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Broaching questions of race and racism through personal journals: an analysis of the reflections of students who self- identify as black

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This article reports on a study of the reflective journals produced by a sample of undergraduate university students in which they consider the relevance of questions surrounding race and racism to their own lives, based on their engagement with post-colonial literature. Using a discourse analytic framework, the article focuses on the discursive frames that structure respondents' reflections on the different manifestations of racism after 1994. We discuss the influence of the politeness protocol across the findings, based on Sue (2013), and interpret the findings by drawing on narratives of ambiguity in Soudien (2010). Finally, we make suggestions as to the pedagogic implications of the results by linking our study with Leonardo and Porter's (2010) theorisation of safety in race dialogue.

1. Introduction

Our analysis centres on the personal journals compiled by a sample of undergraduate students regarding issues of race and racism. We focus on the private reflections produced by students who self-identify as black. Our primary concern is to illustrate these students' familiarity with specific ideological positions in whiteness, and patterns in the way they negotiate these positions. Our analysis suggests that particular aspects of whiteness remain unchallenged. In what follows we contextualise the study before describing our research aims.

Botsis (2010) and Matthews' (2011) research on identity politics among a group of South African teenagers, discern a perennial set of contradictions and uncertainties appertaining to what race should mean for a generation born in or shortly before 1994. Much of the uncertainty reported by the participants in their research stems from the contradictions that emerge from being part of a generation who did not experience apartheid and yet continue to face its structural repercussions (in journalistic shorthand, as well as Mattes (2012), this generation is commonly referred to as the Born Frees). To illustrate, although intimate social relationships across racial boundaries have become more common (Vincent 2008), apartheid's racial classifications still play a role in shaping public policy, access to resources and voting patterns (Mattes 2012; Erwin 2012; Bock and Hunt 2015). Respondents anticipate that the politicised valence of race will exert a powerful (if somewhat unpredictable) impact on their futures. Members of this generation are thus confronted, as Botsis (2010: 240) argues, with the challenge of configuring "a vocabulary of their own in articulating the challenge of race, which will move us beyond the simple contact and numbers arguments". This deduction echoes earlier research by Vincent (2008) and Walker (2005), who posit that generations who have not experienced apartheid struggle to cope with its structural legacy as well as new, often more subtle, forms of interpersonal racism. This prompts Matthews (2011: 13) to conclude that scholars would do well to analyse how these and future generations work to deal with the question of how to "create the kind of South African political community which can be a home to all South Africans, but also in which racial oppression is recognised and uprooted". One way in which scholars might attempt this is by analysing the discourse through which questions of race and racism are broached.

This study aims to contribute to the above-mentioned corpus by analysing the reflective journals produced by a sample of undergraduate students during a course on post-colonial literature. All students were enrolled at a historically white (and Afrikaans) South African university. Taking our cue from the primacy that critical race theory (CRT) accords to experiential knowledge, we specifically

examine the constructions of racism that emerge from these journals and the varying degrees to which racism is constructed as relevant vs. irrelevant, and a minor vs. major problem (Yosso, Smith, Ceja and Solórzano 2009). These reflections were investigated on the basis of the analytic framework proposed by Segall and Garrett (2013); and the pedagogic implications are interpreted on the basis of Soudien (2010) and Leonardo and Porter (2010).

As mentioned earlier, we focus specifically on the way students who self-identify as black respond to the denials of racism that Segall and Garrett (2013) and others (Steyn and Foster 2008) have termed discursive forms of white resistance. Participants were asked to reflect not only on personal readings of post-colonial texts but also on the arguments presented by peers during lectures and small group discussions, during which such forms of resistance became evident.

In what follows we briefly outline the study's aims and data collection method, before describing the educational setting of the project, and the discourse analytic approach that informed our investigation.

1.1 Research aims

Crain Soudien (2010) offers a sophisticated and multi-layered review of transformation policies and projects that aim to deal with structural inequalities in South African higher education, including the intersection between factors such as race, gender, class and sexuality. Our study draws from Soudien's (2010) observation that one of the crucial challenges in higher education involves the advancement of theoretical descriptions and critiques against the role that specific ideologies play in obscuring structural inequality.

In addition, by concentrating our analysis on students' engagement with literature on race, we take our cue from an overlap between Soudien (2010) and CRT. This overlap pertains to the distinction between a "diversity of convenience" and "genuine diversity" (Yosso et al. 2009: 664; Bonilla-Silva 2015). Genuine diversity requires expiation to historically underserved communities, as well as curricula that challenge prevailing conceptions of difference, including white privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2015). A full description of the involvement of the university in question with such projects is beyond the scope of this article, but our own analysis is located within the latter: curricula that seek to advance anti-racism¹. It is situated in an undergraduate course that explores assumptions of difference as well as experiential knowledge pertaining to the ramifications of race and racism.

1 Within a pedagogic setting, we subscribe to Leonardo and Porter's (2010: 140) understanding of anti-racism as learning engagements that shift "the regime of knowledge about what is ultimately possible as well as desirable as a racial arrangement".

Our aims are informed by the view that requiring students to compile written responses to the racial ontologies and manifestations of racism they encounter in post-colonial literature affords an opportunity to examine how participants “search for explanations of race that integrate the ideas they are encountering in class with their previous experiences and knowledge of the social world” (Trainor 2005: 144). More specifically, while some studies have focused on whether respondents perceive race as essentialist or as socially constructed (Hughey 2010; Verwey and Quayle 2012), our study is especially concerned with the understandings of racism that emerge from the journals. This focus derives from Segall and Garrett’s (2013) argument that students’ reactions to (and participation in) anti-racism are affected by the degree to which they conceptualise racism as a structural or individual, relevant or purely historic problem (cf. Vincent 2008; Matthews 2011). The aim of our analysis, consequently, is to examine the specific ways in which racism is understood to be relevant to contemporary undergraduate students. We concentrate on the journals written by students racialised as black to illustrate how specific ideologies in whiteness are negotiated.

In order to pursue this aim our analysis is rooted in CRT (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Employing CRT to conduct a discourse analysis of students’ journals implies attention to the extent to which racism is understood as “embedded in the structure of society”, and as a phenomenon that continually manifests in new forms that are less explicit than legalised racism (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 74). We selected a CRT perspective for its coherence with Soudien’s (2010) observations on the nature of contemporary racism in South African tertiary institutions (described in later sections). To apply this perspective, we take recourse to the analytic framework advanced by Segall and Garrett (2013), as outlined in subsequent sections. In brief, this framework explicates a number of discourses that implicitly deny or belittle the systemic role that racism continues to play in social institutions, including higher education (Segall and Garrett 2013). Importantly, however, our analysis is not intended to accuse students of being more or less racist, but to examine the prevailing understandings of racism, and to consider the pedagogic implications of the dominant patterns.

Finally, with regards to journal writing, Pollock, Deckman, Mira and Shalaby (2010) illustrate how it can be used to collect richly detailed data. Although it lacks the in-situation flexibility of interviews (Verwey and Quayle 2012) or focus groups (Yosso, et al. 2009), it offers the advantage of information garnered over longer periods of time than most interviews or focus groups. It allows respondents to enter the information at a time of their own choosing, and offers them more time to articulate themselves. Casanave (2011) has also indicated that it permits respondents to compare and experiment with different modes of expression,

to refer back to, and possibly revise, earlier statements. Pollock et al.'s (2010) research on how students approach the question of what they can do about racism, notes that in comparison with small-group discussions, journals exhibited more detailed reflection, and more potentially risky/controversial statements.

2. Pedagogic setting

The study is situated in a second-year course on post-colonial literature. This course was designed to reflect the premise that writing/dialoguing on race has the potential to uncover and interrogate the persistence of racial (dis)advantage. It can expose and re-examine explanations that distort or deny the role of race in socio-economic cleavages and other problems. As such, the course in which students participated is intended to convey the constructed and prismatic nature of race, while nevertheless confronting its impact on lived experience (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Trainor 2005). For this reason, class participation occupies a central role, as do small group discussions. These are facilitated both within formal lectures and during tutorials. The latter are specifically set aside for in-depth discussion between students and trained graduate teaching assistants.

Journal writing was introduced into the course, pedagogically, to provide a space for reflection on the discussions conducted during lectures and tutorials (elaborated later). Additionally, since the university in question was (at the time) undergoing a process of curriculum review, students were also informed that the journals would form part of a research project on students' views and experiences of race, with the potential to have an impact on teaching practice. Respondents were therefore asked to limn the contemporary relevance of the ideas on race and racism advanced in the literature to their personal lives and campus environment. The literature forming the focus of the course includes the following three novels: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

The research is therefore intended to shed light on respondents' engagement with the literature under study as a means of, among other goals, influencing pedagogic practice and course structure. We consider this an important research agenda based on the authors cited below.

3. Politeness and race

This study builds on CRT work which suggests that the process of engaging with race in classroom environments is conditioned by what Sue (2013: 665) has termed the "politeness protocol". This protocol sanctions against the in-depth discussion of potentially divisive topics, and is thought to incline interlocutors

to superficial interaction when conflict seems possible. As such, it shapes and constrains the articulation of views that challenge prevailing discourse on race and racism. Sue (2013) holds that the influence of this protocol is traceable in the way some students use familiar rhetoric to avoid engaging with race. For example, he notes that by advocating colour-blindness, white students can attempt to isolate race from class and gender as a means to assert that racism no longer constitutes a systemic problem. This version of colour-blindness is often used to claim white victimisation under the pressure of political correctness. Steyn and Foster (2008), Hughey (2010) and Segall and Garrett (2013) conceptualise such attempts to excise race as discursive forms of white resistance that work to avoid the process of interrogating race (elaborated in the next section). Sue (2013: 664) extends this thinking by postulating that the politeness protocol makes these discursive forms of resistance viable, specifically because they seem to adhere to a version of colour-blindness. Challenging this appropriation of colour-blindness requires a violation of the politeness protocol, notably because those who do so might appear to argue against colour-blindness/non-racialism (a major risk in democratic societies; Steyn and Foster 2008).

Sue (2013) therefore contributes to CRT by emphasising that the politeness protocol can close conversations around race and frustrate attempts to expose new forms of racism when left unquestioned. Along with earlier work by Bonilla-Silva (2015), Segall and Garrett (2013), and Leonardo and Porter (2010) and Soudien (2010), Sue (2013) explains that this protocol runs the risk of discouraging those who wish to share experiences and opinions about the repercussions of racism on contemporary society, especially the subtle forms that Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) call micro-aggressions. Soudien (2010) and Leonardo and Porter (2010) contend that this difficulty is especially pronounced for those who are not racialised as white. Although they are reported as being keener to deepen discussions around racism, social norms such as the politeness protocol complicate the attempt (Sue 2013). By comparison, white students exhibit a stronger desire to avoid the issue, owing to a fear of appearing racist in the public environment of the classroom (Sue 2013; Leonardo and Porter 2010).

Bearing in mind the research by Matthews (2011), Botsis (2010), Vincent (2008) and Walker (2005) cited in the introduction, this study examines the presence of white resistance discourse in the journals under study, as well as the influence of the politeness protocol, as expounded in the next section.

4. Discourse analysis

Segall and Garrett (2013) offer a framework for analysing discursive moves that deny the value of interrogating race and contemporary forms of racism. This section specifies the body of research from the United States and South Africa in which Segall and Garrett's (2013) work is situated, before explicating the analytic procedures that were applied to the journals under study.

A series of discourse analytic studies have examined the way university students engage with questions surrounding race and racism, with several publications focusing specifically on the discourse through which students who self-identify as white deny that race continues to play a role in contemporary social problems. US scholars Segall and Garrett (2013), Foster (2009) and Trainor (2005), for example, note that white students often resort to discursive manoeuvres that allow them to construct racism as irrelevant to university spaces. As a case in point, Foster's (2009) interviewees frequently construct racism as a historic problem, with nothing more than sporadic bearing on the present. When confronted with evidence of racial tensions, transformation policies are blamed, by suggesting that it manipulates non-white others into assuming that racism still exists. The result of this construction of racism is that transformation policies are framed as a cause of, rather than a response to, forms of racism that continue to affect universities. In South Africa, earlier research by Conradie and Brokensha (2014), Bock and Hunt (2015), Matthews (2011), Vincent (2008) and Walker (2005) reach similar conclusions. Working in previously white-only universities that were undergoing transformation, these scholars find a recurring set of discursive moves that frame racism as belonging to a history that has become irrelevant. The need to challenge discourses that deny the impact of racism and the exigency of transformation, thus constitutes an important objective for advancing anti-racism (Soudien 2010). The fact that these discourses also bear close similarities to those generated outside universities (by journalists for example), suggests that they are familiar (pre-classroom) positions on race (Green, Sonn and Matsebula 2007; Hughey 2010; Verwey and Quayle 2012).

The present study builds on this corpus by applying its discourse analytic methods to the sample of journals. Methodologically, we draw from Segall and Garrett's (2013:268) framework, which has been formulated to analyse the way different constructions of race work to "preserve their own integrity[,] plausibility and viability", by delineating "the spectrum of possible and intelligible meanings" that interlocutors who use them can make. For example, as demonstrated in Conradie and Brokensha (2014), Vincent (2008) and Walker (2005), the denial that racism persists in post-1994 South Africa can be made viable and plausible by defining it as a purely historic problem that has already been dealt with. This, in

turn, can enable respondents to reject the viability of attempts to interrogate the repercussions of racism after 1994 by castigating these as illegitimate attempts to drag up the past.

Segall and Garrett (2013) identify three discursive frames that make such positions viable/plausible. One is to argue that in order to advance the interests of colour-blindness, race should no longer constitute a major subject of investigation at educational institutions. In this way, avoiding race is justified by claiming adherence to colour-blindness/non-racialism, without reflecting on the harm that avoidance incurs by obfuscating the presence of race in contemporary dynamics of (dis)advantage. A second method is to configure race as a historic problem, or to blame transformation policies for exacerbating an ostensibly small problem. This strategy involves suggesting that transformation policies manipulate non-white others into assuming that racism exists, with the corollary that if the topic had been ignored, harmony would have been secured. In South Africa this is expressed in the assumption that since apartheid has been abolished, racism cannot be said to have systemic repercussions (Verwey and Quayle 2012). The third strategy involves claiming ignorance, in active and/or passive expressions: "I am white and so I don't know [about race]" or "I am not black, so I don't know" (Segall and Garrett, 2013: 284). Such claims of ignorance are used to disengage from discussions of race, thus framing it as unconnected to whites.

Following a first-level reading of the journals, we applied this framework by first identifying whether any of these three strategies were present in the journals composed by white students. Thereafter, we examined the journals created by black students in order to trace whether black students demonstrated an awareness of such strategies, and how they responded to these.

In order to conduct a detailed analysis of the journals within the present page constraints, we focus here on the results obtained from journals penned by students who self-identify as black. Nevertheless, brief references will be made to patterns exhibited in white respondents' journals. The results are interpreted on the basis of prior research by Soudien (2010), Sue (2013) and Pollock et al. (2010). We review this, and other discourse analyses that proved relevant to our results in the next section.

5. Collegiate racial climate

Soudien (2010: 890) sets out from the perspective that:

universities, aside from all the other structural factors which animate them, such as economic ones, are deeply social. They harbour, nurture and reproduce particular notions of society,

the institution, the self and the other. These attitudes are consequential sociologically.

Soudien (2010) urges that more priority be given to addressing the lack of qualitative research on racial attitudes at South African universities. From one study that was conducted, he reports a persistent tension evident in interviews among students and academic staff at several South African universities (study conducted in 2008 by the Ministerial Committee into Transformation and Social Cohesion in Higher Education). Among students and staff who do not identify as white, the findings indicate two dominant patterns. A minority proved able to articulate various ways in which racism continues to structure academic life despite legal injunctions and transformation programmes. The majority, however, proved more hesitant. "Racism has become subtle [and the] problem is how to articulate it" (Soudien 2010: 892). One the one hand, "there is an awareness [among participants] that the landscape had changed" (Soudien 2010: 892). Racist discrimination is no longer legally sanctioned and projects to address disadvantage are under way. However, on the other hand, there remained a pervasive sense of ambiguity "about how to make sense of it" (Soudien, 2010: 892). An awareness that racism is manifesting in new forms, both structural and interpersonal, is evident. However, naming, discussing and addressing it remains complicated, in part, because this awareness is mingled with a sense that at least some progress has been made since 1994. Speaking out about racism is understood as running the risk of appearing ignorant or indifferent to this progress. This complexity has an impact on the way subjects in Soudien (2010) were able to frame questions around the continuation of racism: describing its nature and repercussions clashes with a desire to adhere to a dominant frame of post-1994 progress. This contributes significantly to the equivocality evident in race talk. Respondents often became tentative as to whether the experiences and observations they discuss can legitimately be linked to racism: "Key about this difficulty was its ideological slipperiness" with the result that "there was a real challenge in locating it sociologically" (Soudien 2010: 893).

CRT work by Yosso et al. (2009) and Sue et al. (2007) at US universities concurs with Soudien (2010). Like Soudien (2010), Sue et al. (2007) and Yosso et al. (2009: 660) agree on the subtle nature of racism, which they refer to as micro-aggressions: "subtle, innocuous, preconscious or unconscious degradations, and putdowns [which may be] verbal and/or kinetic". These are encountered at both the interpersonal level as well as larger institutional practices. Since micro-aggressions are typically of a tacit nature, targets must undergo the taxing task of deciphering how best to react. Choosing to confront the perpetrator(s) often runs the risk of having to defend yourself against accusations of hypersensitivity and political vindictiveness. Durrheim, Greener and Whitehead (2014) observe that

this exerts an influence on discussions of racism, in the sense that those who wish to share experiences of racism must first navigate the danger of being accused of hypersensitivity.

An initial reading of the journals suggested the relevance of these tensions. Therefore, in the analysis that follows, we rely on these authors to probe the framings of race and racism that develop in students' journals. Our primary concern is with the above-mentioned tensions between naming racism, while acknowledging progress, and the pedagogic implications (Leonardo and Porter 2010).

However, we also examine the journals as counter-narratives. The CRT interest in counter-narratives reflects the field's commitment to destabilising discursive frames that deny or occlude racism. Methodologically this entails an acknowledgement of the validity of experiential knowledge. It is intended to challenge notions, beliefs, and rhetoric that contribute to hostile campus climates and which have often become normalised among the historically privileged. This includes uncovering and addressing otherwise oblique aggressions that tacitly "diminish, dismiss, or negate the realities and histories people of color" (Yosso, et al. 2009: 662). In the next section, we discuss the research participants, before reviewing pedagogic inquiry into the use of journals as a means of eliciting personal reflections.

6. Respondents

The students who participated in this study form part of a broader cohort who have undergone their entire primary education under post-1994 educational programmes, but who remain affected by the structural repercussions of apartheid, including high (and racialised) levels of poverty and unemployment. Consequently, they have often been confronted with apartheid history in an education aimed at extolling the democratic virtues of equality and tolerance (Mattes 2012). Our interest in the way this group conceptualises race and racism therefore derives from these factors, and the fact that they have become a significant element of the electorate (Mattes 2012; Erwin 2012). In addition, the majority are enrolled in teacher-training programmes (with the remainder studying journalism and corporate communication). As such, many will be required to teach literature on race in future careers.

All students were registered for a second-year undergraduate course on post-colonial literature in which the interconnectedness of race, gender and class occupy a central position. Based on self-identification recorded by university registration data, the student body enrolled for this course consists of 71% black,

20% white, 8% coloured and 1% Asian students. From this body 43 black and 29 white respondents agreed to have their journals form part of the research project. Each student contributed an average of four journal entries covering several pages over a period of two-and-a-half months.

During the analysis, the authors examined the journals separately by conducting a first-level reading, followed by a first discussion that pointed to the relevance of Segall and Garrett's (2013) framework. As mentioned earlier, this was followed by a second reading aimed at identifying the presence of the discursive frames recorded by Segall and Garrett (2013). The researchers conducted the second reading separately, before comparing analyses in order to verify the findings and to reinvestigate any disagreement.

7. Pedagogic applications of journal writing

In pedagogic research, journal writing has attracted attention for its potential to provide a non-threatening platform for personal contemplation on emerging understandings of a given topic (Casanave 2011). Our interest in journal writing pertains to its usefulness for encouraging participants to make connections between the academic content of a subject and personal experiences, observations, and other forms of prior knowledge that have often fallen beyond the purview of pedagogic research (Dianovsky and Wink, 2012; Pollock et al. 2010). For this reason, students in our sample were encouraged to reflect both on their personal readings, as well as interaction with peers during class and tutorial discussions.

In contrast with most pedagogic research, our focus deviates from an interest in honing students' writing skills. Instead, we aim to exploit the potential common ground between pedagogic work and CRT. Both underline the usefulness of writing as a means of motivating systematic reflection. The latter insists that it offers a means of investigating the knowledge about race and racism that circulate among student populations, including the way students understand themselves as situated within contemporary permutations in race-relations. As Acuirre (2010: 763) observes: "If we agree that a person has agency [...] especially the kind that is self-reflexive, then a person can [relate] stories about how they understand the world around them." Following Acuirre (2010), Sue (2013) and Pollock et al. (2010), this study seeks to combine research in journal writing with CRT.

The study under discussion was preceded by a pilot study conducted in 2013 with four participants. The pilot corroborated Monroe's (2003) observations on the importance of clear instructional design, including the value of sanctioning personal views. For this reason, respondents in the main study were specifically

instructed to describe the discussions that were held during lectures and tutorials, before detailing personal responses to these discussions, and how they felt these were relevant to their own experiences/observations on campus. The pilot also demonstrated the advantages of online journals over hard copies. Online journals are available to students from mobile devices at any time. It exploits an existing familiarity with asynchronous technology, and also offsets the danger of students losing hard copies.

8. Findings

8.1 The value of talking about race and racism

One of the first topics that all respondents engaged with in their first journal entries pertained to the question of whether or not matters of race still warrant attention 20 years after the official abolition of apartheid. In the journals produced by white students, studies of race and racism were considered problematic. Focusing on race was framed as detrimental to the unity of a generation that should be viewed as disconnected from past stratification (examples are included in the next section). These views were not confined to the journals but were also raised during class discussions, and respondents who identify as black devoted much attention to responding to these ideas, as illustrated by the following exemplars:

CH

We discussed [in class] whether we think race should still be talked about or should we forget about it and move on. One of our classmates stated that she believes that we should move on and stop talking about it, then we could perhaps move on as a nation. I feel that we cannot just ignore it; you just don't get over it, because we don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past. Socialization of racist people is the problem. For example, if I grow up having a certain view against white people I will grow in that perspective and no module in varsity can change that overnight.

ElMa

The anthem "just get over it" is quite dominant in the minds of white classmates. One student did mention in class that she did not find the novel relevant. She was of the opinion that children born into this generation do not need to know about the hate that occurred in our past, because if race is not made an issue for them, then our problems are solved. My point is race issues cannot just be dismissed, especially by students, because they

are too difficult to discuss. This novel raises a concern within me, of the psychological outlooks that are passed on from generation to generation. The least that we can do for each other in this country is to be willing to listen to each other.

In such entries, the impetus for disagreement stems from the danger of repeating past mistakes or perpetuating divisive ideologies. Opening and maintaining discussions about race are thus framed as crucial methods of responding to the biased socialisation that some students may have been exposed to prior to tertiary study. In the first extract (CH), this thinking is illustrated through an example of anti-white sentiment. In the extract by ElMa a racially opaque framing is evident (“generation to generation”). Relying on such explanations may offer a safer method of argumentation. Extrapolating from these positions does not yet assign any special role to white South Africans of socialization of the next generation into racist thinking. As we illustrate later, however, this line of argument (that racism is potentially perpetrated by both white and black) would assume a more prominent role during later entries. On the one hand students were able to broach forms of racism in more specific terms. ElMa, for example, later added that: “I think many people, especially white people, are racist because they are raised to be racist. The same way that many black people live in an inferiority complex.” The opacity marking the first entries, therefore, did not persist. As indicated below, during the remainder of the first and subsequent entries, respondents began to reflect more clearly on contemporary forms of racism. On the other hand, especially from the second entries onwards, respondents were also careful to combine these explorations with examples of non-racist whites and to assert that racism is, sometimes, unduly over-emphasised.

8.2 Racialised experiences of competence and language as a form of alienation

Towards the end of the first journal entry, and more so in successive meditations, participants begin to describe racism in more specific terms. While doing so, respondents readily self-identify as black. In contrast, the journals written by white students avoid explicit racial designations. More significantly, most of the entries recorded by the latter cohort show a concern with the influence that studying literature on race will exert on racialised others, by arguing that talking about racism exaggerates the problem beyond its real dimensions. This point was articulated without overt recourse to racial classification. Below, we briefly examine two exemplars from white participants to demonstrate this disjuncture:

Chris

If the University keeps talking about racism and making it a bigger issue than I feel it actually is, then people focus more on what the University is saying on the matter, than how they actually feel or how things are actually playing out in reality.

Emer

I still believe that there are racial issues on campus because people play the apartheid card and unless that is dropped and everyone is finally accepted as equals then we will be able to move towards a better future on campus.

The discursive frames that inform these texts echo the trend observed by Segall and Garrett (2013), as well South African scholars including Steyn and Foster (2008) and Verwey and Quayle (2012). The responses are structured around a narrowed conceptualisation of what racism is: only overt and explicitly prejudicial beliefs and actions are acknowledged. This allows for a rejection of the need to interrogate broader institutional norms and purportedly race-neutral cultural practices that threaten to displace existing worldviews, particularly by implicating whiteness.

By contrast, participants who identify as black frequently use racial terms, and moreover became less hesitant in asserting that racism persists. In order to limn contemporary manifestations of racism, respondents honed discussions on two forms: assumptions of black academic incompetence as well as institutional practices that are considered symptomatic of racism. When broaching these ideas, participants were careful to supply examples. Intermingled with this was a third practice, which we address in the next section.

First, we note that the journals exhibit a recurring focus on racial stereotypes against black academic aptitude. Temporal references, or deictic items, such as “still”, “previously” and “few years back” were regularly employed. The trend corresponds with earlier research among older respondents (Conradie and Brokensha 2014) where similar items were used to frame racism as persistent, but less severe than it had once been:

GraSt

As a black student it actually hurts to see that people are still looking down at black pupils. There are some students that feel that they cant work with a black student because he or she wont do the work in the right way and he or she will take forever to understand the work but they don't know that maybe just maybe this black student is a top achiever in his or her work but he or she is being judged on skin colour.

TsMo

The problem is that on campus we tolerate each other just to get through the day and to complete our degrees. The race relation on campus still exists, even though its not as too much as it were few years back but during lecture sessions you may find that black students and white students seats separately in groups. And for instance when the lecturer asks us to work in pairs in class students move away to find his/her race group and work with. This is a problem of white superiority.

Second, all respondents also implicate institutional practices. These were aggregated around language, and the fact that Afrikaans continues to be a medium of instruction at the university in question, and a language that most teaching staff speak. Again, unless respondents have already done so, the temporal distance between the present and apartheid is stressed:

MpMy

Racism is an issue we keep sweeping under the rug and it keeps popping up again. Racism is an issue that is still relevant; it might not be as worse as it was during the day of Steve Biko and Albert Luthuli but you still can feel it in different forms for example I have a friend and she told me that in her department you have lecturers that explain things in Afrikaans in a subject that is supposed to be lectured in English, you also have students that ask questions in Afrikaans and for a person like her who is not familiar with the language she get discouraged and feels alienated. I feel maybe we and she should talk about the issue of racism in a different light. I feel like the issues that were faced by our great-great-grandfathers have evolved, so us as people need to talk about these issues in a different light and resolve them.

SaFe

There are English and Afrikaans classes, but you find out that in English class some lecturers and students communicate in Afrikaans language which gives difficulties in non-Afrikaans speaking students to understand. This is racism.

SiNg

We get some lecturers addressing the lecture in Afrikaans where it supposed to be an English lecture.

Language emerged as a perennial example of structurally-rooted racism. It was used to extend previous observations on the student population to institutional arrangements. In addition to the above, respondents also suggested

that white students have access to better guidance and advice from lecturers based on their common linguistic background. The difference between the entries produced by white participants and those produced by black participants warrant commentary. The former suggested that analysing literature on questions of race and racism runs the risk of distorting students' perceptions of South African society by inclining them to "play the apartheid card", thus insisting that, in reality, racism no longer constitutes a systemic problem and that it has become a partisan resource for racial others. By contrast, the latter take care to express the belief that racism no longer plays out as it did under apartheid. As was the case in Soudien (2010), respondents emphasise an awareness that conditions have improved to a degree. Similar to Soudien (2010), however, this is not taken to imply that racism has disappeared entirely. As the journals progressed, respondents exhibit an enhanced confidence in asserting how the present-day guises of racism affect them. Observations on the role that language plays in unequal treatment, as well as racial exclusion from study groups, were used to substantiate the prevalence of racism.

In addition to the above, another focal point for journal discussions was an incident that occurred at the University of Pretoria, where two white female students attended a private party dressed in a racialised parody of black domestic servants. Media reports dubbed the incident as Black Face, in reference to the face paint applied by the students. One of the central questions that arose from comments to news websites, as well as in the students' journals, was whether the case should be considered racist. Most participants in the present study were certain that it constituted an expression of racist stereotypes and that the underlying racism was not very different from the prejudice discussed in the literature under study:

MmaMo

Looking at the incident that happened at UP whereby white students were wearing domestic working costumes to the party and painted their faces black, in which this means that the occupation of domestic working is only associated with black people. I felt that it was totally inappropriate and out of line as it showed stereotype against black people by those white students.

OleMo

I think that why black face offends people the way it does is that these girls did not paint their faces black to try and celebrate black women and their beauty... they painted their faces and dressed like maids to entertain themselves, to mock and laugh... I don't recall seeing or watching anyone paint their faces black

to try and imitate the positive things that black people can do, it's always negative and to mock. Illiteracy is associated with being black.

YolSta

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.

8.3 Negotiating competing discourses on racism

Taken together, therefore, the journals showcase respondents' awareness that while racial stratification in South Africa has been ameliorated and is at least no longer legally sanctioned, they are nevertheless aware of its persistence beyond 1994. The respondents show mindfulness of the subtlety of contemporary racism and that it is embedded in other, seemingly race-neutral practices. Although a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty is evident, participants found examples to locate and exemplify the kinds of racism they encounter.

Mingled with the above, however, the journals are also typified by another discursive practice. This sees the journals' authors engage in what reads as an attempt to balance observations on racism. During the same entries that scrutinise instances of racism (second to fourth or fifth entries), students created space to reflect on the progress that has recently been made against interpersonal racism, especially among their own generation, as well as the hardships that they believe white South Africans are confronted with:

MoMo

Discrimination also goes both ways as white people also get sidelined when it comes to getting certain opportunities like getting promoted at work or receiving bursaries. There is always that false assumption that all white people benefited financially from apartheid and therefore do not deserve any aid from the state.

SiZi

Yesterday on the 4th of September 2014, on campus I saw an Afrikaner male on the road stopping his car and hugging a black female who was walking near the road. I was shocked but happy that now people of different races can get along so well that they even hug in public.

Reflections such as the first one (MoMo) concede that privilege, and especially socio-economic resources, are not ubiquitously distributed in favour of white South Africans. That nearly all of these entries relate to affirmative action and black economic empowerment (without recourse to statistics regarding the racialised character of poverty and unemployment), suggests that students are attempting to negotiate one of the most well-known and well-rehearsed discourses around race. Research by Steyn and Foster (2008) as well as Verwey and Quayle (2012) have expounded how economic reparation has become a cornerstone of white resistance to arguments on racism. It constitutes an often-repeated resource for claiming victim status as targets of reverse racism. Journal entries suggest that respondents are familiar with this position and are, to an extent, aware that it might inform attempts to invalidate their earlier observations. Consequently, they seek to negotiate it. They do this by concurring with rather than repudiating the notion that redress victimises white South Africans. The acknowledgement is added as an indication that while they have already advanced views on the present-day contours of racism, they remain open to admitting the difficulties faced by white South Africans.

For two respondents, this reflection spurred a discussion of meritocracy and a desire to earn accomplishments. Again, the notion that the achievements of black South Africans are due in no small part to restitution policies is a regular dimension of white resistance discourse (Green et al. 2007; Steyn and Foster, 2008; Verwey and Quayle, 2012). In this sense, entries such as the following raise a challenge to pedagogic practices around race:

OleMo

I want to earn the opportunities that I encounter in my life, I don't want anything in my life to boil down to my being female or black. Black politicians have used racism to further their own political agendas and career ambitions, so I do not think that every incident that occurs in South Africa should be turned into another case of racism, thus further polarizing a country that continues to remain, beneath the surface and behind closed doors, quite divided.

The risk that we argue is inherent in the entry above derives from its potential to dissuade students from analysing the racialised dimensions of social life, including controversial cases such as Black Face, especially since the accusation of *making things about race* has proven to be such an intransigent feature of white resistance discourse (Segall and Garrett, 2013). Responses such as these outline the pedagogic challenge involved in assisting students to discover ways of negotiating familiar rhetoric by encouraging critical analysis, while also

supporting critique of political opportunism where relevant (cf. Alexander, 2007). To an extent this point is also borne out in the following entry:

SiZu

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.

This reflection is unique in that it is the only one to mention Julius Malema, so it is not possible to argue for the pervasiveness of the above framing of this controversial public figure. However, we note here that this construction coheres with Posel's (2014a) reading. She accentuates the point that a crucial part of Malema's media framing relates to the contrast between his confrontational style, and the non-racial and reconciliatory iconography of Nelson Mandela. This, in turn, has made him a useful resource for white resistance discourse, in which he reignites fears of retribution. As such, this represents another instance of engaging with white discourse on race.

The above-mentioned practice of moving from discussions of racism to progress and white victimhood also prompted all students in this group to briefly mention ways in which they consider black South Africans to be implicated in racism:

KeaDui

I think its blacks who are also racists now on whites. There is so much blaming that's going on right now. The government is not helping but making the situation worse, things like BEE. I know a woman, for example, she is the best gp in town. She lives in the township; is a white young women and she is called Nthabiseng.

NnMo

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 wont be labeled the same.

KhuMu

Some racist anger still perpetuates. I feel that this was never fully discussed [in class], because I believe that as much as the some whites continued to have racist anger many blacks also still have this anger.

SaFe

At this stage white students in our country not only in our campus are sometimes regarded as racist just because we still considered apartheid.

Sue (2013) notes that participants in small-group discussions on race may feel that their worldviews are being attacked, with the result that starting positions are continuously reiterated, rather than evaluating different/competing viewpoints. However, as was the case in Pollock et al. (2010), these journals saw respondents going through different argumentative phases. Inasmuch as the entries that form the focus of our study interrogate subtle yet pervasive forms of racism, the texts offer a counter-narrative to what Sue (2013: 665) calls the master narrative of white resistance discourse: the insistence on “themes of racial progress, of a fair and just society, of equal access and opportunity”. On another level, the journals counter a theme repeated by white respondents: that studies of race will incline racial others to uncritically play the race card.

Nevertheless, as already stated above, we suggest that this should be approached with caution; instead we read the above developments in the journals as reflecting 1) familiarity with white resistance discourse, 2) the influence of the politeness protocol, and 3) the progress narrative recorded by Soudien (2010).

The above extracts demonstrate participants' familiarity with criticism against affirmative action, and allied methods of claiming victimhood in white resistance discourse (Steyn and Foster 2008; Conradie and Brokensha 2014). Additionally, the influence of the politeness protocol is traceable across acknowledgements of the potential misuse of allegations of racism, the description of non-racist whites, and the privations whites are suggested as enduring. Moreover, we suggest that the overall discursive practice that these moves form part of (the attempt to achieve balance/fairness) can be read as another instantiation of the progress narrative in Soudien (2010). This is based on respondents' regular reference to the temporal distance between 1994 and the present, as a way of indexing recognition of the alleviation of racism (see KhuMu and SaFe). The strength of the progress narrative, and the insistence on recognising it when making sense of race, may be linked to the manner in which the transition to democracy was thought to inaugurate an abrupt break with the country's racist past. The notion that accusations of racism are anachronistic, by virtue of this historic break, has been observed in studies of whiteness by Green et al. (2007), Steyn and Foster (2008), Hughey (2010) and Verwey and Quayle (2012). Posel (2014b: 70) incisively articulates this point in her reading of the euphoria surrounding Mandela's election; she postulates that the event:

was linked to a rhetoric of – and aspirations to – new beginnings, as though the post-authoritarian era [...] would be a wholesale break rather than merely a gradual, uneven change [...] all the more exhilarating for the fact that the transition to “freedom” was negotiated in a spirit of “reconciliation”

Journals in this sample seem certain that there has been no wholesale break. Yet the contemplations develop as if it would be unfair to interrogate and expose racism without recognising the achievement of some progress; as if neglecting to introduce this kind of counter-point runs the risk of being indifferent to reconciliation. From one perspective, this could serve as a counter-narrative that displaces racist assumptions about black hypersensitivity. However, as we elaborate in the next section, these nods to progress (as a means of making sense of race) might risk leaving an important range of aspects of whiteness unchallenged. We draw on Leonardo and Porter (2010) to suggest one set of implications.

9. Discussion

We acknowledge that the journals may be read from numerous disciplinary optics by highlighting different facets of the patterns discussed earlier. Owing to page constraints, in what follows we focus our attention on the familiarity that becomes traceable with different discursive positions in whiteness. As examined in the preceding section, these positions are dealt with by acquiescing with and conceding some of the main points. Our concern with this practice stems from the way it allows certain attributes of whiteness to remain unchallenged and thus to persist in shaping processes of meaning-making.

In an extension of Fanonian theorisations of risk, Leonardo and Porter (2010) take issue with the primacy accorded to safety in public race dialogue. They consider that when safety is asymmetrically distributed it runs the risk of blunting the critical potential of pedagogic engagements with race. Viewed as such, safety is allied to the politeness protocol. Although these authors do not link their own work with Sue (2013), analogues with the politeness protocol are evident. This is noticeable in the way that safety and politeness are both often premised on ideas of fairness. More importantly for our concerns, both publications stress that anti-racism is curtailed when, under the influence of these ideas, race dialogues become tacitly concerned with whether or not whites can avoid appearing racist. Leonardo and Porter (2010) posit that this insistence on safety preserves white comfort zones.

As our analyses suggest, the implicit pervasiveness of such understandings of good conduct might incline respondents towards a kind of *quid pro quo* that is considered necessary in the interest of fairness. This, however, risks closing some of the most potentially disrupting avenues to exploration: avenues that are essential to the critique of whiteness. Instead, Leonardo and Porter (2010:140) urge for a “pedagogy of disruption” that exposes contradictions in safety and that “shifts the regime of knowledge about what is ultimately possible as well as desirable as a racial arrangement”.

This is not intended to entail that “people of color are somehow correct by virtue of their social location” (Leonardo and Porter 2010: 139). Nor does it aim to create an antagonistic environment. But it recognises that demands for safety (and for fairness as a part of safety) often reaffirm an already hostile situation when certain arguments restrict the knowledge and experience of others by structuring what can and cannot be said. It therefore stresses that race talk is inherently hazardous, notably for the beneficiaries of unequal power, but also that this should stimulate further thinking. A degree of discomfort and threat is necessary, specifically in order to shift the goal of race dialogue away from whether or not one appears racist, and towards the objective of achieving more nuanced and developed understandings of racial power dynamics.

This line of argument may offer a productive means of enhancing the transformative potential of literary studies with such an agenda. From this perspective, finding ways of exposing the limiting influence of the politeness protocol as well as progress narratives are thus called for, in order to extend the lines of questioning that emerge from the students’ journals (we address the issue of white students’ journals in a separate publication). This point returns us to the fact that most of the respondents are teachers-in-training who will be required to probe issues of race in future careers. This will require the ability to navigate the politeness protocol and white resistance discourse. As such, our findings underscore the need to make teacher-candidates aware of this protocol and its limiting influence.

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