Introduction

It is 2016, the year in which the student couples shared their stories. Legal apartheid was terminated 22 years ago. The Immorality Act forbidding ‘illicit carnal intercourse’ between black and white was abolished in 1985 with the same legislative hand that finally lifted the ban on Mixed Marriages. And since the 1990s the University of the Free State had changed from an all-white campus for almost a century to a majority black campus. There are no longer any legal barriers to interracial love or marriage and no physical barriers to racial integration in the classrooms and residences of former white universities.

But you would not know this from the lived experiences of these 20 young South Africans as expressed in their stories of friendship and love revealed in this book. Though they were born and raised after the end of apartheid lived, the close friends and lovers lived their lives in the shadow of harassment and hatred. For crossing that powerful line separating black and white citizens in another century, these young university students would come to discover the full meaning of William Faulkner’s epithet that ‘the past is not dead; it is not even past.’ So what did we learn from these 20 student couples about race, romance and reprisal among friends and lovers in the democratic period?

There will be blood

The first thing these post-apartheid couples discovered was that when you cross the line separating black and white in South Africa, there will be blood. In other words, there is a price to pay among friends, family, peers and even from complete strangers. We know that while intra-racial relationships proceed relatively smoothly, inter-racial relationships, whether as friends or lovers, bring the wrath of society on the heads of courageous couples.¹ That, in broad
sweep, is what can be said about black and white friendship and romance in South Africa since 1994. What the interviews reveal, however, is an intriguing complexity that lies beneath the negative and even hostile responses to inter-racial fellowship. It is, nonetheless, a complexity that holds out hope for a more humane society when it comes to human love and embrace across racial lines.

*The home you come from, matters*

We learn from these student couples that your home life matters. Where one or both parents allow for inter-racial relationships, these couples enter into society without the burden of racial distinction or racial prejudice in their choices of friends and lovers. Many of the students in this study experienced ‘dual parental approval’ even if one parent (or stand-in grandparent) was clearer and more emphatic in relaying messages of approval for the interracial partnership.²

In these generally supportive homes children of other races came and slept over at the family residence; and the son or daughter was allowed to sleep over in the homes of other-race school friends. By the time the young child reached adolescence, the transition to ‘first love’ across the colour line was relatively easy since patterns of cross-racial familiarity and even ‘best friends’ were established early and rendered ‘normal’ in the household concerned. Over and over again the couples refer to a parent who ‘did not care’ about concerns of whom to love—whether the friend or favourite companion of their child was white or black. But these familial responses were not always straightforward.

As indicated, both parents were not always equally supportive of inter-racial pairings but at least one of those parents sent a clear signal that there was no problem. That was enough encouragement for the young white or black South African and, in all of these cases, the student took their cue from the positive parent as approval for friendships without concern for skin. In several cases the problem was the father who responded in one of three ways.

First, as an outright racist but—as in other studies—the student child is careful not to put that tag on a parent.³ The interview response suggests that the father is racist, but then immediately softens as one would expect a child to say about a flesh-and-blood relative, the person who helped bring him or her into the world. This racism is not necessarily directed towards the black partner but comes across as a general position that is held, an anti-black stance. In other words,
the father’s position is a background sentiment not influencing this relationship. There is no direct confrontation with the black friend or lover but the parent’s position is known to the child. ‘He is just like that’ and the student child made light of the fact, did not dwell on it, and certainly did not lambaste the father for his racist position. But such parents are a minority in this sample of students.

Second, as a disapproving parent who might even conceal the prejudice well. This is the father who remains a background figure in the relationship narrative that emerges from these interviews. The father might not even be present in the life of the child because of death or separation from the mother, but the student anticipates that there might be a negative racial attitude towards the relationship. While fathers dangle in the background in the stories, the mother clearly holds forth in these situations and it is her position that counts when it comes to relationship approval.

Third, there is the cautious father whose package of support for the relationship comes with all kinds of warnings. This concept of racial guardedness best explains Andy’s father. He had experienced white racism on the same campus where his student child had now found white love, and his first guidance—not discouragement—is a plea to be careful: ‘I have seen these people at their worst.’ This father’s cautious reaction is not prejudice but protection, an instinctive parental need to ensure no harm is done to his daughter. The father projects onto his daughter’s choices his own experience of campus life which was decidedly not positive and comes from a time when the university was in the throes of upheaval as blacks, then a small minority, started to infiltrate the long-established white campus in middle South Africa.

There might even be some admiration for the child breaking the generational chain of bitter knowledge but that does not prevent the rather natural concern of a black parent about being careful and not getting hurt. So when Brandon brings home his white girlfriend, ‘they [the parents] were not mad about it; they were just scared…they were just worried.’ And the source of that concern was the reaction of Ashleigh’s parents and ‘what other people think.’ Again, this guardedness is not discouragement of interracial romance but concern about how this decision might impact on not only their own child but his partner—‘are they not angry at her?’

Fathers feature prominently as the racial guardians of their children. But how does one explain Asha’s father? It would be facile to dismiss the father as racist and yet his intense guardedness,
to the point of prohibiting any relationship with non-Indian men, is the fiercest father reaction among the couples studied. None of this complexity can be understood outside of traditional Indian norms where patriarchy and the caste system collude to create a potentially terrifying situation for young women who marry outside of established norms. It is not even so much that the boyfriend is white; it is that he is not Kashmiri. Nor is it a concern about young adult love—‘they know about the urges and stuff’—it is that Asha is a girl (sic).

The same restrictions did not apply to her older brother. As a young woman, or a girl in the estimation of her father, Asha might fall pregnant, her studies might suffer and she would bring shame on the family if she loved outside the norms of the old Indian society that included arranged marriages. Her ‘very Indian’ father might have left India but he still lived his life by the rules of the old country in which the honour of the girl was understood in traditional terms.

Asha is very much aware of the retaliation which might follow from the revelation that she had a boyfriend, that he was not Kashmiri, let alone Indian, and that she was involved in love matters not only before she was married but while she was studying. The risks were real and so it is not at all surprising that while Asha shares ‘everything’ with her parents, this close and treasured relationship is not mentionable. This is an extreme form, perhaps, of what the research calls ‘disclosure negotiations’ where interracial couples actively choose what relationship information to share, to gain support, or to avoid sharing, to prevent reprisal.4 Asha’s firm decision not to disclose the relationship raises the question: would she yield completely to a new love that had become serious or give in to the social expectations of a demanding culture represented in the family patriarch?

Asha’s family history and heritage raise another question on the side—did the fact that the family recently came from India and lives in Lesotho mean that their attitudes towards interracial or more accurately cross-cultural intimacies were not leavened by the experience of Indian South Africans? In other words, was there an even harsher and less forgiving cultural enclosure within this Indian family for transgressive love, than would be the case in a relatively more tolerant South African Indian society?

Mothers were not always innocent in these stories even though they come across as the main parent open to and even encouraging of borderless love. Andy’s mother is concerned about cultural differences even though she does nothing to stand in her daughter’s way when it comes
to close friends and intimate loves (Andy was dating a black African man at the time of writing). This is sensitive terrain in South African society.

*Culture* often functions as the more respectable code word for race, a keyword that tells us more about a society than the term itself. Race is too crude a reference in everyday South African talk—notice how many students in the interviews continue the practice of referring to former white schools as Model C schools—but invoking ‘culture’ substitutes well for the same object, to put a damper on interracial closeness of any kind. ‘Our cultures are different,’ I would often hear white students say during discussions about racial integration on former white campuses. It is as if the word *culture* itself justifies separateness. There is no evidence that Andy’s mother is using culture in this way but her caution still functions as a warning if not a barrier—‘their cultures are different.’ And yet in Andy’s unusually close relationship with Clarise, their respective ‘cultures’ are anything but different.

We learn from these students that the words parents use convey important signals of their degrees of comfort with inter-racial relationships. What is striking in each of the interviews is that students in interracial relationships readily recall the thinking of their parents about the subject as expressed through specific phrases or words conveyed in their ‘growing up’ years. This concept of *signalling* appropriate behaviour through the use of words function as guideposts for children when it comes to relationships with other races. The words parents use travel over time and space as revealed in the stories of the student couples.

Signalling through words could not come more clearly than from Clarise’s parents: ‘You know what? If you were to date [a black person) we would not have a problem.’ Of course they should not be a problem, in a normal society; after all, dating anyone is the choice of the young person. But this is South Africa with its looming past hanging over race relations, and so what a parent says utters is consequential. The impact is immediate and lasting. Clarise’s close friends from school to university include black people of all shades. Not surprisingly, Clarise develops a keen moral understanding of what is right and what is wrong and, atypically, without any sense of racial group loyalty.

Clarise instantly condemns the white male student in a private residence created for white boys after the notorious Reitz residence on campus was shut down by the university authorities. The white boy, seeing Clarise visit his residence with a black woman friend, delivers a stinging racial rebuke: ‘Did you bring someone to wash the dishes?’ Her assessment is as sobering as it
is direct: ‘There is no humanity in him.’ That capacity for unaffiliated judgment of what apartheid society would regard as ‘your own people’ comes from belonging to a decent family whose messages of inclusion and respect are conveyed to Clarise with clarity and consistency over the course of her childhood in the otherwise conservative Southern Free State.

Signalling does not only happen through words. It resides in the actions of parents who lead their children to believe what are appropriate ways of relating to others. Nicholas was taught not to relate to people through colour but ‘to basically look at the person.’ How did this manifest itself in his upbringing? He learns to bond with the Nigerian neighbours and his parents allow the children into the home as their own. ‘Their mother is basically my second mother.’ And so what Nicholas experiences as a child are not lectures on race and race relationships but an openness that his parents make possible within their home for black friendships with neighbours on an equal footing—that is, not simply with the children of the domestic worker, for example.

Saskia with her ‘very Dutch dad’ has similar experiences of signalling through progressive actions. She speaks proudly of her parents adopting a Coloured boy ‘without specifications’ and recalls a family saying, ‘you are a person and that is what matters.’ The action of taking in the young boy as a child of the family without any reference to colour has a lasting impact on Saskia in this open and inclusive family. Saskia is conscious of her heritage not only as Dutch but as liberal in South Africa, and she finds confidence in her family’s openness and influence on her life. Her Coloured boyfriend, she says, bears a striking resemblance to her adopted brother. For Saskia, therefore, the transition into non-white relationships is seamless, a love founded on the powerful example of her parents.

The parents of the student couples in this study do not necessarily encourage their children to pursue interracial relationships. There is in fact no evidence for coaxing children towards open relationships. Sometimes the signalling comes in the form of positive acquiescence or tacit approval. As Russel recalls of his family: ‘My parents are not bothered by things like that,’ an almost shrugging of the shoulders as if to say, ‘it’s no big deal, we don’t care about such things.’ This is a common South African expression when it comes to racial border-crossing in general: ‘it’s fine with me’ or ‘I’m okay with that.’ Ingrid’s mother, for example, casts this approval in the form of personal well-being: ‘If you are happy, that is fine. That is your thing; that is you.’
The ‘we-would-not-object’ position conveys a message that as far as the family is concerned, there would be no difficulties at the first hurdle of parental consent.

Consistent with research elsewhere, signalling on the part of black parents (compared to whites) is more positive, if somewhat guarded, when it comes to interracial intimacies. In none of the cases was there any early signs of negative messaging when it came to relations with white people. This makes sense of course; historically, the obsession of colonial and apartheid governments was with protecting the so-called purity of the white race. Racial insulation was not an obsession of black people. Here too there is a sense of ‘okayness’ with interracial love, as if it did not matter. As Brandon recalls of his parents, ‘They did not really care about it … They were fine with it and never really spoke about it.’ Similarly George recounts from his Coloured/African parents the sentiment ‘okay, we’re not used to it but okay, wow.’ Even Paul, whose mother asks a lot of questions about girlfriends, does not balk at the suspicion that his partner might be white. Paul regards his mother as ‘very liberal’ and ‘without prejudice against anyone.’ When his mother asks ‘is she white?’ Paul senses that she is unfazed by the revelation and so the question immediately changes to ‘is she Christian and stuff like that.’ What Paul as a growing child picks up from the relationship with his mother are signs of openness and acceptance of others even if she remains strict and concerned about her son.

In this respect there are two tendencies among the black parents—those who speak openly about the other race (Andy’s mother) and ‘those people’ (Karis), and those who simply do not speak about ‘it’ (Ashleigh, Paul, Rodley). But whether through open conversation or muted silence, race is always there hanging over the domestic atmosphere especially so when interracial love becomes possible or real in the lives of the black student partner. In other words, these families find ways of talking about race even when they do not. Silence does not mean non-talk, it means subdued talk about the elephant in the room, and the children in these interviews could sense the subject.

But the immediate biological connection—the two parents—are not the only members of the family from whom the student child collects signals about white people, race relations and forbidden intimacies. Those cues come perhaps more openly from the extended family. Rodley remembers a flash of racial anger from his maternal grandfather—‘these white people again, they just think they can do what they want’—in response to a travelling incident on the road. Sometimes the extended family hovers as a warning sign over a relationship whose anticipated response is enough of a deterrent for moving outside a given identity; so for Asha ‘It’s not even
what my parents think; it is what my aunts and uncles think.’ Here reputation is tied to a broader network of approvals—and disapprovals—of romance and marriage outside of a vigorously defended cultural identity. There are with grandparents the range of responses from complete acceptance of interracial relations (Saskia) to non-acceptance (Asha) which gradually changes towards acceptance of such relationships (Corlea, Andy). In short, the extended family also has an impact on the student couples and their relationships. But for the exceptions mentioned, the signalling from the broader family is generally warm and supportive of interracial relationships among the children of relatives.

Viewed as concentric circles, the signalling then moves outwards from the biological parents to the extended family and then towards the friends of the family and how they accept or reject the choices of the children of their mates. Here Nicholas uses strong words to describe the ‘white man approach’ of his mother’s friends, the sense of superiority over black people among ‘this Aryan race.’ He says this without any hint of spite during the interview, offering a simple yet powerful description of the family friends hovering over the relationship. These are racist friends who would poke fun of black people’s accents and their broken English unconscious of their own limitations of language competence in a multilingual country.

The hovering friends could also be expected to be among the first to comment on the partners of their friends’ children. Nicholas’ mother nevertheless accepts Karis into the family even as she continues life among this circle of friends. These are choices parents make that do not always follow the neat-and-tidy logic that expects human beings to separate out the tolerant from the intolerant in family or friendship circles. This observation is true in the everyday lives of so many South African families—that those closest to these interracial couples often live with those contradictions of racial acceptance and racial bitterness within their circles of affiliation.

Of course parental influences form very powerful influences in the life choices of these couples. But there are other ways in which these young people are prepared for more open relationships and that has to do with the schools they attended.

The school you attended, matters
Children who attended white or overwhelmingly white schools will struggle much more with racial integration in universities and in society than those whose schools were more integrated. And those from segregated schools will find it much more difficult to enter interracial love and friendships than those for who had such experiences before they started university.⁹ We now know from emerging research that interracial couple relationships are more likely to start in integrated high schools than on university campuses.¹⁰

Beyond the broad stroke findings from such survey research, what these micro-interactions among students and student couples reveal are how exactly these school-level influences come to impact on young lives open to living and learning across racial lines.

Virtually every student in the couple pair attended an integrated school either in primary school or high school or both. Several students started off in primary schools designated for their group (Lauren, Brosnan) but ended up in an integrated high school. The only two white Afrikaans speaking students (Melani and Nico) among the student couples were also the ones who attended white-dominant schools for both their primary and secondary education. It soon becomes clear that which high school you attended makes a major difference in the degree of openness of each student to interracial friendship and romance.

What enables Melani and Nico to break with the dominant expectation of their group despite their experiences of white-dominant schools? That is, from the expectations of white Afrikaans speaking youth among whom the tendency is strongest to remain loyal to language, culture and ethnic group? One reason might be that their families were not doctrinaire on matters of race and interracial friendships. As Nico tells it, ‘the Oosthuizen family, we never had a problem with racial issues.’ It perhaps explains why his parents allowed him to visit black friends at their homes while he himself made the choice to join interracial groups from among the few black students in his predominantly white school.

Similarly, Melani is blessed with a mother who teaches her about race and race relations with folksy but positive messages about difference. When Melani the young child pushes for an explanation as to why ‘they are brown and she is not,’ the mother replies that ‘their cookies were just left in the oven a little longer. Jesus just forgot them in the oven a little longer.’ Melani’s black friends sleep at her home and she is allowed to sleep over at their homes. As unremarkable as this might sound in 2017, such events must have been rare for a white
Afrikaans family 10 or 20 years ago in isolated Welkom in the northern Free State; then, and even now. ‘Why am I different?’ asks Melani the university student. ‘Definitely my mother.’

Those critical foundations of learning the acceptance and embrace of racial difference within the family builds a value system within Nico and Melani that enable them to make friendship choices without regard to race. But it also empowers them to discern racism in how their white Afrikaans schools teach them racial distinction. ‘At school I could pick up about black people, you know—dangerous, stay away, do not, you do not fit in there, you do not belong there’ (added emphasis). Such ‘emotion narratives’ offer powerful insights into the operations of learning inside a traditional white Afrikaans school in South Africa to this day. None of these racially explosive learnings appear in the formal curriculum which, on paper, is standardised for all schools after apartheid. Nor would such hateful knowledge appear in examinable form. And yet these daily injections of racial prejudice functions as a parallel curriculum whose effects show up in society and in the undergraduate years of university.

By the time Corlea enters the all-white Hoërskool Pionier (Pioneer High School) in Vryheid (northern KwaZulu-Natal) her capacity for sniffing out racism and prejudice has been ingrained through positive changes in her grandparent’s racial views and the experience of a very integrated primary school. She is struck by the small number of black children and the limited language options available in her new high school. Even the school clothes, she noticed, were the colours of the old South African flag—orange, white and blue. “I was always that kid that said ‘but I cannot understand this. Why? Why is it so Afrikaans and why is it so white?’”

In the same way Nico has been fortified against what he senses in high school—the distinctive patterns of racial groups and the tensions in the air. He witnessed the gradual acceptance of friendships but how things quickly grew tense with the threat of relationships which became more than playgroups. He hears things about people and about the country, but his own family upbringing enables Nico to take a different route fully aware of the consequences: ‘You start to form your own mind-set about things, and then it becomes dangerous.’

What becomes especially dangerous is not so much the interracial friendship but the mere possibility of interracial sex. This is what the close friendship of George, the black gay man, and Melani, the white straight woman allows us to see. On a trip to Kloppers, a hardware store on the Bloemfontein Waterfront, Melani is confronted by white people. They first waited for
George to move away during the couple’s walk and then the whites called Melani closer: ‘Listen here, are you two dating or something?’ This is the mortal fear, not so much caring friendship as much as carnal intercourse—to borrow language from another era. Sex carries the notion of intimate physical contact and, of course, the possibility of babies from a mixed liaison which, as Saskia is reminded in a similar encounter, is a matter of shame.

An integrated high school therefore plays a critical role in creating a learning commons in which black and white youth begin to engage each other as equals as far as academic pursuits are concerned. It is in an integrated, former white high school that Lauren can thrive by immersing herself in the full range of social, cultural and academic opportunities on offer. In such a context, the talented Lauren finds that she can now express herself freely and make friends across lines of race and culture. High school is also a place where students can grapple with the problems of race and racism whether it is Paul’s physical confrontation with a racist student at Grey College (the sparring partners become good friends later on) or Clarise’s surprise at the sniping of black female learners at Eunice Girls because of her black lover.13

The sniping of black women against interracial relationships is a complex subject of study. Why would these young learners be so angry with Clarise? Some see such reactions as reflecting internalized oppression where black people react with the same racial essentialism to which they had been subjected by white racism.14 Such racialized thinking and ethnocentric attitudes were precisely what was opposed by black resistance. On the other hand, is the reaction of these young women also informed by a sense of once again being devalued by white standards of beauty?15

Nonetheless, when opportunities for learning and living together are lost to white and black students through the experiences of integrated high schools, they bring an uninterrupted and bitter knowledge onto the university campus. Now things become very dangerous as muscular white and black eighteen year olds begin sharing classrooms and residences for the first time. This generation of students would demonstrate the dictum that ‘desegregation does not mean integration’ and that in fact ‘the more intimate the scenarios became, the lower the comfort levels among some groups of students.’16
Yet it is their peers, the student couples, who allow us to understand the racial dilemmas of those who passed through white families and schools without much disruption of their insular worlds. To understand this insularity, the student couples point first of all to geography.

*The region you grow up in, matters*

As in other parts of the world, region matters in terms of the intensity of reaction to interracial relationships—such as the American South with its history of slavery. \(^{17}\) It quickly becomes apparent in the interviews that Bloemfontein is such a place, part of a very conservative Free State compared to other regions of the country. The Kimberly students to a person would refer to the old Diamond City as much more tolerant than the City of Roses when it comes to race relations. All but one student was born in Bloemfontein and five went to school in the city. The others had origins in East London, Pietermaritzburg, St Lucia, Welkom, Paarl, Johannesburg and Lesotho. Kimberly students dominate and all of them felt more positive about race relations back home. Strikingly the differences in racial tolerance between Kimberly and Bloemfontein was raised in Sol Plaatje’s impressive monograph, *Native Life in South Africa*. A century later, Nicholas speaks of ‘the white foundation’ that structures education in the city’s schools and ‘that is considered the norm in Bloemfontein.’

Why? That is a subject for exploration by historians and sociologists. One can only speculate that the rural, agricultural and isolated character of the Free State helped shaped the perception, and for some reality, of an ultra-conservative region. It was one of the Boer Republics, so that distinction offers some explanation when compared to the more liberal Cape and Natal provinces of those days. The Free State was the only region with race laws denying overnight stay to Indian South Africans. It was unaffected by the liberalisation that came through the diamond mining industry of Kimberley as Europeans came through the city in search of opportunity. The almost complete reliance on farming as a major driver of revenue meant that in the rural Free State the majority white-owned farms remained beyond the reach of transformative forces that re-shaped the government bureaucracy or the service industries.

Children trapped inside these ecologies where relations of white masters and black labourers continued undisturbed, would emerge from these racial enclosures into urban university life
and find the transition disorienting. They lacked the competences to adjust to the Bloemfontein campus where equality of relations was now required as a matter of policy and practice.

What these students would also learn is to defend the borders against racial crossings and mete our reprisal to those who dared to break the line.

The workings of reprisal

In this conservative region of the country, from both strangers and friends, the student couples would experience the sting of reprisal whether on campus or in the surrounding community. But first, a brief note on the concept of reprisal itself.

There is little by way of scholarly work on the concept of reprisal except in the realm of international law and interstate warfare. The word is used more commonly in the context of the human resource policies of organisations such as those that prohibit reprisal actions against employees as in the case of whistleblowing. In such employment contexts ‘the fear of reprisal’ is often cited as an effective instrument that prevents employees from taking action against managers.

There is, however, a long association between race and reprisal in societies where racism shaped governmental laws and white supremacy ordered the lives of black and white citizens. In the USA, lynching and other acts of violence formed part of the ‘ingrained habits of reprisal and retribution’ against blacks accused of ‘stepping out of line’ or ‘not knowing their place’ in racially ordered societies. In South Africa, reprisal was drafted into a dense and complex web of legislation especially after the emergence of the apartheid state in 1948. Reprisal was brutal and swift for everything from political resistance to interracial sex.

What this means is that while reprisal as a concept might not have enjoyed much attention in social science scholarship, reprisal as a practice was an everyday experience in race-obsessed regimes such as the USA and South Africa. Also absent in the literature are studies of reprisal in non-violent situations; that is, in contexts where physical violence is no longer the primary instrument for retaliatory action such as in the ordering of race relations. We know little, therefore, about the working of pacific reprisals (reprisals in peace time) where coercive laws or violent retaliation no longer structure—or need to structure—the ways in which black and white citizens relate to each other in their everyday lives.
The reprisal of strangers

The constant attacks on these couples were merciless driving some of them to despair, even tears. There is no question that such hounding has profound impacts on the students as individuals and on the couple relationship. Reprisal, in its most basic conception, could be regarded as a form of retaliation, a set of target actions taken to express disapproval with socially unacceptable relationships. But as will be shown in the accounts that follow, reprisal is actually much more than an act of retaliation. From the interviews with these student couples, it was found that reprisal from strangers comes in the form of three broad actions—the stare, the snipe and the snub.

The stare

The most common form of reprisal is the stare. In local and international studies, interracial couples report on ‘being looked at.’ So too for the couples in this study. ‘You get a sense that people are looking at you, yes always’ says Paul; ‘you can feel when people are looking.’

The stare takes on two main forms. There is the stare of surprise where the shock of actually seeing an interracial couple provokes an instant reaction. In the case of Saskia and Brosnan, a woman drops her bag in reaction and what the couple sees is ‘a gasp face.’ But she does more; she drags her little girl away from the unpalatable scene and leaves the shop in a hurry. To understand this physical reaction two decades after apartheid one has to understand Bloemfontein, an insular city where hostile attitudes towards race have always been more firmly laid down and more violently engaged than in the larger coastal or industrial cities. This kind of stare, conveying shock and horror, is not uncommon among interracial friendships and is a more benign form in this category of white reaction.

Then there is the stare of disgust. There is much more than shock at play here. The disgusted party comes closer and wants to make sure that the couple receives the message loud and clear—that this kind of liaison is unacceptable. Melani and George share his regular ‘quarter chicken’ order and eat from the same bowl in the open area of the campus Bridge area where hundreds of students pass through the middle of these eating quarters every day. The passers-by do not simply stare ‘in absolute shock’ and then flee; in this instance they come closer to make their point. ‘They stand next to us and stop and look again and then move on. People we
do not know.' This stare is meant to communicate a more direct message, one of disgust, and it leaves a bitter memory in the mind of Melani. ‘It was very, very bad,’ she recalls; ‘it actually made me nauseous.’

Needless to say, it is difficult to distinguish the stare of shock from the stare of disgust but the student couples know the difference. While the tension with black friends around him never turned violent, Nico knew and ‘could see that sometimes you are being looked at like, ‘what are you doing with that guy?’’ The stare is therefore not neutral, a blank and disinterested occupation with what is being seen. It is, rather, a message and the student couples know exactly the content of what was being transmitted.

The snipe

The second form of reprisal is the snipe. While the stare conveys a non-verbal message of shock or disgust, the snipe verbalises the disapproval. The snipe is typically a short, sharp, and biting comment targeting the interracial couple. ‘Did you bring someone to do the dishes?’ is as much a message intended to castigate Clarise for daring to bring a black friend into Slaggat—the white, private breakaway-residence operating beyond the pale of the university’s influence—as it is aimed at humiliating the black woman.

The snipe does not invite response. Like the quick thrust of a knife into the body, the snipe is over before its impact settles on the target. In none of the cases do the targets or victims respond. They are in shock and there is no extended attack on their persons. By the time they recover the attacker has typically left. And even when the attacker stays, the targets remain remarkably calm and withdrawn following the verbal insult. ‘My tongue was bleeding’ says Saskia—desperate to respond—after a vicious verbal attack on her at the Waterfront shopping mall when a white woman called her ‘a disgrace to your generation’ for ‘not thinking of our children’ and ‘what world they are going to grow up in.’ The attacker assumed Lauren, along with her partner Nico, was white and her blood relatives black. ‘It was one of those incidents where we could have reacted … but we just took the kids’ hands and walked off.’

The snub

If the stare fixes disapproving eyes on the target and the snipe unleashes the tongue, the snub functions to create physical distance between the perpetrator and the victim. The snub could take many forms from some family or friends not showing up at an interracial wedding, to
something as simple as making the point about moving to another table at a restaurant or sifting out friends at the entrance to a club.

This is what happens to Nicholas when he takes his African and Coloured friends along for an evening of clubbing at an Afrikaans club in Bloemfontein. This of course is long after apartheid had ended but in this part of the country the practice of racial exclusion continues as if nothing happened after 1994. Here is a direct snub that would invite the white Nicholas in but keep his black friends out. Similarly, Lauren and Nico would experience the snub not by refusal of entrance to a restricted club but by the creation of social distance within a common eating space, like ‘when we are sitting in a restaurant someone would walk in and they would go, ‘oh no, I prefer a table over there.’ Needless to say the snub succeeded in its intention—to hurt and distress the young couple whose simple purpose was to enjoy a meal together in a public place.

The reprisal of friends

The reprisal that students face come not only from complete strangers in the community but also at the hands of those they regard as friends and fellow-workers. This is what happens to these interracial friends and lovers in South Africa through various forms of racial coaxing where the object is to persuade, cajole, manipulate and even harass the straying friend or lover back to their racial fold.

The most moving moment in the set of interviews is when Karis relates the story of a co-worker seemingly interested in her pregnancy. ‘What are you going to tick on the birth certificate?’ This kind of torment traumatises the pregnant Karis. What should have been the excited anticipation of a first child born out of a love relationship with Nicholas is disfigured by racism and reduces the young mother to tears. ‘I really, I do get upset.’ The co-worker is relentless: ‘Almal wil weet’ (everybody wants to know) betraying a broader circle of office gossip around the racial identity of the child; in other words, the act of inquiry is not an individual reaction but that of a broader community of interest. It is out there and hurts the expectant mother. This is the snipe of reprisal at work except it is not committed by a distant stranger but at the hands of a fellow worker.

Rodley would experience friendly fire from close quarters, and for him this is not uncommon. ‘What I do get a lot,’ he recalls, are comments to redirect or coax him back into his own group
and away from a friend on the other side of the racial divide: ‘You not black or you are not coloured? Why do you keep talking to them?’ Rodley’s mixed-race classification shifts according the speaker but however he is framed, the message is about sticking to your own kind and not venturing across the powerful invisible, the racialized border lines maintained in everyday South African society.

At his residence George too feels the pressure from fellow black students to return to the fold. It makes no sense to his hostel mates. He is gay so ‘what are you doing with Melani?’ (emphasis added). “Do you think you are white or a coconut? You spend too much time with white people?” Or from within-group comment: ‘He has fewer black friends than white friends? Why does he always speak Afrikaans (his home language)?’ The attacks are relentless, not from white people but from his black residence mates. The goal is to coax the drifting affection away from whites and towards blacks. Such a line of attack is meant to stir guilt about the interracial relationship and to remind George of loyalty to his own.

Corlea would also experience racial coaxing from her white friends at the even more white and conservative campuses of the North West (‘Potch’) and Stellenbosch (‘Maties’). It was a collective action: ‘They would always team up against me and ask me, from my first year, Why? You are so close, it is so weird.’ This ganging up from close quarters is meant to draw Corlea back into a more familiar, organised whiteness from high school and away from closeness with black love. The question ‘why’ is not a search for explanation; it is intended as accusation and to redirect Corlea’s relationships with the racial other which is declared to be odd, even strange.

These various forms of reprisal do not however always present itself as reprimand; it can come across as humour or even in the form of a compliment as Saskia and Brosnan discovered on an outing to celebrate his birthday. “We bought milkshakes to celebrate his birthday, I bought a chocolate milkshake and he bought a vanilla milkshake which was not planned at all. It was coincidental that the colour of the milkshakes were almost the colour of our skin, and everyone was like ‘ah, you were destined to date each other.’” The milkshake comments are not innocent; they serve to remind the interracial partners of what they hoped would be irrelevant to their love relationship—racial distinction. An ordinary birthday celebration is once again forced to account for race; the lovers simply cannot get away from reminders of their colour. ‘It was pointed out to us again,’ laments Saskia and so ‘We looked at our milkshakes and we looked
at each other’ (emphasis added). The friends had succeeded in doing what strangers were doing all along, to remind the lovers of their racial differences.

This is the purpose at the core of reprisal actions; it is not merely to lash out at the racial transgressor who breached the lines that still order racial society. Reprisal functions also to retain the natural order of things. What government laws no longer impose, social mores seek to enforce through censorious acts committed by family, strangers, friends, co-workers and fellow students.

But how does reprisal do its work when it is unsure of its targets? That is, when one or both members of the intimate couple or close friends are racially ambiguous?

**Reprisal through racial sorting**

As the student couples navigate their way through the new South Africa many of them represent a conundrum to a race-obsessed country. Who are they really? In terms of phenotype, some of the non-white students in the sample present themselves in post-apartheid society as racially ambiguous. Reprisal is therefore uncertain in the face of such ambiguity. Is the person black or white? Are they acceptable targets or not?

Lauren escapes most of the race invective from the white community on the presumption that she is white. Asha experiences similar relief because whites around her make the assumption that she too is part of the white in-group. Here the Afrikaans language serves as the discriminating device by which to confirm white identity, or otherwise. ‘Sometimes when I speak Afrikaans,’ says Lauren, ‘people would see me as white.’ While Lauren taught herself to speak Afrikaans, affirming white identity, Asha is *spoken to* in Afrikaans, assuming white identity. ‘The thing is, everyone thinks she is Afrikaans. Whenever we walk around people start speaking Afrikaans to her,’ says boyfriend Russel. If Asha were to declare that she could not speak Afrikaans, she would lose her white ID instantly.

The couple stories reveal what was always known in South Africa’s race-obsessive history, that race cannot be read-off the phenotype or physical appearance of a student. And so people around these student couples make active and on-the-spot assumptions about racial identity based on a quick survey of epidermal presentation, language usage, attitudes and the company kept. Even the couples themselves make assumptions about the racial identities of their partners.
based, for example, on affiliation. As Brandon recalls about Ashleigh, ‘I actually never knew she was white, to be honest. That first day I thought she was Coloured because her friends were Coloured.’ It would take a visit to Ashleigh’s family home to surprise Brandon that she was actually white.

And so race-conscious white students would pick out other students for promotion or demotion based on race, as the residence housemate in Lauren’s case: ‘I can see you are not white.’ This is a powerful statement that goes way beyond pointing the accusatory finger of exposure. It is about sorting people into their socially determined positions from where they could be treated accordingly. So much of South Africa’s history was preoccupied with the practice of racial sorting and this continues in the everyday tendency to categorise citizens into appropriate racial groups.30

What is striking about this sorting or picking out of race is that it is often done by proxy. When the student individual in the couple remains racially ambiguous, it is other family members including siblings that offer clarity of classification. And so when the couples move into open and public spaces, the corrective form of reprisal comes based on what the accuser sees—race by association. This happens to Saskia and Brandon when they move with her adopted Coloured brother into a public place where the accuser lashes out about their irresponsible behaviour in birthing mixed blood children. When the racially ambiguous Lauren ventures out in public with her darker skinned siblings, she clarifies her own racial identity for the sorters in a racially picky society.

With one exception, all of the students in the couple pairs are light-skinned in varying degrees. In terms of previous race classifications, only one student would be classified as African as in the case of the couple Paul and Ingrid. At first glance, therefore, many of the black students appear as racially ambiguous and therefore present problems for race picking in the broader community. Which raises an important observation about these self-selected couple samples—does the kind of coupling merely repeat historical trends? Namely, that White-Coloured friendships and intimacies still are more common than White-African liaisons, and that black African men in relationships with white women remain an exception over time. A more systematic survey study would need to test these assumptions of ‘differential assimilation’31 but based purely on casual observation, historical trends with respect to race, ethnicity and
romantic choices seem to continue in the present. For now it certainly appears to be the case that in South Africa and elsewhere, skin tone matters in interracial dating preferences.\textsuperscript{32}

The student couples would find that hierarchies of race still matter in South African society. For many in the Coloured community marrying white is a movement of upward status, regardless of whether the mate is a scoundrel or otherwise. Andy’s mother is not alone in cautioning about the traditions of African lovers in the event the daughter would choose a darker-skinned man. At the same time, Andy acknowledges that within her family ‘they would welcome a white guy more than they would a black guy.’ Black African, as under apartheid, is lowest on the social hierarchy of racial preference in the ordering of South African society. When Nicholas therefore tells his mother that he was dating ‘a girl of colour’ her instinctive response is ‘luckily she is not black.’ It could have been worse, in other words, if the lover was African. But as with Andy’s mother, the concern of Nicholas mother is ‘a big culture difference’ with Africans.

This ‘picking out of race’ is not, however, restricted to whites obsessed with securing status and privilege while preventing others, such as Lauren, from accessing such benefits as come from white classification. Being perceived as white is also a scourge among those at the receiving end of racism and inequality. Lauren therefore remembers that at her Coloured school ‘They used to call me a white rat.’ Here the goal is to demean and dismiss the light-skinned student as belonging elsewhere, a member of the oppressive class of white South Africans. Racial ambiguity extracts a double-edged cost in a racially divided society in that students like Lauren would be picked out as targets by both white and black race sorters, pushed from one group to another, and denied by both.

In short, what the practice of racial sorting demonstrates is that even though the laws regulating racial association has been lifted, the social practices that allocate racial place and privilege still operate with painful consequences for those who bear the brunt of an un-rehabilitated society. And what remains in operation in South Africa is a fine-tuned if imperfect ‘ad hoc-ery’ by which racial status is still assigned and re-assigned based on the sensory perception of ordinary citizens.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{What couples do in response to reprisal}
A striking observation across these interviews, and from the sparse literature on the subject in other countries, is the degree of restraint exercised by victims—‘inward responses without outward expressions.’ Saskia, recall, feels the urge to hit back at a racist snipe, but she does not. She collects the darker skinned siblings and they move on.

A common strategy is *shutting out* the bad experiences especially when it comes to staring. You ignore the fact that you are being gawked at, as Rodley recalls: ‘I do not pick up when people are watching now. I used to.’ This is a strategic response that declares the staring person invisible; if the stare was meant to discipline the transgressor of social norms for dating, nothing could be more dismissive than being ignored. ‘It is like water off a duck’s back,’ claims Rodley. Paul similarly shrugs off the felt sense of being looked at with meaning: ‘They are entitled to their opinion.’ And after being the subject of constant stares, George decides that ‘we are past it’ and they no longer paid attention to the fixation.

Another kind of response is *flipping*, where the target of racial abuse makes the perpetrator the subject of derision. By reversing the attention back onto the agent of reprisal, there is relief as in the reaction of Saskia and Brandon to a gasping woman in the bank who dropped her bag on seeing them: ‘We burst out laughing … waiting for the day that someone looks at us and faints.’ Similarly Andy and Clarise laugh about ridiculous stereotypes ‘and go on’ while recognising the sensitivity among others on the subject of race and difference. To laugh under these conditions is to enable the couple to cope with difficult situations but also to relocate the problem to where it belongs, with the person or group seeking reprisal. In other words, ‘you are the oddity, the joke, not us.’

Nicholas on the other hand responds to the Afrikaans club’s attempt to lock out his black friends by making an emphatic point—these are my mates and there is nothing you will do about it. And so he holds the hands of the Coloured and Black friend ‘just to show that these are my friends; do not cause trouble here.’ That was the strategy, says George, ‘to be in their faces [as a couple] …we forced them to become comfortable’ with what they saw in the couple. That helped, ‘and the fact that we did not care’ what they thought.

*Making the point* is therefore an in-your-face response to reprisal rather than walking away from potential conflict to avoid trouble or laughing at the situation to relieve stress. Over time it becomes easier for these student couples to manage the constant pressure of being the
subjects of staring, sniping and snubbing by friends and strangers alike. But the couple strategies involve more than reacting to uncomfortable situations; they often plan to avoid confrontation and unease.

Student couples also manage reprisal through avoidance by seeking out safe spaces. It is clear from the interviews that the students, along and together, move within close circles of friends who accept and affirm their relationships. Starting out, the student couples often met because of overlapping friendships: ‘my friends were friends with her friends’ recalls Ashleigh about their first meeting as a couple. So too Russel found Asha since ‘we were mixing in the same circles.’

These were student and youth circles which were accepting of interracial friendships since that was how they hanged together. ‘Among our close friends there was not anything, nothing at all,’ says Russel about negative responses towards Asha. There is some falling away of friends on the margins, such as Corlea’s school friends, those for whom the relationship with another race is difficult. Sometimes those friends remain on the margins or come back into the life of the border-crossing friend as Ingrid experiences with the ‘boeremiesie’ (farm girls) whom she suspected of being a racist or Andy’s residence house member who gradually comes to accept the diversity around her. But the tight core of friendship remains a safe space for many of the student couples.

‘I am fortunate to have friends who also value different people,’ reflects Clarise and this makes it possible for that circle of white friends to accept Andy into their conversation. In several cases these interracial friendships started in high school and continued through university; such friends offered safe spaces for conversations about difficult things. For Andy the campus friends offer an accepting space in which to live though she expects a different kind of reception off-campus. Ashleigh delights in the fact that her friends ‘did not think anything of us and would not think anything of us’. In fact, her white Afrikaans friends ‘love Brandon.’ Being on campus for most student couples is a relatively safe space compared to outside of the terrain of the university.

Nicholas finds that specific safe space in a new ‘day residence’ called Legatum. Unlike the older and established Afrikaans residences, Legatum is not weighed down by conservative traditions and memories of racial exclusion. ‘The reason I joined,’ he explains, ‘is because of
the diverse environment.’ Indeed the most diverse residences were often the newer ones and
students looking for inclusion and openness were more likely to find those experiences in these
welcoming spaces. For Asha the safe space is the medical school which is ‘like a little
community … Everybody is friends with everyone down there. There are no white friends and
black friends. I think it is a very different life down there than it is up here’ in the centre of
campus.

As in the case for many other students, the medical school appeared less fraught with racial
antagonisms. A distinctive micro-climate had developed in that corner of the campus.37 Such
a distinctive campus climate was made possible by a completely separate medical facility
linked to a hospitable; the selection of the top academic students in the country; a professionally
accredited curriculum that remains relatively insulated from the more general campus classes
and courses; and separate facilities for social interaction such as the medical school cafeteria.

Ultimately, the couple relationship itself is a safe space which shields them from the racism
and interrogation of others. This is clearest in the somewhat exceptional case of the very close
friendship between George and Melani. When George reaches out to his white Afrikaans
classmates, ‘they would start talking but then look away or walk away.’ George was not only
black he was suspected of being gay, and once he is rejected he completely commits himself
to Melani with a depth of affection lost in any English translation: ‘ek wy my toe aan Melani’
(I completely devote myself to Melani).

When George cannot find Melani or she does not show up for class, he says on more than one
occasion that ‘I could run through a wall.’ The intense interdependence is clear. Melani is a
poor white girl without parents and a baby born out of wedlock who refuses the coaxing of
white classmates to enter their comfortable, gesellige (socially easy-going) middle class worlds
of Afrikaans normalcy. She does not fit into that normative world of Afrikaans whiteness and
finds herself rejected, pushed away.

In George she finds full acceptance. Where George can be relied on for class attendance and
making up class notes as Melani struggles to balance family and studies, Melani with her very
sharp intellect can be depended on to make sense of difficult subject matter which she in turn
shares with George. When one or the other loses motivation, the partner is there to encourage
and inspire the classmate. Where both are rejected, they find an intense and enduring
acceptance in each other which enables the couple to navigate the hostile racial waters on and off campus.

When students leave these safe enclosures for public places like the Spar convenience store or the Waterfront shopping centre, they encounter the harsh effects of reprisal. Some might, like Paul, minimise those effects by ‘not doing public displays of affection,’ as Ingrid calls it. These couples are much less concerned with ‘managing their differences’ than navigating the effects of their closeness in hostile environments. Being white, the couples found, did not, guarantee safe occupation of all-white spaces for learning and living together.

Surviving reprisal

It is difficult to explain the persistence of these interracial relationships outside of a certain kind of toughness that marks the personalities of the individuals concerned and that enables them to respond to reprisal actions. Lesser mortals would have given up or knowing the costs, made safer choices with regards to relationships. As in other research on the subject, there is a tough-minded attitude discernible among the student couples.

‘I have just had a thick skin with regard to it. If anyone wanted to say something, they should say it to my face. That is the kind of mentality I have always had.’ These are the words of Nicholas and the ‘it’ has to do with any racial disapproval of his relationship with Karis. The reference to a disposition ‘I have always had’ suggests a trait Nicholas possesses over time, an orientation to dealing with the world around him. So too Clarise acknowledges that she is an extrovert who loves being challenged and engaging the world around her; ‘I think your personality does play a big role…..I think, honestly, it is just how I am.’

This theme of being ‘out there’ and engaging difference was found among several individuals in the couple interviews. Andy contrasts that spirit of openness to out-of-bounds relationships with that of a more introverted sibling: ‘I just did not see any sticking to people that looked like me’ and so she seized on any ‘opportunity to speak to people and get to know their language.’ So how did Andy manage the very difficult situation of being a racially ambiguous individual in educational institutions that bullied her and made her feel left out? ‘I had an incredibly strong character,’ she says, and took karate classes ‘to appease the bullying’ and with these skills ‘I fought my way out of many things.’
This resilience is seldom on display in the form of the very visible boldness of a Nicholas marching hand-in-hand with his black girlfriends through a white club. Often it is something much deeper that binds the resolve. Corlea puts it best, ‘I know who I am and who he is, and that we are friends’ which means that stares or snubs have little effect; ‘I am so over that stuff because it must really end sometime.’

But such deep resolve in the personalities of these student couples does not emerge from nowhere. Parents often build this fortitude within their children as Karis remembers in a very moving reflection on the roles of her mother and father in her upbringing. ‘My parents always taught us character above colour,’ says Karis, while her father would emphasise that ‘You are not different from anyone’ and that ‘nobody’s better than anyone.’ Her mother, on the other hand, would point to her family’s educational standing in the broader community as an achievement against which to measure herself as a human being: ‘You must remember that you’re an educated woman from an educated family.’ These words stick in the mind of the young Karis and despite tearful hardships, she draws on these fortifying resources to enable her to venture into forbidden relationships—including one with the son of a neo-Nazi AWB (Afrikaner Weerstands beweging) family who promptly ejected their wandering lover boy from his home.

**Why reprisal persists**

It is clear from the student stories that reprisal is not some random action on the part of racists or the racially naïve whom the interracial couples encounter in the course of everyday life in South Africa. The reactions they face on the streets or in aisles of the grocery store or at a restaurant table are *scripted*.

*Scripted knowledge* is the knowledge acquired by human beings about how to behave in particular situations.41 The social situation, in this context, is the interracial encounter in public spaces. The reacting parties are working off their scripted knowledge about how to respond to black and white couples who break the unwritten rules about racial intimacy. Their reaction is not spontaneous; it is acquired from years of direct and indirect learning about what are acceptable relationships, and what are not. The reactive behaviour—stare, snipe or snub—is, moreover, the playing out of scripted knowledge in public to signal distaste and disgust at the
unconventional relationship. Such scripted responses are not only common and familiar, they are in fact deeply resident within post-apartheid society.

Nor is reprisal without object. Like all forms of reprisal, the act of responding has several purposes. Reprisal carries in the first instance the sense of ‘taking back’ as in the Italian reprehendre. The act of taking back is therefore restorative—meaning to restore ‘the natural order of things.’ Whether violent or non-violent, reprisals in this context are ‘not an aberration associated with a lunatic or extremist fringe. Instead it is a normative means of asserting racial identity relative to the victimised other; it is an enactment.’

In other words, blacks and whites are not supposed to be together in their intimate lives. The three reprisal actions (stare, snub, and snipe) are verbal and non-verbal messaging systems intended to signal that what was just witnessed is unacceptable. The actors in the reprisal dramas might not understand or articulate such social messages in these ways but they are in effect ‘policing race’ in the lives of ordinary citizens.

The concept of reprisal also carries the negative meaning of ‘pay back’ or retaliation as in the French reprisaille. It is a form of punishment. The perpetrators of these reprisal actions intend to punish the couples by transmitting a sense of public disgust and disapproval. The interracial couple, in turn, are meant to feel hurt, guilt, shame and remorse for stepping out of established patterns of race relations. It is hoped that the perpetrator action and the victim reaction would result in the termination of the relationship.

Reprisal is, in addition, an act of learning. The mother holding her daughter’s hand as she drops her bag in horror is of course not only acting, consciously or otherwise, in relation to what she sees in this interracial couple. Her immediate audience is the little girl. That child has learnt a powerful lesson—the most intimate person in her life disapproves of interracial mixing. It is a message conveyed without a word spoken, in this case of the shocking stare experienced by Saskia and Brandon. And yet its power remains as a direct and undiluted transmission of racial knowledge which the white child absorbs through this brief but potent act on the part of her mother. For the girl this transfusion of her knowledge in the blood—that deep emotional sense of racial identity and racial belonging—takes place in these everyday micro-interactions of life encounters among black and white South Africa. In other words, for the girl reprisal is not simply witnessed as an act of restoration or retaliation—as it is for Saskia and Brosnan—it is also a pre-emptive warning of what the familial response will be if she even thought of crossing those racial boundaries within which white children like herself are raised.
Reprisal, or the mere fear of reprisal, carries sufficient power to prevent many young people from taking the risk of alienation from their families and friends. In closely knit families, whether racist white or traditional Indian family units, the threat of being cut-off is both real and immediate. White youth are much more likely, therefore, to avoid such sanction and separation regardless of what their feelings might be for the black person with whom a potential relationship could or has developed.

‘Social reprisal,’ observes Elizabeth Page-Gould, ‘may be a sufficient deterrent for initiating interracial relationships.’

Reprisal threat has indeed proven itself historically as a reliable instrument of containment. One of the reasons often given by social historians for the long delay in legislating on mixed marriages in 20th century South Africa—compared to other laws such as Immorality Acts—was that the fear of social sanction was deemed sufficient to keep black and white lovers in their separate lanes.

This is a crucial point in thinking about the question—why would young South Africans, coming into love more than two decades after apartheid, still stick so closely to the race register when it comes to intimate association, and act to reprise their friends or families when they defy the historical register that determined race relations? The reason is simple—racial stigma and stereotype outlasts racial laws and policies. Young and old still make choices as if race has value and, in particular, differential value that places Whites at the upper end of the preference scale and Africans at the lowest end. In this sense, apartheid did its work well and it will take much more than the removal of odious laws to change the behaviours of ordinary South Africans when it comes to matters of both friendship and romance.

Reprisal is however not simply an act of white reaction but also one of black-on-black retaliation. Black partners in an interracial relationship are supposed to demonstrate loyalty to the blacks as a group. Becoming friends, let alone intimate friends, with a white person is to hang with the enemy, so to speak. Crossing over therefore means crossing an invisible line of what constitutes appropriate friendships and appropriate love. In racially divided countries and campuses, this sense of betrayal is expressed bitterly and openly by associates—such as black members of the same residence. In cases of black retaliation the snipe is more common—how could you? What are you doing? Why are all your friend white? In other words, are we not good enough?
This strong sense of racial loyalty also comes in the form of reprimand by whites against whites. The white student in the couple relationship would be singled out for racist venom—you are disgusting! Don’t you have any conscience? Have you considered what harm you are inflicting on the children? As blacks target blacks, whites target whites in the interracial union. The assumed sense of racial loyalty therefore cuts both ways, across racial lines, and this unspoken division comes out into the open through a range of reprisal actions against those who love across the colour line.

Reprisal actions come with two faces—from the stranger in its harsher forms, such as the bitter snipe, or from the friends in its softer version, such as racial coaxing. Coaxing gently urges the wayward friend or lover to return to the racial fold. It seeks to reprimand the one who strays through the appeal to previous or primordial affiliation; ‘we are your real family or friends’ in other words. Coaxing is remorseless and afflicts the border crosser with a painful reminder of the rules of separation—‘what box will you tick when the baby is born?’ Of course the fake inquiry is not about clarification at all; it is about damnation, a reminder of the curse of mixed breeds and the inescapable decision of what to do with the offspring not because of past racial laws (those are past) but because of unrelenting racial practices (those are present).

In all these instances reprisal hopes to turn things around through the appeal to reason, however shallow, and the clutch of emotion. It is reasonable, in other words, to be with those who look like you or speak your language. Here reprisal is almost a plea, a deep call to unmoor oneself from straying passions to return to familiar friends and associations. The forces that pull an intimate partner away from unacceptable love are powerful whether as pre-emptive or reactive instruments for maintaining the status quo. That is why intimate couples who risk threat, alienation and ridicule are so interesting for academic inquiry and signal hope for social transformation.

The big picture

What this research shows is the troubled connection between the micro-interactions of student lives and the macro-determinations of student environments. It would be a mistake to read the intimate lives of students outside of the larger social forces that create and sustain the conditions under which learning, loving and living takes place. Those social forces (the macro-influences) are in the first instance historical in nature in that racial attitudes towards intimate lives still operate powerfully in the present. Apartheid laws and policies might have fallen away
but they left an indelible imprint on the lives of citizens including the choices of whom to love and befriend.

What was once enforced by rigid laws are now sustained by social practices that still express racial preferences in intimate relationships. Where punishment for interracial love and marriage once meted out in a court of law, those penalties are now enforced in the court of public opinion through instruments of reprisal.

By reading the micro-lives of students within their broader social contexts, one cannot therefore interpret reprisal actions as mere ‘lashing out’ by individual racists but as patterns of scripted behaviour deeply embedded in what remains a racially ordered society. In such a society the institutions (homes and schools, for example) through which children and youth learn about themselves and others are racially compromised and therefore conspire in the making of reprisal actions against those who defy established norms for close friendship and intimate love.

Reprisal is therefore a product of institutions and ‘occurs within the institutionalized contexts of what is known to be the appropriate place of victim and victimizer.’ For this reason changing race relations in South Africa (or anywhere else) can only be effectively confronted through the transformation of the institutions that produce and reproduce race, reprisal and also romance.

Given the harshness and persistence of reprisal for couples who cross the lines of interracial friendship and love, why would they be drawn to each other anyway?

*The mechanisms of attraction*

Do human mates choose each other, as in the animal kingdom, based on evolutionary impulses that enhance the prospects of the species? Alternatively, is attraction based on a risk-benefit calculation made by each partner? Or are couples likely to match up based on the fulfilment of mutual needs? From the point of view of the students in this study, friendship and love come from very basic—and common—attractions regardless of the costs.

In all cases there is physical attraction that draws young men and women together in romantic encounters. Physical closeness and physical attractiveness, says the research, together represent the strongest predictor of interracial dating. Ashleigh is not quite sure what it is about
Brandon but the first consideration was that ‘he is quite attractive and handsome’ while Brandon replies that for him ‘it is mainly the looks and the way she is.’ Being ‘very attractive … was a bonus’ Nicholas says of Karis who in turn saw many attractive qualities in her man but ‘Physically I think it was his smile and he had really nice arms.’ Asha wonders whether this ‘really handsome’ man would ‘go for’ an Indian girl from Lesotho while Russel is knocked over by the former Ms Rag whom he notices as ‘really beautiful and really intelligent….beautiful inside and out.’

Then there were common interests. What attracted me, says Rodley, was that ‘she really likes the kind of music I like…that is where it started.’ Corlea also finds that they have ‘a lot of stuff in common’ including a mutual interest in hockey and attending the same church. Nico and Lauren meet through attendance at the same church and participation in a church play. The fact that George speaks Afrikaans roundly and fluently attracts the attention of Melani and they realise that ‘we have more in common with each other.’

Personal qualities rank up there among the attractive qualities of the person. For both Paul and Ingrid it is about being mutually ‘chilled’ in a non-demanding relationship that keeps them together. The fact that Corlea is ‘just so caring and a person that I can speak to about anything at any time’ is a draw card for Rodley. Interestingly, it is sometimes the extrovert personality (Saskia, Lauren) attracted to the introvert personality (Brosnan, Nico) and these qualities the pairs find attractive in each other. A list of attractive qualities fall of the pages of the interviews including charismatic, funny, empathetic listening, drive and decency.

As was found elsewhere, it is shared values that brings the friendship couples into communion. Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationship between Andy and Clarise. They could not be further apart in terms of race and culture, but they are bound together by their racial inclusiveness and the embrace of difference among people. They both clearly thrived within diverse communities long before they meet each other, and this is how they work as student leaders on campus. There is a deeper spirituality that binds them too: ‘we can pray together.’ They shared a vision and ‘grew immensely in each other’s friendship.’ This same sense of the friendship is shared by Tasmia as she explains her closeness to Sarah: ‘I think it is her values … Sarah kind of sees life as I do.’

And finally it is the deep stuff that is not easily explained in the devotion that couples sometimes feel for each other. Words end, tears start and what happens next is sheer poetry as I listen to
the voices of Karis and Nicholas. ‘I am going to cry if I have to say what the deeper stuff is,’ shares Karis. ‘The deeper stuff is ….’(Karis cries). The words patience, kindness, acceptance, reliability and communication come through. ‘I know I feel so secure in this relationship.’ Nicholas actually started their couple interview with the language of deepness. ‘It was something deeper than a conversation or something, I really cannot explain it….you just kind of feel like that is your place.’ Nobody in the interviews had gone this far in the expression of the emotional bond between them as connection on ‘a spiritual level’ or the discovery of a love mate as a ‘place I could call home and that was just in her presence.’ Neither biological evolution or economic exchange or ecological interdependence can fathom the spiritual depths of relationships between human beings so beautifully expressed in the partnership between Karis and Nicholas.

Conclusion

We learn much from these student couples about the micro-interactions of loving and learning between black and white youth born after apartheid. We now know first-hand how important family messaging about race and relations is through the ‘engraving’ that happens because of ‘the big influence of the home’ (Nicholas). And we know that the high school a student attends enhances the chances of ‘acquaintance potential’ and adjustment to an integrated campus and community.

Almost all of these students come into young adulthood on a university campus having already enjoyed the diversity of friends and sometimes intimate partners during their upbringing. The comfortability that George talks about is established early on when it comes to race relations.

By contrast negative parental messaging reinforced by segregated schooling produces young people who are ill-adjusted for post-apartheid society and especially dangerous when it comes to integrated learning and living on former white university campuses. What was known from broad claims from the literature is now available in finer detail from the lives of friends and lovers who crossed over the lines that still divide black and white in South Africa.

There is hope. As they reflect on the lives of their peers these students observe a degree of transcience among racially conservative friends; that is, how gradually minds and hearts change as in Andy’s reflections on her Residence Committee member, Marika, who comes to
understand her race dilemmas and appreciate her growth under the influence of her student leader of colour. Or the Bourek (Quantity Surveying) students now in the Honours programme whom, the longer they stayed at university, the more they ‘have actually grown closer’ to black people. ‘I have seen that change and that took time,’ continues Nicholas. Even with her much older grandparents Corlea tracks the changes in their behaviour from discomfort with race relations to gradually accepting and indeed welcoming her new set of diverse friends into their home and their granddaughter’s life. Change happens and what this research hints at is not only the positive influences of families on children but also the transformative influences of children on parents (Andy, Corlea and also Nicholas) when it comes to greater tolerance of interracial intimacies.

Naturally, college friendships and romances do not always last and interracial relationships married couples have higher rates of divorce in countries like the USA. Yet at the time of writing (end 2016) all but two relationships had ended. Asha and Russel are no longer together. Ingrid and Paul split up as well and she now dates a different black student ‘you would be proud of,’ she writes in a text to me. All the friends remain devoted to each other and those married (Nico, Lauren) and with baby (Karis, Nicholas) continue to thrive. The durability of these student couple relationships are less important for this study than the fact that they could have happened in the first place in a challenging environment.

Finally, what we learn again is that the complex apparatus of laws, policies and regulations that once governed racial intimacies continue to exercise enormous influence over ordinary South Africans in their choices of close friends and intimate lovers. Habit and hatred, as well as stigma and stereotype, still dictate racial preferences in many aspects of post-apartheid society proving yet again the lasting influence of the past in the present.

Yet what these courageous young people demonstrate in a still divided and dangerous society is the possibility of what can happen when institutions (the home, the school, the university and more) are themselves transformed to make living, learning and even loving together a reality despite the ever-present past.
Endnotes

1 Barbara Perry (2002) Defending the color line: Racially and ethnically motivated hate crimes, American Behavioral Scientist 46, 72-92

2 In other studies clearer lines of distinction between approval and disapproval of one or both parents were found for interracial couples. See Bell, G.C. and O Hastings, S. 2011. Black and white interracial couples: Managing relational disapproval through facework. *Howard Journal of Communications* 22(3): 240-259

3 See Jaynes (2010), pp 399, 404


6 Towards the end of apartheid the government gave white schools the option of four “models” they could choose from to determine the degree of state funding and autonomy enjoyed by the school; most schools choose the semi-private Model C option. Even those schools were soon abolished by the first democratic government, it remains a short-hand reference for former white schools.

7 The Reitz residence was the site of the horrific racial abuse of 5 black workers by 4 white boys, members of that male hostel. The details of the incident appear in the opening chapter of my book. See Jansen, J.D. 2016. *Leading for change: Race, intimacy and leadership on divided University Campuses*. Routledge: London.


12 I referenced similar though less explosive examples of teaching racial essentialism through difference in white Afrikaans classrooms that I observed and reported on in Jansen, J.D. 2009. *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past*. Stanford University Press: Palo Alto

13 There is of course a line of research making this point about resentment among black women to relationships between black men and white woman; see Zebroski, S.A. 1999. Black-white intermarriages: The racial and gender dynamics of support and opposition. *Journal of Black Studies*, 30(1): 123-132. p 125
14 Tan, T.S. 2014. Race and romance: Understanding students of color in interracial relationships. The Vermont Connection, 35: Article 15


20 See JD Jansen (2017), Interracial intimacies, Bookstorm Publishers, for comparative reading of race, romance

21 Cynthia Skove Nevels (2007) Lynching to belong: Claiming whiteness through racial violence, College Station, Texas A&M University; see also Trudier Harris (1984) Exorcising blackness: Historical and literary lynching and burning rituals, Bloomington, Indiana University Press


23 Again, concept analysis and application are limited to interstate conflict, such as in the classic study of Fritz Kalshoven (2005) Belligerent reprisals. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, second edition


27 Of course references to ‘glances, stares and tripping’ can be found as marginal anecdote in the very slim research on interracial couplets in South Africa; see in du Toit, M. and Quayle, M. 2011. Multiracial families and contact theory in South Africa: Does direct and extended contact facilitated by multiracial families predict reduced prejudice? South African Journal of Psychology, 41(4): 540-551, p543. What this study does is give systematic treatment and conceptual form to a collective of targeted actions described as reprisal.


29 Slaggat is a pseudonym, the name of residence changed at request of the student respondent

30 Read in order of time, Muriel Horrell (1958), Race classification in South Africa: Its effects on human beings, Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations; Roy H du Pre (1994) Separate by unequal: The ‘Coloured’ people of South Africa—A political history, Cape Town, Jonathan Ball; and JD Jansen (2017), see footnote #1


For a dated but still relevant and highly perceptive observations of how race is observed and picked-out in public spaces, see Watson, G. 1967. The process of passing for white in South Africa: A study in cumulative ad hoc-ery. *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 4(3): 141-147


Everyone who has tried to take a photo with the camera on a mobile phone would have had the experience of pressing the wrong icon to find themselves in focus rather than the posed or intended object some distance in front of them. That is the idea with the flipping of the subject.

For an example of this kind of humour, see Simon Weaver (2010) The ‘Other’ laughs back: Humour and resistance in Anti-racist comedy, *Sociology* 44(1), 31-48


Research certainly points to the fact that interracial adolescent couples are less likely to put show public displays of affection than those in intra-racial relationships; see Vacquera, E. and Kao, G. 2005. Private and public displays of affection among interracial and intra-racial adolescent couples. *Social Science Quarterly*, 86(2): 484-508

Compare research on this topic in the USA, for example; see Seshadri, G. and Knudson-Martin, C. 2011. How couples manage interracial and intercultural differences: Implications for clinical practice. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 39(1): 45-48

The concept of scripted knowledge has a short but powerful history in sociology thanks to the works of Roger Schank and Robert Abelson (1997) *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures*, Hillsdale, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum


Barbara Perry (2002)

Barbara Perry (2009) Policing race and place in Indian country, Boston, Rowan & Littlefield

https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reprisal


Perry (2002), p 72

*Evolutionary theory* (biology) reduces couple choices to something akin to mate selection in the animal kingdom. Partners chose each other for competitive advantage. I choose you to enhance the prospects of the species. Women would therefore look for ‘resource potential’ in men and men would be alert to physical attractiveness and fertility.

*Exchange theory* (economics) suggests partners work off a cost-benefit calculus in which risk (such as family rejection) and rewards (such as meaningful connections) are measured against each other in the process of
choosing one or the other person to love.\textsuperscript{50} Where the costs outweigh the benefits, clearly the relationship is a non-starter and other choices are pursued. While some couples are clearly conscious of risks (as in Asha’s case) little of this cold, calculating, balance-sheet reasoning is found within the student rationales for why they came closer to each other as friends or lovers.

\textsuperscript{51} Interdependence theory (ecology) comes closest to explaining why some of the couples find attraction in each other.\textsuperscript{51} They exist better together as human elements in the ecosystem than apart. Each fulfils a need in the other, an application that fits best perhaps in the close friendship between Melani and George who experience a common bond of marginality.\textsuperscript{51} But does young life make such calculations about mutual needs alone? When is commitment unconditional? And is there something deeper or even spiritual that connects loving couples other than an elemental interdependence?


