

Article

Transformative Education, Participative Black Theology and the Challenge of Making a Difference

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Abstract: This paper explores the critical intersection of transformative pedagogies, especially the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, as it encounters Black theology. The nexus of these epistemological frameworks is then reflected on further, in order that a Black participative mode of theological reflection can be explicated as a newer, more critical form of intellectual enquiry. The development of this work, I argue, can then be used as a means of improving the praxiological intent of Practical theology in South Africa. In the final part of the paper, I outline how South African Practical theologians have responded to the radical intent I am outlining in this article.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; Black theology; Augusto Boal; Participative Black theology; Performative action; South African Practical theology; liberative praxis

1. The Importance of Paulo Freire

This article is a critical reflection on the underlying intellectual processes that have given rise to a very specific, intentional, interactive approach to theological reflection and critical pedagogy. Over the past twenty-five years, I have remained committed to a participative approach to the task of doing theology. This approach is one that seeks to engage with ordinary people and sees their presence as integral both to the method of and any resultant 'God-talk'. It is an approach to the task of doing theology that attempts to improve on current practice in terms of how the theological implications of the Christian faith are lived out in particular contexts and to what ends. In this respect, my work falls within the broader arena of Practical theology in terms of the desire to reflect upon practice and to interrogate the relationship between the theory and practice of faith, with particular reference to the historic praxis of the church (Ballard and Pritchard 2000). The means for undertaking this work has been through connecting transformative education alongside the theological intent of Black theology. The purpose of this work is to conscientize ordinary Black people.

Central to the development of transformative education for the purpose of conscientizing ordinary Black people has been the theoretical and praxiological outworking of the scholarship of Paulo Freire. Freire's importance lay in the radical forms of pedagogical and methodological insights into how one works with oppressed and marginalised peoples (Freire [1970] 1990, [1973] 1990). Freire developed a philosophy of education that challenged poor and oppressed people to reflect upon their individual and corporate experiences and begin to ask critical questions about the nature of their existence.

The roots of Freire's own formation were in Brazil during a military junta in the early 1960s. For one whose work was committed to the existential freedom of ordinary people, it should come as no surprise that the military authorities should see Freire's work as a social and political threat. Freire came to the wider academic and public communities with the publication of his first major book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire [1970] 1990). The significance of this book is that it has sown the seeds for the later development of Liberation



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theology in Latin America.¹ One of the key insights of Freire's work is his critique of the 'Banking Method', so called because of the propensity of educators to treat learners as if they bring nothing to the teaching-learning process, so that agency lies solely with the teacher who deposits knowledge into the minds of the students. Freire's work with poor farmers and poor urban factory workers in Brazil sought to enable these ordinary people to name their world, to become subjective agents, who are enabled to articulate the fundamental truths of their existence and the means by which these existential realities can be better understood and ultimately transformed (Lloyd 1972).

Given the significance of Freire's work in giving agency to ordinary poor people, enabling them to articulate their own experiences and so become knowing subjects in the pedagogical process, one can see the significance of his work to Liberation theologians (Freire [1973] 1990, pp. 1–20). Freire's work provided the pedagogical, pastoral and educational frameworks that underpinned Latin American Liberation theology that arose in the early 1970s (Gutierrez 1973). Given the attempts to develop a radical form of transformative education that seeks to utilise a transgressive mode of pedagogy, Freire's ideological approach to education is hugely important. Freire's commitment to bringing about liberative praxis informs the radical intent of this work I am seeking to describe and discuss. His epistemological and methodological insights underpin the intellectual commitments of this work. One of Freire's central concepts was that of 'conscientization'. This is a process where poor and oppressed people are enabled to become critically aware of the circumstances in which they live and the ways in which their humanity is infringed upon and blighted by the often dehumanising contexts that surround them (Freire [1973] 1990, pp. 18–20). What are the systemic and procedural powers that are impinging on their attempts to be autonomous and free people? Freire's work provides the underlying epistemological framing for this form of transformative mode of education and radical forms of learning. Utilising Freire as the subterranean epistemic conceptual framework is essential as I attempt to create a transformative model of education for use with ordinary Black people.

Freire's foundational thinking helps to encourage intellectual breakthrough in the nexus of Christian education, as a mode of Practical theology that has informed critical forms of pedagogical approaches to participative work with ordinary people. Freire's approach to education has created a radical new purview for Practical theologians, as his work encompasses a humanising spirit in which the needs of ordinary people are openly affirmed and indeed, are built into the pedagogical framework itself. Freire's own religious faith was an important dimension to his pedagogical insights, as he was able to fuse his liberative perspectives of Roman Catholicism with his increasing understanding of the needs of ordinary people and finding a means by which they might reflect critically on experience.

For Freire, the liberation of the poor and the oppressed, the way that they might be enabled to discover their voice, is by means of them becoming critically aware of themselves and the situation in which they exist (Freire [1970] 1990, p. 33). This process does not invite the poor and the oppressed to reflect benignly upon their situation; rather, it calls for action, or praxis, in the language of Freire (Freire [1973] 1990, pp. 3–58).

Freire's work, with its emphasis on human transformation and self-actualisation, has become the template by which various models of critical pedagogy, be they Liberation theologies, liberative models of psychology or transformative education, have sought to develop differing perspectives on the task of socio-cultural and political development. In my scholarship, I have attempted to combine the radical intent of transformative education arising from the Freirian tradition with Black Liberation theology in order to develop a more participative and interactive mode of theo-pedagogical engagement that moves intellectual discourse beyond mere theorizing into more praxis-based forms of practice.

The significance of Freire's work is the focus of his scholarship and educational methodology on attending to the lived experiences of ordinary people. Freire's work focussed on how education is a critical reflection of people's everyday lives, and that this process of 'conscientization' is about political awareness of how dehumanising structures

impact their daily existence. Utilising Freire's work has been an essential means by which the notion of talking with and engaging in substantive dialogue with ordinary people has been effected through the medium of a radical and transformative model of Christian education. The basis on which conversation and dialogue emerges is via the intentionality of engaging with the concrete realities of oppression and marginalisation that face ordinary people.

Freire's work first emerged in the slums of Recife in the North-west of Brazil. The significance and importance of conscientization arose through the prism of Freire witnessing how the ravages of poverty and social alienation exerted a negative impact on the identity of ordinary people. Freire's work came to international attention via his first groundbreaking book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Following the translation of this text into English in 1972, Freire's ideas were quickly disseminated throughout the world. In the mid-1970s, Freire began to work as an educational consultant for the World Council of Churches. It was during this period that Freire's work began to be applied to a number of postcolonial nations, particularly those with links to Portugal. The fruits of this work were later detailed in an important text (Freire 1978). Utilising Freire's scholarship has been a relatively easy conduit to utilise given its resonance to postcolonial and decolonial intellectual traditions that have shaped socio-political and cultural resistance in emerging democracies across the world, including South Africa.

The key intellectual ideas and principles of Freire that have been adopted relate to a substantive need to give ordinary people a sense of agency and self-determination. Freire's work has been a committed attempt to engage directly with ordinary people. The creative conversations and dialogue that arise from the concept of conscientization are essentially an intentional desire to entrust in ordinary people the locus of authority that seeks to build knowledge from the bottom up. It is a form of epistemological construction that affirms the significance of lived experience and insights of ordinary people.

Paulo Freire's epistemological grounding is different than the developments in 'Ordinary Theology'², pioneered by Jeff Astley, because whilst this latter movement seeks to explore the theologising and substantive content of the theology held by ordinary people, this intellectual movement does not seek to build theological insights as a constructive model of knowledge construction from the bottom up, using the insights of such individuals.

A significant aspect of Freire scholarship and pedagogical practice is that it enables ordinary people to reflect on their everyday lived experiences, often finding space in which to tell stories and to express important formative narratives that connote meaning and identity. Freire's form of participative engagement with ordinary people is one that has assisted in pioneering the developments in Action Research and the utility of working with ordinary people in order to improve and transform practice.

Action Research is a form of intellectual engagement in which participative modes of methodology are engaged in order to transform practice. The principle of wanting to improve the practice within a given social setting has its roots in the old-style secondary modern schools in the 1960s. Elliot argues that the necessity to create a relevant curriculum for comparatively large numbers of low achievers was an important factor in the impetus to adopt the Action Research paradigm within British state schools (Elliot 1991, p. 9).

A key principle of Freire's work is the process of action and reflection that gives rise to an ongoing dialectical spiral or cycle of learning and new insights. An essential feature of the Action Research paradigm is the ongoing cycle of reflection and action, which moves through a series of distinct phases. The different stages, moving from 'investigation', through 'planning' and 'action', towards 'reflection' are an important feature of the methodology of Action Research. The four-stage description is central to the ongoing spiral or cycle of action and reflection that is Action Research. Within more formal models of theology, one has witnessed recourse to similar notions of reflexive cycles or spirals (Green 1990; Cameron et al. 2010). The constantly developing arena of Practical theology

has witnessed an explosion of writing, a good deal of which is addressing the central question of methods for undertaking theological reflection.

Given that this work is a critical reflection on the development of Participative Black theology that brings together Practical theology and Black Liberation theology, Freire's importance to the development of Action Research and the exercise of cyclical forms of knowledge construction predicated on transformed practice detail his significance to this mode of epistemology.

2. Black Theology

In the epistemological framing of this work, I have sought to bring transformative education into dialogue with Black theology. Black theology as an academic discipline and form of concrete faith-based practice takes as its point of departure the reality of Black suffering in history. Black theology is understood as a branch of the wider family of 'Theologies of Liberation'. This title refers to a group of socio-political theologies that seek to re-interpret the central meaning of the God event within history, particularly, in terms of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. They provide a politicised, radical and socially transformative understanding of the Christian faith in light of the lived realities and experiences of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed.

This enterprise named 'Black theology' has branches across the world. The most obvious and perhaps significant examples can be found in such diverse places as North America, the Caribbean, South America (particularly, Brazil), Southern Africa, in the UK, and also in the Netherlands. For many Black theologians, the brutal realities of the Transatlantic Slave Trade provide the essential backdrop against which the ongoing drama of Black suffering in history is played out (Hopkins 2002).

One version of Black theology lies in the experiences of Diasporan Africans enduring the 'Middle Passage' of transportation from Africa to the so-called 'New World' of the Americas and the Caribbean, where around 12 million people were brought to work on plantations, as mere chattel, i.e., non-human beings (Hall 2021). The first recognised Black theology text was written by James H. Cone. In 1969, against the backdrop of the Black Power Movement, Cone penned *Black Theology and Black Power* (Cone [1969] 1989). Some thirteen months later, Cone penned the first great systematic treatment of Black theology in *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Cone [1970] 1990), in which he developed the liberative doctrinal dimensions of the discipline, outlining the ways in which oppressed peoples reassess the doctrine of God, Christology, Sin, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology (Reddie 2020). Black theology's theological method is the nexus of scripture and Christian tradition juxtaposed with Black human experience, in which the existential realities provide the hermeneutical lens for reinterpreting the foundational concepts that emerge from biblical and theological texts (Ware 2002, pp. 28–65). In essence, it is the ways in which the context of life speaks to authoritative texts. The focus on human experience as a means of re-interpreting theological truth is one that gives agency to Black people. This is a facet that is utilised in the development of this form of theological production.

The God that underpins Black theology is the one who is largely understood in terms of God's revelation in 'Jesus Christ' in light of the historical and contemporary reality of being 'Black'. Black theology is a theology of liberation. Its existence is solely focussed on applying the freeing power of the gospel to the existential struggles of Black people to find their freedom in the stultifying world of White supremacy.

Underpinning the emergence and development of Black theology has been the need for people racialised as 'Negro' to critically engage with the false dictum of 'Whiteness' as the apex in the construction of 'race' as a series of taxonomies defining human potential and ability. The construction of 'race' has led to a great deal of speculation on the underlying epistemological frameworks that inform the development of Black theology. As a student of the discipline who has explored, in particular, the pioneering work of James Cone, the founder of the academic conceptualisation of the Black theology, it is important to state that the roots of Black theology do lie not in secular humanistic theories as asserted by some

right-wing critics. In the wake of the Church of England's 2021 Racism Task Force report, *From Lament to Action* (Church of England (CoE) 2021), a number of conservative Anglican commentators used social media to argue that the report was the latest in an unfortunate trend of so-called 'woke theology', being adversely impacted by the existence of 'Critical Race Theory' (CRT). As CRT is a comprehensive and diverse intellectual movement, any attempt to summarise it here would not do it justice. The Black theology that is cited in the report owes nothing to CRT but has everything to do with the Judeo-Christian God that is revealed in the Bible.

James Cone's doctrine of God is one grounded in Christian tradition. Cone asserts

The Christian understanding of God arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ. This means that whatever is said about the nature of God and God's being-in-the-world must be based on the biblical account of God's revelatory activity. (Cone [1970] 1990, p. 60)

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone goes to some length in outlining the biblical evidence for the liberative characteristics of a God whose existence is deeply concerned with a people whom God has identified as God's own (Cone [1975] 1986, pp. 57–76). Cone makes it clear that the biblical God is not a disinterested bystander of human history, rather like the Deist view of God in Greek philosophy. Rather, "The God of the Bible is involved in history, and God's revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel." (Cone [1975] 1986, p. 57). As Cone narrates the activity of God throughout the Hebrew scriptures, he is not so much 'proof-texting' as seeking to show the consistent quality of a God who is not indifferent to human suffering and seeks to liberate a small nation that is often at the mercy of larger, more aggressive powers.

The necessity of fighting White supremacy remains the central goal of Black theology. In this regard, the work of the late great James Cone remains the unmatched beacon of clarity in critiquing the false consciousness of Whiteness that has not only bedevilled the mission of Christianity that was exported all over the world, including places like South Africa, but it has also stifled the clarity and cognition of poor White people, who have been deluded into believing the myths of White supremacy (Cone 2004, pp. 139–52).

Outside of the brutalities of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Black theology has flourished most notably in South Africa. Whilst Transatlantic chattel slavery is not a feature of the Black experience in South Africa, the socio-political and cultural climate in which White supremacy existed and flourished from within the context of a White settler community helps to create the environment for the development of Black theology. The emergence of the Nationalist Government in 1948 ushered in the policy of apartheid, in which legal mechanisms were used to enshrine the socio-political, religious and cultural context of White supremacy and the marginalisation of the Black majority in the nation (Motlhabi 2009).

Black theology in South Africa emerged against the backdrop of the anti-apartheid movement across the nation, coupled with the Black Consciousness movement to provide a politicised and liberationist understanding of the Christian faith, seeking to mobilise Black agency for social transformation.

The South African tradition of Black theology has been shaped by the iconic work of such luminaries as Allan Boesak, writing from a Reformed theological perspective (Boesak 1977). It can be argued that Boesak is the first great Black theologian in South Africa whose work gained a global audience in the mid-1970s. Boesak sought to challenge the wider ecumenical, Reformed movement to believe that apartheid was a theological heresy and that the Dutch Reformed church should be treated as an ecclesial pariah when exposed to the wider church family, particularly as it pertains to the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Alongside the towering formative work of Boesak, there has been the radical, iconoclastic, biblical theological work of Itumeleng Mosala, writing from a more Marxist perspective, in the late 1980s (Mosala 1989). Mosala's work was notable for the links it established with Black Methodists and the larger anti-apartheid movement in the UK in the early 1990s. Mosala's work in engaging with the Bible has

proved important as it has reminded Christian Black Liberation theologians of the need to hold a cautionary and critical perspective on so-called Scripture and the normative political undercurrents that inform the cultural production of biblical texts. Mosala's critical hermeneutic reminds us that the biblical text is not an innocent paradigm for liberation given that within its pages is a bias towards the Israelites, which does pertain to those identified as Gentiles and so outside of the covenant God holds with the people deemed to be 'The People of God' (Mosala 1989, pp. 154–89). Given that the notion of being the 'chosen people of God' underpins Afrikaans theology, Mosala's critique of particularly Reformed notions of the scriptures being 'The World of God' was an important challenge to the idea that the Bible is always on the side of the poor.

One of the main foci of Black theology has been the need to critique and challenge the workings of White supremacy and the ways in which it has unleashed a form of biased racialised teaching on Black people, which asserted the inferiority and sub-human nature of the Black self (Williams 1983). The continued struggles of Black people that arise from the era of slavery, colonialism and apartheid can be seen in the overarching material poverty and marginalisation of Black people across the world (Hopkins 2002, pp. 127–54).

As we will see when we explore aspects of South African Pastoral theology, it, like that of Black theology, sees as one of its tasks, especially through the Black Consciousness movement, the necessity of addressing the forms of self-negation and the ways in which a form of internalised oppression has impacted on the psyche of Black people across the contours of the former British empire. The obverse side of the false consciousness of White supremacy is the privations on Black people exerted by the equally false notions of Black inferiority (Hall 2021; Boesak 2020).

Contemporary Black theologians, such as Tinyiko Maluleke (Maluleke 2022), Rothney Tshaka (Tshaka 2016, 2019), and the late Vuyani Vellem (Vellem 2014), writing in the post-apartheid era, have all come to continue the radical tradition of exploring religious and theological perspectives through a liberative framework, seeking to deepen the concept and practice of Black consciousness and empowerment of Black Africans. In the years after 1994, particularly in the second decade of the new century, and the universal enfranchisement of all South Africans, the continued development of Black theology has had to respond to a host of contemporary problems facing ordinary Black people. One such issue was the phenomenon of a Black-run government overseeing the continued marginalisation of the Black majority of the population. Whether in terms of confronting 'Afrophobia',³ or challenging the democratic essentialism surrounding the continued support for the African National Congress, post-1994 South African Black theologians have wrestled with continued existential problems that plague the poor Black majority of the nation (Tshaka 2016, 2019).

The more contemporary developments in Black theology have been augmented by the resurgence of the prophetic voice of the great Allan Boesak, whose more recent work of the past ten years has sought to reanimate the classic Black Liberation theology tradition in South Africa (Boesak 2021, pp. 201–22). Boesak's more critical appraisal of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' as a state-sponsored exercise in 'cheap grace' as outlined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a reminder of the continued need for the radicalism of Black liberation theology in South Africa (Boesak 2021).

The work of modern, contemporary Black theologians in South Africa reminds us of the continued necessity for a form of radical theological projects that will challenge the embedded nature of White economic supremacy in the post-apartheid epoch in the nation. Yes, there is now full democracy in the nation and yes, since 1994, there have been Black majority ANC governments that are seeking to reverse the era of untrammelled White hegemony in South Africa. And yet, despite this intent (admittedly with varying degrees of trust and acceptance) (Boesak 2021, pp. 1–26), the poverty amongst and the marginalisation of ordinary Black people in South Africa remains even more stark than it had been in the pre-apartheid era. The argument that Black theology is no longer needed and should be replaced by the nomenclature of 'Public Theology' is one that has briefly flourished but

is now being shown to have been either a naïve false dawn of post-racialism naivety or a cynical attempt to derail the centrality of Black consciousness (De Gruchy and Strijbos 2008).

The aforementioned work has sought, in many respects, to offer a contextualised, theological framework that evokes the radical intent of Paulo Freire's work. While none of the aforementioned is focussed primarily on issues of pedagogy and educational methodology, nonetheless, their work seeks to speak to the necessity of Black conscientization, much of which echoes the underlying intellectual frameworks that resonate with Steve Biko's commitment to and the challenge posed by his notion of 'Black Consciousness' (Boesak 2021, pp. 27–61).

The development of Black theology, especially as it pertains to South Africa, has undoubtedly been influenced by some of the semantic themes found within the work of Paulo Freire, especially that which pertains to issues of conscientization and the critical consciousness of oppressed subjects in history, seeking to work constructively to create radical forms of liberative praxis. Whereas Freire's epistemological frameworks were informed by Liberation theology and popular forms of critical pedagogy, Black theology has been framed within ongoing Black liberation movements, in which Black consciousness and the self-determination to love and appreciate one's Blackness have been key. And yet, for all the developments found in these critical forms of intellectual development, it could be argued that none has provided an extensive paradigm for engaging with ordinary people, shaping Black theology as a form of popular movement geared towards creating models of transformative pedagogies on the ground as accessible and participative modes of liberative praxis (Howard 2014).

It is an attempt to create a critical and radical nexus for this mode of participative liberative theologising that has seen the emergence of what I have termed 'Participative Black theology'.

3. Towards A Participative Black Theology

The nexus of Black theology and transformative educational methodologies is what I have termed 'Participative Black Theology'. This form of theologising emerges from my ongoing attempt to link transformative education and Black Liberation theology. This work has given rise to an interactive and participative mode of scholarly engagement. The roots of my approach to undertaking theological work first emerged through my initial engagement as a community educator working with poor, working-class Black communities in Birmingham, in the West Midlands region of the UK. This work arose from my experiences working in two Methodist churches alongside Black Caribbean people of the 'Windrush'. This term emanates from a pivotal event on the 22 June 1948, when 492 Caribbean people arrived at Tilbury docks on the SS Empire Windrush. These post-war pioneers ushered in a wave of Black migration to Britain from the Caribbean, which (for the most part) forms the basis for Black African and Caribbean communities in Britain (Phillips and Phillips 1999).

The underlying intellectual roots for the creation of Participative Black theology lie in the developmental fusion of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. In terms of the latter, Boal is the conduit between educational and pedagogical insights of Freire and substantive, liberationist content of Black theology as outlined in the previous section. Boal's commitment to interactive forms of dramatic pedagogy provides the intellectual framework for a Participative mode of theological reflection that seeks to engage with the lived experiences of ordinary Black people.

In the context of this study, the work of Augusto Boal has proved invaluable.

The Importance of Augusto Boal

Augusto Boal's ideas on drama as a means of consciousness raising and problem solving owe much to the pioneering work of Paulo Freire. Like Freire, Boal was born in Brazil. He was raised in Rio de Janeiro.

Boal was formally trained in chemical engineering and attended Columbia University in the late 1940s. Despite the formal interest in engineering, Boal's true vocation was the theatre, and whilst still in his early teens, he began to display an aptitude for performance that would mark him out for the remainder of his life.

Like Freire, Boal's work has proved highly influential to liberationist theorists and practitioners across the world. Freire's work was in the area of education committed to raising the critical consciousness of ordinary people. Boal's outlook and perspectives, whilst sharing some of the formative perspectives found in Freire's scholarship, nevertheless, have an alternative arena. For Boal, his intellectual environment has been related to the theatre. Similar to Freire, Boal's ideological commitment to working alongside marginalised and oppressed ordinary people saw him gain unwanted attention from the military authorities in Brazil. Like Freire, he was arrested and had to leave Brazil and go into exile in Europe (Boal 1995).

Boal's approach to theatre was to create a nexus between the performer on the stage and the observer in the audience. The aim was not simply to bring these two elements together. Rather, this synthesis of performer and spectator being in unison on the stage was to break the conceptual distance between the two, in effect to create a dialectical engagement between those who watch and those who perform. In one famous incident, Boal stopped a performance in order that a disgruntled woman spectator could mount the stage and offer an alternative version to the untruth she was witnessing in the stage performance. This incident proved to be a pivotal moment in the development and career of Boal, for from it emerged his notion of a theatre of the oppressed.

Boal came to international attention with his 1971 book *Theatre of the Oppressed* which outlined a self-conscious and deliberate re-conceptualisation of theatre in order that oppressed and marginalised peoples could use drama as a means of re-narrating and renaming their existential realities (Boal 1995). This work was a conceptual framing of the philosophical outworking of an approach to the political dimensions of theatre as a means of raising the critical consciousness of ordinary people, in effect, recreating models of conscientization that utilises drama and theatre as participative models of transformative education and theological reflection. The antecedents of Boal's educational philosophy have their roots in Greek epistemology, especially the philosophical underpinnings provided by Aristotle and Plato (Boal 1971, pp. 1–50).

The political dimensions of theatre have been explored by a number of scholars, in addition to Boal. Academic thinkers such as Harris (1993, pp. 3–64), Millings and Ley (2001) and Schlossman (2002), have developed philosophically informed approaches to drama and theatre that utilise liberative motifs and interactive methodologies that seek to engage ordinary people to re-thinking their social-political and cultural realities that influenced their existential realities. Central to Boal's intellectual development is the concept of 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. This concept gained worldwide acceptance and importance at the first international festival dedicated to this philosophical and educational approach to raising the critical consciousness of ordinary people. This event took place in France in 1981.

Theatre of the Oppressed has been Boal's magnum opus that outlines the fullest expression of the central ideas that underpin this philosophical and practical community work programme for conscientizing ordinary people. In *Theater of the Oppressed* and in later works (Boal 1992, 1995), Boal built upon the initial insights first contained in this initial book. Most critically, especially for practitioners, Boal has developed a number of workshops and community-orientated exercises and activities, so that this conceptual framework can be used in real, everyday contexts in which Practical theologians and educators are engaging with ordinary people. Boal's work has been focussed on engaging with ordinary people, helping them to interact with the drama on stage, enabling them to become part of the dramatic action that breaks the semantic gap between the spectator and the actor; hence, he has created a new term, namely, the 'spec-actor' (Boal 1971, pp. 126–30). This blurring of the lines between the actor and the spectator is intentional since in this dialectical interaction,

new truths and reflections are created, as an outworking of the improvisation in the drama itself (Boal 1992).

Boal's methodology, built on the concept of the spec-actor, seeks to facilitate the active engagement of ordinary people, encouraging them to interrupt the drama on stage, replacing the existing action with their own improvised, alternative words and gestures, in order that new truths and insights can emerge (Boal 1992, pp. 210–23). The improvisation that arises from the involvement of ordinary people is in order to provide a safe, cathartic space in which their attempts to engage in the process of conscientization give rise to new knowledge and critical insights as they pertain to the lived realities of the participants (Boal 1995, pp. 18–27). Essential to the working of 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is that participants are given the freedom to explore inner feelings and wrestle with existential and contextual challenges in order that through the reliving of these issues, important subtexts and generative concerns can be explored. For effective, liberative drama to emerge, the correct subtexts and critical issues must be identified and explored (Boal 1992, p. 6).

The development of my participative approach to theological reflection and transformative education owes a great deal to Paul Freire, in terms of the overarching philosophy of education that underpins this work. His concept of conscientization remains the key intellectual framework that underpins the educational and theological intent of Participative Black theology. In addition to the significance of Paulo Freire is the influence of Augusto Boal. Boal's epistemology that underpins 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is one that is focussed on the substantive intent of working with ordinary people, using participation and interaction, as dramatic forms of methodologies that seek to transform the critical consciousness of ordinary people.

The significance of Boal's epistemological insights can be found in the intellectual rationale it provides for participative forms of knowledge construction that echo Freire's scholarly canon. Like Freire, Boal's principles and ideas have assisted in framing the substantive developments in action–reflection cyclical or spiral forms of epistemology that underpin my work in Participative Black theology. Boal's principles and ideas, like Freire, have helped to shape the development of Action Research. Action Research is committed to the development of new forms of action or practice that seeks to bring about new knowledge through the interactive engagement with ordinary people. This commitment to action in the service of improving practice carries within its framework, also, a rationale that takes seriously the reality and concretised nature of practice. In this respect, practice is not seen as subordinate or subservient to theory. This dialectic between theory and practice is one in which the major result is the production of better practice, not abstract knowledge.

With the imperative to 'act' being a major determinant on the course and nature of the research, it should not be too much of a surprise that Boal's transformative pedagogy that is predicated on participants 'acting' as 'spec-actors' has become an essential foundational framing of interactive forms of Practical theology. Discovering more effective ways of undertaking one's work is often a central motivation for any practitioner in seeking relevant and appropriate models or opportunities for personal and professional development. The motivation to 'act' in order to change or improve the practice within a particular setting must be synthesised with a desire to reflect critically upon one's action. Simply 'acting' without recourse to the self-critical guidance of reflection will not necessarily yield any of the hoped-for improvements.

Reflection is a prerequisite alongside the necessity for action. At this point, I am reminded of the salient words of Paulo Freire, whose dictum that action without reflection is mere activism, and reflection without action is pure verbalism, rings very true (Freire [1970] 1990, p. 68). Action Research incorporates a framework that emphasises a personal, ethical rationale for informed, reflective action. This method enables academics to align themselves alongside others, in the collaborative effort to change the practice of being a church and the resultant elements of Christian praxis that exist within all faith communities. In this regard, the principles and ideas of Boal's scholarship and practice have enabled the development in Action Research and the commitment to engendering

change and transformative notions of learning through the prism of participative forms of pedagogical engagement.

My work as a Participative Black theologian attempts to create a model of theological reflection that brings together all the major ideas and concepts of Black theology, in a manner that will seek to engage with ordinary people, hoping to conscientize them in the process. The engagement with ordinary people is achieved through challenging participants to engage with one another within a constructive, interactive space created by the educator. I have used workshops as ways of developing forms of 'Performative action' in order that exercises, drama, role play and dialogue become the means by which theological reflection is both undertaken and by which it is also created. In the interactive work with ordinary people, in both formal and informal contexts, either with students or ordinary peoples in churches, 'Performative action' has become an expression of Participative Black theology.

The notion of Performative action works on the basis that participants will work in collaboration with others, engaging cooperatively in order that in their joint interactions, what will emerge is new forms of knowledge. This form of engagement affirms mutuality, cooperation and a shared commitment to the production of new knowledge (Irizarry 2003; Apt 1970). The production of new knowledge is not simply for participants to pass exams and to gain assessment; rather, the desire is to create new forms of knowing for the expressed purpose of changing behaviour and developing better praxis in terms of the experiential skills of engaging with the 'other'. The aim of this work is the development of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory forms of Christian discipleship. The liberative praxis of Performative action is one that sees difference as something to celebrate rather than a pejorative that enshrines our worst fears of the 'other'.

Essentially, this work is a combination of practical ministry and community education and academic scholarship. New knowledge is combined with constructed, educated approaches to instilling radical forms of conscientization working alongside ordinary Black people. This work is a critical dialectic between Black theology and Practical theology. The best forms of Performative action emerge in places and spaces where individuals are committed to share their experiences and learning alongside others. In this constructive and participative approach to Black theology, I have used a variety of exercises and activities for enabling participants to find a means of exploring their feelings and emotions in a safe space. The exercises allow participants to explore various identities and to try out new persona, essentially, alternative forms of being themselves. The aim of this approach to theological education is to give rise to cognitive and affective change.

At the heart of the development of Performative action is the use of games, exercises, and participative activities. The range of games and exercises developed over the years have been used to attempt to wrestle with major ethical challenges and issues such as 'racism', 'Blackness', 'Whiteness', 'nationalism', 'scapegoating', 'xenophobia', 'inclusivity', etc. The development of this work and the creative means of engaging directly with ordinary people in a participative and interactive dynamic seeks to give them agency and opportunities to confront existential challenges through the medium of theological reflection. An important dimension of this work can be found in the progressive developments found in models of Black Christian education. An important dimension of this tradition is that provided by Anne Streaty Wimberly. Of particular import is her 1996 book *Soul Stories* (Wimberly 1996), which has exerted an important influence on this developing pedagogy and participative means of undertaking Black participative theological work. This text introduced me to her pedagogical method entitled 'Story-Linking' in which she uses personal, familial and corporate narratives, juxtaposed with the narratives of Scripture to enable African Americans to reflect upon their identity and the agency of God as identified in the articulation of story.

In this curriculum-driven approach to developing a liberative, Black participative and creative theo-educational approach to engaging with ordinary Black people, the influence of story-linking, in which participants are encouraged to link their narratives with bible stories and characters, was an important means by which I have been enabled to create a

form of educational engagement that is participative, entertaining and creative. Given the seriousness with which Black people have to live, in terms of existential challenges facing them, it is imperative that any developed pedagogy is not only participative and creative, but it also needs to be fun and is one that makes the learning process enjoyable.

The sense of wanting to create participative models of interactive learning was also informed by my engagement with the tradition of community education developed by Southern African educationalists, Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, who carried out their groundbreaking participative community development work in Southern Africa (Hope et al. 1994). In the second volume of their quartet of books, the authors explore the role of group work in the process of raising critical consciousness towards the holistic paradigm of individual, group and societal transformation. In utilising their methods, I was anxious to create opportunities for shared learning, and for theological insights to emerge from the many collaborative conversations I have undertaken across the UK and in South Africa over the past twenty-five years. Hope and Timmel seek to embody and make operative the searing insights of Paulo Freire and his vision of conscientization of grassroots peoples for the purposes of transformation and radical faith-based shared praxis.

At the heart of this mode of theological reflection is the necessity of working alongside ordinary people. At the centre of all such exercises and workshops is the dimension of engaging in conversation and dialogue with ordinary participants. In this interaction with ordinary people, new knowledge and insights emerge. The creation of new knowledge, however, is not created in a vacuum. Rather, the new epistemological insights accrued from exercises are achieved through the medium of my conversational engagement with ordinary people. The insights of ordinary people have become a substantive and necessary aspect of this participative approach to theological reflection. This owes a great deal to Augusto Boal and to a lesser extent, Anne Wimberly.

Aside from the sheer fun and joy to be had through my working with ordinary people—something that has always provided an invigorating and expressive set of experiences—conversational and dialogical engagements have shaped the very nature of the work I have undertaken over the past twenty or so years. Talking with and learning from ordinary people is an important dimension of Participative Black theology because it seeks to enable this discipline to have greater synergy with the lived religious experience of those at the grassroots of society. Whilst the likes of Ernesto Cardenal (2020) pioneered ways of undertaking Latin American Liberation theology via poetry, similarly, one can see this in the work of British Feminist theologian Nicola Slee (2019) whose poetic work provides an alternative means by which Feminist theology is expressed in the UK.

James Cone's final memoir, written whilst he was dying and published posthumously (Cone 2018), outlines the reasons why his foundational version of Black theology were so wedded to White Euro-American systematic theology, as a means of ensuring the legitimacy of the discipline. While I understand the reasons for this intellectual move, it does mean that Black theology, although committed to those on the margins who are oppressed, has not been able to engage in a more intentional and formative way with ordinary people.

The purpose of this approach to undertaking Black theology lies in the belief that internalised change (spiritual and psychological) can be a conduit for externally verified changes in behaviour and practice. Both of these modes provide the subjective, experiential basis for liberation, at an individual, inter-personal, communal and ultimately, a systemic level.

The use of participative exercises creates a scholarly connectivity between, on the one hand, teaching and learning that conscientizes students in the classroom and, on the other hand, the creation of new knowledge within the wider purview of Practical theological exploration. This model of liberative, pedagogical work is predicated on a participative teaching and learning process. The natural corollary of this pedagogical approach is a model of liberative theological reflection that is undertaken by means of participative exercises through which new theories and concepts for Christian praxis are enacted. This model of theological reflection is predicated on the active engagement of ordinary people.

4. The Response of South African Practical Theology

Since a version of this paper was first written and aspects of it given at the South African Practical theology society annual conference in February 2022, I have noted the appearance of three significant articles by leading Practical theologians in South Africa, whose work is now addressing many of the concerns I outline in this paper. All three papers were published in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, in 2022. First, in March 2022, Barnabe Msabane published “‘When Are You Going Back to Your Country?’: The Refugee Phenomenon and the Complexity of Healthcare Services in South Africa” (Msabane 2022, pp. 78–90) in *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Given the propensity for pastoral and Practical theology to attend to the interiority of the lived experiences of human subjectivity, Msabane’s article quite rightly focusses on an external, material, socio-political phenomenon, namely, the treatment of refugees in South Africa. This work offers a critical appraisal of the rise of South African nationalism, which in its bounded myopia is seeking to draw a line between contemporary life in the nation and the years of apartheid when neighbouring nations supported Black radicals seeking exile and asylum beyond the nation state that was riddled with White supremacy. This article, while not invoking the sources and epistemological ideas I have outlined in my own work, nevertheless, does demonstrate the need to expand the gaze of Practical theology in order for it to better attend to social realities, such as xenophobia and nationalism as phenomena that are shaping the present zeitgeist.

Second, in June 2022, Eugene Baron published his article “‘Coloured’, You’re on Your Own? A Dialectic Between Biko’s Black Consciousness Thought and the Post-Apartheid Conditions of the “Coloured” People in South Africa’ (Baron 2022), in *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Baron, who identifies as a ‘So-called Coloured’ (my terminology, not necessarily that of the author), utilises the radical, transformative pedagogy of Steve Biko and his conception of ‘Black Consciousness’ to trouble the categories that underpin the heinous crimes of social division invoked by the various apartheid regimes in South Africa. It is noted that as Baron wrestles with Biko as his prime interlocutor, my own work has rarely done so.

Whilst I have focussed on Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal in this work for a form of radical, transformative pedagogy, Baron uses a more authentic voice for the South African context that rightly forces me to consider whether and to what extent my own work has largely been too content to use non-African sources even whilst espousing a commitment to Black liberation. Baron’s article is seeking to find a radical rapprochement between Practical theology and Black theology that provides theoretical space for discourse that unravels the knotted infrastructure of racial binaries in South Africa, whilst enabling particular communities to embrace their lived subjectivities and identities in the new, more democratic nation post-apartheid (Baron 2022, pp. 125–48).

The third article written by my UNISA colleague Olehile A. Buffel is ‘The Potential of Clinical Pastoral Education in Facilitating Contextual, Effective and Affordable Pastoral Ministry for Impoverished Black Communities in South Africa’ (Buffel 2022, pp. 235–50) in *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Buffel’s work seeks to reconfigure the epistemological and methodology insights of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) as it applies to Black Africans in the African context. Buffel recognises the utility of this tool for supporting clergy in their pastoral role of offering soul care to ordinary Africans, often struggling with endemic poverty and social marginalisation, but he recognises the Eurocentric roots of CPE and asserts that it needs to be adapted for use in African contexts. At the heart of Buffel’s reflections is the shared need found in my work of wanting to attend to the existential realities and challenges facing ordinary people. Buffel notes the ways in which CPE operates, especially in White majority, western societies in which the lives of ordinary people vary greatly compared to their counterparts in Africa, especially in South Africa, given that the latter is his context.

This work, like the previous two articles, in being published in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, is seeking to engage with the discipline of Black theology in order

that the nature of Practical theology as it exists in South Africa is framed within a larger liberationist framework and trajectory. These more recent works in the South African context speak to many of the issues I have raised in this paper. The challenge for my work is to assess how the insights I have shared in this paper can be informed by the work of South African Practical theologians, working in the context of the continent and not from the vantagepoint of the Diaspora.

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate how Black theology provides the detailed theological content of this participative mode of Practical theological work, as I attempt to challenge ordinary Black people to become anti-racist Christian disciples in postcolonial Britain and by extension in South Africa. The pivotal role of Black theology in this theological educational schema is one that is attempting to breach the gap between the academy and the church and grassroots believers and academics. It is a commitment to using the experiences and the agency of ordinary lay people as the raw materials for an interactive and constructive approach to Practical theology, using the techniques and methods from critical pedagogy and transformative modes of adult education. In effect, it is another way of doing practical-Participative approaches to Black theology in the service of the Church, especially as it pertains to Black people.

5. Conclusions

In this Participative approach to Black theology, a variety of exercises and activities for enabling participants to find a means of exploring their feelings and emotions in a safe space is presented. The exercises allow participants to explore various identities and to try out new persona, essentially, alternative forms of being themselves. The aim of this approach to theological reflection is to give rise to cognitive and affective change.

At the heart of this work is the centrality of engagement with ordinary people in which participative engagement in the shape of conversations and dialogue is undertaken as a means of creating new knowledge. Over the years, I have rethought the intent of how one engages in conversation with ordinary people. When I started this form of work, conversation and talking with ordinary people was simply a practical means of developing a Participative methodology. On further reflections, I am not seeing that conversation and talking with others is not just a means to an end, but it is part of an ideological intent of giving dignity to ordinary people and recognising and respecting their insights and learning that arise from their involvement in the exercises and activities I have created.

The insights of Paulo Freire and his commitment to engaging with the lived realities of oppression facing ordinary people, coupled with the ideas and activism of Augusto Boal, where the radical model of Participative Black theology have all been fused together in order to create an interactive mode of engagement in which the presence of ordinary people, are key. Talking with ordinary people has proved to be essential. The work of Freire and Boal, coupled with Black theology, has been the key to the development of Participative Black theology. But without the engagement of ordinary people and their willingness to share their experiential learning with me and to engage in constructive conversation and dialogue, this work would never have emerged. By utilising the insights of Freire and Boal, this work has sought to create new forms of knowledge that are informed by Action Research. Action Research with its emphasis on creating new knowledge by seeking to transform practice has become an important intellectual framework in which this work is located. The key ideas and principles of Freire and Boal resonate with the intellectual developments of Action Research and the centrality of reflective forms of learning that arise from participative forms of engagement. These forms of engagement are predicated on an action–reflection cycle in which personal experience and the insights of ordinary people assist in shaping and transforming practice. This, in turn, is the substantive framing for new forms of knowledge that arise from this ongoing dialectic of transformed practice and contextual theorising on the insights provided by ordinary people.

This article has outlined the development of Black Participative theology. As I have stated, this is the nexus of systematic/constructive forms of Black theology and Practical

theology. In the final part of the article, I have juxtaposed this work with recent examples of South African Practical theology. The examples chosen have been published in *Black Theology*, and given that they have all been offered to this publication are indicative of the attempts of their authors to link Practical theology in South Africa with Black theology. The articles referenced are seeking to go beyond the normative parameters of Practical theology as they attempt to empower ordinary people in South Africa.

This article explores epistemological and methodological frameworks underpinning the development of Participative Black theology. This development is juxtaposed with recent examples of South African Practical theology that is seeking to be in dialogue with Black theology. While some of these more recent works have different epistemological roots than my own, they are, nevertheless, united by a commitment to solidarity with ordinary people.

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Notes

- ¹ The relationship between Liberation theology and radical critical forms of education can be seen in [Schipani \(1988\)](#).
- ² Ordinary Theology is a movement that emerged over 20 years ago, where philosophers and theologians sought to explore the theological insights of ordinary people (meaning lay people who have not formally studied theology) using empirical research methodologies as a way of gaining intellectual insights into the belief perspectives held by congregations and individuals. See [Astley \(2002\)](#).
- ³ ‘Afrophobia’ can be understood as the intense anti-African sentiments underpinned by the historic demonisation of the African continent and Black Africans that is an outworking of the constructions of ‘race’ and the imposition of notions of inferiority on the people ‘racialised’ as less than when compared to White Europeans. Due to the history of anti-Black thinking and practice in South Africa due to the existence of a White settler community and the legal framework of apartheid, this context has been one of the primary places for the continued existence of Afrophobia. For further reflections on this, especially in the context of South Africa, see [Ochonu \(2020\)](#).

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