

Ignite some agency: how teaching assistants engage whiteness at a South African university

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ABSTRACT: Decolonial scholarship, although multifaceted, includes questioning how abstract theorisations could concretely reform department-specific pedagogies. This study builds on the proposition that decolonisation is served, at least partially, by department-specific pedagogies that oppose whiteness. It is grounded in a Department of English at a historically-white South African university. Using critical whiteness studies (CWS), I launch a discourse analysis of the experiential narratives expressed by Teaching Assistants during individual interviews. CWS equips me to examine how these contractually-employed educators manage their intersectional subjectivities as they facilitate small-group discussions among undergraduates in support of professors' official lectures. I focus on their reactions to the way students explore experiences of subordination.

KEYWORDS: discourse analysis, whiteness, racism, critical whiteness studies

INTRODUCTION

Tamara:

If students link their experiences with the text, it shows that they understand the text and find it meaningful. It's not just something they read for marks, it impacts their thinking about everyday life, to identify oppression and ignite some agency.

Neo:

People feel so stifled. So we need these conversations. Even I didn't know what other black students were facing. I needed to get my scales shaken off my eyes.

This study is animated by three concerns. First, decolonisation unmasks how coloniality suffuses higher education with violence, but institutionalised whiteness threatens its progress. Some scholars are responding by bridging abstract theorisations of decolonisation with pedagogic reform at the level of institutional policy, but also down to department-specific changes (Makombe 2021; Wale 2019; Makhubela 2018).

Second, from broad institutional to department-specific levels, antiracist praxis is part of decolonisation. Some departments already facilitate antiracist learning, including studies in postcolonial literature, but deepening such critical pedagogies remains paramount (Mueller 2017).

Third, decolonial scholars could mobilise insights from critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness studies (CWS) (Makhubela 2018; Adams, Salter, Kurtis, Naemi, & Estrada-Villalta 2018). Both value counter-storytelling. Should counter-narratives feature in the pedagogies of some departments/disciplines? Both problematise covert racism, systemic inequity and discourses of white ignorance. Should white ignorance be methodically addressed in disciplines dedicated to unmaking material injustices and racist institutional cultures?

This study participates in these debates, grounded in a Department of English in a historically-white South African university (HWU). Many CWS undertakings centre students' narratives, but this project foregrounds contractually-employed teaching assistants (henceforth simply Assistants), since they are required to explicitly broach theorisations of racism with undergraduates, which could counter silence, avoidance and ignorance. This renders their narratives potentially valuable to CWS.

Using CWS, I conduct a discourse analysis of the experiential narratives expressed by Assistants during individual interviews and examine how Assistants reflect on opportunities to resist or preserve forms of whiteness while teaching postcolonial literature to small groups of undergraduates. I hone my analyses on Assistants' discomfort with and reactions to some students' penchant for invoking personal experience.

Many CWS projects investigate students' lived experiences based on the antiracist affordances of specific courses (Mueller 2020, 2017; Kelly 2017). To my knowledge, no discourse analyses scrutinise narratives collected from contractually-employed teaching assistants in South African departments of English. This study does so. It surfaces how Assistants manage their intersectional subjectivities and discomforting experiences while facilitating small-group discussions among undergraduates in support of professors' official lectures on postcolonial literature. Soon, I will delineate the conditions of Assistants' work. First, I outline two theoretic touchstones for my analysis.

(IN)VULNERABILITY AND IGNORANCE

Broadly, this study uses CWS to chart how whiteness truncates encounters with knowledge about racism during tutorial sessions on postcolonial literature. Earlier studies have mapped discourses that equip everyday white actors to deny the systemic dimensions of racism by atomising it as individual prejudice and by exculpating whites as

passively enacting racism out of habit (Kelly 2017). Even universities that prize critical thinking and diversity can still develop novel forms of resistance against uncomfortable learning about racism. From this broad vantage, I distinguish two touchstones.

First, Wale (2019:1189) discursively analyses the narratives of South African students who self-identify as white and who study at an HWU—institutions with histories, symbols, traditions, cultures and curricula organised around whiteness and systemic racism. One of these narratives, called “out of my comfort zone”, surfaces how some white students sincerely wrestle with the power-disruptive, ignorance-rupturing discomfort they encounter upon becoming, “vulnerable to learning about the experiences of black students” (Wale 2019:1200). I detail her argument later, but for now this observation suggests that if such “epistemic vulnerability” is traceable among students, then Assistants could evince similar modes of knowing that are, “open to uncomfortable learning” (Wale 2019:1200). Moreover, these Assistants could engage undergraduates in such learning.

To clarify, the above points are not exclusively pertinent to white racialisation. Participants in this study self-identify along multiple racial lines, but I read Wale’s (2019:1200) “out of my comfort zone” as suggesting that if students can embody vulnerability, then Assistants could also show such vulnerability and grasp that many students, including white students, need to undergo learning about racism that is conducive to vulnerability. Wale (2019:1191) avers that this vulnerability can foster, “critical cultural openness”, but what this openness implies for people who are differently situated in an intersectionally-hierarchical society, like South Africa, is an intricate question. Wale (2019:2014) advises that, “the same requirement for critical cultural openness may not be appropriate for black people”. My interest lies in uncovering the kinds of discomfort that Assistants report, the discourses through which they affix meaning to uncomfortable teaching experiences, and what this might disclose about vulnerability in relation to antiracist pedagogy.

Second, Mueller’s (2020) conceptualisation of white ignorance furnishes a proviso to Wale (2019) by elucidating how white students can profess insights into racism while controlling the consequences of knowing, both epistemologically and affectively, often by means of what is called strategic ignorance. Although small-group tutorials on postcolonial literature might indeed prompt the vulnerability that Wale (2019) observes, the depth of that epistemic and affective vulnerability remains uncertain. It might be counterweighted when white students (and white Assistants) strategically curate what they are willing to know about systemic racism. Relatedly, how Assistants who do not self-identify as white assign meaning to teaching experiences might yield insights into how they resist whiteness and ignorance. In short, my point is that Assistants’ activities, and their reflections on these activities, proffer an opening for CWS that differs from, yet contributes to, research with students, full-time staff, intuitional policies and other domains of contestation.

The research aims addressed in this article can be summarised as follows. Assistants were interviewed about their experiences with teaching about racism via postcolonial literature. Assistants were asked to explicate how they manage their own authority in relation to students and their own potential discomfort during tutorial discussions, as

well as the principal causes of discomfort. Assistants were asked to explain how they manage the potential impact of the positionalities with which they identify, and the racialised and gendered identities which students are likely to assign to them. CWS anchored my discourse analysis of these interviews, initially without a more definitive objective than discerning the sources of discomfort Assistants report, alongside an interest in how Assistants resist and/or sustain forms of whiteness. A first-level analysis suggested the relevance of the above-mentioned CWS work. Next, the value of researching Assistants warrants some clarification.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Most South African institutions of higher education face rising student numbers and a stagnating roster of fully-employed educators. Some universities have responded by training contractually-employed assistants to mitigate the danger that this student-lecturer ratio will precipitate passive learning. I designate them as Assistants to reduce the identifiability of the participants. This section concisely delineates their responsibilities.

All Assistants are enrolled for postgraduate studies, mainly Masters. They are charged with grading oral and written assessments on a roughly bi-weekly basis, and with actively involving groups of 15-25 students in face-to-face (prior to Covid-19) collaborative learning around the content covered during lectures. The department trains Assistants to utilise active-learning strategies, including flipped classrooms, student presentations, small-group discussions, essay-drafting exercises and difficult dialogues. The department's training manual stipulates that students should actively construct meaning with Assistants' aid by setting their own cultural and experiential milieus in critical conversation with the postcolonial texts and theory under study¹.

In principle, these strategies should enliven active, collaborative knowledge construction. A review of research into these strategies exceeds the scope of this article, but to contextualise the current study, it should be noted that Assistants are both required and trained to identify students' relative strengths and weakness, and to innovatively scaffold students' capacities for independent meaning-making.

Consequently, Assistants undergo the challenge of balancing their own studies with teaching responsibilities, including learning-sessions, assessment and administration. In the department under study, Assistants were required to facilitate four one-hour learning-sessions per week and one consultation hour (face-to-face before Covid-19 and online from the second semester of 2020 onwards). Weekly meetings with the lecturer responsible for each module were also mandatory. Finally, Assistants must prepare for each learning-session based on the knowledge they have accumulated about the students assigned to them. Amid these pressures, Assistants are positioned to instigate and direct conversations in far more personalised and targeted ways compared to the formal lectures, which professors deliver to approximately three hundred students. How such opportunities unfold invites sustained analysis,

¹ Citing the training manual would render the institution, department and participants identifiable, violating the terms for ethical clearance.

particularly since the content around which Assistants must stimulate learning explicitly broach the reproduction of systemic racism, directions for antiracism and the role literary texts play maintaining/unmaking injustice. How these factors bear upon the findings will be clarified during the analysis.

Evidently, Assistants are employed as an institutional reaction to evolving teaching conditions. How this response contributes to decolonisation and antiracism merits critical inquiry given its potential to rupture and/or reproduce inequitable and intersectionally-oppressive epistemic ecologies (Makombe 2021; Adams et al. 2018). Such micro-level research is humble compared to institutional policy reform, but grasping the dynamics of Assistants' work can illuminate how specific departments advance/retard decolonisation.

PARTICIPANT DETAILS

All Assistants working in 2019-2021 participated, with the exception of three who left the university after 2020 and declined to participate. This yielded fifteen participants, which compares favourably with similar studies (Wale 2019; Kelly 2017). At the start of 2021, most Assistants had amassed at least three years' experience, with two having served for six years, while four had acquired only two years' experience. Eight were completing their Masters, while the rest were undergoing Honours education. Three Assistants self-identified as coloured, seven as white, four as black and one as Asian. I acquired permission to conduct interviews from the Institutional Review Board, the Academic Head of Department, and all professors responsible for teaching undergraduates. From each professor, I requested the module guide, assessments, and the activities they expected Assistants to execute as co-teachers, especially in terms of how literary analysis is taught in relation to systemic racism.

During each of the approximately ninety-minute interviews, Assistants marked the texts in Table 1 as the most provocative opportunities for inciting discussions of racism. These are not the only texts classed as postcolonial in the department, and they are supplemented by numerous secondary readings. Students also raised racism during discussions of other authors including Shakespeare and Jane Austen by, for instance, interrogating their relevance to an African university.

Title	Author
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	Sherman Alexie
<i>Ghost Strain N</i>	Mohale Mashigo
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Chinua Achebe
<i>The Bluest Eye</i>	Toni Morrison
<i>Possessing the Secret of Joy</i>	Alice Walker
<i>The Color Purple</i>	Alice Walker
<i>The Madonna of Excelsior</i>	Zakes Mda
<i>Houseboy</i>	Ferdinand Oyono
<i>Devil on the Cross</i>	Ngugi wa Thiong'o
<i>Coconut</i>	Kopano Matlwa

Table 1: Texts used to discuss racism

The semi-structured questions that guided interviews are explicated below, along with a rationale for selecting Assistants.

SAMPLING RATIONALE

CWS often map student experiences, but contractually-employed Assistants remain underresearched. To my knowledge, no recent projects have investigated how Assistants in South Africa manage their own racialised subjectivities and their relative power vis-a-vis students, while facilitating instruction on racism and literature. Undertaking such research accords with a theorisation of racism as institutionalised and underscores telling differences between students and Assistants, including the latter's institutional positionality and education-level.

First, apropos to institutional positionality, CWS typically study students in relation to the institutional reproduction of racist systems/structures by interrogating the discursive repertoires, symbolic and affective economies that equip students to preserve or resist racism and intersectional marginalisation (Wale 2019; Kelly 2017; Adams et al. 2018; Mueller 2017). Assistants are positioned differently. Their relative authority enables them to (de)legitimise some students' modes of knowledge production. However, Assistants' position is liminal, since they cannot significantly alter the curriculum. Therefore, like researching students, analysing Assistants centres everyday interactions, but with actors who inhabit the institution differently.

Second, with regards to education, compared to most student-participants in CWS (Wale 2019; Kelly 2017; Adams et al. 2018; Mueller 2017), Assistants have explored critical theory to more advanced levels. This could shape their teaching practices and their capacity to appraise their own practices during interviews. All participants for this study have completed postgraduate courses on postcolonial literature, critical feminist theories, eco-criticism and critical race theory. What this background betokens is uncertain. It might arm Assistants to help students grasp the subtle yet systemic dimensions of racism and to appraise literary interventions in intersectional oppression. Moreover, this educational background might augment Assistants' capacity to reflect on their teaching techniques during interviews. It seems reasonable to harbour higher expectations of Assistants' critical acumen, compared to undergraduate students. Additionally, as a matter of departmental policy², Assistants are expected to stimulate learning environments that breach any routinised avoidance and discursive evasion of racism, principally by delving into postcolonial literary framings of racism. Consequently, tutorial interactions could approximate what Mueller (2017:226) terms "breaching conditions". Undergraduates with possessive investments in sidestepping critical conversations on racism are, in principle, drawn into difficult dialogues. Conversely, students who wish to problematise race-evasive logics are afforded opportunities to accomplish this.

However, Assistants might also encounter and collude in discursive manoeuvres that reproduce whiteness. Whiteness is notoriously tenacious. Mueller's (2020) caveat

² As mentioned earlier, citing departmental policy would violate the conditions under which approval for the study was granted.

remains: racism is sustained by practices through which white people manage what is known and felt. Similarly, Wale (2019) and Adams et al.'s (2018) exhortations to map the practices of those who resist systemic oppression remain equally cardinal, making CWS inquiry into Assistants both necessary and potentially fruitful.

INTERVIEWS PROCEDURES

After securing ethical clearance, all fifteen Assistants were interviewed individually via an online platform in compliance with Covid-19 safety protocols. Adopting a semi-structured questionnaire schedule, Assistants were asked to reflect on the pedagogic strategies through which they broach racism with students while unpacking postcolonial literature, the relevance of Assistants' self-identifications and the identities South African students are likely to assign to them. Assistants were also questioned about how they manage their own authority vis-à-vis students, particularly in terms of how they foster an inclusive and active learning environment. During the process, Assistants were routinely asked to discern potential areas of discomfort around teaching about racism, obstacles to students' critical engagement, frustrations, sources of excitement and success. Assistants were also permitted to digress into areas of interest that would not otherwise have emerged, reflecting an appreciation of Assistants as critical thinkers.

One limitation of my approach stems from explicitly topicalising racism instead of researching the spontaneous/natural arising of racial formations. To partially attenuate this risk, I draw from Kerr's (2020:111) reminder that discourse analysts approach interviews, "as interactions in which speakers are performing various activities" that are agential and ideologically-productive. I argue that although topicalising race and racism is fraught with risk, it can still advance critical agendas, notably the task of undermining ignorance. Asking Assistants to explain how they draw students into discussions of racism and to critically appraise how they (Assistants) assign meaning to students' reactions can spur self-reflection and bolster agency (Kelly 2017). It might also be generative for Assistants to contemplate the risk of becoming complicit in defending race-evasive ideologies during heated tutorial discussions and to elucidate how their own intersectional identifications might inflect their teaching practices.

Mindful of Kerr's (2020:112) admonition that, "no piece of data is self-evidently about any particular topic [and can] be grouped or analysed in a number of ways," I argue that interviewees attended to three broad domains: 1) discomfort around teaching about racism, 2) students' efforts to personalise learning, and 3) Assistants' constructions of the ideal outcomes of learning.

Before explicating my findings, the next sections narrow my conceptualisation of ignorance, invulnerability (Wale 2019) and "creative maladjustment" (Adams et al. 2018:337). The relevance of these concepts surfaced after a first-level exploration of the interviews instead of being selected a-priori.

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF IGNORANCE

Theorising race as socially constructed entails conceptualising epistemologies of racial ignorance as a, “culturally recursive accomplishment” anchored in, “a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing” about racism (Mueller 2017:220). Assistants’ relationship with such epistemologies invites scrutiny.

CWS problematises ignorance about racism by exploring how institutionally-sanctioned knowledge ecologies ease the labour of ignorance. Various normative institutional discourses stymie the deepening and meaningful implementation of critical insights into systemic racism (Adams et al. 2018; Kelly 2017). Decolonial scholars treat this problem as the coloniality of institutionally-sanctioned knowledge (Makombe 2021; Makhubela 2018). Antiracist pedagogy responds by de-normalising such discourses, aiming to expose and disrupt the passive, habitual reproduction of racist discourses and to address the violence enacted on subordinated groups. One method for this de-normalisation is to centre subordinated epistemologies, so that counter-narratives from the marginalised can rupture ignorance (Adams et al. 2018).

Mueller (2017:219-220) cautions against overstressing the, “structurally induced habits”, “unintentional routines”, and “business as usual” discourses that equip white actors to claim unawareness or passive ignorance about racism. Overemphasizing systemically-induced patterns can eclipse white actors’ possessive investment in evasive epistemologies, concealing the “creative agency” and innovative responses they can mount when the well-worn practices that perpetuate ignorance are challenged (Mueller 2017:221).

Indeed, Mueller (2017), Wale (2019) and Adams et al. (2018) adduce that contemporary social life teems with evidence of the severity and sophistication of racism. Concrete proposals for advancing justice are also widely available, with vocal calls for decolonisation contributing to and directing some of these calls (Makombe 2021; Makhubela 2018). Nurturing ignorance against this knowledge is an ongoing accomplishment. The socio-cognitive processes at stake are not, “private, asocial” modes of knowing; instead, “epistemologies of ignorance are social epistemologies, structured into the rhythms of institutions and everyday practices” (Mueller 2017:222).

Tellingly, this necessitates a theorisation of white subjectivities as structurally positioned, without framing them as passive dupes of the system. Rather, all people exercise a measure of self-direction and “motivated reasoning” to curate what knowledge is avowed, integrated and allowed to drive behaviour (Adams et al. 2018:347), as I hope to suggest during the analysis. Assistants must explicitly topicalise systemic racism in the context of postcolonial literature, which might complicate ignorance. But what can be learned from discursively analysing how they reflect on teaching experiences?

Following Mueller (2017), one complication for analysing Assistants’ ruminations is to examine meanings that remain absent alongside those that emerge. As Assistants construct meaning around their teaching experiences, analyses must untangle both what is flagged and what is omitted (Mueller 2017). Since I rely on interviews, I cannot claim to have accessed tutorials directly. Correspondingly, I cannot offer a direct description of how tutorials unfold. The next sections bridge ignorance with invulnerability (Wale 2019) and creative maladjustment (Adams et al.’s 2018).

AFFECTS OF INVULNERABILITY

Wale (2019:11189-1191) probes the “politics of emotion in white students’ experiential narratives” and foregrounds affects of invulnerability, “being emotionally closed to being affected by the experiences of oppressed groups”, and being closed to the way one’s own positionality affects others. She contends that the valorisation of affective invulnerability constitutes a core desideratum of the idealised white-self. Moreover, it has become, “aligned with the global historically intersecting project of racism/patriarchy/capitalism” (Wale 2019:1193). This propels her theorisation that if epistemologies of ignorance buttress exploitative relations, then the valorisation and performance of affective invulnerability buttresses ignorance by blunting empathetic reactions to knowledge about oppression.

As a remedy, she proposes, “critical cultural openness”, a gradual process of “critically evaluating inherited cultural knowledge attached to whiteness” (Wale 2019:1191). A first-level reading of the interview data suggested the fruitfulness of expanding the analytic lens to conjoin epistemologies of ignorance with affects of (in)vulnerability.

CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

CWS challenges putatively race-neutral institutionalised practices that occlude racism and whiteness, including civility, impartiality and detachment (Kelly 2017). For Adams et al. (2018:337-339), decolonisation and antiracism require investment in knowledge ecologies that, “afford creative maladjustment [against] socialisation into a pathological system” in favour of instilling the “critical consciousness to resist repression of troublesome truths”. For them, creative maladjustment is best rooted in subordinated knowledges. This proposition is shared in various streams of decolonial scholarship, but sustained labour is still required to ascertain what it spells for department-specific pedagogies (Makombe 2021; Makhubela 2018). My initial reading of interviews with Assistants flagged the potential relevance of this concept.

In particular, it is worth mentioning that Assistants who do not self-identify as white are often lauded as potential professors of the future. They are celebrated as contributing to the demographic transformation of the university in question. Indeed, this discourse represents a key facet of funding applications for employing Assistants. The institution avers that serving as Assistants while completing postgraduate studies will afford Assistants the teaching experience and academic qualifications needed to become full-time academics, either at this institution or at others. The feasibility and success of these claims exceed the scope of this study. However, it bears mentioning that if the institution prizes the decolonising potential of Assistants who self-identify as black, coloured and Asian, then questions can be asked about how seriously the pedagogic labour and epistemic contributions of these Assistants are taken. To what extent are these Assistants positioned as capable of ascertaining where creative maladjustment against engrained practices are necessary? To what extent are Assistants recognised as capable of formulating methods of creative maladjustment? Put differently, if “marginalised knowledge from the epistemic perspective of subordinated communities [can supply] a resource for critical consciousness”, what role might As-

sistants and their encounters with students play? These questions demand multi-layered responses and in this study, I call attention to directions suggested by Assistants' reflections during interviews.

FINDINGS

Participants explored numerous avenues, but I hone this article on three sources of discomfort, followed by Assistants' reactions to students' penchant for citing personal experience. I start by citing two Assistants. Elucidating how their narratives intertwine epistemologies of ignorance and affective invulnerability demands some detail and furnishes a foundation for illustrating how other Assistants indirectly resist ignorance. To ease readability I follow Wale's (2019) simplified transcription conventions.

DISCOMFORT WITH EPISTEMIC MEDIATION

Two Assistants expressed discomfort with the epistemic and ontological position from which they mediate knowledge when engaging students in learning (i.e. speaking from white subject positions). Their discomfort clustered around moments that signalled students' unfamiliarity with Apartheid history and with histories beyond South Africa (in these Assistants' estimation).

Elaine:

I was uncomfortable with the literature that was American-centric. The racial issues in the literature are very different from South Africa. Students don't know all the historical details, but also I don't want to come across like I'm telling these black students this is how racism is, you know. I felt maybe that they would be like, well what do you know about racism because you're not black? What do you know about experiencing racism?

Jacque:

What right do I have to tell students about Apartheid or other history? I never went through that. All I know is the knowledge I've learned. I haven't really experienced any of the hardships. It sort of puts me in a push-pull situation, where I can correct the student about history. But do I have the right? What if the student approaches me and says you don't know the struggle. You don't know what we go through today.

Both Assistants frame themselves as vulnerable to questioning when sharing knowledge about histories of racism. Both self-identify as white and conjecture that students consider them white (female and male, respectively). Given this racialised and gendered positionality, they anticipate that students could repudiate that knowledge based on experiences of being racialised as black. Blackness is thus ascribed a certain knowledgeability.

It is worth mentioning that this openness to question one's suitability as a teacher might be necessary in contemporary South Africa, especially if racialised as white, and

where it leads is important. Initially, framing themselves as questionable appears to approximate the vulnerability Wale (2019) considers pivotal for critical cultural openness. This includes scepticism against the notion that totalising, objective knowledge (historical or otherwise) is attainable, since knowledge is readily co-opted by hierarchical positionality, including the identity-defensive concerns of whiteness and patriarchy. Consequently, the Assistants' reflections also approximate, "critical historical consciousness", the capacity to de-naturalise the memory practices implicated in normalising the coloniality of knowledge, being and power (Adams et al. 2018:337). Initially, these capacities seem evident from the Assistants' openness to anticipate the contingency of the knowledge they can share.

However, as they narrate students' lack of historical/contextual knowledge their reflections also suggest the simultaneous operation of affects of invulnerability and epistemologies of ignorance.

Elaine:

I think lecturers are being too high brow, expecting too much. You have to take it down real basic. We are told to focus on how students are interpreting the text and that sort of forgets that students don't know how to read the text in the first place. They can't interpret because they don't understand and they don't know how to write academically.

Jacque:

Students tend to bring in personal issues into their essays and they don't know how to separate like real life from academic writing. I've had essays where they say like they can relate to the poverty in the story because they have grown up in townships with a dirt road and no lights. It seems like an automatic response. When they see this imagery in the text it sort of triggers this response that oh I can relate to this now.

A distinct form of ignorance is projected onto students. Students lack granulated historical knowledge and lack mastery over institutionalised expectations surrounding academic writing, at least in terms of the norms these Assistants invoke. Earlier, the Assistants foregrounded their own vulnerability to students' knowledge. Instead of excavating that knowledge-base and its potential contribution to literary analyses (including its shortcomings), students' epistemologies are delegitimised. The implications, from a CWS perspective, are manifold. I belabour two of them here.

First, these narratives resonate with Sue's (2013:666) observation that race-talk violates the assumption that intellectual inquiry demands "objectivity [and] detachment". Seeing this issue persist from 2013 into the present, despite the hype around decolonisation, is problematic.

Second, and more pivotal in relation to Mueller (2017) and Wale (2019), these reflections hinder critical cultural openness and amplify epistemologies of ignorance and affects of invulnerability. To elaborate, the vulnerability occasioned by sharing information about racism with students who possess lived experiences of racism could prompt self-reflection and an openness to explore collaborative meaning-mak-

ing, even if this requires accepting that students could launch critical inquiry from a knowledge-base that Assistants do not share. Instead, students are configured as deficient and maladjusted to the university setting. Doing this preserves invulnerability, since configuring students as deficient enables both Assistants to circumvent self-interrogation by locating the problem in students, allowing the Assistants to safeguard their status as bearers of expert, institutionally-sanctioned knowledge.

In short, Assistants are discursively equipped to sustain invulnerability. To frame students as maladjusted, Assistants must normalise prevailing university standards, despite vocal exhortations for decolonisation. This represents an exercise of power by capacitating Assistants to negotiate what types of knowledge around racism is avowed/acknowledged and what is delegitimised/suppressed. Wale (2019) reports broadly comparable gestures in the sense-making practices expressed by students, but under radically different conditions. Finding this pattern among Assistants illuminates moments where decolonisation meets resistance within department-specific nuances.

The proposition that students lack academic enculturation was elaborated when these two Assistants approached a theme expressed by all Assistants: students' proclivity for leveraging personal experiences and observations as prisms for literary analyses. As I hope to demonstrate, other Assistants responded differently to this student proclivity, reading it as an opportunity, rather than an inherent obstacle to learning. First, I examine another source of Assistants' discomfort.

RESCUING WHITE MORALITY

One other white Assistant articulated discomfort with the task of guiding white students to treat racism as systemic. Responding to texts that interpolate racism with poverty, some white students atomised these problems. Instead of reading this pattern as diagnosing white resistance, this Assistant attempted to "repair moral breaches" by averring, "sincere, passive white ignorance" among students rather than grappling with the probability of active resistance incited by encountering uncomfortable knowledge around racism (Mueller 2017:230):

Teresa:

Compared to black students, more white students just don't recognise the link between poverty and racism. I think it's a perspective thing. I don't think white students were evading it. I think it's just something that they never thought could be linked. It wasn't on their radar.

Later, I intend to substantiate my argument that this constitutes an innovative, rather than habitual, manifestation of ignorance (Mueller 2017). To do so, I analyse Assistants' responses to students citing personal experience. However, it is relevant at this junction to contrast the above with an Assistant who self-identifies as black:

Refilwe:

How does someone who lives in South Africa not understand this dynamic? These students push away the systemic part of racism, of what made these people poor, even though the texts clarify that. When you write from a point of privilege, you disconnect.

For this Assistant, and several others, this reflection inaugurated a contrasting source of discomfort accompanied by a different mode of vulnerability: Assistants' concern over the potential hypocrisy of pressuring students to treat racism as systemic, while exhorting students to think independently.

HYPOCRISY

Neo:

So, I might come across as hypocritical because I tell students to think for themselves and then make such strong suggestions when I guide them to analyse how a text handles systemic racism. It becomes a slippery slope. It's a heavy task. You have to draw a fine line between not being forceful in your ideas, because it can have a lasting impact on students for whom the scales are only peeling off slowly.

Check:

I do sometimes feel that I come across as forcing students to read all these texts and all these theories on racism when there are other theories out there that students might think are actually more factual.

Elsa:

What right do I have to tell this majority of black students and minority of white students what racism is? What flipped a switch for me is that I moderate debates. It's the difference between giving information and facilitating a conversation. But this requires telling them not to coddle me because I am a white girl. But then you run a risk. You guide students towards systemic racism, while claiming they have to think for themselves.

For these Assistants (and seven others), discomfort is primarily seated in the difficulty of balancing independent inquiry with the risk that students (especially white students) could choose to isolate racism from poverty and other inequities thematised in the texts. The Assistants acknowledge the critical task of resisting the, "collective delusions that normalise the status quo of racial violence" but question how this might be balanced with automatous learning and the truncating effects of white resistance, including active ignorance against linkages between racism and poverty (Adams et al. 2018:339). Crucially, the difficulty is impelled by questioning how to advance critical thinking, instead of rote compliance with normative academic standards.

This conflict between normative standards and independent inquiry also surfaced when all fifteen Assistants spontaneously broached students' predilection for rooting literary analyses in what Assistants termed *personal experience*.

INVALIDATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

When asked to expound their claim that students are unfamiliar with academic writing, the two Assistants examined earlier explained:

Elaine:

In the essays we had to mark it was very often quite uncomfortable because students would get very personal. Then I felt like I had to say okay I understand this is very personal for you. Like one student devotes much of her essay to her experience with potty training and toilets at home. I had to be like okay that's not what we're asking from you. It also happened especially with *Coconut* because I think a lot of them connected to *Coconut* because it is a very South African text. So they would start talking and writing about their personal lives and how they experienced instances of being called a coconut because those are the things we talked about during tutorials when they were relevant.³

Jacque:

Students would relate their personal lives to scenes from the texts. I have to tell them it's about academic writing. I mean it's all good to relate personal experiences to the text during tutorials. For example, we will go from sexual violence in the text to gender-based violence in the country.

From a CWS perspective, the following tensions permeate these extracts. Assistants are tasked with helping students produce individual arguments that rely on text-based evidence. But some Assistants are unbalanced when they encounter personal accounts of lived experiences marked by deprivation. These two (and the four Assistants they represent) react by invalidating allusions to personal experiences (I will return later to whether these experiences are indeed simply personal or collective). Invoking hegemonic, colonial academic standards, they disparage students for failing to comply with institutional cultures. Are alternative responses viable?

In CWS, antiracist pedagogy should prioritise active, personal meaning-making over rote-learning and, moreover, valorise counter-narratives and power-disruptive responses to prevailing institutional arrangements (Makhubela 2018). Consequently, CWS suggests a shift in how the citation of personal experiences could be framed. To clarify, this is not to deny the risk that students can digress entirely from text-based study, delving into lived realities to the detriment of theory-based argumentation. However, interpolating lived realities of injustice with textual/literary representations can, in principle, be approached as an opportunity rather than an intractable obstacle to independent learning, especially if the process is construed as a stage in students' education towards whatever goals a department valorises.

³ For the sake of contextual clarity, it should be noted that students were required to explore interfaces between literature and material manifestations of injustice, including access to safe sanitation and sewerage (Robins 2014). From this standpoint, potty training in marginalised communities might indeed contribute to understanding resource deprivation in South Africa. Another Assistant, cited later, illuminates this possibility.

Stated differently, the knowledge that students generate by unpacking lived realities can support interrogations of the texts under study, and can create new knowledge by placing text, experience and theory in dynamic conversation. Admittedly, this project is demanding. Drawing undergraduates into this process requires scaffolding and time, especially considering the general under-preparedness of most South African students (Allais, Cooper, & Shalem 2019). However, my argument is that, at the very least, whether the citation of personal experience is constructed as an impediment or opportunity matters for students' investment in their own education and for just pedagogy. Within the parameters of undergraduate literary explorations, antiracism and decolonisation can be served by positioning students as capable of decolonising their own learning by, among other practices, narrating lived knowledge, especially if Assistants are able to facilitate rich encounters between text and experience. This proposition is supported by other Assistants who voiced this possibility. For instance, the extract that opened this article suggests that students can engage texts as critical resources, instead of, "just something they read for marks". Before elaborating, I suggest that apart from being a missed opportunity, the injunction against personal experience manifests epistemologies of ignorance and affects of invulnerability.

Attempts to incorporate personal experience into academic analyses are constructed as violating normative standards, instead of a potential resource for exploring subordination. This construction presumes the ideological neutrality of hegemonic standards, ignoring its colonial underpinnings. It sustains invulnerability by enabling four of the Assistants to evade the discomfort of implicating their own relative privilege with students' accounts of material realities of racialised deprivation. It also discourages Assistants to ignore the degree to which their own academic achievements (as postgraduate students) are premised on compliance with colonial academic standards:

Elaine:

In my previous university, we really had it drilled into us in undergrad and honours. You don't speak about personal experiences. You have to remove yourself from your writing. There's no I think this and this is my opinion. So I think I'm coming very much from an experience of you don't do that.

Jacque:

When I was going through university we were always told that you do not bring personal experiences into academic writing. Now, especially when we teach texts on racism, it just comes into their writing.

Finally, this construction also enables Assistants to forestall challenges to their authority, based on putatively neutral standards. Directly challenging the lived experiences of students who endure intersectional and material injustice could encounter accusations of racism and insensitivity. A safer route for evading discomfort is to retreat to topics over which Assistants can claim expertise, including the academic conventions they have mastered. But doing this demands ignorance of how these conventions are complicit in coloniality. Such identity-defensive manoeuvring showcas-

es how epistemologies of ignorance and affects of invulnerability intersect to stymie openings for critical inquiry. It signals the exigency of creative maladjustment against ostensibly-neutral institutional cultures.

However, not all Assistants responded this way. Before analysing alternative responses, another vital point about the construction of *personal experience* is necessary.

EXPERIENCE VS OBSERVATION

Elaine:

They get personal in the tutorials where it's relevant, like talking about the toilets thing, but then they go put it into academic writing and I have to be like, well no this is more formal whereas tutorials are informal.

Jacque:

For example, we will go from sexual violence in the text to gender-based violence in the country. Students go to how it is prevalent in the country and nothing is getting done about it.

The practices construed as *getting personal* are equally readable as observations of communal realities. Students are not simply narrating subjective experiences with entirely affective overtones, or selecting a soft/easy alternative over cognitive theorisation. Instead, students proffer observations of collective life under unequal conditions. To these Assistants, such discussions are permissible during the opening tutorial sessions, but not during writing, which might have generated confusion among students. Regardless, it seems that what could have been framed as *observations* are instead actively constructed as *getting personal*. Thus, denigrating these observations as intrinsically personal and irrelevant to academic study seems less like the passive enactment of an institutionally-sanctioned objective-subjective dichotomy. Rather, it seems like an innovative way of circumventing discomfiting truths that rupture the twin objectives of whiteness: to continue enjoying the spoils of structural dispossession, while maintaining a personal and collective sense of moral integrity (Mueller 2020). As such, the proscription constitutes more than a habituated reaction. It also represents a creative accomplishment that insulates whiteness (Mueller 2017).

Finally, the reflections of a more experienced Assistant who often mentors novices, supplies some tentative confirmation since she explicitly mentioned that, "some white Assistants have asked me whether it's okay to avoid discussing racism". However, most Assistants responded differently.

EXPERIENCE AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Refilwe:

If a literary text makes you connect with it to such an extent that your life connects to it, then the author is doing something right because clearly the author has encapsulated some part of your life. So let's talk about that. Let's unpack

that. Some of the black students didn't have the English to portray poverty as a form of systemic racism, but I could tell from their writing that they understood that because of Apartheid we now have the situations we have. But I still comment when students don't connect it to the story. But by contrast, many white students struggled to see how black and coloured South Africans today are disadvantaged. For example, they said people should be working harder. There's no reason for people to be poor and people just have to save money.

Alexie:

Personal experience comes up quite a lot, and students use it to validate their argument about the text, race and racism. So, they use their personal experience as a booster. Like, I know what I am speaking about. I have lived through this. And it comes with a level of confidence. I do think the fact that black students can so closely relate to issues of race and racism makes them confident. It's never a case of black students being mean. They are assertive. They know what they are talking about.

Ten Assistants interpreted students' attempts to co-ordinate literary analyses around lived experience as signalling, "reality attunement of racism perception" (Adams et al. 2018:343). Rather than lamenting students' writing as subjective, affective and irreconcilable with academic inquiry, these Assistants read students as understanding racism and as capable of grasping how some literary texts frame structural injustice in ways that unsettle whiteness-comforting logics, which reduce racism to mere prejudice and which fail to question liberal individualism's *work harder* ethics (Mueller 2017). Experiential knowledge is thus considered a potential resource for validating arguments. In Wale's (2019) terminology, such analyses can nurture critical cultural consciousness, or critical historical consciousness for Adams et al. (2018). Racialised differences between students' perceptions of racism also help Assistants to diagnose the emergence of white resistance.

Tellingly, none of these Assistants assumed that citing personal experience (or communal observations) automatically produced sound literary scholarship. Unrealistic optimism is absent. Problems with academic literacy, and even basic literacy, are acknowledged. Nor do these Assistants mandate engagement with personal experience/observations. The practice is constructed as an option that needs careful scaffolding, support and time as students ascend the levels of undergraduate study.

Among the most revealing of these constructions of personal experience as a pedagogic resource, is a reflection from an Assistant who indirectly challenges the earlier "potty training" narrative. Reflecting on tutorial sessions (face-to-face prior to Covid-19 and online during 2020-2021), she unfolds discussions of Robins (2014), which was assigned reading in relation to *Coconut*:

Daria:

Most black students were speaking from experience, since many do not have access to safe sanitation and sewerage. White students were quiet. So, I asked one of them what she thinks about protesters throwing excrement to protest against

poor sanitation. She said it was disgusting. Black students tried to explain that such radical methods mean people have exhausted other methods. She was adamant. Then in her essay, she repeated her disgust. She took it as if she was attacked. It struck me how this student showed no empathy for protestors.

The Assistant offered this interaction to exemplify active resistance from white students, and to explain how she attempts to counter it. First, she recognises that detachment from material deprivation encumbers empathy and obstructs critical learning by impeding this student's ability to implicate her own privilege in the marginalisation of others. As such, this reflection resonates with the earlier one, "How does someone who lives in South Africa not understand?" Second, in response, the Assistant allows experiences of subordination to challenge resistance and, potentially, disrupt ignorance. The effectiveness of this technique exceeds the scope of this study, but it bears noticing how experiential knowledge is leveraged to unseat whiteness-insulating logics. Relatedly, this Assistant's reflection opposes the invocation of academic standards mentioned earlier. She avoids a dichotomous construction of personal experience as either a distraction from, or definitive indication of learning. Rather, she recognises the uncertain and pluralistic interplay of competing knowledges occasioned by students' interaction.

From a broad pedagogic perspective, this interplay can be valued for its potential to enliven active, yet difficult, collective knowledge construction. For CWS, the interchange can engender reality-attuned knowledges that unsettle strategic ignorance and obfuscatory logics around racism, at least potentially.

In short, most Assistants framed such interactions as opportunities for active learning, whether these transpired during face-to-face (pre-Covid) or online tutorials (2020-2021). The same logic shaped most Assistants' reactions to seeing personal experiences/observations emerge in students' writing. Methodologically my analysis is weakened by an ethical injunction against accessing students' essays directly, barring me from investigating their writing first-hand. Future research could rectify this.

CONCLUSION

Decolonial scholarship elevates, "the epistemic perspective of subordinated communities" as a resource for repudiating, "the White-washed roots of mainstream constructions of reality [in favour of] alternative constructions that better reflect and promote the aspirations of broader humanity" (Adams et al. 2017:339-341). Precisely what this entails for undergraduate studies is debatable. Curriculum reform stresses the urgency of exposing students to texts and theory by antiracist, anti-colonial scholars from the Global South (Makombe 2021). This exhortation is generally accepted, but its implementation calls for ongoing research at micro levels, as embedded in the macro.

To my knowledge, decolonial scholars have not yet grappled directly with how decoloniality is served or stymied at the level of Assistants confronting students' unexpected writing strategies. Similarly, CWS esteems experiential knowledge for its potential to expose the subtle collusion of whiteness and systemic injustice, but how

should this precept change undergraduate studies with antiracist aspirations? Does it necessarily demand that students be encouraged to explore combinations of academic analyses and experiential knowledge? As an entry-point for these questions, I have suggested that how Assistants construct and respond to this student-generated practice matters. Several context-specific caveats bear mentioning.

Assistants work under demanding conditions. There is no doubt that many South African students enter university without having mastered basic literacy, owing to historically-grounded problems (Allais et al. 2019). This might evoke some empathy for the assertion that academics, “are being too high brow”. Moreover, Assistants have no agency in selecting the texts or learning objectives they teach; consequently, they may not feel at liberty to respond flexibly to writing strategies that appear unconventional from normative/hegemonic standpoints. Additionally, although all Assistants have explored critical theory, this does not mean that Assistants have been exposed to theorists who call for students to link experiences to systemic arrangements. While critical theories prize counter-storytelling, not all make unambiguous calls for student-essays that bridge literature and quotidian realities. Taken together, these observations might suggest that critiquing some Assistants for expressing discomfort with what they term *personal experience* is mistaken. Expecting Assistants to ascertain the coloniality implicit in delegitimising this practice might be expecting too much.

However, other contextual variables include Assistants’ training manual, which flags the expectation that students should read texts in relation to cultural, communal and personal values. Finally, Assistants occupy an institutional space rife with public lectures and paper presentations on decolonisation, including antiracism and counter-narratives. These factors suggest that the twin moves to frame students as deficient when they work with *personal experience*, and the subsequent move to rationalise this framing by invoking normative academic standards, represents an active, obdurate enactment of racialised ignorance, capable of encountering alternative, antiracist interpretations without allowing these to destabilise normative conventions (Mueller 2017).

If decolonisation aims to trouble collective delusions that succour ignorance and control how subordinated knowledges are legitimised, then the above-mentioned manoeuvres of ignorance also warrant problematisation. Simply asking Assistants to accept personal experience or to commit to antiracism is inadequate. Instead, an alertness to innovative logics that occlude whiteness is necessary. In this, I concur with Mueller’s (2017:235) proposition that apart from aiming to “generate awareness” about whiteness, critical responses must also make “ignorance more difficult” by intensifying the labour required to sustain ignorance, with the goal of ultimately stabilising self-reflexivity.

More specifically, the key proposition I hope to articulate here is not to read the findings as suggesting that Assistants must necessarily be trained to encourage students to anchor textual analyses in personal/collective experiences/observations. Decolonial theory does not mandate the elevation of student experience, but it does exhort vigilant deliberation on which epistemologies are (de)legitimised (Makhubela 2018). Therefore, my argument is that how Assistants react to unexpected and poten-

tially non-normative student-practices is paramount for expanding Assistants' capacity for recognising how students grapple with racialised realities and for supporting students' learning effectively.

Far from selecting a soft option, students have indeed struck upon one avenue (among many) for learning. This avenue is incomplete; it could benefit from increasingly deeper theorisation about, for instance, intersections between the personal and systemic. Nevertheless, this avenue can help students to untangle the complexities of marginalisation and to deliberate how literary texts can augment opposition to oppression, even when those texts engage foreign/unfamiliar contexts. Most Assistants recognised this, framing students as struggling with basic literacy, but nonetheless busy with earnest ventures to bridge textual and personally-relevant analyses. The frequency with which most Assistants constructed students as active-yet-struggling, bolsters the interpretation that other Assistants are leveraging ignorance actively and creatively, rather than habitually.

CWS scholars often respond to racism-supporting practices among students or teachers by recommending sensitisation through training. Training is also a regular fixture in South African institutional discourses. This might prompt the suggestion that Assistants should be instructed to search for the subtle operation of whiteness in their own pedagogies. Although welcome, the findings illustrate that some Assistants already evince this capability, at least partially. While always incomplete, open to growth and susceptible to degradation, the aptitude is traceable. What Assistants construct as *personal experience* is generally recognised as an opening for a kind of education that can contribute to decolonisation by endorsing and incrementally enhancing engagement with literature as a lens for appraising how coloniality affects quotidian existence. This observation also points in another direction.

As mentioned earlier, non-white Assistants are often celebrated as future professors. If higher education is indeed committed to this endeavour, instead of using it for public relations, then institutions should take such Assistants seriously, especially their agency and the directions for creative maladjustment suggested by their pedagogic experiences. This includes their sense that *personal experience* contributes to decolonisation, even if this practice violates some academic norms. From Wale's (2019) perspective, it is also interesting to note that these Assistants articulate a risk of hypocrisy when calling on students to think independently, while nudging them towards situating the personal in the systemic. Whatever else this apprehension might betoken, it indicates these Assistants' openness to vulnerability, including epistemic and affective vulnerabilities, which enable them to question their own authority and pedagogic methods in ways that engender openness to innovation including students' grappling with experiential knowledge (Wale 2019). How Assistants frame and cope with these pressures, how the institution can attenuate the pressure, and what new pressures arise beyond Covid-19 all invite future scrutiny.

Other questions opened up by this study include whether students and Assistants racialised as white have an obligation to engage not only the epistemologies generated by the texts under study, but also by students and Assistants racialised along other axes. If so, how should white students and Assistants meaningfully respond or impli-

cate themselves in these experiences? Finally, there is of course a major risk in white people consuming black experiences as a facile/superficial gesture of exculpation for racism.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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