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Title: *Whose teaching whom? Interrogating subjectivities in the teaching of literature in post-apartheid South Africa*

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Abstract (add a descriptive paragraph of Output): This paper focuses on the notion of reflexivity in teaching South African literature, particularly at institutions of higher learning. In the context of deconstructing and producing literary texts within the current South African landscape, the aim was to highlight the critical role of academic 'intellectuals' in the interrogation of their subjectivities when engaging with students from different 'racial' backgrounds and different socio-economic contexts. In other words, the seminar focuses on the ways 'white' academics, in post-legalised apartheid South Africa, may fail to account for the ways their own socialization 'racially',

1. Results in discourses of privilege in their teaching and producing of South African literature - with human costs for both themselves, the students they

engage and the readerships they attract and

2. How this lack of interrogation inadvertently maintains and reproduces 'white' supremacist thinking and behaviour.

Whose teaching whom? Interrogating subjectivities in the teaching of literature in post-apartheid South Africa

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Intro

People generally view the world from their own vantage point. Experiences of places, events, other individuals and groups, and even self, are apprehended through our own eyes, our own skins, bodies and minds. It is from this ever-shifting centre that we evaluate all that impinges on – and that comprises – that experiencing self. Most people are, in a very general sense, self-centred; and this – in spite of structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism – remains valid (Coullie, 2002: 226).

Building a democracy in contemporary South Africa means consistently assessing, through constructive criticism, the spaces where historical privileges based on 'race', gender, class and other socially-relevant subject positions continue to operate in ways maintaining and reproducing historical understandings of these subject positions. Academia is one such space. For this reason, this seminar will focus on the notion of reflexivity in teaching South African literature, particularly at institutions of higher learning. In the context of deconstructing and producing literary texts within the current South African landscape, my aim is to highlight the critical role of academic 'intellectuals' in the interrogation of their subjectivities when engaging with students from different 'racial' backgrounds and different socio-economic contexts. In other words, I will discuss the ways 'white' academics, in post-legalised apartheid South Africa, may fail to account for the ways their own socialization 'racially',

1. Results in discourses of privilege in their teaching and producing of South African literature - with human costs for both themselves, the students they engage and the readerships they attract and
2. How this lack of interrogation inadvertently maintains and reproduces 'white' supremacist thinking and behaviour.

Toni Morrison's book *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992: 11) is centred around the notion that effort must be exercised to "avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served." 'Race' then, becomes asynonymous with difference and 'other', but highlights the source of oppression; the ability of a 'white' world view to 'race', mark, name and construct this difference.

De-essentialising 'race'

In contemporary South Africa, 'race' continues to matter, serving as the primary signifier of personhood and human ability. 'Race' is therefore a social reality, which has been constructed socio-historically and politically. While my aim is not to reproduce essentialised discourses around 'race', it is important to be cognisant of the ways in which 'race' continues to shape particular social, material and economic realities for 'black' people in South Africa. But my argument in this seminar is that 'race' simultaneously, albeit not equally, has effects for 'white' South Africans so that the racialised socialization of 'white' South Africans have consequences for the roles they play in contemporary South Africa, and in particular, the ways they contribute/do not contribute to the

nation-building exercise. It is equally important to note the intersectionality of various subjectivities, so that 'race', gender, class, sexuality, disability and so forth become mutually exclusive, producing complex identities: it becomes difficult then to talk about 'white' and 'black' as all-encompassing identity positions.

Teaching and producing South African literature – reflexivity

It is my contention that a feminist/humanist poststructuralist paradigm will provide a teaching and publishing framework for academics at higher education institutions. This feminist/humanist approach would serve two purposes:

1. Account for the intersectionality of subjectivities such as 'race', class, gender and sexuality and
2. Provide the space for much-needed reflexivity on the part of 'white' South African academic 'intellectuals'.

It is my view that 'white' academic intellectuals in particular need to begin interrogating their socialization as 'white' South Africans in their teaching and writing, specifically when teaching courses on African and South African literature relating the narratives of historically disadvantaged subjects. History, in the past, has most often served the purpose of telling the colonial stories of men. As a consequence, herstories have often not been told. Taken further, colonial narratives have not told the stories of the oppressed 'other', this providing contemporary South African literature the space to tell those stories which haven't been told, to enable voices which were either invisibilised and/or marginalized.

But it matters who deconstructs these narratives. And the issue of who can speak for whom is a critical one which cannot be ignored in the current South African climate. The views of academic 'intellectuals', translated into teaching and publishing, matters to the extent that they can play a crucial role in challenging norms around 'race', gender and other socially-relevant identity markers. Because academics 'teach' South African youth, who will generate the future intellectual capacity of South Africa, it matters that the positions they hold are informed by a reflexive approach which takes into account the ways their socialization as 'white' South Africans impacts on their teaching and writing.

In teaching and producing South African literature, 'white' privilege is often unwittingly sustained through discourses which invisibilise its normality. Mandisi Majavu (2006), a cultural critic, has argued that the works of 'white' South African academics and producers of literature often serve to further marginalize, completely ignore 'racial' realities in South Africa and thus reproduce and maintain 'white' supremacist thinking. He refers specifically to J.M Coetzee, author of the 2003 Nobel Prize Winning novel *Disgrace*. Majavu (2006) points out that *Disgrace* cannot be removed from the contemporary global and South African climate, since the novel, in his view at least, attempts to provide a 'true' reflection of postcolonial South Africa. The core of Majavu's argument is that in his novel, Coetzee "subscribes to white supremacist notions of how black and white subjectivities are constructed in this white supremacist world." He further argues that Coetzee's novel

Fails to chart new frontiers of ideoscapes, which would challenge and subvert the present representation of postcolonial blacks and Africa in the

media. The novel must be described as being trapped in history, and history as being trapped in the book.

I found Moreton-Robinson's (2000) work, *Talkin' Up To the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, particularly useful in its objective to name and visibilise 'whiteness' as a site of power and dominance in the lives of white female academics. Of course, these discourses are not unique to academics identifying as feminists and can be extended to academics historically classified as 'white' in the South African context. Moreton-Robinson's argument elaborates on the invisibility of 'whiteness' in her interviews with white middle-class feminist academics in Australia. According to Moreton-Robinson, white women feminists are not racialised solely as whites but

presented as variously classed, sexualised, aged and abled even though the social construction of their racialised subject position is tied to the way in which 'whiteness' is 'taught, learned, experienced and identified in certain forms of knowledges, values and privileges (Giroux, 1997 in Moreton-Robinson, 2000: 126).

Taking Moreton-Robinson's view further, 'white' academics teaching and producing South African literature might advocate anti-racist practice in their teaching and research, but simultaneously might consciously and unconsciously exercise their 'race' privilege. The women in Moreton-Robinson's study (2000) were frequently unable to position themselves as privileged in terms of anti-racist practice. Their subject positions as *white* middle-class feminist academics appeared to be normalised, unnamed, unmarked, but centred. Their intellectual engagement with racism allowed for a position where these women perceived 'whiteness' as external to their identities, rather than a racialised subject position where they were personally implicated.

Taken further, 'white' academics teaching and producing South African literature might recognize that 'race' shapes the lives of 'others' (particularly in South African/African novels and reading material) but might not recognise their own 'racial' socialization as shaping their lives as 'white' South Africans. This is similar to Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) analysis which highlights that one of the key privileges of 'whiteness' is the apparent inability of many 'whites' South Africans to see how 'race' shapes their lives, choices and experiences. In Abby Ferber's (1998: 4) words: "Since race is believed to be something that shapes the lives of people of colour, whites often fail to recognise the ways in which their own lives are shaped by race."

It is critical that white South Africans begin to interrogate their subjectivities as 'white' South Africans and how the preservation of this location (which functions as a largely invisible and unnamed position) maintains 'white' supremacy in the teaching and producing of South African literature. When 'white' solipsism (seeing the world solely from the privileged position as a 'white' South African) is naturalized, it limits 'white' people from encountering full human experience with different subjectivities and even more, from deconstructing texts which would benefit from a reflexive approach. For 'white' academics then to speak/write for/about that which they may be unfamiliar with and imaginatively construct as the 'other', is a complex situation and serves to maintain the 'normality' of 'whiteness' within academia and in the South African context at large.

I am suggesting here that in the context of teaching and producing South African literature, it is necessary that 'white' academics place their socialization as privileged 'white' South Africans firmly on the agenda in the movement

towards transformative politics, "to address their structural position of white privilege and examine the 'racialness' of their experiences" (Holland-Muter, 1993: 55). Exposure to how 'black' South Africans experience the world from multiple perspectives is important if 'white' dominance is to be denormalised and decentred in a country working towards democracy.

Internalisation of 'white' privilege has not disappeared in South Africa after apartheid. The process of building a democracy means that all 'racialised' subjects need to interrogate the internalization of 'racial' constructs that deter us from moving towards a non-racialised society where these constructs do not serve as primary identification signifiers. It is my view that despite our colonisation and apartheid history and the contemporary climate of celebrating multiple ways of 'being' in the South African climate, 'whiteness' in the South African academy has not been interrogated sufficiently. I believe that this stems from two interconnected reasons. Firstly, due to our historical legacy of 'white' educational and economic privilege, there is a substantial presence of 'white' academics at tertiary institutions, including those institutions with a dominant 'black' student base. International and local literature on 'whiteness' has revealed that the normality and invisibility of 'whiteness' is apparently most difficult to see from the position of those socialized as 'white'. White academics are not immune to this apparent inability to see how their 'whiteness' filtrates into teaching, research, writing and relations with those identified as 'white' or 'black'. Many 'white' academics *may* not see how their 'whiteness' plays itself out when confronted with the 'other' in spaces historically dominated by 'white' South Africans. When 'race', racism and classism are raised as issues to be confronted, a number of defensive reactions might come into play. These may range from outright dismissal and/or evasion of the possibility that educated

'white' South Africans could be racist and/or classist, to silence around any issues regarding 'race' in the belief that race does not exist as a determining factor in the lives of black people since it is socially constructed. Erasmus (2005: 22) refers to this reaction as 'colour -blindness', a patronizing position to hold when 'race' continues to serve as primary signifier of identity. This denial of 'whiteness' and evasion of the 'real', psychological, material and economic effects of racialised constructions in post-apartheid South Africa serves to effectively reproduce and maintain 'white' privilege not to *see*; to sustain the invisibility of 'whiteness' and to ignore the ways in which the experiences and subjectivities of those who are not white are invalidated, undermined, questioned. The ultimate 'white' privilege is, as noted by Robert Jensen¹, "the privilege to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means."

Conclusion

It must be said that while I was this paper, I felt extreme discomfort using terms such as 'black' and 'white' to define people. We've probably all felt some discomfort using this 'racialised' discourse in our daily communication, in teaching and in writing. In some ways, I believe this discomfort to be an indication of a healthier frame of mind, signifying an understanding that 'race' is a social, political and historical construction which in no way serves as a determinant of humanity. So, while writing, trying to find the words and trying to express logically what they mean, deconstructing the falsehoods on which the world operates, I kept reminding myself that all this is part of the bigger project

¹ In Helfand and Lippin (eds). 2001: 51.

to destroy a capitalist and patriarchal system which continues to oppress people on the basis of damaging constructions. I hope that this paper has, at least, provided a space where at least one challenge can be interrogated further.

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