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Liberating liberation theologies in post-apartheid South Africa: New directions

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In taking the notions of dynamicity and change seriously, this article offers a critical, albeit partial, examination of the status quo of liberation theologies in South Africa. To that end, this article provided a background to our thinking on how and why the current discourse on liberation theologies must be challenged to embrace alternative liberative ways of thinking and being that exist outside of academia and, consequently, outside a liberative paradigm largely defined by academic liberation theologians. This article argued that interpreting the current liberationist conversation through Vincent Lloyd's concepts of domination and dignity – drawing on the black struggle – provides a valuable framework for understanding what constitutes liberation and liberation theology beyond the prescriptive academic discourses bound to a specific set of ideological lenses and practices. In other words, this article contends that a stronger framework for interlocution and praxis emerges when infused with dignity. This infusion allows both concepts to be understood primarily as grounded rather than dictated. In practice, this article proposes that this shift would enable academic liberation theologians to engage with new and diverse voices and knowledge outside the confines of academia in a less authoritative manner.

Contribution: This article contributes to the ongoing debate about what it means for liberation theologies to move with the times and respond to both new and old struggles. Instead of dwelling on the question of relevance – something that liberationists locally and globally have articulated and agreed upon – the article explores how academic discourse can open up to appreciate liberation theologies as relevant to the communities they serve, even when these theologies do not fit neatly within the established academic framework. This article does not claim that these theologies are dominant in faith communities; instead, we urge academia to identify and engage with these grounded theologies wherever they exist.

Keywords: academic hegemony; dignity; domination; interlocution; liberation theologies; praxis; South Africa.

Introduction

For a while now, theologians in South Africa and other parts of the world have been asking the question of whether liberation theologies (or particular types of liberation theologies) still matter (Cooper 2013; Dolamo 2016; Pillay 2020; West 2009). In South Africa, this question has been more pointedly asked and has become more relevant since the dawn of the new dispensation of democracy after the fall of apartheid in 1994. That is, what now that apartheid, the common adversary, is beaten? Since then, not only is there a growing consensus that apartheid lives on in the economic structures of the country (Bond 2004; Eligon, Chutel & Leatherby 2024; Mpofu-Walsh 2021; Msimang 2021; eds. Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni 2021), but liberation theologies have also very clearly moved on to a wider consideration of the multiple contemporary struggles and new ways of thinking (e.g. De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005; Headley 2022; Maluleke 2000), in true form to their contextual underpinning. Arguably, then, when liberation theological insiders or sympathisers ask this question in academic publications, the crux is generally on showing that this theological movement is as relevant and vibrant as ever, and, thus, in need of continuous interrogation given the changing contexts of injustice globally.

Against this background, and despite liberation theologies being self-reflexive about their relevance in today's world, we argue that this introspection is primarily proscribed through the limited lens of the academic lifeworld. In other words, it is largely academia that frames the discourse of the continued relevance of liberation theologies, and, in our view, this is a problem. As is well known, these theologies were born out of praxis, but over the years some have, in many instances, found their comfortable space as merely academic in orientation (Buffel 2017:5;

Petrella 2008:loc3412, 3509). That is, the justice praxis that first informed them appears to have been often replaced by an orientation that primarily centres intellectual reflection, complete with its navel-gazing. What follows, inevitably, and this is central to our argument, is that academics then often get to define and decide what counts as liberation theologies – at least when these theologies are discussed in academic contexts.

Vellem (2017:1) notes that Black Theology, his own liberation theological tradition, should 'move beyond rethinking and repeating its tried and tested ways of responding to black pain caused by racism and colonialism'. He suggests that Black Theology – and liberation theologies more broadly – needs to adapt to the times. Indeed, several theologians have suggested various ways in which liberation theologies have been or should be expanding or refocusing and being rethought. One of the ways of doing this has been to show that there are new themes that call to be tackled by liberation theologies, expanding the content that liberation theologians should centre in their work (Adera 2022; Duncan 2020; Maluleke 2020). There are also attempts at refining how liberation theologies should be approached or understood differently – and these resonate with the work in this article. For example, Nadar (2009) calls for a shift from liberation discourse to liberation pedagogy, emphasising the need for liberation theological movements to avoid stagnation within the corridors of academia. Here, discourse is framed as a specifically academic enterprise and pedagogy as a dialogical process that invites people of different social classes into conversation and work for transformation, as per Freire's (1970) argument in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

However, in our reading, Nadar still cedes to the intellectual the power to decide where the limits of what counts are, even if she is explicitly criticising the idea of an 'all-powerful' academic. As a result, we are keen to question the power of the academic hegemony further. Furthermore, Reddie (2020), writing in the UK but with strong links to South Africa, has called for Black Theology to once again better connect to the concrete realities of black people and suggests a stronger connection to spirituality or spiritual praxis, as it was spearheaded by Vellem, as a way forward. Moreover, in a recent introduction to a thematic journal issue on Black Theology, Nadar and Solomons (2022:1) suggest that the black theologians writing in the issue, among them scholars with a recent PhD such as Lerato Sandiswa Kobe and Hlulani Mdingi, have managed to bring out new ways of thinking about the subject, and importantly 'also challenge the exclusionary nature of the old frontiers, calling to attention how even liberation discourses can sometimes reinscribe hegemony'. We share this concern and join the conversation to think and rethink how to escape and challenge the shadow of academic hegemony in a context where the academic theologian, by default, holds a lot of power. Such participation is also a call for humility, a very important theological praxis.

Our argument

In this article, our particular interest is in what it could look like for liberation theologies to go beyond the academy and, importantly, be defined by those outside the walls of academia. Our aim is not to posit a simplistic binary of academic versus 'real world' liberation theologies. Rather, it is to ask, what happens when we take seriously Vellem's call to move with the times? Indeed, our focus remains with academic theologies, in a sense that we are keen to think of how they (ourselves included) could enter a conversation with locally circulating theologies, theologies that people in faith communities embody and construct, on a more equal footing than what often appears to be the case, as we have noted so far. In other words, what kind of theoretical tools can assist us today in leaving the beaten path and embracing new avenues of thinking and doing liberation theologies?

We begin by articulating the ways in which academic liberation theologians – despite all our collective attempts to think otherwise – hold the power in the liberation theological conversation, at least as it features in academia, quite contrary to the ethos of liberation theologies. More specifically, we begin by offering one reading of how limits to what counts as liberation or liberation theology are set in academia through a given reading of interlocution and praxis, and then move to critically engaging with these limits, appreciating the strengths but also critiquing the weaknesses. Through this, we aim to show how the key breach in the current academic liberation theological debate is the often way too powerful academic theologian. It is good to state upfront, too, that we do not see ourselves above or outside this problem, but acknowledge our own participation in the very discourse we criticise. In this article, we aim to find a way for not only the collective 'other', but ourselves too, beyond the walls of academia.

In search of alternatives, in the second part of the article, we engage with critical theoretical pointers that could form the basis of re-envisioned limits to liberation theologies and, in particular, a more expansive notion of interlocution and praxis that can embrace different liberative theologies that shape local faith communities and people of faith – who are members of these communities but also residents and citizens in broader societies. For this expansive engagement, we draw on the work of Lloyd (2022) on domination and dignity. While Lloyd's focus is on black dignity in particular, we argue that his understanding of the concepts of domination and dignity can help us shift the academic hegemonic discourse of liberation theologies in post-apartheid South Africa. We do not call for the core of the liberationist discourse that we locate in the concepts of interlocution and praxis to be discarded, but instead, we suggest that the discourse, including these concepts, is reread through a lens that centres domination and dignity, as they are articulated by Lloyd.

We have chosen Lloyd as a dialogue partner first and foremost because of the potential we see in the way he discusses domination and dignity, which raises a fruitful challenge for

the liberation theological discourses with which we engage. While one could ask why not look for a theory from Africa, we believe that engaging Lloyd is meaningful, also from a liberative perspective. He writes as a black scholar in the concrete, painful context of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States – which has resonances in the South African context with the Fallist movement (Ampofo 2016; Daniel & Platzky Miller 2024; Kenyon & Madlingozi 2022). For us, the South African liberation theological discourse as a theory from Africa remains the focal point in this article, and Lloyd's thinking on domination and dignity becomes a tool for challenging what we draw from our own wells. The intention is not to bring in an American theory to define the future, but to acknowledge the interconnected nature of the struggles of those who occupy the underside of history everywhere for liberation, for dignity. Lloyd is not brought in as the last word, but as a conversation partner in a context where too often struggles are fought in silos and disaggregated. In other words, we see contours of shared trans-Atlantic experiences that might find more valence on both sides, akin to what Gilroy (1993) termed the Black Atlantic.

Lastly, whether tweaking the limits to liberation theology in light of Lloyd's conceptualisation of domination and dignity has the power to allow the academic liberation theologian to truly make space for the embodied and potentially liberative theologies in faith communities will have to be tested in practice. The threat is that it simply turns into a new tool for the academic community to remain all-powerful. Yet, we see potential for another outcome and propose this tweaked framework as a tool for academic theologians who work empirically to make sense of what is going on in faith communities. As is then obvious, this is indeed a tool for academic theologians, and we do not claim that it creates an equal playing ground between the academic and the community. What we do believe, though, is that it will allow academic liberation theologies to be shaped in clearer ways by theologies of people in faith communities. When this happens, the liberation theologies we teach in theology programmes would also look different, with the place of the academic theologian being refined.

The academic limits to liberation theology

Interlocution and praxis as concepts that define the liberationist limits

One of the ways through which the academic hegemony in shaping liberation theologies is manifested in framing the discursive language of liberation in specific ideological terms. A key part of this ideological hold in the South African context is through two concepts, namely interlocutors and praxis. In our reading, these two specific conceptual concerns feature as criteria that bind different academic discourses of liberation theologies together, as has been argued by Hankela (2020) and Vähäkangas et al. (2022:269), for example. As is evident here in Hankela and Vahakangas' conceptualising of the liberation theological discourse, it is good to remind the reader that we do not locate ourselves outside this criticism.

Different theologians diverge in how they use the two core concepts. Yet, there is convergence in how even critical readings of the discourse through the conceptual lenses provided by interlocution and praxis allow one to position liberation theologies in terms that resonate with an established academic historiography of liberation theologies. In other words, there is a specific method by which one analyses liberation theologies as fitting through a concern with interlocution and praxis. The argument that liberation theologies are not defined by content but by method (Frostin 1988; Vellem 2012; West 2009) supports our choice for a concept-oriented approach to defining liberation theologies. One of the foundational texts in this regard is the 1988 book by Swedish theologian Per Frostin, who sets out to translate what was happening theologically in the Global South to Western readers, focusing on Black Theology in South Africa and theology in the context of Ujamaa in Tanzania. He leans on the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians (EATWOT) to draft a framework that reflects the method of liberation theology.

For Frostin (1988:6–11), this method consists of five 'emphases': the choice of the poor as interlocutors; a perception of God as someone who takes sides in history; the understanding of social reality through a lens of conflicts; the incorporation of social scientific tools – and no longer only philosophical tools – in *doing* theology; and the centrality of praxis in any liberation theological space and work. As he unpacked this, Frostin (1988:3–4) wrote about the 'critical break' reflected in this paradigm vis-à-vis the then mainstream Western theological paradigm of the 1980s: commitment to the transformation of the world became the criterion of truth, to the point of EATWOT theologians declaring the Western theology of the time irrelevant as it was not committed to justice. At the time, this method was drafted in conversation with theologies on the ground. Consequently, framing our critique of the hegemony of academic discourse of liberation theologies around these threshold concepts serves as a useful starting point for us, as we want to reimagine the liberationist discourse in a way that allows people on the ground (as in 'the masses') – outside of the usual academic gatekeepers' club – to be taken seriously when we now rethink the limits to liberation.

Moreover, in their reading and use of Frostin, South African scholars West (2009, 2014) and Vellem (2012) both emphasise that the choice of interlocutors is the key to understanding the liberationist method. This means that, first and foremost, the liberationist choice is to listen to and know the world from the perspective of the poor, where the poor refers to those who exist on the margins of power. This is not an easy task, as Vellem (2012) has shown in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, where blackness as the sole category no longer works when making the choice of interlocutors in Black Theology. Moreover, and importantly so, interlocution should not be understood in a conceptual vacuum. Theologies across schools of thought speak of the poor or opting for the poor – but what the choice in liberation theologies stands for is unique (Vellem 2012:348–350). In Frostin's attempt to capture the liberationist method, four other emphases inform interlocution, something

Vellem emphasises in making the above argument of the way in which the preferential option for the poor needs to be understood within the broader liberationist paradigm. In reading the current liberationist discourse, it appears that the concept of praxis (i.e. action and reflection towards transformation, as Freire defines it), helps determine when interlocution is indeed liberationist: the liberationist choice of interlocutors cannot be divorced from the idea that liberation theologies are rooted in praxis that aims at just transformation, or else the liberationist edge is cut off.

Reading the South African liberationist conversation through these chosen lenses allows one to see how they structure the debate. For example, in Farid Esack's Islamic liberation theology, the preferential option for the poor (i.e. interlocution) and praxis are foundational pillars as his theology centres 'the experiences of the marginalized [*interlocution*] coupled with struggle against oppression [*praxis*]' and places their significance right next to that of scripture (Rahemtulla 2017:10). Likewise, writing from within Black Theology of liberation, Boesak (2017) locates Miriam as the liberationist voice in the story of Exodus, choosing her as the interlocutor over her brother Moses who carries the patriarchal power in their context (interlocution). Boesak frames Miriam as one who speaks and does liberation (praxis). Masenya (2005:747), in an article where she unpacks her *bosadi* approach to biblical hermeneutics, in no unclear terms, centres interlocution and praxis in the make-up of this approach. She argues that, 'the major hermeneutical focus of the *bosadi* biblical hermeneutics is the unique experiences of an African-South African woman, with a view to her liberation'. To include one more example, urban liberation theologian, De Beer (2017) argues that the church is to learn from social movements, such as Abahlali Basemjondolo, where the organised poor's perspective (interlocution) is central to the struggle for justice (praxis).

The choice of these two concepts does not mean that there would be no other concepts that are central to and shared among liberation theologies, such as solidarity, conscientisation, conceptions of social justice and so on. What we aimed at above was showing what the minimum criteria for being called a liberationist appear to be. Obviously, it is a choice to read the above material in this way, but at the same time, this reading shows how the two concepts allow one to bring authors from different corners of the South African liberationist conversation together under one umbrella, an umbrella that we find both useful and too restrictive and limited in its capacity to imagine who else might want to claim space under its shade for different reasons other than those that fit the prescribed one. It is important to be explicit about there being some ideological value in the threshold concepts in that they provide a limited focus, which is important in the context of struggles for justice. In what follows, we further outline some ways in which we see this value manifesting, as well as how this focus limits the capacity for dynamic thinking within the academic discursive spaces of liberation theologies and should therefore be challenged.

Before we move on, it should be noted that we do not necessarily claim this reading of the South African liberation theological conversation in academia to be representative of the said conversation as a whole, even if we suggest that it has traction beyond the examples presented. To illustrate this traction, we intentionally selected scholars from various liberation theologies as examples. Moreover, we have opted to, in particular, include voices that have been influential for a long time and continue to actively contribute to the discourse because of their weight in the conversation. This is not to be understood as a dismissal of younger scholars, some of whom are struggling with similar concerns to ours, as noted in the introduction. Also, the academic writing of many of the more established scholars, to whom we refer in making our case, has its roots in concrete, grounded struggles. While we appreciate this, we ask what happens when academic liberationist writing takes on a life of its own – seemingly rather far removed from faith communities. How do we bring the faith community into the academic world in order for the way in which we think about liberation to be constantly challenged?

Appraisal and critique of the academic limits to liberation

To reiterate, the choice of interlocutors that culminates in the preferential option for the poor was a defining factor in the epistemological break between liberation theologies and the mainstream theologies of the time decades ago (see Frostin 1988:6–7). This choice locates the conversation in the margins, demands the world to be seen from the margins and – in many instances – with those in the margins. The EATWOT theologians declared all theology not committed to action and the margins irrelevant (cited in Frostin 1988:3). As Gustavo Gutiérrez's work illustrates, this is not seen as a once-off choice but a continuous conversion (Gutiérrez 2003:106), required of not only the privileged but the poor too (Gutiérrez 2009:325), in a world that the liberationist argues is defined by the powerful. The poor were not chosen because of their ethical standards or higher knowledge, but because of where they are and what they experience as oppressed communities (De la Torre 2023:13, 16). This, De la Torre (2013:13) argues, allows them to see differently and, hence, we need that knowledge if we want to imagine a future that is more just.

Besides being foundational to understanding what liberation theologies stand for, the choice of the poor as interlocutors makes it clear that there is a need to resist the co-optation of liberationist language by the powerful (Petrella 2008:loc3418) and, to some extent, understanding this language within the broader framework provided by the threshold concepts may guard against such co-optation (see Vellem 2012:348–350). Moreover, there are 'multiple marginalities' (De la Torre 2013:12) that need to be discerned anew in changing contexts, as is evident in the incorporation of 'new' margins in the liberationist conversation over time, one of the latest examples being the focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) experiences

(Adera 2022; Duncan 2020). For this reason, who the liberation theologian chooses as their interlocutors is an ongoing question and process. When liberation theologies so often appear to sit comfortably in the academic corridors, as noted poignantly by Petrella (2008:loc3412) who writes from the Latin American perspective but whose words speak loud and clear to the South African context as well, it becomes evident that the academic in one or another way determines who the interlocutor should be in this space – and it is the academic who holds power over this choice.

An example of this process, and the academic power involved, is the emphasis in some South African writing on the choice of 'the organised poor' as the interlocutor. In other words, the academic needs to decide who is 'organised'. An example of this is Gerald West's work, where he explicitly refers to 'organised' poor as the interlocutors, when speaking of the Contextual Bible study and the poor, and states that 'their (organised) presence is central to liberation hermeneutics' (West 2014:5; brackets in original), and further that:

> Contextual Bible Study, some of us argue, […] is a potential site that can be controlled by poor and marginalised ordinary readers, provided they are organised. If they control the Contextual Bible Study site, their local knowledge will be used in the interpretive process. (West 2014:4)

While there might be many reasons for West to emphasise the importance of the interlocutors being organised, including perhaps an attempt at responding to peer critique of his earlier work, it nevertheless goes to show that the academic here chooses a particular kind of people among 'the poor' to listen to. In this same article, West (2014:8–9) also speaks of the scholar's 'grant[ing] an epistemological privilege to the knowledge and analysis and resources of the poor and marginalised'. This is typical liberationist language that many of us use, but even as such, it further shows how much power we who speak this language assume with regard to those among the community whose voice we choose.

In a more implicit manner, the idea of organised poor seems to also inform De Beer's (2017) important prophetic call for the church (and theological education) to listen to urban social movements:

> If the church fails to respond in appropriate and bold ways to the challenges South African cities and particularly the urban poor face, and if theological education deliberately chooses to locate itself in disembodied ways as immaterial, intellectual or 'scientific' exercise, largely detached from the struggles of the urban masses who are poor and condemned to urban fringes and who happens to form the majority of the church's urban membership, then God has no obligation to continuously try to change the course of history, or to liberate the urban poor, through the church.
>
> In this article I consider urban social movements as possible irruptions of the Spirit: movements organised around the longing of excluded people, or nonpersons, to reclaim their humanity, their place in the city and indeed their right to participate in making the city. (p. 1)

When looking for the interlocutor outside the church, De Beer identifies it in four social movements, the politics of which he presumably agrees with, organisations that in many ways reflect some of the key insight of the preferential option for the poor and the primacy of praxis: Ndifuna Ukwazi, Reclaim the City, the Social Justice Coalition and Abahlali baseMjondolo. Both West and De Beer's choice of the interlocutor is in line with the liberationist position, and, indeed, cannot be faulted. Yet, both instances show how the choice of interlocutors in academic liberation theologies is ultimately a choice by the academic who chooses a community, a person, or people to be heard and involved as contributors in the (academic) conversation of liberation.

Another example is the debate among black theologians about who is or should be the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation. Vellem (2012), among others, has provided a convincing argument regarding not all black people being the interlocutors of Black Theology of liberation in the democratic South Africa. Kobo (2022:635), a black, African womanist theologian, for her part, has, on the one hand, criticised Black Theology for not 'include[*ing*] women in the search for life-affirming forms of liberation knowledge for Black humanity', but, on the other hand, also turns the gaze to womanism and poignantly acknowledges that:

> The question who the key interlocutors of womanism are in spaces like the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, for example, is essential because of the critiques of the circle being elitist and exclusionary. (Kobo 2022:655)

Here too, the academic thus makes the call of who the interlocutors are or should be, even if it were through negative dialectics and self-critique.

In a way similar to that of the choice of interlocutors, what constitutes praxis also remains – at the end of the day – something that the academic has power over. What committed action or transformation is can be somewhat elusive, and again seems to be predetermined by the academic authority, in most instances, centring structural change. Paradoxically, the academic liberationist discourse has been criticised for becoming a mere language that is often divorced from action – even if it praises praxis:

> Liberation theologies were born of rebellion … To make these questions [related to whether liberation theology has become just a kind of writing] disappear liberation theology must once again rebel; this time, however, it must rebel against itself. (Petrella 2008:loc3509)

In South Africa, Buffel (2017) writes a few years ago that:

> Black Theology is a theology of the people that must be liberated from academic books, from comfortable conference centres, seminaries and universities but unleashed into the streets where there is pain and suffering as a result of poverty and oppression. (p. 5)

In light of these utterances, from two continents and a decade apart, it becomes questionable whether this discourse can claim authority to judge real-world action in

faith communities, as it often does. Nadar's (2009) call for a move from liberationist discourse to liberationist pedagogy takes seriously the distance of academic liberation theology from action. In the context of the article, Nadar calls for academics to carry their responsibility in the process of conscientisation in the community. While this is a welcome criticism, at the same time, it again shines light on the authority the academic has when it comes to what is regarded as positive social change.

The work of the South African scholars with whom we have engaged, together with the work of many others, helped to mould what liberation theologies are in South Africa. What this body of academic liberationist knowledge seems to have in common is the academic becoming the authoritative voice by making the decisions of who fits the(ir) liberationist mould. Is there a way to avoid this? Perhaps not entirely, but it appears that if we draw on recent theorising from the broader black debate, there are tools that can assist in opening up the space to faith communities without losing the liberationist framework. To this end, we engage Lloyd and his thinking on domination and dignity.

We are thinking of the liberationist framework with Lloyd in the context of a research project we are busy with that focuses on how, if at all, leaders and members of selected Christian churches construct and embody revolutionary theologies both as members of faith communities and citizens and/or residents, and how then, based on the findings, liberation theologies should be taught in tertiary institutions in South Africa (Hankela 2025). In other words, our team works on select Christian churches, wanting to make space to understand what could be liberative within the theologies of those who inhabit these spaces. In this context, if we want to take the people we engage with seriously, it appears arrogant at best to simply apply the generally accepted liberationist lenses to determine what counts as liberative, for the reasons already discussed. While we believe that our argument speaks to the liberation theological conversation in South Africa more broadly, this is our key motivation to engage with Lloyd's take on domination and dignity, looking to adjust the liberationist tool kit in a manner that opens up the conversation for the sake of giving the faith community more space while holding onto the strength that is embedded in liberation theologies.

The struggle against domination

As we have noted so far, in mapping the South African discourse on liberation theologies, we wish not only to challenge the assumption that liberation theologies are what academics determine interlocutors should think and do. But we also challenge the opposite idea that academics are necessarily immediately misguided if they do not always simply cede space to theologies on the ground and portray them as perfect as they are. Neither one of the two extremes, as we see it, is conducive as we grapple with the question of what constitutes liberation or liberation theologies. In a similar vein, in the introduction to the *Contending Modernities* Symposium on Lloyd's (2022) book, *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination*, Joshua Lupo makes a very important observation that captures part of our concern in this article.

Lupo notes that the question of how much credence one should give to interlocutors versus how much one should be critical of them is a perennial problem. Specifically, he argues that:

> Confronting the push and pull between theory and practice has long challenged scholars in the field of religion and humanities more broadly. Should we take what our interlocutors say at face value without critically questioning their claims? Or should we apply a scholarly apparatus that ignores the content of their claims and instead prioritizes our theoretical concepts? (Lupo 2023)

Admittedly, we find this distinction problematic for a number of reasons. It is not only caught up in a false ideological warfare between academics of liberation theologies or other progressive academics and the interlocutors of these traditions, including theologians outside academia, who can supposedly only be fully embraced or completely ignored. This distinction also leaves no room for the dynamism and plasticity of academic liberation theologies, including their abilities to be responsive to their contexts at each and every moment and, thus, not constituting stultified ideas of what is liberation as the only other option to valorising grounded theologies in communities.

To the end of challenging this ideological distinction (in the Marxist sense of false consciousness), part of what we believe can help alleviate this problem is to engage with a multiplicity and diversity of ecclesial spaces as places where we might begin to look for liberation theologies in/of post-apartheid South Africa, and to ask what happens when we allow for contextual understandings and articulations of liberation/liberative/revolutionary theologies to occupy the foreground. That is, what happens to the register of liberation theologies when we start from diverse entry points, including foregrounding ecclesial spaces and individual narratives that are not primarily informed by the academic discourse? What theoretical tools will allow us to do this in a meaningful manner? Our argument is that such an approach to liberation theologies at best opens up a space for encountering liberation theologies in ways that are responsive to particular contexts, which is a foundational idea in liberation theologies. Moreover, a space is opened for different versions of what might constitute the core of liberation theologies in post-apartheid South Africa. It is an attempt at bringing the struggles in communities and in everyday contexts into conversation with how academics have come to speak about struggle, without trying to necessarily undo the tension between the two.

Importantly, the call for the opening up of the canon should not be taken automatically as signifying the dismissal of the traditional academic discourse, but it is to challenge its hegemony in proscribing liberation and liberation theologies for a long time. A hegemony that has led to some discontent – expressed specifically by those who want to give back liberation theologies to interlocutors on the ground (see e.g.

Buffel 2010, 2017). We, too, want to foreground the agency of interlocutors on the ground, but we also want to, as Lloyd argues in his book, think with the interlocutors by probing and engaging with their visions (the way we engage with our academic colleagues, too, if we take them seriously). At the end then, when giving them a kind of academically approved shape and coherence, we take their words as points of departure (Lloyd 2022:viii–ix) while we also bring the academic apparatus into the mix: the aim is not to simply valorise the theologies in faith communities but to represent them honestly and then engage them just as honestly, without claiming to have the final word as an academic. Indeed, at times, bringing the visions of the interlocutors into conversation with academic constructs, as equally important, means a critique of one or the other, but often both simultaneously.

Consequently, we suggest that one of the ways of opening the liberation theologies space and giving academic shape to the visions articulated in ecclesial spaces about liberation theologies – for the sake of them informing the academic conversation and teaching of liberation theologies in academia – is to think about a paradigm shift regarding what constitutes core concerns of liberation theologies, including what theoretical grammar might be useful for naming what constitutes liberation theologies today and how the concepts of interlocution and praxis should be read (if they are relevant at all). To that end, we are drawn to the work of Lloyd and, in particular, his argument regarding dignity as the central pursuit of resisting domination. While Lloyd writes specifically about black dignity, we draw out the implications of his arguments for liberation theologies broadly, including but not limited to black liberation theologies.

The pursuit of dignity[1]

According to Lloyd (2018), and worth quoting at length:

> The standard history of dignity told by political theorists is based around a shift from one meaning of dignity before modernity to another meaning of dignity in modernity … Before modernity, dignity suggested the honor and privileges associated with high rank or office. Dignity in this sense was attributed to kings and nobles, church officials and government officials. Dignity was an attribute of, as the word suggests, dignitaries … According to Jeremy Waldron, in the late eighteenth century, a 'transvaluation of values' occurs: Now, it is ordinary people, rather than classes of elites, who have dignity, while the dignity previously ascribed to elites comes to be seen as 'superficial or bogus'. Ordinary people all share in the same rank, all share in humanity, and so all share in a basic type of equality. Dignity now, in modernity, is ascribed to each person by virtue of his or her humanity. We still talk of dignitaries, and about politicians or other elites sullying the dignity of their office, but in political and legal discourse dignity refers to the inherent worth of each human being. Dignity is democratised. In other words, this form of dignity is grounded in human rights discourse and proposes a clear, relatively uncontroversial claim, one that is endorsed broadly by many religions and traditions of the world (or so its proponents insist), namely, that each human being has inherent, incalculable worth. (pp. 80–81)

However, for Lloyd, this democratised sense of dignity does not capture a better sense of dignity, which he argues is to be found in black dignity.

In particular, as he further notes:

> [*T*]he concept of dignity found in black political thought, at its best, is neither attributed to classes of individuals because of their rank nor is it ascribed to all individuals by virtue of their humanity. Dignity is ascribed to those who struggle against domination. (Lloyd 2018:81)

For Lloyd (2018), this observation is important for our own argument:

> Those who dominate, or who participate in systems of domination, do not have dignity. Those who are entirely dominated, to the point that all of their speech and actions are determined by the dynamics of domination, do not have dignity. But those who are subjected to domination and challenge that domination in whatever way, from passive resistance to active political organizing to aesthetic imagining, those individuals are properly described as having dignity. (p. 81)

In other words, this form of dignity 'is not ascribed because of a status but because of a performance. You have dignity because of something you do rather than because of who you are' (p. 81). Therefore, in terms of our overall argument, academic liberation theologies that proscribe the discursive limits of liberation theologies are often party to the very domination that liberation theologies struggle to topple. As such, they then undermine the dignity of the very people they claim to represent by forcing on them prescribed understandings of liberation or liberation theologies.

While Lloyd maintains that you have dignity based on 'something you do' resonates with the idea of interlocutors being chosen because they are 'organised', the doing involved in resisting domination could take multiple forms and is not restricted to a given way of being and doing in the world. While this way of defining the interlocutor, based on resisting domination, may raise fears of the preferential option for the poor being lost, it is good to remind that Lloyd writes from the perspective of black pain and struggle. This is not a move towards an 'all lives matter' type of relativism. Moreover, moving with Lloyd to rethink interlocution does not mean that the academic would not still hold power in academic discourse, but the space that opens for those in faith communities to steer the conversation broadens significantly.

As we have already outlined so far, a core factor defining liberation theologies in the current conversation is doing or performing certain actions in a reflective cycle that lead to the transformation of the socio-political sphere from domination to liberation (praxis). While the liberationist conversation is not exhausted in praxis as outlined here, in our view, the strong emphasis on such praxis may risk liberation theologies being understood merely in terms of justice and love of

1.Parts of the argument presented in this section first appeared in S. Dube. Struggling Against Domination: The Ontology of Black Life Everywhere. *Contending Modernities*, 11 July 2023. https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/theorizing-modernities/domination-ontology-black-life/.

humanity that materialise in a particular 'organised' manner. Lloyd affirms as much with respect to dignity when he notes that, while 'black political struggles, and in the background black political theology, are more often identified with themes of love and justice than with dignity', he hypothesises that:

> [*I*]f dignity takes center stage, forms of black political struggle seemingly at odds with each other – black nationalists and integrationists, black feminists and Afrocentrists, black writers and black community organizers – in fact appear to be animated by the same fundamental impulse. (Lloyd 2018:73)

This impulse is the pursuit and centreing of dignity as arising from resisting domination in whatever form it takes.

For our article's context, this means Lloyd can assist us in pushing the boundaries of what we understand as liberation theologies so that we can see such liberation in spaces where it does not take the familiar form of the structural and academic, but manifests in the realm of the personal and ecclesial. The shape and form that interlocution and praxis take in these contexts might not be at odds with traditional liberationist normative thinking, but they will look different. That is to say, the current limitation of conceptualising liberation theologies through the notions of interlocution and praxis understood through a particular ideological lens delimits the possibilities of what might be liberatory for people where such liberation does not fit the traditional script of liberation. But when the domination and dignity lens is brought to bear on the situations under scrutiny, the liberatory potential becomes evident. Here, concrete examples might be apt to clarify the argument, and we choose two specifically controversial ones because we think that they best illustrate our argument. To be clear, these examples are not presented as new foci or themes for liberation theologies. They are presented here as examples that illustrate how the domination and dignity lens allows us to begin to reimagine where we can find liberation and liberation theologies being embodied and at work – and what they may look like.

The first comes from Dube (2024), who has argued that African Neo-Pentecostalism's definition of liberation is not limited to the spiritual sense of freedom from personal sin but also accounts for the broader structural contexts within which such personal sin arises. Drawing on Steve Biko's writing, Dube argues that as a theology informed by a desire for self-determination, African Neo-Pentecostalism provides the black African Christian with the means to transcend all forms of oppression (spiritual and material). Consequently, for example:

> [*T*]he Neo-Pentecostals concern with prosperity, should not be read only at the register of neoliberal accumulation. The desire for material well-being should also be understood in terms of transcending socio-economic oppression [*domination*] and doing so by not relying only on the state as the provider, but on the ethics of working on the self [*dignity*] and relying on God to provide the means, including special favour. (Dube 2024:14)

In fact, Bowler (2018) puts it well when she notes that the prosperity gospel offers a message of hope:

> What gives the prosperity movement breadth and depth for many is its thorough accounting for the pain of life and the longing we have for restoration. For those trapped in failing bodies or broken relationships or the painful possibility that their lives might never be made whole. (n.p.)

Therefore, if liberation is apprehended in the terms of interlocution and praxis that are understood and redefined from the ground up through the lens of domination and dignity, Neo-Pentecostal theology should be regarded as a rich space from which to also rethink liberation theologies for today's problems. That is to say, the rise of Neo-Pentecostalism churches should not only be read through the various limited lenses that have been put forth in much scholarship. These range from a focus on the links between Neo-Pentecostalism and propping up of a neoliberal order (De Witte 2012; Jennings 2020) to analyses that critique the Neo-Pentecostals as an aberration of some pure form of Pentecostalism (eds. Kgatle & Anderson 2020; Orogun & Pillay 2022) where its politics remain largely spiritualised rather than materialised. In reading African Neo-Pentecostal political subjectivity through the lens of liberation theologies, we are proposing that we expand the repertoires of meaning associated with the rise of Neo-Pentecostalism in 21st-century Africa, including how this expansion might also be useful to think about in the context of post-apartheid liberation theologies. Here it is good to remind the reader that our proposal is not to then just say that this *is* a liberation theology, but rather to bring this theology into dialogue with the academic liberation theologian, not as the right answer, but still as an equal – and see what transpires. Obviously, this does not exclude criticism towards the movement. Indeed, the idea is to take the 'other' seriously enough not to simply either demonise or romanticise what is going on.

Our second example that speaks to what the broadening of the liberationist gaze could look like in practice is controversial in its own way. Here we want to engage with Hankela's (2017) argument, which she developed in the explicit context of the liberation theological discourse, that charity needs to be identified and conceptualised as part of the broader liberationist framework that aims for just transformation in the world. Based on fieldwork conducted among young, low-income Zimbabweans in Johannesburg, charity – at times in its most mundane forms – is shown to be a source of motivation and dignity, besides at times being a means of day-to-day survival. In other instances, charity became the measure of credibility, showing whether the talk is walked when encountering real human beings. While charity is often lambasted in the critical discourses, Hankela's argument shows why a social justice approach to praxis requires a charitable component in the unjust world we live in, even if not all charity can be called liberationist. This example draws attention to what is possible when the narratives of interlocutors who may not be organised in the liberationist sense – but still yearn for dignity in other ways – get space in

determining the questions academics grapple with. The liberationist discourse is used in the article as a critical conversation partner, but not one that predetermines the outcome. In this sense, this argument on charity from some years ago already anticipated the theoretical argument we present in this article.

Such readings of African Neo-Pentecostalism (a theological tradition not conventionally understood as part of liberation theological discourse) or charity (a response to injustice that is hardly central in the current liberationist conversation that centres structural responses) show how redefining interlocution and praxis through the lens of Lloyd's thinking of domination and dignity allows the academic theologian to take the interlocutors' views of liberation – that do not align with the academic discourses framed by a hegemonic proscription of liberation theologies – seriously without valorising them. In the first example, interlocution and praxis are in ways that do not undermine African Neo-Pentecostals but ones that foreground their self-articulation in dignified terms that stress this tradition's struggle against domination in terms of both spiritual and material well-being of its adherents. In the second example, in upending the traditional liberationist discourse of charity as largely patronising, we are provided with another example where interlocutors define for themselves what is dignified living, including praxes that affirm such dignity. In other words, if interlocution and praxis are read through the lens of dignity, the academic theologian finds theoretical tools to include the faith community at the table when reimagining what liberation theologies look like in South Africa today.

Conclusion

We have offered a critical reading of the status quo of liberation theologies in South Africa. Through this, we have provided a background to our thinking on how and why the current discourse on liberation theologies in today's South Africa needs to be challenged to embrace alternative liberative ways of thinking and being that can be found outside academia or outside the liberative ways of being defined in academia. We have argued that reading the liberationist conversation through Vincent Lloyd's notions of domination and dignity provides a useful way of making sense of what can count as liberation theologies beyond the proscriptive academic discourse bound to interlocution and praxis (read through a particular set of ideological lenses) as the non-negotiables of liberation theologies. In what we have argued, interlocution and praxis would serve as stronger frameworks when infused with dignity, conceptualised primarily as grounded rather than dictated.

That is, as a retort to the focus on interlocution and praxis that are defined in limiting ways, we have offered our argument that draws on Lloyd's work on dignity. We have argued that the shift of focus to domination and, linked to it, the dignity that Lloyd offers in his work, helps to better frame the concern of liberation theologies in ways that go beyond the traditional interlocution-praxis nexus. Dignity, we have shown, should be a central concern of liberation theologies in a context where structural injustice is not the only enemy of justice, but exists alongside other forms of injustices that do not bear an easily identifiable source but can still be named by those who struggle with them. Importantly, centring dignity would allow the academic liberation of theological discourse to be challenged by faith communities. In this way, we have aimed to shift the conversation of liberation from the grip of its academic decadence into the space of struggling and wrestling, a space where the faith communities are both brought to the (academic) table but also engaged critically.

Briefly put, we have tried to offer new vocabulary for liberation theologies in post-apartheid South Africa that foregrounds domination and dignity as more reflective of the contemporary response to the changed forms of injustices that cannot be adequately addressed only by granting interlocution primacy to people that the academic determines to be oppressed (and organised) and stressing a praxis that aims at justice as it is understood by the academic.

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Authors' contributions

S.I.D. and E.A.H. were responsible for conceptualising the article, conducting relevant literature reviews, writing assigned sections and editing the final draft.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval for the broader project was submitted to the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, and consent was granted on 02 June 2023. The ethics approval number is REC-01-405-2023.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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