

# **‘Behind the doors of learning’: The transmission of racist and sexist discourses in a History classroom**

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*Now that the doors of historically white schools have officially been opened to Black learners, this paper presents a critical analysis of discourses of domination transmitted behind the doors of learning in a History classroom. While the official History curriculum (NCS, 2002) advocates multi-perspectival epistemological approaches, this paper illustrates the subordination of epistemic goals to racist and sexist ideological goals through the transmission of racist and sexist discourses. A teacher’s lessons were observed, audio-taped, transcribed and analysed according to critical discourse theory. The conventional Grade 10 topic, The conquest of the Aztecs by the Spanish, was mediated through racist and sexist formal and informal discursive strategies such as the use of teacher power to silence contestation of inaccurate statements; the use of metaphor, simile, and binary oppositions to convey prejudicial meanings, derogation, inferiorisation, ridicule, jokes, disclaimers, and stereotyping that subsumed the historical topic being taught. The analysis exposes the informal yet effective workings of power for the perpetuation of discourses of domination in the History lesson. Such discourses subjected learners to a form of symbolic violence which may lead students to ontological misrecognition of self and race.*

**Keywords:** History curriculum, discourse, ideology, racism, sexism, symbolic violence

## **Introduction**

The form that the History curriculum should take is particularly challenging in post-conflict societies as traumatic memories, experiences and interests are carried by teachers and learners. How these experiences are conveyed differs in terms of who is describing the event – whatever description is legitimated socialises learners into particular ontologies or ways of thinking about and seeing the world. For example, by presenting Australian History written by white people a particular set of knowledge and understandings is presented. Such accounts may not be complete or accurate from the perspective of the indigenous people who experienced the process. While white Australians write about “settlement” Black Australians describe this as “invasion, occupation and genocide” (Lovett & Smith, 1995).

History, in the post-apartheid curriculum (NCS, 2002) is aimed at permitting the unofficial, the hidden to become visible through a commitment to the idea that historical “truth” can be subjected to rigorous analysis by providing opportunities for “border crossing” (Weldon, 2009). The History teacher is called upon by the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) to prepare learners for full participation in a democratic society, promote their sense of personal agency, and foster among learners the skills to make informed choices. History is considered by the curriculum designers as a vehicle for examining “with greater insight and understanding the prejudices involving race, class, gender (and) ethnicity” (NCS, 2002:9). The History teacher is therefore viewed as a significant agent for positive social change as well as the intellectual development of learners. Thus pupils need to be provided with opportunities to engage with texts that both affirm and interrogate the complexity of their histories through creating classroom conditions that facilitate pupils’ ability to speak, write and listen in a “multi-perspectival language”. In such multi-perspectival discourses “pupils are engaged as border crossers who challenge, cross, remap

and rewrite borders as they enter into counter-discourse with established boundaries of knowledge” (Weldon, 2009: 182pp?).

Political and curriculum change has required all teachers to adjust their curriculum, pedagogy and thinking to embrace human rights such as non-racism and gender equality, social justice and equity. The interplay between the changing social field and the individual has been conceptualised by Bourdieu (1993). He points out that one’s *habitus*, which refers to an individual’s characteristic ways of thinking, acting, feeling and being, is largely shaped by one’s history which intersects with one’s present circumstances and the physical spaces or field one occupies. Changes in the political field in South Africa, from apartheid to democracy, require individuals, both victims and beneficiaries of apartheid alike, to shift their *habitus*. The field is, however, continuously evolving and if the subject is unable to grow with the changing context s/he runs the risk of clinging to anachronistic and outmoded notions and practices. The individual may be in danger of becoming what Bourdieu terms “a fish out of water”, at odds with one’s social surroundings and unable to grasp the *doxa* which are the assumed rules and values that are perceived by most to be “natural” (Maton, 2009:60-61).

The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the discourses transmitted behind the doors of learning in a History classroom and briefly compare them with the intended History curriculum. The key questions posed in this study are: Does History discourse in the classroom provide opportunities for border-crossing? Are students provided opportunities to engage with texts that affirm and interrogate their historical discourses? Are students encouraged to produce multi-perspectival texts?

## **Ideology, curriculum and discourses of domination**

The ideological role of the curriculum has been highlighted by a range of writers from the 1970s (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1994, Carr, 1993, Cornbleth, 1990). Ideology from the critical perspective refers to the use of repressive forms of power to legitimate meanings “which serve to establish and sustain relations of domination” (Thompson, 1990:56pp?). According to Fairclough (2001), the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language. Ideologies are embedded in, communicated through and perpetuated or challenged by language. The word ‘discourse’ implies the view that language is not just a technical means of communication but also constitutive of meaning.

Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis approach, particularly the ‘ten questions’ method for interrogating texts which includes close examination of vocabulary (the experiential, relational and expressive value of words), synonymy and antonymy, strategic use of pronouns, syntax, grammar, and deployment of metaphor (Fairclough, 2001:92-105), framed the analysis of the teachers discourse. The *experiential* value of words provides the receiver with cues as to the manner in which the producer of the text experiences the world which s/he inhabits. By *relational* value Fairclough refers to the means by which words reveal the producer’s social relationships that are enacted in discourse while *expressive* value refers to the producer’s assessment of his/her reality. *Synonymy* may be used to stress a point or affect a resemblance between things while *antonymy* sets up tension by creating an oppositional or binary relationship between concepts. The choice of *pronouns* such as ‘we’, ‘you’ and ‘them’ reflects relationships of power and creates perceptions of opposition or solidarity. In the examination of *syntax and grammar* Fairclough recommends an analysis of *active and passive voice* in order to observe how agency is either revealed or concealed through tactical positioning of subject, verb and object, and how the mode of expression differentially positions the subject. Whereas in the *declarative mode* the transmitter is positioned as the imparter of information to the receiver, in the *imperative mode* the transmitter seeks to command compliance of the receiver. In the *grammatical question mode* the speaker requires information of the addressee or makes an implicit statement by using rhetorical questioning. In all three instances there is an asymmetrical power relation in which speaker or writer commands compliance from the receiver. Fairclough also points out that the use of *metaphor*, in which one thing is tacitly said to resemble another, serves an ideological function that can influence the recipient’s understanding of reality.

Van Dijk (2001) further recommends a focus on the tactical deployment of *derogation and inferiorization, exclusion and bias, stereotype and disclaimers* to identify the use of language for the perpetuation of racism. *Derogation* ranges from the use of disparaging language to “supremacist derogation stressing the Other’s intellectual, moral and biological inferiority” (Van Dijk, 2001:361). Semantic and lexical devices may also be employed to stress difference, implying deficiency or deviance among ‘Others’. The speaker or writer may, however, also attempt to mitigate the perception of racism by using semantic devices such as *disclaimers* (for example “I am not racist but ...”).

## The context of the study

The empirical data for this paper was collected at a former white model C school. Black learners were admitted for the first time in 1992. Increasing enrolment of Black learners and the beginning of employment of Black teaching staff led to ‘White flight’. At the time of the study the majority of the learners were Black while the majority of the teachers were White. Many of these teachers began their careers prior to 1992 and received their training and early professional grounding in a segregated education system as did the authors of this article. The school management and administration remains almost entirely White as can be observed from the following table:

**Table 1**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>School</b>
Number of learners	1290
Number of Black learners	1225 (95%)
Number of White learners	65 (5%)
Total number of teaching staff	54
Number of Black teaching staff	18 (33%)
Number of White teaching staff	36 (67%)
School management Black	0
School management White	4
School administration Black	1
School administration White	3

## Data collection and analysis

Since the majority of the teachers in this school are White, the teacher who was observed came from this population group. The choice was not a deliberate one, but merely reflects the demographics of the teaching staff. This teacher’s Grade 10 History lessons were observed, videotaped and transcribed. Informal interviews were also conducted after the lesson as a means of validating the data analysis. Informed consent to collect data was obtained from the school principal, staff and teacher in the study. The school, staff and students were assured anonymity and confidentiality. Since much of racist and sexist ideology was inscribed in and transmitted through language a critical discourse analysis approach was used to expose the workings of power for the perpetuation of racist and sexist power relations reflected in society.

In the analysis of the classroom discourse the authors described the teacher’s activity and the interaction in the classroom in the past tense but observed the literary convention of discussing the teacher-generated text in the present tense.

The findings apply specifically to the school studied. How general such discourses are across similar school contexts is a subject begging urgent large-scale empirical investigation.

## Overview of the lesson

The topic, *The Spanish conquest of the Aztecs*, was narrated to learners and accompanied by the use of metaphors, similes, jokes and analogies that inferiorised the Aztecs and the colonised, on the one hand, and aggrandised the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes and colonisation by force, on the other. The conquest of the Aztecs was paralleled with the story of David and Goliath. The teacher intimated that Goliath's fall was due to poor reflexes caused by a brain tumour and that the Aztecs were colonised by a paltry number of white men due to their inferior intellectual abilities. Learners' questions regarding the verification of the teacher's opinions presented as 'fact' were dismissed by the teacher. He then provided a description of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, and the arrival of Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes, whom he commended for his radical commitment, exemplified by the burning of his ships. The lesson was redolent with stereotypes of African people's fear of reptiles, of suicide bombers' belief in being rewarded 'with 70 virgins in heaven', of the highly emotional and irrational nature of women, and the superstitious beliefs of Zulu people.

## Racist discourses behind the doors of learning

The teacher began the lesson by asserting his authority as the teacher and thus the source of knowledge in his opening sentences with the recurrent use of the first person pronoun 'I'. The learners were informed that 'I' prepared the lesson and then the educator went on to share with the learners his 'own life experience'. The teacher thus established his right to pronounce what he considered legitimate understanding of the topic and to legitimate his view as the only rational one.

The teacher then set up a parallel between the Aztec and African people who, he argued, shared a common fate: being colonised by a 'handful of White men'. The Aztecs and Africans were **othered** as 'those people' and depicted as hapless victims who despite their numerical advantage were unable to stand up to the European colonisers. This depiction of the Aztecs and Africans **inferiorises** them – constructing them as deficient in the agency necessary to withstand even a paltry number of Europeans. The teacher then discussed the military advantages enjoyed by the Spanish, in particular their possession of horses.

Next the teacher commenced with an extended **metaphor** in which he likened the Aztecs (and, by extension, Africans) to the Biblical Goliath, while the colonisers, in this instance Cortés and his party of 460 conquistadors, were compared to David. While superficially it would appear that this metaphor is intended to emphasise the disparity in population size and strength, it valorises the Spanish, investing them with qualities of courage and righteousness that are traditionally associated with David, while the Aztecs are compared to Goliath – 'the uncircumcised Philistine ... (who defied) the armies of the living God' (1 Samuel 17). Thus through the use of this analogy, the teacher tacitly invested the Spanish conquistadors with moral authority and rectitude and vilified the Aztecs and, by extension, the colonised Africans. This metaphor also disseminates and bolsters Eurocentric stereotypes of the heathenish nature of non-Europeans. Furthermore, the analogy can only be fully understood or appreciated by learners with a Judeo-Christian cultural frame of reference which means that any of the learners who do not have the benefit of the hegemonic cultural viewpoint established by the teacher in the classroom are excluded from accessing meaning. The teacher also clearly positioned himself as a Christian by recalling his experience of Sunday school and thus implicitly classified the classroom discourse within a Western Christian world view.

In the discourse that followed Goliath, who is representative of colonised non-Europeans, is othered as '*this man*'. The educator then made extensive use of similes, focusing on Goliath's apparent intellectual limitations: he is described as being 'as thick as two bricks', having a non-functional brain and as being 'stupid'. By logical extension, therefore, the teacher ascribed similar mental limitations to the colonised. The teacher then used **antonymy** to magnify the courage of David and, by implication, the colonisers. The learners were repeatedly reminded of the disparity in size in juxtapositions such as 'big versus small', 'huge man ... little boy' and 'small and big'. This reinforces the impression of courage in the face of danger that is ascribed to David and consequently to the Europeans.

As the teacher's exposition progressed he moved from the first person to the second person with the repeated use of the **pronouns** 'we', 'our' and 'us'. This tactical deployment of second person pronouns is

aimed at building a feeling of consensus. It creates the impression that the learners are in agreement with the teacher, particularly in phrases such as ‘we are told’, ‘we would call a catty’ and ‘we have proved our point’.

Further evidence of the teacher’s effort to pre-empt any challenge to his authority is the manner in which he dealt with the enquiry which one of the learners made. The learner wished to know how the nameless ‘they’, the anonymous authorities cited by the teacher, arrived at the conclusion that Goliath had a brain tumour. This question would not only have provided an opportunity for discussion on methods of historical enquiry, how hypotheses can be validated and how historical reliability can be tested, but it could also have stimulated dialogue about how historical narratives are constructed, and provided an opening for an investigation based on the curriculum requirements contained in Learning Outcome 1 (practical competence) in which learners are required to ‘acquire and apply historical enquiry skills’. The teacher, however, was reticent to explore this avenue for at least three possible reasons: first, he seemed reluctant to relinquish any of his authority to the learners; secondly, ‘the fact’ that he had imparted to the learners seems to be dubious, particularly since the source of this information is unknown and, finally, it would appear that his presentation of his opinions as facts would have achieved his ideological goals rather than enable learners to discover the constructed nature of History as a discipline. His response therefore was to **ridicule** the learner ‘but duh, what person just stands there and watches a stone flying towards them?’ This implies that the assumption that Goliath had a brain tumour is so obvious and self-evident and that one would be foolish to even question it. He proceeded to isolate the learner from his classmates and peers through a skilful interplay of pronouns: ‘You could turn around and call him stupid but the Bible says don’t call your brother a fool so we will say he had a brain tumour’. By this juxtaposition the learner – ‘you’ – is set apart from the rest of the class – ‘we’ – and socially punished for even questioning the teacher’s assumptions. The message conveyed is that to uphold an opposing position is not only foolish but also uncharitable and unchristian. Finally, the teacher’s ridicule of the learner’s question provoked laughter from his peers which was a clear indication to every other learner in the class that questioning would be socially punished. Thus the teacher set the rules for what constitutes a ‘legitimate text’ and classified certain contributions and meanings by learners as illegitimate. This is communicated by means of disparagements such as “but duh” and later on ‘ag, come on’ and ‘of course’.

The repeated pejorative **synonyms** and similes deployed by the teacher in his description of Goliath’s putative brain cancer are also telling. The learners were told he had ‘a brain tumour’, his ‘brain was not functioning’ and he had a ‘cancer growing in is head’. The emphatic nature of the teacher’s assertions could indicate that he was aware of how tenuous these claims are and, unable to support them with evidence, he sought to use his authority as teacher to render them incontestable truths.

The teacher ended this process of analogical reasoning with the statement ‘we have proved our point’. This would create the impression that the preceding discourse was expository and convincing, beginning with a proposition, followed by evidence and finally a justification. The teacher also used **syntactical devices** to create the impression of consensus. Four rhetorical questions were used. ‘How old was David?’ ‘Fourteen or fifteen?’ ‘What are we told?’ ‘What person just stands there and watches a stone flying towards them?’ These questions serve several functions: they are regulatory in function, ensuring that the learners are listening attentively; they contain implicit assumptions which the teacher seeks to impart to the learners, and they reinforce the notion of consensus.

Another striking lexical feature is the teacher’s use of an **informal register**. The colloquial tag ‘I mean please’ implies that what the teacher was about to say is self-evident and therefore beyond dispute whereas the slang contained in ‘... Goliath checked him out as thick as two bricks’ reinforces his ridicule of the biblical character and by extension colonised peoples. The colloquialisms, however, also serve to create the surface impression that this is a democratic classroom environment in which the voices of the learners are recognised. This, however, is misleading since at no point did the teacher invite participation from the learners by asking engaging questions. The use of slang in this lesson appears at times to be a form of deficit discourse: the teacher adopted an informal register and relaxed linguistic boundaries in order to speak ‘in the language of the learners’. The teacher made an effort to speak in the learners’ register by adopting what he assumed to be their diction and cultural frame of reference. For example, the teacher

used the colloquialisms and slang which he appeared to believe the learners could relate to such as ‘chick’, ‘radical’, ‘oke’ and ‘vreked’ and made repeated references to Michael Jackson to describe things that appear otherworldly and foreign: ‘a landing strip for aliens – Michael Jackson’ and ‘here comes a person with a white skin. He is not of this earth. He’s Michael Jackson.’ This does little, however, to bridge the generational and cultural gap since the language used was intended to ridicule rather than establish rapport with learners.

The teacher proceeded to question Cortés’ motives for burning his ships. Again the Spanish were valorised but the teacher also made a seemingly arbitrary comparison between the conquistadors and religious fundamentalist suicide bombers. The teacher deployed **synonymy** to emphasise the active agency of the Spanish who were described as purposeful – ‘he’s got a mission, a purpose’. This contrasts with insinuations of Aztec passivity. Through the omission of a discussion of the rise of the Aztec empire, its cultural advances and complex state structure, the Aztecs are denied recognition and agency and are instead depicted as unresponsive and docile. This strategy enables a homogenisation of both the inferiority of the Aztecs and the superiority of the Spanish. Again to establish superficial consensus the teacher posed the rhetorical questions: ‘Do you think that that was a bit radical?’ The word ‘radical’ has multiple connotations and, although the teacher appeared to have used the word in the sense of drastic and extreme, it also reinforces the image of Cortés as decisive, fearless and courageous. While this question appears to be an honest enquiry, it is a close-ended question aimed yet again at enforcing agreement. When one learner disagreed, the teacher’s response was to persuade the learner to agree. He paraphrased his initial question and then attempted to use group cohesion with the second person pronoun in ‘You would think they would work out a plan B’ in order to generate a feeling of consensus. The dissenting learner was not given the opportunity to explain his viewpoint and was silenced by the majority opinion.

The teacher proceeded to depict the Spanish and Aztecs and, by extension, colonised peoples, in **binary terms** (cf Table 2)

**Table 2**

<b>Spanish</b>	<b>Aztecs</b>
<b>Focused, resolute and active agents</b> – Speaking of Cortés ‘He’s on this mind-blowing mission’	<b>Passive victims</b> – ‘your attackers can just sit and wait’.
<b>Religious</b> – ‘Cortés came from a Roman Catholic culture’	<b>Superstitious</b> – ‘these people of five hundred years ago cloaked in all kinds of ignorance and superstition’
<b>Civilised</b> – ‘The Spanish had steel swords and steel amour and guns’	<b>Backward (and infantilised)</b> – ‘Wooden swords ... Ag, come on, that’s what kids play with’
<b>Heroic</b> – ‘Those Spanish soldiers must have suffered’.	<b>Cowardly</b> – described as ‘unnerved’
<b>Canny and wise</b> – ‘Cortés was a very astute, good politician ... That’s good politics’	<b>Politically naive</b> – ‘enemies of the Aztecs (could) start getting busy again’
<b>Scientific and rational</b> – ‘For people who have scientific things here (points to his head), we know that an earthquake is a natural phenomenon’	<b>Irrational</b> – ‘Now for <b>superstitious people</b> an earthquake is a sign from the gods’

By using binary oppositions the teacher stressed the dissimilarity between Cortés and a suicide bomber. In this instance, suicide bombers were othered as ‘those guys’ and placed in a separate category not only from Cortés but from the rest of humanity. The teacher proceeded to dismiss their motives as fatuous and shallow since their reason for acting was said to be to obtain ‘seventy chicks and all the nice fruit juices and things ...’ This provides a deliberately caricatured and superficial description of a suicide bomber’s logic in order to easily ridicule and dismiss his/her actions. The teacher proceeded to imply that suicide bombers come from a ‘suicide culture’. He thus established a mental scheme for the learners based on the

following classification: Christians (as exemplified by Cortés) are daring and brave, risking their lives for a mission or purpose. Muslim suicide bombers, by contrast, are venal and shallow, giving up their lives for sensual pleasure and a material reward in the afterlife. While Christians have respect for life and condemn suicide, Muslims come from a 'suicide culture' where life is not valued. Thus the teacher's instructional discourse was redolent with Islamophobia.

At this point in the lesson the teacher made an intercultural comparison between Zulu people and the Aztecs with particular reference to their attitudes towards horses. He also compared what he termed Aztec 'superstition' to African customs and beliefs and by means of this cross-cultural comparison made inferences not only about the Aztecs but also about Black South Africans.

First, he stated 'Zulus do not like horses' which is an ahistorical generalisation since it creates the impression of Zulus as changeless and culturally static. It is also a disingenuous ploy by the teacher to minimise Dingaana's distrust of Piet Retief, diminishing it to a superstition regarding men on horses. This greatly over-simplifies the complexity of Voortrekker-Zulu relations and trivialises Dingaana's motives, making him appear ignorant and foolish.

South Africa was also described as a 'little country' with 'great mysteries'. This implies that South Africa is somehow inconsequential when compared with other 'bigger' countries and that the ways of Africans are murky and inscrutable. This is clearly a Eurocentric view of Africa, 'the dark continent', which holds that Western science, logic and rationality is the norm whereby other societies should be measured. The teacher's deliberate repetition of the word 'wizard' to describe Dingaana's perception of Retief only serves to reinforce the concept of Africans as ignorant and motivated by false notions. When a learner added that Sotho people eat horse meat the teacher responded again by contrasting African customs with 'European ways' and through a comparison denigrated the learner's contribution in a disparaging comment that makes light of Sotho cultural practices.

The teacher's **syntax** is an effective indicator of the power relations that were at play in this classroom context. Fairclough argues that the identification of the three major modes of expression (declarative, grammatical question and imperative) can all be used to expose and interrogate the power relations operating in discourse. In the following extract all three modes of communication indicate a disparity in power where the teacher is positioned as the voice of knowledge and authority:

*I saw an interesting thing the other day. Watch the word culture. I know that in African culture snakes and lizards have a bad meaning, okay?*

The teacher began in the declarative mode 'I' (subject) 'saw' (verb) 'an interesting thing' (object). This constructs a discursive orientation where the speaker, in this instance the teacher, is positioned as a transmitter of information and the learners are positioned as the receivers (Fairclough, 2001:104-105). With this opening, the teacher asserted his authority as the source of information. The next sentence is in the imperative mode in which the teacher commands the learners, who are expected to be compliant and to act in a certain manner, in this case listen attentively to the teacher's construction of the concept culture. Again, the implication is that power resides with the teacher. Finally the tag ('Okay?') at the end of the last statement serves as grammatical question. In this instance, however, the question is phrased in the declarative mode and is in fact a blunt statement. The effect of this 'question' is regulatory, since it is aimed at ensuring agreement from the learners. Thus, even in this short extract, the teacher used a variety of syntactical devices to assert his position of expertise and authority.

In the narrative that followed several themes emerged, namely Black hysterics versus White equanimity and African ignorance versus Western reason. The teacher expanded 'the superstitious nature of Africans' by describing how a petrol attendant was distressed by the sight of a dragon lizard that had been left in an idling vehicle. He described how he attempted to pacify the hysterical man and expounded on the beauty of snakes. The petrol attendants are described in language which suggests buffoonery and panic through extended synonymy and repetition: 'there was screaming. He made such a scene ... there was a lot of screaming and shouting.' The lack of emotional control is strongly contrasted with the teacher's composure: 'I thought ... I looked in the car... I tried to calm him down'. The teacher maintains his composure, investigates the problem and draws a rational conclusion. On the basis of his investigation

he attempts to pacify the hysterical Black men. Thus the underlying message is that a White man, with his superior intellect and culture, is required to address the disorder caused by the irrational behaviour of Black men.

The teacher continued in the **declarative mode** to state that ‘*In fact* they (snakes) are just creatures of nature’. Thus the teacher is depicted as the custodian of ‘facts’ which he seeks to impart to others who are lacking in insight and knowledge. By stressing that it is *a fact* that snakes are ‘creatures of nature’ he implies that his knowledge is neutral and value-free. On the other hand, the petrol attendants are constructed as irrational, and lacking in common sense.

As a form of **disclaimer**, however, to mitigate the possibility of reproach or being viewed as racist the teacher referred repeatedly to the petrol attendant as ‘my friend’. In her examination of desegregation in American schools, Picower observes that for many White teachers their social interactions with Black people were of a hierarchical nature, in which Black people in subordinated positions render unskilled labour or service to Whites. According to Picower, this establishes hierarchical assumptions “setting up the association that people of colour are there to serve or work for White people” (Picower, 2009:201-202).

The teacher also invoked a racist notion of the evolutionary superiority of westerners: ‘These people have not got to that stage of evolution.’ The teacher thus appealed to notions of biological superiority grounded on Social Darwinism. This use of a pseudo-scientific idea of evolutionary superiority is presumably intended to invest the underlying racist assumptions with scientific authority. Soudien identified this kind of discourse as a form of ‘knowing’ which dominated discourses about race during the era of National Party rule. He defines ‘knowing’ as “exercise of power of those who determine the conditions of knowledge and its production and reproduction in particular context” (Soudien, 2007:443). Soudien points out that the dominant European discourse used a biological rationale to justify White dominance: “it drew on biological justifications which unequivocally established the superiority on the human evolutionary ladder of people described as White and European” (Soudien, 2007:443). According to Soudien, the school played an important role during the apartheid era as the “key site for the production and reproduction of this kind of knowing” (Soudien, 2007:443).

The teacher’s **tone** when discussing African culture was frequently derisory. In addition to the strongly framed content selection, he omitted to make references to African accomplishments or affirm African initiative. In discussing the issue of ‘culture and superstition’: he asserted that ‘Zulus do not like horses’ and believed that Retief was a wizard since he rode on horseback, while ‘the Sotho love their horses’. When a learner interrupted to inform the class that some Sotho people eat horse meat, the teacher quipped: ‘That makes sense. When your four-by-four packs up you eat it and buy yourself another Landrover’. The teacher then described the alarm that the Aztecs would have experienced at their first encounter with white-skinned Europeans and likened this to meeting Michael Jackson or the sighting of a UFO. While the tone was derisory it was veiled by the use of humour which formed a large part of the teacher’s communicative repertoire. Humour was used as a subtle means of transmitting ideological meanings without their being apparent. It offers a further type of disclaimer against the possibility of being viewed as racist since the teacher’s reaction, if challenged, could be a protestation of innocence: ‘Can’t you take a joke?’ The meanings communicated are, however, not diminished by humour. The joking tone creates an opaque type of communication which conceals its own meanings even as it transmits them, and provides the speaker with a defence should he be confronted. The attitude appears to suggest that humour offers the speaker a special licence to say whatever he pleases, and affords him immunity against the exposure of derision, bias and derogation.

## Sexist discourses behind the doors of learning

The classroom discourse was also marked by sexist **gender stereotyping** as well as the virtual exclusion of women from the historical narrative, except when they were cast in roles of disruptive influences, ‘girlfriends’ and objects of male fantasy. Literary scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that in male-authored texts women are frequently depicted as “mere properties ... generated solely by male expectations and designs” (Gilbert & Guar, 1979:133). Frequently men construct a binary depiction of

women as either an “angel in the house” or the dangerous, unruly woman endowed with undertones of sexual force. (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979:227) In the following instance not merely the semiotics of the linguistic sign but also body language and gesture convey the impression that the female figure described the teacher is the wild, wayward demonic variety:

*I was filling up with petrol and the next moment a Black Beetle arrived, a Volkswagen. The lady left the engine running, a blond woman (gestures cascading hair and breasts) and she got out ...*

Her appearance is sudden (‘the next moment’) and the impression is created of someone who is impulsive and unrestrained (she ‘left the engine running’). The class was first told that she was a ‘lady’ which has connotations of refinement and good manners, but she was then termed a ‘woman’, a neutral gender noun, which casts aside the initial impression that the word ‘lady’ may have created. The teacher added that she was blond and accompanied this description with a suggestive gesture indicating cascading hair and breasts. Shortly thereafter she was associated with a dragon lizard which caused great consternation. The underlying gender stereotypical message appears to be the disruptive influence of the wild and wayward woman who is the cause of male anxiety.

Highly masculinist language and imagery was also used, especially in the teacher’s discussion of suicide bombers. The teacher used the masculine pronoun ‘he’, suggesting that all suicide bombers are male while women were objectified as ‘chicks’ and associated with ‘all the nice fruit juices and things’ which implies that they are provided for male consumption. The word ‘chick’ has strong connotations of female submission. Thus a binary opposition is established between men as active agents and women as passive objects.

Indeed, women were only mentioned on three occasions in the entire lesson, cast either as submissive objects for male use and consumption, as wild and disruptive, or a ‘girlfriends’. The teacher also appeared to focus his lesson on the male members of the class, to the virtual exclusion of the females. For example, he seemed to assume that males initiate relationships and send Valentines: ‘On Valentine’s Day do you guys send pictures of kidneys to your girlfriends? You send pictures of ... Hearts.’ In the next sentence he again addressed the male members of the class: ‘We talk about a broken heart if your girlfriend has broken up with you.’ This language was not only exclusionary of the fourteen females in the class but again constructs men as active agents and women as recipients of male attention.

## Conclusion

This study commenced with the questions: Does History discourse in the classroom provide opportunities for border-crossing? Are students provided opportunities to engage with texts that affirm and interrogate their historical discourses? Are students encouraged to produce multi-perspectival texts? The analysis has shown that the discourses enacted in the lesson were a far cry from the intended curriculum that advocates that History studies provide students with opportunities to engage with texts that both affirm and interrogate their histories. On the contrary, the lesson illustrated the transmission of racist and sexist ideology that denied students access to a specialised form of knowledge and procedural skills which are prescribed by the History curriculum. The weak classification of subject content results in the majority of the lesson being deployed for the transmission of racist and sexist ideology.

In terms of creating classroom conditions that facilitate pupils’ ability to speak, write and listen in a ‘multi-perspectival language’, the asymmetrical power relations between teacher and learners resulted in the teacher’s discourses being legitimised. The results are consistent with Carter *et al.* (2009) who note the non-reconstructive responses of white teachers in former whites-only schools towards ‘dismantling apartheid’ and that perceived group interest overrode national equity goals. With reference to pedagogy, the teacher’s practice was informed by neither critical nor post-conflict pedagogy. The limitations of critical pedagogy in practice were evident as it cannot be assumed that teachers put aside their individual and group interests to become agents of transformation.

Having identified the transmission of racist and sexist discourses in the classroom, how does one explain it? To explain the oppressive pedagogy of the teachers it must also be borne in mind that the teachers’ *habitus* itself is the product of a historical process and is not static. With changes in the political

and moral field, the teacher's discourse points to a disjuncture between his *habitus* and the official pedagogical field. Since *habitus* is durable and transposable but not immutable with re-education, teachers would be in a better position to embrace change and achieve congruency with broader society in a process which Bourdieu terms metanoia: "a mental revolution, a transformation of one's whole vision of the social world" (Maton, 2009:60).

Notwithstanding the need for urgent attention to history teaching in schools in the post-apartheid era, the implications for the learners who are currently being subjected to oppressive discourses are dire. A further aspect of Bourdieu's theory that will help to elucidate the discursive practices of the teacher is his theory of symbolic violence. This is the term that Bourdieu gives to the exercise of power by a social agent who holds symbolic capital, to impose meanings and perceptions upon a subjected agent. This may lead to the misrecognition of self in which the subjected individual comes to misunderstand his/her own nature and accepts the imposed meanings and values as legitimate. The dominated social agent fails to recognise the arbitrary nature of such constructions and may therefore come to embrace these coerced thoughts and perceptions as correct, natural and just, even when they are at odds with his/her sense of self (Maton, 2009:59). The racist and sexist discourses that dominated the history topic subjected learners to a form of symbolic violence which may lead students to ontological misrecognition of self and race.

Abdi provides a description of what may be called the 'ideal' situation in which teachers respond 'positively and effectively' to the learners' needs. In such a situation, he argues, teachers must be capable of encouraging and motivating learners and creating a classroom environment that empowers learners to "attain both social and academic confidence to learn, achieve and develop". He regards this as an essential part of nation-building in South Africa (Abdi, 2009:235-236). Citing Soudien, Abdi argues that the role of the teacher must be

*conspicuously marked in his or her opposition to inequalities and discrimination ... (Education) must culturally liberate African students. This liberation will enhance the self-esteem as well as the self-efficacy of these students, who should all see the positive nature of inter-group collaboration among all South Africans (Abdi, 2009:235-236).*

The challenge for teacher education is to enable teachers through pre- and in-service programmes to understand the difference between ideological statements and strategies and historical statements and procedures; to be forceful agents for social justice, equity and human rights.

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