

**Collaborative Auto/biography:
Notes on an Interview with Margaret McCord on
*The Calling of Katie Makanya:
A Memoir of South Africa***

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Introduction

The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa belongs to that curious genre of collaborative autobiography in which a writing author (Margaret McCord) publishes a written account of an oral narrator's (Katie Makanya's) life story. What distinguishes *The Calling of Katie Makanya* from the host of predominantly anthropological and historical texts¹ in this genre is its novelistic style, which places it in the tradition of another South African collaborative auto/biography, namely Elsa Joubert's *Poppie* (1980) and John Miles' *Deafening Silence* (1997). The interview below probes issues specific to this kind of collaborative "written orature," such as the relations of production, authorship, and the transition from the private oral narrative to the written publication.² As some of the questions and answers reveal, one of the aims of the interview was to establish to what extent the oral narrator and writing author were aware of the degree to which they had moved away from the *apparently* monological notion of truth production propounded by Descartes in his autobiographical *Discourse and Meditations* and carried on in Rousseau's *Confessions*, and to what extent they promote

¹ Cf. Charles van Onselen (1997).

² The interview was conducted in Boston in August 1998 as part of the forthcoming collection *Telling Lives: Interviews on Southern African Autobiography* (Coullie et al. forthcoming).

an intersubjectivist understanding of autobiography and relational notions of the self.³

Context

The Calling of Katie Makanya won the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Prize for nonfiction.⁴ On the dust cover (which shows a photo of Katie with the African Native Choir as they appeared in traditional African dress in London in 1892) and on the title page, the author of the publication is given as Margaret McCord (the full maiden name of Peg Nixon, who also holds the copyright). The book narrates the life of Katie Makanya née Manye. According to her mother's entry in the family Bible, Katie was born in the Cape Province at Fort Beaufort on 28 July, 1873, to a Basotho father and a Fingo mother.⁵ Her father had converted to Christianity and started learning to read and write upon meeting her mother, who had grown up literate and Christian. Katie's closest relationship during her youth was with her older sister Charlotte, who later graduated from Wilberforce and became founding president of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League. After difficult teenage years in which Katie funded her schooling in Port Elizabeth with work as a live-in maidservant and nurse in white homes, she and Charlotte traveled with the South African Native choir in Britain. From 1892, for just over two years, they were hosted by and moved freely among the aristocracy, philanthropists, and women's liberationists, giving performances to Queen Victoria, among others. Turning down an offer to be trained as a solo artist and a career in Europe, Katie returned to South Africa determined to marry. To the initial consternation of her mother, she married a Zulu, Ndeya Makanya, in Johannesburg in 1895, where their first son, Samuel, was born. Their lives endangered by the Anglo-Boer war, they fled

³ See Habermas 1992:149-204. Collaborative auto/biography in fact makes patent a point concealed somewhat by classic autobiography, namely the extent to which "human life is dialogical" (Taylor 1994:32).

⁴ The Alan Paton Prize is awarded to publications that illuminate small, unfashionable truths, display elegant writing, and demonstrate intellectual and moral integrity.

⁵ The Fingo are a mixture of Zulu, Xhosa, and Pondo refugees who wandered to the Eastern Cape in the wake of Shaka's construction of empire (*DSAÉ*). The Eastern Cape was one of the most heavily missioned areas in South Africa, with a comparatively high literacy rate among Africans in the 19th century.

to her husband's homeplace in Amanzimtoti, about twenty kilometers south of the city of Durban on the South African east coast.

From 1903 until her retirement in 1939, Katie worked as an assistant to Dr. James McCord,⁶ a United States mission doctor and the father of the writer Margaret McCord. Her working life was accompanied by several moves from Adams near Amanzimtoti, the site of the first mission surgery, to rented rooms and hostel accommodation in various parts of Durban city after a surgery was opened in town and the McCord Zulu Hospital was built. During this period she brought up her own and several other children under trying conditions. A reading of the transcripts of the interviews (more so than the publication) illustrates that her staunch Christian beliefs were instrumental in shaping her commitments to missionary medical practice, her latent Eurocentrism in certain matters, her role in the founding of the temperance movement, and her rejection of radical politics of the 1930s. At the age of eighty-one, wanting to have her autobiography published but having completed only eight years at school, Katie enjoined Margaret McCord to write her life narrative. Thus came about the tape recordings on which the publication is based. Katie died nine years later in 1963, thirty-two years before the 1995 publication of the book.

The author Margaret McCord was born in South Africa of an English-speaking South African mother and the Dr. James McCord mentioned above. Katie knew her from her birth in 1913. This early acquaintance, and the intimacy established by Katie's having given Margaret her Zulu name, Ntombikanina (M. McCord 1995:209), prepared the ground for both their early and later narrating-listening relationship. As a teenager, Margaret's interest in storytelling and Zulu history were kindled by Katie, who told her stories about her own life and from Zulu history, both of which subjects were purged from official white society and school history. After completing school, Margaret studied in the United States (where she now lives) and married a scholar of African studies. Intermittent work on several drafts resulted in publication when she was herself eighty-two—about the same age Katie had been at the time of the oral recordings. The preponderance of “third world” women as oral narrators and “first world” women as writing authors in the genre of collaborative auto/biography points to class, racial, and gendered aspects of these texts that have been dealt with extensively in the context of subaltern studies. This reality shines through not only in Katie's dependence on McCord's writerly skills but also in the latter's remark that the chores of being a wife and a mother made it

⁶ *The Calling of Katie Makanya* opens with an oblique reference to James McCord's ghost-written autobiography published in 1946 (J. McCord 1946).

difficult for her to focus her energies on the task of turning the transcripts of the oral recordings into a literary text.

According to McCord, it was essential to their project that at the time of recording Katie's oral narrative, she herself was no longer just the listening teenager and Katie the Spivakian native informer of her youth. Because Katie had ceased to be the "voice of authority" she had been when Margaret was a teenager, they "were able to argue" over each other's interpretation of events (e.g., M. McCord 1995:226-27). Yet like many contemporary writing authors, McCord responds to the widespread skepticism towards collaborative auto/biography produced by ostensibly different people⁷ with qualms about her ability to understand and to tell Katie's life. Her reticence in responding to Katie's request to write her life story because of the differences between them is thematized in the opening lines of the book, set at the time of the 1954 recordings (M. McCord 1995:3):

"You are very much educated so you know about these things. That's why you must write my story."

"But Auntie, I can't do that," I gasp.

"Why not?"

"Because—" (I search for the right words) "—we live in different worlds." She shakes her head impatiently. "Now you talk foolish. God only created one world."

"I mean we lead such different lives."

"What does that matter? When you were little you slept in my bed, ate my food, played with my children. [. . .] You were like a daughter to me."

Significantly, it is Katie Makanya who here denies both the existence and the importance of these differences. In contrast to her insistence in the opening of the book on the obstacles posed by difference, Margaret McCord downplays this aspect in the interview. This paradoxical double emphasis found in many collaborative auto/biographies illustrates a muddled conception of the significance (including the benefits) of both similarity and difference for the writing author's ability to understand the oral narrator's life and for them to jointly produce a true account of it. The writing authors' insistence on the similarity between themselves and oral narrators may well be due to objections raised by critics that understanding across difference is impossible. However, what critics often forget is that, if similarity were a

⁷ Even a sympathetic critic like Ngwenya raises a question about "the capacity of [a] white American woman to enter the consciousness of a South African black woman and authentically articulate her thoughts and feelings" (Ngwenya 1995:6-7). For a more recent discussion, see Ngwenya 2000.

precondition for the writing author to understand the oral narrator, it would be just as much a precondition for the reader (including the critic), with the consequence that only readers identical to the oral narrator could understand her. This limitation would contradict the whole idea of making one's life story known to a wider reading public.

Furthermore, a look at the production process of novelized collaborative auto/biography illustrates to what extent the question "Is that really what she said?" and Malcolm X's comment to Alex Haley—"A writer is what I want, not an interpreter"—are misplaced (Malcolm X 1968:78). The interview specifically goes into the parts played by the editor, the pre-publication reader, and the translators, not to mention the influence of the assumed expectations of a reading public on the way in which the writing author transforms the private oral narrative for written publication. Such a situation makes it senseless to want to tease out a purified oral narrator's voice from the others, an initiative that amounts to a hangover from the misguided Cartesian and Rousseauian monological ideal of spinning the truth about oneself out of oneself. Thus the more appropriate question to ask is: "Would the oral narrator (have) accept(ed) the way in which the writing author has rendered her original words?"

The written publication of Katie's oral narrative cleverly deals with the issue of authorial presence in the production of the oral narrative in eight unpaginated insertions set at the time of the recording (Durban, 1954) and writing (California, 1993). In these insertions the perspective is that of the first person narrator who coincides with the writing author Margaret McCord. In the actual narrative of Katie's life, however, the perspective shifts to that of an omniscient third person narrator of biography rather than an autobiographical first person, as it is found in the transcripts of the oral recording coinciding with Katie's own view. The narration thus differs from many other collaborative autobiographies in which the presence of the writing author is totally concealed by a first person narrative told from the viewpoint of the oral narrator,⁸ those that punctuate the first person narrative of the oral narrator with other texts,⁹ and those that retain a semblance of dialogue between the first person oral narrator and the listening (but never speaking) author.¹⁰ McCord ties this significant shift in perspective to the

⁸ For example, "My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony" (Menchú 1984:1).

⁹ See, for example, Mandela and Benjamin 1985 and Shostak and Nisa 1990.

confluence of difficulties in linguistic and cultural translation created by the mediation of an oral narrative to those unfamiliar with the oral narrator's lifeworld.

A comparison of the transcripts of the oral recording, which McCord has kindly made available to me, and the final publication sheds light on the production of the oral text as well as the transition from the oral to the literary. What seems to be the transcript of the first recording starts with Katie's birth and gives a selective autobiographical sketch up to 1903, when "I started helping the doctor"—all in less than eight hundred words without any sign of Margaret's intervention. The following transcripts are more clearly divided into paragraphs and thematically less continuous, indicating ways in which Katie strayed from one story to the next as well as possible divisions due to Margaret's questions or prompts. With the exception of the few bracketed remarks "(What is the difference between Umkulunkulu and God asks Peg)" (ms. 27), McCord's prompts are not transcribed. A few of these can be roughly reconstructed from Katie's replies, as in "No when I married Ndeyo I was still a Basuto. How could I be a Zulu. They were not my people" (ms. 38). This makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the content, style, and structure of Katie's narrative were influenced by Margaret's presence already at the level of the oral recordings. References in the transcript to "heathens" and "boys" (to refer to adult male African house servants) seem to indicate that the missionary discourse is Katie's rather than McCord's.¹¹ In fact, the publication has been sanitized of a couple of embarrassing comments that call into question Katie's apparently evenhanded lack of prejudice.

In contrast to other collaborative autobiographies (e.g. Joubert's *Poppie*, 1980) that attempt to retain the oral nature of the original recordings in a sort of written orature, McCord has opted for a literary style, especially in the descriptive parts, with finely crafted writerly sentences drawing on Katie's oral narrative. In some cases the direct speech in the transcription is rendered virtually verbatim. (For example Katie's address on the issuing of passes to women, which shows similarities to Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" [ms.120, M. McCord 1995:229]).¹² In others, like the quotation

¹⁰ For example, "Baba Mhlahlela, you wish to hear my life's story so that you may reduce it to writing. Yes, indeed, there is much I can tell you, as to how I grew up and as to how I served my king, Cetshwayo. . ." (Dlamini 1986:11).

¹¹ This in answer to a question by Anne Mager, see footnote 13 below.

¹² For Katie's version of John Wilkins' 1694 anecdote in Mercury, see McCord 1995:11 and ms. 97-98. These similarities of course raise interesting questions regarding

below, McCord rendered the gist in the form of a stylized conversation typical of the written, novelized form.

As a comparison of the published version and the transcript shows, McCord's novelized written text does not follow some of the conventions of oral historians (M. McCord 1995:8):¹³

"Before they left," Ma continued, "the warriors warned their women to flee, and leave the children behind so that their crying would not betray their whereabouts. Some did abandon their children. But your ancestor refused. She tied her baby on her back and took her little boy by the hand, and all three hid in the bushes."

"You were that little boy?" Katie asked Grandfather.

"Yes," he said. "I remember that very well. Those Zulus passed so close to our hiding place I could see the dirt under their toenails. But they did not see us. They were laughing too loud at a girl who was trying to hide in the river. [. . .]"

"So you escaped?" Charlotte said.

"Almost. We crept out of the bushes, but too late we saw one last Zulu straggling after his brothers. As he passed us his knobkierrie¹⁴ swung down, crushing the baby's skull, and swung down again on my mother's head. He ran on supposing her dead, and why she did not die I cannot say."

"What happened then?"

"That girl came out of the river and pulled my mother to her feet and helped her bury her poor dead baby."

And the transcript (n.p.):

I can still remember my great grandmother. She was very old. But she still told us stories about how she hated the Zulus. She followed about a

the connections between the absorption of literary culture into oral culture and cross-Atlantic transferences.

¹³ There "are none of the conventions of oral historians to comfort the reader. There are no footnotes, and it is not clear whether quote marks designate Makanya's words or McCord's reconstruction. Are the love letters taken from the original, recounted from memory by Makanya, or reconstructed by McCord? Where does the title of the book come from? Did Makanya adopt the language of the missionaries in describing herself thus or was this McCord's understanding? Perhaps it does not matter. Nevertheless, the uneasiness niggles, particularly since the efforts of oral historians to adopt self-reflexive approaches to their work have taught us to question ourselves more rigorously as chroniclers of the lives of others" (Mager 1996:299-301).

¹⁴ An Afrikaans term for a traditional Zulu fighting stick with a round head.

mile behind the impi¹⁵ and her husband told her to leave the child because she had my grandfather but also a very small baby on her back and her husband told her the other women grumbled because they had left their children but she would not leave hers and so she could not go with the impi for fear that baby would cry and tell the Zulus where they were. So she followed a way behind. And then the Zulus did come and one hit her on the head, she had a big hole there, and then hit the baby with a knobkierrie. And there was another woman there who jumped in the river, and the baby died, and then they went on. And she told me she said, I have done one great sin. I let that man kill my baby on my back and I should have made him kill me first but of course she could not help it but she said her sin was that baby buried in the bushes there. And as for those other children left behind, they were all eaten up by the Zulus.

Mager's objections may have been a point of concern had McCord been writing an academic text with primarily oral historians in mind. While being of use to (oral) historians, *The Calling of Katie Makanya's* aims and readership are broader, as its novelization implies.

Since David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (1998) and Arturo Arias' *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001a and 2001b), the problematics of texts like *The Calling of Katie Makanya* have once again been brought to public attention. Two of the issues at stake are the nature of the truth of the claims raised in such publications and the notion of the subject, which touches on issues like authorship and appropriation. The former issue has been central to the Rigoberta Menchú debate and the latter to criticisms of Joubert's *Poppie* (McClintock 1991). I have tried, both here and elsewhere,¹⁶ to frame these issues in a different light. I suggest that most of these criticisms directed at collaborative auto/biography are still indebted to a monological philosophy of consciousness and would need to be reformulated if they are to hit the mark. They disregard the extent to which, as Habermas argues, truth and identity are intersubjectively generated in speech and acts of reciprocal recognition, a fact borne out by the production and reading of *The Calling of Katie Makanya*.

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¹⁵ A Zulu term for an army or regiment.

¹⁶ In a paper given at the international auto/biography conference at Peking University in 1998.

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Interview with Margaret McCord

SM: Some of the things that I would like us to speak about are the shift from orature to literature, and the relationships between writing authors and speaking narrators. So, can we start off with the question how it happened

that Katie asked you specifically to write the book? What kind of relationship did you have that led to that point?

MM: Well, to begin with Katie worked for my father, as you know. From ever since I can remember she was there in the dispensary and whenever I was down in the dispensary she would tell me stories about her life. When I was in high school, through her stories I became very interested in Zulu history. In schools at that time in South Africa history stopped at the end of the Boer War. Well no, it stopped in 1910 when Union was established. We didn't have any history lessons on African history after 1910 and the Zulu history was all told from the white point of view. But I'd get these stories from Katie. For instance, one of my favorite stories that she told me was about the last great Zulu war, the Cetshwayo War, and her father's reaction to that. And the reaction of some of the Africans at church, feeling that the English were so unfair because they didn't regard war as a sport, they used all these terrible guns and so on. And then Katie's sister coming up with the idea that it was magic, because Napoleon's son was killed and so Napoleon had really created this magic medicine that destroyed the A[fricans]. . . . I mean all this I found so interesting. We never learnt any of this in terms of school. So when I was in high school I would really pester Katie for stories about African history, and I think she remembered that. And then I was at the dispensary when she got the telegram about her one son's mental illness, and I cried I. . . . It just seemed terrible. I was then fifteen, sixteen. And I think Katie really felt that I was very close to her. Well, in a way I was, but I was close to her in the sense of an ancient family friend. I didn't think of her at that time as a friend—she was a very old lady.

SM: How old was she then?

MM: When I went back in '54 she was eighty-one, so she was in her sixties then. Then when I came to America she wrote to me and I wrote back. She wanted me to visit her brother in Chicago, which I did. And I would send her Christmas . . . the way you do for an elderly person that's been a friend of the family. But then when I went back in '54 she was the first person who visited me after we were established in the flat. I had a nine-year-old son at that point, so she started telling my son stories and it brought back all the stories that she had told me. She was a fascinating person so I got interested. Her sister Charlotte had written an autobiography that was never published. I don't know where it is now. But Katie wanted to write her story, but she had never . . . well, she had finished standard six but she had never gone beyond that. I think that it was because I had always pestered

her for stories and I'd been to college so I ought to be able to write, was the attitude that she had. So that's how it came about. And in terms of the relationship, I was then myself forty.

SM: And she was eighty-one then?

MM: But I was an adult. I was no longer a teenager and I really began to appreciate the kind of person that she was. My mother was visiting us at the time and those two old ladies were a riot together! I really felt much closer to her then as a person than I had as a teenager when she was a source of information. One of the other aspects of that relationship was that when I was a teenager she was a voice of authority. When I was forty I was able to argue with her and there was a difference there. I was no longer the child to be brought up. I think that she respected me in a different way than she did when I was a teenager.

SM: Many questions arise from what you have said. You mention your son being present when she started telling these stories in '54. How important do you think it was that she told your son these stories as well as you? What was that constellation exactly? Was he always present? Was he only sometimes there?

MM: No, he was at school most of the day. He'd get home between three and four and when he came in the door she turned off the recorder. That was her time with Johnny. One of the things that's rather interesting, and I think it indicates how overwhelming a personality she was, was that Johnny had a friend at school—a little boy called Norman, whose father was an English-speaking South African policeman in Durban—which should give you some clue to his political orientation. Norman often came home with Johnny to play and those two boys would sit right down at Katie's feet and listen to her stories. Now I took Katie back to Amanzimtoti for the weekend. We'd drive back Friday afternoon and I'd pick her up Sunday afternoon. Once when I was about to take her back I had told Norman that he couldn't come home with Johnny on Friday because we were driving Katie back to Amanzimtoti. Well, he wanted to go too, and I said, "Well, you have to ask your mother." Incidentally I always called Katie *Tante* Katie.¹⁷ So his mother called me up that night and she said "Oh, it's so kind of you to ask Norman to go with you when you take your aunt back to her home." And this woman had no idea that Katie was a black woman. And I was faced

¹⁷ The Afrikaans term for "aunt" (*DSAE*).

with the problem, do I tell her that Katie is not my aunt, that she is an African woman, or do I just leave it. Well I just left it. And I just don't think the fact that she was black made enough impression on Norman for him to mention to his parents that she was an African woman and not an English woman. I found that rather interesting. And of course she spoke with a perfect English accent. She made grammatical mistakes. But, with her three years in England (and she had moved easily among the aristocracy) she spoke without a trace of an African accent—which of course to a child of nine would perhaps be more important.

SM: Can I ask you some questions about the very nuts and bolts around the recordings? You mentioned before that it was a big bulky thing on which you did the recordings.

MM: Yes. We went to South Africa at the end of 1953 and those personal recorders were very new at that time. My husband had a research grant. We went out to Durban on a research grant. He got himself a recording machine and we were very proud of this new gadget. He got several tapes and of course he was the one who had the grant. I went along as his wife. We were a couple of young academics, didn't have any money; I couldn't go out and buy tapes. I did buy three. But I couldn't afford to buy any more. So I used them over and over and over again. And I transcribed them in the evening. So what I have are my transcribed notes. I don't have the recordings. In hindsight I think what a pity that I didn't have the money and didn't think ahead to preserve her voice on the tapes.

SM: How long were the sessions? Did you have regular meetings? Did you say you were going to do this all in one month for example? Three hours every morning, etc.?

MM: When we talked about my writing a book about her, which she wanted me to do, I warned her it would take a long time, it would be very hard work. I brought her into town and put her up at the Salvation Army hostel out towards the Sydenham area. I would go out and pick her up at the hostel at eight o'clock in the morning, take her back to the flat, and we would have a cup of coffee and just. . . . I'd try and get her organized to the kind of material that we would talk about. It didn't work ever. And we would start. We'd have coffee. We'd have a bun or so on, and then we would start. I'd hitch up the recording machine and we would work until Johnny came home.

SM: Which was early afternoon, then?

MM: Yeah.

SM: And you did this regularly from Monday to Friday?

MM: From Monday to Friday. We would have a break between eleven thirty and twelve thirty for lunch. I mean she needed a rest at that point. I would try to get her to lie down, take a nap, but she was not willing to do that. That went on for six weeks. By that time, the last two or three days, I think she was talked out. She didn't have her thoughts organized. It was all spontaneous, and she'd be in the middle of telling me one story and something reminded her of another story, which reminded her of another story. So it was a very confused story. As I transcribed the notes at night I would have to sort of raise questions the next morning as to what happens in the middle of this story to get the end of these various stories that she had started telling me bits and pieces of. Then of course the first major job that I had to do was to piece together all these reams and reams of material in a chronological way, because the only way I could really tell her story was to do it chronologically.

SM: You mentioned that after transcribing you would have questions. To what extent were you asking questions? How many questions did you have to ask? When did you have to ask them? The whole thing around questions and answers interests me.

MM: Well, in this little period between eight and nine I would say, "Look Katie, you started to tell me about when you and Dad went off to visit chief so-and-so and Dad had trouble with the motorcycle, but you didn't tell me what happened after that." Then she would start talking and I would say, "Hey, wait a minute, we have to turn on the recorder! But there's something else I want to know." This was the way it went. I would raise two or three questions. Once the recorder was on I would remind her of the first question and she would talk about that. Sometimes she would complete the story and sometimes she would go off on still another tangent and I'd have to pull her back. The first couple of hours was really a matter of trying to get her to finish things that she had told me the day before, and then after lunch I just didn't interrupt her, I just let her talk.

SM: So the first part would be following up, tying up loose ends. Then you would have a second part in which she would speak freely which you would tie up again the next morning.

MM: Right. That was roughly what happened. But sometimes in the first part I would give up because she would get onto some incident in her life that was very important and then she would just keep talking. One of the other problems that I had . . . (I could make myself understood in Zulu. And I can understand a good deal, probably half to three-quarters of what somebody is saying if they're talking quickly. But I'm not fluent) . . . when she was telling me things that had a lot of emotional significance to her she would unconsciously break into Zulu. Then I would have to have somebody come and transcribe them. There were times when I really felt that just a Zulu phrase would have so much more dramatic impact. But because I was writing for an English audience I would have to tr[anslate]. . . . For instance when she talked about the death of her friend Mbambo she'd told me about his going back to his homeplace, and then she looked at me and she just said "Aikona Mbambo."¹⁸ There was so much emotion behind that, there was no way I could translate it. I actually did make an effort and said "I do not see Mbambo," but that doesn't carry the emotional impact of the Zulu word, which is all frustrating for me as a writer.

SM: I'm sure these were thoughts that came up with you regularly, this shift between languages and cultures and to what extent you had to make some things fit into a tradition which they didn't necessarily come from. Say the whole notion of an autobiography. To what extent were you framing a life story into a certain tradition, namely the tradition of the autobiography which might not have been a tradition in which the story was originally thought, or in which Katie originally thought? So it's that shift between different languages, different cultures, because you're writing in English you have to transfer certain things. And it's more than just words.

MM: Well, I knew enough Zulu so that there were times when I actually used the Zulu idiom. For instance, the phrase "The mountain's eating up the sun" is a Zulu phrase. It's a literal translation of a Zulu phrase. I think it's a telling phrase for the sunset. And there were a few other idioms of that sort for which I used a literal translation. Mostly when she used an African language she would use Zulu, but occasionally she would forget and use Sotho phrases. This was back in '54. It was before the [South] African

¹⁸ *Aikona* is Zulu for "no."

government had prohibited nurses coming down from what was then Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia, Malawi, and other parts of Africa to train at McCord's. So we still had a number of different tribes represented by the nurses and we did have Sothos, we did have Xhosas, and of course Zulus. The nurses, being high school graduates, wanted to be very exact and they also wanted to show off their knowledge of English. So they would come over and dictate their translation of what she said, and it would come out in rather flat high school English. Then my problem was to rephrase it so that it fit into Katie's way of speaking. Sometimes I succeeded and sometimes I didn't, but at least I made the effort to keep the poetic quality of the Zulu language in the story and that was a conscious effort. I hope it didn't make it sound too affected but

SM: I think what is unfortunate is that many readers won't pick it up, because they don't know the Zulu, that they won't get the richness of it because it doesn't ring the Zulu bell in the background for them.

MM: I did have one very interesting experience two months ago. I met a young man, Veit Erlmann, in the late eighties who was a young music professor at NUC¹⁹ and he was very helpful because he was working on a book in which he was talking about the African choir. He had done a lot of research in London. He was very helpful to me in terms of getting me the actual quotes from some of the English newspapers. He called me a few months ago from Austin, Texas. He'd read the book, congratulated me on it, and we chatted for a bit because I had given him a lot of my notes about the choir's trip in England. Then he said that the one thing that puzzled him was that I used the term *ufufunyane*,²⁰ and that was a term which he understood had not come into the Zulu language until the 1920s and I used it for the 1890s. I was bothered by this. I have three dictionaries. One that was the first English-Zulu dictionary published in South Africa by one of the missionaries. Well, there were two by missionaries, one in 1860 and one about 1880 and another one in 1954. The one in 1860 did have a word *ufufu* meaning basically the same thing. So actually *ufufu* was being used in 1860, perhaps without the suffix. Katie would use a term when talking to me about the 1920s and that was a fairly new term. That sort of bothered me. That's the one error in the book that has been pointed out to me.

¹⁹ Natal University College (now the University of Natal, Durban)

²⁰ "An emotional disorder, characterized by hysteria and hallucinations and often believed to be caused by witchcraft" (*DSAE* 1996:s.v.).

SM: Can I ask to what extent you found that the recorder was impacting on the narrating and listening relationship?

MM: The first couple of days it was difficult and then Katie got very used to it. She'd go in, she'd sit down, she'd touch the button, she'd pick up the microphone, and then when she'd finished she'd put the microphone in her lap and wait for me to ask a question or to prompt her and she picked it up and. . . . So it took her really a very short time to get used to it. This is partly, I think, because she was very anxious to have her story told. After we had finished (I think we finished it in late September and we left South Africa at the end of November to come back to UCLA), I went out [to Adams] to say goodbye. It was six weeks or two months and she wanted to know if my book was written yet. I hadn't even finished going through the notes, but she was impatient. I think she'd recognized the symptoms (she died of consumption of the heart) and knew she didn't have long to live, and she wanted so much to see it before she died.

SM: Did you communicate after you had left South Africa and before she died?

MM: I had two letters from her. I wrote her probably every week, but her hands were very crippled. Then, after she died I got a long letter from her son Samuel telling me, you know, everybody who had come to the funeral, and then she was taken out to Adams and buried out in Adams in the cemetery there. It's interesting . . . her grandson Desmond . . . three of her grandchildren live out at Amanzimtoti. . . . Desmond, I think, was her favorite grandchild. He was fifteen in 1954 when my son was nine. During the school holidays he would sometimes come in and he would take John places. He was a big boy when John was nine. Now that both men are grown up they have become, in their adult years, very good friends. As John says, Desmond has a lot of Katie's genes. He's very much an activist. The hospital has recently set up a clinic at Amanzimtoti and Desmond was very active in getting that established. So there has been a continuing family relationship. I think the relationship between John and Desmond will continue long after I'm gone—it's independent of me.

SM: I wondered about the time difference between the recordings, the transcripts, and the actual publication. What happened in that time?

MM: Well, I was married. I had two children to raise.

SM: Could you comment on the name? Why, for example is it subtitled *A Memoir of South Africa*? Whose memoir is it? And how is it different from an (auto)biography?

MM: Russell Martin, who was my editor at David Philip, didn't like the original title. He couldn't come up with another one, and he was trying all sorts of things and none of them gelled. He sent a copy of the manuscript to Tim Couzens, a professor at Wits, who had also been a Paton prize winner for a novel that he'd written about South Africa, and asked him to read it to get his reaction for a blurb at the back of the book for the African edition. He also commented about his problems with the title and this professor (he wrote a wonderful blurb for the African edition) suggested *The Calling of Katie Makanya*. I liked it, Russell liked it, and so we decided on that. As far as it being a memoir, that was Russell's addition. I think I had it *The Calling of Katie Makanya* and that was all, but he added *A Memoir of South Africa*—I think partly from a sales point of view.

SM: How do you see the difference between autobiography and biography? How would you describe a text like this? Or doesn't this distinction really matter?

MM: I don't think it really matters. Basically I think it's a biography but it has a few autobiographical. . . . This is something that I have been interested in because so many of the reviews have commented on the mixture of autobiography and biography. It seems to me that it puts more emphasis on my history than is entitled by the contents of the book, because what I wrote about myself was really (except perhaps for the epilogue) to explain reactions of Katie or the relation with Katie.

SM: Would you say then that it makes sense to rather look at the book not as anybody's autobiography but as the trace of your relationship?

MM: Yes, yes, I do. One of the things that I find very interesting is that most of the South African reviews emphasize the historical aspects. I've had letters from most of either the history or African studies programs from NUC and Wits and Cape Town and Pretoria—interestingly enough—wanting the recordings, because they have felt that this period of the first half of the twentieth century was a rather gray area as far as history was concerned. They had used [the book] as supplementary reading in a lot of their graduate history courses, and I found that very interesting. It is true

that when I was still in South Africa I did do an enormous amount of checking of names and dates particularly and I Katie just was extraordinarily accurate in terms of her memory when it came to times. In addition to that, Russell at David Philip had read history and he did some more research. I think I mention, in the foreword that I wrote for the American edition, that Katie had told me about this Louisa and I thought she'd said Hyde. She told me that Louisa was the wife of an American. Well, Russell went back to the book of addresses of that period and the name was Height and he was an American and he owned Height's hotel in Johannesburg during those tumultuous mining days of the nineties. So I was grateful that Russell had caught that, because I had misheard.

SM: A more general question: What do you think are the preconditions under which people from different cultures, different ages, different continents, different languages can actually understand each other? I am thinking here of two things: firstly you and Katie, and secondly you and your readers.

MM: Well, the first one is easy to answer. The second one is not so easy. To begin with, I grew up in Africa, so it was not a different country because my parents were missionaries and my mother had also been born in South Africa. Both she and I were always considered descendants of a chief from Umzinduzi. There was nothing of the kind of barrier that you find between blacks and whites in this country. And I think there is less of that kind of a barrier in South Africa, anyway. I was comfortable in African families and in African kraals. I visited heathen kraals and Christian houses with my parents as far as I can remember. Then of course, when I was in high school, like most youngsters, I rebelled more at the white culture than I did at my parental culture. I mean that was the form that my teenage rebellion took. I don't know whether that answers your first question.

SM: And the second one? Say, for example, if we take Katie's family, or people from the area now reading this text?

MM: Well it's interesting: Katie's family is thrilled. As a matter of fact, Desmond bought a copy and sent it to the Minister of Health. Whether it was his gift and his accompanying letter, or his friendship with this particular minister which resulted in a large government grant to the hospital, I don't know. But Katie's grandchildren and great-nephews and -nieces are very proud of the book. I think the greatest compliment that I had was not in South Africa, but in Malawi. I have a friend who is a Malawi

woman who was made deputy chief of health. On one of my last visits to Africa we stopped in Malawi to visit her and she introduced me to her secretary. Her secretary had read the book, and her comment to me was, “Even now that I meet you I can’t believe you’re a white woman because you wrote that book”—which I felt was about as great a compliment as I could have got. I had another very interesting experience from an American black. I gave a reading at a Borders bookstore and this very, very attractive young black woman was sitting in the front row. She waited until I’d done all the signing and then she came up. When she left New York she had been given a copy of my book to read on the plane, and then she had stopped in at this bookstore to buy another copy to give to somebody and found that I was speaking there that night. And she was very complimentary. So those two I thought I found very. . . . Oh and I must tell you something else that was very exciting! *San Francisco Review*, back in April of last year, had a great review of the book. They reviewed two books: one by the Vice President of Cape Town University, Ramphele. And the reviewer pointed out something—that Ramphele met Biko at 86 Beatrice Street, and 86 Beatrice Street was the dispensary that my father built in 1902. After he retired in 1940 the mission kept on the schools. There was a wing that had been built on to it for the school administration. The mission kept it and it now has big UCC²¹ letters. They also continued the night school. Apparently this was the headquarters of the student liberation movement back in the seventies that Biko was running in Durban. I thought, how appropriate that they should have chosen that particular location, because Dad was considered such a radical when he first went out. By the time I was growing up he had been accepted and the society had accepted the necessity for medicine among the Africans, but when he first went out this was something new. Anyway, I got a tremendous thrill.

SM: To what extent do you think the writing author is both facilitator for the narrator, for Katie, as well as a corrective, asking her to check on her own views and her own perception of herself? Because by speaking to you she is also checking herself against how other people might perceive her.

MM: I think that’s true. But I can remember asking her if she ever regretted leaving England. I was thinking in terms of her singing career. She didn’t

²¹ UCC: The United Church of Christ, the organization that followed the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions under which Dr. and Mrs. McCord worked in South Africa. The original building still stands at 86 Beatrice Street, Durban.

even understand what I was talking about: why would she want to sing? She came home to find herself a husband and have a family—that was the important thing to her. I don't think actually that she understood really what she was offered, or what the possibility was of the prediction that her agent made about her singing quality. She was angered by the way it was put to her, but I don't think she ever really envisioned herself as being a wealthy woman. For me to ask that was a silly question. What she was really proud of was her work among the Zulus. I don't think my father would ever have accomplished as much as he had without her support. She was very proud of that, but as far as her singing was concerned, well, that wasn't something that she had *done*. Her voice was something that God had given her.

SM: And how do you think the idea that there would be a reading public acted as a type of censorship on what she was saying?

MM: It's hard to say. I think she was leaving it to me what to put in and what not to put in. I think she felt that my father, in writing the book he wrote, had left out a lot. He wrote an autobiography in 1940. What he was interested in doing was writing the history of a medical work, the building of a hospital. He didn't write the personal human stories. And that's what she was interested in. She wanted the stories of the patients told. And there were quite a number of patient stories which I included in my original manuscript which we finally cut. My first full manuscript was eleven hundred pages.

SM: I was wondering about that move between the first manuscript and the final two hundred and sixty pages.

MM: Well, I cut it down to seven hundred, and I thought I had done all the cutting I could. Then I cut it down to about four hundred and fifty and that was it. Then after David Philip said they wanted to publish it, they wanted me to cut it to a hundred and twenty thousand words. So I worked with Russell on that, and we cut out certain things which I have always regretted cutting out.

SM: How would you say that your book is different from other collaborative efforts where the writer and the narrator could both read the text and make changes to it? One of the examples I'm thinking of is Katherine Kendall and Mpho Nthunya's *Singing Away the Hunger*, where Katherine Kendall took down notes, wrote a text, and then gave it to Mpho Nthunya to read; and then at times Mpho Nthunya would say, "No it wasn't like this" and then

changes were made. Elsa Joubert describes a similar relationship with *Poppie Nongena*. How do you see that fact that you couldn't go back and check with Katie?

MM: Well, I think it would have been wonderful if I could have gone back. How much Katie would have changed, I don't know. I mean that's impossible for me to say. I tried to tell the story as honestly as I could, but there were a lot of incidents where I added descriptions which might not have been accurate. But they were as accurate as I could make them. I'm not talking about her husband's home place up in the Transvaal, because I visited there and I know those descriptions. The physical descriptions were correct. But there were things that had happened in Johannesburg where I felt that I had to set a scene, and so I described a scene and it may not have been correct. She might have changed that. As far as the incidents are concerned, I think they were accurate.

SM: I'm not so concerned about the accuracy of your rendering. I'm thinking more about the relationship between the writer and the narrator—how it's a full circle. But if I understand you correctly, you sometimes had this feeling that it would have been nice if you could have discussed it again with Katie.

MM: I would have appreciated that. I think it might have given me a little more confidence, at least when we were peddling the book. I got the confidence since then, but I might have had a little bit more. I might have had a little more confidence about insisting that I had something to say which was important to say, and insisted on writing it sooner. I don't know, it's hard to say. It's one of those *if* questions. I really am hoping that the family can rediscover [her sister] Charlotte's manuscript. Charlotte was a more important person from a public point of view than Katie was, perhaps in a different. . . . She certainly was better known than Katie outside of Natal.

SM: How do you see the difference between writing an autobiography and speaking an autobiography?

MM: How do you mean? Do you mean the reporting of a speaking biography?

SM: Maybe more concretely: How would it have been different if Katie had herself written? How do you see the significance of the fact that she spoke rather than wrote?

MM: Well, now we're talking about a specific individual. As far as Katie is concerned, if she had written it, it would have been very stilted and very short. She was an oral person. She could tell wonderful stories, but the letters she wrote to me were like letters written by a high school student, or by a grammar school student. She was much too busy making her handwriting beautiful than she was concentrating on what she said. Now as far as I'm concerned, I write much better than I speak, so it depends on the individual I think.

SM: Listening to what you said I take it that her letters take the form of all high school letters of the time, that her own writing suffered the typical fate of the period in that it followed a set format. Her letters to her parents written from England presumably followed the prescriptions of what a daughter in a distant land had to say, and were in that sense probably not very personal.

MM: Of course, I had never seen any of the letters that she had written from England. I saw the letter that she wrote to my mother after she heard of my father's death, and that was a very personal letter. But again, it was expressed like a thirteen-year-old would express herself—in very affectionate but sort of vague terms: "No one will ever know how much we loved the doctor because of what he did for our people." Now that's both very personal but it's also vague. I'm not quoting, actually, but I remember she said something like that. And the letters that she wrote to me: she would tell me that her husband was well, and that she had seen Mrs. Hoskins and Mrs. Hoskins wanted to be remembered to me; and it would be a short paragraph.

SM: How do you see the shift from the first person insertions in the book, which are printed in italics, to the third person narrative which makes up the bulk of the book?

MM: The first draft was written in the first person. Then I ran into problems, because she described her great-grandmother and she said, "I

thought she was a *sangoma*.”²² Now how do you translate that so that an American would understand what she was saying? The word *witch* is such a generalized term, and yet it was the only term that I could come up with. That was what made me feel I had to write it in the third person, because Katie would never have said that her great-grandmother was a *matagati*.²³ And yet, that was the translation I was giving it, but it made sense from an English-language point of view. So there we come in to the problem of translation again.

SM: It’s interesting that you take that very word. Because it is the opening line and I had problems with it myself. I asked myself, “A witch? What exactly would a witch be?” But if you’d used a *sangoma*, as an average white South African reader I would have immediately caught on. So there’s that connection between the language shift and the shift to the third person. Are there any questions which I left out, which you think should be asked? Or is there anything that someone who does not know the context as intimately as you do would never think of, but which you think is important?

MM: I don’t know how to answer that really because I think the importance to me is the fact that here was a personality that had a great influence on me: a woman I loved very much, who led a very important life and a life that was not appreciated by the majority of white South Africans. There were a lot of women like that. I think of many women that I knew in that generation, not as well as I knew Katie, but I think Mrs. Luthuli was the same kind of woman. And other women that I knew well. I think I had a certain feminist point of view—that I wanted the white South African society to appreciate the women in the black society. That’s a rather American point of view. It’s not a South African point of view particularly. I remember asking Katie once (she had always kept on her dresser a newspaper cutting of Emmeline Pankhurst; it was a cutting of Pankhurst with an umbrella that she was shoving at a policeman on the streets of London) what she thought of Emmeline Pankhurst: “She was an important woman, and she did an important political job, were there any African women who acted like that?” And Katie’s response was something to the effect that they didn’t have to act

²² The Zulu term for “traditional healer or diviner who employs music, dance, and the throwing of bones to discover evil and diagnose disease” (DSAE 1996:s.v.).

²³ The Xhosa and Zulu term for “witch or wizard; a practitioner of evil magic” (DSAE 1996:s.v.).

like that, because it was better to work through your husband, and that African women were really . . . were really . . . made decisions, but that they had their husbands voice those decisions—in other words, the power behind the throne.

Boston, 18 August 1998