

*Pathways to critical literacy: a memoir of history, geography and chance.*

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I was born in 1949, four years after the end of World War II and one year after the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa, bringing with it apartheid policy and ideology. I was fortunate in that my grandparents had left Lithuania before the outbreak of the war. Those that remained, their parents and sisters did not survive the holocaust, except for one sister and her two daughters, whose concentration camp tattoos intrigued and horrified me as a child. It has never surprised me that many of the 1940s Afrikaner Nationalists were Nazi sympathisers, and as such subscribed to theories of racial purity and superiority.

My maternal grandfather was the oldest in his family. He found work in a bakery at first and slept under the table. Bit by bit he earned enough money to bring my grandmother to South Africa. They then worked with each successive brother to bring the others out, one by one. My mother was born in South Africa, and by the time I was born my grandfather was able to afford a nice house. We lived with him in a three-generation extended family including my uncle and cousins at different times until I was eleven. My paternal grandfather left Lithuania for South Africa after he turned thirteen. His three brothers eventually joined him. At first he earned a living travelling around the country as a trader taking goods to the rural areas. He eventually settled in an isolated Karoo town in the Northern Cape with my South African born grandmother and two of his brothers. There they started several small businesses – a petrol station, a general store, a butchery, a veldskoek (shoe) factory, while working a few small farms in addition. Although my grandfathers began their lives as poor immigrants who did not speak the local languages, they both had the benefit of an education in the Yeshivas of Eastern Europe – they were literate, numerate and entrepreneurial.

I was born into a comfortable middle class existence in a country where my whiteness opened the way to privilege and structural advantage and into a time and a community that thought it was important for girls to be educated. My grandfathers' generation had little sympathy for black South Africans who had been oppressed by two centuries of colonial rule followed by 40 years of apartheid exclusion from good education, proper health care, freedom of movement, fairly paid jobs and political rights. My maternal grandfather used to say that if *he* pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, so could 'they'. Coming from a history of anti-Semitic persecution, his own privilege was invisible to him. I was lucky to have had parents who were politically progressive. But they shielded me from reality.

My grandfathers' stories of 'de heim' (home) were romanticized accounts of lost fortunes, youthful adventures and heroic escapes. I suspect that what serious discussions there were, were in Yiddish, a language that I never learnt to speak apart from a few words. My generation was not told about the pogroms, the deaths of our family in Europe, or the horrors of the holocaust. I grew to understand our history gradually over the years, through photographs, books, documentaries, visits to holocaust museums and more recently through the written down, matter-of-fact, oral testimony of my paternal grandfather's two nieces who survived the war.

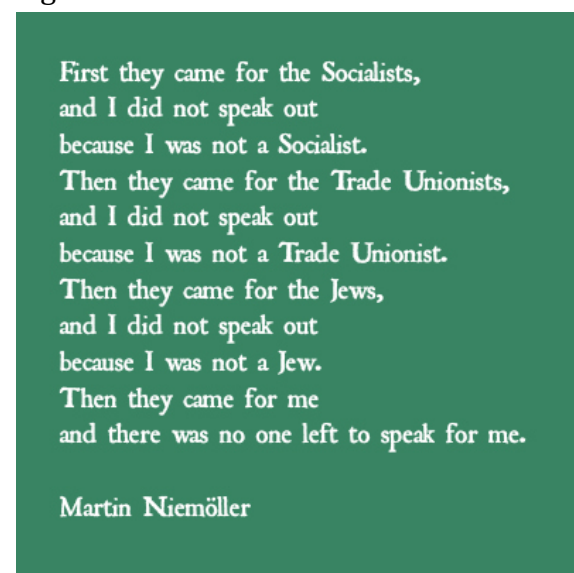
We were equally ignorant of the multiple ways in which black people were subjected to denigration and structured racism enshrined in law. I remember the day I understood how apartheid worked. My uncle was a human rights lawyer and my aunt offered to host the daughter of one of his colleagues, a Durban lawyer. Eleven years old, I was roped in as Fazila's designated companion. I remember that it was hot and I begged my mother to take us to the public swimming pool. I must have asked a hundred times before my mother told me that Fazila was not allowed to go to the whites only public pool. Thus began a life-long friendship and my education. I came to know which department stores would not allow 'black' people to try on clothes; I came to understand what it meant to go to inferior schools and Universities designated for Indians, or to face the disapproval of one's Moslem parents for marrying a Hindu, even though he was a descendant of Ghandi. In those days friendships that crossed racial lines were unusual and I consider myself to have been fortunate.

The year I met Fazila in 1960, was the year that 69 black people were shot and killed following an anti-pass law demonstration in Sharpeville. The requirement for all Africans to carry identity documents delimiting where they could be, was just one of the indignities imposed on 'non-whites'. Protests, demonstrations and riots followed. As my awareness grew, I chose to leave the right-wing Zionist organization that all my friends belonged to. I had opportunities to attend rehearsals of a radical racially mixed theatre group, daring for its time. My parents took me to hear Robert Kennedy speak about civil rights at Wits in 1966. I remember feeling shocked, but not at all sorry when our Prime Minister, Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, was assassinated. By the time I entered University I was ready for left wing politics.

The Extension of University Education Act, Act No 45 of 1959, made it a criminal offence for a 'non-white' student to register at an open university without written consent from the Minister of Internal Affairs. When I went to Wits University in 1967 it was, against its will, a whites only institution. My friends and I all joined the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) that

included students from the universities established for the different racial groups. An anti-apartheid student association, which at the time included black student leaders like Steve Biko, NUSAS was already under attack. Its President had been banned the previous year for inviting Senator Kennedy to speak. Throughout our time as students we took part in protest actions and were inspired by the words of Pastor Niemöller, who spent seven years in Hitler's concentration camps. (See Figure 1). We became accustomed to police firing tear gas at us or beating fleeing protestors with their batons. Those experiences only made us more determined to support the liberation struggle despite knowing that there were informers among us. I graduated with a postgraduate degree in English literature in 1971.

Figure 1 Pastor Niemöller



I was teaching at a school in 1976, the year of the Soweto student uprising that began as a protest to language policy in education. I was pregnant with my second son. The townships were burning, students were boycotting schools, protests turned into riots, police in fierce looking armoured vehicles, Casspirs and Hippos, used brutal methods in their attempts to quell the 'unrest', a euphemism widely used in place of 'civil war'. One National State of Emergency followed another. The press was severely censored. Meanwhile the South African apartheid armed forces were doing everything they could to defend against the struggles for liberation taking place on our borders with Mozambique, Rhodesia and South West Africa. White boys were being conscripted to fight in border wars that many of them opposed. I returned to the University as a member of Faculty in 1977. Jonathon Paton, whose father Alan Paton (1948) wrote *Cry the Beloved Country*, was my friend and boss. There I became better informed about the atrocities that were taking place around us. When a close colleague was

banned and placed under house arrest for no good reason, my husband and I decided it was time to leave. We did not want our sons to grow up under apartheid, or to serve in the South African army.

We were in London for two years and returned as jobless, failed émigrés at the end of 1981. I returned to my post in English Teacher Education at the University strengthened by my short time at London University, where I was taught by Harold Rosen, Tony Burgess and Jane Miller, by working in English comprehensive schools, and by attending meetings of the London Association of Teachers of English. I brought back *The Languages Book*, (Raleigh, 1981) which provided classroom materials for teachers of English working in multilingual classrooms in the UK. Its sociolinguistic orientation to language influenced my subsequent work and the format of these materials became the precursor for the *Critical Language Awareness Series* classroom materials that I wrote and edited (Janks, 1993). It cost me £1.

On my return to South Africa, I made two important decisions, one professional and the other political. Professionally, I needed to move from being a literature teacher educator, to being a language educator so that I had a better understanding of how to teach English to black students proficient in African languages. Between 1984 and 1995, I completed Honours, Masters and PhD degrees in Applied Linguistics, with research that focused on the relationship between language, power and ideology. The second decision was political. If I was going to live in South Africa, I needed to be more involved in the liberation struggle. For me, knowledge about what was happening in the country was less scary than ignorance. I chose to focus my energies on the struggle to transform education. I joined the Black Sash education committee where, amongst other activities, we designed a programme and materials for schools every 16 June to commemorate the first day of the 1976 Soweto uprising when police shot and killed young black students who were protesting peacefully. I also joined the National Education Union of South Africa, which many of us used as a base from which to work with students and teachers in Soweto. My teacher education courses increasingly focused on the teaching of English language in a multilingual context. Every year my students produced materials like those in *The Languages Book*, but for the South African context. As my teaching began to foreground the relationship between language and power, these materials became more critical.

The 1980s saw the beginning of the armed struggle against the apartheid state, led by the underground African National Congress (ANC), which had been banned in 1960. Education remained in a state of crisis throughout the 1980s. The 1976 slogans 'Liberation before education', 'Say, *NO* to gutter education' continued to spur students to fight against the apartheid state. Black youth

boycotted school and threatened teachers and principals who did not support their boycotts. They destroyed school buildings and set government vehicles alight and later formed part of the campaign to make South Africa ungovernable. Young people were being jailed, going underground and dying. Concerned parents in Soweto met to form a Crisis Committee to consider the effects of the liberation struggle on their children and the consequences of their rejection of Bantu Education. This generation of young people who led the liberation struggle at the expense of their own education came to be known as South Africa's 'lost generation'. Their parents' concerns led to the establishment of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) responsible, amongst other things, for developing People's Education. People's Education was "a deliberate attempt to move away from reactive protests around education to develop a counter-hegemonic education strategy, to contribute to laying a basis for a future, post-apartheid South Africa" (Kruss, 1988, p. 8). See <http://www.populareducation.co.za>, as well as Butler (1993) and Janks (1992). The People's Education Commissions – People's Maths, People's English and People's History – were charged with reimagining curriculum in these three key areas. I was invited to join the People's English Commission. The commission did not get much further than providing a transformative vision for the teaching of English. This was released to the press in November 1987 and the NECC was banned by the State in February 1988. I was advised by the NECC to continue my work on writing critical materials that could be distributed underground. The years that followed saw my research on the development of the *Critical Language Awareness Series*. (Janks, 1993). After the release of Nelson Mandela, Wits University Press and Hodder and Stoughton were willing to risk publishing them. With a stroke of extraordinary irony this coincided with the British government's placing an embargo on the *Language in the Curriculum* (LINC) materials that they had commissioned. *These* became the materials that circulated underground. I saw the LINC materials as an extended version of the *The Languages Book* that started my own journey.

The burden of being white in apartheid South Africa was something I felt keenly as an adult. Call it white guilt. Call it a social conscience. Call it the recognition of structural privilege. However, you name it, I found this to be an extremely uncomfortable and inescapable subject position. In South Africa, race was the overarching social category and it defined us all. A newspaper report on racial reclassification delivered to Parliament in 1985 reveals the absurdity of the Population Registration Act of 1950, which required all inhabitants of South Africa to be registered according to their racial characteristics. Figure 2 is the report published in *The Star*, 21 March 1986.

Figure 2 The Chameleon Dance

## 1985 had at least 1 000 'chameleons'

Political Staff

PARLIAMENT — More than 1 000 people officially changed colour last year.

They were reclassified from one race group to another by the stroke of a Government pen.

Details of what is dubbed "the chameleon dance" were given in reply to Opposition questions in Parliament.

The Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Stoffel Botha, disclosed that during 1985:

- 702 coloured people turned white.
- 19 whites became coloured.
- One Indian became white.
- Three Chinese became white.
- 50 Indians became coloured.
- 43 coloureds became Indians.
- 21 Indians became Malay.
- 30 Malays went Indian.
- 249 blacks became coloured.
- 20 coloureds became black.
- Two blacks became "other Asians".
- One black was classified Griqua.
- 11 coloureds became Chinese.
- Three coloureds went Malay.
- One Chinese became coloured.
- Eight Malays became coloured.
- Three blacks were classed as Malay.
- No blacks became white and no whites became black.

The more I turned my attention to language, the more I became aware of the relationship between language and power and the ways in which the language of the apartheid state was used to divide and rule; to legitimate, justify and dissimulate immoral policies; to represent the white race as superior; and to

construct South Africa's colonized subjects as Other and dangerous. It was this language that became the focus of my research. I began to collect examples. I had boxes of newspaper clippings and transcripts of Current Affairs, a daily 'news' bulletin broadcast on State controlled radio. I think I was the only left wing subscriber to these transcripts and I enjoyed the irony of the State's sending me my data in the post every week, free of charge. My early postgraduate research looked for patterns of linguistic use in the data, analysed emblematic texts and interrogated language policy in South Africa. I came to understand language as 'meaning potential' (Halliday, 1985) that provided users with a set of options. Meaning is realized by the choices made by text producers. These choices affect the ways in which texts are positioned and positioning.

I found, for example, that practices of renaming to conceal the pejorifications carried by the original words simply did not work, if the social conditions that produced the negative evaluations in the first place remained unchanged. Specific examples include the following attempts at re-lexicalisation.

Apartheid → separate development → self determination → co-operative co-existence → own affairs → power sharing.

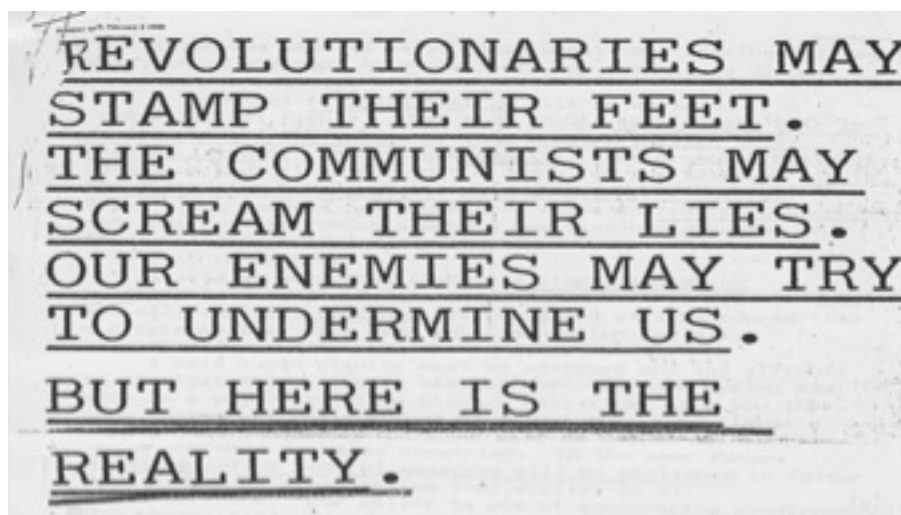
Natives → Bantu → plurals → non whites → non-Europeans → Africans → Blacks

Rellexicalisation was resisted, with activists choosing to use the terms that captured the full discriminatory force of the original naming.

Euphemisms that hid the ugliness of apartheid practices abounded. *Homelands* a euphemism for 'Bantustans', (the 20% of the country designated for 80% of the black population according to ethnicity), was used to justify the forced removal of Africans from white areas as repatriation. Many of the people sent to the Bantustans had never previously set foot in them. This was called *resettlement*. The *Extension of Universities Act*, discussed earlier, closed the Universities to all except white people and *unrest* was the euphemism for civil rebellion.

Attributing the 'unrest' to 'outside agitators' suggested that people inside were quite happy with the status quo, but for the work of communist instigators. A letter published in the *Sunday Times*, 2 February 1986, signed by the State President, P. W. Botha, is a case in point. The first paragraph of this letter is reproduced in Figure 3.

Figure 3: First paragraph of PW Botha's letter to South Africans



Notice how the struggle is infantilised as a stamping, screaming temper tantrum, The use of *the* in 'the communists' reifies their existence and constructs knowledge of their role in fomenting unrest as shared information. Notice also the collocation of revolutionaries, communists and enemies that constructs anti-apartheid forces as different and dangerous. The use of *the* in 'the reality' works differently. It denotes a singular reality – only one true reality, that of Botha and his party.

These are just some of the patterns of use that interested me, along with linguistic resistance. Amongst other strategies, those opposed to apartheid developed an alternative vocabulary – *freedom fighter* for terrorist; *comrade/brother* as opposed to agitators and traitors; the *regime* for the government; *murder* for deaths in detention and so on. They preferred to use the pejorified term such as Bantustans and Bantu education, despite the government's efforts to move away from them. To distance themselves from apartheid language, particularly categories of race, writers used scare quotes and speakers used hand gestures denoting quotation marks. *So-called*, as in so-called homelands, so-called democracy, so-called coloureds, was also widely used.

This early work established the platform for my subsequent work. I was extremely fortunate to be able to do my doctoral work at Lancaster University under the supervision of Norman Fairclough. I sent him my Master's dissertation and he sent me the penultimate draft of his book *Language and Power* (Fairclough, 1989) annotated with comments by Gunther Kress. What a precious gift. Working with Fairclough, I discovered Foucault, which helped me to move beyond only a Marxist analysis of power. He also helped me to move from a focus on linguistic features to a focus on discourse. I attended his courses and learnt how to do critical discourse analysis (CDA) and taught myself Halliday's (1985)



Systemic Functional Grammar. I also became a member of Fairclough's Language Ideology and Power research circle, which continued to meet throughout the six years that it took me to complete my doctorate part-time. It was this group of people, Roz Ivanič and Romy Clark in particular, who provided me with an ongoing intellectual home every time I visited Lancaster.

While Fairclough inducted me into the theory that I needed for my thesis on the research and development of critical language awareness materials for the South African context (Janks, 1985), Ivanič and Clarke provided the touchstone for pedagogy. Richard Allbright, my second supervisor, developed my understanding of what was needed in materials if they were to be accessible for students who spoke African languages.

I registered at Lancaster in September 1989, and on 9 November the Berlin Wall fell.

This proved to be the beginning of the end of apartheid. On 11 February 1990, the South African government released Nelson Mandela from prison. He emerged without bitterness from 27 years of incarceration to lead the transition to democracy. Negotiations took time amidst ongoing violence. In 1994, the first free and fair democratic elections took place and the ANC came to power. To begin the process of healing, Mandela's government established The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to effect restorative justice. Formal hearings began 15 April, 1996. People who felt they had been victims of violence could give testimony and ask for reparations, as could perpetrators who could request amnesty. The TRC report was published in 1998. With respect to language it found that

Language, discourse and rhetoric does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people. (TRC, 1998:7,124,294).

The ideologies of racism, patriarchy, religions, capitalism, apartheid and militarism all intertwined to manufacture people capable of violence. (TRC, 1998: 7,131,296).

A spiral of discourses increasingly dehumanised the other, creating the conditions for violence. (TRC, 1998: 7,125,295).

I was not alone in recognizing the destructive force of language.

The period of research that ended with the completion of my doctoral thesis, in 1995, had focused on deconstructing linguistic choices in texts and examining

the discourses that produced them. This no longer seemed appropriate in a time of positive change. Using the language, taken from the ANC's Reconstruction and Development programme, I began to explore the possibilities of critical literacy for reconstruction. It was no longer sufficient to provide critique, texts had to be redesigned, remade, reimagined for more hopeful times.

The work of Ivanič and Clarke provided the lead with regard to critical text production with their focus on writing (Clarke and Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič, 1998). Kress (2010) provided the turn to multimodality, enabling the development of multimodal pedagogies and text production. By then I had established an ongoing collaboration with Colleagues at the University of South Australia. Not only did they network me with all the key critical literacy academics in the country but they also introduced me to the extraordinary critical literacy work being done by classroom teachers. At the time Australia was the undoubted leader in critical literacy practice in schools and I learnt a great deal there. Phil Cormack helped me to design an online course in critical literacy and Barbara Comber and Pat Thomson (2001) invited me to join their research project on Children's Representations of Place. Through this project we established a connection between the principles, teachers and students in a two poor primary schools on two different continents. The children produced alphabet books and other identity artefacts to exchange. (Janks and Comber, 2006; Janks, 2007). The principals and students visited one another's schools. The Australians were impressed by the principal's ability to make a plan despite limited resources and in particular with her garden project (Janks, 2003). They took this idea to new heights involving children in the design of a garden for their own school (Comber, Nixon, Loo, Ashmore and Cook, 2006)). The South African teachers set out to implement the classroom practices that impressed them in Australia. Making and transformation were at the heart of this project.

In partnership with other Australian colleagues I worked with Ana Ferreira on an international project on Reconciliation Pedagogies (Ferreira and Janks, 2007; 2009). The aim of this project was to effect understanding across the divides in post-conflict societies. We chose to work in three multi-racial South African schools. This too was designed as a transformation project. The 'born free' generation of high school students had become increasingly hostile to talking about the apartheid past in class. Still in racially structured friendship groups, they saw such conversations as 'dangerous'. The most interesting part of this project was our invitation to the students to research the TRC by interviewing different members of their communities. Being in charge of uncovering the past in relation to their own communities proved to be a profound experience for many of them as the past became personal. Many of them discovered things about their own families that they had not known. Because black communities had taken more interest in the TRC hearings, black students had greater access

to preferred classroom knowledge and more to contribute. Suddenly they had more cultural capital than their white peers. Power shifted. We thought it healthy that some white students came to experience marginality in relation to the curriculum for the first time.

The data from these projects provided important practice-based material for my book *Literacy and Power* (Janks, 2010). The impetus for this book was a literature review of critical literacy research in which Bonny Norton (1997) found that male researchers in the field produced theory and women researchers were the ones who applied theory to practice. This was certainly the case of my own postgraduate research in which I attempted to turn man-made theory into materials for critical literacy pedagogy. I was incensed that I had been interpellated by and unconsciously subjected to the discourses of gender that I inhabited. It was as if my own life proved the power of discourses beyond my conscious awareness. I became determined to make and not just consume theory.

I began to notice that theorists worked on one or other aspect that contributed to the field, and that practitioners, like me, tended to focus on social injustices that are tied to our own subjectivities and our own contexts. I found remnants of the literacy wars in continuing hostility to the genre theorists in Australia, whereas in South Africa, genre theory was seen as contributing to access, particularly in relation to academic literacies in Higher Education. Freebody and Luke (1990) had produced a synthesing model for literacy; I started to work on a synthesing framework for critical literacy. I came to understand that power needed to take seriously differential access to cultural, material, and symbolic resources. I understood that difference produced social hierarchies and that injustices often centred on diversity, that is, on issues pertaining to identity and difference. Because there is no point in consciousness raising without an imagination for social action that can contribute to change, critical literacy has to include transformative design and redesign. I was able to show that critical literacy needed to integrate the dimensions of power, diversity, access, design and redesign and that any one without the other produces a problematic imbalance. This theoretical framework is developed and explained in my 2010 book *Literacy and Power*. I subsequently derived particular pleasure in working with colleagues to apply my woman-made theory to practice in *Doing Critical Literacy* (2014).

I wish there were a happy ending to this story. I wish I could claim that the work I have done has affected classroom practice. For a brief moment, just after 1994, the first post-apartheid curriculum included critical language awareness as one of seven specific outcomes for the Languages Literacy and Communication Learning Area. This curriculum proved too taxing for teachers trained under

Bantu Education to implement and it was systematically eroded. In CAPS, the current skills based curriculum, critical literacy remains as one of the aims of learning a language in Grades 10 to 12 only.

Learners should be able to use language as a means for critical and creative thinking; for expressing their opinions on ethical issues and values; for interacting critically with a wide range of texts; for challenging the perspectives, values and power relations embedded in texts; and for reading texts for various purposes, such as enjoyment, research, and critique. (Department of Basic Education, 2011)

Unfortunately very little critical literacy appears in the teaching plans prescribed by CAPS. I have run a course for Department officials responsible for all of South Africa's languages, and workshops for teachers. Many in-service and pre-service teacher education programmes include critical literacy, but there has been little take up in state schools. In 1992, I helped establish a Department of Applied English Language Studies at Wits, which was able to attract academics from across the country as postgraduate students. As a result our work in multiliteracies, multimodal literacies, early literacy and critical literacy has had an impact on teacher education nationally, but also with little effect in schools.

I also wish that there were no longer any need for critical literacy in South Africa and elsewhere. Said's (1995) work *Orientalism* shows that discourses are tenacious. They continue across time and space, ready-formed, to flourish at moments such as 9/11. In my own country, the ANC has not remained true to its ideals. 'Tenderpreneurs' have benefited from state patronage, and the political elite have been accused of turning the country into a 'predator state where a powerful, corrupt and demagogic elite of political hyenas are increasingly using the state to get rich' (Vavi, Secretary General of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, 2010). The president remains ensconced in his position despite numerous scandals relating to his immoral sexual conduct, the expenses incurred by the State for his personal homestead, Nkandla, his responsibility for allowing private interests to capture the state, and his disregard of the Constitution. President Zuma attributes criticism to the problem of 'clever blacks' (Zuma, News 24, 1 November 2012). This is not a leader who wants a critically literate population.

As I write, a remembrance ceremony is being held at Marikana for the 34 miners criminally shot by police in 2012 while protesting. This was a chilling reminder of apartheid shootings such as Sharpeville and in Soweto on 16 June 1976, except now sanctioned by the ANC government. The intention of the ceremony is also to highlight how little has been done to change miners' working and living conditions in the two years since. The #Feesmustfall movement is also in the news as it prepares for a second year of political action. University students are

as concerned with the lack of transformation in Universities and the country, and the service contracts of workers, as they are about unaffordable fees and the right to Higher Education. Black girls are protesting against racist school rules pertaining to hair and their teachers' telling them to straighten their hair, as natural African hair is untidy. White norms continue to be imposed on black bodies in post-apartheid South Africa. This year Britain voted to exit from the European Union and Donald Trump was elected as the Republican nominee for President of the United States. Millions of refugees continue to flee from conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Xenophobia is on the rise. Global warming continues. There is still much work to be done.

In tracing my paths into critical literacy, I have to factor in chance, which is why I began with the significance of the place and time of my birth. I was fortunate that I was white, that my family was progressive, and that I received a good education. Many South Africans did not, especially girls. I happened to be at University in the 60s, a time of social change and political struggle. I found a partner who took pride in and supported my work. As chance would have it, the daughter of an English professor was in my class when I was a school teacher. As a result he asked me to apply for a job at Wits in English teacher education. I had the opportunity to work with brilliant, socially committed colleagues. I returned to my studies just a decade before the demise of apartheid and in the era of the literacy wars, when critical literacy was just beginning. My academic and political timing were fortunate. I met the right people, first in England, then in Australia and subsequently in Canada and the US at the right time. Bill Green told us what we needed to read. Barbara Comber generously shared her international network of scholars with me. Alan Luke introduced me to Naomi Silverman, a visionary publisher who has produced the most influential booklist in the field of literacy and social justice. By the time my books were ready for publication, she was with Routledge, a prestigious academic publisher. The first in South Africa to get my doctorate in critical literacy, I was in a position to work with and advise exceptional doctoral researchers, many of them colleagues at Universities in South Africa. If any one of these circumstances had been different, I would have been different. I have learnt never to underestimate the conjunction of history, geography and chance.

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