

Uncomfortable positionings: Critical literacy and identity in a post-apartheid university classroom

Carolyn McKinney, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

“Is truth that closely related to identity? It must be. What you believe to be true depends on who you believe yourself to be.” (Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull* 1998:99)

Introduction

In this chapter I present classroom-based research conducted in a first year English and Cultural Studies course at a South African university. In my pedagogy as well as my analysis thereof, I attempt to answer the questions

- What does it mean to take student identity seriously in critical literacy practice? And,
- How does one engage productively with student resistance to critical pedagogy?

While the dominant view of resistance to critical pedagogy has been that it is a problem which needs to be overcome, my data supports a more positive view. I argue that student resistance can create potentially productive, albeit uncomfortable, spaces for critical literacy work and that our aim should be to engage with students' resistance rather than to avoid or overcome it. Resistance as theorised in my study is resistance, or opposition, to the knowledge and identities, as well as the values, which are constructed or presented, and sometimes imposed, in the classroom. Using transcripts of classroom discourse, I document one of my attempts to engage productively with students' resistance and analyse the effects of my teaching strategies: consciously positioning students differently and attempting to teach them to deconstruct binary oppositions. In the first part of the chapter, I begin by defining my approach to critical literacy and then discuss research on student resistance to critical pedagogy. I go on to outline the post-structuralist theorizing of identity that I am working with. In the second part of the chapter I turn to a discussion of classroom data focusing on an analysis of classroom discourse and examining the students' constructions of identity.

What is Critical literacy?

Since critical literacy has come to assume a range of different meanings in different contexts, I will begin by briefly sketching what I mean by 'critical literacy'. Critical literacy work can be strongly text-focused involving linguistic analysis of ideologies in texts (for example, much work in Critical Language Awareness in the UK, see Wallace 2003, and South Africa, Janks, 1993 and critical literacy drawing on systemic functional linguistics in Australia, see Comber, 1993) or more loosely text-focused, drawing on definitions from critical pedagogy, especially the work of Freire and Giroux (see Bee, 1993). Giroux argues that critical literacy offers “the opportunity for students to interrogate how knowledge is constituted as both a historical and social construction” and should provide them with the “knowledge and skills necessary for them to understand and analyse their own historically constructed voices and experiences as part of a project of self and social empowerment” (Giroux, 1989:33 -34). Key to critical pedagogy, and related critical literacy work then, are the notions of emancipation (through the rational process of increasing students' knowledge and understanding) and empowerment. My own work draws on this broader approach to critical literacy that is rooted in critical pedagogy and Freirean ideas of reading the 'word and the world', although, as my discussion will show, I problematise notions of empowerment and of learning as an emancipatory and rational process.

Student resistance to critical literacy

A challenge to critical pedagogy and related critical literacy work is found in the problem of student resistance or opposition to critical teaching, that is to the knowledge and identities which are constructed, and possibly imposed, in the classroom. Discussions of such resistance in North America and South Africa suggest that the extent to which students participate in or resist critical literacy is bound up with their identities, and thus with how they are positioned or identified through the texts under study (Britzman, Santiago-Valles, Jiménez-Muñoz, and Lamash, 1991, Britzman et al, 1993; Janks, 2001; 2002 Granville, 2003).

In South Africa, Hilary Janks (1995) remarks on her research into secondary school students' responses to Critical Language Awareness (CLA) materials that "[i]nterpreting the interview data is like disentangling a knot of identity investments" (p330). Reflecting on students' responses in this research some years later, Janks writes: "[w]hile I recognised the power of identity investments, I failed to realise how helpless rationality is in the face of them" (2002:19-20). She relates a more recent example where students were involved in deconstructing print advertisements, critically analysing sexist representations of women. While the (female) students were well able to produce critical deconstructions of the texts, this did not prevent them from desiring to be like the female models represented as sexual objects in the advertisements. Janks thus argues, "[w]here identification [with the text] promises the fulfilment of desire, reason cannot compete" (2002:10). Janks positions critical literacy as an "essentially...rationalist activity" and challenges educators working within this frame to explore the territory "beyond reason" (2002:22).

Writing about student resistance, researchers have drawn on feminist and poststructuralist perspectives which deconstruct critical pedagogy as an enlightenment project and which problematise the notion of the fully rational and unified subject (e.g. Britzman et al 1991, 1993; Ellsworth, 1989; Lather 1991; Janks, 2001). They problematise the assumption underlying most critical literacy approaches that revealing social inequalities to people will necessarily bring about change, whether personal, or collective. As Elizabeth Ellsworth indicates in one of the most-well known critiques of critical pedagogy, this assumption ignores the way in which people have investments in particular social positions and discourses, and that these kinds of investments are not lightly given up.

More recent work in critical literacy (Ferreira and Janks, 2007, McKinney, 2005, Moffat and Norton, 2005) thus foregrounds issues of student identity, considering what students' investments might be, and how students are positioned both inside and outside the classroom. As the focus on investment and positioning implies, such work brings together critical theory and poststructuralist theoretical frameworks. While critical theory maintains the focus on teaching for social justice and foregrounds issues of power and inequality, poststructuralism signals multiplicity and complexity, a move away from a dogmatic approach to the deconstruction of binary oppositions such as oppressor/oppressed; masculine/feminine; advantaged/disadvantaged; white/black.

Theorising identity/subjectivity

In theorising student identity, I draw on the post-structuralist work of Chris Weedon (1997), Bronwyn Davies (1990, 1997) and Stuart Hall (1996). In particular, I use the key concepts of *representation* and *interpellation* (looking at how we are positioned); *identity investments* and *desire*; as well as subjectivity as a *site of struggle* to analyse and interpret my data. Drawing on the Foucauldian notions of discourse and historical specificity, identity in post-structuralism (or subjectivity as it is often called) is understood as discursively constructed, and as always

socially and historically embedded. It is thus always in process, “neither unified or fixed” (Weedon, 1997:87). However, while subjectivity may be always in process, individuals can (and do) invest in particular identities or identifications which have better or worse effects. Henrique, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine gloss investment as “the emotional commitment involved in taking up positions in discourses which confer power and are supportive of our sense of continuity” (1998:205). Weedon argues further that subjectivity as a site of struggle enables individuals to resist being positioned in particular ways and to construct new meanings from conflicting discourses.

Along with Weedon, Hall focuses on identity as in process, ‘becoming’, and, significantly for critical literacy, stresses the importance of representation in the construction of identity:

identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in a process of *becoming* rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constructed within, not outside representation. (Hall, 1996:4, my emphasis)

As Hall points out, how we are represented is intimately related to “how we might represent ourselves” (ibid). Of course we may not accept certain representations of ourselves, though these will still influence our identities, and thus such undesirable representations may be resisted. Finally, in theorising desire, Davies also emphasises the centrality of representation arguing that

...Desires are constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are ‘interpellated’ into the social world (Davies, 1990:501).

In relation to my pedagogy, I have considered how my students are represented, and positioned in and by the curriculum materials that are on offer in the course as such representations may affect the way that students respond to these. I have also considered the questions: what identities are constructed for students in the classroom and what identities do they construct for themselves? I have thus analysed evidence of their investments and desires in relation to self and other positioning.

Research context

I turn now to a discussion of the research itself. The project was conducted in 2001 at a university which can be described as a privileged institution historically linked to ‘white’, Afrikaans culture. At the time of my fieldwork, it still had a large majority of ‘white’ students, who mostly spoke Afrikaans as a first language, but with an increasing number of English first language students and a minority of ‘black’ students (among these, an even smaller minority of ‘black’ African students)¹. I researched my practice teaching a group of 17 first year undergraduate students, all but two of whom were ‘white’ and most of whom were Afrikaans first language speakers. I taught two South African fiction courses in a tutorial (small class) programme which were part of the general English studies curriculum followed by all first year students: South African short stories and South African poetry. For the most part, I followed the same syllabus of short stories and poetry as other tutors, but in some classes I had the opportunity to design my own content. At the same time as they were studying South African literature, students also completed two modules taught through large group lectures: one on persuasive language in advertising and another on introductory sociolinguistics. I collected data by video-recording my tutorial classes (later transcribing significant moments from these);

keeping a teaching journal, which included field notes, and collecting students' journal writing and more formal written assignments completed during the course.

In my teaching of the South African literature, I aimed at a critical analysis of the social issues and representations of South Africa raised in the texts as well as of the socially constructed nature of students' reading responses. Of course dealing with social inequality in South Africa inevitably means dealing with the oppressive apartheid past and its continuing effect in the present. However, many of my students, though not all, found it difficult at times to deal with the apartheid past as represented in the South African literature prescribed.

Early on in the course, a heated discussion arose about why students had to study South African literature. Elsewhere I have analysed the moments of resistance in this class arguing that students' resistant responses are tied to the undesirable ways they feel interpellated by the texts under study and that they resist such representations because these contradict that aspect of their identities that they attempt to construct for themselves as new, post-apartheid South Africans (McKinney, 2004). During this classroom discussion, I promised my students that we would return to their concern about studying South African literature and that I would take their concerns seriously. The data I discuss in this paper is from a class later in the course in which I gave students the opportunity to discuss at length their feelings about studying South African literature and difficulties in dealing with the apartheid past. This was my attempt to get students to reflect on the reasons for their own resistance (or desires) to representations of the apartheid past in the fictional texts we were working with. The class was thus designed both to develop my understanding of students' resistance as well as to intervene in this. One of my strategies was to connect the students' uncomfortable positionings in relation to the past to other people outside of the classroom. I was fortunate in that earlier in the year Michael Gardiner had written about the 'crisis in the study of the past' in South Africa, and the Minister of Education had commissioned a working group to prepare a report on this (Ndebele et al, 2001; Gardiner, 2001). I used Gardiner's article and the working group report in a dual move: firstly to position students as not exceptional but similar to many others in South African society, and secondly to position them as part of the solution in thinking of ways we might address the 'crisis', rather than as resistant (see the student handout in Appendix 1). The extract of classroom discussion that I present below took place soon after the students had read quotations from Gardiner's report in their handout.

Extract from tutorial 22: 16/05/01²

(...)

[**CM**³ asks whether the students, as the post-apartheid generation, cannot view the struggle positively]

Alistair: it depends who you are, because if you're looking at the people, I mean, it's obviously it's amazing for them to have struggled, but the people who struggled were struggling against the people whom you are associated with, but, or, in my case, you understand what I mean? (...) it's the humiliation factor because if you look at that positively they were actually fighting against, they were struggling against the people who (**CM:** *ja*) you were, are

CM: (...)

Herman: *ja*, I don't think if I had to go back these days I can't associate now well I can't see the struggle as being positive for me it, it's, it's positive for the country yes but um, I can't turn against my grandfather's grandfather because it's just, wrong, I can't say that the struggle was positive if I look at it because

CM: because of some family connection that you feel you must be loyal to

Herman: *ja*, something like that

CM: maybe, ok Eric

Eric: I think that perhaps over a longer period of time we could begin to see a broader history, but, all, all these negative things happened such a short time ago, it's still like eating us

CM: that the time isn't long enough (**Ricardo:** mhmm)

Eric: *ja*, and the change was so radical, that, um

Keith: I think we've also been taught to sort of feel that it does affect us but I don't feel in anyway affected by it maybe it did for my father, and my parents, my grandfather but to me, to me you know it's just a story, I don't feel like I'm (**CM:** right, so) a white person and I oppressed blacks, it's not like I personally took part, so

CM: right, so that's I mean that's interesting in the sense that you feel you can dissociate (**Keith:** *ja*), not dissociate yourself maybe that's too strong but separate yourself //**Keith:** like a new generation// from the history of these people whereas other people feel it's more difficult, or more complicated

Keith: maybe older people

CM: and some younger people, Herman is saying he's finding it more complicated that that perhaps [**Herman** nods] which is understandable, [to **Alistair**] *Ja*

Alistair: um I went to a very much more multiracial school and I did history and this section comes up and it's it's very difficult in a school like that because the change is so new, this, the struggles just come (**CM:** *ja*) the change has just come (**CM:** *ja*) they feel that it's still to do with them, as much as I feel that I've got absolutely nothing to do with apartheid some of them do feel that they've just come out of it and it's still// connected to them

CM: //well some people for them they're still living it//

Alistair: and they, *ja*, and they've won it, and they've won the struggle and now they're on top, so there's a big superiority complex that comes into it as well as if, it's almost reverse apartheid, look what you did to us now, and it gets like that in some of the classes you, you can see them how they feel, how certain members feel

(...)

CM: ..., [to Riana] OK

Riana: we went to Robben Island and um on a history *uitstappie* uh (**Hannelie:** expedition **CM:** outing) outing and it was a very very racist day, because we we felt, um almost uncomfortable because the people who did it with us was 'here the whites put' (**CM:** you mean the tour guides?) *ja*, the tour guides, 'here the whites killed the black with telephone wire', 'here the whites threw the blacks with rocks', 'here the whites', and this really un, in, unhuman way of telling the stories and I remember when we came back, obviously all of us was feeling a bit [pause] woh, it was really not me, I'm sorry, and when we got back one of the uh [hesitation] coloured girls [soft] in our class just made a comment, 'ha, now you know how we feel' (**CM:** uh, right) and I remember thinking that's so sad because it really shouldn't be like that, it's really not how we feel overall but just the way the tour guides y'know presented y'know our history caused that, division between the two groups (**CM:** mhmm, nods) and I don't think that's right, I don't think it should be like that [**Keith:** hand up]

CM: *ja*, in the sense of accusing //**Riana:** *ja*, it was really accusing, *ja*// that they're doing the work of accusing people, right

Keith: I agree with Alistair, you sort of, you almost get the feeling you're trying to get put on a guilt trip or something

Riana: *ja*, y'know I didn't do anything

CM: mhmm, mhmm

Alistair: I feel that the fundamental problem is the teaching, it's not the students who want to learn, it's the teachers who need to be taught how to teach it and you know (...) not that this massacre took place on this day and that massacre and this is how many they killed and, we don't want to know, we, cos, almost

you do feel kind of responsible because you're made to feel that you have the same colour skin as the people who did it, so it is somehow connected to you, and you do feel guilty because the person next to you's thinking *Ja*, look what they did to my grandfather (CM:mhmm) and it's vicious, that's why you must rather learn how they, they, y'know

CM: *ja*, I mean it is a difficult one because if it's, if our history continues to be taught and thought about by us, sorry Trevor [I didn't see his hand up] before I go on

Trevor: I just wanted to tell about a strange thing that happened when I was overseas. I attended a course for German and these people from overseas, from Germany, from Japan, from Singa, all over the world, and you have to tell name, school name, where are you came from and so on, and I said I came from South Africa and there were four people who came from North Africa, somewhere in the Congo and something like that, they suddenly [gets up from chair and turns round to show turning his back] they turned their backs on me and I said what is wrong? I have no experience of the apartheid, I have nothing to do with that and they said to me, well you were part of it [now?] what I'm saying, the black community are seeing the white community as part of, the apartheid system, and then I told them, well I feel ashamed about it, my past and my country, but I also must feel proud that our country has tried to get in, to be democratic, but if people are seeing another picture, that thinks we are cruel, we are hurt *mens* [people], I feel more ashamed about my past and I have, I have [looks to me]

CM: because of the way that how people are positioning you basically as being part of that

“It depends who you are” – relating to the apartheid past

I want to focus on two inter-related issues in analysing the extract above: the first is how students feel positioned by others, and how they position themselves, in relation to the apartheid past; and the second concerns their feelings of guilt and accusation. We can see a strong discourse of racial division in the extract; ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is a recurrent way of talking about ‘white’ and ‘black’ and they are set against each other as opponents. Not only is South African history very clearly divided along racial lines, but deracialisation of the history is seen as impossible. In Alistair’s contribution at the beginning of the extract, the “people who you were, are” are clearly ‘white’ people. Alistair’s words later in the extract that “you’re made to feel that you have the same colour skin as the people who did it...,” illustrates how he feels positioned into whiteness. In Alistair’s expression of being made to feel ‘white’, he accuses his history teacher of provoking such feelings along with hostility from the ‘black’ students. From his account however, it seems that his teacher is presenting particular ‘facts’ which make him feel uncomfortable because of his own racial connection to the ‘white’ perpetrators, and this causes him to assume that his ‘black’ classmates are thinking ill of him. For some of the students there is thus a complex interaction between being positioned by others as ‘white’ and positioning themselves as ‘white’. Such positionings have profound significance for how they relate to the past, and prevent a positive engagement with this. It is precisely because identities continue to be so strongly racialised and group based that a young ‘white’ South African in 2001 could still feel that the struggle was against him, even if he disagrees morally with the view of ‘white’ apartheid South Africa.

Hall’s notion of identities as “being about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in a process of becoming” (1996:4) is significant here. Hall goes on to signal the importance of “how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (1996:4). How the students feel they are represented (in texts, and by other people, especially young ‘black’ people) has a profound effect on how they in turn represent themselves. While the “resources of history, language and culture” might more usually conjure up celebratory, and positive connotations, this is not necessarily the case for these students.

Herman’s response, “I can’t associate...I can’t see the struggle as being positive for me,” reinforces Alistair’s position, although their perspectives are not exactly the same. While Herman

chooses to identify with apartheid perpetrators (“...I can’t turn against my grandfather’s grandfather”), Alistair points out that he is prevented from identifying with the struggle because of the way he feels positioned by the ‘black’ students in his history class who have “just come out of it [apartheid].” It is interesting that in showing his family links, Herman goes far back in time and way beyond his parent’s generation. In fact during his “grandfather’s grandfather’s” time (in the 19th century), British colonialism, rather than it’s offshoot apartheid, characterised the historical period. Herman’s reference then suggests that he may even be thinking beyond apartheid, and referring to what his ancestors fought for in South Africa through the Anglo-Boer wars and wars with indigenous people in order to claim the land itself. Perhaps identifying with the struggle for him then would mean a disavowal of his reason for being in South Africa and a complete displacement of that part of his identity which is Afrikaner South African.

Herman’s response later in the class (quoted below) is again, like Alistair’s, explicitly articulated in terms of ‘race’, and gives evidence for my argument that the way in which the students racialise history prevents them from identifying positively with the anti-apartheid struggle. His argument relies on the view that ‘race’ is the most salient feature in identifying with South African history, rather than moral or ethical values. His speaking of not being able to ‘associate’ [identify] with black people because he is ‘white’, shows how Herman views ‘race’ as the defining feature in who he is (“being” and “feeling” ‘white’).

Herman: ... every story in history you take from any country in the world has, um two sides and even if you look at both sides objectively, you still, you still tend to choose that you think right, so how is it possible for anyone living in our country looking at our country’s story and also still being different races and still feeling that in a way, you can’t really look at this story of apartheid without choosing sides, associating with either side and um I, I can’t I can’t see how [I could?] associate with with the side of coloured people because I’m not so I tend to associate with the white people’s side not that I still share their opinion but I still feel that I still (his emphasis).

While Herman’s statement of actually choosing, or feeling obliged to choose, the side of ‘white’ oppressors is extreme and drew whispering among some students, it nevertheless expresses a view which is more common: that because one is ‘white’, one cannot identify with the struggle of ‘black’ people whether one agrees with this or not.

Herman’s binary division of only two sides to history (here ‘black’ versus ‘white’) further closes down any opportunities to identify with the struggle. This discussion emphasised for me the powerful role which ‘race’ plays in the students’ identities and indeed their investments in ‘whiteness’. Their belief in the apartheid myth that ‘race’ exists so strongly, traps the students in old ways of seeing and being. While Herman’s political views may in any case prevent him from identifying with the struggle for democracy, for many other students (such as Riana and Trevor in the extract) this is not the case. They value this struggle and see it as a positive aspect of South Africa’s history, but by virtue of their whiteness, they still feel they represent the people who the struggle was waged against.

Contrasting responses from Eric and Keith

In contrast with Alistair and Herman’s responses in the classroom extract quoted above, Eric and Keith do not explicitly use ‘race’ in their arguments regarding the difficulties in dealing with the past. For Eric, time is the issue and he argues that it is too soon for them as ‘white’ people to view South African history more positively: “... it’s still like eating us.” This image of the memories of apartheid atrocities ‘eating’ the current generation is a powerful one, indicating the role which apartheid continues to play in the lives/identities of this ‘new generation’. That aspect

of their identity which is 'new', post-apartheid South African thus struggles to emerge. In Eric's response we see the contradiction which arose in several class discussions: apartheid is both unnecessary to deal with because its "in the past" and yet it is also too close temporally (and thus still too painful) to deal with.

While also not placing apartheid in the distant past, Keith's statement seems to contradict that of Eric. Unlike Herman, Eric and Alistair, he is arguing that he can separate himself from the past. But like Eric, Keith is more realistic in his historical placing of apartheid. It is his father, his parents and his grandfather who are affected by apartheid (but significantly, only "maybe" affected), he points out, and not himself. Keith argues that young 'white' people have "been taught to sort of feel that [apartheid] does affect us," but explicitly rejects being positioned in this way. What is interesting here, is that unlike many of the other students, Keith does not seem to feel interpellated as a 'white' oppressor. His statement "...I don't feel like I'm a white person and I oppressed blacks," is evidence of this. This is also confirmed by his statement that he is part of "a new generation". Keith seems unable to understand the responses of Herman, Alistair and Eric before him, as when I point out that some people find it "more difficult, or more complicated" to separate themselves from our history than he does, Keith says "maybe older people", thus excluding anybody in his peer group from this problem. It is perhaps significant to note that Keith was schooled at one of the most elite private boys' schools in the country and seems to have mastered a post-apartheid discourse which cuts the "new generation" off from any ties with the apartheid past, including acknowledgement of privilege linked to apartheid.

"unhuman way[s] of telling the stories": Narratives of accusation

Apart from the clear (and) binary racialisation of history, the most dominant theme of the extract seems to be that of accusation and guilt. Alistair is at pains to point out that the problem in their (i.e. young 'white' people) not being able to identify with the struggle, and thus with the positive in South Africa's history, is not that they don't want to do this (like Herman). It is rather that 'black' people still accuse him, and other 'white' people, of involvement in apartheid, thus forcing them to take responsibility for what happened during apartheid: "...look what you did to us..." Again Alistair uses a strong othering discourse in his reference to 'black' people as 'they' and 'them', and assumes that the rest of the class (including the 'coloured' students) will know he refers to 'black' people:

they feel that it's still to do with them, as much as I feel that I've got absolutely nothing to do with apartheid some of them do feel that they've just come out of it and it's still connected to them.

However, if we remember Alistair's statement, discussed above, regarding the thoughts (rather than the words) of his 'black' class mates, we must recognise that his own feelings are not so clear cut as he suggests here. This notion of being positioned, forced to take on a particular undesirable and uncomfortable identity through the accusations of other 'black' people, is taken up by Riana who offers her own narrative of accusation to the discussion.

Riana's story

Riana presents a personal narrative, or remembering of a history excursion to Robben Island while she was at school in order to argue that the way history is represented can cause division between 'black' ('coloured' here) and 'white' students. It is significant that the outing was to Robben Island, a powerful symbol of apartheid oppression and, one could argue that regardless of the tour experience, just being on Robben Island may position 'white' South Africans in an uncomfortable way. Earlier in the discussion, Riana was the only student who could identify with the positive in South Africa's history by identifying with the success of overcoming apartheid:

Riana: I think the thing is that eventually we got through that and eventually things turned around and there has been a lot of changes, so I think we, that can be said more, and I think that should come in as well [CM nods]

Here Riana chooses to avoid an othering discourse dividing 'us' from 'them' and to discursively construct a unity of all South Africans in her statement "we got through that". Despite this, her story of the Robben Island trip shows that she is also not so easily able to dissociate herself from the negative in our history at other times. Riana's emphasis in her description of the day as "a very very racist day" gives some indication of the strong emotion with which Riana told this story; she was clearly upset by the outing and the memory of it is vivid.

Riana's use of the pronoun 'we' from the beginning of her story to mean only the 'white' people who went on the history outing is also significant. This is more ambiguous with the first use in "we felt, um almost uncomfortable" until she continues with her account of the tour guide's narrative, and tells of their return to school. Here it is clear who felt uncomfortable in Riana's 'we': "and I remember when we came back, obviously all of us was feeling a bit [pause] woh, it was really not me, I'm sorry..." Of course it may well be that the 'black' students did not feel comfortable during the trip either. Riana is thus clearly telling the story from her perspective as a 'white' person, and in doing so positions herself as 'white', while at the same time rejecting the positioning of 'white' imposed by the tour guide and the 'coloured girls' in her class, which she represents as that of 'white' oppressor. Her response to the 'coloured' student's comment, "ha, now you know how we feel", is in itself interesting. Her interpretation of this comment was that she, along with the other 'white' students, was being blamed for, or at least accused of, apartheid atrocities by virtue of being 'white', and of the way in which the tour guide had told the story of events on Robben Island. Perhaps this was the case, or perhaps the 'coloured' student was merely expressing a belief that the 'white' students did not really know and understand the experience of oppressed people under apartheid; the statement reported of the 'coloured' student could be read in both ways and of course it is impossible to reconstruct the 'factual' details of the event from Riana's telling of the story. In telling a story like this, there is inevitably a reworking of memory going on, but in many senses what actually took place on the outing and at school afterward does not matter. It is clear that the outing made Riana feel defensive, accused and very firmly positioned with the undesirable, and uncomfortable (as Riana points out) identity of 'white' oppressors.

Trevor's story

Trevor's story of the reaction of African students from the [Democratic Republic of] Congo to him as a 'white' South African is similar to Riana's in that it is also a tale of accusation. In this story, Trevor is positioned by the African students as "part of it [apartheid]", despite his own feeling that he "had nothing to do with that". Trevor told this story with strong emotion, clearly demonstrating how upset, "hurt" he felt at this rejection by the African students. His physical demonstration of the African's turning their back on him and his emphasis in his question "what is wrong?" ('wrong' was almost shouted by Trevor), indicated both his distress and disbelief at being treated in such a way. The accusation which Trevor reports for the African students (and again, how factual or accurate these words are is not the issue here), "well you were part of it," is an unequivocal positioning of him alongside the people he describes as "cruel", 'white' oppressors under apartheid, from which these students do not allow him to escape. Trevor makes a clear argument for why he finds it difficult to identify with the struggle for democracy: in his view, the "black community" will not allow the "white community" to do this. Trevor's response to the African students shows his desire to identify with the struggle, and to a certain extent he is identifying with this in his statement:

I told them, well I feel ashamed about it, my past and my country, but I also must feel proud that our country has tried to get in, to be democratic. But Trevor goes on then to show how this pride is undermined by being positioned as an oppressor. It is not that he has no desire to identify positively, but that he feels he cannot, and is left with a feeling of despair:

but if people are seeing another picture, that thinks we are cruel we are hurt *mens* [people], I feel more ashamed about my past and I have, I have [looks to me] This expression of despair and of helplessness echoes that of Alistair in his explanation of how "...you're made to feel that you have the same colour skin as the people who did it, so it is somehow connected to you, and you do feel guilty...". In both of Trevor's statements here, the apartheid past of which he is ashamed has become a personal history - it is "my past." It is also interesting to note that when he speaks of shame, he speaks of "my ('white') past" and "my (apartheid?) country," but in speaking of the new democracy as a source of pride, he switches to "our [all South Africans, 'black' and 'white'] country." Understandably however, accusations from other Africans increase Trevor's feelings of being ashamed about the past, and position him in such a way that he feels forced to accept the shameful apartheid past as his personal history, and to feel distanced from the new democracy.

Deconstructing binaries

In an attempt to disrupt students' essentialist notions of 'white' and 'black' in relation to the struggle, I asked the students which part (i.e. 'white' or 'black' as these were the categories they were using) of our history the 'white' ANC activist Albie Sachs's⁴ children were likely to associate with. The students told me that they had no knowledge of Sachs and I briefly related his story. Alistair then argued that they had never learned about any positive 'white' figures in the struggle in their school history and how necessary this was if they were to be able to identify with the struggle:

Now you see that's a positive thing for, just a simple positive thing for say white, is for looking at people like Joe Slovo⁵ and Albie Sachs, y'know, they, they help us identify with the struggle...

My strategy in attempting to offer alternative, and more positive, representations of whiteness with which students might identify could be seen to be partially successful in this moment. Since the power of racial identification with white people was so strong, I attempted to work within this framework by identifying and inserting positive 'white' role models into the class discussion. I also attempted to make visible to students the range of positions amongst 'white' students in the class itself, another tool in deconstructing their homogenous representation of whiteness. We can see this in my attempt to explain to Keith that some people, like himself, feel able to distance themselves from apartheid perpetrators while others, such as Herman, cannot. Such strategies however will have mixed responses and thus mixed success. Ultimately, as the teacher, one cannot control students' self-positioning and processes of identification though one can certainly attempt to influence these. Even in the analysis of one extract from classroom discourse it is clear that resistance is not a homogenous or unitary experience. Students will resist different texts in different ways, depending on their identifications, investments and desires.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored a few significant moments from a class in which I attempted to engage with students' resistance to critical literacy pedagogy. I have analysed the complexities of their being and/or feeling positioned alongside 'white' oppressors, focusing here on such (perceived) positioning from 'black' people, and by students themselves. I argue that the

students' continuing racialisation as 'white' and emotional investments in whiteness makes it difficult to deconstruct their responses to representations of the apartheid past and of white people in the curriculum materials. It was clear to me that I needed to help students deconstruct the binary division they (and many others) set up between 'black and white'. Key pedagogical strategies here include offering examples which unsettle binary constructions of 'race' in South Africa, both by foregrounding the different positions among these young people themselves (e.g. Herman and Keith) and thus emphasising difference amongst them as well as by inserting examples of 'white' struggle activists to destabilise their racialised logics and illustrate how one's ability to identify with the struggle would not always be tied to 'race' in fixed ways.

Using a post-structuralist theorising of identity as a tool for understanding actual moments of resistance and for analysing classroom interaction which engages with this has significant implications for how such resistance can and should be viewed. I would argue that in working with relatively privileged students, the aim is not one of empowerment, though to the extent that it still involves working towards self- and social change, the aim is emancipatory. In order to understand students' resistances and to work productively with these, we need to recognise and analyse what they are invested in, their hopes and dreams, and how they are embedded in the socio-political and historical moment in which they live. While the dominant view of resistance to critical literacy pedagogy is that it is a problem which needs to be overcome, I have argued for a more positive view. Resistance does not necessarily prevent productive engagement; on the contrary, it can provide powerful teaching moments. Resistance is a complex, rather than homogenous process and is uneven – that is, students can resist different texts in different ways, and can return to accept texts that they previously resisted. But resistance is also not an arbitrary phenomenon and in better understanding our students, their fears and desires, we can begin to predict what texts they are likely to resist, though this would not be an argument for excluding such texts. While not part of a linear progression, resistance may be a necessary process for some students and may be the only way that they can engage with particular texts at particular moments. Our aim then should not be to overcome resistance, but rather to engage with it. We need to give students, and ourselves as teachers, the space to explore how and why they resist particular texts and to take their positions seriously. This view does not ignore the fact that engaging with resistance can be extremely challenging for teachers and students (see McKinney, 2005). While it is important to acknowledge the limitations to what is possible in the classroom, it is also important to acknowledge the potential productivity in uncomfortable pedagogic spaces and uncomfortable positionings.

References

- Bee B. 1993. Critical literacy and the politics of gender in C. Lankshear and P. L. McLaren (Eds) *Critical literacy: politics, praxis and the postmodern*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Britzman D, Santiago-Valles KA, Jiménez-Muñoz GM & Lamash LM 1991. Dusting off the erasures: race, gender and pedagogy. *Education and Society*. 9(2), 88 –99.
- Comber B. 1993 Classroom explorations in literacy, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 16(1): 73-84
- Britzman D, Santiago-Valles, KA Jiménez-Muñoz, GM & Lamash LM. 1993 Slips that show and tell: fashioning multiculturalism as a problem of representation, in C McCarthy & W Crichlow (Eds) *Race, identity and representation in education*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Davies B 1990. The Problem of Desire. *Social Problems* 37(4), 501-516.

Davies B 1997. The Subject of Post-structuralism: a reply to Alison Jones. *Gender and Education*. 9(3), 271-283.

Ellsworth E 1989. Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*. 59(3), 297-324.

Gardiner M 2001. History and Archaeology in Education. *Mail and Guardian*, February 2-8.

Ferreira, A and Janks, H. (2007) Reconciliation pedagogy, identity and community funds of knowledge: borderwork in South African classrooms, *English Academy Review* 24(2), 71-84.

Giroux H. 1989 *Schooling for democracy*. London: Routledge.

Granville, S. 2003. Contests over meaning in a South African classroom: Introducing Critical Language Awareness in a climate of social change and cultural diversity. *Language and Education* 17(1): 1-20.

Hall S 1996. Introduction: Who needs Identity? In Hall, S and du Gay, P (eds) *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage.

Henriques J, Hollway W, Urwin C, Venn C & Walkerdine, V. 1998 *Changing the subject psychology, social regulation and subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge. (1st edition 1984).

Janks, H. (Ed) 1993. *Critical Language Awareness Series*. Johannesburg: Hodder and Stoughton and Wits University Press.

Janks H. 1995 The Research and Development of Critical Language Awareness Materials for use in South African Secondary Schools. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis Lancaster University.

Janks, H. 2001, Identity and conflict in the critical literacy classroom. In Comber B and Simpson, A (eds) *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Janks, H. 2002. Critical literacy: beyond reason. *The Australian Educational Researcher* 29(1) 7-26.

Krog, A. 1998. *Country of my skull*, London: Vintage.

Lather P 1991. *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York and London: Routledge.

McKinney C 2004. 'A little hard piece of grass in your shoe': understanding student resistance to critical literacy in post-apartheid South Africa, *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 22(1&2) 63-73.

McKinney, C. 2005. A Balancing Act: Ethical dilemmas of democratic teaching within critical pedagogy, *Educational Action Research* 13(3) 375-391

Moffat, L. and Norton, B. 2005. Popular culture and the reading teacher: A case for feminist pedagogy, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 2:1 pp1-12

Ndebele N, Odendaal A, Mesthrie U, Jordan P, Nasson B, Esterhuyzen M, van Onselen C, Callinicos L, Maloka E, Bashe T & Kallaway P 2001. *Report of the History/Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education*, February 2001 [Online] url:///A/Reportof the History-Archaeology Panel.htm Accessed 12 February 2001.

Wallace, C. 2003. *Critical reading in language education*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Weedon C 1997. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist theory*. Oxford: Blackwell (1st edition 1987).

¹ This predominance of 'white' students is unusual in South Africa where universities generally have a minimum of 50% 'black' students enrolled.

² Notes on transcription: I have used conventions of punctuation to make the transcription of spoken language into writing more readable, conveying my understanding of the spoken words. // indicates overlapping speech and/or interruptions. Words underlined indicate the emphasis of the speaker. (...) indicates a gap, data omitted. Square brackets[] are used for additional transcriber's comments and minimal responses are included in brackets in the main speaker's texts xx(Carolyn:ok)xx

³ CM = Carolyn McKinney (author and teacher). All students are given pseudonyms and gave written consent to their involvement in the research. Alistair, Eric and Keith are 'white' English first language; Herman, Riana and Van Zyl are 'white' Afrikaans first language.

⁴ Albie Sachs was a 'white' African National Congress (ANC) activist who survived a car bomb attack by South African security forces in Maputo, Mozambique on 7 April 1988. In the attempted assassination he lost his right arm and the sight of one eye. He is now a justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and as an expert in constitutional law, played a crucial role in drawing up the post-apartheid constitution.

⁵ Joe Slovo (1926-1995) played a leading role in the ANC (as one of the early leaders in the armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe) and in running the South African Communist Party (SACP). He went into exile in 1963 and returned to South Africa in 1990 to participate in the negotiations for a post-apartheid democracy. He was the first Minister of Housing in democratic South Africa and was national chairperson of the SACP and on the National Executive committee of the ANC at the time of his death.

Appendix 1

Extract from the handout for Tutorial 22.

Gardiner, Michael "History and Archaeology in Education" *Mail and Guardian*, February 2-8, 2001:

a)'The crisis in South Africa within the study of the past is, as the report suggests, ironic. Instead of an excited upsurge of interest in the opportunity to explore the past in a freed environment, and despite the belief that "the humane influence of history education would lay claim to a secure and distinctive place in the learning system...the cumulative effect of relevant government policy...has been to de-emphasise history not merely in schooling but also in tertiary sectors.' (Gardiner, 2001: 10.)

- Why do you think there is a 'crisis' in 'the study of the past'?

b)'Then there are also the subtler forces of aversion to learning about a history of pain and humiliation...as well as the recoil away in young people from overtly political issues' (Gardiner, 2001:10.)

-
- Do you agree that there is 'pain and humiliation' in the study of the past? Are there other feelings?

Report of the History/Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education, February 2001:

c)'A study of the past can serve a range of important and enriching social, political, cultural and environmental functions. Its general potential is particularly pronounced in our own society, which is consciously undergoing change- in historical terms, we are living in a country that is presently attempting to remake itself in time. In these conditions, the study of history is particularly urgent as it helps to prevent amnesia, checks triumphalism, opposes the manipulative or instrumental use of the past, and provides an educational buffer against a "dumbing down" of our citizens.' (2001:7.)

- According to the report, what is the value of studying the past? Do you think this is valid? Can you think of other purposes?