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Educating and Reimagining the Daughter: Ethnicity and Relational Self-Construction through Writing

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Abstract

Nozipo Maraire's epistolary novel *Zenzele*, describes the complex relationship between the mother, who was born and raised in Zimbabwe, and her daughter who moved to United States to study in Harvard. The mother writes a long letter to her daughter to overcome the cross-cultural and cross-generational clashes between them as her daughter is attracted to the Western culture and gradually loses her connection to the African heritage. Although at first glance it might appear that the mother's choice to write her life story is an attempt to engage in a safer, more controlled (monological) narration of her story, this paper will show that the texts the mother produces can be interpreted as dialogical writings due to the mother's attempts to imagine her daughter's perspective with empathy and compassion. The article discusses the cognitive processes that enable the writing mother to imagine the daughter's point of view while creating an ethnic identity that the daughter can identify with despite the cultural gaps.

Keywords: Mother/daughter relationship, cognitive literary theory, creating ethnic identity, dialogical narration, epistolary novel.

Nozipo Maraire's epistolary novel is written as a long letter from an African mother to her Westernized daughter, Zenzele, who has left her family and native Zimbabwe to study at Harvard. Recounting the events of her life, the mother tells Zenzele about her own childhood in colonized Zimbabwe, as well as the struggle for her country's independence as experienced by her family. While Zenzele's aunts were participating in the armed struggle against the colonizing government, the mother, called Shiri before marriage, led a much more peaceful and traditional life as the oldest sister of the family. She complies with the familial values until falling in love with the village sculptor. Although both families disapprove of this union, the young couple decides to get married. Tragically, their plans are destroyed when the young sculptor dies in a car accident, leaving his future bride inconsolable. This "deviant relationship," as the mother later refers to it, is the only rebellious and independent act she has been ever capable of. Her lover's death shatters Shiri's naïve belief that "all would be well if you lived by the rules" (127). She undergoes a maturation process at the end of which she relinquishes her mourning and meets Zenzele's father – a civil rights lawyer, who fights the injustices of colonialism as a public leader. Thus, while Zenzele's aunts and father actively engage in the historical changes occurring in Zimbabwe, the mother becomes their companion, supporter and audience. By assuming this role, she partially complies with the traditional cultural norms that perceive women as passive, humble and obedient. This, however, is not the heritage she intends to transmit to her daughter. She provides Zenzele not only with her own story, but also with the stories of her aunts and other female freedom fighters who assumed militant, rebellious and untraditional female identities.

By addressing her daughter in writing, rather than through direct conversation, the mother has apparently chosen to engage in a safer, more controlled (monological) narration of her story. However, in this paper, I will show that the texts the mother produces can be interpreted as dialogical writings due to the mothers' attempts to imagine her daughter's perspective and give it a voice. In working to make her life stories accessible to the Westernized daughter, the mother expresses her hope of overcoming cross-cultural misunderstandings and generational gaps. This article will employ the cognitive literary theory of distributed cognition and literary universals to demonstrate how the mother manages to overcome the obvious ethnic and cultural differences between herself and her daughter by employing specific figurative and cognitive techniques that enhance cross-cultural intimacy and understanding.

In “Current Trends in Narrative Theory,” Ellen Spolsky employs the theory of distributed cognition to show how art in general, and literary texts in particular, function as cognitive affordances that help us think. According to Spolsky, “thinking does not take place only in the head of the thinker;” rather, “it is distributed in the world around you, in objects and in other people” (4,5). In *Fictional Minds*, referring to such theorists as Edwin Hutchin, Daniel Dennett, Andy Clark and David Chalmers, Alan Palmer describes our minds as a “distributed cognitive system” that employs the environment in order to survive (160). Thus, we make use of our social and physical environment when thinking and acting. Integral to culture, works of art and narratives function as cognitive affordances that allow people to operate effectively in society and solve complicated problems. The manuscript produced by the mother in *Zenzele* functions as such a cognitive affordance, helping the mother and daughter bridge the cross-cultural and generational gaps.

According to David Herman’s “Stories as a Tool for Thinking,” narrative can function cognitively to negotiate otherness and organize social interaction:

Narrative bridges self and other, creating a network of relations between storytellers, the participants whose experiences they recount, and the larger environment embedding those experiences, including the setting afforded by the activity of storytelling itself. (184)

The ethnic mother’s text thus serves as a cognitive tool or an affordance that enables the mother/daughter communication and empathy in spite of the physical and cultural distance that occurred due to the daughter’s aspirations to assimilate into the Western culture. Interestingly, while the process of creating the literary affordance enables the mother to imagine her daughter’s perspective, when reading her mother’s text, the daughter gains insight and understanding of her mother’s life choices and thus understanding her perspective. In this way, the text establishes a bidirectional channel of communication in which the mother reimagines her daughter, who in turn reimagines the mother when reading her life-story. As we shall see, the more the mother attempts, when writing her manuscript, to imagine their daughter’s states of mind, the more dialogic the narrative becomes,¹ thus enhancing the

1 In *Fictional Minds* Palmer elaborates on Bakhtin’s argument suggesting that “consciousness

daughter's ability to understand her mother's intentions.

Seeking to teach her daughter African wisdom, customs and tradition, the mother shapes her life-story in a way she believes will be valuable and educational for her daughter. The mother views the stories of her life and the customs of her village as the legacy that has fashioned her own identity and should also influence her daughter's self-construction. The daughter, however, is drawn to Western, feminist, individualistic ideals and political struggle. Growing up in the city, she often misunderstands the intentions of her mother's fellow villagers and even resents her heritage. Communication problems between the mother and daughter arise from the generation gap and especially from the mother's insistence on the importance of her traditional, ethnic, and rural values that appear archaic and outdated to her urban daughter. Moreover, the mother's contradictory messages regarding women's roles in society lead to the daughter's misinterpretation of her mother's intentions. In "Mothering Daughters and the Other Side of the Story" Monica Bungaro suggests that in *Zenzele* "the mother is conscious that she has provided the daughter with a contradictory model of womanhood, rebellious against neo-colonial forms of oppression though complicit with patriarchal power structures" (78). The mother's letter attempts to negotiate the contradictory aspects of her own identity and to answer her daughter's challenging questions regarding women's rights in Africa.

In the opening pages of her letter, the mother presents herself as a simple woman, almost unworthy to teach her well-educated daughter:

the world is full of so many more illustrious and better qualified women – bankers, lawyers, doctors and presidents – who would have served as far superior role models. But I alone had the responsibility of being your mother and so, by default, your guide and mentor...So I hope you will pardon this curious distillation of traditional African teaching, social commentary and maternal concern. (5)

never gravitates toward itself but it is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness. In this way, every experience, every thought that a character has, is internally dialogic, filled with struggle, and is open to inspiration from outside itself" (153). This is particularly true when mothers and daughters attempt to understand each other in order to construct separate identities.

The mother assumes that her daughter may disregard her guidance because she has not achieved a high social position and has not received a Western education. Nevertheless, the mother establishes her authority through her natural/biological role, as well as through her experience as an old woman, whose life has taught her many valuable lessons:

I have learned something in my awkward journey to womanhood. These lessons are few but enduring... These are the stories that made me what I am today. It is just that you are my very own, and it is an old woman's privilege to impart wisdom. It is all that I have to give you, Zenzele. (5)

This introduction can be interpreted as the mother's attempt to provide a legitimate excuse for her autobiographical writing. Guiding the daughter appears to be the main reason for the mother's self-expression. Alternatively, this opening may indicate the mother's attempt to accommodate her desire for authorship and individuality to the traditional female role in her society. The mother's rhetoric enables her to find a path between modernity and tradition, Western education and African wisdom, individuality and relational identity. Nozipo Maraire's portrayal of an African mother writing in English to teach her cultural heritage to an assimilating daughter is in itself somewhat ironic. Although the mother values the stories of her ancestors conveyed to her by word of mouth, she has to address her daughter not only in writing, but also in a foreign language. This is because writing in English may be the most effective way for the mother to influence her daughter's mind. Moreover, since the mother and daughter are physically separated, the letter attempts to bridge both geographical and emotional distance. Acknowledging Zenzele's admiration for Western culture, the mother seeks to attract her daughter's attention to her own story, thereby teaching her about African tradition.

The novel's rhetoric balances individualistic and relational discourses, manipulating the ambiguities that become the essence of the mother's writing and her identity. In spite of the clearly individualistic elements implied by the mere idea of self-representation through first-person narration, the mother's discourse is rather relational. The subtitle of the novel itself, *A Letter for My Daughter*, testifies to the novel's dialogic aims. Although *Zenzele* is the *mother's* fictional autobiography,² the title of the novel foregrounds the

2 Suzanne Keen explains that first-person narratives in which the experiencing self is also

daughter's name, mentioning the mother only indirectly as the writer of the letter.³ Moreover, writing *for*, rather than *to* Zenzele, the mother hopes that the manuscript will provide her daughter with guidance and support, rather than merely with some autobiographical facts about the mother's life. Her writing is intended to suit the daughter's changing needs as a maturing woman searching for her identity, rather than merely to narrate the mother's personal story.

Moreover, the mother's first name, the most obvious signifier of a person's individuality, is revealed rather indirectly in the novel. Her main social title – Amai Zenzele (mother of Zenzele) dominates the narrative, while her first name is revealed through additional titles such as Sisi Shiri, (older sister/cousin Shiri). Even in private conversations Zenzele's parents are described using official titles which define them through their offspring: Amai Zenzele and Baba va Zenzele. (85)⁴ The mother's first name, intertwining with or concealed by the official relational titles mingles the private and public realms of her identity thus hindering her individuation process. As the mother herself admits: "I had fulfilled my role in society's expectations and my duties as a woman... I have done this. I have put my whole life into it" (37).

The traditional titles, assimilated so deeply into the mother's sub-conscious, reflect the culture's influence on her self-construction. These titles define women's roles in society through their relationships to their children, husbands, siblings and fellow villagers. These customary roles are challenged during the Revolution, when Zimbabwean women join men in arms to fight the colonial government. Commenting on the younger generation of women

the protagonist, or the central character, are often called fictional autobiographies. These "narratives do not differ formally from actual autobiographies of real people about their own lives, except in the fictitiousness and preconception of the events narrated. In both cases a narrating self presents the earlier life-events of an experiencing self" (36).

- 3 Nozipo Maraire's novel presents itself as the mother/writer's autobiography thus making a clear distinction between the author and the fictional mother/narrator who instructs her daughter. The mother/narrator thus becomes a character on her own right. She both narrates the novel and develops as a character through this narration.
- 4 It is only during the short period in the mother's adult life, when she is not married, that she is directly referred to as Shiri by a friend. This, however, occurs in an unusual social context, when the mother attends a party arranged by her sister's revolutionist friends.

revolutionaries, Amai Zenzele suggests that these women “were as foreign to our traditional image of women as Eskimos” (165). Unlike the traditionally educated women, whose identity was shaped by their culture, the women of the revolution “fashioned their own identity” (165). However, in spite of their apparent distance from tradition, these “strong, heroic women [did manage to find] the balance between cause, culture and self” (40). This delicate balance between cultural influence and the individualistic aspirations is precisely what the mother is attempting to teach her daughter. While cherishing her traditional bonds and relational identity, the mother also admires the individualism of her daughter and other modern women.⁵

Maraire’s attempt to negotiate relational and individualistic discourses is evident in her choice of the novel’s genre as well as in the representation of Zenzele’s character. Although writing in English is hardly a part of her native culture, her choice of the epistolary genre keeps the mother’s voice as close to the oral tradition as possible. As Janet Gurkin Altman suggests, the epistolary form often incorporates oral discourse; it serves as an effective medium for the mother’s attempt to relate to her daughter’s Western, individualistic perspective, while maintaining the relationality of the oral tradition.

According to Gurkin Altman, “for the letter writer to write to someone is to speak to him” (137). This illusion is enhanced by recording the addressee’s voice, usually through “quotation and paraphrase” (137). Conveying the mother’s interaction with Zenzele through direct speech, Maraire provides not only the mother/narrator, but the daughter as well, with an independent voice. Monica Bungaro suggests that although “many of Zenzele’s external and internal traits are revealed through descriptions and/or comments by her mother/narrator, . . . Zenzele has a voice of her own” (77). The daughter’s words are often relayed in direct discourse followed by the mother’s comments on the daughter’s inquiry: “‘Mother, what do you think about global warming?’ My mind flashes a picture of a beach in Jamaica, then goes blank. I often feel

5 “You have a special gift. It is the gift of the third eye. You can see what others cannot, and this is a power that you must cherish and use wisely. You have the ability to create the world that you wish to live in. Nothing is fixed for you. Knots can be untied, chains can be broken, walls can be smashed and doors can be pushed open” (168). Zenzele’s independent and rebellious character is perceived here as an advantage that enables her to challenge social conventions and improve her position as an African woman.

compelled to prepare for a conversation with you. But I could never keep up” (4). Although the mother could have manipulated the daughter’s words, representing her discourse indirectly (by restating the daughter’s words, for example), she chooses to relate her words as accurately as possible. This creates a sense of immediacy and reproduces direct communication between the mother and daughter.⁶ It also records the mother’s sense of her daughter’s distance and difference.

Quoting not only the dialogues with her daughter, but also Zenzele’s long monologues or, as the mother puts it, her “feminist litanies,” the mother learns to understand the daughter’s supposedly alien values and point of view, thus representing her consciousness. In “A Telling Side of Narration,” Janice Berkowitz Gross suggests that the use of direct dialogue in texts by women may suggest the “author’s desire to ‘speak’ for and as others, and, on the other hand, to speak for self through others and as other” (404). In reproducing her daughter’s arguments, Amai Zenzele speaks *as if* she were her daughter.⁷ Writing about her daughter’s rebellious individuality the mother incorporates it into her own identity, thus assimilating the daughter’s otherness. This causes Amai Zenzele to rethink the values upon which she has built her own sense of self:

I had no answers to your questions, which dropped like little bombs to disturb my orderly, swept, waxed and shiny world. Ever since you had burst into womanhood with your fervent egalitarianism and sweet idealism, the complacent foundation of my morning reveries had been shattered. (36)

6 Since, according to Altman, epistolary language is produced as a result of the addressee’s absence, it “is preoccupied with immediacy, with presence” (135). Restoring the daughter’s presence through the letter’s direct discourse, the mother overcomes not only Zenzele’s physical absence, but also the otherness and even a certain hostility created by the daughter’s radical opinions. The mother/daughter conversations about politics and gender are often difficult for the mother; she describes them in such terms as a continuous struggle or a battle with multiple rounds in which the daughter usually wins. Although the mother eventually acknowledges her daughter’s individualistic identity, she balances Zenzele’s individualistic discourse through the extensive use of a relational and dialogical narration.

7 Marianne Hirsch suggests that the plots of mothers and daughters can become speakable when the mothers are “able to speak for themselves, perhaps with two voices” – that of a mother and of a daughter (197).

Moreover, direct speech allows for a dialogic relationship between the self and other. As Berkowitz Gross points out, direct speech enables “individual acts of enunciation, all the while nourishing a dynamics of intersubjectivity among multiple voices” (405). The narrative mode of *Zenzele* attempts such intersubjectivity: “[t]he most distinctive aspect of epistolary language is the extent to which it is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship between them...[since] the *I* of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his ‘address,’ is always relative to that of his addressee” (Altman 118-119). The letter thus provides the mother with a natural medium for the establishment of a relational bond with her daughter. It aims at enabling the mother to achieve the seemingly impossible task of establishing a dialogic communication with her absent daughter. Through this imaginative, epistolary dialogue the mother acknowledges her daughter’s separateness and independence, which enables her to construct her own subjectivity through writing.

Amai Zenzele’s identity is a collage of her own, and other people’s life-stories related in the context of her narrative. Shaped by her community and culture, her sense of self is constructed through the stories of her relatives and friends, forming what Paul Eakin refers to as “relational autobiography,” or in the case of this novel -- a *fictional* relational autobiography. In *How our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin argues that all selfhood is relational “despite differences that fall out along gender lines” (50). Following Jerome Bruner, Eakin places “special emphasis on the family” role in the process of social self-construction. “The child’s early achievement of narrative competence in the preschool years ushers in a decisive phase of identity formation that lasts as long as the child remains within the family circle...From this perspective we can think of the child’s sense of self as emerging within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts” (117).

In this novel, the mother actually constructs her own identity through negotiating her resistance to her daughter’s assimilation. Even though both the mother’s and the daughter’s selves are the products of their families; the mother’s identity was formed by African rural life whereas Zenzele’s sense of self is constructed in a largely Western household with occasional, (and on Zenzele’s part undesirable) experiences of the traditional life in the village. The mother communicates a double message to her daughter: she adopts a Western life-style in the city, while remaining loyal to the values and traditions of her ancestors in the village.

Acknowledging that most young people of Zenzele's age forsake their heritage, the mother is determined to teach her daughter about the traditional way of life. This educational process, however, succeeds only to a certain extent: although Zenzele observes the customs of the village, she does not accept them as her own. Rather, she perceives the life of her ancestors through a foreign, Western perspective. The daughter's criticism of traditional African values derives from what Uri Margolin refers to as "dissonant categories and modes of reasoning" (quoted in Palmer's *Fictional Minds* 165), which lead to a cultural clash that can generate identity construction. Zenzele refuses to marry an African man thus expressing her resistance to the custom of *Lobola*, or bride price: "I will never be bought! Mama, how could you possibly accept some cattle and cash in exchange for my freedom?" The mother, however, perceives the custom in a completely different light:

It's not a purchase, Zenzele. It is an expression of appreciation of how well we have brought you up" . . . You must not take the Western anthropologists' view of our culture. They perceive our customs through their lenses. There are terms and customs that cannot be translated adequately into their language and so become distorted. *Lobola* is called a "bride price," kings are "chiefs," our medicine is called "witchcraft," and our religion is labeled "animist." They do not capture the spirit of our culture. (32)

Neither this, nor any of her other eloquent arguments in favor of the traditional marriage ceremony convince Zenzele, and the mother finally admits that she is "running out of energy and arguments," and that she has no answers to her daughter's questions. (33)

Having exhausted her verbal skills of persuasion, the mother turns to writing. The rhetorical techniques she employs in her letter allow her to comment on former conversations with Zenzele in order to explore the implicit emotions expressed through body language, gestures and tones of voice. Employing her ability to interpret her daughter's mind or create a theory of her mind⁸, the

8 In "Evolution of a Theory of Mind," Simon Baron Cohen explains there are a set of synonyms for the ability "to attribute a full range of mental states (both goal states and epistemic states) to ourselves and to others, and to use such attributions to make sense of and predict behavior" (3). Such terms as mind-reading, mentalizing, folk-psychology and intentional stance are all interchangeable with the phrase Theory of Mind.

mother reinterprets her relationship with Zenzele through narrative. Focusing on her daughter's and her own paralinguistic signals, Amai Zenzele reveals the unspoken nuances of their relationship. While their verbal conversations often end in exasperation and sadness for both, their *unspoken* communication overflows with compassion, love and mutuality. By revealing that which cannot be spoken, the mother's writing conveys the underlying connection and affection between the mother and daughter.

We see this in their discussion of *lobola*. When Zenzele declares: "I'm not going to marry an African. I shall marry in America – some dreadfully clever blond-haired creature who has never even heard of Africa," the mother looks up in alarm. Yet seeing her daughter's face, she realizes Zenzele is joking: "Your lips were quivering with audacity, then tensed in a vain attempt to suppress your laughter." While the daughter's words not only challenge but also hurt the mother by disregarding her system of values, the daughter's facial expression testifies to the daughter's playfulness. Observing the daughter's body language, the mother realizes that she has no intention to hurt her.⁹ The daughter, too, is successful at interpreting her mother's body language correctly. When she realizes that she went too far in her resistance to her mother's values, she attempts to pacify her: "my exasperation must have been evident, for you sat still for several minutes settling your mirth, rallying your intelligence." Even though Zenzele understands her mother's point of view, she refuses to accept it:

I hear your point, Mama. You have often explained that *lobola* is the appreciation of the gifts that a woman brings to her marriage. I find it encouraging that our culture actually places a great value on an educated, smart woman who has a career... But it is just difficult for me to appreciate sometimes. I suppose in the old days when everyone understood it all, it worked. But nowadays, when people start sending cheques in the mail or using credit cards for *lobola*, as if they are paying for a pack of beer or a phone bill, then I find it indecent... You stood up, shaking your head sorrowfully. (33-34)

9 Another example of the mother's successful mind reading occurs when she attempts to explain to her daughter the importance of rural life for the construction of African identity. The mother notices her daughter's changing facial expressions: "In the rural areas the mangoes are bigger [a smile], the *sadza* is better [a rolling of the eyes], the tea has more flavor [a nod] and *matumbu* tastes real [a grimace]" (27).

Although Zenzele resists her mother's opinions, her apologetic tone and body language testify how sad she is to disappoint and upset her mother. Since it is in fact the mother, rather than the daughter herself, who describes Zenzele's feelings in the letter, the reader may assume that the daughter's attempt to get her feelings across has succeeded.

When Amai Zenzele puts her conversations with her daughter on paper, she is impelled to reflect on their oral interactions and reconsider her behavior. Facing her daughter's eloquence in direct conversation, the mother had often remained a speechless auditor. Conversely, when imagining her daughter's reactions through her writing, the mother is able to assume the role of a performer, a subject, and a speaker of and for traditional wisdom. Reading her mother's life-narrative, the daughter has no choice but to accept her role as an audience and thus hear her mother's words of wisdom. The written medium provides the mother with the leisure to shape and edit her argument enriching it with the necessary autobiographical context. It also enables her to reconsider her own subjectivity and reconstruct her voice in such a way that it becomes more appealing to her individualistic daughter.

The letter is the mother's last message to Zenzele - her only legacy. In the final part of the letter, the mother tells her daughter that she is about to die of cancer and that since it is a custom to "pass on gifts to one another at the time of death," she leaves her daughter these words of wisdom and her story. The mother presents her story as a gift, an act of benevolence, rather than a didactic message of cultural norms and customs. Although the daughter's reaction to the mother's letter does not appear in the novel, Amai Zenzele's words keep reverberating as "the very manifestation of [her] immortality" (192). Unlike their spoken conversations, the mother's written message will survive her physical death, remaining to accompany or maybe even haunt the daughter's life. The mother's approaching death endows her narration with ghostly characteristics and becomes the mother's means to maintain her connection to the daughter even after her death. The mother's writing preserves her consciousness for the daughter to refer to in times of need.

Appearing in the novel mostly through her mother's perspective, Zenzele's mediated presence causes us to imagine her as a mysterious, rebellious and unpredictable figure. Nonetheless, by obscuring the daughter's reaction to the mother's story, Maraire bridges the gap between Zenzele and the readers.

Since the assumptions we make about Zenzele's reaction to the mother's letter are based on our own reactions to the mother's text, the daughter's character is eventually transformed into someone we can identify with. By representing Zenzele's feelings and point of view through writing, the mother overcomes the accumulated alienation she feels towards her daughter. Moreover, following the transformation of the mother's feelings, the readers, too, sympathize with Zenzele, relinquishing their initial perception of her as the mysterious "other."

The mother in *Zenzele* engages in the task of self-commemoration through writing in order to distribute her consciousness and experience to her daughter, in the hope that she will transmit it to the following generations. Since the daughter needs her mother's story in order to establish her relational self, she is impelled to remember her mother through the stories she will later convey to her own children. The mother's narrative establishes a shared memory of practical knowledge essential for her daughter's survival.¹⁰ If "narrative is assumed to be a group construction [that] turns individual memories into shared conceptual systems," (Nelson, 127) mother/daughter written and spoken narratives can serve universally as the basis for trans-generational cultural preservation. The mother's story thus becomes a cultural artifact distributed across the readers' minds thus incorporating the mother's individual experiences into our cultural memory.

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¹⁰ See Katherine Nelson, "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative," 126.

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