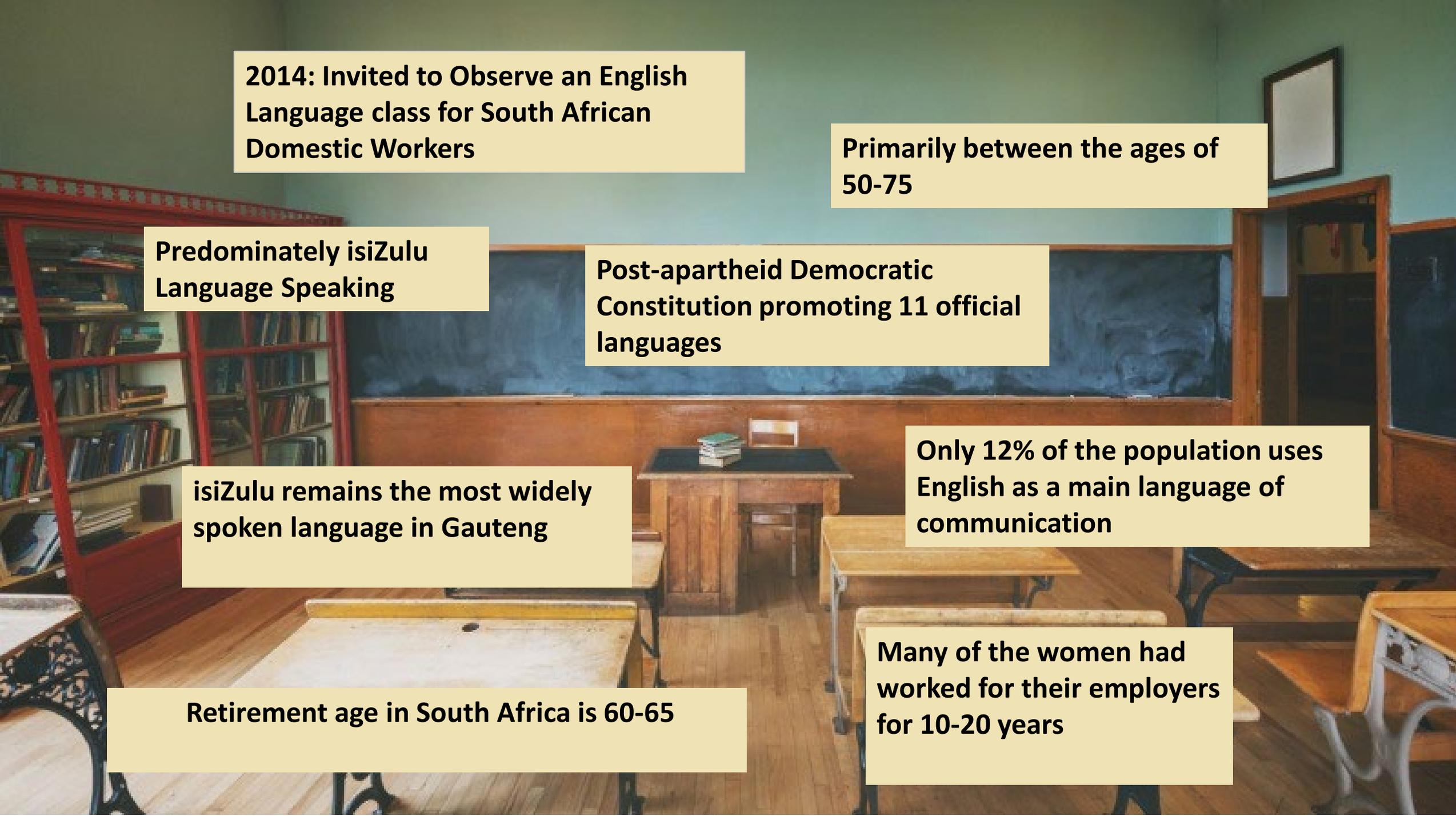


Interstitial Glimpses:
The Linguistic
Agency/Oppression of South
African Domestic Workers

**The Workshop on Language Basic Education for Adults in the United
States and in Germany**
April 5-6, 2022

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A photograph of a classroom with wooden desks and a chalkboard. The room has light green walls and a wooden floor. There are bookshelves on the left side of the room. The text boxes are overlaid on the image.

2014: Invited to Observe an English Language class for South African Domestic Workers

Primarily between the ages of 50-75

Predominately isiZulu Language Speaking

Post-apartheid Democratic Constitution promoting 11 official languages

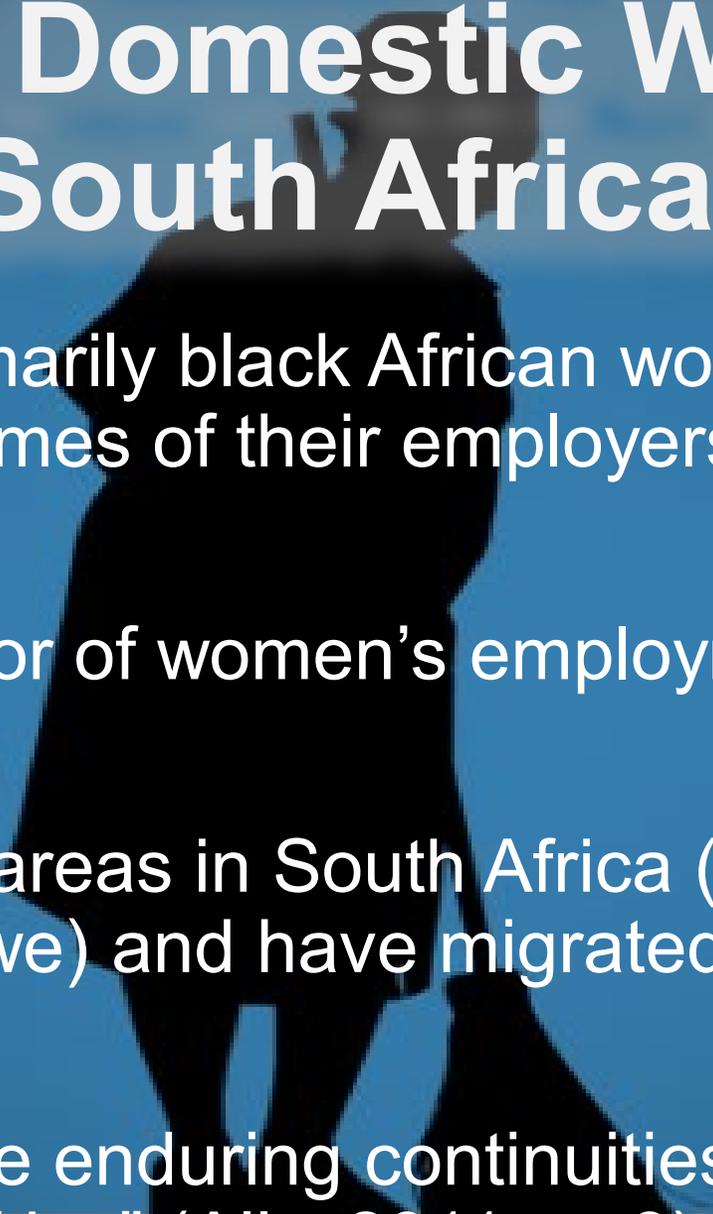
isiZulu remains the most widely spoken language in Gauteng

Only 12% of the population uses English as a main language of communication

Retirement age in South Africa is 60-65

Many of the women had worked for their employers for 10-20 years

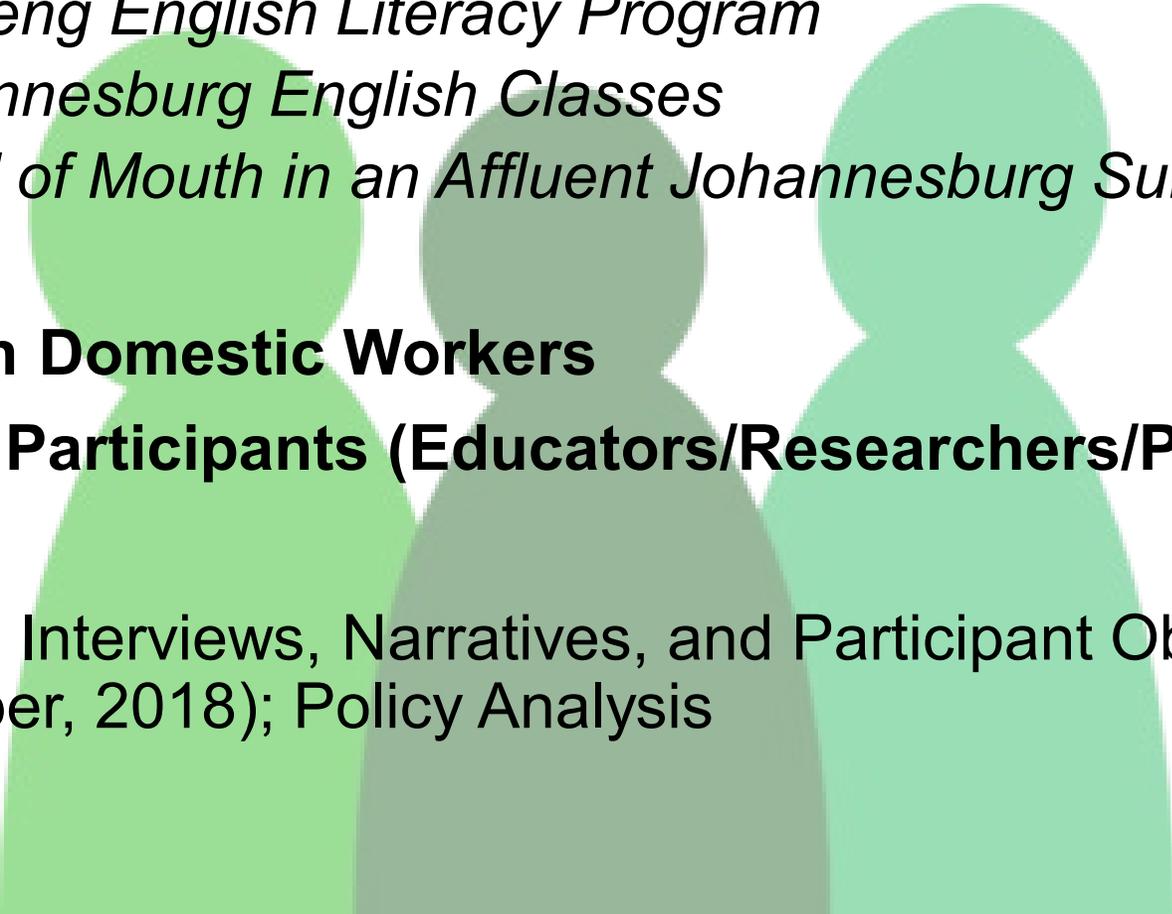
Who are Domestic Workers in South Africa?



- Often women (and primarily black African women) who both work in and often live in the homes of their employers
- The largest single sector of women's employment in South Africa
- Often come from rural areas in South Africa (as well as growing numbers from Zimbabwe) and have migrated to cities for work
- They remain “one of the enduring continuities of apartheid in contemporary South Africa” (Ally, 2011, p. 8).

- 
- **Why are older South African domestic workers (many of whom are retirement age) taking English language classes?**
 - **What roles does English language learning play in the professional and social lives of domestic workers?**
 - **How do histories of domestic work and English language learning in South Africa intersect to form moments of oppression and moments of agency for these women?**

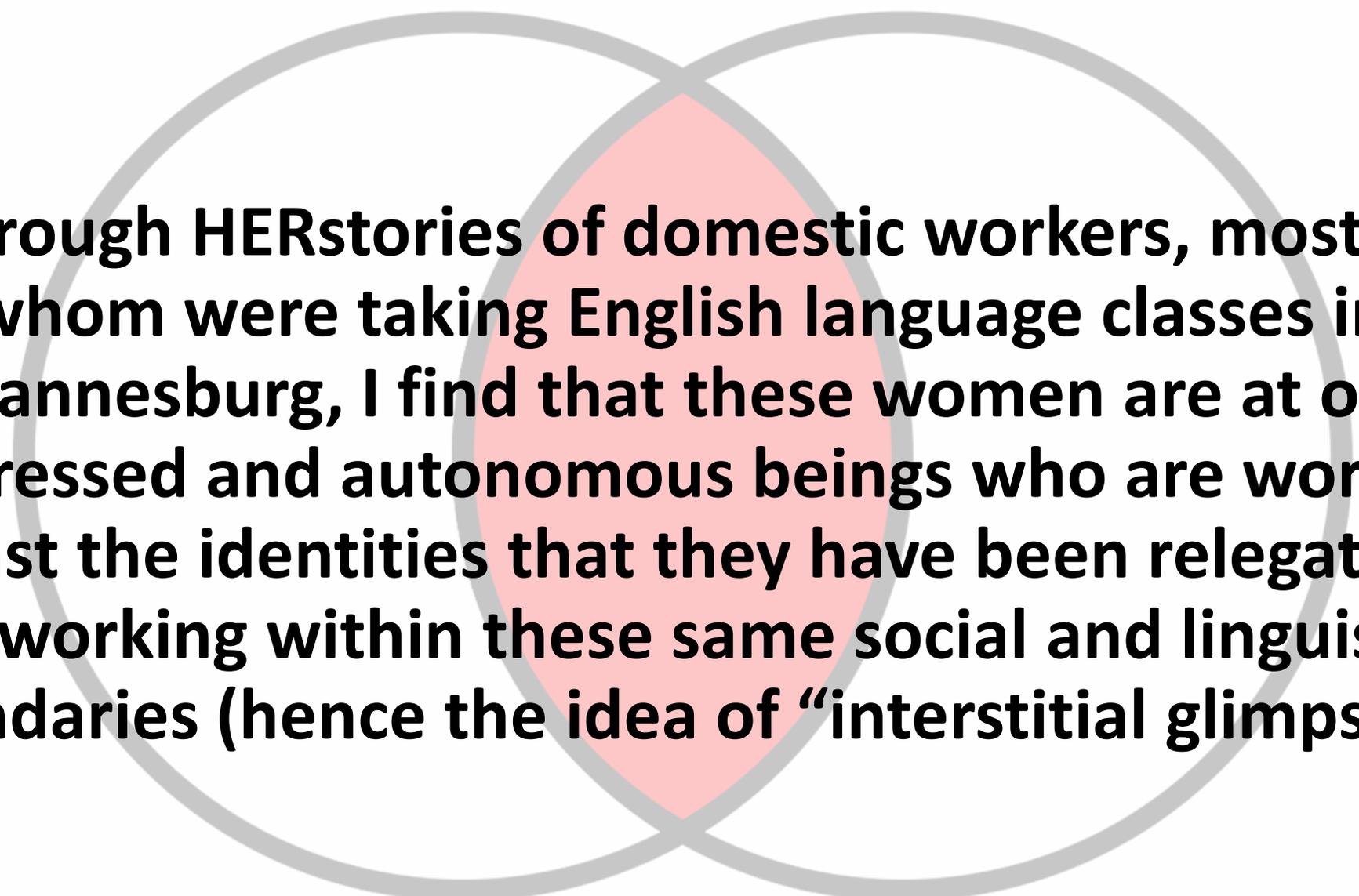
Data Collection

- **Research over a 3-year span (2014-2016)**
 - **3 main sites:**
 - *Site #1: Gauteng English Literacy Program*
 - *Site #2: Johannesburg English Classes*
 - *Site #3: Word of Mouth in an Affluent Johannesburg Suburb*
 - **28 South African Domestic Workers**
 - **7 Supplemental Participants (Educators/Researchers/Policy Makers)**
 - **Data Collection:** Interviews, Narratives, and Participant Observation; use of HERstories (Kaiper, 2018); Policy Analysis
- 

Poststructural Conceptions of Language, Identity and Power



- Weedon (1997):
 - language is both the place where forms of social organization and social consequences are defined and contested, but also the place where people's sense of self, or subjectivity, is constructed
 - While individuals are the objects of language and a discursive struggle for identity, they are also the site of this same struggle as it takes place within the consciousness and self-making practices of each individual.
- Butler (1997):
 - Roles of language in the creation of reality and the ways in which language can be used not only to incite hatred and injure subjects, but concurrently can be used to create agency
- Showden (2011):
 - analyzed differing conceptions of agency and asserted that agency is both a product of autonomy, which she defined as the individual capacity to act, and freedom, which are the conditions that facilitate the action



Through HERstories of domestic workers, most of whom were taking English language classes in Johannesburg, I find that these women are at once oppressed and autonomous beings who are working against the identities that they have been relegated to by working within these same social and linguistic boundaries (hence the idea of “interstitial glimpses”).



Oppressive Moments



Linguistic Violence

- **Zothile:** Some others like the Boers, they will call you stupid and that word for stupid, it hurts a lot. I don't want people to call me stupid cause I'm not stupid, I'm a human being like everybody. They have to understand that English is not my mother's tongue, but I grew up in a rural area and I'm willing to learn English, but they don't understand. They just say, she's stupid. No, I'm not stupid. It's just I don't understand English proper, do you see?

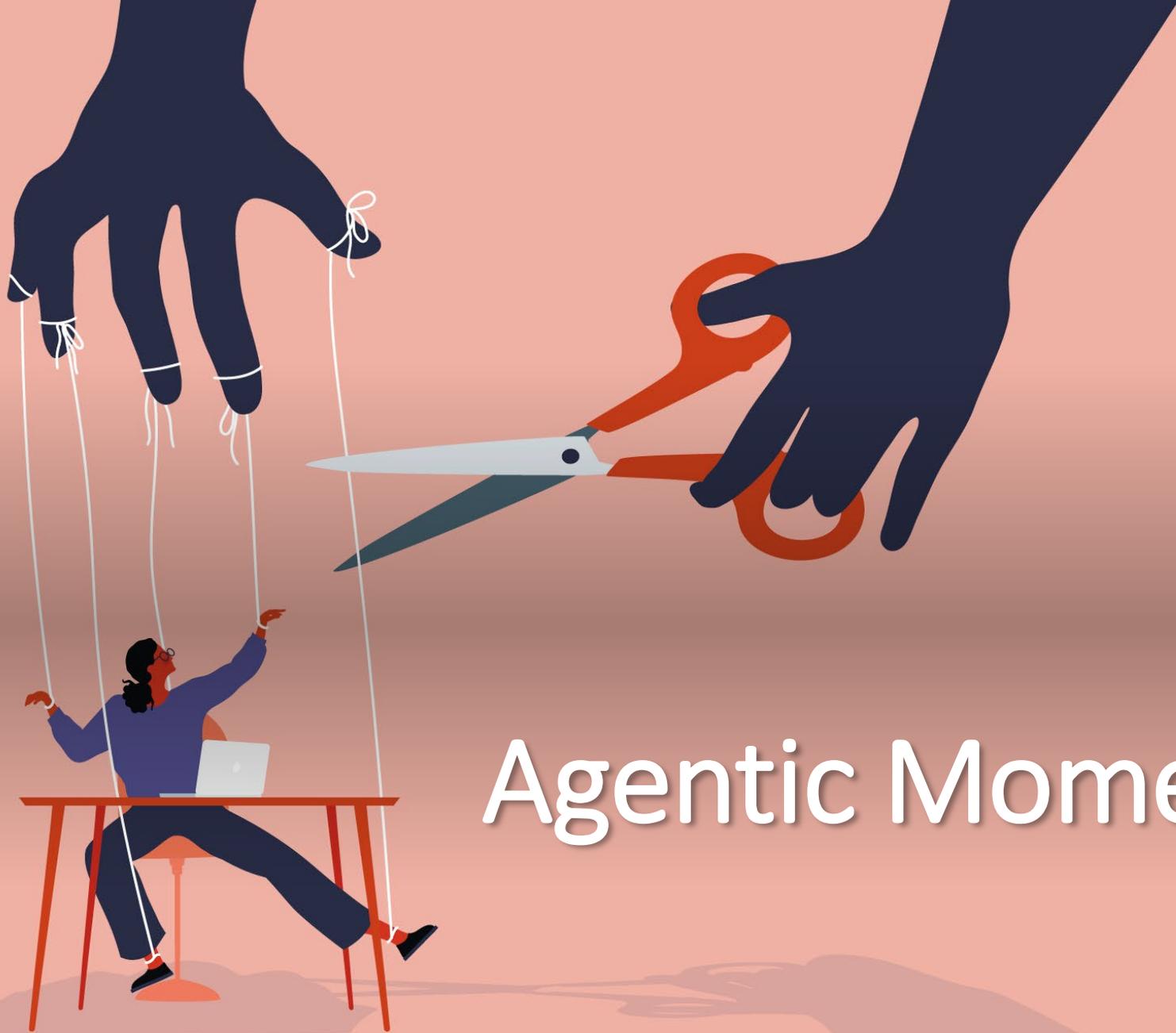
Domesticity and Oppression

- **Anna:** Pula, how do your employers treat you? Do they treat you okay?
- **Pula:** Yeah, actually the woman is very- umm, sometimes she's mad, I don't know. Sometimes she is so aggressive. I remember one day they were renovating. And when they were renovating, she put her handbag on the table and she left the phone there. Her phone was ringing. She was outside with the builders. I went into her handbag and took the cell phone and gave it to her. The next day she said to me, **'you know what, I was having my- I was having 800 rand in my handbag and those 800 rand are gone. Because you were there and took the phone out of my handbag, you have it and I want it.'** I was crying, crying. I said **'I haven't took no money.'** She was so cross, cross, cross, and said to me **'you are lying. You lied to me and I'm sick and tired of the thief in my house.'** And I said **'I didn't take it'** and I was crying. She said **'why are you crying if you didn't take it? Why are you crying?'** **The following day, she came to me and apologized and said 'you know what, that money my son found in my cabinet.'**

“Just as good as a dead person...”

Anna: And do you think Ma, that once you learn English- I mean, I understand of course the realistic benefits, but what do you think would be the emotional benefits of that? **If you were able to read and write in English, do you think that you would feel differently? With yourself?**

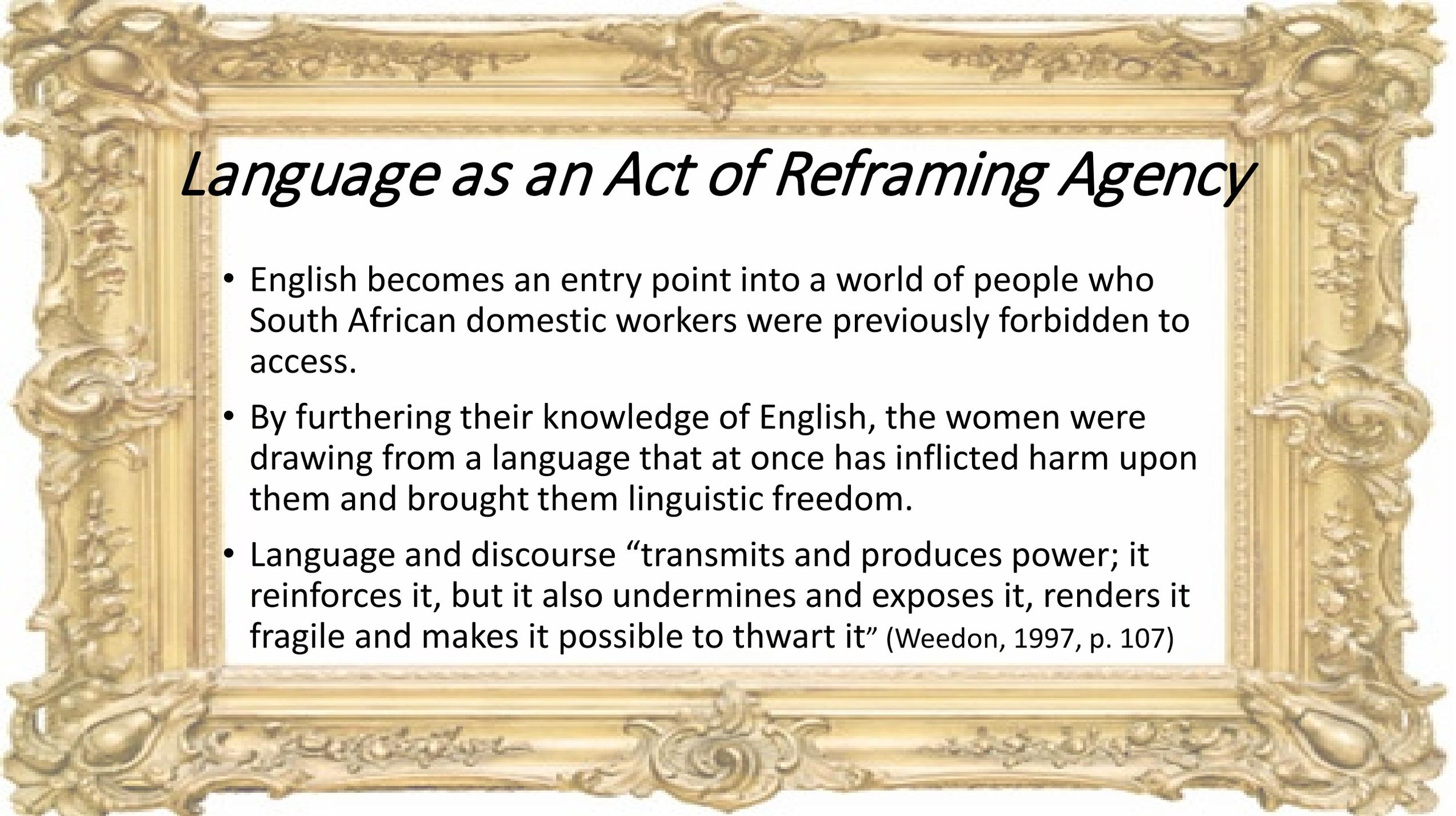
Thuli: Yes, yes. I would feel differently because I can knock on the door, I'll be able to open it. You know, **when you've got (English) education, it's like a master key**, you've got a master key which opens each and every door. **If you don't have education you're just as good as a dead person.**



Agentic Moments

“They see I’m not stupid”

Rose: That is why I say to you I love the English. Because I hear now what you are saying. One day it was May. Now again he (Rose’s employer) shouted at me again. I got so cross cross cross cross. My madam said “hey Rose hey.” I said “hello.” She said “what’s wrong?” I said “I’m so cross and double cross and double cross. He shouted at me in front of people. No. If I’m wrong, you must take me to the side. You must talk with me.” **Now the people know if they see me, they see I’m not stupid.**

An ornate, gold-colored frame with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns surrounds the text. The frame is rectangular and has a classic, decorative appearance.

Language as an Act of Reframing Agency

- English becomes an entry point into a world of people who South African domestic workers were previously forbidden to access.
- By furthering their knowledge of English, the women were drawing from a language that at once has inflicted harm upon them and brought them linguistic freedom.
- Language and discourse “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Weedon, 1997, p. 107)

*Pushback in
the English
Language
Classroom*

- **Rose:** That is why I told Emmanuel, I said if we are sewing, my eyes here are so sore. Now I can't. If now we are sewing, me I will stay at home. I can't go to school. Because if you teach sewing, you are not going to talk- to teach me how to talk English.





- **Thuli:** When Nelson Mandela came into office, I knew that **English would be really important in this country.** Maybe people will say I'm being brainwashed, but **English is the only language that you can communicate with other Africans and with White people.** And it's the language that I talk to Karrie (Thuli's employer) in.

A landscape featuring a deep, narrow canyon with a river at the bottom. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. A large yellow callout bubble is positioned in the center of the image, containing the text 'Adult English Language Literacy'. The word 'AGENCY' is written in a stylized, blue-outlined font on the left side of the canyon, and 'OPPRESSION' is written in a similar font on the right side.

Adult
English
Language
Literacy

AGENCY

OPPRESSION

- Domestic workers and adult English language learners worldwide are often looked at through lenses of linguistic and systemic oppression
- This work asserts that within systems of patriarchal, racial, socioeconomic and linguistic oppression, there are spaces for agency and counter-hegemony
- Moreover, “empowerment” and “transformation” (e.g., Freire) are not one directional, but can exist concurrently with power and oppression

A hand is shown placing a brown puzzle piece into a larger assembly. The puzzle piece has the text "Connections to adult ELLs Worldwide" written on it in white with a blue outline. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with a faint silhouette of a person's head and shoulders.

Connections to adult ELLs Worldwide



Upcoming Special Issue on Language and Global Domestic Work (2022)

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Thank you!



PLEASE EMAIL ME TO TALK
ABOUT THESE IDEAS MORE!



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