

Teaching Social Justice and Diversity through South/ African Stories that Challenge the Chauvinistic Fictions of Apartheid, Patriarchy, Class, Nationalism, Ethnocentrism ...

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Abstract

In a complex world where social, political and economic value systems are shifting, young intellectuals in developing societies need effective tools for reconstruction as much as for deconstruction. Anti-colonial approaches to literary studies can contribute to transformation by developing awareness of the significance of social justice and agency (empowered action) by exploring diverse South/ African subjectivities, subject positions, voices and values, even (if not ideally) in exceedingly large level one classes.

Students work with primary texts that tackle discursive and more material forms of power creatively. They learn how narrative building blocks are constructed, through formal elements such as character, narrator, plot, theme, style, audience. And they are taught metacognitive skills to enable them to analyse many familiar, naturalised and pervasive chauvinisms behind bigotry. These are taught *through* a heuristic to help them read and analyse each and all of the formal elements in relation to place, race, gender, class, nation, and culture. This is a synthesizing strategy aimed at countering the histories of systemic violence that persist despite their long-established bankruptcy.

These skills are explored and developed through a selection of short stories that deal with the challenges of difference across South/ Africa: gender identities (including sexuality and masculinity), inter/ intra-gender relations, sexism, racism, ageism, poverty, family violence, sexual violence, HIV-AIDS, inter-group/ global oppression. All the stories are in English, with a proto-feminist fantasy translated from isiZulu. Several stories

exemplify strong elements of African orature, and contradict colonial logic to produce and recontextualize knowledge developed in contexts of violence.

Keywords: postcolonial culture, identity and literature; teaching social justice and diversity; South/ African short stories, voice and agency; chauvinism and bigotry; transformation

1 Introduction

South African life has been woven out of many discourses and fictions of identity, such as race/ gender/ national/ ethnic homogeneity, differences, supremacy and purity. These ideologies were imposed by the colonial and settler colonial (apartheid) regimes for so long that they assumed the hegemonic status of truths, to which the unwary and the opportunistic still subscribe. That such entrenched fictions retain their hegemonic power is absurd this late in our young democracy and needs challenging.

Some of our literary works (among other arts) have been very effective at rendering and challenging such fictions and discourses of identity, both during and after the apartheid period. Postcolonial fiction¹ worthy of the name has striven to represent such narratives at the same time as it deconstructs them, weaving the weft of criticism into the warp of creativity, to generate further metacognitive development in all people yearning for greater freedom and justice.

In our large level one classes (of around 600 students, divided into two groups) I introduce the focus of this section, identity, by pointing out that none of us has had much choice over our identities, whether racial, gender, ethnic, or even national and class identities to a large extent. So what is the point of holding those identities against anyone? It is what a person *does* with her/ his received identities that counts. That is a fairer and more effective basis for such judgments, whether in fiction or in life. This helps to level and equalise the subject position of every student, whether oppressed/ beneficiary of apartheid, patriarchy, capitalism, etc. The aim here is to enable

¹ This genre is one among others, notably poetry, as argued elsewhere (e.g. Narismulu 2003).

and challenge students to think critically about social justice in our society and world, at the same time as learning to be engaged and effective in an increasingly diverse world.

Progressive or social justice conceptions of diversity involve recognising and appreciating the equality, dignity, complexity and rights of other individuals, communities and societies. The corollary, chauvinism, forecloses on the shared character of being and therefore existence, which extends to denying the rights of others, as happens in racist, patriarchal, class bound and other elitist systems. Bigotry is chauvinism in action².

Since the late-1980s I have addressed the challenge of bigotry at all levels of teaching, and have sought to break the silences and develop my understanding through scholarship and research I conducted and published. Deeply ingrained historical conceptions of difference have complicated our constructions of ourselves and others, and have stymied our interactions with each other at every level. This is one of our core challenges for this problem does not improve with neglect; if anything, denialism compounds the problem, much as in the case of HIV/ AIDS.

It is necessary for the deepening of human rights and democracy that the value of social justice and diversity are addressed by publicly-funded institutions and intellectuals. Our lecture rooms are important places for furthering the values and deepening the knowledge that will challenge the bankrupt histories and ideologies of otherness, give substance to *simunye*, and rescue many of us from a mindless nationalism that is little more than tribalism³.

Our universities need to actively promote social justice and diversity in policies, practices, research and curricula to overcome centuries of segregation and enable one of the most divided societies in the world to transform. Students are as central to this process as academics and other support staff. At least since the early-1990s, in an increasingly globalising

² This is for the purposes of teaching at this level and in the small time frame of six lectures (eight if possible) and two tutorials, which is very little but all that is currently allocated.

³ Nationalism and tribalism have colonial exploitation as their engines, beginning with the Dutch-British incursions to the FIFA football empire and beyond.

world, it has been apparent that it is also important to make a difference in the larger world, for our world is in fact one and indivisible, despite the national and ideological fictions entrenched for the benefit of elites, imperial forces, and the increasingly segregating operations of neo-imperial capital.

I have always assumed that our students are going to make a significant contribution to our society and our world, which informs my expectations of them and of myself. By way of reflecting on the teaching of a section on social justice and the complications of our time and place, this paper addresses the contribution of a range of outstanding South/ African writers to the challenges and resources of identity even while apartheid dictated its balkanising fictions. The following sections will focus on the teaching philosophy, and the experiments with curriculum development and pedagogy in a level one module.

2 Teaching Diversity

2.1 Constructing an Inclusive Programme that Challenges Entrenched Fictions of Difference

In my lectures I begin with what is most accessible and inclusive, for dealing with issues of difference can be quite scary, given our history and our manifestly inadequate skills (including intellectual) for engaging openly with our social realities. So I begin by noting that all human beings are storytellers, as is obvious from our frequent use of anecdotes, excuses, explanations, and lies. It is instructive that a range of professions work closely with narratives: lawyers, social workers, psychologists, health workers, historians, anthropologists, etc.

Traditions of oral storytelling (e.g. fairy tales, fables) are found in all societies, and are particularly well developed on our continent. There are hundreds of sub-genres (e.g. crime, romance, trickster), some dating back to the Bushmen tales (of Southern Africa), followed later by collections like the *Panchatantra* (India), *Aesop's Fables* (middle East), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (14th century England), the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm (17th century), *Brer Rabbit* (United States, though of African origins), etc. More recent exponents of the art of the short story include Anton Chekov, Joseph Conrad, George Orwell, and South Africans such as Herman Charles

Bosman, Can Themba, Nadine Gordimer, Zoë Wicomb, and the writers included in the primary readings in this section⁴.

An inclusive introduction helps counter the unnecessary histories of segregation. An integrated approach to the genre signals a challenge to the gratuitous history and perpetuation of social alienation, and prepares for the inclusion of stories from some of the most marginalised sectors. Central to relating better to the people around us who may be different on the grounds of gender, race, class, nationality, etc. is the challenge of confronting learned bigotry.

This is a good point in the lectures to contextualise the origins of Southern African and world art, by referring to the finding of a shard of engraved clay at Blombos cave in the Western Cape from some 70 000 years ago (McCarthy & Rubidge 2005). It is also a good place at which to reflect on the significance of narrative in creative reconstruction and analytical reflection. Caveats against newer forms of national chauvinism must also be addressed through the caution that this is but the *latest* finding, and that all human beings will continue to benefit even from the finding of older cultural artefacts in other places. In 2010 such an argument helped question the hype around hosting extravaganzas like World Cups that offer only vicarious and fleeting experiences to the millions of people who must bear the material costs for many decades to come.

Pedagogically, there is a conscious effort to situate the range of learners in familiar contexts, through:

- stories collected and reproduced in the Course Reader so that they are accessible to all students;
- tutorial questions (beginning with items such as: What do I already know about this topic?);

⁴ The stories have included Bessie Head's 'The Old Woman'; Asilita Philisiwe Khumalo's 'The Floating Room' (translated from isiZulu); Bessie Head's 'Life'; Gcina Mhlophe's 'The Toilet'; Joan Baker's 'Undercover Comrade'; Puseletso Mompei's 'I Hate to Disappoint You'; Mtutuzeli Matshoba's 'To Kill a Man's Pride'; and Shimmer Chinodya's 'Queues'.

- a cartoon to ease students into accessing (even in cases of ingrained or latent bigotry) and interpreting the core concepts, challenges and debates;
- a heuristic to help young analysts navigate and perform quite complex analytical operations;
- detailed skills-based worksheets;
- the provision of contextual information (in lectures, as well as in lecture note summaries distributed at the end of the lecture series); and
- reproducing interviews with the writers, analytical arguments by the writers, and secondary readings on the genre, orality, and creativity.

The stories, approaches, heuristic, secondary material, tutorial challenges, skills development exercises and the assignment, test and examination questions seek to locate all the students at the centre of the teaching and learning endeavour.

Part of our challenge as South African intellectuals (and emerging young intellectuals) involves learning how to communicate sensitively and assertively in public about the often closeted subjects of identity (Narismulu 2001b), which tend to be aired only within ‘in-groups’ that consider themselves homogenous. With the skill of the storytellers, and some trust and tolerance (of which there is plenty, even in huge first year classes), holding up the madness of our behaviour to light is sometimes enough to help it start to evaporate. This makes for exciting teaching and learning but whether it has a lasting impact requires far more sustained curricular attention, and further research.

There is a commonplace idea that unity is the opposite of diversity, which seems fair enough, except that these binaries say little about history and agency. However, I have learned that by *valuing* diversity what can be achieved, with some effort, is the goal of inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is a value that requires action and references history, as it is the opposite of that South African staple, *apartheid* (segregation). The attendant bigotry or

prejudice may be more productively characterised at this level of teaching as chauvinism, because young people have some familiarity with that concept, and have not learned to be too afraid of it. Almost as ugly and egregious as the other concepts, chauvinism works as the core concept in the section for it can be put to work to unpack patriarchy and sexism (including heteronormativity and homophobia), apartheid and racism, capitalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, ageism, etc. This is a fitting way of dealing with our legacy of bigotry: one of the satisfactions of intellectual work is that some of the most reprehensible human practices can be turned into valuable instructional material.

The term chauvinism signifies excessive support for one's own group or cause that precludes due regard for other subject positions, individuals or groups whom we may consider different. It represents a narrow, pre-digested conception of oneself and one's attributes. Such an understanding is at the root of our prejudices, and prevents us from understanding or appreciating others. Chauvinism lies at the core of most of the bigotry and prejudice that has characterised our society, notably during the colonial-settler colonial periods, but also before that, in the subjugation of women and groups like the Bushmen, who turn out, ironically, to be among the earliest communities in the world (McCarthy & Rubidge 2005). With just a little reflection it is obvious to students that chauvinism is at the core of virtually every form of oppression: sexism, misogyny (patriarchy), racism (apartheid), class (capitalism, feudalism), nationalism, ethnocentrism, ageism, etc. At the core of chauvinism itself under the overt manifestations of arrogance and grandstanding, is fear and ignorance. It is interesting that a number of South/ African writers have dealt with one or more forms of chauvinism in their stories, and a selection of these narratives form the primary readings in my teaching of the South/ African short story.

2.2 Conceptual Framework: Teaching Core Concepts

One way of dealing effectively with our generally inadequate approaches to our social and intellectual challenges is to offer students tools they need to deal substantively with a range of cognitive skills to be effective in academic work, in society and, as Griesel and Parker (2009) indicate, in the world of work. What is needed to deal with such challenges is what Apple (2008) has

identified as synthesizing strategies. Given the attention that a range of disciplines (including English Studies) pay to postcolonialism, it is important to develop more integrated approaches to the (often fragmented) cultural analyses that we undertake. Not just as postcolonials, but as global citizens committed to transforming all forms of neo-imperialism, we have special interests in countering the unnecessary divisions that have silenced and stymied us.

Analysis is at the core of the work that is done in many disciplines and fields, including literary studies, and more needs to be done to scaffold this important social and intellectual skill. For this reason strategies for promoting metacognition inform the design of the entire section. An explicit focus on reasoning balances with the attentiveness that must be paid to subjectivity in African literary studies (and indeed all humanities and social sciences). Students learn that analytical reasoning is generally expressed through concepts. Concepts help articulate points of view and assumptions (definitions, axioms, principles, theories, or models), they have implications and effects, and they can help lead to solutions or address challenges effectively. The Introduction to Short Stories revolves around the following core concepts, which articulate with the stories that are taught:

1. Identity and social justice;
2. Texts: short story (narrative form); influence: oral literature; medium: English, some isiZulu (translation);
3. Contexts: South Africa and Africa; city, township, rural village;
4. Diverse identities: gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationalism, age, language, etc.;
5. Discrimination: colonial/ apartheid/ patriarchal/ class opportunism, chauvinism, stereotypes, bigotry, oppression, violence; and
6. Narrative representations of difference: chauvinism, opportunism, oppression (singular and multiple forms), and violence:
 - Race: racism, apartheid;
 - Class: elitism, deprivation;
 - Gender: patriarchy, hetero-normativity, sexual relations, sexism, misogyny, sexual exploitation, HIV/ AIDS;
 - Age: elder/ youth stereotypes, oppression; and

- Cultural identity: ethnocentrism (including tribalism), nationalism, xenophobia.

7. Responses of characters/ narrators:

- Empowered: agency (i.e. empowered action), creativity (e.g. problem-solving, artistic, literary voice/s), resistance (challenging oppression), transformation;
- Disempowered: apathy, passivity, denialism, risk-taking; and
- Transitional figures.

These core concepts comprise one of the tools used to enable and challenge students to think critically about social justice in our society and world at the same time as they are empowered to be focused and effective in an increasingly diverse world.

2.3 Developing Awareness of the Pervasiveness of Chauvinism and Bigotry through a Cartoon

Awareness is central to knowledge, self-knowledge, and transformation. Attentiveness to questions of social justice is introduced through a cartoon, to encourage all students to learn how to recognise and analyse a range of familiar, naturalised and pervasive chauvinisms. Because most prejudices have become so entrenched and ‘natural’, the cartoon helps students become aware of the chauvinistic stereotypes and logics that influence thinking. Many years of teaching South/ African literature helped me realise that skills in metacognitive thinking are particularly useful for helping expose ingrained bigotry and for showing how discursive and material forms of oppression may be challenged creatively and analytically. The Conditions of Illusion cartoon (1993:85) serves as an effective catalyst for developing metacognitive thinking and analysis. It also helps students develop their responses to the various kinds of chauvinism and bigotry that appear in the stories.

Serving as an ice breaker at the beginning of the lectures and tutorials, the cartoon engenders humour, encourages student participation and stimulates a critical attitude.



Figure 1: The Conditions of Illusion cartoon (1993:85).

The cartoon is a handy tool for learning about a form of oppression (sexism) that has become so naturalised (through the operations of patriarchal power) that it is quite invisible to many people. The cartoon uses six frames to tell a story that is accessible and familiar (in that it resonates with virtually everyone's experiences), in ways that are sophisticated and dialogical. Through the words (voices) the cartoon records a range of injunctions that issue from the system of patriarchy. At the same time the cartoon challenges the values of patriarchy directly through the sequence of drawings that show how girls *and* boys grow up so stunted by patriarchal stereotyping that they are unable to develop fully or communicate with each other.

It also highlights the metacognitive skill of going beyond the 'naturalness' (i.e. the entrenched logic) of the dominant ideologies and discourses to address their contradictions. It helps people who may fear being sanctioned for challenging authoritarian systems to see how strategic action may be effective (in this the cartoon anticipates the themes of several stories).

The cartoon also illustrates how anti-sexist (including feminist) approaches to gender roles and relations do not only serve women's rights (as big as that battle is). By addressing the disabling stereotypes that both women and men endure, it shows that such interventions can also help liberate men from entrenched patriarchal demands.

The cartoon serves to reassure students who may have learned to be fearful of addressing 'difficult' questions of gender (or race/ class/ ethnicity/ nationality), or who have no experience (beyond their primary groups) of broaching such sensitive issues. It also offers a progressive place to start from, rather than the mindless racism, ethnocentrism and other forms of bigotry that all too many people encounter in 'own' group communication, or the crude sexism, elitism and unequal racial representations (some copied from western countries with inverse racial profiles) that pervade the media and commercials.

As a public text the cartoon counters the in-group stereotypes that characterise communication in bigoted subcultures, showing how form may help develop more public (diversified) engagement and dialogue on issues considered sensitive. It also shows how the form and content of a text may challenge censorious authorities by skilfully opening up what may have been made taboo (e.g. 'Don't criticise men/ Whites/ Blacks/ Indians/ Coloureds/

Americans', etc.) in ways that generate more light than heat. From the cartoon students also learn how far a little courage, imagination and frankness may go towards overcoming unnecessary histories of oppression and silencing. At the same time the cartoon engages readers who are conversant with feminist or other critical/ liberatory discourses, supporting them to go much further in their own analytical and activist work. In these ways the cartoon supports the urgent social need for people of different races, classes, genders, nationalities, ethnicities, etc. to make the shift from speaking only *about* each other in private to speaking *to* each other directly, and publicly.

What is also shown in the cartoon is that even the beneficiaries of elite power (e.g. boys in the case of patriarchy) receive emotionally destructive and socially stunting messages that may suppress or distort natural, amicable responses towards others. Various chauvinistic forms of socialization have the effect of incarcerating not just the other in 'conceptual prisons' (Spivak 1990) but the privileged subjects as well, constraining them to serve and reproduce inequitable systems. This is achieved through the disparaging stereotypes of people constructed as the other (who could be as close as mother, sister, wife, daughter in the case of patriarchy, or extending even to male relatives as happened in Rwanda). The destruction of the character, spirit and potential of people by groups who imagine themselves to be elites also occurs through toxic inducements and threats to members to secure ongoing control of ill-gotten benefits and resources that were hijacked from the broader society, as is evident in the tellingly inaccurate label of 'affirmative action candidate/ s' that is used in South Africa, where it is the inequitable *systems* like higher education that are still in need of thorough redress and overhaul.

The cartoon anticipates the focus of the stories that follow, stories which expose the operations of sexism, racism, imperialism, class or ethnocentrism and show how ordinary women and men deal with these challenges. Like the short stories, the cartoon encourages and rewards (with powerful insights) those who dare go beyond the still pervasive chauvinisms to explore the deeper and more meaningful layers of experience to be found in our lives. This suggests the capacity of the discipline to go beyond its vestigial functions to address the challenges of context and epistemology. The cartoon also serves students (and even tutors) as a tool for easily

identifying patriarchal logics and stereotypes, and by inference, racial logics and stereotypes, class logics and stereotypes, ethnocentric logics and stereotypes, nationalist logics and stereotypes, and so on.

Finally, as far as possible the concepts are taught inductively so that students have an opportunity to arrive at them on their own, in this way activating and centering prior (oral and incidental) knowledge and reading. Students are also encouraged (in class and through the Worksheets) to do independent research using the library, internet, notes and exercises in the Course Reader and Workbook, etc. and raise their findings in tutorial discussions⁵. This is intended to help students work out their own interests and values in relation to the concepts under study at the same time as they learn the importance of research and learning in community with their peers, tutor, lecturers and others. It is important for students to have the space to explore and develop their own ways of dealing with these social contradictions, at the same time as enabling them to recognise the inherent dynamism of knowledge, for these dialectical and dialogical processes will recur throughout their lives as public, postcolonial and majority world intellectuals.

2.4 Introducing Gender Analysis, to Empower Students to Tackle all Forms of Oppression

In introducing the concept of gender I draw on the cartoon to point out the ubiquitous and normative character of patriarchal (as well as racial, class, ethnic and national) chauvinism, and the disabling effects its norms have on people who are 'othered'. Race-class-gender chauvinisms dislocate most, if not all, South Africans. Submissiveness to such unrepresentative norms is completely unnecessary at this point in our history, and reasonably educated people need to take more responsibility for disabusing themselves of what they tacitly allow to oppress themselves, and move on to deal with the real and urgent problems of our time.

⁵ In lectures, tutorials, notes and self-study exercises attention is also paid to skills in reading, analysis, argument construction, writing, and test/ time management to serve personal, social, intellectual and career development.

It is usually easiest to introduce the critique through the best known form of chauvinism: patriarchy represents a system of male authority and privilege, in which men have much more social power than women merely as a result of their biological identity. Patriarchy is found everywhere, e.g., in the way couples, families, communities, corporations, governments, and global organizations are structured, function and communicate. Women experience oppression in most societies, even in South Africa, where the constitution recognizes gender equality. The cartoon also helps address the disabling and unnecessary stereotypes that women and men too endure.

The concept of masculinity is meaningful wherever gender roles are distinct (i.e. virtually everywhere). Masculinity refers to maleness and to behaving in ways considered typical for men (behavioural norms are associated with given gender identities). Through the gender/ sex system biological sexuality is used to set up social norms that privilege men. Women tend to be constituted as the 'other' (the shadow) of masculinity. This impacts on perceptions of women, norms governing women's behaviour, and women's own self-images. Women who deviate from patriarchal norms risk ostracism and violence, as do some homosexual men.

Even in relatively peaceful societies, young men tend to be socialized to engage in risky and aggressive behaviour (sometimes through injunctions such as 'Be a man' from loved ones, peers and media that glamorize macho role models). The consequences are evident in the high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, road accidents and injuries, HIV infections, interpersonal violence, and deaths from unnatural causes. Increasingly, these problems are also affecting young women, which is a travesty of the meaning of equality (because they represent the most reductive denominator). We can all do better than risk our lives mindlessly, because we are intellectuals, and publicly funded at that. We are meant to be in a new society but our thinking remains surprisingly hopeless and bankrupt. Why should publicly-funded academics be reproducing the old ways of thinking and blaming when we are among the best placed to transform ourselves, our curricula, students, institutions and societies.

That's only gender, how much more complicating are the operations of class, race, age, geographical location, nationalism, linguistic marginalization, and educational underdevelopment? The majority of people in South Africa experience numerous interwoven layers of oppression, which

raises the challenge of what are we doing about all these oppressive systems that should have long been overcome, at least in the publicly funded palaces that are our universities.

2.5 Tackling Various Forms of Chauvinism, Prejudice and Bigotry

For some years I have used a conjunctural approach to overcome the contradictions that many South Africans, including many intellectuals, display: acute sensitivity to particular forms of oppression (e.g. gender) accompanied by apparently total incomprehension of other forms of oppression (e.g. race or class). Encountering such inconsistencies challenged me to work out what would enable intellectuals to perceive and overcome such ugly and disabling blind spots in a heterogeneous society/ world in which egalitarianism is not only a desirable value but a life skill.

It became apparent that the simplest way to disabuse anyone of learned insensitivity to particular forms of oppression and social justice is to draw on a form of oppression that the person understands as a starting point, and incrementally address the other forms of oppression:

The most effective way to challenge a form of oppression that seems 'natural' (to a beneficiary of a particular system of privilege) is to invoke a form of oppression that that person has experienced, establish agreement about what it means and then challenge the person to transfer recognition to the other forms of oppression. Engaging race, gender and class stereotypes alongside each other helps overcome the selective perception characteristic of a particular form of privilege and counters the marginalisation of particular forms of oppression (Narismulu 1999)⁶.

⁶ While this works well enough in classroom engagements with students, and in tests, assignments and examinations, it would be interesting to test its efficacy under more complex conditions, particularly where histories and discourses of self-interest prevail.

Gender identities, like racial and class identities, can be complicated. There are men who do not subscribe to patriarchy just as there are women who actively serve the interests of patriarchy while being oppressed by it (illuminating Gramsci's idea of the hegemony of power). Not all men benefit from patriarchy in the same way. Some men enjoy elite (class or racial) privileges while others are subservient, e.g., black women and men were subordinated to white men and white women under apartheid (and colonialism), as 'The Toilet' by Gcina Mhlophe and 'To Kill a Man's Pride' by Mtutuzeli Matshoba illustrate. The class/ race oppression that men experience is often linked to how they treat the women in their lives. Shifting gender or any other form of inequality cannot be expected to work if it occurs in isolation.

Feminists have identified and challenged previously naturalised systems of male privilege and dominance, and mobilised support for gender equity and women's empowerment. Despite this individual feminists and feminist groups have long been pilloried, by critics who are conspicuously silent about the problems of patriarchy and their own contradictions. This closely resembles the labelling of Nelson Mandela as a 'terrorist' for decades by the people who supported and benefited from apartheid and even some people from among the oppressed groups who were unable to think for themselves. Besides the impact of hegemony, this is also the consequence of the systematic educational and social underdevelopment that occurred under apartheid and colonialism.

3 The Stories: Exploring Issues of Social Justice through f(r)ictions of Chauvinism and Bigotry

Eight South/ African short stories dealing with questions of social justice were chosen to enable students to interact confidently and skilfully with a variety of discursive subjectivities. All the stories are used to help students learn to read attentively and deconstruct the assumptions, concepts, reasoning, form, style and speech patterns in the narrative texts as well as in their own lives. These are taught through a range of metacognitive skills to enable students to learn that they can use their otherwise binaried resources of words-worlds (or texts-contexts) as a continuum.

Fictional narratives have the power to alert us to the many narratives

and fictions of being that inform our consciousness and which have become naturalised through racial, class, gender and cultural hegemonies. A great strength of the arts such as literature is their capacity to represent social challenges, articulate their complexities from various points of view, as well as offer commentary, alternatives and solutions, often well in advance of the development of social and academic analyses (Narismulu 2001a)⁷. Through the selection of texts that reward attentive reading, students are encouraged to develop more engaged analyses of characters, themes, plots, narrator, style etc. as resources and skills for making greater sense of these referents in their own lives. This works, in möbius-strip fashion, to enable them to draw on their life experiences (or those of people around them) to make greater sense of what they are reading. So the culture of inter-relatedness, inter-transferability, equivalences, and inter-permeability is introduced before engaging with the specifics of form (and more poststructuralist issues such as inter-textuality, which includes references to the oral tradition).

All the stories produce, reproduce and recontextualize knowledge (Bernstein 1996, cited in Apple 2008) to engage insightfully with the challenges of difference (diversity). All have characters (main, and some secondary as well) who are socially marginalised, singly or severally on the grounds of race, gender, class, rural location, age, education, marriage, HIV, language, ethnicity, and nationality. Five of the seven writers are Black Africans: Asilita Philisiwe Khumalo, Gcina Mhlophe, Puseletso Mompei, Mtutuzeli Matshoba and Shimmer Chinodya. Two of the South Africans were classified as Coloured: the late Joan Baker and Bessie Head, who never knew her White mother or her African father. Five of the seven writers are women. Among the writers are two Batswana: there are two stories by Bessie Head (who found apartheid intolerable and left to settle in rural Serowe) and one by Puseletso Mompei (who has been working in Johannesburg). One of the male writers, Shimmer Chinodya, is from Zimbabwe.

⁷ This may well have been the reason that some intellectual gatekeepers and beneficiaries of apartheid disparaged oppressed writers who dared to challenge the injustices, which a number of South African writers did particularly well, despite the criticism and the structural repression they endured (Narismulu 1998).

Through the selection of stories and writers⁸ the challenge of representing people who have endured oppression is tackled. It makes an enormous difference that these writers have written powerful, lively and engaging stories that give students a good introduction to the richness of this often disparaged period in our cultural history. Such stories challenge students to:

- think in more focused ways about South/ African experiences and challenges;
- make links to their own lives, and ask more questions about issues that are often muted or silenced, such as race, class, gender, ethnic, national and language differences;
- access a variety of cultural forms, histories and methods of social production;
- understand the writers as fellow intellectuals and citizens who offer significant knowledge about the world and how people respond to their challenges;
- be attentive to the feelings, ideas, concerns and roles of African/ world citizens, artists and intellectuals;
- question the legitimacy of the dominant power-knowledge systems and consider alternatives to them;
- challenge racist, patriarchal, elitist, ageist, hetero-normative or ethnocentric (including unduly westernised, Anglicized or Americanised) representations of people and values;
- develop their capacity to understand and engage with emerging discourses;
- participate consciously and actively in the development of African literature in English, in race, gender, class, ethnic and national relations; and in discursive constructions of these identities and challenges such as HIV/ AIDS;

⁸There are many more than the approximately 2000 stories I audited during initial preparations for the teaching.

- identify various manifestations of the chauvinisms that undermine individual/ social development as well as interpersonal and intercultural accord, and think through the options exercised by different characters; and
- counter class chauvinism (some of it incipient) and rethink their own and others' subject positions in relation to the geopolitics of the English language, which needs to offer better advantages as a cultural currency (than the financial currencies that mainly serve neo-imperial globalization).

Several writers show that the frightened self and its pseudonyms inform unthinking self-caricatures by self-important bearers of apartheid/ colonialism/ patriarchy/ capitalism/ ethnocentrism/ nationalism. Overcoming internalised fears (sometimes expressed as hatred of others who are constructed as different, inferior, deviant or undeserving) is closely linked to fears about the alienated self. In her story 'Life', Bessie Head illuminates the problem through the character of the macho Lesego whose chauvinism, despite his successes, is predicated on an underlying lack of confidence and communication skills. This is apparent even today in all too many of the unconscious behaviours South/ Africans have inherited from the past and which are visible in the narrow, threatened, increasingly-competitive self, in the ever-assailed, ever-fragmenting ego that must compete at all costs, even to the death, for whatever is valued, whether lofty or ridiculous: a country, car, salary, partner, or game. Yet the value that is supposedly generated through endless competition can never quite compensate for the absence of self-worth. The question of intrinsic value gets lost in the macho hype of an overly materialistic and superficial approach to the world. As majority world intellectuals we need to contradict imperial logic (Ngugi 1986) and learn to look beyond the dismissive attitudes towards the other and the mistakenly narrow constructions of self-interest that have characterized apartheid, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies.

While our world is slowly beginning to appreciate the value of biological diversity many intellectuals still battle to grasp the value of human diversity, which needs simple tolerance and open, caring communication, as Bessie Head tried to teach decades ago through her shocking yet poised and

insightful story. Indeed the valuing of social diversity (including one's own differences from entrenched norms) is central to the ethos of social transformation, helping reverse the hold of the prejudices, exclusions and fears that characterise the chauvinism underlying racism, sexism, elitism, ethnocentrism and other forms of bigotry. Mtutuzeli Matshoba's apartheid era story 'To Kill a Man's Pride' (1980) tackles many of these challenges in ways that are instructive and sophisticated.

The power of storytelling is used by all the writers to challenge bankrupt discourses in the governing narratives, to inscribe new narratives even as they examine new ways of being (through the plot and character representation), new values (e.g. through new themes), and more caring ways of communicating with and treating each other.

The First Story: 'The Old Woman' by Bessie Head

The first story I teach is Bessie Head's 'The Old Woman', which counters the stereotypes attached to the demographic: the feebleness and powerlessness of old age, exacerbated by race, poverty, rural underdevelopment and social disregard. The themes of this very short story revolve around the intrinsic value of all people, self respect and intra-gender responsiveness.

Through her narrator in 'The Old Woman' Bessie Head articulates a personal ethical position that respects and values social and class diversity. The narrator celebrates the dignity of the poor old woman and her equally poor woman relative, showing the reader that human value resides in a variety of locations. Through the empathetic responsiveness of the participatory narrator, Head challenges the reader to either perpetuate (however passively) or transcend the barbaric systems of social inequality in which we find ourselves. For young people preparing to be leaders in a world that seems to be governed, economically and politically, by insecure and irresponsible egos, this tiny story deftly captures the social and cultural dimensions of community and individual responsibility, and suggests the value and benefits of respect and sensitivity when negotiating with others in our increasingly complex social conjunctures. With its quiet insistence on intrinsic values, this is a very mature and instructive African vignette against the shallow, noisy materialism that pervades much of our world.

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Despite its brevity ‘The Old Woman’ is very resonant, and sets out to provoke its readers to reflect on issues such as:

- How much humanity do we (intellectuals) actually have?
- What appreciation do we have for the lives of people around us and what can we learn from them?
- Do we treat the people around us, who still endure the oppressions of the past, with dignity, consideration and fairness?
- To what extent are we aware of our own limitations?

Bessie Head challenges a range of chauvinisms in this story: class elitism, sexism, ageism, ethnocentrism, and the hegemony of the English language. Like Matshoba, Head does not only teach the art of the story with wisdom and grace, she also teaches a poetics of care and resistance. This is done while the narrative responds to the underlying challenge of how to remain sane and effective in a violent and dislocated world. In addressing this challenge Head, Matshoba and the other writers illustrate the contention of Amilcar Cabral (1979) that art has the capacity to make a powerful contribution to oppressed people’s struggles against various forms of domination.

The horrifying circumstances of Bessie Head’s birth and estrangement from her mother and family are issues that are raised after students have had a chance to analyse the story as well as the story ‘Life’. This helps them to develop a clear sense of the themes of each story. Once this is well established (through the lectures, worksheets and tutorial discussions on each story) students are invited during the third lecture to observe how a woman of Black and White parentage, who was profoundly excluded by the apartheid political and social systems, dealt with the challenges of identity through the resources of narrative art. Overcoming Head’s own marginalisation and degradation by the apartheid system, the complex, ambitious and deeply engaged stories underline how various forms of bigotry and chauvinism may be tackled by people who have very few options or resources. Students are invited to read Head’s responses to such challenges alongside their responses to these and other challenges, as well as

the responses of family members (e.g. grandmothers, given that Head was born in 1937) to the forms of chauvinism and bigotry that have been encountered.

4 Conclusion

Through these approaches, methods and generative stories the Introduction to Short Stories attempts to assist all students, irrespective of race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, or other identities, to begin to develop agency through metacognitive skills and transformative practices. The objective is to shift the focus from received identities (where some seem to feel stymied into passivity) to the interesting and galvanizing challenge of what we *do* with such identities. The larger goal of this teaching and learning project is to help students find their own voices (adapted from Greene 2000), overcome their obstacles (Freire 1973), draw on generally difficult histories and subject positions as resources to change their lives (adapted from Grumet 1980), and so strengthen their capacity to improve their world (adapted from Freire 2004)⁹.

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⁹ Given that 12 August 2010 – 11 August 2011 was the International Year of Youth (cf. United Nations website <http://social.un.org/youthyear>) helped strengthen the thematic focus on the social and intellectual empowerment of young people in my 2010 teaching of the section.

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