

## Decolonizing the Literature Classroom

John K. Noyes

*What does it mean to decolonize the literature classroom? This short paper is intended as a personal reflection on teaching as an engagement with the social forces that bring neocolonial relations into the classroom, drawing on my experience teaching literature and literary theory in South Africa and Canada. I explore the idea of decolonizing the classroom as the production of an “outside” that provides meaning for the classroom’s “inside.”*

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*In Memoriam Peter Horn (1936–2019)*

What does it mean to decolonize the literature classroom? This short paper is intended as a personal reflection on teaching as an engagement with the social forces that bring neocolonial relations into the classroom. For a literary scholar trained in South Africa and working in Canada, the question of decolonization is a multilayered one. For one, although *decolonization* is the term in vogue, I prefer to speak of imperialism and neo-imperialism, rather than colonialism and neocolonialism (I spelled out the reasons in my book *Herder: Aesthetics Against Imperialism*).<sup>1</sup> This does not avoid the “plethora of meanings, ambiguities, conflicting memories, and competing narratives” that, as Jan Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel observe, incite disagreement over the term.<sup>2</sup> But it is, I believe, historically more accurate and conceptually more effective to use this term. Furthermore, it is convenient that the prefix “de-” does not attach in any easy way to the word *imperialism*. We should take seriously the challenge this presents because it forces us to ask what exactly is intended by the act of

John K. Noyes is Professor of German at the University of Toronto, Canada, and Extraordinary Professor in Modern Foreign Languages at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He has published on the cultural history of colonialism, postcolonial theory, the history of sexuality, and German Enlightenment thought. His books include *Herder’s Essay on Being. A Translation and Critical Approaches* (2019); *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (2015), *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (1997); and *Colonial Space. Spatiality in the Discourse of German Southwest Africa 1884–1915* (1992).

1 John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics Against Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

2 Jan Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization, A Short History*, Trans. Jeremiah Riemer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), viii.

negation the prefix points to. Even if you do not accept my argument about colonialism and imperialism, the matter of negation still requires a concise and careful analysis. One way to do this is to draw historical lines between the legacy of imperialism in South Africa and Canada (and elsewhere, of course), and the interpretation of culture in the university today. This cannot be done without drawing the line between imperialism in its classical forms and neo-imperialism of the twenty-first-century variety, and linking this to the neoliberal university in which my inquiries and my teaching take place.

It is telling that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o begins *Decolonizing the Mind* with a discussion of imperialism, and his definition is even more telling: "Imperialism is the rule of consolidated finance capital."<sup>3</sup> Ngũgĩ has argued convincingly how imperialism is embedded in universities and how its foundations are built into language and literary studies.<sup>4</sup> Ngũgĩ was right that the institutional imbalance in the teaching of indigenous versus imported languages and literatures is a relic of imperialism that needs to be remedied. To this I would add that, where the imported traditions are retained as objects of study, they must be framed within the critical traditions—both imported and indigenous—that destabilize their claims to truth (I argued this point in my inaugural lecture in Cape Town in 1999).<sup>5</sup> Institutional definition of the disciplines and the internal design of curricula are two interrelated issues that need to be distinguished in discussions of de-imperializing the university. Syllabi, course content, and curricula as well as teaching and learning methods need examination, but so does the distribution of resources within the university. In a university such as my own, which has not shed its ties to the weapons manufacturing industry and to fossil fuels, it is bizarre and dangerous to speak as if the task of de-imperialization should take place in the humanities alone or on the level of curricular design alone (and it is heartening to see divestment movements addressing both of these links at Canadian universities).

The literature classroom as I understand it is best seen as a place where students acquire skills in advanced critical literacy, to borrow an idea from the literacy debates associated with Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E. P. Thompson. Critical literacy involves interpretation of cultural products, whose meaning or significance is neither self-evident nor self-generating nor accessible via clear rules. Nor does the significance of cultural products stand in isolation from various other social forces, including the social forces that put any one particular book on a particular syllabus, or this particular student or instructor in this particular classroom.

Critical literacy helps students to draw connections between the object of study in the literature classroom and the network of social forces in which they are immersed. This places it in the Kantian tradition of putting reason on trial in the sense of trying to tell the difference between reason in pursuit of its own rules and reason obeying the dictates of authority. Ideally, knowledge in the classroom is not a finished product handed out in acts of authority; it is a set of contesting positions whose negotiation is the

3 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kampala, Dar es Salaam: East African Publishers, 1986), 2.

4 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 93.

5 John K. Noyes, "Difficult Humanity: Why European Culture is Studied in Democratic South Africa," *Pretexts* 8.2 (1999): 207–20.

job of the university. I would hazard the claim that this holds true even in the natural sciences classroom (Bruno Latour would be my witness), but it certainly holds true in the literature classroom.

Anyone who teaches knows that the struggle for the Kantian classroom is a complex process, influenced by the subtle ways in which authority is at work in the neoliberal university. This struggle is also destabilized by the production of shared meanings in the historical alliance among authority, knowledge, and European imperialism. It is important to add this last element because it introduces the structuring dimension of global capital into discussions of the production of knowledge. Ever since Herder, it has been impossible to overlook the threat this alliance poses to the Kantian idea of representational transcendentalism. Reading Herder's critique of logic (in his commentary on the aesthetics and logic of Alexander Baumgarten 1775–1777),<sup>6</sup> it becomes clear that even the discipline that strives for absolute clarity of thought is itself subject to regulation that exceeds its own rules (this would later be given mathematical and logical expression by Bertrand Russell, Kurt Gödel, and Ludwig Wittgenstein). Between the ideal of working at unfinished knowledge and the fact of working within the neoliberal university's network of authority, a chasm looms.

One of the tools I find useful in negotiating this chasm is critical theory of the Frankfurt School. I find it helpful to think of the literary object in the terms Theodor Adorno spelled out in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), where he spoke of objects cheated of their possibilities by the logic of late capitalism and where he tried to develop a methodology for revitalizing these possibilities. At this point, it is important to emphasize that when I speak of critique in the classroom, I'm not talking about what in certain contexts is called "critical thinking." When I spoke at the workshop that gave rise to this collection of papers, one of my colleagues, a philosopher, attempted to downplay the importance of critique in the classroom because she considered it to be a ruse aimed at educating students into a docility, which, in a self-congratulatory gesture, marvels at its own independence. She was quite correct to do so, but I'm talking about something completely different. I'm talking about what Oskar Negt was referring to in 2006 when he stated that the aim of critical theory is to produce political contexts for interpretation.<sup>7</sup> The critical tradition addresses students' ability to look at their education and see how the political context for interpretation includes both the moment of their docility and the moment in which docility might be overcome.

Critique in the literature classroom is concerned with the idea that intellectual work—teaching—is only partly done if it fails to address the limits within which it operates. There are many ways to talk about these limits. I'm interested among other things in the institutional production of disciplinary limits. I'm also interested in the way financial circumstances force students to drive a wedge between what happens in the classroom and what appears to be the productive potential of their intellectual activities. This is basically a variation on Max Horkheimer's idea that critique attempts to

6 Johann Gottfried Herder, "Auseinandersetzung mit Baumgartens Aesthetica. Plan zu einer Aesthetik," in *Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1984): 659–76.

7 Monika Krause, "The Production of Counter-Publics and the Counter-Publics of Production: An Interview with Oskar Negt," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9.1 (2006): 119–28.

overcome the fragmentation of knowledge in modernity.<sup>8</sup> (1968). Horkheimer followed a line from Adam Smith through Hegel and early Marx in identifying capitalism with the fragmentation of experience. Interdisciplinarity both activates and interrogates this fragmentation by pointing to a wholeness of experience that social reality denies. In the African context, this dovetails with a critical tradition that assumes some possibility of wholeness beyond fragmented life. It is most apparent in the works of African humanists from Frantz Fanon (1963) and Steve Biko (1987) to Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2013).<sup>9</sup> Bringing these insights to the literature classroom, it is easy to see how students struggling to harmonize learning with the acquisition of professional qualifications are enacting a critique of the humanist idea of wholeness.

For the literature classroom, the promise of critique is that it tries to understand how what happens inside the classroom is in dialogue with the classroom's outside. In fact, one could say that critical theory defines the outside of the classroom in order to produce meaning for its inside. If the literature classroom is a place where knowledge is produced in dialogue, and interpretation is a process of coaxing meaning out of texts, then much is at stake when it comes to the political context that is chosen to be operative in dialogue and interpretation.

The importance of this was constantly driven home for me during the years I taught at the University of Cape Town (UCT), years that spanned the final few years of apartheid and the first decade of South African democracy. I was proud to be part of the department led by Peter Horn, who had made a name as an anti-apartheid activist and poet, and I was proud to be associated with an institution that had been opposing the race-based admission policies for decades and had been doing its best to create an intellectual space where apartheid could be opposed in as many ways as possible. Statistically, this opposition was hopelessly inadequate, and Black students remained the minority in my classes, though the numbers gradually rose throughout the 1990s. This applied also to the Theory of Literature program, which we founded as a collaborative program in the humanities in the mid-1990s. Those Black students who opted to study German literature and theory of literature did so for the same reasons as the White students—partly to compile the most useful set of undergraduate courses for their future careers and partly out of pure intellectual curiosity.

The inherent injustice of the South African education system under apartheid adhered to every single aspect of my role as a teacher. After studying in Johannesburg, I was hired as a junior lecturer in the Department of German Language and Literature at UCT in January 1985. In October the previous year, Desmond Tutu had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A month before that, P. W. Botha had been named state president, enforcing the new constitution of 1983, which had been approved by a Whites-only referendum. The apartheid regime's new constitution was intended to counter growing resistance to this racist, White minority government. It granted the vote to persons

8 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury, 1972), 188–243.

9 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox ([1963]; reprint, New York: Grove, 2004); Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Steve Biko: A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987); Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois ([2013]; reprint, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

classified Colored or Indian, electing representatives to their own racially segregated houses in a tricameral parliament, in which the White chamber had the power of veto. In those final years of the 1980s, in the apartheid government's death throes, whether I wanted to or not, I stood in class as a representative of the population group in whose name the White chamber governed the disenfranchised majority of South Africa.

Once the tricameral parliament was in place, it was immediately clear that the political effect was the opposite of what its designers had hoped for. There was a mass boycott of parliament, and a new wave of mass protests shook the townships. Both deployed the South African Defense Force to quell the unrest, and the failure of this tactic led to repeated states of emergency beginning in June 1985. Foreign capital fled the country, the value of the currency plummeted, and the South African economy began to collapse. This had an interesting effect on the demographic of my students. Refusing the race classification of apartheid, the general disenfranchised populace began to identify overtly as "Black," insofar as they had an activist sensibility. This meant that my teaching career began just as the proportion of self-identifying Black students in the classroom was rising and as the epistemological incoherence of the word *race* was locking horns with it political efficacy.

In the German program, many of the students outside the White English-speaking population for whom the university had been reserved had attended the German classes at Livingstone High School in the "Coloured" township of Athlone, a school that had become politicized under the influence of Neville Alexander. Before he was imprisoned for ten years on Robben Island, Alexander had obtained a master's degree in German literature at UCT and a PhD in Tübingen. Alexander was a passionate defender of multilingualism as a tool for political emancipation, and he pointed out the way recentring native languages can lead to a reevaluation of technology and its place in the lives of those who use it (see the interviews and articles in the collections published in 2013 and 2014).<sup>10</sup> The students from Livingstone provided a relentless and important corrective to the perspectives of their fellow White students. Throughout my tenure at UCT, however, German studies and literary studies in general remained dominated by White students. It is one of the gross failings of educational reform in the 1990s that the previously White-designated, English-language, liberal-leaning universities did not manage to undo the predominance of White instructors and learners in their classrooms. In the year 2000, White students still made up 52 percent of the student body at UCT.

Because of the demographic imbalance in the classroom, when I taught German literary texts or even German language, there were always two sets of forces at work—it was almost as if there were two classrooms. One was a space that had been hermetically sealed, like a laboratory, where we could talk about the love life of an eighteenth-century introvert as if it were our own, and where we could enact the humanist leveling of the race-based privilege and oppression that defined the lives of all of us outside the classroom; the other one had no walls and no roof, and in this space the emotions of that same eighteenth-century individual struggled for legitimacy among apartheid's and

10 Neville Alexander, *Interviews with Neville Alexander: The Power of Languages Against the Language of Power* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014); Neville Alexander, *Thoughts on the New South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2013).

post-apartheid's young adults, both Black and White. Just as it was impossible to look out the windows without seeing Cecil Rhodes's land, his statue, his legacy, it was impossible to conjure up the ghosts of past writers without letting in the ghosts of the students who couldn't be there because social forces, or laws, or economic circumstances wouldn't let them even get close. This conflicted classroom meant that, as a teacher, I was constantly hovering between complicity and critique. The project of de-imperializing the literature classroom is muddled by the way this mixed complicity and critique, although it was extreme in the apartheid and post-apartheid university, characterizes the ambivalent position of all university teachers in all disciplines.

The politics of teaching in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa drove home to me that the outside of the classroom is not simply there, but something that has to be produced inside the classroom. I mean this in two ways. First, the apparent autonomy of the classroom reproduces social norms, and the interrogation of this process needs to find its way into everything that happens in the classroom. Second, if the outside of the classroom is to be understood as a determining factor in the production of knowledge, it won't just announce itself in the classroom; it has to be brought in through conscious acts of resistance—resistance to received norms of authority, resistance to the evacuation of the political from interpretation, resistance to the text itself. This amounts to using the literary text, irrespective of what that text might be, to open doors and let the outside of the classroom in.

This concerns first of all the formal makeup of the text itself. This is Walter Benjamin's and Theodor Adorno's idea of imminent critique.<sup>11</sup> Why would I teach Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836) in apartheid South Africa? Not only because of his radical left-wing politics, or his sharp portrayal of the links between poverty, mental illness, and crime, but because his indecision about the formal coherence of his story is intimately related to the fragmented experiences of life in an unjust society. Similarly, when my students analyzed Heinrich von Kleist's story "The Engagement in Santo Domingo" (1811), they were confronted with the question of what it means to deconstruct the idea of race (Peter Horn spelled out how this works in his groundbreaking essay of 1978: "Did Kleist Hold Racial Prejudices?").<sup>12</sup>

These considerations need to be held alongside examination of the institutional framework of teaching because it is the most immediate announcement of normativity in the university. Irrespective of whether we teach in South Africa or Canada, our classrooms are full of the ghosts of students who can't be there. Teachers in neoliberal universities have a responsibility to resist the building of walls designed to keep students out of the classroom. This is not only a matter of economic justice, it is a matter of academic freedom that, as David Lumbo-Liu remarked at the workshop, is not to be confused with freedom of speech. In the literature classroom, academic freedom is the right to pursue useless knowledge and (this is the corollary to the pursuit of useless knowledge) to give students access to knowledge without being plunged hopelessly into debt. In asserting this right, we are acknowledging that—beyond discussions about class

11 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton ([1966]; reprint New York and London: Continuum, 2007).

12 Peter Horn, "Hatte Kleist Rassenvorurteile?—Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der Literatur zur 'Verlobung in St. Domingo,'" *Monatshefte* 67.2 (1975): 117–28.

sizes and enrolment numbers—professors in all disciplines have an interest in doing everything they can to resist the rampant financialization of knowledge.

The financialization of knowledge added another dimension to the German studies classroom and the theory of literature classroom in 1990s South Africa: the tension between the instrumental view of education reform and the critical tradition of decolonization, between the transformation of education to meet the economic and vocational expectations of a newly empowered Black population and the need to include a non-instrumental component that did not involve obvious vocational training. Behind the scenes negotiations between political interest groups and foreign capital held in the late 1980s had fostered the peaceful transition to democracy, but at the same time they had defused the radical political and economic agenda of the African National Congress (ANC) spelled out in the Freedom Charter of 1953, resulting in the neoliberal economic regime that has been struggling for legitimacy ever since. There is no better or more concise description of this than Sampie Terreblanche's 2012 book *Lost in Transformation*.<sup>13</sup> Concurrent to this eclipse of redistribution behind the interests of international capital, there was a widespread assumption among university administrators of the immediate post-apartheid years that being a Black student automatically meant holding instrumentalist and vocationalist aspirations in the pursuit of a higher degree. This assumption may have been correct (I don't think it was), but it was never examined.

At this point, disciplines such as mine were forced into either inventing far-fetched vocational outcomes or arguing openly (and often against pressing ideological and economic odds) for a non-instrumental approach to education. Initiatives designed by well-intentioned administrators often masked cost-cutting measures by evoking transformation measures. Because *transformation* in South Africa in the 1990s was another word for *decolonization*, I take this as a warning to decolonization movements today to avoid the trap of instrumentalizing learning. A good impression of the issues at stake in non-instrumentalist learning in the 1990s can be gained by reading John Higgins's collection of essays, *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities*.<sup>14</sup> In his foreword, J. M. Coetzee summarized Higgins's position well:

All over the world, as governments retreat from their traditional duty to foster the common good and reconceive of themselves as mere managers of national economies, universities have been coming under pressure to turn themselves into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy.<sup>15</sup>

Higgins counters with the argument (in Coetzee's words) that:

Allowing the transient needs of the economy to define the goals of higher education is a misguided and short-sighted policy: indispensable to a democratic society—indeed, to a

13 Sampie Terreblanche, *Lost in Transformation. South Africa's Search for a New Future since 1986* (Johannesburg: KMM, 2012).

14 John Higgins, *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa. Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities* (London: Bucknell, 2014).

15 J. M. Coetzee, "Foreword," in *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities*, ed. John Higgins, (London: Bucknell, 2014): xi–xv, esp. xi.

vigorous national economy—is a critically literate citizenry competent to explore and interrogate the assumptions behind the paradigms of national and economic life reigning at any given moment.<sup>16</sup>

Later, it would become ever clearer how important this resistance to instrumentalized education would be. As it became evident what kind of political compromises the ANC had been prepared to make in order to enter the global financial marketplace, it became equally clear that the defense of education against its cooption by neoliberal economic thought was a struggle that had to be fought not only in the post-industrial nations of the north, but also—and perhaps above all—in countries such as South Africa. Over the past years, this struggle has expressed itself in the South African universities in the student movements of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the movements to decolonize the universities while at the same time making education accessible to all. In these two struggles, I see students trying to balance the conflicting needs of deimperalized education today. In “fees must fall,” all humans are equal, all entitled to an education, not impeded by the disadvantages of race or class. “Rhodes must fall” formed the most serious challenge to the humanist idea, the awareness that race was and continues to be the defining factor in determining the status of humanity in South Africa today. Political outcomes would be quite different depending on whether one pursued the universalist or the particularist political project. Students in South Africa wanted both, and I believe they were right to want both.

16 Coetzee, “Foreword,” xii.