

A critical race theoretic analysis of vulnerability among teaching assistants in a South Africa Department of English

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ABSTRACT: Critical race theory interrogates how systemic inequities in higher education are reproduced through institutional cultures and everyday practices, which interact with material disparities in broader society. Actors positioned within these institutions can collude with or resist unjust systems, within their means. The discourse analysis that anchors this article explores how contractually-employed teaching assistants (henceforth simply Assistants) contribute to, or resist, injustice while working with students in the context of tutorials that directly topicalise systemic racism. Based on individual interviews with Assistants serving in a Department of English and Cultural Studies at a historically-white South African university where the contemporary student body predominantly identifies as black, I unpack the discursive practices through which Assistants implicate their own institutional embeddedness in students' learning experiences. I hone this article on Assistants' openness to vulnerability as they interrogate their own systemic embeddedness, and how they experience themselves as becoming vulnerable to expectations from students.

KEYWORDS: critical race theory, discourse analysis, systemic racism, whiteness, tutorials, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Grounded in interviews with contractually-employed teaching assistants of literary and cultural studies (henceforth simply Assistants), this study explores discourses of vulnerability generated by Assistants as they appraised their own teaching practic-

es. These Assistants are employed on the basis of annually-renewable contracts by a Department of English and Cultural Studies at a historically-white South African university (HWU). They are trained to support active learning among undergraduates. The aim of this article is to examine discursive practices through which some Assistants come to question the limitations of their own knowledge, and how they foreground the need to become vulnerable to particular kinds of knowledge produced by students. While the analysis is specifically attuned to the particularities of the South African context in which the data was generated, the conclusion proffers interpretations that may be applicable to other institutions where graduate students are charged with involving undergraduates in studies of racism. The rest of this introduction briefly contextualises the study and outlines its research agenda.

Like most HWUs, the institution in question has voiced its dedication to policies designed to realise decolonisation and enhance social justice (Matthews, 2021; Makombe, 2021). Actualising this commitment demands critical engagement with its own histories of exclusion and the present-day normalisation of whiteness and continued collusion with systemic injustice (Makombe, 2021; Matthews, 2021; Makhubela, 2018; Mueller, 2020; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Wale, 2019). Aligned with critical race theory (CRT), I propose that investigating the discourses through which everyday institutionally-positioned, actors such as Assistants, assign meaning to experiences related to teaching and learning about racism can illuminate opportunities for, and obstacles to, critical learning and the advancement of more equitable and relevant forms of education. Although rooted in CRT, the analyses detailed later might also contribute to some dialogues on decoloniality, especially in relation to the pedagogic modalities through which ostensibly antiracist curricula are delivered to undergraduate students.

The Assistants in question were invited to participate in this study because they are trained to actively involve undergraduate students with learning to theorise racism as structural. The context, therefore, is one in which delving into racism cannot, in principle, be avoided. Opposing perspectives on racism might come into conflict as Assistants support students' ventures to link the texts under study with lived realities (Mueller, 2020, 2017; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Kelly, 2017).

During the tutorial sessions, students and Assistants examine postcolonial literature, premised on the view that such small-scale interactions (15-20 students) can support antiracist agency and activism (Kelly, 2017). In principle, these interactions can become conducive to critical knowledge-production in part because Assistants have opportunities to accumulate detailed insights into students' capabilities and to direct their teaching accordingly, dovetailing with the precept that, 'changing oppression requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge' (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 34). Equally, such interactions can also reproduce injustice. By conducting a discourse analysis nested in concepts developed by CRT, I map the discursive practices through which Assistants construct meaning as they reflect on these tutorials.

I hone this article on Assistants' reflections on experiences that show traces of (in) vulnerability to the challenges students experience. That is, based on a CRT conceptualisation of (in)vulnerability, I chart ways in which Assistants accept, work with or re-

sist (in)vulnerability and consider how the findings might be read from a CRT vantage (Mueller, 2020; Wale, 2019; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Gilson, 2011).

The next section summarises Assistants' duties, based on the training manual provided to me, as well as discussions with the lecturers responsible for working with Assistants, and the Departmental Head.

CONTEXT: ASSISTANTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

South African institutions of higher learning label contractually-employed teaching assistants with an assortment of titles based on the minutia of their contracts. Interviewees for this study are designated with the generic term Assistant to prevent participants from being identified, as mandated by the conditions for ethical clearance.

Assistants are commonly employed in South African universities to offset the risk that the official lectures, frequently addressed to classes seating hundreds of students, will induce the passive transmission of information, to the detriment of more active and co-operative forms of pedagogy. In support of the main lectures, Assistants aid small groups of students (15-20) with cultivating both self-directed and group-based critical learning (Allais, Cooper, & Shalem, 2019).

Assistants in the department under study are most commonly recruited from post-graduate students completing Honours and Masters dissertations in literary and cultural studies. Their duties include:

- (1) Grading oral and written assessments on a roughly bi-weekly basis;
- (2) Two one-hour tutorials per group; these interactions were hosted via online platforms during 2020-2021, but were conducted face-to-face before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- (3) One consultation hour per week;
- (4) A weekly meeting with the lecturer responsible for each course; and
- (5) Time spent preparing for each tutorial session.

Assistants received training in strategies for inciting active learning, notably based on essay-drafting, small-group debates and flipped classrooms. Extensive research has already been conducted on the value of such techniques and although a review of this scholarship oversteps the scope of this study, it should be mentioned that Assistants are responsible for prioritising active learning, especially in terms of scaffolding students' acumen for comprehending racism as systemic. Actively involving students in such forms of knowledge-production could displace discourses and logics that normalise whiteness, elide structural injustice and erase knowledges that expose the present-day violence of coloniality (Mueller, 2020; 2017; Adams, Salter, Kurtis, Naemi, & Estrada-Villalta, 2018; Kelly, 2017).

Before outlining details about the interviewees and accounting for the interview process, the next section explicates the core CRT concepts that furnished the touchstones for the analyses that follow. These concepts were selected after a rigorous engagement with the interview data and were not determined a-priori.

AFFECTIVE AND EPISTEMIC (IN)VULNERABILITY

This study is rooted in CRT, specifically its concern with discerning how higher education reinforces and disrupts systemic racism. Accordingly, the study rests on the five core precepts of CRT: 1) racist is fundamentally structural and thus engrained in society, with the implicated that racism shapes all social institutions, including universities; 2) CRT challenges dominant ideologies that normalise or trivialise racism including ideologies that sustain affective invulnerability and epistemologies of ignorance; 3) CRT prizes the experiential knowledge of racism; 4) CRT endorses interdisciplinary analyses; and 5) CRT is committed to advancing social justice (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). The rest of this section explicates how these precepts undergirded my analysis, particularly with regards to affective and epistemic vulnerability.

CRT studies regularly rely on discourse analytic frameworks to unpack self-reflective narratives generated by undergraduate students in order to gain purchase on quotidian experiences of resistance against and collusion with racist structures and institutional arrangements (Wale, 2019; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Kelly, 2017). Less scholarly attention has been devoted to Assistants in South African Departments of English who are required to directly and actively involve students in theorising racism as structural and contemporary, rather than purely individual or historically distant. Researching Assistants' capacities for reflecting on and appraising their teaching experiences and strategies could prove fruitful. For some recent studies involving full-time academics, see Matthews (2021), Belluigi and Thondhlana (2020), Hlatshwayo (2020), Brisnett (2020), Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase and Canham (2019). As is the case with students, Assistants navigate institutions of higher learning as everyday actors who encounter practices that sustain or resist systemic injustice. How they respond merits study.

Like students, Assistants can collude with or oppose marginalising practices, but Assistants can exercise a comparably higher degree of influence, particularly in their role as assessors who can support or invalidate students' learning strategies as they enter into dialogue with knowledge surrounding racism. Nevertheless, Assistants' influence is limited and they cannot, for example, effect significant changes in the overall curriculum or learning outcomes of a course. Concurrently, the Assistants under study have accumulated more knowledge of critical theory compared to most students in CRT studies, including Wale (2019), Rudick and Golsan (2018) and Mueller (2017; 2020), which could expand and refine their acumen for critically reflecting on and evaluating their teaching experiences with students. The rest of this section elucidates how Wale's (2019) theorisation of affective and epistemic (in)vulnerability provided a touchstone for the analyses discussed later.

Building on longstanding research into the discomfort produced by teaching and learning about the structural dynamics of oppression, Wale (2019) conducts a discourse analysis of the way students wrestle with both the affective and epistemic aspects of this discomfort (Garrett, Segall, & Crocco, 2020; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Based on Gilson's (2011) work, Wale (2019, p. 1200) explicates how vulnerability becomes a vital element of learning, and develops an understanding of epistemic

and affective vulnerability as prioritising these components:

- (1) Being open to knowing as a precondition to learning.
- (2) Being open to being wrong and making mistakes.
- (3) Putting yourself in unknown, foreign situations where you are the uncomfortable party.
- (4) It is an affective and embodied form of knowledge—beyond knowing the facts it is letting this knowledge sink all the way down as an affectively lived experience.
- (5) It results in an altering of the self and sense of the self.

Focusing on South African university students who self-identify as white, Wale (2019, p. 1190) charts the discursive practices through which some of these students gradually learn to inhabit a, 'position of vulnerability' from which they can incrementally foster an ability to, 'challenge the comfortable norms of whiteness both internally [and] externally'. However, the majority of Wale's (2019) respondents sustain invulnerability by refusing to countenance knowledge that threatens to expose their own possessive investments in unjust arrangements. This is achieved through affective and epistemic manoeuvres that equip students to remain closed to, 'being affected by the experiences of oppressed groups' (Wale, 2019, p. 1191). The discursive manoeuvres that assert and protect invulnerability along affective and epistemic lines are intimately tied to epistemologies of racialised ignorance, as clarified below (Mueller, 2020, 2017).

Epistemologies of ignorance enable white subjectivities to navigate institutions of higher education in the mode of comfort by strategically limiting engagement with knowledges that threaten to expose how whiteness colludes with and maintains racialised, structural disenfranchisement. Strategic, wilful ignorance, therefore, eases the cognitive and affective work required to maintain an uncritical acceptance of comfort. Affective invulnerability further incentivises the refusal to meaningfully integrate knowledge that could make it difficult to assert that ignorance is, in fact, sincere and passive, instead of a 'structurally recursive accomplishment' (Mueller, 2017 p.222).

Despite the intransigence of such forms of invulnerability and its imbrication in whiteness, resistance and the earnest embodiment of vulnerability are possible, as Wale (2019) demonstrates. Informed by Wale (2019) and others (Makombe, 2021; Matthews, 2021; Mueller, 2017; 2020; Garrett et al. 2020; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida, 2019; Rudick and Golsan, 2018; Kelly, 2017) I work with a possibility emerging from her findings. If undergraduate students can evince vulnerability to a degree, then Assistants might showcase similar patterns or even a deeper openness as they make sense of their teaching experiences with students. More specifically, Assistants might recognise both that students could benefit from learning that is conducive to vulnerability to critical knowledge about racism, and that they (Assistants) might need to embody forms of vulnerability to the knowledge students bring to tutorial interactions.

Aligned with CRT, Wale (2019, p. 1191) argues that vulnerability is consequential for creating disruptive knowledge (Kumashiro, 2000). In Adams et al.'s (2018, p. 34) conceptualisation, vulnerability to discomfoting knowledge is decisive for uncover-

ing how, 'everyday ecologies carry a charge that promotes some forms of awareness, inhibits other forms of awareness, and nudges action towards particular ends'. However, given the complex, intersectional stratification of South African society, Assistants who self-identify along various racialised, gendered and other lines might experience and construct (in)vulnerability in different ways, which intersect differently with broader structures of asymmetric power relations, including the whiteness and coloniality of higher education. The knowledge produced by Assistants from marginalised communities can contribute to, 'counter-hegemonic' perspectives (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 99).

My foremost interest is to explore the discourses that mediate how Assistants who self-identify as white, black and coloured construct meanings related to (in)vulnerability as they reflect on how they teach about racism. In this regard, it should be mentioned that interviewees offered these self-identifications spontaneously and used them as subject positions, or 'footing', from which to frame self-reflections (Sambaraju & Minescu, 2018). The agenda to explore (in)vulnerability surfaced after a first-level reading of the interviews and transcripts signalled the regularity with which Assistants articulated discomfort with teaching racism, coupled with the observation that discomfort developed along divergent avenues.

INTERVIEWEES

All Assistants for 2019-2021 participated, except for three who had ended their contracts in 2020 and decided against participating. This yielded fifteen interviewees, which compares favourably with similar discourse-driven research (Wale, 2019; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Kelly, 2017). The majority of these Assistants had accumulated three years' experience. Two had six years' experience, and four others had been working for two years starting in 2019. Eight interviewees were writing their Masters, while seven were engaged in Honours degrees at the time of writing. Three Assistants self-identify as coloured (one male, two female), seven as white (one male, six female), four as black (two male, two female) and one as Asian (female).

The Institutional Review Board, Head of Department and lecturers charged with teaching undergraduate courses in postcolonial literature all granted permission for this study to proceed prior to contact being made with the Assistants. Lecturers also made their teaching materials, assessments and expectations for Assistants available.

Interviews lasted around ninety minutes, during which Assistants indicated that the texts below constitute the primary occasions during which questions surrounding systemic racism were raised. These are not the only texts classed as postcolonial in the department and teaching around these texts is scaffolded by a variety of secondary readings.

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 considered conducive to broaching systemic racism

The next section outlines the semi-structured questions that guided interviews.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

Constituting the main source of data for this analysis, interviews are conceptualised not as, 'a neutral conduit for extracting information' but as, 'interactions in which speakers are performing various activities' that are inherently agential and linked with wider arrangements (Kerr, 2020, p. 111). Moreover, interviews were intended to prioritise and validate Assistants' daily experiences, with the potential to become especially empowering for the process of delving into the frustrations, anxieties, discomfort and excitement that mark their activities (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019).

By exploring, reflecting on and constructing meaning around experiences with students, Assistants become involved in processes of questioning how their teaching resists and/or reproduces the oppressive aspects of everyday ecologies (Adams et al., 2018). They have opportunities to consider how they welcome, legitimise, become vulnerable to and/or invalidate the forms of knowledge that students bring to tutorials and the new knowledge they collaboratively produce as they engage the texts under study. Following Rudick and Golsan (2018) and Wale (2019), individual interviews were selected over focus groups in the hope that Assistants might be willing to contradict and contest or support the meanings constructed by other Assistants without pressure from other Assistants. Of course, this enters the limitation that Assistants were not able to collectively create meaning during group reflections.

Interviews were completed during June 2021 by using an online platform, in answer to Covid-19 regulations. Following Rudick and Golsan (2018) and Wale (2019), the semi-structured questionnaire schedule was intentionally designed to welcome and validate unexpected topics and insights developed by Assistants, based on an understanding of Assistants as independent knowledge-producers. Interviewees were invited to outline, appraise and interrogate their strategies for stimulating learning around the structural dimensions of racism. For instance, how Assistants foster in-

clusive, collaborative and critical discussions about what the texts under study disclose about systemic racism represented a key starting point. Finally, Assistants were asked to discuss their methods for supporting students' oral and written analyses. All Assistants proved willing to return for follow-up interviews, or to request follow-up interviews designed to clarify, revisit and elaborate previous topics, or to introduce new topics. The findings discussed in this article were shared with and deliberated with Assistants.

CONDUCTING A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Discourse analytic frameworks developed by scholars in CRT (Wale, 2019; Mueller, 2020; Belluigi & Thondlhana, 2020; Wale, 2019; Adams et al., 2018) were selected for this study owing to their efficacy for uncovering intersections between constructions of racism and affective and epistemic vulnerability as explained earlier. The process of conducting a discourse analysis of the interview data was designed to effect, 'a critical conversation between theory and data' (Kerr, 2020, p. 111). To clarify, CRT informed my data collection methods and suggested pertinent avenues for exploration during interviews, but analytic concepts were not narrowed down beforehand (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Subsequent to numerous rounds of reading the transcripts and listening to recorded interviews, in order to enhance familiarity with its content, CRT oriented attention to potential narrative patterns. Conceptualising the interviews as narratives entails the following.

Narratives are constructed on the basis of discursive practices, which create versions of reality that are inherently unstable, fluid and linked to the forms of identification and normative assumptions that comprise everyday ecologies and broader structures of power (Mueller, 2020; Wale, 2019). To launch discourse analyses into the relationship between discursive practices, (in)vulnerability and strategic forms of racialised ignorance demands attentiveness to both the practices that surface during interviews, as well as alternatives that remain silent despite being relevant from a CRT vantage.

Following Kerr (2020), Rudick and Golsan (2018), Wale (2019) and Mueller (2020, 2017), the initial stage of expanding familiarity with the concerns, ideas and topics raised during interviews was followed by analyses rooted in CRT. This included questioning how race and racism are constructed. What modes of discomfort are articulated and omitted? How are racialised identities constructed or omitted? How are systemic injustices constructed, acknowledged or omitted? This approach is intended to recognise that discourses are never, 'self-evidently about any particular topic' and can be subjected to analyses along multiple lines, contingent upon the directions suggested by setting theory in dialogue with data (Kerr, 2020, p. 111). While the interviews are open to numerous analytic lenses, I propose that they illuminate particular enactments of (in)vulnerability that shed light on how everyday ecologies manifest in tutorials that are purportedly designed to deepen critical knowledge surrounding racism. To ease readability I follow Wale's (2019) simplified transcription conventions.

FINDINGS

Discomfort emanating from whiteness

Three interviewees who self-identify as white (and female) expressed an awareness that being racialised as white impacts how tutorials unfold. They begin by reporting that students are often unresponsive when discussions related to racism start. Instead of dismissing this phenomenon as inherently related to students' personal unwillingness to engage, they construct this initial silence in terms of wider ecologies.

Elena

I think my discomfort definitely came from knowing that I have never experienced the racism they have experienced. But I am more comfortable now that I give the floor to the students and make it about their opinions not mine. They still start out like colourblindness is expected and I don't know if I would have gotten that if I wasn't white. If students veer away from discussing racism it isn't necessarily them. The Assistant, especially a white Assistant, must signal that it's okay to talk about racism.

Elaine

It feels presumptuous to talk about racism to students who experience it. But an Assistant's job is not to share information, but to moderate debates. Once I accepted that I became more comfortable. Obviously, my white privilege still has an effect on classes and I am still learning how to manage that because some white students do feel threatened and tiptoe around whiteness and I really feel it happens because I am white. The authority figure is a white person.

First, interviewees construct black students as possessing legitimate forms of knowledge regarding racism, particularly originating from experiential knowledge. These Assistants express a hope that students will rely on this knowledge to direct tutorial interactions. This is done by prioritising, 'their opinions not mine' and by signalling that it is 'okay to talk about racism', which is considered especially necessary for white Assistants.

Second, these three interviewees profess an awareness of whiteness as a structuring force in pedagogic interactions (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Being racialised as white Assistants increases the likelihood that students, who predominantly identify as black, might doubt their receptiveness to disruptive knowledge or critiques of whiteness (Kumashiro, 2000). The interviewees also implicate themselves in white students' silence. They frame white people as having possessive investments in evasive manoeuvres, echoing the longstanding tenet that, 'white people are actively invested both in remaining uninformed about whiteness and refusing to acknowledge this resistance' (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 97). Rather than de-contextualising, atomising or individualising students' discomfort and silence, these white Assistants try to link their own racialised identities to the learning process, especially to students' silence. This linkage prompts them to seek ways of managing the danger that their racialisation as white will hamper critical learning.

Nonetheless, whiteness can resist decisive change. White ignorance can evolve in surprising ways, and create a type of trade-off, in which some putatively critical admissions are made, while others are suppressed, as numerous theorists remind (Matthews, 2021; Makhubela, 2018; Mueller, 2020, 2017). Since interviews constitute interactions during which various subjectivities are performed, it bears mentioning that performing a white-antiracist subjectivity can be misconstrued as sufficient in itself without meaningful further steps (Mueller, 2017). It is also worth mentioning that the degree to which such affirmations about the impact of whiteness on teaching drives meaningful change remains uncertain; it is not a matter on which CRT is unanimous (Mueller, 2020; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Moreover, it also raises the question as to what constitutes a meaningful response to such acknowledgments. How can Assistants who self-identify as white meaningfully render themselves vulnerable to uncomfortable knowledge?

Mueller (2017) catalogues how some white students acknowledge systemic racism, but in ways that induce passivity in the face of the sheer scale of the issue. In the present study, these three white Assistants attempt to take further steps by working to, 'give the floor to the students and make it about their opinions not mine'. While the professed intention is to elevate and validate the meaning-making practices that students elect to raise and explore, it is not risk free. There is a danger that Assistants will extricate themselves from the discussions, thus discovering a new way of shoring up invulnerability. This might enable them to sidestep their responsibilities to assist in deepening inquiry into racism, even at the cost of their own comfort, by compelling students to figure it out on their own.

The above-mentioned attempts to acknowledge whiteness contrast starkly with other white Assistants. Four others, who self-identify as white, did not relate their racialised identities with students' silence. When asked to describe how they stimulate discussions, these Assistants mentioned silence, but did not interrogate the embeddedness of that silence.

Tina

A lot of the time they tend to just withdraw and they don't engage.

Tiana

Students don't seem really interested in discussing systemic racism. For many students this is just work they have to get through. Maybe they just don't find the topic topical.

These interviewees did not link students' uncommunicativeness around racism to the impact of the racialised identities with which they (Assistants) are associated. Students' silence is, by their calculation, entirely seated in students' own proclivities rather than the pedagogic environment. Even after being prompted to elaborate, these interviewees refrained from exploring alternative explanations for students' reticence.

This construction of students constitutes a form of strategic, racialised ignorance. It manifests a, 'structurally recursive accomplishment' that undergirds, 'a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing' (Mueller, 2017, p. 222; 220). Put differ-

ently, it diagnoses more than a passive absence of knowledge. The prioritisation of affective invulnerability underscores Assistants' vested interest in circumventing the vulnerability produced by reflecting on histories of racism, which have privileged white bodies in the landscape of South African higher education at the cost of other racialised groups. It also suppresses reflection on contemporary interrogations of the continued privileging of whiteness in academia, in defiance of increasingly vocal challenges raised by scholars of decolonisation (Makombe, 2021; Makhubela, 2018).

Thus, even during small-group discussions ostensibly designed to instigate robust considerations of racism, the present-day realities of (dis)advantage can still be evaded, in this case by de-politicising and de-racialising students' levels of engagement. As Garrett et al. (2020, p. 3) put it, 'students' [and Assistants'] histories of learning are tied up with psychical investments in particular narratives with which they are associated and others that they would prefer to resist'.

Intersectionality as a foundation for self-reflexivity

Belluigi and Thondlhana (2020) and Adams et al. (2018) insist that CRT can orient projects designed to uncover how everyday actors are already attempting to resist becoming complicit in epistemologies of ignorance that normalise whiteness and affective invulnerability. Like Matthews (2021) and Makombe (2021), they also assert that such efforts do not create a simplistic destination at which to arrive, but instead contribute to an ongoing process that aims to enhance social justice by recovering experiences and epistemologies that continue to be excised from many institutions of higher learning. The narratives espoused by Assistants who self-identify as black and coloured correspond with such commitments, and supply vantage points from which to trouble some of the narratives expressed by white Assistants.

The above-mentioned arguments (Belluigi & Thondlhana, 2020; Adams et al., 2018) already reify the value of taking the discourses and epistemologies generated by black and coloured Assistants seriously in terms of their emancipatory and decolonial potential. However, another factor arises from the manner in which the university and department under study have chosen to position these Assistants. They are frequently celebrated as future professors. Relatedly, they are celebrated as evidencing how the contemporary hype surrounding decolonisation is, in fact, coming to fruition, since these Assistants can, after completing doctorates and acquiring teaching experience as Assistants, enter the academic labour force at this or other South African universities where they will, presumably, continue to advance decolonisation. Knowing that they are thus positioned in institutional discourses provoked these Assistants to express intersectional discomfort with this framing, as discussed below. Following Belluigi and Thondlhana (2020) and Jones (2021), I conceptualise intersectionality as an anti-essentialist theorisation of identity, which approaches all identities as fluid and socially constructed. Moreover, and as attested by the research participants, constructions of racialised, gendered and classed identities are not simply additive, but instead, 'individuals have potentially conflicting identities, loyalties and allegiances', which are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated during everyday interactions such

as tutorial sessions (Jones, 2021, p. 6). In what follows, I first unpack how some Assistants trouble the earlier suggestions that students are unresponsive when urged to discuss and write about racism.

In sharp contrast to earlier claims by Assistants racialised as white, these interviewees constructed students as both excited and perceptive in terms of their insight into the ways in which the texts under study shed light on the past and present evolution of racism and intersectional injustice. The pronounced character of this divergence reinforces Matthews' (2021) and other (Makhubela, 2018; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Kelly, 2017) arguments that identification matters in relation to tertiary education and the cultivation of critical knowledge. Being racialised as black or coloured Assistants seems to have instilled greater willingness from students who are racialised as black and coloured to actively and collaboratively undertake knowledge-production during tutorials. Conversely, white racialisation necessitates a studious, alert and reflexive willingness to work with the hindrances imposed by this positionality, as Matthews (2021) avers in her own reflection.

Della

I think black students are more comfortable being taught by black Assistants. They feel like black Assistants understand them better. Some students have said to me, I am so happy you are my Assistant. I said why. They said because of race.

Alec

Black students who are a little more quiet when we cover Chaucer are a lot more engaged when we do Coconut, for example. It's where black students shine in terms of their engagement, their participation and their eagerness, especially in terms of how the legacies of Apartheid continue in contemporary South Africa.

Yoyo

By comparison, white students had trouble coming to terms with accepting that because of Apartheid we do have systemic racism now, which causes the problems we have today. Some asked why we study so many postcolonial texts in every year.

These Assistants substantiate their arguments by invoking other tutorials focused on other literary works, and notice that when the curriculum transitions into postcolonial literature (at first-, second- and third-year levels) black students in particular become increasingly involved, vocal and confident about their ability to bridge literary framings of racism with contemporary realities. Assistants also evinced an aptitude for reading racialised differences in students' reactions to the texts under study as symptoms of white resistance against discomforting knowledge.

As they discursively assigned meaning to these experiences, Assistants also actively linked their own intersectional identities with students' learning processes. Specifically, they insisted on framing their own knowledge and their ability to engage students as incomplete and as benefiting from self-reflexivity, chiefly based on in-

teractions during which students exposed these Assistants' unfamiliarity with abject levels of poverty and material insecurity. By exploring their own relative privilege in relation to students, particularly in terms of socio-economic security, the Assistants accepted the need to render themselves vulnerable to the lived insights many students could contribute to tutorials.

Yonela

I went to a very good school, unlike most students. This impacts on my privilege. I speak from a middleclass side. Generationally, my family still comes from the rural areas, but I am in a more elevated position than students. Most of them really need an education to go forward and manoeuvre their way out of poverty. I have to be aware that this is what is happening and be as patient as kind and possible.

Baru

Thinking about your own privilege is important because you can see intra-racial tensions between black students along class. A well-read student can be criticised by other black students who feel suspicious. As in, you are saying this because you went to a good school and you want to sound better than us.

Assistants thus showcased an aptitude for reading differences between their own structural embeddedness compared to the positionalities inhabited by their students, which prompted them to frame their own knowledge as limited and open to growth.

Belluigi and Thondhlana (2020) chart comparable gestures among South African members of academic staff who are similarly framed as professors for a decolonised future. Respondents in their study also voiced misgiving about how universities might leverage their 'visual diversity' to satisfy the 'numbers game' of racialised and gendered diversity (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2020, p. 9). Like Assistants in the present study, they expressed unease about how their relative socio-economic privilege could limit their suitability as agents of decolonisation. These convergences across different studies and the discourses produced by different respondents underscores the representativeness of some of Belluigi and Thondhlana's (2020) findings.

Put differently, while some Assistants recognised that solidarity in terms of racialised identification can spur (or hinder) active learning about racism, they nevertheless assert that race constitutes an insufficient commonality and that self-reflexivity about other differences, especially financial security, remain paramount. In fact, one Assistant who identifies as black and male went as far as questioning the degree to which he should push white students to read racism as systemic.

Neo

You think to yourself, did I go overboard? Should I have said less or more? Should I have been more cordial? You have to draw a fine line in terms of not being too forceful because this can have a lasting impact, especially on students for whom

the scales are only peeling off slowly as they navigate university, which is a microcosm of society.

The discomfort he experiences originates from the tension created by the realisation that white ignorance around racism constitutes a perennial and deeply-entrenched problem, while concurrently recognising that white students' vulnerability to discomfoting learning might demand time. This narrative is also a reminder that the wider institution would do well to support Assistants by endorsing resistance against whiteness so that Assistants can at least remain certain that their critical efforts are recognised and safe from backlash from either students or institutional authorities. None of the Assistant expressed anxiety that students or the institution would reprimand them for, 'being too forceful'. Nonetheless, given the entrenched character of whiteness, CRT suggests that care is necessary to protect Assistants from potentially hostile reactions. Finally, the absence of substantive reflection on intersections between race and gender is noteworthy.

Student expectations

Assistants who self-identified as black also discussed the expectations they encountered from black students. Following directly from the extract cited earlier, one Assistant remarked.

Della

I asked the students why race matters. They say, because white Assistants don't understand when they struggle with language. That puts a burden on my shoulders because the students are expecting me to rescue them from low marks. What if they don't improve?

Although these Assistants contended that if they are to advance decolonisation, self-reflexivity about race and class remained vital, they also reported experiences during which they were expected to share and empathise with racialised experiences that often clustered around students' challenges with academic literacy and proficiency in English. In this regard, the Assistants reported some anxiety over students' expectation that they would be able to 'rescue them from low marks'.

While reflecting on these expectations, Assistants expressed some discomfort with the risk that students are essentialising race and overlooking intersectional differences. Nevertheless, they also voiced empathy, grounded in their own experiences as undergraduates, when they also relied on similar framings.

Tazi

I remember when I was an undergrad. I used to rely on archetypes about the lecturers to categorise them so I could understand my position in relation to them. So I understand students wanting to categorise me.

These narratives illuminate the obdurate character of race in contemporary South African higher education and its power to mediate relationality (Matthews, 2021). More specifically, the narratives shed light on experiences that Assistants racialised

as white do not encounter, but which inflect the work that Assistants racialised as black and coloured encounter regularly. To my knowledge, these disparities have not yet attracted systematic attention from the institution in question, let alone meaningful intervention. The same might be said for experiences narrated by Assistants who self-identify as coloured, as elaborated below.

For context, it should be explicated that in South Africa *coloured* constitutes a racial identifier with a multi-layered history, as well as ongoing contestations with regard to its nuances and implications for agency and subjectivity. Adhikari (2013) provides useful entry points for some of these debates, but a rigorous overview oversteps the agenda and page limits for this article. However, it must be noted that South Africans who self-identify as coloured continue to encounter systemic and intersectional marginalisation in complicated ways. Assistants encounter some of this during their sessions with students.

Tazi

A female student who self-identified as black said she had personally been discriminated against by coloured people and she wanted me to account for why that was. So, she was homogenising me and coloured people, assuming that we can account for each other. I did not want to get positioned as the oracle or spokesperson for coloured people just because I identify as coloured.

Assistants who self-identify as coloured are thus confronted by the expectation that they can account for behaviours ostensibly shown by other South Africans whom students identify as coloured. While accepting this as an opportunity to address essentialism, these experiences are reported as taxing, both cognitively and affectively. Again, Assistants account for this expectation in systemic terms.

Zack

I think it happens because students don't see coloureds in many roles on this varsity. They see admin staff and secretaries and cleaning staff. Students never see coloured people as intellectuals.

If CRT and efforts to decolonise higher education in South Africa intend to rely on, 'the epistemic perspective and knowledge formations of racially subordinated communities as a privileged standpoint from which to generate critical consciousness' (Adams, 2018 et al. 341) then these narratives can contribute to such processes by highlighted the everyday ecologies that Assistants traverse.

CONCLUSION

Discourse-based data are open to interrogation from multiple theoretic lenses, and these interviews could be interpreted along avenues that critique the propositions I have averred so far. Bearing this in mind, in what follows I attempt to pull together how the Assistants' reflections might be read in terms of Wale (2019) and others (Dick & Painter, 2021; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2020; Mueller, 2020; Adams et al., 2018).

One element of the analyses proposed earlier centres on the way some Assistants

labour to grasp how their own structurally-situated identities impact students' willingness to meaningfully engage the Assistant as a partner in learning. Some Assistants expressed a commitment to accepting and working with the vulnerability entailed by this process, notably in terms of admitting how their positionalities drive the need to invite and learn from the experiences and epistemologies that students contribute to tutorial sessions. This vulnerability always encompasses both epistemic and affective dimensions. Wale (2019) and Adams et al. (2018, p. 337, 341) insist that such vulnerability is exigent for unsettling the, 'delusions of grandeur that construct the Eurocentric modern order [as a] pinnacle of human civilisation' and for learning how, 'hegemonic knowledge institutions [...] have evolved via cultural selection to protect white comfort and to promote white ignorance'.

Assistants who self-identify as black and coloured actualise vulnerability by showing insight into intersectionality, chiefly by comprehending and wrestling with the introspection occasioned by being confronted with students' experiences of abject material disenfranchisement. In doing so, their narratives parallel some of the misgivings analysed by Belluigi and Thondhlana (2020). Concurrently, black and coloured Assistants also run into students whose expectations signal the dangers of racial essentialism, with the former being expected to improve students' academic growth and performance, while the latter are expected to account for the behaviours of other South Africans grouped in the same racial category.

Scholars of CRT, and of decolonisation, have agitated for the radical reform of university curricula, both in terms of the texts and theories students are required to process, and in terms of the modalities through which texts and theories are communicated to students, such as supporting lectures with tutorials (Makombe, 2021; Garrett et al., 2020; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Continued research is necessary to understand how such changes (when they are implemented) impact the everyday ecologies inhabited by actors such as Assistants. The process of actively and collaboratively engaging undergraduates in texts and theories that are considered conducive to antiracism and decolonisation (whether this occurs under the auspices of postcolonial literary studies or other courses with comparable objectives) will also involve Assistants in complicated and potentially painful, exacting tasks. Given that these actors inhabit a precarious status between students, on the one hand, and lecturing staff and the broader institution on the other hand, the danger exists that they could be left to deal with the pressure individually, as is already frequently true for fully-employed academic staff who identify as black and coloured (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2020).

As such, one pressing question is whether university authorities who exert influence over the conditions under which Assistants work are willing to consider how they might meaningfully respond to the pressures under which Assistants work. To address this question, the experiences and epistemologies of Assistants themselves must figure centrally, at least if institutions are willing to consider what social justice and decolonisation might mean at the practical level of Assistants' interactions with students (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). At present, South African universities are rapidly embracing neoliberal managerial regimes. These systems induce a, 'work environment characterised by affects of insufficiency, non-relationality, competitive-

ness, individualism, isolation and very often anxiety' in which many employees are often, 'on the verge of a collective nervous breakdown' (Dick & Painter, 2021, p. 38). The repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic can only exacerbate matters, notably for contractually-employed educators.

Regardless of these conditions, Assistants, and especially those who identify as black and coloured, labour to support students' growth and to advance their own critical acumen. Institutions should not treat their work tokenistically or merely in terms of measurable outputs, as is common in increasingly business-oriented discourse (Dick & Painter, 2021). Instead, the emancipatory potential and agency of these Assistants merit recognition and thoughtful support, and to do this CRT premises would insist on taking cues from the Assistants themselves (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). For this reason, additional research across institutions and generations of Assistants is important.

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