

## **'A little hard piece of grass in your shoe': understanding student resistance to critical literacy in post-apartheid South Africa**

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**Abstract:** This paper engages with some of the tensions raised by critical literacy in the post-apartheid South African context, both theoretically and in classroom practice. I examine Kress's (1996; 2000) challenge to the notion of 'critique', exploring the way in which critical literacy pedagogy is linked to the particular socio-political and historical context in which it takes place. As an illustration of this, I look at the development of critical literacy in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. I then turn to an analysis of data from my classroom-based research in a first year undergraduate English and Cultural Studies course in South Africa and explore how and why students might resist critical literacy pedagogy. In particular, I focus on moments of resistance in a critical reading course using South African literature, exploring the students' difficulties in dealing with the apartheid past. I theorise these moments of resistance in relation to Kress's challenge to the notion of 'critique' and in relation to the feminist post-structuralist theorising of identity, arguing that the students' identities or subjectivities affect their ability to engage with the course.

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on research conducted by a colleague, Ermien van Pletzen, and myself in a first year undergraduate English and Cultural Studies course at an historically 'white'<sup>1</sup> and Afrikaans university in South Africa from February–June 2001. The course is described in the university handbook as developing students' ability to read texts critically, whether these are literary texts (novels, poems, plays) or other texts (films, news reports, advertisements) as well as developing students' awareness of language (what it is and how it influences us). English Studies consists of several smaller courses which are linked by key concepts, such as representation, discourse, identity and gender. In the first half of the year, the students took four courses, two of which were seminar courses on South African literature, the first on short stories and the second on poetry. We taught both of these seminar courses on South African literature to one group of students each, adopting a critical literacy approach (see McKinney, 2003 for a fuller discussion; McKinney and Van Pletzen (2004) for a discussion of a different aspect of the research).

In this paper I engage with some of the tensions raised by critical literacy in the post-apartheid South African context, both theoretically and in classroom practice. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I define what I mean by 'critical literacy' and then move on to explore critical literacy within the South African context. I present Kress's (1996; 2000) challenge to the notion of 'critique', exploring the way in which critical literacy pedagogy is linked to the particular socio-political and historical context in which it takes place. As an illustration of this, I consider the development of critical literacy in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. I then address research which raises the problem of student resistance to critical literacy pedagogy. In the second section of the paper, I turn to examine data from my classroom-based research and explore how and why students might resist critical literacy pedagogy. In particular, I focus on moments of resistance in a critical reading course using South African literature, exploring the students' difficulties in dealing with the apartheid past. I theorise these moments of resistance in relation to

Kress's challenge to the notion of 'critique' and in relation to the feminist post-structuralist theorising of identity, arguing that the students' identities (or subjectivities) affect their ability to engage with the course.

### **What is critical literacy?**

Since critical literacy has come to assume a range of different meanings, 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 1992; 1999; and critical literacy drawing on systemic functional linguistics in Australia, see Comber, 1993; O'Brien, 1994) 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' (Freire & Macedo, 1987), although, as the analysis which follows will show, I am not uncritical of the notions of empowerment and of learning as an emancipatory and rational process.

### **Critical literacy in South Africa**

I turn now to consider the particular context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa to explore what being critical in this context means, and to raise the limitations of working within a critical framing. I look at the way the role of critique may differ in the post-apartheid context from that during apartheid, and highlight the need to consider student identities in critical literacy pedagogy. I will focus here on the well-known and oft cited work of Hilary Janks in

Critical Language Awareness (CLA). Janks explains that she had a particular goal in her critical literacy work which began during the late apartheid years. This was to highlight the ways in which language was manipulated by the apartheid state, including through their control of the media, (Janks, 2000; Janks & Ivanic, 1992). Janks's initial aim in her critical literacy work was thus closely tied to the socio-political and historical moment in apartheid South Africa. In a recent discussion of her work she explains:

I cut my critical literacy teeth in the struggle against apartheid. I saw my own work as both a moral and a political project which valued education as an important factor in achieving a just society. In the days of apartheid it was easy to understand power as a negative force which constructed and maintained relations of domination by protecting the interests of the small white minority...my work set out to deconstruct the language of the oppressor, and to search for an 'emancipatory discourse' (Janks, 2000: 175).

Janks argues that after two democratic elections, the critical literacy project in South Africa is now necessarily different and requires a re-imagining of how critical literacy can contribute to reconstruction and development and 'to our reinventing our nation and ourselves' (Janks, 2000: 175).

Thus, as Janks makes clear, the critical literacy project during apartheid South Africa was unquestionably oppositional. Although this was tied to the socio-political moment, there does seem to be an assumption in critical pedagogy and in many forms of critical literacy, that we should be working against, critiquing, the insufficiently democratic state (especially in Giroux and Freire's writing). Such social critique made sense in South Africa when the target was the apartheid government. Critique in the current South African context is, however, more complex and varied, and may involve criticism of particular policies and activities (e.g. health policy on HIV/AIDS) rather than of the entire government system. Indeed, new government educational policy advocates taking up issues of social inequality and injustice (especially racism and sexism) in the curriculum, both at school level and in higher education.

Gunther Kress argues that the notion of critique itself is a 'response to particular circum-

stances in a particular period' and thus is an 'historical phenomenon' (2000: 160). He elaborates:

In periods of relative social stability critique has the function of introducing a dynamic into the system. In a situation of intense social change, the rules of constitution both of texts and of social arrangements are in crisis: they're not settled, but in process of change (2000: 160).

Applying Kress's argument to South Africa, one could see apartheid South Africa, ironically, as the relatively 'stable period' in which critique was crucial in 'introducing a dynamic into the system'. This is not to deny that such 'stability' was enforced through the police state. The present highly dynamic, transitional environment could then be defined as more in need of a forward looking approach and a focus on solutions and productive activity. Kress argues that the focus during such times of intense social change should shift from critique to that of 'Design'.

While critique looks at the present through the means of past production, Design shapes the future through deliberate deployment of representational resources in the designer's interest. Design is the essential textual principle and pedagogic/political goal for periods characterised by intense and far-reaching change (2000: 160).

Kress explains that critique is one of the processes on which Design rests and thus he is not arguing for the abandonment of critique but rather that it should no longer be the focal process. Indeed, deploying resources in the 'designer's interests' could be dangerous without an examination of what these interests might be — my own study provides evidence of this.

### **Student resistance to critical literacy**

A further challenge to critical literacy (and critical pedagogy) 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 South Africa and North America 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 *et al.*, 1991; 1993; Janks,

1995; Granville, 2003).

In South Africa, Hilary Janks (1995) remarks on her research into secondary school students' responses to CLA materials that '[i]nterpreting the interview data is like disentangling a knot of identity investments' (1995: 330). 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).

In discussing 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:

As long as the literature on critical pedagogy fails to come to grips with issues of trust, risk, and the operations of fear and desire around such issues of identity and politics in the classroom, their rationalistic tools will continue to fail to loose deep-seated, self-interested investments in unjust relations of, for example, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Ellsworth, 1989: 313).

It is thus crucial for those working in critical literacy to take student identity seriously, considering what their students' investments might be and how they are positioned by the texts under study.

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. Henriques *et al.* 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 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'. 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. In relation to my pedagogy, I have considered

how my students are represented and positioned in and by the curriculum and 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? Related to this, Hall emphasises the importance of Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation in identity construction:

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus temporary points of attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall, 1996: 5–6).

Along with representations, students may feel uncomfortable about being interpellated as subjects of particular discourses and more comfortable with different subject positions. Again, they might resist such uncomfortable, or undesirable, interpellations, more or less successfully. 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).

### **Stranded in critique? A case study of 'resistance' to critical literacy in South Africa**

In this second section of the paper, I extend the discussion of challenges to adopting a critical perspective by looking at a specific example of practice in post-apartheid South Africa where some students resist critical literacy pedagogy in different ways. In this case, students' identities as 'new' South Africans are important in understanding the way some of them felt trapped in critique and frustrated at not being able to move beyond this position.

I taught 17 first year students in the South African literature course, 14 of whom were

Afrikaans first language (including two 'coloured' students) and three of whom were 'white' English first language. Researching my own practice, I collected data using ethnographic methods including participant observation of my classes (which I videotaped), student journal writing as well as assignment writing and through interviews with a sample of students. Each student granted me written permission for her/his involvement in the research as well as for the use of data generated in subsequent writing. My aim in my own teaching within the general English Studies curriculum was to take a critical literacy focus, using the opportunity of the prescribed texts to focus on issues of social inequality within South Africa. My approach, while text-focused, was not aimed at a linguistic analysis of ideologies present in the texts, but rather 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. I will argue that these difficulties are related to both of the challenges to critical literacy discussed above.

### Students' writing on South African identity

Since the seminar course was to deal with representations of South Africa in South African literature, what we termed an insider perspective, we decided to begin with students exploring the way South Africa was represented by 'outsiders' in foreign travel guides: *The Rough Guide*, *The Lonely Planet*, *Footprint* guide and *Eyewitness* guide. In the first class, students compared the introductions to the four different guide books and in the second they compared entries on their own university town. *The Rough Guide* and *The Lonely Planet* were more political in focus and in the entries on the university town, they made some comment on the connection between the town, university and apartheid (e.g. that the notorious figure Verwoerd was educated there). While there was some linking of the town with apartheid

and/or political conservatism in two of the four guides, overall, the entries were more positive than negative and two of the guides presented an idyllic picture.

Partly in response to the 'outsider' representations of South Africa in the travel guides and also as a preparation for looking at the South Africaness of the short stories to follow, I asked my students to respond to the following questions in their journals after the second class:

1. How would you describe being South African?
2. Do you think there is a collective South African identity?

Most of the students responded optimistically about present-day South Africa, but they frequently expressed the desire for South Africa to be free from racial tensions and divisions, acknowledging the continuing deep-seated racial divisions which characterise our society. Liesel<sup>2</sup> writes:

...It's exciting being South African. Who knows what's going to happen in the future. There are so much potential, because we have such a lot of cultures and people who never had the chance to do something is now getting it...Although there's more interaction between racial/cultural groups than ever before we're still divided into groups and that makes it difficult to have a collective identity.

And Keith writes:

...I believe that all true South Africans share a positive attitude towards their motherland.

South Africans are those people who have turned their backs on the past and decided to start afresh. Racial prejudice is still prevalent among people and until they turn over a new leaf, they will never truly be South African.

Other students were more overwhelmingly positive, for example van Zyl:

Being South African means you're living in one of the most beautiful and diverse countries in the world...South Africa is a passionate and sociable nation and there is a bigger sense of respect and together[ness] between South Africans than the world might think.

And one student was overwhelmingly negative, yet still with a desire for optimism:

Being South African nowadays is all about

being negative and I would like it dearly for that negative to change to a positive (Jaco). Riana's journal entry combines all the elements I have outlined above (optimism, being part of a new generation, awareness of continuing divisions and strong desire for a non-racial South Africa):

Only being born in the eighties and growing up in a quite liberal town, I don't think I know the first thing about apartheid. In my mind things had always been complicated, but not nearly as much as I found it was later. For me being South African is therefore not about racial issues. It's never been about black, white and brown. I don't believe that that is all a land can be about. For me, being South African, is about something more...it's about something more positive...

I know that apartheid is far not over. But I believe we can have the identity of a liberal land...We can have the identity which I picture in South Africa in a few years, but South Africans has got to want that and work for that and stop focusing on previous issues and problems. [my emphasis]

Riana responds to the questions in a very personal way, beginning by telling the story of when and where she was born. She also begins by clearly distancing herself from the apartheid past: she was 'only...born in the eighties'; grew up 'in a quite liberal town' and she doesn't 'know the first thing about apartheid'. This distancing suggests a defensiveness, but there is also perhaps a tone of desperation in her attempt to convince the reader that being South African is 'not about racial issues' and is 'about something more.' Riana's words '*I don't believe that that is all a land can be about.* For me, being South African, is about *something more...it's about something more positive...*' read as a plea for this to be the case. She begins the second paragraph with a recognition of continuing problems. However, beginning the next sentence with the adversarial conjunction 'but' ('But I believe...'), she quickly takes the reader back into her desire ('We can have the identity which I picture...'). Riana's journal entry suggests that she strongly desires South Africa to be something different from what it is at the moment and dramatically different from its past. This expression of 'there must be more' than

the apartheid past (which Riana repeats in writing later in the course) to me expresses a wish, desire, that apartheid were not the grand narrative of our past and the dominant narrative of our current times. Like the students quoted above, Riana is clearly writing against her reading of the representation of South Africa's past in some of the travel guide entries and precisely resisting the undesirable way in which she feels interpellated by some of these texts. In another journal entry much later in the course Riana wrote, 'We are smothered with this issue [apartheid], coming from all sides'. The almost violent metaphor she uses of suffocation shows the extent to which Riana feels trapped in a past that is not of her making and, perhaps, in a space of critique rather than a more productive one. This deep frustration is accompanied by a strong desire to move beyond current social divisions and inequalities in South African society.

### **The '...little hard piece of grass in your shoe...': students' difficulties in reading apartheid literature**

In exploring Riana's 'resistance', there is a tension between the desire to escape the past, and attendant feelings of guilt, and a real desire for a new, non-racist and equal South Africa. Her position contrasts with that of another student who seems to be more concerned with escaping the past and consequently avoiding the acknowledgement of his continuing position of privilege in South Africa, than he is desiring of a more equitable future. In the third short story class, a heated discussion about why students had to study South African literature developed spontaneously among a group of students while the class was engaged in small group work. It is significant that students were working on the story "The Toilet" by Gcina Mhlope. The story is partly autobiographical dealing with Mhlope's development as a writer under oppressive circumstances in apartheid South Africa. In particular, the story caricatures the 'Maid/Madam' (domestic worker/employer) relationship common at the time and portrays the 'white' 'madam' particularly scathingly. The story also represents the stark contrast between the luxurious living conditions of the employer and the vastly inadequate living conditions of the domestic worker. I decided to give the other students in the class the opportunity to contribute

their views on studying South African literature as well and in response to my invitation to do this, the following exchange took place:

from Tutorial 7: 12/3/01

[André shoots his arm up into the air; note: André was not part of the small group who raised the problem.]

**CM:** ja

**André:** yes, I think everything we have read is racially connected

**CM:** racially connected, OK

**André:** and, and no just like saying, listen here how bad you know the white people treated the black people and because it's in the past, we just don't, we don't feel like dealing with that, because it's in the past. It's not our problem. We are a whole new generation and we live in harmony with each other and we don't feel like dealing with other people's problems

**CM:** uhhmm

**André:** and it gets thrown in our faces all the time

[Herman points to Riana to speak]

**Riana:** I can see the argument that we should know about it and it is part of our lives also. But that's why we should do one or two of these, but OK, we've been doing these [laughs] I don't know if it's just our school

**Herman:** we know about it now. We did all of this since Std 6

**CM:** ok so you're talking about your experience of literature at school as well not just in the course, but in the sense with the course as I've said, in the course we've done "Rain", we've done "Nocturne" which are not necessarily, and even "The Toilet" which is dealing much more with apartheid than the others, it's still not the central theme of the story as such

**Riana:** ja, ja, it's not!!

**Herman:** it's still there

**CM:** yes, it's there

**Herman:** it's like a little hard piece of grass in your shoe, it's not a thorn but it still irritates!!

**André:** //Ja , it's like that// you and this is exactly the same

(...)

[André raises hand]

**CM:** Yes

**André:** I just feel like, like in America, they, those guys sent wagons of whiskey off into the Indian tribes and killed them off like thieves

**CM:** ja, so they did hideous things is the point you're making

**André:** they did like hideous things, much more hideous than (CM: ja) than what the apartheid government ever did

**CM:** well, I think that's difficult to say. I don't think we should judge in terms of//

// people doing worse//

**André:**// well, we never,// OK, not we the apartheid

government never (...)

**Riana:** I just want to say about the issues. I don't think we shouldn't address them, I just wonder if we can get over it at some stage?

Note: (...) indicates sections of discussion or statements omitted.

// indicates overlapping speech or interruption.

After the class I asked myself why this discussion occurred at this particular moment. In the previous week we had discussed two different stories, both set during apartheid in District Six. However, firstly, despite this setting, these stories were not focused particularly on social inequality and apartheid as themes and, secondly, one of them did not represent any 'white' characters, while in the other there is one minor 'white' character who is not portrayed as pejoratively as the madam in "The Toilet". While Mhlope's story is centrally exploring how the narrator came to be a writer, it is also strongly portraying a particular 'black' experience of apartheid as well. It is also important to consider the fact that many of the students come from homes where domestic workers are employed. André begins the exchange quoted above by arguing that 'everything' the students had read thus far 'is racially connected' and on this basis problematic, but I had a strong sense that the students who resisted in this class were resisting "The Toilet" text in particular, and responding to the undesirable representation of the 'white' character in the story. Bringing their own meanings to bear on the text, or the meanings they felt expected to bring, some students also then felt interpellated by this character (and thus the text) and resisted this interpellation. However, André and Riana's different contributions to the discussion illustrate that students resist in different ways and for different reasons.

The level of Herman's frustration, and irritation, is clear from his remarks. After the class, Herman also spoke to me about how frustrated and angry he had felt when reading the story in preparation for the class and how he had written several pages raging about this in his personal diary. His statement, 'we know about it now. We did all of this since Std 6 [first year of secondary school]' shows that he believes that the students are reading "The Toilet" (and other apartheid literature) in order to learn about apartheid. It also reveals how he feels positioned by the text as somebody who needs to be taught about apartheid. Herman's simile

comparing the irritation he feels with apartheid literature to a 'little hard piece of grass in your shoe' seems to downplay the extent of his discomfort: 'it's not a thorn', which would be much more painful, it is only a 'little piece of grass', but perhaps he is trying to explain that what irritates him the most is that he cannot escape, or discard, the apartheid past and his links with it. Unlike the piece of grass in a shoe, he cannot simply remove his shoe and throw the grass out, though he may be attempting to do this by raising the issue for discussion in the classroom. His image thus suggests continual and inescapable irritation.

Herman may introduce the issue in the class, but it is André's narrative which dominates the discussion. Not only is he supportive of Herman's position (e.g. his comment 'it's like that' when Herman compares his irritation to the grass in a shoe), but he expresses his frustration far more strongly than any of the other students dare to do. André places apartheid firmly in the past and emphasises his investment in being part of the 'new' South Africa: 'We are a whole new generation...'. He also expresses a strong sense of accusation, for example, in his feeling that all the texts they have read thus far show 'how bad you know the white people treated the black people.' André romanticises the present situation in South Africa: 'we [new generation] live in harmony with each other', glossing over the continuing racial divisions of which most students show a strong awareness in their journal entries on South African identity discussed above. This statement also ignores any racial divisions in his immediate environment on the university campus itself.

André later puts forward the argument that other countries have done terrible things in the past which they don't really acknowledge and gives the example of the treatment of native Americans in the United States. By this he raises the question: why do we have to deal with this if young people in other countries don't? He then extends this example with an extreme argument that attempts to minimise apartheid atrocities by showing that the treatment of native Americans ('Indian tribes') in the USA was 'much more hideous than//than what the apartheid government ever did'. In doing so, André not only expresses his limited knowledge of what happened in apartheid South Africa, but

also his disbelief about the extent of the enormous atrocities. There is a stark contradiction between Herman's response earlier 'we know about it now' and André's lack of knowledge or disbelief as expressed here. How can one explain André's response? The slip in his use of pronouns from 'we never, ok, not we, the apartheid government never...' is, I think, particularly telling. André's 'we' here shows his identification with 'white' people in South Africa, and, in this instance, by extension with the apartheid government. Surely he can only make an association like this if he imagines that what 'we/they' did was not really that bad. André's continuing identification with 'white' people of older generations, with his family, is dependent perhaps on his belief that human rights abuses which took place in other parts of the world (in this case the USA) were 'much more hideous than...what the apartheid government ever did'. And his interpellation by the 'white' oppressor character in the short story, "The Toilet", is made possible by this identification with 'white' people of older generations.

André's strong investment in the 'new' South Africa suggests a desire to separate from the past, even to deny the past, and the continuing effects of apartheid in present day South Africa. This position, and thus André's resistance, contrasts with the way Riana positions herself in this class. For example, after his initial outburst, she says, 'I can see the argument that we should know about it and it is part of our lives also. But that's why...' thus showing her recognition of the continuing difficulties which apartheid poses even for young people today and refuting André's glossing over of these problems in his statement '...we live in harmony...'. Later in the discussion, after André's reference to the treatment of native Americans in the US and his attempt to minimise apartheid atrocities, Riana again distances herself from his view while at the same time maintaining her own frustration in dealing with apartheid: 'I just want to say about the issues. I don't think we shouldn't address them, I just wonder if we can get over it at some stage?' Although Riana is not overtly attacking André's argument, in saying 'I don't think we shouldn't address them', she is in effect countering his position as well as expressing a different fear of her own, 'can we ever get over [apartheid]?' Riana's fear of being trapped in [by] the past was also present



in her journal writing on South African identity, discussed earlier, where she expresses the fear that if we continue to focus on the past (and related issues of inequality and racism), we will never be able to move beyond it:

...We can have the identity which I picture in South Africa in a few years, but South Africans has got to want that and work for that and stop focusing on previous issues and problems (journal entry, tutorial 3).

However, again I believe that this fear which Riana expresses is different from the position André takes. Riana expresses the belief that discussing apartheid in the present might prevent us from moving beyond it and that South Africa has to be about 'more than' issues of 'race' and racism. She feels stranded in the past which we also see in her last statement in the extract above: 'I...wonder if we can ever get over it'. André's positioning of apartheid as 'other people's problem' seems to indicate a refusal to take any responsibility for working to end such problems and contrasts with Riana's recognition that 'apartheid is far not over'. However, both André and Riana share the experience of their identities as 'new' (post-apartheid) South Africans, and their desire to be part of a unified non-racial South Africa (albeit for different reasons and to different degrees), being under threat when they feel uncomfortably interpellated by the undesirable identity of 'white' oppressor which is represented in some of the South African literature, and in this case in Mhlope's story, "The Toilet". I am thus arguing here that students' sense of identities as 'new' South Africans often conflict with the way they feel interpellated as 'white' oppressors by the South African literature texts they resist and thus they are resisting such interpellations and emphasising their identities as 'new' South Africans. In this case, their rejection of the representation of the apartheid past in the text prevents students from engaging fully with the text and ultimately prevents us from moving to a critical deconstruction of this representation.

## Conclusions

In South Africa today it is clear that the role of critique is different from what it was under apartheid. My analysis thus has important implications for the way in which being critical is tied to particular socio-political contexts and historical moments. The extent to which critique

as a process is predominantly backward rather than forward looking, taking students into a past that they are frequently desperate to escape and leaving them feeling stranded in the past, is problematic in post-apartheid South Africa. It is true that while periods of intense change can be exciting and can offer up many opportunities (as Liesel points out of the 'new' South Africa), such periods of instability can also be deeply unsettling. For some of my students, such as Riana and André, these ideas connect with their feelings of being stranded in the moment of critique and stranded in the past. For Riana in particular, her fear is that if we continue to focus on critiques of the past, we are prevented from moving on in the present. In this case, critical literacy is working to disempower these students, rather than engaging them in a process of 'self-empowerment' outlined as one of the goals of critical literacy by Giroux (see Giroux, 1989: quoted above). This connects with Riana's fear: if we continue to focus on critiques of the past, how can we move on in the present?

Returning to Kress's ideas on critique and Design, it is important to note that while critique is often focused on the deconstruction of texts (for example, much critical literacy practice focuses on critical reading rather than on writing, or creating texts), Design is focused more on the production of new texts. Design may thus be a key idea in developing further university courses in South African literature. Perhaps students could engage more successfully with South Africa's apartheid past if they were also given the opportunity to design and produce their own alternative fictional texts, which represent South Africa now, as well as their visions for this, in addition to more traditional analytical writing within the critique mode. For some students, it was also easier to engage with the apartheid past in their own writing where they had more control over how they positioned themselves in relation to the past.

In justifying his belief in the necessity of dealing with the apartheid past in an interview discussion with me, one of my students, Ricardo, points out:

*...if you don't know your past, you don't know where you are going...*

My teaching in the critical literacy course discussed here is premised on exactly this belief, but we also need to take seriously the

difficulties for young South Africans of living with the legacy of an oppressive past that was not of their making. Thus my data also problematises notions of empowerment and change through critical literacy. While more recent writing on critical literacy has moved away from simplistic notions of self-empowerment, it has not adequately addressed questions such as who is being critical of whom and what might happen when critical literacy pedagogy works to disempower certain students. When critical literacy positions students in undesirable ways (as was the case with Riana where some texts positioned her such that she was unable to take up the identity of 'new South African' which she

desired), it is not surprising that it will be resisted. We cannot ignore students' feelings of entrapment, accusation and despair and in doing so we need to find ways of tapping the optimism about being South African that many of these young people express. Finally, we need to give students opportunities to design the kind of social future that they desire for the 'new' South Africa.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I signal 'race' as a social construction by placing 'race' terms in inverted commas.
- <sup>2</sup> I use pseudonyms to protect the students' identities.

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