Critical diversity literacy
Essentials for the twenty-first century

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The concept of critical diversity literacy (CDL) has been a work in progress for more than a decade. It represents an attempt to distil into a single framework the analytic proficiencies I believe a qualification in diversity studies should provide. The particular framing is the outcome of a confluence of factors: the specific higher education context in post-apartheid South Africa where students enter a society characterized by an impetus towards transformation, integration and greater equity; the deepening of my own work on whiteness towards recognizing the family resemblances in how privilege and oppression operate along other axes of difference; and a serendipitous encounter with France Winddance Twine’s concept of racial literacy, which I recast, developed and extended along new lines for a different purpose.

In Twine’s empirically grounded work, racial literacy describes a ‘reading practice’ acquired by the white partners of British interracial couples to manage the racial climate affecting the lives of their children. She helpfully casts racial literacy as ‘a sociopolitical vision’. The framework of CDL, by contrast, synthesizes relevant trends in social theory pertaining to questions of diversity, difference and otherness. It is an ethical sociopolitical stance in a world increasingly characterized by heterogeneous spaces – organizational, social and public.

This chapter will briefly explicate the concept of ‘critical diversity literacy’ (CDL) before presenting the model, giving necessarily brief, broad-stroke comments on each of the criteria, which would obviously be further developed and nuanced when taught.

Critical diversity literacy

The new context

It has become commonplace to note the complexity of the unfolding world attributable to its increasing diversity, the manner in which differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist – more or less functionally – as the globe ‘shrinks’. The discrete national state belonging to a homogeneous population group has been recognized as a myth of modernity. Not all of the new complexity we call our diversity is the result of mobility within and across borders; it is also a function of the changing relationships between people who are differently positioned within the
nation state. Under the changing social imaginary of our times described by Vertovec (2012), a more rights-based ethos has taken hold and some oppressed groups now claim the right to be visible, affirmed and included in how we think about ourselves as social collectivities.

It is obvious that such a changed environment requires new skills from the citizens that inhabit it. This is particularly true of those who have acquired a high level of education. Those who exercise leadership within their respective fields will need to be freer from the constraints of a single history, and understand human reality as multilayered and multiperspectival, shifting, ambivalent and open to yet unknown possibilities. In short, they need to be literate in reading the complex world of the twenty-first century.

Being socially literate

Conventionally, literacy has been regarded as a private accomplishment, a set of cognitive skills used to encode and decode written texts. However, since the ‘social turn’ (Gee 2005), literacy is seen as always already embedded in social and cultural contexts, involving the ability of an actor to engage with and respond to the world in which she exercises agency. ‘Literacy’ increasingly embraces an expanded and growing set of skills necessary for participation in technology rich and complex societies: information literacy, media literacy, computer literacy, health literacy, scientific literacy, emotional literacy and more. A lack of access to the means of gaining these capacities can be regarded as a disabling condition.

In line with this understanding, I suggest ‘diversity literacy’ is ‘an enabled’ mode of existence, congruent with the requirements of the emerging social imaginary of the twenty-first century.

Being critically literate

Any term gaining currency as a descriptor of social relations is subject to attempts to secure its use and meaning in ways that serve the interests of differently positioned groups. A term like ‘diversity’ could be regarded as a floating signifier (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) in the social imaginary, which contesting discourses attempt to secure, gaining most currency. ‘Diversity’ has at times encapsulated legal compliance, demographic representivity and neo-liberal inclusion, and has accommodated conservative, liberal and transformative impulses.

It can be argued that a normative conception of diversity as ‘all the ways we differ’ has emerged, especially prevalent in the corporate world. Epitomized in terms that lean towards the carnivalesque – ‘embracing,’ ‘celebrating’ diversity – all differences are grist to the merry diversity mill:

(See 2005: 184)

Such a characterization divorces people from the power relations within society that advance or constrain the achievement of their full potential, moulding how others see us and how we see ourselves in relation to them. Apolitical, individualized conceptualizations of differences serve the interests of those who are already centred economically, socially and organizationally.
Dominant collectivities can be seen to be adjusting to the new diversity imperatives, while actually controlling, even stemming, the deeper, less comfortable aspects of these very imperatives.

It is into this normative space that the idea of critical diversity literacy speaks. The Critical school of social thought owes its intellectual debt to the Frankfurt School, and ultimately to Marx. Foregrounding unequal power relations, social inequities and fundamental contestations of situated interests in society, the tradition seeks to critique and not just to understand or explain society. The goal is a more socially just world. Embedded within this tradition, CDL shares the commitment to uncovering assumptions that obscure more penetrating understandings of historical and current social realities.

The CDL framework

‘Critical diversity literacy’ can be regarded as an informed analytical orientation that enables a person to ‘read’ prevailing social relations as one would a text, recognizing the ways in which possibilities are being opened up or closed down for those differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of specific social contexts. The following section outlines ten criteria for CDL. Each of these requires much deeper explication than it is possible to provide in a short chapter; the comments therefore merely indicate one or two central concerns for each criterion.

(1) An understanding of the role of power in constructing differences that make a difference.

Far from reflecting a pre-given, natural order, all our categories for thinking about difference are socially constructed within unequal power relations. Some differences are constructed as those that make a difference (Hall 2007) while others remain unmarked. The implication is that difference is always (inter)relational, inessential, incomplete, fluid and destabilized. To retain the conceptual frameworks that support and maintain the appearance of a natural hierarchy requires constant ideological work. Paradigmatically this is achieved through the polarization of a range of human variation into mutually exclusive, binary opposites, such as man/woman; white/black; heterosexual/homosexual. In each case one side of the binary is valorized above the other. These binaries obscure and repress human variation along the axis in question, sedimenting social understandings into an ultimately self-fulfilling ‘common sense’. Oppressive social structures maintain the categories, conferring or withholding rewards such as inclusion, belonging and acceptance, or conversely administering exclusion and censure.

Such inequitable social arrangements ‘other’ those subordinated, and progressively develop systems of entitlement for the privileged; power and resources are sapped away from those disadvantaged. Social, economic and psychological rewards are amassed in the hands of the more powerful. We can thus rightfully talk about non-normative groups as oppressed by those in dominant positionalities. Young (1990) usefully identifies the ‘faces of oppression’ as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The presence of these, singly or in combination, indicates the presence of oppression. These dynamics operate both within nation states and transnationally, an important consideration in the experiences and conditions of migration.

Understanding and acknowledging the constitutive role of power in issues of diversity is the first principle of CDL. All the other criteria arise from the effects of underlying unequal power dynamics and how these are played out in relation to different differences – establishing normative orders, creating centres and margins, bringing about systems of privilege and disadvantage. Oppression on any vector obviously needs to be examined for the specificities affecting that
oppression. Yet, sexuality, for example, requires analysis of the specific constructions and dynamics that pertain to bodily difference, sexual identities and expressions, as opposed to those that create, say, racial oppression; the deep systemic dynamics need to be understood as those of unequal power.

(2) A recognition of the unequal symbolic and material value of different social locations. This includes acknowledging hegemonic positionalities and concomitant identities, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, cisgender, ablebodiedness, middleclassness, etc. and how these dominant orders position those in non-hegemonic spaces.

Some of the social fault lines created along particular axes of difference have proved to be enduring and wide ranging in their effects – they have long histories and wide reach. The divisions along lines of genders, ‘races’, ethnicities, sexualities and nationalities, for example, are entrenched and difficult to change (Payne 2006). These condition and shape knowledge formations, our sense of reality and self-understandings, collective and personal (Cesaire 2000 [1972]).

A critical approach to diversity names the ideological systems put in place by and for these positionalities as well as the hegemonic discourses that reproduce them, such as whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, eurocentrism, etc. This does not imply that all people are identically placed in relation to the power structures that hold their positionalities in place. Social spaces include great disparities, and are riven with inconsistencies and contradictions. Not all people who are regarded as heterosexual, white and male will benefit equally from the privileges afforded to heteronormativity, whiteness and/or maleness. Some may be in quite weak positions within what is nevertheless a relationship of privilege when seen relative to the ‘othered’ groups.

Powerful forms of these centred positionalities are able to define the outside ‘other’ so that they retain their own psychological and material comfort. This applies also to non-dominant expressions – those that don’t conform, or may be marked as less desirable. Patriarchal notions of masculinity, for example, constrain not only expressions of femininity, as the other, but also those of gay masculinities, or transgendered expressions of both masculinity and femininity. It is difficult for non-dominant and subordinated people to express their personhood in ways that challenge or fall outside of the ‘admissible’ ways of being endorsed within their societies, particularly in interactions with dominant groups or in public spaces (Biko 1987). A woman who performs her femininity within the parameters set for a ‘good woman’ will accrue the benefits, unlike those who step outside of these strictures. Disabled people are often constructed as recipients of charity if they accept their role as objects of sympathy, or as heroic if they exceed the expectations held for them. For the most marginalized in society the only way to perform their selfhoods so that the required ease of the dominant groups is retained may be to render the ‘offending’ self invisible, as with gay and trans people who simply do not risk coming out, either ‘passing’ or living a precarious life in fringe and alternative spaces.

Generally, those who are socialized into spaces of relative disadvantage are more likely to understand and recognize that these systemic odds are at play in their lifeworlds and are stacked against them. They contend with unearned barriers in the way of their advancement, being predominantly situated in positions of service and support for those who are advantaged, and with dominant versions of their realities superseding their own (DuBois 2008). But they also have to work through feelings of shame and humiliation and threats to their mental and physical health; they also have to confront the perils of nonconformity if they do challenge social
expectations set for them. They may resist acknowledging relations or incidents of collusion and co-option, and the extent to which they may accept the prevailing narratives of the society.

Those socialized into positions of relative privilege tend to have less insight into the social dynamics that have created their advantages. The field of whiteness studies has drawn attention to the blindnesses and distortions that tend to infuse the spaces of racial privilege. Mills (1997) has eloquently described the epistemological contract that developed along with white racial domination through modernity:

> On matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.  

(ibid.: 18)

At the heart of the subjectivities of entitlement that develop in such spaces is a sense of comfort with, and indeed commitment to, a world that is dominated by, centred upon and identified with their interests and the normalized unearned advantages that accrue to them (Johnson 2001). The way things are is experienced as ordinary, normal and ideal. Unsurprisingly, when the constructs that hold such a lifeworld in place are exposed or challenged, the tendency is often towards denial and an unwillingness to acknowledge how one benefits from the systems which continue to hoard advantage for those like oneself.

None of the above analysis should be read as denying people’s agency, as clearly we adopt different personal stances towards how we find ourselves positioned by history and chance. But we are located within social relations, and this is a critical point, given the growing ethos that encourages us to think of ourselves simply as individuals who control our own destinies through our worthiness, entrepreneurship, self-belief and positive attitudinal toolkit.

My experience is that fully appreciating the import of how we are positioned within the relations of power that structure hierarchies is the most difficult part of acquiring CDL.

(3) Analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other, and how they are reproduced, resisted and reframed.

Black feminist writers have been at the forefront of exposing how dominant formations do not act singly, and are not experienced discretely within people’s lives (Collins 1993). A disabled woman’s life will be shaped by the interaction of her disability and her gender in ways that are not simply an aggregate of the two lived separately or additively, and her racial location, yet again, will change her experience. Recent scholarship has taken the analysis further, showing not only that these axes intersect, but also that they are actually constructed through and mutually sustain one another (see Lutz, this volume). Othering processes on the basis of class and gender, gender and race, race and nation, masculinity and nation, sexuality and race, disability and race, gender and sexuality – all of these, for example, in different permutations and interactions, are implicated in one other. Given this mutual imbrication, theorists increasingly name composite hegemonic formations that capture some of these intersectional relations – such as heteropatriarchy, heteronationalism, europatriarchy, etc.

Intersectionality plays an important role in how systems of domination are reproduced. Oppressed groups often vie for advantage relative to one another; to create a hierarchy of
oppressions would prioritize their interests above those oppressed differently. Intersectionality creates ambiguities in people’s lives that may sustain such hierarchies. Black men who have historically experienced emasculating racial subordination may compensate through taking the advantages that a sexist order provides them; in the face of the ubiquitous power of whiteness, black women may be called upon to demonstrate racial solidarity, thus repressing gendered hardships within patriarchal communities. White women may take for granted the advantages of whiteness, contributing to black women’s racial oppression, just as ‘first world’ disabled people may not see how their relative advantage is related to the deprivation of those in less privileged parts of the world. Class and race are often played off against each other, rendering one less visible than the other, rather than holding both simultaneously in analysis.

Recognizing the processes that allow the relatively smooth reproduction of existing power relations — such as those that invisibilize the norm, naturalize the status quo, construct ambiguities, promote patterns of forgetting and remembering, render some things unthinkable, discourage envisaging other possibilities — is essential for CDL. Included among these is the function of hegemony, through which the internalized oppression of dominated groups renders the overt violence of contradictory social relations indirect and obscure. Conforming oppressed people may develop positive self-images in order to form successfully their subjectivities in ways that bring them the rewards conferred upon those who bolster the system and weaken the position of others who may be more resistant. To the extent that the ideological machinery is able to reproduce a world in which whiteness is held to be the standard for all of us, systemic benefits along racial lines can be perpetuated, while the violence — physical, psychological and discursive — of the colonial conquests integral to shaping modern understandings of ‘race’ can be allowed to recede from memory.

The constructs of the powerful are invested in their own reproduction; however, this does not suggest that existing relations of power are inviolable. History is replete with examples of struggles against hegemonic orders that have yielded results. Members of non-dominant groups are not simply victims, and there are always resistances, refusals, oppositional memories, alternative knowledges and challenging sense makings. These provide resources for those who would open up different possibilities. A commitment to social justice requires being open to, and affirming of, such multiple realities: seeking out knowledges constructed from non-dominant positionalities, speaking out as a voice from a marginalized space, acknowledging the legitimacy of the organic experience of othered groups, recognizing value in alternative histories, putting in place and supporting affirmative programmes — these all work to counter the ways in which hegemonic orders would disqualify, discredit and undermine resistance.

(4) A definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems and (not only) a historical legacy.

It is commonplace to hear that we now live in post-race societies; that we should focus on the future and not dwell on the injustices of the past. Discourses which (re)write the past so that the oppressive dynamics formative of current inequities are lost to memory construct epistemologies of ignorance and amnesia essential to continuing the gains of the past discriminatory practices without any moral accountability.

Struggles of memory and forgetting are about present social arrangements, as groups jostle for relative advantage. This has deep implications for what kind of practice we put in place, and how we set in motion options for the future. When we depoliticize the present by refusing a critical memory of the past, we render it impossible to understand the depth and scope of current
challenges. We delegitimize the realities of the recipients of egregious effects of the past and their struggles for redress.

Far from simply accepting an ahistorical present, undertaking an archaeology of concepts can show the contingency, as opposed to the inevitability, of current understandings and determinations. Different possibilities for any of the axes of difference that shape social orders could have emerged under other power configurations and historical confluences, and often can be shown to have in fact existed in other contexts. Historical work on the construction of Africa through the colonial period, for example, shows that many achievements of the pre-colonial societies on the continent were actively undervalued (Davidson 2013). Misrepresentations of African creativity were integral to the construction of the idea of a ‘dark’ continent, a discursive strain that endures in representations of Africa as ‘hopeless’. A sense of historical contingency, rather than historical inevitability, facilitates envisioning other possibilities for the future.

(5) An understanding that social identities are learned and are an outcome of social practices.

The four preceding criteria all facilitate an understanding of this one. The tendency to naturalize the positionings we have created is facilitated through essentialist notions of the groups simultaneously constructed within these spaces. This criterion of CDL requires recognition that there are no immutable characteristics attributable to a group of people that would be evident regardless of the historical processes of location, socio-economic conditions and other such social influences. Work on stereotypes has shown that often the characteristics that will be attributed to a group of people can be ‘read off’ how they are positioned in relation to the prevailing power dynamics in a context (Sidanuis 2001). Similar stereotypes have been held about such divergent groupings as the Irish, the English working class and Africans, for example. The social nature of what is regarded as innate personal characteristics also applies to the identities that people hold of themselves. Post-humanist understandings of selfhood deconstruct the bifurcation of the individual and the social, indicating the permeability and unclear nature of our personal boundaries. This constitutive porousness is reflected in the important processes of internalized domination and oppression and in our sense of how various intersectionalities ‘land’ within our sense of being.

(6) The possession of a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression.

As with any literacy, development of the lexicon in the area is key to fluency. An important indicator of CDL concerns the skill to engage the discourses that circulate within the contestations to define issues, people and events – placing them within dominant and oppressive understandings or challenging such attempts at closure. Being able to name these dynamics is often the first step in changing the power balances. A grasp of notions such as ideology, hegemony, oppression as well as commonly used notions in antiracist practice, such as ‘blaming the victim’, ‘institutional racism’ and ‘internalized oppression’ provides the tools to navigate difficult conversations. Having a language for CDL assists our agency not to be in the grip of dynamics that we cannot name; it enhances the capacity to recognize, point out and insist on the reality of the practices, strategies and effects of the operations of power on difference.

An example of how naming the operations of power has led to an empowering redefinition of a group has been the successful reframing of disability by the Disability Rights Movement. Once recognized as an othered social relation that affects people with impairments, disability can
be shown to be created and maintained through the normalizing pressures of an ablest society. This shifts the struggle for better lives for disabled people from the discursive terrains of medicalization and charity to empowerment and rights (Charlton 2000; cf. Thomas, this volume).

(7) *The ability to ‘translate’ (see through) and interpret coded hegemonic practices.*

One of the key insights that frames CDL is that power never names itself as such. Rather, hegemonic language tends to obfuscate the ways in which social control is being exercised, how powerful groups may be benefiting or how the options of others are curtailed. So, for example, there is a tendency to create systems of explanation that attribute benefits to the virtue of those within the privileged group, to ‘merit’ or ‘standards’, rather than to unearned advantage. These discourses tend to be characterized by strategies of deflection, ambivalences and minimization of the adverse effects for those on the receiving end of social injustice and its legitimization.

Because dominant discourses are able to recast issues in ways that suit prevailing interests, they can co-opt, contain and curtail oppositional discourse. Dominant ways of talking about things may, for example, accommodate contradictions, keep shifting the terms of discourse or deflect attention away from how power is operating, holding the overall agenda in place. We can see how this has happened as the norms have become clearer for the emerging social imaginary as discussed. As a general disapproval of overt racist language has taken root in the contemporary world, the language that facilitates racial privilege has changed. Racial advantage is now advanced through ‘colour blind’ discourse, resulting in what Bonilla-Silva (2013) terms ‘racism without racists’ and through various forms of ‘white talk’ (Steyn and Foster 2008).

(8) *An analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalized oppressions are inflected through specific social contexts and material arrangements.*

While the fault lines of gender, for example, are evident across the globe, we need to understand how they play out within the intersectional webs of the politics of locations, the particularities of place, time and the specific ways in which people live within and through their material worlds. Gender is expressed and inflected under different historical processes and geographical influences. Assumptions arising from one context simply generalized to another can be misleading and imperializing in effect. Rather, it may be beneficial to think in terms of how hegemonic frameworks ‘translate’ between specific contexts, with differing outcomes (Drzewiecka and Steyn 2009). Similarly, constructs shift over time, and may mutate in different economic conditions and arrangements. An example is how the current neo-liberal economic system enables denial of the enduring salience of race and facilitates the belief that we live in a post-race era (Goldberg 2007).

The social and material worlds are inextricable. Objects, spatial arrangements, the built environment, all carry symbolic and emotional significance, and play a role in establishing, maintaining and/or subverting relationships between people. Inequitable distribution of wealth and fluency in accumulation and exchange of material assets and resources characterize the unequal relations created along social divisions. Disabled people, for example, tend to be the poorest people in every class of their societies. Oppressed people are often placed in positions of economic dependency on those who oppress them. Women have had to struggle, and continue to struggle, for the right to be economically active within a marriage relationship, and the work for which they are overwhelmingly held responsible, housekeeping, remains unpaid labour, widely institutionalized in the role of ‘wife’. ‘Things’, commodities, even our tastes in these things, are often the vehicles through which relative positionalities are established and
communicated (Dolby 2000). Through the constructions of certain diseases, even germs and viruses are vehicles for stigmatizing groups (Sontag 2001). The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) has been a carrier of racism and homophobia, playing a role in configuring social arrangements. The most oppressed have literally themselves been reduced to material objects of exchange, as has been the case with black Africans who have been enslaved as chattel, women who have been the vehicle through which status and wealth have circulated and been preserved and children who are sold into the sex trade.

Spatial arrangements reveal a great deal about what is considered the proper relationships between people, and reflect the normative moral order. In apartheid South Africa physical distance between races was seen to reflect their moral distance (Mbembe 2004). Disabled children have often been placed in ‘special’ schools, often also physically removed, situated in semi-rural or rural areas, out of sight and largely out of mind.

(9) **An understanding of the role of emotions, including our own emotional investment, in all of the above.**

Recent social theory has emphasized the mutually constitutive nature of the social and the affective. Affect and emotions bind collectivities, circulating within what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls an affective economy. These economies provide bonding and belonging, and define the actual contours of our ‘groupness’. The social construction of our emotions schools us into systems that tie in our affect in patterned ways: who we should move towards, who away from; who to connect to, who to separate from; who to protect, who to repulse. We are, literally, incorporated into this flow of feelings, into a sense of how we matter in relation to all other mattering objects: how and to what to give recognition and value; what lacks worth and deserves to be held in contempt; what should evoke our compassion or cause us outrage; what is lovable, desirable, joyful or repulsive; what gives us safety, what threatens us. All such flows of affect are operative within systems of power and have social effects.

How we are taken up within the circulation of affect is at least partly constitutive of our felt embodiment within particular locations, and of how we fashion a sense of identity in relationship to social power. CDL encourages a capacity for self-reflexivity and critical reflection on how our feelings are caught up in collectivities. How may we be encouraged to feel complacency or indignation towards specific experiences of social injustice? Which objects/issues are our feelings directed towards? What do we learn about our participation in processes of social formations? Processes of othering are crucially about impeding the current of positive affect towards those othered, and encouraging instead affective responses usually socially channelled to objects, those things regarded as less human, or less than human. To break these patterns, therefore, requires ‘the education of the sentiments’ (Rorty 2011) and sometimes uncomfortable emotional labour (Boler 2003).

(10) **An engagement with issues of the transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening social justice at all levels of social organization.**

This final criterion raises the question of praxis, the willingness to bring together theory and practice in everyday life. It points to our imbrication in the dynamics outlined in the other nine criteria; our inevitable enmeshment in the social, with all its complex intersectional dynamics, constantly creates, recreates and redraws centres and margins. This criterion asks of us to recognize and interrogate these ‘messinesses’ and yet still to act into the world with a will to bring about more socially just arrangements: not only to understand them, but also to change them; to
become an ally to those whose oppression would otherwise be further entrenched through conscious and unconscious assumptions of privilege.

Conclusion

These ten criteria are not intended to be exhaustive, or complete. Nevertheless, taken together, they provide a complex set of analytic skills with which to recognize, think about and interrupt prevalent relations of social oppression. No single person is likely to be equally or fully adept at all the criteria. They may represent directions for personal development as graduates, especially, the need to ‘read’, confront and engage with the increasing complexities of differences and otherness emerging in the twenty-first century, as they take on the challenges of the new social imaginary it births.

Notes

1 See, for example, Steyn (2010).
2 France Winddance Twine (2010) provides the following criteria for racial literacy: the definition of racism as a contemporary problem rather than a historical legacy; an understanding of ways that experiences of racism are mediated by class, gender inequality, and heterosexuality; a recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness; an understanding that racial identities are learned and are an outcome of social practices; the possession of a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race, racism and antiracism; the ability to interpret racial codes and racial practices.
3 For an open source version of a course based on this work, see http://opencontent.uct.ac.za/Humanities/Diversity-Literacy.

References