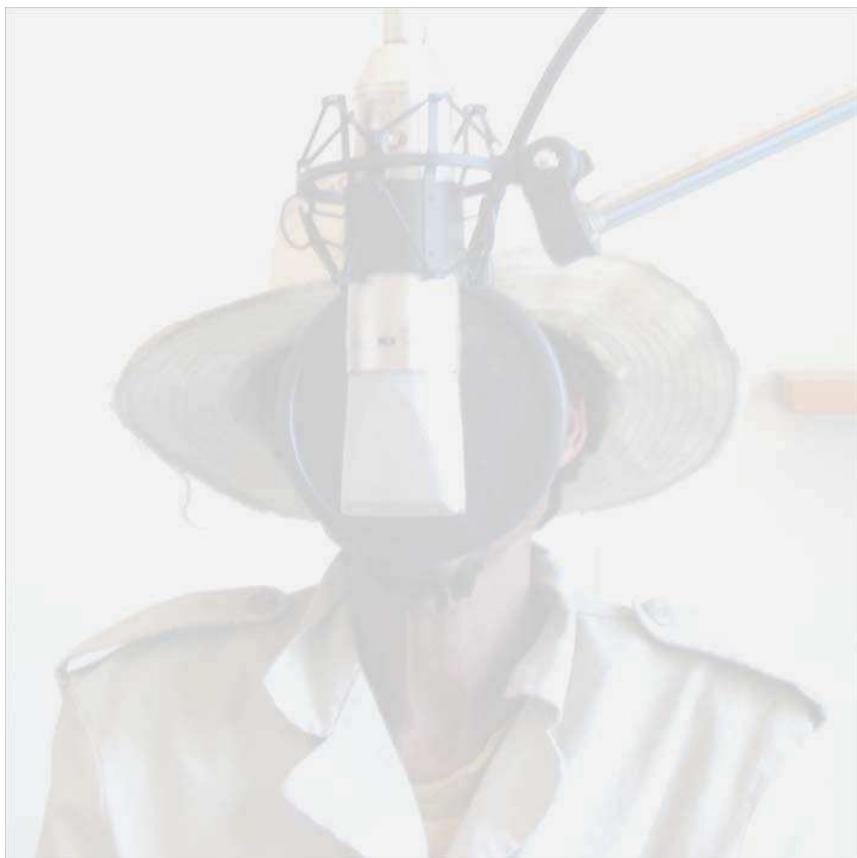
Cukuri Dako is a young Naro speaker who was involved with the Naro Language project when we met him in D'Kar. He tells a couple of hunting stories: one about a hunter who tried to wipe away his tears from the smoke of the cooking fire but, forgetting he had a knife in his hand, cut off his ear instead, and another about a hunter who, reaching for something to wipe his bottom with, grabbed a snake by mistake. Some time after our visit, he officially changed his name to Xukuri Xukuri, at least partly a reflection of the influence of the newly developed orthography of his language. He is currently studying at the University of Botswana and, despite some struggles with funding, is apparently doing well with some support from the Vissers. He

will soon finish his degree in Business Administration and remains very active in working for the San community.

While in D'Kar, we were fortunate to meet Roy Sesana, who was passing through and staying in the next room. Roy is a Gǁana speaker and founding member of the organisation *First People of the Kalahari*. He agreed to participate in our project and spoke with his usual eloquence about the oppression and deprivation that threatens the indigenous inhabitants and cultures of the region:

> They are told that there is development, but the development is not for them, it is for other people – and these are the people who oppress them…. It is other people who get chiefs and politicians representing them – we have nothing. They only time they think of us is when they want to give us handouts to keep us quiet, to make us lose our culture. This is painful and we must fight for our rights.

Roy told us that when the Khoi and San ask for their rights, they are told to go to the High Court. In fact, this is exactly what has happened. With the support of *Survival International*, the *First People of the Kalahari* took the Botswana government to the High Court to challenge the legality of the forced evictions of the San from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, land the Khoi and San have occupied for thousands of years. They were dispossessed of their land and displaced, either forcibly or by coercion, into settlements such as Kg'oesakene (New Xade) and Kaudwane, outside the borders of the reserve. In these places they have no access to natural resources and hence no opportunity to pursue their traditional lifestyle of hunting and gathering: their choices are wage labour, if they can get it, agropastoralism, or reliance on meagre government handouts.

The kind of basic housing provided by the government as an incentive to leave the Game Reserve and other traditional homelands where oil and diamond exploitation are going on can be seen in Figure 5. This dwelling is where we recorded Qgõcgae (Figure 7), whose name at the time was spelled !Kun/'xae, such changes in spelling reflecting the active state of orthography development in the region. She spoke of the difficulty of obtaining the kind of wild foods that were readily available to her before she moved to D'Kar. She complains that she has not received the promised government food rations and is forced to rely on food rations given to other people:

Because I got married, I moved here with my husband, but now I am suffering because I don't get what I need here, because wild foods are scarce – now people eat mieliepap, only mieliepap.[8]

Figure 7: Qgõcgae during recording session at her home in D'Kar, Botswana. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

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[8] A maize porridge whose name, given to us in Afrikaans by translator Nicodemus Barkard, is taken from the Dutch *pap,* for 'porridge'.

For the elderly couple we recorded in the Lone Tree squatter camp beside the Trans Kalahari Highway (Figures 1, 2, 8 and 9), life is equally difficult. There is nothing for them to do here and little to eat apart from government rations. They came to the area to pursue work and remain because their children are in a local school. Although I used recordings of passing cars on the Trans Kalahari as a recurring motif in my piece for radio broadcast, I wanted the voice recordings to be as good as possible, so we decided to record Tshabakgotta Igamamoo and Kanokabe//nee//ee inside the car. I was using a sensitive large-diaphragm microphone designed for studio use, so even a slight breeze would have been problematic. In a room, it is often possible to reduce unwanted resonances and minimise reverberation using mattresses or blankets, as we did in D'Kar, but in a vehicle there is only so much one can do to overcome the boxy sound. However, with close microphone techniques and the careful application of equalisation in post-production, the results were acceptable to my ears.

Figure 8: Andy Chebanne (back to camera) talking to residents of the Lone Tree camp. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

Figure 9: The author setting up a large-diaphragm microphone in a vehicle to record speakers in the Lone Tree camp. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

As Nathan (2010) argues, the relatively easy access to *remote* communities now available to fieldworkers should be met with a firm commitment to respect the people and cultures being documented. Such respect includes the essentially ethical responsibility to 'at the very least mobilise their advantages and opportunities by acquiring and using the right equipment and skills in order to create quality records of the language for a variety of purposes' (Nathan 2010: 265). When I first turned on my recorder in Botswana and heard in my headphones Gosaitse's beautiful voice speaking a few inches away from the microphone in the most fascinating sounding language I had ever heard, I was almost overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility, both in terms of the quality of my recordings and the sort of creative use I would make of the materials I was about to accumulate.

4. Working with the materials

The *Hearing Voices* installation is an 8-channel sound composition created to be heard as part of an immersive environment in which the sound comes directly from the photographs themselves via bespoke flat-panel speakers (Figure 10).[9] Early in the development of the piece, it became apparent to me that there was a tension between the bulk of accumulated voice recordings, interviews and research materials and the uncluttered, contemplative work I wanted to make. I hoped to create a sounding environment which would draw the visitor in, slow them down, and offer a space to consider the aesthetic, linguistic and socio-political dimensions of Khoi and San languages, as well as broader issues of language endangerment. But the weight of the *issues* threatened to restrict the freedom to experiment which is integral to my practice as an artist, or at least to push the resultant work into something closer to documentary than I wanted, particularly for the installation.

Figure 10: Hearing Voices installation, Brunei Gallery at SOAS, London. (Photo: JW)

The images from which the sound emerges – photographs taken by visual artist Denise Hawrysio during the recording sessions and subsequently digitally manipulated by me – are composed to simultaneously reveal the process, symbolise my own presence and disrupt, frustrate, or at least problematise, the ethnographic gaze, the '"ethnotopia" of limitless observation' (Nichols 1991: 218). They question the easy association of the photographic image with *presence* and disrupt what Barthes (2000: 5) describes as the 'antiphon of "Look," "See," "Here it is"' of photography. The photographic composition suggests the '"facelessness" such people have suffered in world dialogues' (Biesele 2002: 6). and highlights the power

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[9] *Hearing Voices* showed first at the Botswana National Museum in Gaborone (2005), then at the National Art Gallery of Namibia in Windhoek (2005), the Brunei Gallery at SOAS in London (2005) and at P3 Gallery in London (2008).

relations which are of particular relevance to technological mediation in cross-cultural work.

The portraits are suspended from the ceiling so that visitors can walk around and between them. The vowels of each of the subjects' voices were 'massively extended into shimmering drones' (Bell 2005) through a painstaking process of editing and granulation to give a sense of suspension in time. Granulation is a technique pioneered by Barry Truax at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. As Truax (1996: 61) explains:

> Briefly, the technique divides the sound into short enveloped grains of 50ms duration or less, and reproduces them in high densities ranging from several hundred to several thousand grains per second. A dramatic alteration of the sound called "time stretching" is made possible with this technique, in that it allows the sound to be prolonged by any factor with no resultant change in pitch. The principle of the technique is that the samples within the grain are identical in order to those found in the original (hence the absence of pitch change), but the rate at which the grains move through the original material may be arbitrarily controlled. The fact that the grains are enveloped prevents audible transients and allows arbitrary sections of the original material to be juxtaposed and combined freely.

Cultural critic Stefan Szczelkun wrote of *Hearing Voices:* 'Languages slowing down, coming to a standstill – almost. The stillness of the sound is poignant. And the space left resonates.'[10]

These vowel drones modulate over time as they retrace the shape of the vowels in slow motion. They carry the personal characteristics of the voice from which they are derived, but are also, at times, severely filtered, thinned out to take on the sinuous fragility of lone sine waves weaving amongst the other sounds and voices surrounding the visitor. The effect, as Bell (2005) describes it, is 'a simmering, ominous sound which conjures the desert itself'.

The unmanipulated voices emerging from each of the portraits become audible by turns, and as they recede, the click consonants become modulated into bell-like tones, with their temporal/rhythmic placement, characteristic of each speaker and his or her language, preserved. Some of the languages, such as Naro, have only one or two clicks in an average sentence; others, such as !Xóõ, have at least one click in nearly every

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[10] Stefan Szczelkun, in visitors' book at Brunei Gallery, 2006.

word. The result is a shifting, syncopated soundscape which retains linguistic cues but also merges into the realms of music and environment. One visitor to the gallery where the exhibition was held wrote in the comments book: 'On the one hand the sound is just very lovely and meditative and on the other I can't quite lose the feeling that the bell-like sounds mark the passing of something lost – or being lost.' The installation sets up a tension between presence and absence which symbolically renders the limbo in which endangered languages and cultures find themselves.

The installation uses only the voices of the eight participants as its sound sources; for the BBC Radio 3 commission I took a different approach. This half-hour radio piece, also entitled *Hearing Voices*, further investigates the boundaries between documentary and abstraction, using voice recordings, interviews with Peter Austin, Andy Chebanne and Herman Batibo, as well as environmental recordings alternating between raw and manipulated form to present the listener with 'a capricious sound world where aural objects shift and surprise, and conventions are undermined or mutated' (Drever 2005).[11]

Alongside my intention to create a distilled, contemplative gallery installation, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to disseminate and publicise the materials and research and to provide background information and context for gallery visitors. When my recordings came to the attention of Peter Austin and David Nathan at HRELP, we decided to develop a CD-ROM which would act as catalogue, archive and research document, effectively restoring some of the contextual substance peeled away by the installation. To design and create this interactive disk, I worked closely with Robert Munro, who was at the time working at HRELP and who later went on to found *Idibon*, a specialist language technology company in San Francisco.

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[11] A 20-minute excerpt; at www.st andrews.ac.uk/soundanth/work/wynnevoices/

Figure 11: Nicodemus Barkard reviews the first version of the Hearing Voices: Speakers/Languages at the Botswana National Museum. (Photo: JW)

My intention was that the CD-ROM would be available at a computer kiosk adjacent to the installation each time it was exhibited (Figure 11). When I arrived in Gaborone in 2005 to install *Hearing Voices* for its première at the Botswana National Museum, I was told that, because Roy Sesana (Figure 12) was one of the speakers on the CD-ROM, someone in the government would need to approve its use in the (government funded) museum. With the opening of the exhibition just days away and a decision by the Permanent Secretary unlikely to be immediate, I was given the option of withdrawing the CD-ROM from the exhibition, which I refused. Eventually, permission was granted for the delayed opening of my exhibition, but the wait made the museum director and curator, both civil servants, distinctly uncomfortable, and I was asked by the British Council (whose logo was on the publicity material in recognition of their assistance with the Kafkaesque customs regulations involved in transporting the work) not to go to the press because they did not want to appear anything other than neutral. The Permanent Secretary no doubt realised that Sesana was only saying on the CD-ROM what he was travelling around the world saying anyway, and that the exhibition would have received more publicity if it were banned than if it went ahead. Unfortunately, Nicodemus, the only speaker who was able to travel to the

capital for the opening, had to return to D'Kar before the delayed launch, which was a great disappointment. I also got the impression that the museum was not particularly keen to publicise the show.

Figure 12: The author with Roy Sesana and Andy Chebanne in D'Kar, Botswana. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

Thankfully, the reception at the National Art Gallery of Namibia, where *Hearing Voices* was shown later the same year, was more welcoming and the publicity was extensive (Figures 13 and 14). A group of Khoisan representatives from WIMSA were in Windhoek at the time and we asked one of them, Joram |Useb, to speak at the opening. He noted that the faded printing of the images was a fitting analogy for what is happening to Khoisan languages and cultures and spoke with appreciation of my recordings and the attention the piece brought to the issues.

Figure 13: WIMSA representatives and a member of the public view and listen to the Hearing Voices CD-ROM adjacent to the installation at the National Art Gallery of Namibia. (Photo: JW)

Figure 14: Malua, a member of staff at the National Art Gallery of Namibia, listens to the voice of Xukuri Xukuri in the installation. (Photo: JW)

When the installation showed at the Brunei Gallery at SOAS in London, one room of the gallery was occupied by HRELP with displays and information about their work and the research projects they support. The visitor's book was full of interesting comments and encouraging remarks, including a description of the piece as 'An eye-opening, almost disturbing experience of the fragility and subjectivity of language.' One day, when visiting the gallery, I could hear someone quietly singing along to one of the Dutch hymns translated into Naro and sung by the Naro Language Project Choir. It turned out to be a Japanese woman sitting at the computer kiosk learning one of the hymns, an interesting example of the power of music to encourage language acquisition.

5. From clicks to voiceless fricatives and country music

When I decided to pursue a second endangered language project, my attention turned to the west coast of Canada where, as in the Kalahari region, there are a large number of small scale languages whose survival is under threat. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, the Canadian history I was taught at school was almost exclusively about events after the arrival of Europeans so, having lived abroad since the early 1980s, I knew little about the history or contemporary situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and saw this as an opportunity to educate myself and perhaps to contribute to the study and recognition of their languages. As with the Botswana project, I wanted to work with a linguist who had a long-term relationship with speakers in the community. I began by contacting Leora Bar-el at SOAS (now at the University of Montana) who gave me a long list of academics to contact in Canada. I communicated with several of these and began to get a sense of what was going on in terms of the languages themselves, research in the area and some of the political sensitivities involved in working there. I was not keen to focus on any of the languages in British Columbia with only a handful of speakers left, of which there are several. This was partly to avoid the easy sensationalism and exoticism of focusing on *the last speaker(s)*, and partly because I thought I could contribute more by working on a language which still had a reasonably wide, if ageing speaker base.

I received very helpful information, advice and contacts from Suzanne Urbanczyk at the University of Victoria and Henry Davis at the University of British Columbia. Henry put me in touch with Doreen Jensen, an artist from the Gitxsan community living in Vancouver, who in turn suggested I contact her sister, Barbara Harris (Figure 15). I met with Barbara in Vancouver, showed her the *Hearing Voices* CD-ROM and told her about my creative practice. She seemed to immediately understand how creative

practice could dovetail with documentation and linguistic research in drawing attention to the importance of language survival and revitalisation and recommended that I contact Tyler Peterson, with whom she had been working. At the time, Tyler was working on his PhD at the University of British Columbia, focusing on modality in Gitxsanimaax.

Figure 15: Barbara Harris in the linguistics lab at the University of British Columbia. This mirrored image using photographs taken by Denise Hawrysio is one of the large scale prints (200cm x 80cm) used in the Anspayaxw installation. This is the only recording session for the project which did not take place in or around the Kispiox reserve. Barbara grew up in Kispiox but now lives in Vancouver.

Tyler was impressed by the quality of my recordings from Botswana and had an immediate, intuitive appreciation of how a sound artist and a linguist could work together to mutual advantage. Depending, of course, on who you ask, it is estimated that there are approximately 400 'competent' speakers of Gitxsanimaax and so, given the good personal relationships I instantly struck up with both Barbara and Tyler, this felt like the right language to work with. Tyler and I successfully applied for a fieldtrip grant from ELDP and, along with Denise Hawrysio, who photographed the process, planned our work in and around the Kispiox reserve in northern British Columbia.

Like many of the Khoi and San languages we recorded, Tsimshian, the language family to which Gitxsanimaax belongs, is considered an isolate, in that it can not be shown to be genetically related to other living languages.[12] One of the first things that struck me about Gitxsanimaax was the frequency of glottalised resonants and voiceless obstruents, particularly because of the

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[12] There is some conjecture that Tsimshian may be related to indigenous languages found much further south on the west coast of America, but this possibility is not universally accepted. Language isolates are often the result of specific migratory conditions combined with the disappearance of any related languages.

stark contrast to the astounding percussive energy of the click sounds I encountered in the Kalahari. These breathy sounds are often practically inaudible and present almost the opposite problems for me as a sound recordist when compared to clicks. *Anspayaxw,* the Gitxsan word for Kispiox, was chosen as the title for my installation, partly because it ends with a voiceless fricative.

I decided to refrain from manipulating the voices of the Gitxsan speakers we worked with, having felt somewhat uncomfortable, in retrospect, with the processing to which I subjected the Khoi-San language material, however sensitively it might have been undertaken. Rather than use only vocal sounds, as in the *Hearing Voices* installation, I wanted to include environmental sounds and to stretch and resonate these in order to create an immersive sound environment influenced and inspired by the characteristic breathy sounds of the language.

One day during our initial fieldwork in 2006, after a session of recording materials for Tyler's study of modality (Peterson 2008, 2010, 2012) in the home of Alvin and Clara Weget (Figure 16), we were discussing what else Clara and her daughter Fern might want to record when Fern enthusiastically suggested that she could sing a song which, unlike traditional Gitxsan songs which are subject to carefully maintained rules regarding their use, wouldn't require obtaining permission to record. Some years earlier, Fern translated the words of a country-and-western song from the 1930s into Gitxsanimaax and she often sings it at memorial gatherings. When she performed it for us, she stopped part way through, saying that she often got the Gitxsan and English verses mixed up, and that she even did so once at a memorial. Rather than view her interrupted performance as an out-take, for me the unedited recording, including her mid-performance comments about the difficulties of code-switching was invaluable material for the installation. I wanted the work to reflect *process* and the sometimes messy, asymmetrical nature of translation. Her translation and use of a popular song from outside the community is also, of course, an excellent example of one way that individuals can contribute to language revitalisation.

Figure 16: Clara (left) and Fern Weget in the home of Clara and her husband Alvin in Kispiox. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

Figure 17: Anspayaxw as installed at the Museum of Anthropology in 2010. (Photo: Ken Meyer)

Reflecting on Fern's comment, I set out to reinterpret her reinterpretation of this song, stretching, distilling and layering her voice across the 12 channels of the installation (Figure 17). This was the only exception to my decision not to manipulate the voices of the project participants. By contrast, my treatment of the only other song used in the piece was very different. Tyler was interested in recording the words of a funeral song: in order to record or reproduce such a song, permission needed to be obtained from Walter Harris, who was at the time the representative of House of G̱eel, to which the song belonged. Since Walter's death, I am required to seek permission from the current representative each time the installation is exhibited. I decided to use the recording of Thelma Blackstock (Figure 18) speaking the words of the song slowly and clearly for the sake of clear linguistic documentation. She

stops at one point and acknowledges the difficulty of speaking words that are normally sung, and for me this was an interesting moment that revealed a great deal about the often awkward nature of research and documentation, and again decided to use the recording unedited. Kate Hennessey, in an essay entitled *Asymmetrical Translations* published to accompany the exhibition of the *Anspayaxw* installation at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, writes about my use of these two songs (Hennessey 2010/13: 3):

> Thelma Blackstock is recorded speaking the words of a funeral song named *Xsin Naahlxw* (Breath). The words are spoken rather than sung for the linguist, whose goal is to transcribe the Gitxsanimaax words. Wynne uses this recording in the installation with the permission of the representative of the House of Geel, Catherine Blackstock-Campbell. He presents it as spoken word to resist ethnologizing and circulating this sacred, hereditary, song. Instead of a documentation of a performance, it is a record of the moment of encounter between researcher and speaker. It reveals the process of translating intangible cultural property into orthographic transcription, which, without permission from the owner, is an act of theft.

> Later, Fern Weget sings her own Gitxsanimaax translation of Bob Miller's 1933 country song, *White Azaleas.* Unlike Blackstock's funeral song, with its strict protocols of ownership, Weget sings the song because "it doesn't belong to nobody." Weget makes this popular song her own, yet at the end of her performance Wynne reinterprets the recording, drawing the tones of her voice into expansive harmonics, remixing the piece anew. Both of these songs, like the images, are asymmetrical reflections. The artist's/linguist's recordings, Wynne demonstrates, are not unmediated actualities, but the creation of new forms. Weget's *White Azaleas,* a Gitxsan version of a public-domain country-and-western song, is translated into the social and cultural life of Anspayaxw.

> The two songs illuminate the tension between epistemologies and legal regimes of ownership. Along with the stories told by residents of Anspayaxw – narratives of survival, suffering, and humour in the face of colonial oppression and discrimination – they expose negotiations of relations of power: the subjective acts of recording language and culture, creating works of art, and the dynamic processes of cultural change, adaptation, and appropriation.

Figure 18: Thelma Blackstock in her home. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

Another interesting illustration of the differing interpretations of ownership and permission between community members and academia came when I wrote to Louise Wilson to check that she and her brother Bob had no objections to the publication of a photograph taken during our recording session (Figure 19). I met Louise one evening in Kispiox when we attended the Bingo hall where she was working at the desk. When I explained what we were doing on the reserve, she told me that we simply *had* to record her brother, whom she regarded as her 'encyclopedia' for matters of language and traditional culture. Bob turned out to be one of the most important contributors to the project, due in no small part to his familiarity with the older form of the language as spoken by his great grandmother, and Tyler has continued to work closely with his sister Louise since we met her her in 2006. During the fieldwork, we made the majority of our recordings without an officially approved consent form because the process of getting approval from the ethics committee at Tyler's university took so long. Louise thanked me for my request for permission, but added that 'If he [Bob] didn't want you to use the photographs, he wouldn't have let you take them.' Sometimes, a responsible approach to participants entails recognising that they know what they are doing and saying, and respecting the trust they have given by participating. For people with a history of oral culture, their word is enough. After all, treaties were written documents, too.

Figure 19: Bob Wilson in the home of his brother Roy in Kispiox, British Columbia. (Photo: Denise Hawrysio)

6. Conclusion

Louise Wilson was one of the participants in a symposium at Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology in 2013 entitled *On Endangered Languages: Indigeneity, Community and Creative Practice* [13] (Figure 20). The event was co-organised by myself, anthropologist and filmmaker Kate Hennessey, linguist Tyler Peterson, and Karen Duffek, Curator of Contemporary Art at MOA. It was designed to facilitate a conversation between community members, academics and artists; many of the participants belong to more than one of these categories. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 1) has described research as 'probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary' – but as she also acknowledges: 'at some points there is, there has to be, dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions.' Beyond the customary exploration of academic interests and language maintenance efforts, this symposium set out to problematize research and raise questions about the opportunities and consequences of language documentation for local communities and collaborating outsiders.

Also speaking at the symposium was Cynthia Jensen-Fisk, daughter of project participant Doreen Jensen, who passed away shortly after the project's completion. We invited Cynthia along with Barbara Harris, my initial point of contact in the community, partly because she is currently working with Barbara to learn Gitxsanimaax through the master-apprentice program of the First Peoples' Cultural Council at the University of British

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[13] For further information about the symposium and video documentation of the sessions, see hennessy.iat.sfu.ca/mcl/symposium-on-endangered-languages-indigeneity-community-and-creative-practice/

Columbia. Cynthia spoke passionately about both the difficulties and the rewards of learning her community's language relatively late in life.

The symposium illustrated the value of interaction across cultural and disciplinary categories through a lively and at times productively awkward discussion. I was already well aware of the value of cross-disciplinary collaboration in my own research and creative practice – my relationship with the linguists I worked with on the Gitxsan and Kalahari projects was clearly of mutual benefit – but the symposium made me feel that through my practice I had become part of a diverse community held together by a mutual concern about the decline of indigenous languages. I was inspired by the people I met and by the languages I heard and hope to develop further projects involving endangered languages.

The sound, video and photographic materials generated by myself, Tyler and Denise Hawrysio during our fieldwork will be part of the ELAR archive and will also form the starting point for a Gitxsan Language Archive held at the 'Ksan Museum a few miles from the Kispiox reserve. The archive at 'Ksan will be available for community use and, we hope, will encourage community members to contribute further materials in the future.

Figure 20: Symposium at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. Participants in the session entitled Digital Technologies and Archives: (left to right) Kate Hennessey, Clyde Talio, Mark Turin, David Nathan and Candace Kaleimamoowahinekapu Galla.

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