

We Cannot Become Oppressors: Towards a Critique of Safety through a Reading of Students' Reflective Journals on Issues of Race and Racism

Marthinus Stander Conradie

Senior lecturer at the Department of English, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 9301, South Africa

***Corresponding Author:**

Marthinus Stander Conradie

Email: conradiems@ufs.ac.za

Abstract: Education on race is typically concerned with preserving safety, especially when facilitating dialogue between students. The current study takes its cue from research that problematizes the implementation of safety on the grounds that, without critical alertness, safety risks truncating interrogations of whiteness. This, in turn, inhibits the possible trajectories of race dialogue, shifting talk away from exposing contemporary manifestations and effects of racism. The article aims to contribute to extant work on classroom discussions of racism by applying this critique of safety to a set of reflective journals created by undergraduate students. These journals offer personal contemplations on classroom discussions of post-colonial literature, especially with regards to the perceived relevance of this literature to the racial climate of the campus in question. Based on a discourse analysis that draws from critiques of safety and whiteness, recommendations are offered as to particular conceptions of racism and non-racialism that should be problematized.

Keywords: Racism, race, whiteness, education, critical race theory, safety.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how the propositions advanced by Leonardo and Porter [1] and Leonardo and Zembylas [2] can shed light on a particular discursive feature that emerged from a sample of reflective journals produced by undergraduate students. These journals record students' contemplations on the ideas about race and racism that are advanced in a selection of post-colonial literature. The journals specifically relate students' views on how these ideas are relevant to their own experiences and understandings of race on the campus in question. The study probes into the way entries produced by students who self-identify as black respond to concerns raised by white students of accused of racism and racist privilege during classroom engagements.

Leonardo and Porter [1] offer recommendations for a pedagogy of disruption as a means of addressing the way ideologies of whiteness, especially a sense of white victimisation and defensiveness, limit classroom debates about racism and inequality. In a related vein, Leonardo and Zembylas [2] consider the pedagogic implications of theorising whiteness as a technology of affect. The present article first outlines the sensibilities underpinning the above authors' perspectives by placing it in relation to a range of other scholars. Subsequently, the article explores the way these sensibilities might inform some of the pedagogic practices with which educators can respond to one of the most recurring features of the above-mentioned

journals. This feature concerns the way students who self-identity as black produce journal entries that concede the validity of certain argumentative points that are rooted in ideologies of whiteness, with the consequence that the ideological bias of these points go unchallenged. The article draws on Leonardo and Porter [1] and Leonardo and Zembylas [2] to investigate the role that conceptions of safety might play in this kind of defaulting to white comfort zones, with the result that attempts to interrogate whiteness are obstructed, while concomitantly minimising and delegitimising the experiences and worldviews of those racialised as non-white. While Leonardo and Porter [1] and Leonardo and Zembylas [2] speak specifically to the US context, the present study examines their relevance to a sample of South African students' writings about race.

As elaborated in a later section, the questions that guided the initial discourse analysis of students' reflective journals were:

- 1) to uncover the constructions of racism that emerge from journal entries; that is, was the persistence of racism beyond 1994 acknowledge or denied; is racism understood as involving structural disparity or is it defined in other ways such as purely individual prejudice?
- 2) how are any of the discursive manoeuvres rationalised and substantiated?
- 3) how do respondents configure themselves in relation to racism?

This interest in different constructions of racism stems from Durrheim, Greener and Whitehead [3], Segall and Garrett [4] and Sue's [5] research on the ideologically-productive nature of competing conceptualisations, including the way competing understandings of racism affect classroom interaction. Following this first-level analysis, more attention was paid to the way journals composed by black students construct race and racism along lines that seem to acquiesce to certain stand points in ideologies of whiteness. Earlier studies hold that these standpoints on race and racism are well-known components of whiteness, with pre-prepared methods of articulation, frequently employed in media, classroom, and private debate. Intentionally or not, such argumentative points often elide racialised power in debates on race, and stymiecritical analysis [3, 6, 7]. Reading the results through the lens adduced by authors such as Sue [5] and Leonardo and Porter [1], suggests that some of these viewpoints gain momentum and legitimacy through normative conventions and ground rules that currently organise race dialogues in educational settings. Using these authors to conduct an analysis of this feature of students' reflective journals, the article considers alternative, more disruptive, approaches to race education, especially in the context of courses that deal with literature on racism.

WHITENESS AS A CONDITIONING PRESENCE INCLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS OF RACE

Undergraduate courses on the study of literature at South African universities are not solely concerned with the advancement of race literacy and the analysis of racism. However, investigating race as a social construct (one that has undergone numerous permutations from colonialism to post-1994 South Africa) is a central component of most courses. Moreover, such courses are approached as having the potential to support transformation by inculcating critical thinking on the continuation of inequality along racial and gendered lines [5, 8]. Class conversation in such courses typically occur in racially mixed groups, mirroring both the evolving demographics of university student populations as well as the objective of public integration and social cohesion.

However, using such courses as a platform for anti-racist dialogue has proven difficult (the present article subscribes to a definition of anti-racist dialogue as discussions that attempt to shift "the regime of knowledge about what is ultimately possible as well as desirable as a racial arrangement" [1]). A prominent part of this difficulty involves the emotional discomfort incurred when broaching racism as a problem that remains relevant despite the abolition of past oppressive legislation. It includes, for example, anxiety over becoming a target of aggression from peers, and/or the distress of having current worldviews and sense-making paradigms displaced, as outlined below.

As Vice's [8] deliberation on post-apartheid race-relations reminds, much of contemporary white privilege is non-voluntary in origin. This factor exacerbates the discomfort experienced by white subjects when they are confronted with this privilege and their personal implication in the racist distribution of power [8, 4, 5]. Often such difficult knowledge elicits a variety of defensive stances, such as asserting that white South Africans have become the real victims of a race-obsessed post-1994 government [9]. Maintaining the viability of such defence stances involves a broad range of power-evasive explanations for racial disparity and ideologically-productive accounts of race that are typically expressed in well-rehearsed patterns and with a pseudo-logic, as identified in studies of white resistance discourse [4, 6, 7, 9].

For Leonardo and Porter [1] a critical point of enquiry in the above topic is the way attempts to manage the discomfort experienced by white students can perpetuate the asymmetric distribution of power that is already in existence beyond the classroom. It is, therefore, necessary to guard against the risk that ideologies of whiteness will structure the engagement, (re) producing inequality, ossifying particular lines of identification, and obstructing alternative ways of thinking that could cultivate solidarity and social justice [2]. As such, Leonardo and Porter's [1] theorisation problematizes current implementations of safety and its conditioning effect on classroom discussions of race. In orthodox conceptions, safety is upheld as a key procedural rule for stimulating truthful debate while avoiding divisive conflict. Leonardo and Porter [1], however, demonstrate its potential for shoring up the status quo and the interests of whiteness (as detailed below).

In contrast with stated intentions, the influence of safety in conditioning race talk can work against the worldviews and experiential knowledge of students who are not racialised as white, often by reducing racism to an intellectual pursuit as opposed to a lived problem. However, it should be noted that their theorisation is not intended as an endorsement of reactionary hostility against those racialised as white, but as an acknowledgement that despite official dogma, racial hostility is already present in and beyond the classroom, specifically in ways that privileges whiteness [1]:

Public race discussions are examples of white racial hegemony insofar as they represent whites' accommodation to demands of colour as long as white common sense is observed and kept intact.[...] In this interaction, the otherwise deep and intimate understanding that people of colour have to offer is forsaken in exchange for an epiphenomenal, intellectual interpretation of race.

In this common sense, conditions of safety often co-mingle with versions of colour-blindness and non-racism in which “noticing whiteness is itself regarded as a form of transgression”, most notably where the knowledge produced by racial others is experienced as threatening [1]. As demonstrated in the analysis that follows, one result is a truncation of the objective of classroom talk that favours the attainment of strategic colour-blindness (as a type of image management) over anti-racism (as a political project).

Leonardo and Zembylas [2] expound this effect through an extension of Derek Hook’s [10] theorisation of whiteness as a technology of affect. Taken from Foucault’s later writings [11], the term technology designates any ensemble of “knowledges, practices, techniques, and discourses used by human beings on others or on themselves to achieve particular ends” [2]. It provides theoretic purchase on the pseudo-logic defensiveness mentioned above, and the affective investments that white subjects have in favouring colour-blindness over anti-racism. To elaborate, establishing a colour-blind or non-racist persona can serve to elide the “vacillating subjectivity that is whiteness” by overlooking how even those repulsed by white privilege can be attracted to its enactment under expedient conditions [2]. That is, while anti-racism indexes a long-term commitment to discovery and labour, a non-racist persona represents a position that one is able to claim.

The analyses that follow look into the way black students responded to such positions in whiteness. First, however, the next section considers Sue’s [5] conceptualisation of politeness. While Sue [5] does not explicitly link his work with Leonardo and Porter [1], his approach to politeness seems to conceptualise it as one of the implicit ground rules of safety that further contributes to unbalancing race talk in favour of whiteness.

POLITENESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF SAFETY

Sue [5] affirms that students from a wide variety of racial affiliations report a sense of unease about participating in class talk on race and racism. For respondents racialised as non-white [5], participation is attended by the hazard of micro-aggressions from white peers. The latter, by comparison, are invested in upholding a non-racist image, and to avoid the displacement of extant worldviews through interpellation in white privilege. The tension thus entails a clash between lived experience, and attempts to consign racism to history and/or to isolate the problem to aberrant individuals who pose no systemic threat to the accomplishment of post-racism and meritocracy [4, 6, 12]. Central to Sue’s [5] explication of this friction is the politeness protocol, an implicit ground rule that complicates the repudiation of, or back-talk, to power-evasive framings [12].

This protocol sanctions the avoidance of issues that risk division, unease and offense. When avoidance becomes impossible, the politeness protocol legitimises recourse to superficial ways of framing the issue. Consequently, its observance (especially when tacitly or openly endorsed by educators) provides a resource for denouncing controversial views as provocative and unwarranted [5]. For example, when manifestations of white privilege are at stake, this protocol favours attempts to focus on social class as a less divisive factor, effectively extracting the role of racialised power from discussion.

Psychoanalytic research by Segall and Garrett [4] caution against the assumption that this kind of resistance denotes a complete lack of learning. Instead, the presence of resistance indicates an awareness (however unacknowledged) that difficult knowledge is present and that it is recognised as jeopardising extant views. However, the politeness protocol offers a means of keeping difficult knowledge from prompting a more penetrating analysis of race. It therefore contributes to an already hostile environment, since the burden of navigating the way politeness might invalidate the narratives of racial others is foisted upon them in what Leonardo and Porter [1] call “a symbolic form of violence experienced by people of colour”.

Leonardo and Porter [1], Sue [5], Segall and Garrett [4], and Yosso *et al.* [12] thus concur that by promoting a degree of superficiality, politeness as a procedure of safety, instead of advancing understandings of the construction of race and the permutations of racism, support white efforts at image management. Such conditions of safety cater to white fears of appearing racist, as well as the discovery that whiteness constitutes a racialised position [1]. Realising this facet of whiteness destabilises its assumed normality and has the potential to expose colour-blindness as a power-evasive resource that does, in fact, see race in strategic ways. As a consequence of these factors, conditions of safety may subvert and defer the goal of developing more nuanced understandings of contemporary racism and how to address it [1]. Pedagogues are, therefore, urged not to aim for safety, in the sense that race dialogue becomes mainly directed towards navigating a conversation without overt discomfort.

The analysis that follows aims to explore how this critique of safety and politeness can shed light on some of the conceptions of race and racism that emerge from students’ journals. Using the above sensibilities, it also inspects possible implications for pedagogic practice. As such, the present study investigates this sample of journals in order to postulate how the influence of safety and politeness may be said to be at work. By focusing on what journal entries might reveal

about constructions of race in an educational environment and the implications for pedagogy, this article does not intend to argue that dialogue is sufficient, in itself, for destabilising racialised (dis)advantage [1]. Nonetheless, it assumes that the structuring of dialogue remains a site that critical warrants attention.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: FRAMING UNDERSTANDINGS OF RACE AND RACISM

Methodologically, this study operates from the precedent discourse analyses of Durrheim *et al.* [3], Segall and Garrett [4] and Modica [6]. A key premise in this corpus is that any construction of race and/or racism can be ideologically-productive, at least in so far as specific ideas, extrapolations, intersections and implications are made salient at the expense of alternatives. Doing so carries the potential to open or stifle particular analytic tangents [3]. Close scrutiny of the recurring expressive manifestations of these constructions can yield insight into the underlying frames that are thought to infuse them with a semblance of coherence and rationality [4]. This, in turn, can offer directions for pedagogic practice [6].

A related point, is the notion that when talking and writing about race-relevant issues, one part of what respondents do is to navigate a range of pre-existing discursive frames, which mediate the meaning-making process, and which can shape the expression of ideas. Such discourses are rendered reachable, viable, and defensible through various processes of socialisation, including prior experiences in classroom discussions, written assignments, media representations and personal encounters [6, 3]. For example, Segall and Garrett [4] explicate how a rhetoric of meritocracy (among others) frequently frames white students' engagement with race-relevant materials, especially texts that advance destabilising knowledge about white privilege. Similarly, Yosso *et al.* [12] note how racialised others try to anticipate how best to react to micro-aggressions by first calculating how white perpetrators might respond. This includes predicting the discursive frames within which whites may attempt to invalidate non-white views, such as accusations of political oversensitivity.

Since no discursive framing of race and/or racism is simply inevitable, but yielded by contested and on-going social processes, scholars including Modica [6], Segall and Garrett [4] and Durrheim *et al.* [3] urge for continuing analysis of the way different understandings "play a complex and multifaceted role in structuring debates about potentially race-relevant matters". Applying this approach to journal writing affords one method of investigating how the learning process is experienced [13].

The present study therefore draws on such work by first examining how respondents construct race and racism, and how they locate themselves as racialised subjects. This informed a first-level analysis of the journal entries. Subsequently, a number of second-level readings were conducted to inspect how "broader social contestations work through the text[s]" [9], particularly how students negotiate familiar positions on race.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Respondents for the current research comprise undergraduates born in or shortly prior to the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994. Participants therefore possess no experiential memory of apartheid and are counted as members of the Born Free generation. Consequently, the primary education of this cohort has been marked by post-1994 educational plans intended to inculcate core values of democracy, including equality, social cohesion and tolerance [14]. Nevertheless, this generation remains confronted with the structural legacies of earlier racial hierarchy. This includes widespread poverty and high levels of unemployment of a strongly racialised character [14].

Most of the students included in the present sample are training to become teachers of English, and will thus be expected to provide education on literature that deals with questions of race and racism in future (a minority are enrolled for majors in journalism and business communication). Following Segall and Garrett [4], Sue [5] and Pollock *et al.* [13] this factor constitutes one of the primary motivations for including this group in the study. Like Pollock *et al.* [13], participants were also informed that the institution was undergoing a process of curriculum review and that journals could aid in shaping changes to pedagogic practices and/or curriculum content, based on the links between personal experiences and course content posited in the journals.

All participants were enrolled for a second-year, semester-long course dealing with post-colonial literature. Themes on the interconnectedness of race, gender, class and social institutions represent a prominent component of the course. Studying these intersections is embarked on through a series of class discussions and tutorial groups. The latter sees students divided into small groups and assigned to graduate teaching assistants for further discussion. Three novels constitute the core readings of the course beside a wider array of supplementary texts: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda.

The study was conducted at a historically white and preponderantly Afrikaans university in South Africa. As is the case with most South African universities, students are required to select a racial category upon registration. This, in addition to self-identification

during the journals, indicates that 29 students identified as white, while 43 identified as black (instructions to students never required racial identification). All students generated an average of four journal entries, each covering several typed pages, for a span of two and a half months.

JOURNAL WRITING AND CRITICAL STUDIES OF RACE

In education studies, journal writing has been appropriated for numerous pedagogic ends, including intervention in academic writing, to promote critical thinking and personal commitment to learning [13, 15]. The current investigation turns to journal writing for its utility in offering a vehicle for students to explore resonances and/or disjunctions between academic content and experiential knowledge. Here, the research takes its cue from Hook [16], Aquirre [17] and Pollock *et al.* [13]. Taken together, these authors productively underscore how narratives generated by students can extend insights into the kinds of discursive frames that circulate within student populations and through which meaning is assigned to race in response to texts such as post-colonial literature. Aquirre [17] asserts: "If we agree that a person has agency [...] especially the kind that is self-reflexive, then a person can tell stories about how they understand the world around them". Requesting narratives in journal form also affords time to formulate responses. The creation of multiple accounts also holds out the opportunity for respondents to reflect back, extrapolate from, or develop earlier entries. This constitutes part of the advice that Hook [16] forwards for enriching narrative projects. In the present study, it enables investigation of students' experiences of the learning process [13].

Participants were therefore instructed to contemplate personal readings of the novels under study as well as discussions conducted during lectures and tutorials (the latter two became the most prominent focus). These were recorded in online journals. Relying on electronic recordings carries the advantage that students can access the campus network at any time from mobile devices and/or from computers at the student centre. It obviates the risk of hard copies becoming lost, and is intended to take advantage from students' acquaintance with asynchronous communication technologies. All students receive training for the university software during their first year of study, and are also required to use these technologies for assessment and related tasks throughout their tertiary careers. However, it must be added that since both the lecturer in charge of the course, as well as the researcher to whom students were submitting journals, are white, this variable might exert a further influence on black students' responses.

FINDINGS: DEALING WITH WHITENESS

Before proceeding to the findings, it should be clarified that the subsequent analysis does not intend to presume that the discourse produced by respondents is solely explicable by the opinions uttered by white students, or the influence of whiteness more broadly. Nor is it intended to argue that students are entirely passive conduits of ideology, incapable of speaking back to the oppressive potential of discursive frames that have roots in whiteness (in some ways, the findings counteract this). Rather, the principal point is to examine how the articulations and reflections presented below cohere with, or are mediated by, positions in whiteness, and to posit challenges that can stimulate critical analysis of the covert ramifications of race, racism and whiteness in educational settings.

The rest of this section begins with an exemplar of entries that reflect on utterances deployed by white students in class, before turning to responses:

Ula

What really got to me was a white girl who said that she feels so disgusted and embarrassed by what racist white people do and she knows that many people consider them the same and sometimes she is treated as though she is racist. She explains how talking about racism is not the issue for some white people, it's just the assumptions that black people make and her fear of saying something wrong that would make her seem racist. This really opened my eyes because I was of the opinion that white students dismiss issues of racism quickly because they don't see the importance of it, but it is the fact that many black people like me, are not willing to listen and understand. As students we realise that we cannot become oppressors by not allowing students of a different race from ours the opportunity to have an opinion.

One of the affective mechanisms of whiteness is that white speakers are afforded the opportunity to locate racism outside themselves. To elaborate, racism can be situated in other whites: in "racist white people". As a result, racism is isolated to personal prejudice, with the corollary that structural inequality remains outside the scope of the discussion. In a similar fashion, the complex ways in which white privilege remains available even to apparently liberal whites remains unquestioned. In short, the ramifications of racism are not given centre stage, nor is the urgent need to address it. Instead, primacy is given to asserting ones bona fides as non-racist: "talking about racism is not the issue for some". Consequently, racism is kept at a distance that achieves personal exculpation: "she feels so disgusted and embarrassed[but] she is treated as though she is racist".

The manoeuvre described above is what Leonardo and Zembylas [2] call the creation of a non-racist alibi. The logic of alibi-creation depends on splitting whites into mutually exclusive camps. Moreover, it is premised on the defence that one body cannot house both a racist and non-racist person [2]. Strategically, it overlooks even those who denounce overt white supremacy can still contribute to racial hostility and advance the interests of whiteness. In addition, it also expects interlocutors to become co-opted in overlooking the alibi's deficiencies. For this reason, its logic benefits and draws legitimacy from the politeness protocol. The protocol can serve to frame rigorous race dialogue as an attack on all whites: racist and non-racist. In the above response, the alibi pivots on showcasing the capacity to admit the existence of some racist whites. But, having claimed this bona fide, the anxiety over being judged as racist is projected onto most/many "black people". One of its most problematic repercussions is there-centring of white concerns. It reifies racial disparity by hindering the critique of whiteness for its involvement in racism. Doing so avoids centring the knowledge and experience of racial others, which could expose the oppressive dynamics of whiteness, even among seemingly well-intentioned whites. Taking this vantage point [2] highlights the danger that dialogue will become truncated at junctions that are threatening to whiteness by shifting the objective away from exposing the guises and consequences of racism. In the absence of a critical appraisal of, and considered response to such strategies, including the role of safety in overlooking affective enactments of whiteness, dialogue can fail to attain critical and transformative potential.

The alibi contrived in the foregoing extract opens a platform for white students to claim victimhood in the face of unwarranted political scrutiny [4, 6]. In response, black participants opted for a racial position/location that associates themselves with those who might contribute to the racial anxieties reported by whites. In the extract (and later examples), this is done when the respondent locates herself among those who obstruct whites' equal participation in race dialogue: "many black people like me are not willing to listen". Racism, in this configuration, becomes a vice that all racial affiliations are complicit in, albeit from different social locations. The ostensible alignment between this construction and democratic notions of equality and non-racialism may dispose black students to concede its feasibility: "we cannot become oppressors by not allowing [others] the opportunity to have an opinion".

Of course, when non-racialism is endorsed by black participants it need not automatically be critiqued on precisely the same grounds as accounts from whiteness. Unlike versions of non-racialism in whiteness, the type that emerges from the journals of black respondents does not necessarily constitute as

elective observation of race that attempts to insulate whiteness from critique. Instead, it interprets non-racialism as a willingness to acknowledge that racism can be perpetrated from any racial position, at least when racism is interpersonal. This might be understood as an expression of what the struggle for democracy was meant to accomplish [8, 18]. Nevertheless, it remains problematic insofar as it helps to keep white alibi-making and investment in power-evasive forms of non-racialism and colour-blindness outside visibility. On a related level, the notion that for some whites issues of racism do, in fact, warrant discussion might offer some attraction for black students, and therefore elicit a return of the favour ("I was of the opinion that white students dismiss issues of racism quickly because they don't see the importance of it").

Pedagogically, both the non-racialism noted above and the attraction of an apparent willingness from some whites to examine racism, accentuate the worth of close attention to the way courses codify racism. To elaborate, it reiterates the importance of designing courses to limn racism as a problem extending beyond interpersonal bias and judgement. Rather, it constitutes a larger entanglement that implicates broader social structures, including the dispensation and reproduction of material and symbolic power. With regards to the black-white binaries that are drawn into the above alibi, failure to respond critically to the impact of such manoeuvres risks adding to the "primordial validity" of racial identities, which Alexander [19] claims has persisted beyond 1994 because individuals are not sensitised to "the social, historical and political ways in which their identities have been constructed".

Other responses also illustrate attempts to navigate frames that have, in scholarly circles, been reported as key to whiteness. The presence of these frames index a degree of familiarity with them, and their potential as resources to delegitimise expositions of contemporary racism [3, 9]. As outlined in the following exemplars, these ideas aggregated around the abuse of racism attributed to public figures and political parties, as well as the dangers that inhere in blaming apartheid (codified as a kind of black racism):

Red

The colour issue seems like something that is not going to stop now because black people still think back to the Apartheid history about the whites that's nearly destroyed them and they are not aware they are continuing the apartheid legacy by being discriminative towards whites themselves.

Sam

White students in our country, not only on campus, are regarded as racist just because we still consider apartheid not looking at the way

round that black students also are racist themselves.

In entries such as these, students looked beyond the classroom to explore the affective reactions in evidence among white peers. These reflections interpolate what was encountered in class with ideas about black racism (or black misuse of racism), in a manner that seems to cohere with specific features of white resistance discourse.

Probing into apartheid and colonial history is frequently bemoaned in white talk as symptomatic of an irrational appropriation of race, as renewed efforts to blame whites and to elide post-1994 failures [7, 9, 13]. Entries such as the above demonstrate some familiarity with this discourse, and caution against the black racism that looking into apartheid is thought to engender. Its prevalence in the journals points to the value of underscoring that studying apartheid and blaming whites are false corollaries. Moreover, it highlights the need to convey that apartheid entailed material processes of domination with structural and institutional consequences which can legitimately be taken to underpin the socio-economic discrepancies in post-apartheid South Africa. That is, the validity of linking “the colour issue” and its persistence with apartheid, and thus with structural (dis)advantage and covert white racism, should be broached through pedagogically responsible methods.

Furthermore, besides the contention that enquiry into apartheid’s presence beyond 1994 prolongs racial division and fosters black racism, other respondents focused on public figures and political parties who stand accused of exploiting racism:

Lanzi

I don't use the word racism lightly. We have desensitised the word by using the race card too often (and acting like the ANC [the African National Congress]) and out of fear of admitting that black folk are greatly racist too.

Zug

I just feel that we have placed too much emphasis on race so that now everything has to revolve around race in all the things we do and think. I do understand that people have to understand the mistakes of the past so they will not repeat them but now for me people actually find everything racist nowadays. We are becoming more like Julius Malema. He points out too much racism even if there is none and eventually this gives rise to even more hatred amongst different racial groups.

A staple of white claims to victimhood is that the post-apartheid government is depending on

hypersensitive political correctness and on increasingly tenuous accusations of racism in order to mask an otherwise faltering leadership [6, 7, 9]. An analogous framing is applied to Julius Malema, once leader of the ANC Youth League, and presently leader of a political party the Economic Freedom Fighters. Deborah Posel [20] expounds how Malema has assumed a prominent place in white anxieties over violent retribution, notably since his confrontational style is cast as a violation of national reconciliation. Both the ANC and Malema are configured as abusing racism and perpetuating its division, especially by seeing race where it is, ostensibly, not in evidence. Respondents propose that these examples should be avoided. They situate themselves as potentially implicated in the damage to reconciliation posed by oversensitive scrutiny: “We have desensitised the word” and “we have placed too much emphasis”.

Although this article is not focused on evaluating the veracity of such accusations against the ANC, EFF or Malema, it is concerned with discourses that discourage enquiry into the presence of race. Similar to charges of overplaying the race card [4, 12], the above admonitions seem to acquiesce to the illegitimacy that ideologies of whiteness attach to the sustained investigation of race. Uncritically framing the ANC and figures like Malema in this manner risks erecting discursive and affective barriers, which black students believe they are obligated to navigate in order to limn questions of race. Clarity is called for with regards to the possible uses of such critique. If educators are concerned with promoting an understanding of race as permeating even outwardly race-neutral practices, then knowledge of the potentially curtailing influence of these frames should prompt caution against allowing this kind of rhetoric to prevent scrutiny of the racialised dynamic sunder pinning social arrangements (elaborated in a subsequent section).

The above ruminations on political parties, public figures and the apparent hazards of blaming apartheid were typically followed by statements highlighting progress in race relations:

Mack

[Following a summary of overt racism in *Bluest Eye* and *Color Purple*] But what is happening on campus i think it is totally different [from events in the novel] because now it is the new time in South Africa where majority of people no longer take race into consideration, but we see each other as human beings. yes there some people in her who are still racist but it when thin come out they solve it.

Thabang

As i was walking around the campus yesterday and i saw a white guy with his black girlfriend and some other guys who were also watching them made a comment of “cute couple”. and that clearly shows that were are no longer living in those years were a white person is only allowed to date a white person and same as black.

Melo

Our country has come a long way since the apartheid era and I feel that things have changed, there's not much discrimination anymore against black people, there are places that could do with a little bit of help but it's not as extreme as it was

Leonardo and Porter [1] and Leonardo and Zembylas [2] do not deal specifically with claims of improvement. Extrapolating from their critique against whiteness suggests, on the one hand, that such observations on the attenuation of racism (on an interpersonal level), may be welcomed. On the other hand, to shift the regime of knowledge around race, pedagogues would do well to propose that interrogating racism does not deny the achievement of incremental progress. Instead, questioning issues of race is strengthened by an alertness both to broader structural arrangements that have remained intractable, as well as covert manifestations that co-exist with grades of amelioration.

Other journal responses comprise similar moves to suggest that matters of racism are overstressed at the institution where the study was conducted. These were not linked to particular parties, public figures or to apartheid, but continue a theme of guarding against centring race as lens for social analysis. Such entries typically work to absolve the individual from contributing to racism:

Batam

I believe that the topic of race gets way too much attention, forcing students to always think about it. Of course, I am not saying that it should be side lined, but for the two years I have been in this institution, racism has been the one topic that continuously resurfaced. As a person who cares less about another person's pigmentation and rather focuses on what it is they have to bring to the table, I find it tiring having to voice an opinion over something I think should be the choice of the individual and it should in no way affect the life of a person that pays no mind to racist remarks, happenings and the like.

Expressions of this character have been studied in critiques of whiteness for its role in denying white involvement in racism, for asserting ignorance about race, and as a form of resistance against troubling knowledge [4, 6]. Adjusting the analysis to the current context by reading such entries from the vantage point of Sue [5] and Leonardo and Porter [1] necessarily raises different points. It is worthwhile, at this junction, to mention Hook's [16] contention that one significant facet of personal narrative (of which the present journals are an example) is that: “typically [it] functions as a means of consolidating and defending the ego-interests of the speaker; to maintain and support a positive self-image”. Labouring to project a positive self-image involves what we anticipate others will consider positive [4]. This coheres with Leonardo and Zembylas' [2] theorisation of technologies of affect, in the sense that: “Emotions, beliefs, and actions, for example, may appear as authentic expressions of our mentality”. Yetto a degree (albeit varying and uncertain) these are simultaneously “socially organised and managed” [2].

Applying this perspective to the journals suggests that, as respondents engage with the ideas they encounter appertaining to race and racism (through private readings and in class), they are also concerned with securing a positive self-image. In part, therefore, respondents who rely on the above-mentioned patterns do so because these are thought necessary for this pursuit. The positive valence of such expressions may derive from their apparent alignment with meritocracy and no-racialism. In the above exemplar, the entry departs from a narrow conceptualisation of racism, and forwards the author's bona fides as an adherent of meritocracy. Implicitly, this allows the participant to avoid the stereotype of black hypersensitivity and dependence on government initiatives including affirmative action. It exposes an understanding of race dialogue as focused on whether or not one is revealed as fixated with “another person's pigmentation”. Having established her bona fides, the respondent moves to extricate herself from this dimension of race talk, by professing colour-blindness. As a criticism against race dialogue, it suggests a misunderstanding of the objective of such exchanges. If Leonardo and Porter's [1] position is accepted, these moves can be viewed (at least partially) as a cognate of the structuring effects of safety and how it favours whiteness over achieving more critical and transformative knowledge. Addressing the perceived necessity among non-white students of acquitting themselves from racism and the related views exemplified by the above extract, thus becomes a crucial task.

A comparable dynamic can be traced in the appraisals that respondents make of the conduct of white and black South Africans:

Numba

We still face racial issues in South Africa but it seems like people tend to take advantage of democracy and rights because people always shout racism when there is actually no racism. For example, the issue at UP of the two girls who painted themselves brown and dressed up in domestic worker's clothes. This to me shouldn't be made a racial incident at all because the two girls were just having fun and I don't think they had any intentions to harm anyone. The question is, would I be prosecuted if I, as a black person painted my face white and wore the boer farming clothes? No, I don't think so. It's high time South Africans stop making racial allegations unnecessarily.

Mona

People tend to take everything that the white people do and label it "racism", but funny how the black people does the same thing to a white person it won't be labelled the same. When I look on what happened to UP (The University of Pretoria) impersonally wont classified that as racism (White girls painting them self with brown face and dressed like domestic workers). Those girls they were just having fun.

These entries, as was the case in earlier examples, frame racism as a politicised resource that is exploited to subject whites to unfair scrutiny. It invalidates analyses of race through a version of non-racialism that appears to uphold equality, and takes the above-mentioned incident as a case in point. This version of non-racialism is not wholly commensurate with that of whiteness, to reiterate an earlier point. Nevertheless, it raises the challenge of stimulating students' ability to consider the limitations of colour-blind and non-racial appraisals of behaviour. However, with regards to the specific event discussed here, that of the incident that occurred at the University of Pretoria, these views were in the minority. Most respondents condemned the occurrence as a clear instance of racism:

Neo

As a country with such an extreme racial past; race isn't something that we can take lightly. With the recent incident of the UP girls who dressed up like black domestic workers; race is still a sore issue. If acting to be of another race is found funny; that says a lot about the state our country is in.

Nick

My mother is a domestic worker, she is over the age of 50 and cannot find a proper job because of her current age. I feel like this incident is a smack in the face.

Mary

The literature under study and the incident in Pretoria both highlight racial discrimination against black South Africans. In both cases black women are seen as domestic workers, often as ugly/dirty human beings. The image that we get regarding these cases is that white people are superior and black people are inferior.

For one respondent, the incident prompted the citation of statistical data relating to structural manifestations of racism:

Cube

We should not focus all the time at pointing the finger at "whites" and not exploring the whole issue. But. Studies published in the City Press have shown that out of 4000 professors in South Africa, 4% are black and a shocking 0.85% are women. On campus, we need academic role models that will show us, women; black people that certain academic standards can be attained. If people see "their" own being able to do something we might see more women and black academic coming from this campus.

These responses suggest the value of building a space for students to postulate linkages between the knowledge forwarded in literature and contemporary socio-political events. Eliciting such processes of hypothesis-generation can aid in extrapolating some of the limitations of non-racialism and colour-blindness. Supporting the further refinement of such ideas can urge students to look into racism as an entanglement of interpersonal and larger structural dimensions. In the present study students indicated an emerging capacity to hypothesise such entanglements in the form of reflective journals. Finding ways of transferring these contentions into class discussions may offer a productive opportunity for enhancing the anti-racism of race dialogue.

DISCUSSION

This article has employed narratives, in the form of reflective journals, to analyse how students who self-identify as black engage with discourses that cohere with patterned articulations of whiteness, some of which were expressed during class discussions of race (non-racist white alibis). A principal part of the analysis indicates how the critical interrogation of race might become blunted along specific avenues. The logic of whiteness manages to play a role in moulding the terms of reflections on race. The feasibility of some of the discursive constructions of whiteness is conceded and conjoined with warnings against the types of racism and (reverse) oppression that whiteness foregrounds.

To be clear, the argument is not that these meaning-making frames denote a complete lack of insight, understanding, or analytic acuity on the part of respondents. For example, some forms of political critique and demands for accountability can be productive and necessary. Nor are these discursive patterns ascribed to respondents in an essentialised manner, or considered an exhaustive account of what respondents think or are capable of thinking. Rather, the contention runs that since the discursive framings discussed above are socially (re) produced and, moreover, can play a part in structuring dialogue, it is possible and important to stimulate more finely textured analyses for the furtherance of both personal/individual reflection as well as group discussion. In part, this pursuit attains its social significance from the dire need for South African teachers who are capable of engaging learners in complex and sophisticated deliberation on pressing issues of social justice [21].

The journals expose, on the one hand, the already well-documented fears among whites of appearing racism and having the intricacies of whiteness made explicit [4, 5]. On the other hand, the journals also divulge that black students exhibit a concern with being implicated in reverse-oppression. The latter constitutes a delegitimising resource for whiteness, but this is not made apparent in the journals; possibly because respondents are unaware of this dimension, or might not have felt at liberty to broach it. As a consequence, this strategy partially manages to secure a central space for the logic of whiteness.

These represent very different sets of anxieties, and their impact on the possible trajectories of race talk merit attention. More specifically, methods are needed to affirm that enquiry into race, rather than constituting reverse-oppression, is an endeavour that can become more sharply orientated towards social justice when it uncovers the effects of whiteness (and white politeness/safety). In combination, Leonardo and Zembylas [2] and Leonardo and Porter [1] are useful here for proposing “not to escalate the pedagogy of fear [by] turning the proverbial table on whites” but by first recognising that “fear is already in the room”. The remainder of this discussion considers these authors’ proposal for the use of meta-dialogues to refine race education by relating it to the findings.

Meta-dialogue (dialogue about how dialogue can be conducted) can sanction the pedagogic space as one of risk. Advocating a recognition that the goal of whether or not one appears racist (or reverse-racist) is potentially inhibiting, can open opportunities to refocus the objective on nuancing and honing understandings of racism and its real-world repercussions; but also that doing so entails vulnerability and requires a willingness to experiment with divergent perspectives and knowledge [1]. Space is thus legitimated for

experimenting with attempts to see race when politeness (and whiteness) dictate against it, including covert and even well-intentioned manifestations. For example, such spaces encourage more complex readings of political practices where race might be appropriated for parochial ends, but nevertheless point to actual problems that have indeed extended beyond 1994, and for which solutions are still being contrived. Plainly, this also requires frankness about the constraints of politeness, inasmuch as politeness and safety support superficiality [5]. The corollary is that risk does not endorse hostility, but is indispensable for rigorous analysis.

In the South African context, this also requires attention to prevailing understandings of the 1994 transition. As Posel [18] contends, tropes of reconciliation were attended by discourses, not only of new beginnings, but also of aspirations to a complete disconnect from past injustice and authoritarianism. This understanding has regularly been used to mark 1994 as a year beyond which any systemic interrogation of whiteness constitutes a betrayal of the spirit of reconciliation [8, 9, 14, 18]. Decentring and de-naturalising the discourses of whiteness, analysing its investment in colour-blindness, and deepening the scrutiny of race can be couched as an exigent continuation of that transition, however perturbing. This, in turn, necessitates that white subjects assume responsibility for feelings of trepidation and defensiveness, framing it as a task that is indispensable for solidarity and self-reflexivity [1, 2]. However, accepting responsibility should not be taken as essentialising race. As Vice [8] reminds: “Part of eradicating racism [is] to eradicate the forced identification of oneself as a particular public and political product”. Instead, it represents a caution, and an exhortation to appraise, even when discomfiting, the social forces and histories that remain a conditioning presence (although often opaque in quotidian experience) and which merit scrutiny if solidarity is to be pursued.

This project has collected narratives in journal form, but the argument developed is meant to highlight practices that extend into classroom debates, as well as other interactional platforms such as online forums [6]. However, it should be stressed that reading the journals, and similar data, from alternative theoretical perspectives is necessary for further refinement and productive critique. For example, Gade’s [22] research on Ubuntu and other methods of readings of students’ sense-making practices (including gendered dimensions) have not been applied in this study.

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