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Policing Racial Boundaries:  
University Students' Interpretations of  
Race Relations in South Africa



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## Abstract

This paper draws on observation as well as informal and in-depth interviews to explore the continued policing of racial boundaries for students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of Johannesburg (UJ). While overt race talk is often silenced in public South African discourse, these students recode racial boundaries in terms of a discourse of cultural authenticity. This discourse operates in conjunction with powerful emotions of anxiety and significant support from the social institution of the family. Claims to cultural authenticity have particularly powerful boundary policing functions for an emerging in-between racial identity which participants refer to as 'Model C'. This term is used by the South African public to indicate historically white state-aided schools, but is invoked by these students to more generally refer to those 'black' and 'coloured' students who have become adept at negotiating traditionally 'white' spaces. Through this analysis of the Model C position in terms of the discourse of cultural authenticity, it is argued that despite the seemingly integrated nature of this group, this in-between racial identity represents a site at which racial segregation is most powerfully policed.

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## 1. Introduction

If a white family gets robbed by 5 black guys, then we are all hooligans and we must be killed. If a white family on a farm shoots a black boy who works for them, then all the black people hate the white people. How many of us are willing to say this white lady treated me badly and I'm going to keep it at this white lady? You know what, I'm guilty of that, straight up, I'm guilty of that. There will be some coloured people in the bus making noise and I'm going to think, ah, coloured people, because what I think is that they are probably saying, ah, black people. I promise you, and I don't even say it as much as other people do. The thing is I think it's better to admit it, because some people, they act like that whole race barrier doesn't exist.

Interview with black female student from UJ

The excerpt above exposes the intensity of continued race thinking and segregation in South Africa and sets this against a problematic tendency to pretend that racial barriers no longer exist. This continued significance of race has its historical roots in policies of apartheid which served to carve up the inhabitants of South Africa into imagined race groups and legally enforce practices of segregation and discrimination on the basis of racial group membership. South African society, through apartheid, was arranged in terms of a racial hierarchy of power so that the 'white' group was privileged at the expense of the 'Indian', 'Coloured' and 'Black' groups (Posel, 2001). The transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994 came with the withdrawal of legally entrenched racial segregation. While this shift has brought with it various new forms of intra-racial diversity and cross-race alliance, these processes occur alongside a continued social policing of old apartheid boundaries. As a recent university student in South Africa, this research was informed by my own experience of the ways in which interracial friendships continue to be policed in terms of old apartheid racial categories. While racial segregation is no longer legally policed and enforced as it was during apartheid, inter-racial relationships are nevertheless made extremely difficult through the meanings (discourses) given to them and enforced through powerfully established social forces and networks. This social policing happens from within (as a form of self-policing) and without (as a form of social policing) as students respond discursively and emotionally to broader social messages about the meaning of racial boundaries and the implications of crossing them.

This study aimed to explore some of the ways in which the policing of these racial boundaries occurs for the university students interviewed. Research consisted of qualitative interviews with university students from the University of Cape Town

(UCT) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ). A total of 15 students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule covering topics such as race in South Africa today, racial integration on campus, and experience and perceptions of interracial friendships and couples. Six of these students self-identified as ‘black’, five as ‘white’, two as ‘coloured’, one ‘Indian’ and one as ‘Indian’/‘coloured’.<sup>1</sup> Although collected from two different campuses, this is not a paper of campus comparison. Rather it aims to discuss the forms of racial boundary policing shared by the students interviewed across these two campuses. Furthermore, this study does not claim to represent South African students in general, but rather to think through the mechanics and dynamics of boundary policing as it is occurring in these particular interactions, discussions and interviews with students.

The findings of this research can be divided into two key sections. The first of these deals with the mechanisms of policing racial boundaries, or what goes into the construction and maintenance of racial boundaries for the students interviewed at these universities. While an overwhelming and politically significant silence around racial segregation is evidenced, students nevertheless find ways to police this boundary through a discourse of cultural authenticity. This legitimization of racial segregation through a claim to culture is discussed in terms of its discursive, emotional and social components and the interaction between them.

The analysis then moves to discuss an emerging inter-racial identity position which is particular to the historical unfolding of post-apartheid South African society. This identity position, labelled ‘the Model C’s’, can be conceptualized as an example of what Vertovec (2007) captures under the summary term ‘super-diversity’. Super-diversity recognizes the multiple and interconnected forms of diversity and moves us away from the homogenizing and reductionist tendencies of concepts such as ‘race’ towards recognizing the complex interplay of multiple identity factors. This part of the analysis attempts to think through the mobilization of the policing discourse of cultural authenticity discussed in the previous section, but in the context of a new formation of diversity in contemporary South Africa.

This model C identity is the name given to black South Africans that are well-versed in what is considered to be ‘white culture’. The term model C is derived from

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1 Scare quotes are used here to demonstrate that these racial groups are socially constructed. While recognizing that racial groups are constructed and their membership contested, South Africa’s racial history nevertheless necessitates that this kind of study recognize the ways in which constructed racial differences impact on individual’s experiences and interpretations of the social world.



the classification of previously white state-supported schools turned multi-racial during the transition. Soudien (2004) demonstrates how these model C schools have functioned as part of a broader process of reconfiguring class dominance in post-apartheid South Africa as the children of the new and future black elite are drawn into the schools of the old white elite. Through this process, the new black middle class buys into this structure of class dominance and accepts the interests of the white middle class as its own. In these interviews, Model C comes to refer more generally to black South Africans who are well versed in white ways of being, knowing and speaking, and thus occupy an in-between racial position. While some of the black respondents specifically went to Model C schools, others might not have gone to a model C school but either identify with the model C position or have been labelled as model C by other black South Africans. In particular, these findings demonstrate that despite forms of super-diversity, race research still needs to interrogate the ways in which racial homogeneity is policed in the face of such diversity and how this policing supports broader relations of racial privilege and power.

### *1.1 Racial Segregation on South African Campuses*

Despite the popularization of integration discourses of non-racialism, various studies demonstrate that race thinking and segregation remain powerfully present in the lives of South African students. Research conducted by Steyn and van Zyl (2001) and Erasmus and de Wet (2003) on race relations at the University of Cape Town indicate that the campus continues to be a site where students group together according to apartheid racial categories. Furthermore, these and other studies argue that when interactions do occur, they are assimilatory and work to subtly re-enforce relations of racial domination (Carrim & Soudien, 1999; Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Steyn & van Zyl, 2001; Vally & Dalamba, 1999). In the social psychology literature, Shrieff et al. (2005) and Tredoux et al. (2005) observed that students at the University of Cape Town manifest segregation spatially by arranging their seating patterns along racial lines. A study by Finchelescu et al. (2007) explored the reasons students provide to account for the lack of interracial mixing using an internet-based survey across four South African Universities. Language, socio-economic status, difference in behaviour, in interests, and culture were some of the main reasons provided by students.

This paper forms part of this literature on racial segregation at South African universities, and in particular the literatures attempting to understand the discursive construction of racial identities. Studies by McKinney (2007), Pattman (2007) and

Walker (2005) report on the ways in which university students discursively construct and negotiate their racial identities against a backdrop of past and present, official and informal discourses of race and racism. Pattman and Walker highlight the continued significance of racial identity in students' informal experience of campus life. However, this is experienced alongside their desire to position themselves in terms of an official discourse of non-racial citizenship as children of the rainbow nation. Furthermore, as McKinney (2007: 227) argues, our race language is "overpopulated' with apartheid meaning', making it difficult to speak about race without reproducing these meanings. Together, these studies demonstrate that students are invested in being positioned as non-racial citizens of the new South Africa. However, this official discourse does not adequately allow students to talk through continued racial barriers. If they talk about race as an issue they risk being labelled racist.

### *1.2 The Discursive, Emotional and Social Construction of Racial Boundaries*

One of the thorny complications around conducting this kind of race research is that the researcher risks re-producing the racial boundaries which she is attempting to expose and ultimately challenge. Race matters in South Africa but not because racial groups are natural, homogenous and uncontested, but rather because they are so often imagined, constructed and treated as such. This research attempts to unearth and critique the continued construction and policing of old apartheid racial boundaries. Theoretically speaking, race is a socially constructed concept with powerful symbolic and material effects. It is not enough to simply wish away the concept as race continues to permeate our everyday material and psychic worlds. Critical race theorists Goldberg and Solomos (2002) describe this kind of social constructionist approach to race:

It is best to see race as always a medium by which difference is represented and otherness produced, so that contingent attributes such as skin color are transformed into supposedly essential bases for identities, group belonging and exclusion, social privileges and burdens, political rights and disenfranchisements. We do not mean to deny, therefore, that race remains, at the level of everyday experience and social representation, a potent political and social category around which individuals and groups organize their identity and construct a politic. We are pointing to the fact that race is fabricated, socially made and politically manipulated.

(Goldberg & Solomos, 2002: 3)

Following Goldberg and Solomos, this paper takes a critical constructionist approach to race. Despite the fluid, contested nature of racial identity, racial boundaries are nevertheless discursively, psychically and socially policed.

Understanding the dynamics involved in the policing of constructed racial boundaries requires a theoretical movement between the related realms of social structures, meaning and emotion. Our words represent an interface between these three realms. With words we shape and interpret the world. With words we can legitimate, police, deny or challenge racial boundaries. The recognition of the productive power of words is expressed in the concept of discourse. Discourse refers to the units of meaning we use to interpret the world around us (Hall, 2001). Our social worlds are in turn reproduced through both the content of meaning, and through the underlying structures which govern the organization of this content (Foucault, 1984). The underlying structure of boundary discourse organizes the social world into us vs. them. In reflecting on Frederick Barth's (1969) introduction to the collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Brubaker writes:

Ethnic boundaries emerged, rather, in and through categorical we-they distinctions drawn by actors themselves and through the channelling of interaction through sets of prescriptions and proscriptions about who can interact with whom in what sorts of social relationships.

(Roger Brubaker, 2009: 29)

While the meanings we draw from to interpret and produce our social relations with others are partly strategic and conscious, they are also very significantly emotional and unconscious. Phil Cohen (2002: 171) argues that 'psychoanalytically informed anti-racist work may be able to tackle some of the more intractable forms of popular and institutional racism'. Similarly Clarke (2003) suggests that psychoanalytic theorists allow us to understand the largely unconscious and powerful emotional, psychological processes at work in the construction of the racial other. In states of anxiety we are prone to split the world into dichotomous polarities. We idealize the good and project the bad onto others. For Clarke, Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the 'gardening state' and 'the stranger' provide bridges across sociological and psychoanalytic approaches to racism. As a 'gardening state' the modernist world is obsessed with designing and implementing order and instils in us an obsession with order, neatness and the removal of chaos. It is the other, for Bauman 'the stranger', who contains all our fears of disorder and chaos. In expelling the other we maintain our sense of order (Clarke, 2003). Through Bauman we see how our processes of catego-

rization and meaning-making are deeply connected to our experience of being in the world and the emotions that that experience throws up for us.

These psychological and discursive processes of constructing group boundaries both feed into and are fed by the social world. In attempting to capture the interface between the social and psychological processes of boundary making as they are enacted at the level of the everyday, there is a move in social psychology towards treating segregation as a 'micro-ecological practice'. The micro-ecology of the practice of segregation refers to 'the dynamic and emergent quality of micro-processes of boundary construction, negotiation, maintenance and dissolution within a given space' (Dixon et al. 2005: 403). Furthermore, this approach attempts to view the micro as part of a continual dialectic between practice and social structure. Boundary making is thus enabled by a broader system of segregation which it in turn reproduces.

In terms of racial boundaries and identities, South Africa has undergone a radical transformation from a society where segregation was legally enforced and overtly supported to one where desegregation and inter-racial connections are legally encouraged. In this context new formations of diversity have come to overlap with the old racial identities to form in-between spaces, such as the Model C positioning. However, alongside these changing racial formations and interracial relations, there is also a discursive and social resistance in the opposite direction that develops in an attempt to re-instate old racial boundaries. Race relations in post-apartheid South Africa seem to pull in two different directions at the same time. It is therefore important that we develop ways of researching race that enable us to uncover these forms of re-coding and social policing that operate in conjunction with increasing super-diversity. It is with this in mind that this research is conducted and analysed within a social constructionist methodology. This methodology makes possible an understanding of the covert role that meaning plays as a mechanism of maintaining rigid racial boundaries even as new forms of super-diversity and cross-race alliances appear to be developing.

## 2. Policing Racial Boundaries Through Silence

A significant finding of this study is that despite the continued significance of racial boundaries, students report a general silence around issues of race thinking and race segregation. This is not surprising considering the political correctness of much pub-

lic discourse that champions a view of South Africa as a non-racial rainbow nation. While race continues to be an issue on campus, students do not feel comfortable to openly talk about this seemingly taboo subject. Erasmus and de Wet (2003) similarly report that UCT students have difficulty naming race. The students interviewed in their study recognize that racial segregation exists, however they do not admit to racial antagonism despite having painful stories about experiences of race at UCT. Drawing on Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) concept of the colour/power evasive moment of race discourse, this section demonstrates that these silences around race boundaries in fact serve as a means of policing these boundaries.

### *2.1 A Campus Divided*

Walking through both the University of Cape Town and the University of Johannesburg, the racial divisions are glaring. Historically, the racial politics of South African campuses were both reflective and subversive of the apartheid regime. Mirroring South African society, South African universities were divided into different race and language groups. While both of these universities were historically white universities, they engaged very differently with the racial politics of apartheid. The University of Johannesburg, previously known as the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), was an Afrikaans medium university which was in political support of racial segregation, whereas UCT, a liberal English medium university, was opposed to apartheid and fought for integration. In order to distance itself from this history of collusion, UJ has had to implement a variety of recent transformations, including a merger with a previous black township university and a name change. The reason for choosing these two campuses is partly because I have spent time working and studying in both. As a result I have recent experience with the ways in which racial segregation occurs and operates on both campuses and access to these research sites.

While UCT and UJ may have different political histories, they nevertheless share similar forms of racial segregation on campus. While a few interracial crossings are visible at both universities, in general the campus space is carved up and occupied according to race. Students from both UCT and UJ generally recognize this racial carving up of campus space and will admit to it in the interviews:

V (white female, UJ): I think there still is [a racial divide], like even here look at this, all the Indian people chill together, all the white people chill together, all the coloured people chill together, all the black people chill together.

In the longer interviews many of the students admit that race continues to exist as a significant barrier to social relations. This barrier was most strikingly present in the discussion of romantic interracial involvements from both UJ and UCT students. Students often used words like ‘taboo’ to describe the way in which these relations are received by broader society. Chito Childs (2005) argues that romantic interracial relations are like the miner’s canary. They give warning of the noxious racism that continues to exist in society even if it cannot be seen in other areas. Indeed, in the interviews with both UJ and UCT students there tended to be a ‘degrees of separation’ approach to integration where most people will feel comfortable being friends with someone from a different race, but not dating someone from a different race. Students A and V quoted below explain that despite the ways in which race continues to determine students interactions and relationships, there is nevertheless a tendency to silence or deny discussion about the existence of this continued racial boundary.

A (black female, UCT): It’s very rare that you would see a white person asking out a black person... It just doesn’t happen like that, there’s always this race barrier... I think it just comes from the past, the fact that we’ve been placed into different races, I’ve got a feeling there are some black guys who would want to approach white girls but they’re just scared, they’re embarrassed and worried about what will she say to me... Race, we try and pretend that it’s not happening and that we are all the same, but we’re not, that’s what I think.

V (white female, UJ): This topic [interracial relationships], it’s interesting because no one really speaks about it, it’s kind of in the closet, like gay people coming out of the closet...

The quote from V is particularly telling as it highlights the fact that people do not speak about interracial relationships because the topic makes them uncomfortable. She further comments (as two other interviewees did) that interracial relationships share a similar societal status to same-sex relationships. Both make society uncomfortable and as a result face discrimination. The strict laws against miscegenation under apartheid have long since been removed. However, it appears that their underlying ideologies and the fears they produced have remained and continue to informally police interracial relationships in post-apartheid South Africa.

## *2.2. Silencing the Racial Boundary*

The general silence around talking about racial boundaries is further highlighted when students often fumble around an awkward attempt to explain segregation without invoking racism. The general awkwardness surrounding race talk and the sense



that one should not mention race issues is evidenced in the discussion with two white male students at UCT:

E (white male, UCT): It's a pretty bad thing to say, I think in property studies we all get along fine there's no race discrimination, there's no hate, but we still are separated in class, like, people find their little niches and these niches seem to be related to, some niches seem to be related to race, it's not a racist thing

F (white male, UCT): It's also a cultural thing because people, cause people relate to each other like that, but you can notice, you can notice the groups.

E: It's simply down to the fact that people can relate to each other.

In the discussion above, we see how student E immediately asserts that it is a 'bad thing to say' before he begins to talk about racial separation in class, but before he can even make this statement he further qualifies it by saying that 'everyone gets along fine... no race discrimination... no hate'. His friend further jumps to his rescue by offering the culture argument that serves to confirm that it is not about race, it is about being able to 'relate' to people.

How are we to understand this silence and covering up of continued racism and racial animosity in post-apartheid South Africa? Walker (2005) and Pattman (2007) demonstrate that despite the continued significance of race in determining friendships, students are nevertheless invested in being positioned as non-racial citizens of the new South Africa. However, this official discourse does not adequately allow students to talk through continued racial barriers. If they talk about race as an issue, they risk being labelled racist. In addition to this self-presentation function of silence around issues of race, a further function is to police racial boundaries. In order to understand this latter function it is useful to reflect on Ruth Frankenburg's (1993) discussion of the power/colour evasive moment of race discourse. This discourse argues that we should not see colour (race) and instead everyone should be treated equally. While appearing to be arguing for a non-racial world, in the context of continued racial relations of power and inequality a colour evasive discourse functions to play down and therefore support these relations of power. Similarly, in her 2000 book entitled *Tripping on the Color Line*, Heather Dalmage (2000) argues that when people draw a colour-blind line by denying the significance of race, they ultimately support the status quo by maintaining an illusion of meritocracy. Similarly, the silence around continued racial boundaries allows these boundaries to remain unchallenged, and thus in a covert way separation is policed through silence.

This policing through silence occurs on both sides of the racial boundary as most of these South African students demonstrated an investment in presenting a non-racial identity. However, the white students interviewed often took a step further towards actively policing a silence around race talk on campus. For example, the white students below both go beyond a self-presentation of non-racialism to criticize instances where black students or politicians have attempted to name racism at the university:

P (white female, UJ): My age group we weren't really affected by apartheid, but it makes me cross that people keep on bringing it up... we weren't even part of apartheid and that's why I think race is still, because people keep on bringing apartheid up and it's not even necessary to do that because none of the people on campus were part of it, and I think its still a problem because the university keeps on pushing it down on us.

C (white female, UCT): People in our class get irritated when politicians like Julius Malema<sup>2</sup> come here and say that the University is racist, a lot of people in our class were very upset about that.

For these white students race is only an issue when people name racism. Following Frankenburg's colour/power evasive discourse, this policing of the recognition of racism by labelling it racist is based in the way in which white South Africans continue to be privileged by unequal race relations. For these white students it is not only their identity as a non-racial citizen that is at stake but their continued race privilege.

### 3. The Discourse of Cultural Authenticity

Boundary policing is at once a discursive, emotional and social process. We produce, reproduce and enact the boundaries between us and them through the continuous back-and-forth interchange between our social, emotional and categorical worlds. In this section on policing through culture discourse, I further explore the links between the racial categories students live by, their emotional world, and the broader social structures in which they find themselves.

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2 Julius Malema is the president of the ANC youth league and is known for his provocative statements about race in South Africa.



### 3.1 *Race as Culture*

In 1996 Nadine Dolby conducted groundbreaking ethnographic research at a South African high school in Durban in an attempt to understand how students were articulating race in this post-apartheid context. She found that students were re-coding racial boundaries in terms of taste, or culture (Dolby, 2001). In a similar vein to the students researched by Dolby, the university students in the present study attempt to re-articulate racial difference in terms of cultural difference. As we saw in the previous conversation between student E and student F, the reference to cultural relating came from F to save E from his awkward attempt to talk around race segregation in class without inferring racism. One of the most common ways this discourse of cultural difference is expressed is in the ‘birds of a feather’ type expressions:

C (white female, UCT): I don’t think that race is a big issue at UCT, obviously it is clear that there are friendships that are like, you know, birds of a feather flock together, but I think that’s a cultural thing.

While this discourse might allow respondents to feel as if they are presenting themselves in a non-racial light, it in fact works to reproduce, legitimate and police racial boundaries.

This function becomes more evident when we further unpack the different forms this cultural discourse takes. For example, in discussing people’s perceptions of romantic interracial relationships, a black, female UJ student T asserts: ‘A lot of people still think it’s taboo to have mixed relationships, because apparently that person’s not your kind, because they don’t understand you’. By linking race and ‘kind’ together, this discourse assumes a belongingness and familiarity based on race that reproduces an essentialist construction of racial difference. Student Y below tells of how his white friends make jokes about black girls being Romany creams (a brown, chocolate biscuit):

Y (black male, UJ): I feel my friends treat me the same as other people, they don’t treat me any differently, it’s just with the racial jokes... we could be sitting down, just a group of guys and a black girl walks past and one of the white guys will be ‘there’s a Romany Cream for you’ because it’s a chocolate biscuit.

By referring to a black woman as a Romany cream, student Y’s friends are re-drawing the boundary of difference between what is brown/chocolate and by comparison what is white and further asserting that what is brown belongs to you and is ‘for you’. The way in which the discourse of kind functions to police inter-racial love is more

strongly expressed by respondent P when she explains that people battle to imagine love existing between different races:

P (white female, UJ): People in interracial relationships, people assume that they are just together because he wants a girlfriend or she wants a boyfriend, that's the only reason they are together, he's not in love or she's not in love. Like most of the time people are like really like oh my word she's got a black boyfriend or oh my word he's got a black or coloured girlfriend and then it's like it cannot be love, it must be for the sex or it must be a different reason, they can't be in love.

Many respondents spoke about this tendency to construct inter-racial relations as based in something other than love, the assumption being that romantic love cannot exist between two people of a different 'kind'. Erasmus (2005) explains the workings of this kind of race talk by drawing on Goldberg's notion of 'the assumption of abstract familialism'. This notion refers to the assumption that because I share characteristics with those I imagine to be like me, I will then share other characteristics with them and presume to know them. Such assumptions of familiarity and belonging reproduce 'race thinking – the idea that race and racialized identities are fixed and definite' (Erasmus, 2005: 25). Similarly, Paul Gilroy emphasizes the assumptions underpinning cultural racism in Britain:

Culture is conceived along ethnically absolute lines, not as something intrinsically fluid, changing, unstable and dynamic, but as a fixed property of social groups rather than a relational field in which they encounter one another and live out social historical relationships. When culture is brought into contact with race it is transformed into a pseudobiological property of communal life

(Gilroy, 1990: 266-267)

Following Gilroy's quote above, the discourse of cultural authenticity mobilized by students functions to produce and police racial boundaries by re-articulating race in terms of culture, and by constructing culture as if it is a fixed 'pseudobiological property'.

McKinney (2007) found that her students would similarly write and talk about race as culture. She argued that using the term culture allowed students to avoid the racist connotations and history of the term race. Ironically, the construction of race in terms of culture has a long history within the discourses of apartheid and functioned to ideologically legitimize racist segregation policies (Dubow, 1995). For McKinney's students, as for my respondents, culture is constructed along racial lines as if it is a fixed essential substance which belongs to a group of people making

them homogenous and bounded as a group. Students' use of the category culture to explain racial segregation is also a powerful form of policing race relations.

### *3.2. The Emotional Content of Constructions of Cultural Authenticity*

When talking about racial relations in South Africa, these interactions are often described using terms which signify the strong emotional content of these interactions. Students speak about an inability to connect, racial suspicion and threat. Just as the discourse of culture assumes a familiarity with those considered to be your 'kind', so it assumes a suspicion and unfamiliarity with those considered other. The quote below, from a conversation between two black female friends at UCT, demonstrates the suspicion, lack of connection and understanding that is experienced when attempting to communicate across race:

A (black female, UCT): maybe you start chatting [to a white student] because you have something you have to do together, an assignment or something, and then once we are introduced we are like 'hey so and so', but we don't have that, I don't know, (B: that connection) yes, that connection... you don't know what the person is thinking inside (B: they can pretend) exactly.

There is a sense that the racial other as cultural other is profoundly unknowable. It is important to highlight that some of the students interviewed do attempt to resist and work against these emotions of mistrust and suspicion. For example, the black male student quoted below works hard to challenge the racial boundary and engage in interracial friendships. Nevertheless, he has an acute sense of the discourse of cultural authenticity and the powerful emotions that surround it, as he has often experienced its policing function:

R (black male, UCT): I think people love the fact that they can have something to identity with... they feel threatened by the fact that you are taking one away from them, that's their culture, they don't want to dilute their blood, many people keep saying that, 'I don't want to be with a white chick, cause I'm going to have coloured children and then what culture are they from, what am I going to say when they look at me and say my dad's black and my mom's white, which culture am I from'. They always find a sense of belonging amongst themselves.

In the quotes above, student R highlights the powerful us/them discursive structure which underpins the discourse of race as culture. The 'other' is constructed as profoundly different from the 'self' and potentially threatening to the 'self'.

In understanding the policing effect of the culture discourse, its emotional content is as powerful as its signification. As Clarke has demonstrated through drawing on psychoanalytic theories, it is in these emotions of anxiety that we are moved to split the world into black and white, good and bad (Clarke, 2003). Furthermore, we draw on emotions of anxiety to further legitimate these constructions of the world. As Durrheim and Dixon (2005: 70) argue, we must appreciate how:

Constructions of threat enable the (re) production of racialized categories and meanings.... Threat in other words is not merely a correlate or predictor of racism: it is one of its most fundamental accomplishments.

In the loop of emotion and category, threat is at once the emotion experienced as well as the content which reproduces the conditions under which the emotion is re-experienced and fed back into the content. Jansen (2008: 73) draws our attention to the importance of engaging with the emotions which underpin and fuel racist attitudes. Reflecting on his experiences with university students, he argues that 'even the most egotistical expression of racism conceals a vulnerability that can and should be laid bare'. In recognizing the pain, anxiety and fear that underpins racism, Jansen further argues that it is in uncertain times that we revert to perceiving the world through a racial lens and that confronting racism through accusation rather than compassion will only serve to heighten these underlying feelings of anxiety and fear. If we are to challenge racial boundaries this needs to be a process that deals with both the ideological and emotional work that goes into reproducing these boundaries.

### *3.3. The Family as Keeper of Culture*

The final force to bring into this analysis of the discourse of cultural authenticity is the social structures which help to generate and support it. One of the reasons why this cultural discourse is so powerful and popular is that it is supported by important social forces. We have already seen the role that friends play in policing racial boundaries with the culture discourse. Even more significant is the family as the keeper of culture. In talking about interracial relationships, many respondents refer to their family as the keeper of culture to which they would have to answer if they were to transgress this cultural taboo. The family in these interviews acts as the symbol from which you draw your culture and from which to judge another's culture as the same as, or different from, yours. When explaining why they would not engage

in interracial relations, respondents again drew on the culture argument, which was strengthened through the perceived judgement that would come from the family:

P (white female, UJ): Just the way I was brought up, my household, my family, everybody's married to the same culture, and I don't think that I could... but I wouldn't be able to put my family through something like that, like I'm in love with a black guy, I'm going to have his children and it's just wrong.

H (coloured male, UCT): My parents keep joking about this, saying that if I had to go out with a white girl, Sundays for us is like *kooningskos* (kings food), like lunch man, big lunch, and say if I marry a white girl one day, they joke about it and say I will be eating sandwiches for lunch. So instead of having that big lunch, it's going to be sandwiches saying 'oh darling don't worry we going to have sandwiches you need to lose weight'.

S (black female, UJ): I think with most interracial relationships can't really work because of the family and the support system...when it comes to marriage I will look for a black guy cause there's certain things as a black guy traditionally he will have to do, he will have to maybe hold the goat's tail, for example.

These quotes indicate that the discourse of cultural homogeneity and difference does not just exist in people's heads and in their talk, but is nourished, re-enforced and re-produced through the societal structure of the family.

The discourse of culture and kind operates in a number of different forms. As an ideology of separation it is deeply internalized by individuals. The discourse does not necessarily need to be spoken to be experienced, and to feed into the way in which the self is governed in relation to the other. In a quote which summarizes the tacit workings of this discourse, student V argues that forms of racial thinking are never challenged because people are too 'scared' to challenge the us/them binary for fear of being ostracized from your imagined 'kind':

V (white female, UJ): Maybe, I think, culture, like sometimes people won't like other cultures because of their practices and maybe stereotypes. People think like, I don't know, like all black people are loud or that all white people are snobs, which isn't true. Like maybe black people don't want to associate themselves with snobs, white people don't want to associate themselves with loud people. And everyone's too scared to push themselves into another culture and race groups and just be friends... I think as well the whole outside world perception, like 'oh my word she's so wrong, she's abandoning her race' and some people aren't strong enough to take it, and they think okay, I'll do it, to conform I will stick with my white friends I will do it.

Student V is an interesting case as she is the only white student I interviewed whose social group is predominantly black. Like student R quoted above, she has, to some

degree, pushed past the stereotypes and race thinking she talks about. As a result, she has often been accused of betraying her race and has been ostracized by her white friends. Perhaps it is this experience that allows her this fleshed-out understanding of the way in which race thinking joins forces with emotions of ‘fear’ and anxiety and social pressure to ‘conform... stick with white friends’.

#### 4. Ambiguous Racial Identities: The ‘Model C’ Positionality

Chito Childs (2005) argues that rather than being a sign of the breaking down of racial borders, black-white couples instead allow us to see how racial borders exist. A similar statement could be made about the individuals interviewed in this study who occupy an ambiguous, or in-between racial position. In particular, this section looks at the politics of boundary crossing and boundary maintenance for what is constructed as the ‘Model C’ positionality. This post-apartheid identity position represents an example of super-diversity in contemporary South Africa. Such new forms of intra-racial diversity have come about through re-constituting the relationship between race and class. One might expect that racial boundaries would be experienced as less salient for this middle group, as culturally and economically they share a lot with white South Africans. However, as with the black-white relationship in Chito Child’s analysis, the middle position of the Model C is precisely the position which is most strongly policed through the cultural discourse discussed in the previous section.

While Model C schools have been conceptualized as part of a class project attempting to align middle class interest across racial boundaries, the assimilationist nature of this process has been criticized for re-enforcing structures of racial privilege. Black students are expected to accept white cultural forms as dominant. As such, black elite are assimilated into former white schools as culturally weaker groups who might be in a similar class position, but remain in a position of cultural inferiority to white students. Soudien (2007) calls this process the asymmetries of knowing as white people are positioned as the bearers of superior knowledge about the world. By contrast, the black middle-class students and parents need to learn these ways of knowing from whites. The quote below describes the process of growing up model C in South Africa and was expressed by student Q in a more general discussion with her friends who also identify as Model C:

Q (black female, UJ): So you know when you are growing up as a younger teenager like 13, 14, I went through those stages, you know, when the black girls start flicking their hair like the white girls, you start wearing all the hairclips in the hair, you start doing all these things, you start acting like them, you even start changing your voice and everything, you start denying your, I don't know, being black.

The assimilation of Model C students has created new forms of intra-racial diversity and new forms of hostility. In the section below, the analysis of the discourse of cultural authenticity is further unpacked through demonstrating how it comes to be asserted as an argument for racial homogeneity.

#### *4.1 Policing Model C through Cultural Authenticity*

In the present post-colonial world, the notion of authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a “useful fiction” or a revealing distortion. In retrospect, it appears that only a concerted disciplinary effort could maintain the tenuous fiction of a self-contained cultural whole. Rapidly increasing global interdependence has made it more and more clear that neither ‘we’ nor ‘they’ are as neatly bounded and homogenous as once seemed to be the case.

(Rosaldo, 1989: 217)

This section contributes to an understanding of what Rosaldo above calls the ‘concerted disciplinary effort’ to maintain the fiction of the neatly bounded and homogenous cultural/racial group. Despite the fictitious nature of these boundaries evidenced in the very existence of forms of intra- and cross-racial diversity, the ‘model C’ identity is constructed as if it were an unnatural apparition which needs to be policed back into the more desirable, natural form of homogenous racial boundaries.

One of the ways in which Model C's experience the policing of their in-between status is through being called names such as ‘coconut’ or ‘Oreo’ (brown biscuit with a white center):

T (black female, UJ): If you spoke a word of English you were called a coconut and later on it moved onto an Oreo and that is another form of segregation because black people now are separating themselves, because you speak English, I don't speak English.

The Coconut and Oreo metaphors are used to mock Model C's as they imply that these individuals are black on the outside but white on the inside. While these metaphors do serve to create divisions between black South Africans, they also serve to police black identity, and especially the model C identity. Instead of creating a sepa-



rate group, the way these metaphors are used serves to make model C students feel like they are abandoning their race and should be ‘rehabilitated’ back to an authentic black identity. Student S explains the workings of this discourse below:

S (black female, UJ): People feel the need that you are a black child, you must speak the black language, and be the black, but what is the black? You know, how am I supposed to be, and what does the society accept as black? Must I be ignorant, speak only venac [African dialect]? Ever since I was small, when I used to go to primary school my mom spoke English... There will always be the black click which feels the need to bring the blackness home, like we have to rehabilitate this person because now she thinks she is white.

Student S shows the limiting nature of an essentialist construction of blackness, where you are required to be black in a very particular way, otherwise you are mocked for being racially inauthentic. Through accusing Model C blacks of being too white, this discourse reproduces the cultural essentialist discourse which constructs race as a fixed, pre-given essential identity (Erasmus, 2005; Gilroy, 1990).

These racial in-betweeners, therefore, become the site at which the discourse of cultural authenticity is most strongly asserted, as they represent the strongest potential threat to the legitimacy of this desired racial purity. Mama (1995) provides a psychoanalytic explanation of the fierce policing of people who are racially ambiguous. She argues that while race groups want to maintain an ideal of racial purity, this denies a reality of a long history of collusion and connection across races. It is because people do not feel secure in their own imagined sense of racial ‘authenticity’ and separation that they label others as inauthentic race traitors. Mama argues that discourses are not always rational and often do not reflect reality. In South Africa, this amounts to the continued fierce policing of racial boundaries despite other forms of connection and class collusion that have taken place.

Many of the model C respondents indicate that despite their in-between status, or because of it, racial boundaries come to structure their every interaction. The continual reminder to be true to one’s cultural blackness has been internalized by ‘model C’s’ who assert that when choosing a partner they will choose a black partner, precisely to comply with these external expectations of racial authenticity. For example, in a previous section, student S asserted that she would not marry a white man, as her husband would need to be able to perform certain cultural tasks such as ‘holding the goat’s tail’. Similarly, student R discusses why he would not marry interracially despite growing up in a white suburb, going to a white school and having an ‘English heart’:



R (black male, UJ): I don't know, maybe it's that I'm trying to compensate because I grew up in a very white area, I'm trying to compensate for, at least, like my children should grow up, somebody in the house should be able to understand and speak a black language and at least pass down the tradition at least, that's at the back of my mind.

Student R seems to understand blackness as a cultural artifact that he needs to find ways to possess, hold onto, and pass down. Despite the new forms of cross-race connection forged through the middle class project of the Model C environment, these students have internalized the discourse of racial/cultural authenticity. The coconut discourse comes to weigh heavily on the psyches of these black South Africans and to instill in them a desire to regulate and police their black identity in terms of these discourses.

#### *4.2. Policing From Above: The Politics of Accommodation*

The constant reminder of the racial place of a model C student is policed both from below the hierarchy of power and from above. We have already seen how both black and white students draw on a discourse of cultural authenticity to police relationships across race, and especially interracial relationships. In addition, these boundaries are policed within relations of power through the politics of accommodation. Erasmus and de Wet (2003) show how in these asymmetrical power relations between black and white students, black students are the ones who have to 'do the race work'. While racial boundaries are policed by both black and white South Africans, what is at stake in this process of policing is different for different race groups. The boundaries exist in and are governed by a system that continues to be organized in terms of white power and privilege. Even within intimate interracial relationships, the hierarchical racial separation remains in tact. The quote below highlights the politics of accommodation, what Erasmus and de Wet call the 'race work' of interracial relations and the way in which this politics serves to reproduce both the boundary and the hierarchy of race relations.

O (Coloured/Indian female, UCT): Most people don't recognize the power relations when you're dating someone from another race, particularly when you're a person of colour dating a white person, I didn't even notice it when I was in that relationship with him, he always had the power and I gave him that power because I accommodated his questions, accommodated his bullshit, I accommodated his comments that exoticized me. I allowed it, I constantly felt like I was giving away parts of myself, and allowing him to gain more territory on me, it was so territorial! You know, and it was completely race, and I could only understand it in retrospect.

This quote demonstrates the way in which both sides of the racial hierarchy are complicit in and unaware of the constant reproduction of racial boundaries and hierarchies within interracial friendships. Furthermore, it highlights a common intersection between racial and gender domination in intimate interracial relationships between white men and women of colour. Students are often unaware of the ways in which relations of racial domination feed into their own close friendships. White students are especially unaware of the way in which these politics of accommodation participate in continued relations of race privilege.

O: white people don't know what they are, they don't see what they are, white culture for them is so normal, they don't know what it is, and for us it's completely different.

Salisbury and Foster (2004) argue that white English-speaking South Africans (WESSAs) like to think of themselves as cultureless. This taken for granted normalcy of white culture is part of the way in which white privilege operates to position white ways of being as the norm to which everyone else should aspire. Within these politics which hold up white ways of being as dominant and 'normal', it is very rare for a white student to swim against the cultural grain in his/her friendships with black students. One of the white female respondents (student V) did swim against this grain and was often accused of 'abandoning her race' by her white friends. One of her black friends (student S) expresses the uniqueness of student V's tendency to swim in the opposite direction of the politics of accommodation:

S (black female, UJ): When we (S and V) were at high school together she was in the all black girl group, everyone always thought what's wrong with this girl, it's always the opposite, we black people try a lot, and here she is trying to fit into this culturally strict black group.

Within these race relations, black students feel their racial identity policed from below and from above. From above, black students tell stories of the ways in which they are often reminded of their racial place by white students and friends. An example of the way in which the racial hierarchy is policed is provided by student Q. This example further serves to demonstrate that despite changes in the way race and class are articulated for model C students, these changes do not necessarily impact on the way in which racial boundaries and hierarchies are constructed.

Q (black female, UJ): My dad's best friend is white and I was best friends with his daughter, we went through school together... And then one day, I was at her place and then they had cousins come over, and immediately now they start treating me like the help. I came

there and suddenly they start treating me like the help in front of these people, then these people leave and suddenly I'm their friend again... and what's more interesting is that my father is her father's boss, you know what I'm saying, and I've never really put her down for that, for me I don't care about that, but now suddenly I'm being treated as the help in front of other white people.

Even when the class relations are reversed, as is the case in the quote above, racial hierarchies continue to structure the power relations within interracial relationships. In addition to the policing of boundaries through the cultural essentialist discourse, these black 'model C' students are further reminded of their racial place through the everyday playing out of the politics of accommodation and through the active reminders from white students.

## 5. Conclusion: Confronting the Boundary

This conclusion reflects on what these findings offer in terms of the potential for reducing the continued salience of racial boundaries in South Africa. One of the key findings of this research is that despite new forms of inter-racial diversity and cross-race connection, old apartheid racial boundaries continue to be powerfully policed through a discourse of cultural authenticity. How then might we begin to deal with continued racial segregation in South Africa? On the one hand, the powerful emotions surrounding race relations have to be brought to the fore and worked through. The emotions of interracial anxiety, threat and distrust exist alongside an emotional desire to present a non-racial image. Without some acceptance of the reality of the continued emotional policing of racial boundaries, how can we hope to deal with these emotions? This is the first insight of these findings, that a discourse of non-racialism denies South Africans the possibility of facing and working through a continued reality of strongly policed and anxiety producing racial boundaries. As Erasmus explains:

Although one cannot afford to be complicit, if not with overt racism but with race thinking, by virtue of one's history as a member of this society one is likely to find oneself complicit with racism and/or race thinking. We do not have to view such complicity as sinful. Nor do we have to condone it. But we do need to acknowledge complicity with racism and race thinking. This implies that we need to engage critically with the continued presence of patterns of race thinking both in our own structure of thought and feeling, and

in the public sphere. It implies being open to criticism and abandoning political correctness. It requires reflective political practice.

(Erasmus, 2005: 29)

A second and related insight concerns the content of the discourse of boundary policing, what Erasmus refers to as the patterns of race thinking which influence our thoughts and our feelings. Students' essentialist constructions of race in terms of culture need to be critically engaged. The findings of this study demonstrate the way in which South Africans (and especially black South Africans) are made to feel like prisoners of their racial identity through these forms of race thinking. If sincere connections are to be forged across race, then such boundaries need to be broken down and such categories deconstructed. As McKinney (2007) asserts, it is only through breaking down and replacing our apartheid ways of thinking that white and black South Africans can be freed from the meanings and consequences of apartheid constructions of race. One of the interviewees of colour gave an example of a relationship that was interracial but not governed by race thinking:

Student O (Coloured/Indian female student, UCT): The level of comfort is such that I can talk to you about being in my body with this skin tone without thinking that I have to censor what I'm saying because I'm either going to offend you or make you feel good, you know what I mean so when you're that comfortable with a white person you don't even see their race that much anymore, it's rare, but it happens.

For this respondent it is precisely the ability to talk about race honestly that allows us to begin to open up different ways of being with and seeing race.

Another crucial insight of this research is that the ways in which we challenge race thinking and forge new meanings and connections cannot be unidirectional, with black South Africans continually feeling like visitors to a white world. This brings us to the third and final point about power. In order to challenge the policing of racial boundaries, we need to challenge the hierarchies which depend on these boundaries. Drawing from the insights of the Model C experience, the forms of boundary policing from below are partly a reaction to the way in which this group, by necessity, buys into white forms of knowing which re-assert the racial hierarchy. The South African middle classes may be increasingly inter-racial in their constitution, but the ability to enter this class continues to be predicated on the ability to perform white ways of being and speaking. The black working class, therefore, are increasingly excluded in terms of their economic and cultural position in South Africa. It is as a result of this exclusion that discourses of racial authenticity and betrayal are asserted and expe-

rienced in such a powerful manner. If we want to challenge race thinking and race stereotypes, the continued realities of white cultural and symbolic privilege need to be dismantled. Currently, many white South African students remain oblivious to the fact that they even have culture. With this obliviousness it becomes impossible to challenge the dominance of white culture and to interracially meet one another on some kind of equal footing from which to engage and challenge continued race thinking.

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