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# CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE QUESTION OF SAFETY IN DIALOGUES ON RACE

## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to combine research from critical race theory, as applied to post-1994 South Africa, with insights from practical theology. It looks into points of agreement between these perspectives, especially the call to critically appraise ideologies that deny or obscure the present-day consequences of racism. On this foundation, the article moves on to consider the recommendations adduced by Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue (2013:666-669) as to how dialogues around race and racism can be enhanced. The article begins by contextualising its argument, followed by an overview of the guiding principles of CRT, focusing on the way these have been applied to research in South Africa. Thereafter, the precepts of CRT are matched with insights from scholars in theology regarding the continued need to glean more precisely nuanced understandings of how race plays out in South African society. Finally, the article draws from Leonardo and Porter (2010:140-142) and Sue's (2013:666-669) suggestions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution investigates a specific challenge that complicates the need for constructive dialogue on race and racism. To do so, it draws from critical race theory (CRT), as outlined below.

Although race is recognised as a social construct rather than a biological fact, competing assumptions about what race means for everyday interaction and how it influences society still impact the public imagination (Erwin 2012:95). A growing corpus of discourse analytic research has contributed substantially to existing knowledge about the different assumptions, rhetoric and linguistic repertoires that impact dialogue on

race. Two recurring strands from this body of academic work that are of particular significance to South Africa involve the persistence of systemic inequality and new forms of everyday racism (Venter 2008:542; Dames 2012:238; Slater 2014:329). First, a strong body of work, including Cloete (2014:34-37), Steyn and McEwan (2013:2), and Mattes (2012:139-142), expound the racialised dimensions of (dis)advantage in post-apartheid society, among which socio-economic inequity remains pervasive. Second, other research, notably from a discourse analytic orientation, emphasise the emergence of surreptitious forms of racist hostility/discrimination that are difficult to pin down in a legal sense. Of vital significance to this article, the covert nature of such hostility/discrimination is compounded by the perennial denial that racism remains a significant problem and the avoidance of constructive dialogue that could bring these forms of prejudice into visibility (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 74; Bock & Hunt 2015:150; Hook 2013:75-93; Verwey & Quayle 2012:556; Erwin 2012:95; Soudien 2010:892-893; Vincent 2008:1426).

Research in the latter category also emphasises the confusion and conflicting interests among South Africans born around 1994. As they seek to develop their own epistemologies about race, the desire to break from the assumptions (and vocabulary) of preceding generations is evident (Bock and Hunt 2015:150-151). However, these efforts remain conjoined with views that lean towards essentialism: the notion that race denotes a more or less stable set of essential human traits rather than a malleable social construct, with the result that race is perceived as a reliable indicator of similarities and differences (Erwin 2012:95; Verwey & Quayle 2012:555; Vincent 2008:1426). Among respondents who consider themselves white, for example, there remains a pronounced proclivity to preserve positive connotations with whiteness, such as its symbolic association with order, progress and intelligence, while simultaneously denying that there is a need to investigate the impact of such assumptions on others (Conradie 2015:291).

Given this context, the current study looks into a proposition advanced by Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue (2013:666-669). These authors offer suggestions as to how dialogues around race can be enhanced in order to more effectively probe into the above dimensions. More specifically, this study considers their proposition in the light of a range of empirical data gleaned in the South African context (Conradie 2015:292; Verwey & Quayle 2012:572; Vincent 2008:1426).

Moreover, since faculties of theology at South African universities are concerned with developing effective means of facilitating such dialogues on difference (Dames 2012:237), this article argues that insights

from Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue (2013:664-666) are worth considering. These insights will be discussed in detail later on. As a brief introduction: Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) critique the insistence on safety for dialogues on race-relevant matters. They suggest that under current orthodoxies, making safety a procedural rule inhibits the transformative potential of such interactions, by allowing conversations to default to white defensiveness – the desire to avoid difficult knowledge about the endurance of racism and the persistence of post-1994 (dis)advantage. Sue (2013:666) contributes by identifying conversational norms that further inhibit open dialogue. As a result, there is a need to sanction such dialogues as spaces of risk. The theoretic framework that underpins this stance proceeds from the foundational principles of CRT. This article will begin by outlining these precepts, before discussing their application in research on post-apartheid South Africa. Subsequently, attention is devoted to the similarities between CRT premises and the arguments advanced in a number of theological studies. On this combined basis, the article argues for the value of taking heed of Leonardo and Porter's (2010:147) hypothesis. Moreover, since their recommendation mainly stems from ruminations on the US context, the article also limns suggestions that speak to the South African setting.

Before continuing, it should be noted that with regards to racial signifiers this article adopts Boucher's (2014:8) conceptualisation, in which: "the binary of Black and White does not even scratch the surface of the range of human diversity" but is operationalized as "a temporary condition" aimed at fostering discussion of race and other exigent social issues. The process of studying race is thus taken to imply the analysis of the complex social processes that create and (re)produce ideas about race, rendering it a social reality rather than biological fact (Erwin 2012:96-99).

## 2. CRITICAL RACE THEORY: PRECEPTS FOR STUDYING RACE

The application of CRT in South Africa derives its impetus, not only from the structural legacies of apartheid (such as socio-economic ones), but also from tensions at the interpersonal level, as evidenced by the numerous incidents at South African universities (Soudien 2010:892; Conradie 2015:292). Vincent (2008:1447) and Erwin (2012:96) reiterate that while apartheid sought to segregate people along the lines of state-contrived categories, the demise of that system has thrust South Africans together, and much uncertainty persists as to how best to negotiate this situation, notably since a great deal of exigent work towards equality remains unaccomplished. This section outlines the tenets of CRT, and provides an

illustration of how these have been operationalized in studies within post-apartheid South Africa.

CRT, as a conceptual framework, proceeds from a bedrock comprised of the following premises: 1) an approach to racism as endemic, which requires 2) the dismantling of prevailing ideologies, as informed by a 3) commitment to social justice that recognises 4) the experiential knowledge of research subjects and benefits from 5) interdisciplinary work.

## 2.1 Racism as endemic

First, while South Africa has witnessed the erosion of overt and legally endorsed racial hierarchy, and an increase in cross-racial contact, CRT holds that these measures alone cannot ensure the complete erasure of racism (Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solórzano 2011:254; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano 2009:663; Bonilla-Silva 2015:74). Instead, CRT aims to interrogate the nature (and interplay) of structural disparity and interpersonal prejudice. Examples of the former include the unequal dispensation of wealth and access to quality education that are ultimately rooted in historical structures, while the latter (the interpersonal level) concerns the range of harmful assumptions and “racialised patterns of reasoning” that have remained intransigent despite intensified contact (Vincent 2008:1426; Cloete 2014:37; Slater 2014:392; Mattes 2012:140).

Notable examples include the presumption that race remains a reliable index of difference and a biologically valid explanation for behaviour (Foster 2009:690; Conradie 2015:292). One of the implications for social research is that although contact across apartheid’s racial categories are more frequent now, contact always occurs in a particular context. Critical analysis is, therefore, required in order to ascertain whether these contexts interrogate, change or reproduce existing inequalities and assumptions. As a case in point (that will be elaborated later): although insisting on safety in race dialogue may appear neutral and apolitical, dialogues occur within specific contexts and may, in the absence of careful appraisal, entrench pre-existing disparities.

Across a wide range of social contexts (including faith-based communities, educational, private, and municipal settings; (cf. Modica 2012:40; Verwey & Quayle 2012:567; Steyn & McEwan 2013:2), extant research suggests that, instead of disappearing, racism has persisted, albeit in covert forms that are no less harmful for being difficult to pinpoint (Soudien 2010:892). On the contrary, since the enactment of such microaggressions (Yosso *et al.* 2009:662) are surreptitious in nature, targets/victims are frequently uncertain as to the best response. Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent and Ball (2012:122), for example, describe the influence of teachers’ systematically lower

academic expectations for black learners (mainly middle class), coupled with disproportionately higher levels of criticism and disciplinary policing. Yosso *et al.* (2009:671) trace the pernicious effects of outwardly innocuous racist humour aimed at non-white university students. Besides the initial strain of undergoing these aggressions, attempts to expose and address them are often met with hostility, evasion, and accusations of political oversensitivity or reverse-racism. Consequently, these subtle yet cumulatively damaging experiences of prejudice have been shown to exacerbate a sense of marginality. They impair academic achievement and encourage disengagement with those who are considered to defend or collude with perpetrators (Gillborn *et al.* 2012:122; Yosso *et al.* 2009:671). Such experiences affect participants in dialogues on race, whether these are hosted by public institutions (Soudien 2010:892) or faith-based communities (Modica 2012:40). The evasion and denial of racism may, therefore, form part of the context in which dialogue occurs, and can dissuade targets/victims from sharing their knowledge, thus allowing perpetrators' evasion to remain unchallenged.

Consequently, CRT takes issue with modes of interaction that avoid, deny or obscure attempts to expose and address these covert guises of racism. Part of its theoretic response is to examine and dismantle discourses that contribute to this occluding effect. As expounded below, one type of discourse that is central to this article is the invocation of non-racialism.

## 2.2 Decentring power-evasive ideologies

The last point introduces the second tenet of CRT. Its appropriation of discourse analysis is geared towards interrogating ideologies that avoid, obscure or deny the ramifications of racism. These are termed power-evasive discourses (Foster 2009:686).

Power-evasive discourses serve to justify the desire to avoid obtaining knowledge about the way race plays out in society. In this capacity, they can act as a form of resistance against unmasking connections between race and power, as well as the way certain ideologies elide or implicitly support racism. Such discourses typically confine racism to anomalous individuals, with the corollary that systemic racism is isolated to a history that ended in 1994 and which has no bearing on the present. Claiming that final victory over racism has already been achieved (barring sporadic but trivial incidents) circumvents any deeper analysis of broader cultural patterns (Hook 2013:70). Such positions are regularly substantiated by vigorous claims to individualism, which repudiate personal responsibility and the need for more comprehensive research (explained below).

Extensive research has uncovered power-evasive discourse among subjects who self-identify as white (Vincent 2008:1426; Soudien 2010:892; Modica 2012:40). To be clear, power-evasion as a form of resistance and avoidance are not framed as an essentialist trait of white people. However, CRT analyses suggest that respondents who commonly label themselves as non-white have shown a stronger desire to engage with questions around race and racism, while those who identify as white have used this racial identification to argue that racism is no longer a problem and that any attempt to broach the issue constitutes a form of white victimisation (Verwey & Quayle 2012:560; Conradie 2015:283).

To elaborate, because racist legislation has been officially repealed in favour of a non-racial constitution, white subjects in particular have found it difficult to understand the abiding call to investigate the so-called new guises of racial (dis)advantage (Hook 2013:70). Simultaneously however (and as subsequent paragraphs will argue), this is not a simple matter of ignorance. Cogent analyses by Sue (2013:666), instead of simply taking for granted that race and racism are sensitive topics, have detailed a set of contributing factors.

Sue (2013:666) explains that the fear of appearing racist in public hinders white students' willingness to gain knowledge about the social construction of race and to concede the possibility of new racism. Power-evasive discourse is thus related to the fear of appearing racist, but it is also linked with an anxiety that after confronting the subtlety of contemporary racism, white subjects might discover their own complicity in its perpetration, even though this might have been involuntary (Sue 2013:666; Conradie 2015:292). Ironically, avoiding this discomfort, often by invoking ideas about individualism and non-racialism, can exacerbate racialised tensions (Yosso *et al.* 2009:663). Victims of microaggressions can become exasperated with the perennial obstinacy encountered among white peers (Leonardo & Porter 2010:147; Sue 2013:667). In fact, the recurring rejection of non-whites' knowledge/experience is itself often interpreted as a manifestation of racist aggression, because of the refusal to engage with the worldviews of others (Yosso *et al.* 2009:670). Vincent (2008:1439) argues that it is precisely because many white people "see themselves as diverse individuals and as self-evidently irreducible to their race" that any discussion which limns their implication in covert racism is perceived as illogical and hostile.

Invoking non-racialism and individualism are key examples of how engaging with the worldviews of others can be avoided. Although South Africa has committed itself to making non-racialism a social reality, there remains a danger that the call for non-racialism can be used to deny the

existence of subtle racism (Erwin 2012:96). As mentioned earlier, this is often voiced by a vehement insistence on individualism. As Vincent (2008:1432) postulates:

Social ills are crafted as problems located within specific individual relationships and the possibilities for social action are thus undermined. The hegemonic liberal humanist discourse insisting that we focus on our "common humanity" erases the specificities of raced experiences and evades the question of who has the power to define that humanity.

In a later section, the application of this perspective to empirical data, gleaned from earlier discourse analyses (Conradie 2015:292; Verwey & Quayle 2012:567), will be illustrated. Suffice it to say for now that caution is needed, so that the pursuit of non-racialism does not place the scrutiny of racism outside the purview of inquiry, including those enactments that are so subtle that perpetrators are themselves unaware of its harmful consequences.

In terms of the overall agenda of this article, the above-mentioned need to challenge the exploitation of non-racialism (as a form of resistance/avoidance) is at that the heart of Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue's (2013:666) research. More specifically, these authors argue that the current call for safety when broaching the topic of racism, allows such power-evasive forms of non-racialism to go unquestioned. The present article is, therefore, specifically concerned with the norms surrounding safety, as theorised by Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue (2013:666). Before dealing with these authors, the final principles of CRT are explained below, followed by an illustration of how they have been applied to the South African context.

### 2.3 Social justice, experiential knowledge and interdisciplinary work

Third, the above-mentioned appropriation of discourse analysis is intended to generate insights that can advance social justice. Crucially, this agenda is taken to entail more than a superficial acceptance of people who are perceived as different. Instead, it encourages an interrogation and reconsideration of the taken-for-granted assumptions of in- vs. out-groups, with the potential of reconfiguring dominant (and essentialist) understandings of group boundaries (Vincent 2008:1447; Erwin 2012:96).

Fourth, to pursue these objectives, CRT promotes research into the way race acquires meaning through everyday practices. This draws from longstanding methods in the social sciences that focus on narrative data.

Data collection procedures include interviews and focus groups (Steyn & McEwan 2013:2), online debates and writing courses (Modica 2012:38), and personal reflections on past events, as well as archival sources (Hook 2013:70). The primacy that CRT accords to experiential knowledge is meant to investigate the way subjects experience, resist and/or perpetuate particular epistemologies of race.

Finally, as a fifth premise, CRT calls for interdisciplinary research as a means of augmenting current knowledge about the processes that produce race, as a social construct, and the entanglement of such constructions with racism. It therefore draws from insights gleaned from legal, cultural, gender, literary, historical, anthropological and sociological studies (Jain *et al.* 2011:254; Yosso *et al.* 2009:663).

## 2.4 Application

Before looking at perspectives from practical theology, consider the following empirical results from Conradie (2015:292) and Verwey and Quayle (2012:567) who illustrate the application of the above principles.

The following exemplars from Conradie (2015:287) are situated in a student debate, facilitated within a so-called historically white and mainly Afrikaans South African university. The discussion centres on students' opinions regarding the nature of racism in post-1994 South Africa:

- Racism is old news and yet everyone is constantly reminded of it in a country that is known as the Rainbow Nation. Isn't this ironic? Yet when we look at a rainbow each colour is in its individual place. Each colour is in its own line and shines out its own colour. If all the colours mixed together we end up with an ugly colour and very little purpose.
- How do we ever expect our country to move forward if we are still stuck in the past? We are all individuals and should refrain from wanting everyone to be the same, and therefore every person should be allowed their own beliefs, values and culture. If all South Africans can come to this realisation, we can move forward and put the past behind us.

In these excerpts, and the similar responses which they represent (cf. Bock & Hunt 2015:151; Hook 2013:70; Modica 2012:40; Vincent 2008:1447), issues of racism are described as an anachronistic topic that can safely be ignored. No value is assigned to questioning the construction of race or the evolution of racism in covert guises. Arguments for the persistence of prejudice after 1994 are denounced, despite attempts by several black participants in Conradie (2015:285) to raise the issue in the online debate.

Instead the study of race is misconstrued as an irrational obsession with the past, or as a violation of the right to individualism.

Bearing in mind the economic discrepancies that mark South Africa (and its historical roots; Mattes 2012:140; Cloete 2014:38), as well as the series of race-related incidents that occurred at numerous South African universities several months prior to this online debate, the above arguments can be said to demonstrate: 1) the denial that racism continues, 2) the desire to avoid the topic and 3) the consonant rejection of those who wish to open dialogue (Conradie, 2015:285). Taking account of the fact that the above exemplars stem from an online debate in which students who self-identify as black tried to make some of their concerns heard (including reported and unreported cases of racism on campus), points to the difficulties that students experience in navigating such discussions.

In addition, despite trying to isolate racism to a pre-1994 past, these responses attempt to justify voluntary segregation (“Each colour is in its own line”). As such, they not only exhibit discourses that delegitimise and reject efforts to focus the debate on the perpetration of contemporary racism, but also continue to reify the assumed validity of essentialist racial difference, rather than viewing race as a contingent and malleable result of complex processes of racialised socialisation (Vincent 2008:1447).

Beyond such educational settings (cf. Vincent 2008:1447; Soudien 2010:892), Verwey and Quayle (2012:567) have investigated private conversations among South Africans who self-identify as white. Discussions of race, which included respondents with a professed affiliation with Christian churches, reflect similar themes (Verwey & Quayle 2012: 570-571):

- Realistically speaking I don't think we [white South Africans] will ever be in power again, so the country will never come right again... um, the country will only go backwards, crime will only increase... um, and everything will only go backwards... um, yes, so there is nothing... That you can make living here, I won't argue with that, but I am not optimistic that things will go well again.
- Now it's not a question of I don't want to be a part of their country but... they [black South Africans] are busy [expletive] it up so much that I am not interested anymore. Do you understand?

As is the case in other studies (Hook 2013:70; Foster 2009:690), these deliberations on the future of South Africa are informed by assumptions of white superiority. The wide range of social ills confronting the country are configured as a result of inherent black incompetence and criminality. The unquestioned veracity of this logic prompts predictions of society's steady

degradation. Decline is projected as an inevitable corollary of the lack of white leadership (Verwey & Quayle 2012:567).

This section has outlined the precepts of CRT and the foundation these have offered to scholarly projects in post-1994 South Africa. The next segment places a range of studies from practical theology alongside the theorisations that emerge from CRT.

### 3. ANALOGUES IN SOCIAL ETHICS AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Questions surrounding the interplay of power, ideology and difference have, in multifarious ways, remained a major component of theological research in post-apartheid South Africa, with contributions being generated from a wide range of disciplines, including the study of social ethics, liberation theology, historical exegesis as well as systemic and practical theology (Fourie 2013:7; Molobi 2010:36; Wright 1999:12; Dames 2012:241; Slater 2014:329). The study of social ethics (as a subset of Christian ethics; Fourie 2013:7), in particular, has proceeded from the core principles that: 1) God confers an inalienable dignity upon all human beings, and 2) this dignity moves individuals toward compassion, empathy and service (Fourie 2013:4). These are taken to entail that a just society should preserve the dignity and freedom of the individual, since

dignity and freedom are promoted where people have the experience that in realising their calling they can care for themselves and others (Fourie 2013:2).

As explicated below, some scholars in practical theology have set out to identify and critique the social arrangements and norms in post-1994 South Africa that obstruct this dignity and freedom (Slater 2014:329). This section deals specifically with theological perspectives that concur on: 1) the endemic nature of racism, 2) the need to destabilise ideologies that obscure its repercussions, and 3) the commitment to social justice.

Conceptual points of agreement between CRT and theological research encompass work by Slater (2014:329), as well as Dames (2012:241) and Robinson (2013:87). These authors contend that an imperative need remains for theologians and communities of faith to pursue more precise understandings of the mechanisms of racism and the social processes that shape ideas about race. This imperative includes the analysis of discursive forms of resistance against interrogating matters of race (Modica 2012:40). Failure to investigate this phenomenon runs the risk of communicating the notion that race, and racism, are only of epiphenomenal

interest. This, in turn, underestimates how racism violates the above-mentioned dignity and the vocation to reflect the image of the creator God (Slater 2014:329; Robinson 2013:87). Like CRT, therefore, there is an abiding openness to investigate the survival of racism in behaviours, attitudes and larger social structures that are often overlooked and unnoticed, despite official condemnation.

Slater's (2014:329) analysis of discrimination in South Africa underscores that beside broad socio-economic inequalities, stereotypical assumptions about race and gender still espouse subtle forms of hostility, notably against those who are perceived as falling in the black racial category (with women facing particularly acute hardships). Working in theological ethics, Slater's (2014:329) research suggests that South Africans racialised as black still encounter stereotypes about their intellectual aptitude and ethical integrity from peers who occupy other racial categories, in apartheid terminology.

Dames (2012:242), whose recommendations are focused on faculties of the theology in South Africa, concur that meaningful dialogue on culture, race and allied vectors of difference remains challenging and worthy of concerted study. He notes that the University of the Free State, for example, has sought to open various spaces for critical reflection and debate, through its creation of the International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice (IISRRSJ). Dames (2012:238) observes that the creation of this institute reflects a recognition of the hazards that inhere in evading difficult issues of difference and prejudice. From the perspective of practical theology, drives such as the IISRRSJ constitute crucial opportunities to respond adequately to the challenges presented by socio-cultural difference, and to learn from Rian Venter's (2008:543-544) admonition against earlier failures to launch such critical responses. Venter (2008:543) has urged reflection on the possibility that everyday microaggressions, as well as those incidents that have seized national and international media attention, are at least partially engendered by the omission of penetrating theological deliberation on, and reaction to, stereotypical assumptions of racial difference that are still common after 1994. On this basis, Venter (2008:543) and Dames (2012:238) have encouraged scholars to consider how "the creation of [a sense of] community amongst people" can be promoted over a superficial tolerance of difference (perceived or real). In Irizarry's (2006:30) articulation, this demands recognition of the possibility of negotiating common values and norms, which in turn first requires an acknowledgement, analysis and renegotiation of power relations.

From this vantage point, neglecting to engage with the worldviews of others runs the risk that "Western theological interpretations will produce

Western cultural teaching” that overlook severe socio-cultural tensions (Dames 2012:241). To shift from a previous us-against-them rhetoric towards equitable collaboration and negotiation is, therefore, contingent on discovering and understanding the obstacles that predispose participants to resist constructive engagement of difficult issues (Venter 2008).

Similarly, Robinson (2013:87) and Cone (2011:37) urge for an openness for further dialogue, and warn against assuming that legal measures alone can address prejudice and inequality. They advocate that avoiding questions of race, racism, and other forms of prejudice, implicitly supports discursive forms of resistance. Even when avoidance is pursued in the interest of appearing racially apolitical, it threatens the further entrenchment of prejudice by avoiding/denying its real-world consequences (Cone 2011:37; Modica 2012:40; Robinson 2013:87). Moreover, it compromises the Christian vocation to critique discrimination, injustice and the violation of dignity, notably because a more detailed understanding of one of the most pronounced components of present-day injustice is routinely silenced (Robinson 2013:87; Cone 2011:38).

With regards to the problem of ideologies that elide racism, Modica (2012:40), whose analysis is focused on white Protestant students in a Christian college, has discerned patterns in the race talk of her respondents that match the resistance/avoidance exhibited in CRT research, which do not record information on religious affiliation (Yosso *et al.* 2009:659; Foster 2009:690). Modica (2012:40-43) showcases how discursive forms of resistance/avoidance deny any remaining vestiges of racialised (dis)advantage. In fact (and perhaps paradoxically), her respondents express the conviction that race-relations will become more amicable if the subject of racism is evaded altogether (similar trends are evident in South Africa, but without information on religious association; Conradie 2015:292). That is, respondents who identify themselves as white and Christian in Modica (2012:40-43) are not more likely to express concern over racism or a commitment to developing insights into the construction of race than other respondents who identify as white (Foster 2009:690). An alignment is evident, here, with the premium that CRT assigns to critiquing ideological orientations that elide subtle racism.

Finally, with regards to social justice, Wright (2006; 1999:16), Molobi (2010:36) and Slater (2014:329) remind that critiquing injustice and speaking to power constitute a vital facet of the Christian vocation. Wright’s (2006:8) treatment of this vocation proceeds from an explication of the task that Jesus believed himself called to achieve:

Jesus didn’t come as if were merely to display what God looked like in human form. He came with a job to do, to complete the work

to which Israel was called. This work, from the call of Abraham onwards, was to put the human race to rights [And this] task was to be accomplished not simply by revealing to the world who God really was, still less by offering an example of how human beings really ought to live. It was to be accomplished by Jesus bringing about, within this present world, the sovereign, healing rule of the creator God.

From Wright's (2006:11) perspective, the task of Jesus has the following implication for discipleship:

to implement the victory [Jesus] won over evil, over hatred, over violence and death itself, and thereby to anticipate in the present time, always partially [the] eventual victory of God.

This argument lends further impetus to the need for rigorous analyses of race and racism. Reading it alongside Robinson (2013:87), Dames (2012:238), Cone (2011:38) and Irizarry (2006:30) suggests that projects to expand knowledge about race-relevant issues, represents a crucial component of the Christian vocation to uncover and address the harmful consequences of practices that violate individual and group dignity (cf. Molobi 2010:35-48 for reflections from Liberation and Black Theology).

Mindfully pursuing this commission will require (in part) a thorough engagement with the voices of those who wish to bring their experiences and knowledge of race and racism to light. Pivotal to such processes is a willingness to become vulnerable, to the extent that "unquestioned norms, habits, unconscious assumptions, stereotypes and the taken-for-granted behaviours of social institutions" can be probed (Albrecht 2014:347). To pursue this, Robinson (2013:87) urges for reflection on how being socialised/ racialised as white can inure people against the impact this socialisation exerts on the translation of Christian ethics into everyday life. This caveat is meant as a critique against aggressive claims to individualism, and the relegation of racism to distant histories and/or aberrant individuals (Robinson 2013:87; Albrecht 2014:347).

The purpose of this, admittedly succinct overview, was to describe similar exhortations for the sustained study of race from scholars in theology. The next section discusses the propositions advanced by Leonardo and Porter (2010:147), and Sue (2013:664-669).

#### 4. SAFETY AS A BARRIER TO THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF RACE DIALOGUE

Although calls for constructive dialogues, debates and learning opportunities regarding race-relevant matters is by no means new, recent scholarship has enhanced our understanding of conversational norms that impede meaningful interaction. To clarify, meaningful engagements are understood as encounters to do more than encourage superficial tolerance, but that aim to shift “the regime of knowledge about what is ultimately possible as well as desirable as a racial arrangement” (Leonardo & Porter 2010:140). This article focuses specifically on the work conducted by Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) and Sue (2013:666).

As suggested in preceding sections, meaningful interaction is often obstructed by the emotional distress entailed by broaching questions of race, especially racism. Even compared to socio-economic class, gender and sexuality, race has remained “the most vexed public and private question” (Soudien 2010:893). When engaging in dialogue, participants who have been racialised to think of themselves as non-white face the possibility of aggression from white peers, particularly if they dare to challenge the myth that racism has been eradicated in 1994 (Sue 2013:666). By contrast, those who have been disposed to consider themselves white are confronted with the discomfort of having this myth displaced, and the possibility that they are complicit in covert racism. This, in turn, is liable to elicit the discursive forms of resistance examined in the previous section on CRT (Conradie 2015:292; Verwey & Quayle 2012:567; Modica 2012:43; Vincent 2008:1447).

In pedagogic disciplines, awareness of the above distress has resulted in a demand for conditions of safety around race dialogue. Leonardo and Porter (2010:139-141) take issue, not so much with the demand itself as with its implementation. Attempts to manage the anxiety of white participants, runs the risk of erecting further boundaries against openly mentioning and discussing the permutations of racism in guises that are often already surreptitious and difficult to pinpoint (Yosso *et al.* 2009:662).

To elaborate, while the official dogman on safety upholds it as a fundamental rule for facilitating constructive debate that will not devolve into open conflict, Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) demonstrate how it often ends up defending the status quo, by allowing discourses of resistance (see earlier section) to become legitimate - to the extent that any attempts to reveal its superficial analysis is made out as irrational, divisive and unnecessary. The alternative they propose is that ideas about safety should be re-configured, but more importantly that the classroom, or whatever alternative space is selected for the discussion of race, should

be sanctioned as space of risk. In such a space, participants should feel allowed to speak against the grain of overarching social ideologies.

Before elaborating this recommendation in more exact terms (Sue 2013:666), it should be noted that Leonardo and Porter's (2010:140) theorisation is not intended to espouse reactionary aggression against whites. Instead, its premise is to first acknowledge that in a society where broaching race and racism is often considered taboo, politically-loaded and hostile, rather than necessary, aggression is already a real danger for those who want to address the problem based on their own experiences and observations. Under such conditions, Leonardo and Porter (2010:149-150) warn that:

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.

To expound this influence in more precise terms, the next segment deals with Sue (2013:666) who delineates a set of interactional norms that shape difficult discussions and play a powerful role in determining how and what interlocutors feel themselves permitted to articulate. These norms (or protocols) represent implicit and taken-for-granted ground rules that accompany dominant interpretations of safety, but are sometimes explicitly enforced by educators who rely on them to maintain safety (Sue 2013:666).

## 5. CONVERSATIONAL PROTOCOLS AS CONSTRAINTS ON RACE DIALOGUE

Based on a range of prior investigations (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 74; Yosso *et al.* 2009: 662; Jain *et al.* 2011:264), Sue (2013:666-669) concurs that interlocutors from different racialised affiliations report apprehension at the prospect of sharing opinions on race and racism, although non-white interlocutors are reported as being far more likely to express a conviction of its necessity. As mentioned earlier, non-white participants are liable to have experienced resistance from white peers, manifesting in the denial/rejection of non-white paradigms. White participants are anxious about the danger of appearing racist in public and/or discovering their own role, however unintentional, in exacerbating racial tensions. Sue (2013:666) elucidates three conversational protocols that allow discussions to lean in the favour of the latter group: the politeness, academic and colour-blind

protocols. Although Sue (2013:666) speaks specifically to educational settings, the need to uncover and analyse covert racism, as expressed in a number of theological studies, suggests that attention to these protocols can be equally beneficial to the latter context.

The politeness protocol designates a general societal norm that endorses the avoidance of conversational topics that are potentially offensive, divisive and uncomfortable. It dictates that such topics should either be avoided altogether, or at the very least confined to intimate/private conversation. If complete avoidance is no longer feasible, the politeness protocol inclines interlocutors to take recourse to superficial arguments that give the appearance of wading into difficult topics, but fail to open participants to more penetrating scrutiny. Moreover, if some participants do raise more critical views, the politeness protocol provides a resource for disparaging these views as needlessly controversial and provocative (Sue 2013:666). For example, when surreptitious manifestations of prejudice are raised, this protocol sanctions the move to belittle them as an illogical obsession with history or aberrant individuals. The politeness protocol therefore provides a way of enforcing superficiality. It prohibits difficult knowledge from encouraging a more thorough analysis. By doing so, it can contribute to existing tensions by foisting the burden of navigating politeness on the shoulders of those who want to engage with the topic. The latter group are now charged with finding a way of articulating themselves without contravening politeness.

An allied conversational norm is the academic protocol (Sue 2013:666). Under the guidance of Western mind-body dualism, it endorses empirical over experiential knowledge: that which is observable and verifiable, over experience and interpretation. It provides a recourse that, implicitly or explicitly, refuses to accord any validity to the experiences of others, opting instead to castigate these as purely subjective and therefore as undeserving of serious attention. Adhering to this protocol fails to take into account how the desire to consign racism to history or isolated individuals is itself a subjective form of defence (Sue 2013:669).

The combination of these two protocols cater to white participants' apprehensions of appearing racist, and forces the burden of complying with these conversational norms onto others. The consequent danger is that the objective of coping with white fears comes to dominate the interaction, at the expense of the higher goal of attaining fuller understandings of racism and the pursuit of anti-racism (Sue 2013:669; Leonardo & Porter 2010:140).

Finally, and related to the above, the colour-blind protocol also dictates against open dialogue about race-related matters. As mentioned earlier, colour-blindness/non-racialism was initially intended to repudiate

essentialist notions of race, and the role these notions have played in justifying stratification. However, colour-blindness/non-racialism has been revealed as one of the bulwarks of resistance against the interrogation of race (Bonilla-Silva 2015:78; Yosso *et al.* 2009:663). In fact, since it represents one of the primary drivers of post-1994 efforts to advance social cohesion, respondents are aware that by aligning their utterances with this norm, they are able to extract race from difficult discussions, focusing instead on issues of class and/or gender, despite the continued relevance of race. For example, when deliberating on the skewed dissemination of wealth in South Africa, its racialised dimensions can be ignored on the basis of non-racialism. The earlier extract from students' online debates also exemplifies this form of argument (Conradie 2015:288):

How do we ever expect our country to move forward if we are still stuck in the past? We are all individuals and should refrain from wanting everyone to be the same, and therefore every person should be allowed their own beliefs, values and culture.

Here, non-racialism and the individualism that it is typically interpolated with, serves to deny the influence of historic racism and fails to reflect on the way this denial supports the interests of some groups over others.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Drawing the above points together suggests that dialogue around race puts participants in jeopardy. Those who seek a space to ask questions about race and probe the nature of racism are at peril for destabilising a broader discourse of progress and colour-blindness/non-racialism (Soudien 2010:892). Others, by contrast, are concerned with the hazard of appearing racist or being labelled as implicitly supportive of racism. Moreover, safety, as it is presently implemented, is not a neutral practice. That is, without critical reflection, its pursuit does not necessarily secure safety for all interlocutors. This caveat applies, especially, to the way it can default to the discursive enactment of resistance against difficult knowledge. In the main, this challenge of rethinking safety stems from the conversational norms, or protocols, that already play a role in structuring the interaction. They are derived from the larger social context and have been shown to ease the expression of resistance, while concurrently making it difficult to critique resistance (Sue 2013:666; Leonardo & Porter 2010:140).

In view of the observation that racism has become covert and difficult to broach, but nevertheless causes significant damage and trauma, Leonardo and Porter (2010:147) urge that whatever site is selected for facilitating dialogue can benefit from framing its intended purpose through

meta-dialogue. In their view, meta-dialogue (or dialogue about the aims and procedures that dialogue will follow) can be used to sanction the site in question as an opportunity for risk. Doing so, explicitly calls the limiting potential of the politeness, academic and colour-blind protocols into question. It holds out the promise that if participants can manage their initial inclination towards defensiveness, and avoid becoming exclusively concerned over whether or not they come across as racist, opportunities can be gained to refocus the interaction on the goal of achieving more inclusive and expansive understandings of how race is socially constructed, as well as the everyday repercussions of microaggressions. A space is therefore created in which to experiment with interactions that are not inhibited by strictures of non-racialism, while nevertheless advocating an epistemology of race as socially constructed rather than essentialist. Similarly, the validity of personal experience and/or observation is recognised, instead of privileging the assumed objectivity of some forms of knowledge over others. Finally, a kind of honesty is sanctioned that is not only able to wade into challenging topics, but that also aims for a deeper level of understanding, empathy and self-reflexivity, even when doing so breaks social taboos about broaching divisive topics. Implementing such recommendations requires a conscious development of the necessary willingness to endure the vulnerability that can result from respecting the knowledge and experience of others, especially when these have the potential to implicate one in the perpetration or defence of subtle prejudice (Leonardo & Porter 2010:147).

Within the context of post-1994 South Africa (specifically a context of continued (dis)advantage, covert racism and confusion around questions of difference and social cohesion; cf. Soudien 2010:892), any attempt to translate Leonardo and Porter's (2010) recommendations will need to deal with some of the ideologies about the meaning of the 1994 transition, especially those that have been used to justify resistance and avoidance. Deborah Posel's (2014:70) incisive reading of the discourses surrounding the first democratic election holds that:

it 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. Discarding the mantle of global pariah, South Africa rapidly became the global exemplar of this new post-authoritarian will to transcendence, all the more exhilarating for the fact that the transition to “freedom” was negotiated in a spirit of “reconciliation”

Interpretations of the 1994 election as a wholesale break have offered a resource for denouncing inquiry into new forms of racism (Soudien 2010:892; Vincent 2008:1447). In particular, among some members

of the generations born around 1994, discursive forms of resistance have been based on the claim that, given this break, the topic of racism is now unnecessary and must be avoided in the spirit of reconciliation (Conradie 2015:292). Proceeding from this interpretation, much of the resistance against participating in any discussion of race and/or racism, derives its force from a rhetoric that configures any such discussion as a betrayal of the 1994 reconciliation. This rhetoric is often combined with the view that talking about racism is a form of white victimisation rather than a necessary continuation of reconciliation (Conradie 2015:292; Verwey and Quayle 2012:567). If Leonardo and Porter's (2010:140) proposition is considered feasible, its use of meta-dialogue could also serve to clarify that the sustained interrogation of race (including forms of racism) is an extension of reconciliation, rather than a betrayal. That is to say, meaningful interaction (as defined above) is necessary in order to understand how far reconciliation has gone, and what needs have arisen in the years since 1994.

Moreover, the need for constructive interaction emerges as a vital component of the Christian commission to speak "the truth to power", to reflect critically on the abuse of power, and other forms of self-interest that value personal self-esteem and security over the implementation of the achievement of Jesus (Wright 2006). In this vein, Modica (2012:40-43) notes that although the white Christian students in her sample articulated racial ideologies that were profoundly similar to those held by other students, once they had navigated coursework aimed at critiquing these resistant/avoidant discourses, Christians were more likely to assert the desire to foster anti-racism as an exigent expression of their religious vocation. Likewise, Dames (2012:239) urges that critical consideration of the barriers to equitable interaction can contribute significantly towards social transformation.

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