

## ***District Nine and constructions of the other: Implications for heterogeneous classrooms***

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*ABSTRACT: Culturally responsive research and pedagogy are a challenge in classrooms that are increasingly heterogeneous. I start from the premise that culture is dynamic not static, that difference is a resource for new ways of doing, thinking and believing, that identity is hybrid. The challenge for teachers is how to harness the productive potential of diverse classrooms for pedagogy. John Thompson (1990) argues that discourses of “unification” which construct an “us”, and discourses of “fragmentation” which construct a “them”, produce and maintain relations of power. Us/them discourse will be explored in the South African context in relation to both apartheid’s racial othering and post-apartheid’s xenophobic othering. The South African film, District Nine, which can be interpreted as both forms of othering, is presented as a case for considering these ideas.*

*KEYWORDS: Culturally responsive pedagogy, othering, relations of power, critical literacy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper tells a story in three parts. It begins with an incident of cultural insensitivity in my critical literacy class and its resolution. It moves on to a discussion of research on the representation of foreign Africans and their countries in the South African press and it concludes with a discussion of *District Nine*, a South African film which is a vivid portrayal of the ways in which we construct the Other.

#### **1. The experience of Othering in a critical literacy classroom**

Roseline Adegoke was one of twenty students taking my Critical Literacy course at the Honours level at the University of the Witwatersrand. Adegoke is Nigerian. She and a male student called Gab<sup>1</sup> from another part of Africa, were the only foreigners in the class. Everyone else was South African. The class was composed of even numbers of black and white students and of men and women.

The incident in question took place on a day that a colleague was standing in for me. She asked students to choose a partner to work with on an oral presentation on a topic covered in the course, at a later date. It was this instruction to choose partners that led to Roseline’s experience of being othered. I only became aware of this much later when I read her course journal. Students had been encouraged to chart their reflections on the course and the reading and to make connections between the course and the actual discourses encountered in their own lives.

I have never felt more upset and confused than I did today, during and after the Critical Language Awareness class....We were asked to choose partners for oral

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<sup>1</sup> This is a fictitious name.

presentations....The resulting exercise made it clear to me how racially inclined people still are in the class. Every one chose his/her friend of the same race and nationality as partners. Even those who were not present were chosen by people (without knowing their preference of topics), while I couldn't get a partner. I was suddenly reminded that I am a foreigner. From what I observed I doubt whether there was any pairing of a black with a white person. I may not be totally right but this is my opinion – perhaps influenced by my position as a foreigner. I don't know if Gab who is also a foreigner got a partner. Perhaps we will end up as partners perforce. I will be happier if the presentations were done individually. On the whole, I don't feel I am benefitting from this course.

When I read this journal entry, I was deeply moved and concerned. Up until that point, Roseline's journal had shown a student engaging with the issues raised by the CLA course in a way that teachers dream of. There is no evidence of her accepting anything uncritically; she resists the material until she can make sense of it on her own terms. Gradually, however, the entries reflect her growing ability to make sense of her own lived experiences in South Africa with the theories and tools of analysis provided by the course. Then suddenly she is hurt and says explicitly: "I don't feel I am benefitting from this course." The change is abrupt; the rejection she feels is painful; her ability to learn from the course is threatened. I had to do something. The question was "What?" I did not want to move directly into theorising what had happened, as this might discount the importance of her feelings. Her emotional response was important, because in my view it was the mechanism that denaturalised the practices she had been experiencing. At the same time, I needed to help her move beyond the hurt so that she could make sense of what had happened. By then she was presenting with Gab, and it was too late to change this. I did what I could to get her through the presentation and then met with her.

We were both fully aware of the irony involved in this incident's having taken place during a critical literacy course. We saw that knowledge about difference and power had not led to the recognition or reconstruction of our students' own naturalised practices of exclusion. I wanted us to discuss this in class. Roseline refused but agreed to co-author a paper with me so that other teachers and future students could learn from her experience. I also wanted to make a symbolic statement: if other students had *refused* to work with her, I would *choose* to work with her. We wrote and presented the paper, but never published it.

Using theories of identity and othering to understand the incident enabled us to see that Roseline's identity as a foreign other was only one of a complex set of identity positions that she occupied. In addition to being Nigerian, she was also black and a woman. Race and gender had affected all the pairings in the group, with only one partnership crossing these lines. None of the partnerships crossed lines of nationality and the only two foreigners were left to pair with each other, although they came from different countries in Africa. Roseline's unhappiness at working with Gab was further complicated by the fact that as an older African man, he treated her dismissively with patriarchal condescension. Already othered in terms of race and nationality by her South African peers, Roseline now found herself othered in terms of age and gender.

As Roseline worked on the theory for our paper, she came to understand that, when she and Gab were rejected by their classmates, they felt humiliated, alienated and inadequate. Roseline internalised this devaluing of her abilities as her being "not good

enough to partner the white, first language speakers of English”, and her internal conflict became externalised as a power struggle between her and Gab. Because Gab had the advantages of gender and age, Roseline chose not to contest his assumed authority while they were planning their presentation, but to subvert it on the day. When presenting, she ignored his “edicts” and did what she had wanted to do. The presentation was an uncoordinated disaster. Roseline and Gab, from their marginalised positions, constructed the other as an obstacle to their own success; in turning on one another they lost the possibility of combining forces to “write back” to the class.

Roseline came to accept that it was not her competence that had led to her exclusion, but her perceived otherness. She also achieved a more complex reading of Gab. Whereas before she had only been able to see him as a dominant male oppressor, she came to see him as also oppressed and excluded on the basis of race and nationality. She understood how powerful their presentation might have been had they been able to use it to theorise and contest their construction by their fellow students.

## **2. The representation of foreign Africans and their countries in the South African press**

Roseline Adegoke went on to complete a Master’s degree with a research project entitled *Media Discourse on Foreign Africans and the Implications for Education*. In this research, she is concerned to understand the discourses about Africa and Africans that produce xenophobia in the South African context and lead to forms of exclusion.

Adegoke collected every text on African countries and foreign Africans published in three mainstream South African newspapers during the month of March 1998, the *Star*, the *Sowetan* and the *Mail and Guardian*. The newspapers were selected because of their high circulation figures and their different target audiences. A total of 397 texts were collected. In order to make the data set more manageable, this figure was subsequently reduced to 334 by removing all the texts in which the reference to foreign African countries or foreign Africans was tangential. The data were classified into two broad categories. Category A dealt with general news on African countries outside of South Africa, while Category B dealt with foreign African issues within South Africa. Each category was then further divided into three discourse domains – political, social and economic (Adegoke, 1999, p. 71). Finally, within each domain, Adegoke conducted a topic and subject frame analysis of each text using van Dijk’s (1997, 1987) method of analysis. Topics refer to the content: what the discourse is about. They occur within organising frames, which are culture specific conceptual structures within discourse such as, for example, war, poverty and crime. In addition, each text was evaluated in relation to whether the representation was positive or negative, with the evaluation made from the viewpoint of foreign Africans. This method creates a hierarchy of analysis at different layers of specificity.

Table 1 shows the frames with the high, medium and low frequencies of occurrence. The percentages are based on the total number of occurrences. Negativity is apparent simply in the frequency of negative frames, which construct Africa as a place of war, civil riots, corruption, crime, dictatorship and oppression, poverty and dependence, together with disease. A closer analysis of the content of the articles shows that 57% of all the texts are negative, 20% are both positive and negative, with only 18% that are only positive and 5% that are neither (Adegoke, 1999, p. 110).

|                     | High frequency frames  | %                | Medium frequency frames    |     | Low frequency frames    |     |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| Category A: Outside | War & violence         | 12.5             | Economic reconstruction    | 4.4 | Tourism                 | 1.4 |
|                     | Foreign relations      | 10.1             | Regional initiatives       | 4.1 | Economic responsibility | 0.3 |
|                     | Sports                 | 8.8              | Notable personality        | 3.7 | Mystery                 | 0.3 |
|                     | Economic crisis        | 6.8              | Foreign aid                | 3.7 |                         |     |
|                     | Dictatorship           | 6.4              | Political crisis           | 3.4 |                         |     |
|                     | Civil unrest & riots   | 6.1              | Group oppression           | 3.0 |                         |     |
|                     | Economic advancement   | 5.4              | Uncivilized behaviour      | 3.0 |                         |     |
|                     | Corruption & crime     | 5.1              | Poverty & underdevelopment | 2.7 |                         |     |
|                     |                        |                  | Disaster & tragedy         | 2.7 |                         |     |
|                     |                        |                  | Political reconstruction   | 2.7 |                         |     |
|                     |                        |                  | Culture                    | 2.0 |                         |     |
|                     |                        | Health & disease | 2.0                        |     |                         |     |
|                     |                        |                  | 2.0                        |     |                         |     |
|                     | Total                  | 61.2             |                            | 37  |                         | 2   |
| Category B: Inside  | Immigration & problems | 39.5             | Notable personality        | 2.6 |                         |     |
|                     | Crime                  | 36.8             | Group oppression           | 2.6 |                         |     |
|                     | Sports                 | 13.2             | Health                     | 2.6 |                         |     |
|                     |                        |                  | Religion                   | 2.6 |                         |     |
|                     | Total                  | 66               |                            | 34  |                         | 0   |

**Table 1. Frames showing high, medium and low frequencies of occurrence. (Based on Adegoke, 1999, Tables 6, 7 and 8)**

Some of the headlines that Adegoke analyses give a flavour of this negativity: “No end in sight to Algerian horror”; “Algerian carnage continues”; “Thirty children die in Ugandan ambush”; “Chaos panic then murder”; “Angola on brink again” (Adegoke, 1999, p. 114).

Adegoke is able to conclude with little doubt that the representation of foreign Africa and Africans is “systematically negative”. From her own classroom experience, she understands the impact that such discourse has on the collective unconscious of South Africans and how it can hurt others. Her call for educators concerned with issues of social justice to take these issues into the classroom and to include work on xenophobia in the curriculum can be seen as prescient. In 2008, exactly ten years after the year of Adegoke’s data collection, 67 people died in what came to be referred to as xenophobic attacks. Directed at foreigners, mostly from Africa, living in some of the poorest urban areas of South Africa, hundreds of people were injured and thousands were forcibly driven out of their homes. South Africa awoke to images of horrific violence. Approximately 1,400 people were arrested for crimes committed as part of the attacks – murder, attempted murder, aggravated robbery and theft.

### 3. District Nine

*District Nine* is the story of human beings’ first encounter with an alien species in Johannesburg. The director Neill Blomkamp grew up in South Africa during Apartheid and

There's no question that there's many, many, many elements of Apartheid and segregation and now xenophobia in South Africa that have made their way into the film ... they provide the sort of foundation that the film rests on top of. (Topel, 2009, Blomkamp utterance #5)

Although he wanted to make a film about segregation and apartheid's dehumanisation of the Other, he also wanted to present his ideas with a light touch. His use of science fiction and satire enables this. Humour lowers our defences, enabling us to laugh at both the characters and ourselves. Lying behind the laughter is our recognition of our own prejudices or inaction, our own complicity, when confronted with the unjust use of power.

*District 9* is a film about how we relate to a species very different from our own. It is about human arrogance and intolerance when confronted by the unknown other. It is about fear for our own that justifies violence against those who are different from us. It is about corporate greed and ruthlessness. It is about two fathers: one (the human father) willing to destroy his children to serve his own selfish ends; the other (the Alien father) striving to give his child a meaningful life. In the end it is about our ability to transcend our naturalised prejudices and to understand and appreciate the Other. As Wikus comes to know the Prawns, so do we; his transformation becomes our transformation.

The aliens are depicted as large and insect-like. They resemble the "Parktown prawn" (*Libanasidus vittatus*, a monotypic king cricket), which although harmless instils fear in many South Africans. Frightening as the Aliens' size and appearance are, they nevertheless have human features that enable audiences to empathise with them. Their eyes are expressive, their facial movements reveal tenderness, and they act with an intelligence that surpasses our own.



**Figure 1. Images of prawns**

The script is explicit about the naming of the aliens and the following sequence is presented as a collage of news reports and the opinions of ordinary South Africans.<sup>2</sup>

- The aliens, prawns, they take my wife away.
- The derogatory term Prawn is used for the aliens and obviously implies something that is a bottom feeder, that scavengers the leftovers. I mean you can't say they don't look like that. That's what they look like, right?
- The aliens made off with an undisclosed amount of cash. One bystander was hurt.

<sup>2</sup> Each dash represents the start of a different speaker

- What for an alien might be seen as recreational, setting fire to a truck, derailing a train, is obviously an extremely destructive act.
- They can take the sneakers you're wearing off you.
- They take whatever you have on you. Your cellphone or anything.
- After that they kill you. (Blomkamp, n.d., lines 63-73)

Notice how this description starts with their strange appearance, moves to the assumption of their criminality and finally the Prawns are constructed as other and dangerous, as a threat that must be expunged.

- I think they must fix that ship and they must go.
- A virus, a selective virus. Release it near the aliens.
- The must just go. I don't know where, just go. (Blomkamp, n.d., lines 57-59)

This is later shown visually when Wikus discovers a large prawn incubator. After phoning for a "population control team" he unplugs the nutrition supply to the prawn eggs and the "little guys" with glee. In handing part of the disconnected life support system to Thomas, his side-kick, he says "You can take that. You wanna keep it as a souvenir of your first abortion?" (Blomkamp, n.d., line 214). Wikus' casual manner, as if murdering a new generation is an everyday occurrence, shows complete disregard for the life of the Other. Murder is committed without pause or regret.

The residents riot and the government develop plans to move 1.8 million prawns to a "safer and better location, 200 kilometers outside of the city ... so that the people of Johannesburg and South Africa are going to live happily and safely, knowing the prawn is very far away" (Blomkamp, n.d., lines 87-91). This is an intertextual reminder of the Apartheid laws, which confined black South Africans to rural Bantustans, so-called "homelands" and to urban ghettos. The name "District 9" evokes memories of evictions from an area in Cape Town known as "District Six".

District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, District Six was a vibrant centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the history of removals and marginalisation had begun.

The first to be "resettled" were black South Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. ... In 1966, [District 6] was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. 60 000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers. (Anon, 2009)

District Six was only one of many communities to be bulldozed in terms of the Group Areas Act (1950) and in the name of separate development. The use of Caspers in the film is a visual reminder of the military vehicles used to control black townships during periods of insurrection in the struggle for liberation, euphemistically referred to as periods of "unrest". Black townships in South Africa, like District 9, were built outside of the city with few roads leading in and out, enabling them to be cut off easily by military forces. The aerial shots of District 9 are images of existing shack settlements, which show how the structural effects of segregation and apartheid continue.



Figure 2. Signage in *District 9*

The signage in *District 9* mirrors old apartheid signs (see Figure 2). Notice how “humans” and “whites” are the linguistically unmarked form, with the prefix “non” in “non-humans” and “non-whites” indicating deviation from the norm. These outward signs that denote unequal rights of access, point to the underlying practices of entitlement and exclusion that produced inequality based on difference.

The choice of language, accent and grammar are clear markers of identity in this film. Shot as a quasi-documentary, the action is interspersed with news broadcasts, expert commentary, and vox populi. English is the unmarked choice of language with Wikus, the anti-hero, using a broad South African accent with flat vowels and grammatical inaccuracies. This accent, designed to capture that of an obedient apartheid civil servant, suggests both his white collar position in society and his level of education. His father-in-law’s accent by way of contrast has more marked Afrikaans overtones. Posh Anglo-varieties of South African English are given to the expert commentators, while African languages and second-language errors are reserved for people on the street. The Nigerian criminals speak in a foreign African tongue. The use of sub-titles when the Aliens speak shows that the sounds they are making constitute an intelligible language of an intelligent species. It is significant that in South Africa, the derogatory word for foreign Africans is “makwerekwere”, a reference to the incomprehensible sounds of their languages.

The use of language and the choice of words are directed at constructing the prawn as primitive, incapable of understanding “the concept of private property”, and “unable to think for themselves”. The following sequence shows the ways in which Wikus talks down to the Prawn, constructing him as an infantile and simple Other.

- Prawn: No, it’s not my house. I don’t live here.  
 Wikus: Well, that’s a pity because, you know, this ... This is nice cat food, you know. But of course it’s not your house. So, we’ll just have to go and give it to someone else....  
 News reader: The creatures became terribly obsessed with cat food.  
 (Blomkamp, n.d., lines 194-198)

This use of language is subtle compared to the use of images, which portray the aliens as ugly savages hacking off chunks of raw meat to cart away in wheelbarrows.

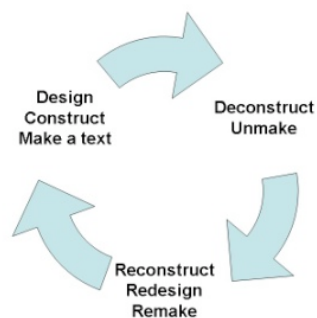
But negative constructions are not reserved for the aliens. Traces of old-style apartheid interaction appear in Wikus' relation to Thomas, his black partner. Wikus assumes the right to wear the only protective vest, while Thomas' fears for himself and consequently for his family are trivialised. Thomas addresses Wikus as "boss", which creates an intertextual reference to apartheid forms of address. Finally, the film is framed within current xenophobic discourses, which construct Nigerians as drug dealers and criminals.

- Sociologist: The Nigerians had various scams going. One of them was the cat food scam. Where they sold cat food to the Nigerians for exorbitant prices....Not to mention interspecies prostitution. And they also dealt in alien weaponry.
- Wikus: You have car high-jacking, there's a chop shop there, you can see that, that's somebody's car in there....
- News Commentator: The Nigerians in District 9 are headed by a man called Obesandjo. He's a very powerful underground figure in Johannesburg.
- Wikus: You don't want to play with these boys. They will cut you in pieces. (Blomkamp, n.d., 213-224)

Roseline Adegoke would not be surprised.

Notice how many of the high frequency frames that Adegoke found in her research can be seen in *District 9's* construction of the Nigerians: war and violence, foreign relations, dictatorship, civil unrest and riots, economic advancement (their own), corruption and crime. In addition, her analysis by country shows a negative evaluation of Nigeria, particularly within the frames of crime and dictatorship (Adegoke, 1999, p. 91). Even as the film moves towards reconstructing the Prawns as an intelligent and compassionate species, the Nigerians continue to be constructed as unremittingly evil. This works to reinforce xenophobic discourses of foreign Africans in South Africa.

Janks (2010) describes the process of design, deconstruction and redesign as cyclical (see Figure 3).



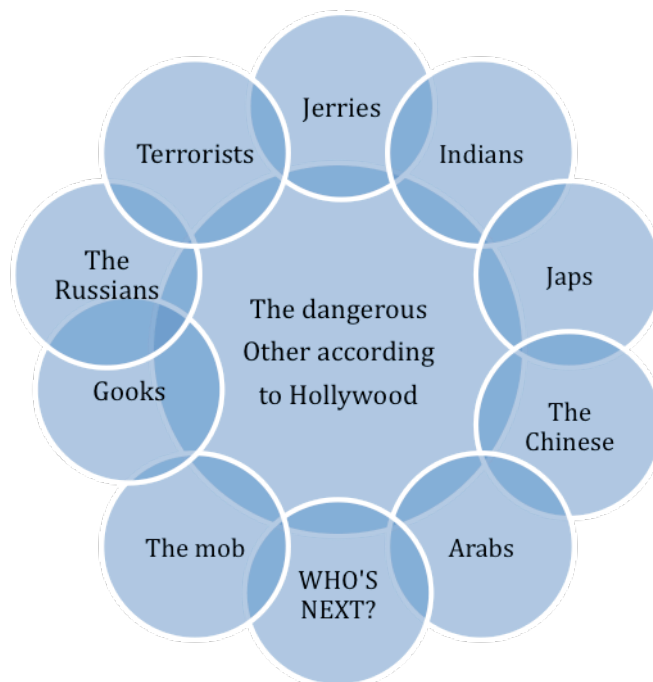
**Figure 3. Design, deconstruction and redesign**

*District 9* is designed to deconstruct and satirise apartheid's practices of segregation, exclusion and othering as well as to critique the violence used to enforce racist policies. In doing so, it produces a text which, when deconstructed, shows its own

forms of othering.

## US AND THEM

Anyone who has watched mainstream Hollywood movies understands the difference between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. Who the bad guys are changes according to whom America sees as its 'enemy' at different moments of history. The enemy is often given an offensive or derogatory name.



- 1 Who do these names refer to? Why do you think derogatory names are often used?
- 2 What era is associated with each of these baddies?
- 3 Describe the stereotype that goes with each of these baddies?
- 4 What is a stereotype?
- 5 Do you think that movies influence our attitudes to groups who are stereotyped?
- 6 Can you think of movies made in the US that challenge these representations?
- 7 How does who the baddy is change in James Bond movies over time?

It is a pity that people tend to construct a sense of who *they* are in contrast to people who are different from them. Too often the Other is seen as a dangerous threat. Look at your own country: read your newspapers; listen to the news on TV. Who in your country is portrayed as a threat to society? Is it "the youth"? Is it immigrants? Is it women who wear the veil? Is it a racial group? Is it foreigners? Is it criminals? Is it unemployed people? Is it people with HIV-AIDS?

Make a collage using photographs, headlines, words, cartoons of the people or types of people currently constructed as the 'bad guys' in your own country or community.

**Figure 4. Heroes and villains**

Stories often require heroes and villains, but who is chosen for which role has everything to do with the relations of power that exist at the time. Figure 4 shows how this understanding can be translated into classroom materials. The following moves underpin the activities:

1. Students are required to uncover both the history and the ideology that lead to particular constructions of Otherness.
2. They have to deconstruct negative naming practices.
3. They have to describe the stereotypes of successive enemies portrayed by Hollywood.
4. They have to consider the possible social effects of repeated negative representations of the Other.
5. They have to relate Hollywood's representations of "the enemy" with representations of the Other of their own communities.

These same questions can be asked in relation to *District 9*. Perhaps it is worth asking one other. What is lost by our refusal to engage with those who are different from us? It is clear that there is much humankind can learn from the technologically sophisticated "Prawns". No doubt this is also true of Nigerians. I certainly learnt a great deal from working with Roseline Adegoke.

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