Never forget where you come from: Critical diversity literacy and structure-facing virtue among first-year students

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Abstract

This article investigates tensions that arose when a group of Learning Facilitators (LFs) and students collaboratively examined the socially constructed nature of racial identity. These discussions transpired in a South Africa Department of English, in an introductory module in postcolonial literature designed for first-year students. The core contribution of the article lies in conjoining critical diversity literacy (CDL) and structure-facing virtue to theorise this tension. It also produces suggestions for deepening the emancipatory potential of such discussions about identity and power in ways that are intended to be relevant to other settings in which comparable discussions are occurring between students and contractually appointed university teachers like LFs.

Keywords

critical diversity literacy, structure-facing virtue, racism

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Introduction

This article combines critical diversity literacy (CDL) and structure-facing virtue to analyze interviews with Learning Facilitators (LFs) who are contracted to teach first-year students about the socially constructed nature of identity (Steyn, 2015, 2023; Madva, Kelly and Brownstein, 2023). This combination helps to theorise the concerns LFs raised during interviews in ways that relate to broader questions about identity and power.

CDL and structure-facing virtue have not yet been combined despite taking a similar stance in a key debate, "If the fundamental source of racial injustice lies in social structures rather than in hearts and minds, then [we must focus on] changing those structures" (Madva et al. 2023: 2).

However, educating hearts and minds need not be abandoned wholesale but redirected. Structure-facing virtue and CDL use similar principles to show how students can be equipped to conceptualize social injustices as systemic. For instance, students can be alerted to the way oppressive systems condition commonsense discourses around identity-formation. LFs facilitate interactions where such aspirations can be accomplished. We argue that these principles generate insights into how LFs can teach students to link oppressive systems with everyday discourses about identity. These insights can prove pertinent to other educational settings that interrogate the nexus between identity and power.

The analysis presented in this article unpacks the tension LFs experienced when students who identify as black South Africans expressed ambivalence about the principle that racialized identities are socially constructed. The central argument of this article is that LFs must not only work with a theorisation of identity as socially constructed. They must also explore how identities are always constructed within systemically unjust hierarchies. The analysis pinpoints moments in LFs' interactions with black-identifying students when doing so became possible. In fact, the LFs reported intuiting the emergence of such opportunities, but remaining uncertain about whether they were permitted to raise questions around power.

Conceptually, this article is anchored in CDL and structure-facing virtue, since both approaches proved useful for theorising the ambivalence that black-identifying students expressed to LFs, and which LFs examined during interviews. The principal contribution of the article lies in showing how these two frameworks theorise interactions that might be occurring in other higher education contexts in South African and elsewhere.

The rest of this article is divided into the following sections. First, LFs' responsibilities are delineated, followed by a justification for involving LFs in research. The interview protocols are outlined next, before elucidating CDL and structure-facing virtue. Finally, the analysis is presented, before offering conclusion observations.

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LF recruitment and responsibilities

Fully employed professors present classes to hundreds of students in one sitting, while LFs play a supporting role by collaborating with groups of 15-20 students. They must facilitate discussions about the post-colonial texts under study, focusing on themes including identity-formation and racism.

LFs are required to become familiar enough with their students to tailor learning activities to their needs, capabilities, and cultural backgrounds. To these ends, they must encourage students to interpret the texts in relation to their own lived experiences. Potentially, this includes the epistemologies that contributed to students' personal and collective subjectivities prior to entering universities. It also includes students' experiences as they navigate the university environment. LFs should, therefore, attend carefully to students' existing and emerging epistemologies around identity. Potentially, the work that LFs undertake can spur critical learning about the entanglements between identity and wider social forces. This is a demanding enterprise, and the study is partly impelled by an aspiration to comprehend LFs' work, hoping to learn how LFs might be supported so that students' critical capabilities are expanded.

Since our scholarly backgrounds are critical race theory and special pedagogy, we consulted LFs and the professors who designed the module, to explore their understandings of the intended outcomes of the module. Both parties affirmed that the module was designed to use postcolonial studies to introduce first-year students to framings of identity as socially constructed and historically contingent, rather than inherent or biological.

Details of the participants and justification for researching LFs

Thirteen LFs were employed for 2023, all of whom consented to interviews. This pool of interviewees compares favourably with other qualitative projects. Two of these LFs had accrued eight years' teaching experience and five had four years' experience. For the remaining six, 2023 was their first year of teaching. In terms of self-identification, seven LFs identified as black, one as mixed-race, one as Asian (Taiwanese) and four as white. All identified as women, apart from one white man.

Ethical clearance was secured from the Institutional Review Board, the Academic Head of the Department, the professors involved in designing and teaching, and each LF. Individual interviews lasted around ninety minutes.

The value of interviewing LFs stems, in part, from the fact that the experiences of contractually appointed university teachers remain under-researched. Analysing LFs' experiences with students can deepen the impact of pedagogies intended to engage students on difficult contemporary issues.

Additionally, of the thirteen LFs, seven self-identify as black and they expressed some familiarity with the reasons why black-identifying students registered uncertainty about

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the LFs' approach to identity. For context, it should be mentioned that most of the first-year students in this module self-identify as black, but intersectional differences between these students and black-identifying LFs still exist, notably in terms of educational and financial backgrounds. LFs who identify as black expressed an interest in deepening their knowledge about these intersectional differences, using the interviews as a chance to reflect on their experiences.

Adopting a critical approach to LFs' teaching experiences demands reading their micro-level interactions with students as situated within larger systems and structural arrangements. To achieve this, the interviews are read through the lenses of CDL and structure-facing virtue.

Interview procedures

Individual interviews were selected over focus groups to afford LFs the liberty to examine their relationships with other LFs and with the professors who designed and taught the module. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured questionnaire, organised around these subjects:

1) the teaching methods LFs used to facilitate discussions with students.
2) the topics that were covered.
3) students' reactions to these topics.
4) moments when students articulated discomfort, ambivalence, resistance, or excitement.
5) any personal discomfort that LFs experienced.
6) the potential impact of LFs' positionalities in a South African university context.

Interviewees were also consistently encouraged to raise other topics they considered important. The intention was to conduct the interviews as exchanges that allow all participants to actively co-construct knowledge as the conversation unfolds.

The discourse analysis of the interviews highlighted a pattern expressed by most LFs: a level of tension that arose when black-identifying students registered ambivalence about the precept that group identities along racial lines are socially constructed.

All the LFs who encountered this concern attempted to draw students into an open, peer-centered discussion, during which students were prompted to share and contrast views on the subject. During the interviews, LFs shared the results of their efforts to facilitate these conversations and attempted to interpret what students had shared.

Analytically, the study reads the interviews with LFs using CDL and structure-facing virtue. The next section not only explicates the core precepts of these approaches, but details their exact relevance and utility vis-à-vis LFs, and the work they undertake with students.

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Critical Diversity Literacy

CDL extols, "an ethical sociopolitical stance" that challenges apolitical and neoliberal framings of diversity (Steyn, 2015: 379). It opposes "carnivalesque" discourses that reduce diversity to, "a floating signifier" focused on legal compliance, demographic representivity and superficial celebrations of inclusion, because such discourses ultimately remain power-evasive, avoiding penetrating questions about social justice (Steyn, 2015: 379). Superficial constructions of diversity are not simply inadequate, theoretically speaking, but directly implicated in sustaining injustice.

By contrast, CDL prioritises the rights of oppressed groups to, "be visible, affirmed, and included in how we think about ourselves as social collectivities" (Steyn, 2015: 380). This approach flows from the twin observations that, "The discrete national state belonging to a homogenous population group has been recognised as a myth of modernity" and yet the legacy of this myth still exerts material and psychological consequences. This is evidenced by the continued normalisation of systemic oppression in post-conflict societies such as South Africa.

Critical literacy should, from Steyn's (2015) perspective, instil capacities to notice forces that stymie social justice and illuminate methods of resistance. To this end, critical literacy must exceed a mere, "private accomplishment [and], a set of cognitive skills" (Steyn, 2015: 380). It must encompass both cognitive skills and affective dispositions, with both individual and collective aspects, all of which must be alert to the context-specific nuances of systemic oppression.

Our argument is that CDL is relevant to the work LFs do with students. Below, we enumerate the ten principles of CDL (Steyn, 2015). Each precept is far more nuanced, and we elaborate as necessary during the analysis.

CDL cultivates (Steyn, 2015: 381-387):
An understanding of the role of power in constructing differences that make a difference.
A recognition of the unequal symbolic and material value of different social locations.
Analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other.
A definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems and (not only) a historical legacy.
An understanding that social identities are learned and are an outcome of social practices.
The possession of a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression.
The ability to translate (see through) and interpret coded hegemonic practices.
An analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalised oppressions are inflected through specific social contexts and material arrangements.
An understanding of the role of emotions, including our own emotional investment, in all of the above.
An engagement with issues of the transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening social justice at all levels of social organisation.
The next section expounds the resonances between CDL and LFs' work, as we see them.

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LFs and CDL

First, reflecting Steyn's (2015) approach to diversity, LFs are responsible for fostering a learning environment that engages diversity critically. To achieve this, LFs must avoid framing students simply, or only, as atomistic individuals, as often happens in neoliberal discourses about education, diversity and student success. Rather, LFs must grow their capacity to discern how students are embedded in broader systems that mediate learning.

Second, as LFs pursue the above capacity, they must cultivate an alertness to complex forms of difference. This entails sensitivity to intersectionality and its impact on the way students respond to educational materials. Therefore, the learning interventions LFs use must actively engage students' existing knowledge alongside their emerging insights, as exemplified during the analysis. This also means that LFs must avoid stereotyping students. For instance, students who share racial markers like skin color might not respond identically to classroom interactions. LFs must remain alive to unanticipated dynamics yielded by contrasting ethnic identifications, financial backgrounds, life experiences and other factors (Steyn, 2015).

Third, and of focal significance for this article, the points mentioned so far can be summarised in the first tenet of CDL. All our existing discourses for conceptualising difference, for talking and thinking about classification and categorisation, are always, already moulded by unequal power structures. Sensitivity to the entanglements between power, identity, and injustice, constitutes the central lens through which LFs can learn to envision their teaching and to respond constructively to students (Steyn, 2015). In fact, many LFs are already doing this, as discussed later.

This sensitivity is also the key commonality between CDL and structure-facing virtue. The latter also contributes a crucial defence as to why education anchored in this sensitivity is worth undertaking at all, as outlined in the next section (Madva et al. 2023).

We suggest that reading the interviews using CDL can pinpoint places where LFs' training can be sharpened, equipping them to respond critically and invitingly to students, even when students express doubt about the direction of the instruction LFs provide.

Concisely put, all educational interactions are already embedded in layers of context that demand critical attentiveness, and CDL pinpoints how LFs might acknowledge some of these layers in ways that make CDL relevant to other learning contexts. These contexts might not witness precisely the same pattern that emerged from interviews with LFs, but the analysis nevertheless outlines how CDL can stimulate productive responses.

Finally, the students assigned to LFs are likely to encounter complex forms of diversity in other classrooms, other educational settings and in life beyond the university. Consequently, honing LFs' capabilities for supporting students' critical literacy is a worthwhile endeavour, and the analysis of interviews with LFs can contribute to this long-term agenda.

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Structure-face virtue

Structure-facing virtue, as developed by Madva et al. (2023), principally concerns what people know about oppressive structures, and how they think, feel, and respond to such knowledge. The concept adds theoretical depth and analytic impetus to our application of CDL to interviews with LFs. Madva et al (2023: 2) insert the concept into debates regarding the purpose and direction of anti-racist education:

"At the root of the problem of racial injustice […] are sets of social practices, laws, and historical forces that advantage white people in myriad ways. Racial animus and psychological entities like stereotypes are said to flow from these more fundamental social structures, not the other way around. […] This diagnosis has been taken to suggest that there isn't much work for moral education to do."

Anti-racist education misses the mark when it aspires to improve inter-group sentiments by reducing prejudice without interrogating systemic power imbalances (Kendi, 2019). Madva et al. (2023) concur that many familiar iterations of education against racism have perpetuated this error, but they insist that education must be redirected, not abandoned.

The aspiration to change hearts and minds can be retained, but the goal shifts towards enabling hearts and minds to discern inequitable systems and to adopt the determination to oppose policies and practices that reinforce these systems. Harmonious daily interactions across difference are unseated as the chief goal because they are insufficient if decoupled from the larder objective vis-à-vis systems. In summary, when asked whether to focus on either changing racist structures or educating hearts and minds Madva et al (2023) promote a both/and position.

Madva et al (2023) don't coordinate their work with CDL directly, but their advocacy coincides with many precepts of CDL. Both frameworks orient education towards teaching how racial differences are not only socially and discursively constructed; they are fabricated within subordinating structures that have proven remarkably obdurate. Moreover, both frameworks highlight how these structures have proven flexible enough to morph under contemporary pressures, including legislation against overt racism and the institutionalisation of diversity initiatives (Ali, 2022; Vachon, 2022; Zembylas, 2022; Allen, 2019). Put differently, both CDL and structure-facing virtue envision racially oppressive systems and the everyday, institutionalised discourses that obscure racism as interdependent. Teaching students about this mutual imbrication is cardinal.

To illustrate, students might experience racial groups as given, static, discrete entities. These experiences might incline them to enter discussions about racism with the intention of ameliorating inter-group conflict. Other students might agitate for post-racial discourses or colour-blindness. In either case, racial categories are abstracted from the marginalising structures that create and sustain them. Consequently, the contingent nature of racial difference is elided. Sensitising students to the relationship between essentialist racial discourses and power structures is vital, and the same applies to power-evasive discourses like colour-blindness.

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Our argument is that the doubt expressed by some black-identifying students against the proposition that their racialised identities are malleable and unstable, can be read productively through CDL and structure-facing virtue. The next section clarifies the dispositions that Madva et al (2023) consider indispensable for structure-facing virtue, before linking these with CDL, specifically as a means of analysing interviews with LFs.

Dispositions of structure-facing virtue

First, "structure-facing virtue consists partly in dispositions to notice and act upon situational influences on our minds" (Madva et al, 2023: 13). To clarify, this entails probing beyond surface-level behaviours, especially by embedding what is observed in relation to structural influences. What might this entail for LFs' interactions with students?

To illustrate, when students voice resistance against the teaching that identity is socially constructed, it can be interpreted in ways that racist reify stereotypes. For instance, students can be seen as unprepared for university study. After all, they seem unable to grasp a basic theoretical precept that is fundamental to scholarship in the humanities.

In South Africa, this deficit reading of students might find widespread acceptance as common sense. The deplorable state of pre-tertiary education is well-known and considered a major driver of South African students' poor performance at universities (Adonis and Silinda, 2021).

Such deficit framings gain racist overtones when considering that the students who expressed unease with this precept often made their own racial identifications a central part of their concerns, as explained during the analysis. However, structure-facing virtue demands more robust attempts to unpack behaviours, and the analysis of the interviews proffers one package of possibilities.

Second, "structure-facing virtue incorporates dispositions not only to attend to situational influences affecting behaviour and thought but to look for ways to change those situations" (Madva et al, 2023: 14). Critical race theorists will recognise how this disposition aligns with calls to promote social justice (Madva et al, 2023). For LFs working with students, this disposition might prove challenging. After all, they occupy a liminal institutional position which, on the one hand, gives them considerable freedom to engage students as they see fit, using learning activities of their own design, based on their insights into students. On the other hand, without the authority to change the texts they are required to teach or to change official assessment methods, LFs might also feel frustrated and unable to attend meaningfully to the "situational influences" which they believe are affective students (Madva et al. 2023: 14). Madva et al. (2023) offer a starting point by outlining the third disposition as follows.

Third, structure-facing virtue elevates resistance against the status quo, promoting scepticism against, "a default tendency to assume that the way things currently are is morally acceptable" insisting instead that, "structural change is appropriate, desirable and achievable" (Madva at. 2023: 15). This orientation hinges on, 1) a willingness to critique the epistemologies

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proliferated by hegemonic knowledge institutions, 2) a willingness to regularly undertake challenging cognitive activity, even when it proves affectively demanding, and 3) a capacity to accept that the process of adopting critical views can bring one into conflict with others' viewpoints, including the views of friends, family and/or institutions.

In some regards, LFs already undertake much of this work, given that they are required to draw students into potentially discomforting discussions about racism, personal experiences, collective knowledge and the literature under study. The analysis expands on this point, using CDL and structure-facing virtue.

Author positionality

Identifying as a white man and a white woman makes critical self-reflection exigent. We implemented several procedures such as conducting interviews as opportunities to co-construct knowledge. Doing this requires being open to epistemologies that challenge whiteness and patriarchy. Additionally, we made the writing process transparent to participants by having regular discussions intended to show sensitivity to LFs' concerns and priorities. This step proved impactful, because it allowed LFs to explain that they envisioned the article as an opening to share their perspectives and experiences with a wider audience, while remaining protected by anonymity.

Comprehending identity as socially constructed

This article examines the ambivalence that some black-identifying students articulated when LFs explored the theoretical principle that identities are socially constructed. First, however, this section discusses students who grasped this tenet with alacrity, according to LFs. It also considers how students found it useful for analysing anti-black racism.

Before continuing it should be noted that some readers might question whether racialisation should be centred in the analysis at all. But racial identifications are relevant, since students made it a cornerstone of their unease with reading race as socially constructed. This is also where attention to systems become vital, as exemplified later.

According to four LFs, some groups of students embraced this theoretical principle speedily. These students not only understood the principle in an abstract sense. They also expressed an increasingly nuanced appreciation of how it can strengthen their awareness of racist systems. As examples, students invoked experiences of anti-black racism in communities outside the university, but all also in the university.

Ananda

"My students explained that race must be socially constructed by recounting memories of white friends they had growing up, who showed zero interpersonal racism until their

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teenage years when older white kids and adults told them to abandon their once black friends. How can anyone not be racist as a child, then change over time? It can happen if what race means is learned from the environment. As their white friends aged, their behaviour changed, starting with unspoken racial segregation at school and social events, and my students say this continues into universities. So, what race means depends on context."

This extract, and those it represents, exemplifies how some LFs prompted students to see lived experiences as a pedagogic resource. In this instance, black-identifying students recall times when racial identification posed fewer barriers to social interaction, especially the formation of friendships. In fact, group belonging had yet to ossify into rigid in-groups vs. out-groups.

LFs reflected that these students could imagine a future without racialisation. However, according to LFs, students never lapsed into power-evasive discourses of post-racialism, because they asserted that problematic patterns of socialisation must be recognized and undone first, such as the pattern that inclines some South African children to see themselves as white and then to follow, "unspoken racial segregation".

LFs also discerned intersectional elements of the experiences students invoked.

Ayanda

"There are some key differences between my students from the suburbs vs. rural areas. Those from the suburbs had many interracial interactions. They could mention these relationships with white kids and how they changed, but students from rural areas grew up where everyone was black. They only had interactions with people who look and identify differently after coming to university. For them, it was much harder to think of race as learned or to see systems that limit ideas about race."

These reflections highlight the legacy of Apartheid on contemporary South Africa. Many "rural areas" still endure mass unemployment, abject poverty and failing infrastructure. They are also predominantly inhabited by South Africans racialised as black, a repercussion of the systemic racism imposed by white minority rule. Officially, this rule ended in 1994, but it still mediates contemporary realities. In the context of the tutorials under study, LFs explained that for these students, it was initially harder to extrapolate how race is contingent and contestable. However, some LFs were nevertheless able to facilitate productive conversations.

Anansi

"My black students said they get that race is socially constructed because of on-campus protests that get violent. Some don't even participate in those protests, but when things get violent and vandalism happens, then white professors will look at them a certain way when classes resume as if they were also protesting just because they are black. They say, they get eyed as if they are barbarians. So, that's how these students can say that what race means is situational."

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Faya

"When students share those experiences, I tell them that identity is not about the body you are born with, like it's skin colour and hormones and so on, it's about what society does with that body like calling some bodies barbarian without thinking about socioeconomic inequalities."

To contextualise these extracts, it must be mentioned that South African universities witness regular acts of mass protest, aimed at calling attention to the precarities endured by financially vulnerably students, many of whom are from rural areas.

The protests that were most frequently discussed during tutorials had occurred between 2021 and 2023. The goals had been to challenge the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). NSFAS was originally created to fund students without the financial resources to pursue a university education. The organization has been accused of corruption and incompetence by student protestors, many of whom hail from rural areas of South African (Adonis and Silinda, 2021). For many students who depend on NSFAS funding, universities represent some of their first, consistent, daily exchanges with South Africans who identify along different racial lines. As demonstrated in the extracts cited above, these interactions improved the students' grasp of what it means to construe racial identity as fluid and contextual, rather than given or inherent. Moreover, students could interpolate this perspective on identity with anti-black racism.

The fact that students were able to link anti-black racism with framings of identity as socially constructed, points to an aspect of LFs' teaching. Crucially, from the joint perspectives of CDL and structure-facing virtue, LFs saw these moments as opportunities to interrogate power. Although LFs are not trained in the tenets of CDL, they considered these moments as allowing them to suggest to students that unjust power constructs, "differences that make a difference" (Steyn, 2015: 381).

To clarify, LFs felt ready to propose that group identities are not only situationally contingent in an abstract sense. Instead, they reflect underlying power structures that operate as a taken-for-granted status quo. Simply insisting on the inherent instability of group identities could be taken to imply that group identifications are illusory and thus unimportant (as discussed later). For instance, when white children are socialised to prioritise white identification at the expense of childhood friendships that defy racialisation, or when white professors treat black students with hostility by stereotyping them as "barbarians", then groups are being constructed around whiteness and the racial inequities that have survived the legal demise of Apartheid.

As mentioned earlier, LFs are not presently trained using CDL, but the discussions they facilitate showcase a commitment, on their part, to configuring identity as conditioned by social practices that perpetuate hierarchy. This, in turn, highlights a link between LFs' work and a specific aspect of South African institutions of higher learning.

South African institutions have publicly devoted themselves to unmaking prevailing injustices (Adonis and Silinda, 2021). Interviews with LFs suggest that the teaching

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strategies they employ could play a part in motivating and enabling students to participate in projects to promote social justice, since students are clearly capable of explicating how institutions are implicated in perpetuating some forms of marginalisation. Involving students and their epistemologies is a crucial, and long-term undertaking, but for the immediate purposes of this article, it should be noted that LFs are already mobilising some of the core tenets of CDL in how they envision and direct their pedagogic practices.

The next section deals with interviews in which LFs articulated concern over the ambivalence that some students voiced when engaging with the theoretical precents LFs raised for debate.

Never forget where you come from

This section shares perspectives voiced by LFs to whom black-identifying students articulated scepticism about the socially constructed character of identity, especially group identities organised around race. It details important discourses that emerged from the interviews with LFs, and creates a foundation for an analysis from the joint lenses of CDL and structure-facing virtue, which follows in the next section.

Before citing specific extracts from the interviews, it is worth mentioning the positive pattern that saw students expressing these concerns to LFs instead of remaining silent. Although the LFs never reflected on this willingness from students until it was pointed out to them during debriefing sessions, it might indicate that LFs were indeed able to formulate a foundation for open exchange.

This pattern was not entirely racialised, since some white-identifying LFs discussed similar themes. However, in the interest of centring the voices of black-identifying LFs (and owing to page constraints), the analysis that follows focuses on interviews with them.

Nombusa

"Many of my black students say when they go home, many people say, we are so proud of you for going to university but don't forget where you come from. The same was said to me. Now students say that when I teach them that identity is socially constructed, it feels like I'm telling them to question those people. Back home, people say identity is something you're born with. You're born into a racial group and cultural group. That's who you are. It determines how you must behave, but I'm asking them to question the influence of context. For me, turning that critical gaze on the home environment is good, but for students it's uncomfortable."

Maholi

"Many students reported being uncomfortable with thinking of racial identities as just socially constructed by the environment instead of being something you're born with. They said it makes them feel like I'm teaching them to question the ideas they were raised

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with, to question people back home who say group identity is given at birth. I recognise those words. You cannot change your gender, race or culture. Questioning that means questioning the people who say, we are proud of you for going to university, but never forget who you are and where you come from, which makes it hard for students when I encourage them to question contextual influences."

As mentioned earlier, reading these reflections superficially might see them as disclosing students' unpreparedness for university study. In fact, this might seem like a context-sensitive and realistic appraisal of the weakened state of primary education in South Africa and its effects on students' entry into university environments (Adonis and Silinda, 2021). Such an interpretation might even be touted as a critical recognition of the legacy of Apartheid on the academic readiness of many black South Africans. However, CDL and structure-facing virtue surface the inadequacies of these conclusions.

The twin interpretations outlined above are, obviously, skewed by racism. For one, they suggest that black students are uniquely unready for grasping the tenet that identities are socially constructed. They might also suggest that students' guardians and other people "back home" can be characterised as backward. To be clear, most of the students assigned to LFs identify as black and, consequently, there are no grounds for suggesting that these students are more or less likely to treat group identities as inherent, since students who identify along other lines were underrepresented. It must also be clarified that none of the LFs (regardless of racial or gender identification) voiced such deficit views of students. In fact, as demonstrated below, they favoured interpretive positions that show some amenability to CDL and structure-facing virtue.

Before specifying how these two frameworks might examine these reflections, a further detail is necessary. The following excepts explicate the affective challenges LFs face when they encountered this scepticism. These excerpts also clarify one of the core drivers of students' ambivalence, adding an indispensable factor to the analysis.

Kaya

"Initially, I felt students could relate to me because I'm a black woman like most of them, but when I ask them to question ideas from their home environment, it creates a disconnect. I suspect that for many students the idea that identity is socially constructed sounds like a white idea that can undermine black people's faith in their own ideas, because the lecturers are white, and I come across like I've adopted white ideas. We mainly read non-white authors, but some students think we cherry-picked those who agree with white ideas, but I think this will change beyond first year."

Sinanda

"For now, at least, this undermines my ability to relate to students, because they start to say that maybe these are white perspectives on identity and that if they talk about it too much, they might lose trust in black ideas about identity, but these are new ideas and I think students will grasp them over time."

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The uncertainties shared by black-identifying students bear a certain relation to whiteness and systemic racism. Instead of contending that students' "home environments" are uniquely backwards and hostile to questioning authority, CDL and structure-facing virtue suggest that by sharing the above perspectives with LFs, students are showcasing a measure of critical awareness. Students are evincing a degree of unease about the prevalence of whiteness as a structuring factor at the university where they are studying.

Madva et al. (2023) theorise structure-facing virtue around an attentiveness to situational and systemic influences on the behaviours that can be observed in-situ. If applied to interviews, students are not being held back from advancing academically owing to backward epistemologies inculcated in their home environments. Instead, they are bringing diverse epistemologies into productive tension with each other. They are doing this in ways that illuminate the operation of whiteness and systemic racism, both at the university in question, and in the wider economic, sociopolitical context of South Africa. CDL contributes by supplying precise ways of attending to situational and systemic influences. As a point of departure, it spurs recognition of, "the unequal symbolic and material value of different social locations" (Steyn, 2015: 382).

Never forget: A CDL perspective

The unique symbolic and material positionalities from which students' doubt is being voiced can – if acknowledged and validated – repudiate deficit and racist framings of students' responses. To clarify, any analysis must start from an awareness that students navigate a society still marked by racism, sexism and hierarchies founded upon these intersecting matrices of subordination (Madva et al. 2023; Ali, 2022; Steyn, 2015). From this vantage point, students' views are no longer deficient, but valuable resources for understanding how potentially liberating precepts about identity can be subverted by structural shortcomings in the teaching process.

If students' "home environments" have primed them to question whether universities might demand that they adopt "white ideas" that risk alienating them from these environments, then this might not be without good reason. If students are anticipating forms of anti-black racism in the education they will receive, or if they suspect that universities might assume the superiority of its own, institutionalised knowledge over whatever knowledge students gained at home, then their scepticism might be well-founded.

Both historic and contemporary racial injustice in South Africa give students ample grounds for inferring that universities might not be receptive to the familiar epistemologies that students gain from their communities. In fact, this tension sits at the heart of some calls for decolonisation (Ali, 2022; Vachon, 2022; Zembylas, 2022; Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Allen, 2019).

CDL not only legitimises students' doubt in an abstract sense. For example, teaching informed by CDL would not simply categorise students' ambivalence as a form of diversity that should be tolerated. Instead, its precepts validate students' anxiety that their

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education remains grounded in, "white ideas", or institutionalised whiteness. In fact, CDL is committed to supplying "a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression" (Steyn, 2015: 385). As such, teaching grounded in CDL would prompt students to, "interpret coded hegemonic practices," including deficit views of students' "home environments", using concepts such as whiteness and intersectionality. Crucially, this does not mean abandoning the proposition that identity is socially constructed as a way of respecting students' communities, but it does entail more carefully explicating why this teaching is liberating. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the interviews that many students experienced these teachings around identity as threatening. Careful attention to the discourses students used highlights another insight from CDL.

Two expressions that students frequently used to articulate their positions, according to LFs, are that identities are "just socially constructed" and that students feel uncomfortable with "questioning the home environment". The prevalence of the former suggests that some students understood this tenet as asserting that all forms of knowledge founded upon identity-specific experiences are not simply questionable, but potentially invalid. In short, the claim that identities are "just socially constructed" is mistaken for claiming that they do not matter.

One part of students' ambivalence might, therefore, flow from the anxiety that they are being expected to embrace a post-racial, post-gender vision of society, since these identities are simply contextual, discursive constructions. Students are, in that sense, evincing a capacity that LFs can expand and sharpen – the ability to read, "oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems and (not only) a historical legacy" (Steyn, 2015: 384). Similarly, students' anxiety over "questioning the home environment" might indicate unease with what they interpret as the claim that these epistemologies have no place in the university context.

These possibilities highlight an omission in the education that LFs were instructed to provide to students. Some lived experiences can illuminate how, "all our categories for thinking about difference are socially constructed within unequal power relations" (Steyn, 2015: 318). Experiences that showcase how identities are shaped by marginalising power structures should be afforded a unique level of prominence and centrality in any critical appraisal of the nexus between social justice and identity. For instance, Adams, Salter, Kurtis, Naemi and Estrada-Villalta (2018: 339) insist on "the importance of marginalised knowledge from the epistemic perspective of subordinated communities as a resource for critical consciousness".

In other words, students were not encouraged to view the ambivalence generated by their "home environments" against universities as a useful sign of the marginalisation to which these communities are subject. Students were not effectively encouraged to see their own experiences with navigating the transition between different communities as a resource for critical thinking. Far from claiming that identities are "just socially constructed" students could have been made to feel that the competing discourses they are encountering around group and individual identities can generate strategies for advancing social justice. More precisely, students could have been afforded opportunities to question the relationship between universities, home environments and overriding inequalities in South Africa.

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However, it should be clarified that this analysis is not intended to blame LFs for the above-mentioned shortcomings. On the contrary, during the interviews LFs highlighted their concern that tutorials failed to communicate an emancipatory and empowering vision of identity as socially constructed, from which oppressive structures can be unmasked and problematised. A key obstacle for LFs is that they were uncertain about how to proceed once this obstacle had been uncovered.

Maholi

"This semester was all about teaching students that identities are socially constructed. The second year will unpack power and that stuff, or that's how I have it, so I just wasn't sure what to do when students were so doubtful."

To shed further light on this dynamic, it is crucial to recall LFs' earlier observations regarding intersectionality, and the "key differences […] between my students from the suburbs vs. rural areas".

As mentioned earlier, the LFs reported that students from suburban areas could call upon more experiences with children who were later racialised as white. These experiences impelled a certain appreciation of how identities are socially constructed and, significantly, how this perspective on identities unmasks the subtle persistence of racism in contemporary South Africa. These divergences in the lived realities of students from suburban vs. rural areas hint that the module under study was implicitly designed with the former audience in mind. As such, an intersectional lens surfaces a foundational shortcoming in the module's design – over which LFs could not exert any control. The module is hampered by an underappreciation of the diversity of its audience.

This mismatch between the module and its student audience exacerbated the affective labour LFs were compelled to undertake. Most of the LFs who identify as black were able to recognise students' uncertainty as a familiar discourse. They had also encountered it while transitioning to university. However, despite being familiar with exhortations to, "never forget where you come from", these LFs found their education around identity, discourse and power emancipatory. They did not consider it a wedge between themselves, and the epistemologies cultivated in their communities beyond the university. Given this experience, they expected that students would resonate with them as their teacher-student relationships developed. By contrast, when faced with some students' ambivalence, these LFs' expectations were overturned.

Sinanda

"I really felt like as time went on that students were less likely to relate to me and to trust that I would never teach anything intended to undermine the value of their experience or discount their sense of who they are as black people."

By analysing these aspects of LFs' experiences, this study intends to suggest that CDL and structure-facing virtue offer impactful guidelines for engaging first-year students, but they also arm LFs, by enhancing their own capacity to see themselves as situated

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in subordinating structures. LFs' attempts to resonate with students and to create an emancipatory learning environment are clearly embedded in these structures, and produced by them, with affective repercussions.

CDL prioritises interrogations of "the role of emotions," seeking to uncover how flows of affect can expose marginalization (Zsögön 2021) and highlight areas that demand change (Steyn, 2015: 387). LFs reported that participating in the interviews helped them to explicate the interrelatedness between their own affective responses to students, and the shortcomings of the module's design – shortcomings which reflect a structural failure to recognise the diversity of the lived experience that students bring to the university. This realisation, for LFs, points to several conclusions.

Conclusion

We did not select structure-facing virtue until the first stage of our analysis highlighted its relevance. Subsequent analyses, coupled with debriefing sessions with LFs, called our attention to the exhortation that, "anti-racist moral education [can] continue to aim at changing hearts and minds [but it must] provide instruction about the character of social structures," and it must aspire to, "teaching people to see structural change as appropriate, desirable, and achievable" (Madva et al. 2023: 15).

To readers who already support such action, Madva et al.'s (2023) position might seem obvious. Nonetheless, this study has drawn on both the experiences of LFs, and their efforts to assign meaning to these experiences by participating in interviews, to surface specific junctions and ways in which both structure-facing virtue and CDL can exert concrete implications for teaching about the interface between identity and power. These implications might resonate with similar teaching contexts.

When discussing the findings of the study with the professors who designed and taught the module, they explained their ambition to dissect questions about power with students during the second year of study. Nonetheless, the findings can be interpreted as proposing that students need to be exposed to an analysis of systems/structures alongside the teaching that identities are socially constructed, instead of staggering these precepts into discrete units. At least two more specific implications can be inferred from the findings.

First, with regards to students, some of them clearly experienced dissonance between the epistemologies they were expected to embrace at the university vs. the worldviews espoused in what they called their "home environments". This offers an opportunity. The dissonance itself can become a topic of discussion and study. Doing so carefully would reward students for noticing this discord, and for voicing it to LFs and fellow students. Taken together, this affords an opportunity for students and LFs to examine the social dynamics that impact how precepts taught at the university interact with perspectives created outside its formal strictures. Put differently, students are invited to interrogate how different epistemologies can be brought into conversation in ways that unmask the operation of power. Involving students in this manner signals to them that their concerns

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and experiences matter for learning, which is a central priority for many critical forms of education (Ali, 2022; Vachon, 2022; Zembylas, 2022; Allen, 2019).

LFs, for their part, should have been empowered, permitted, and trained to respond sensitively when students raised this topic – especially since those LFs who identify as black resonated with the experience and could have mobilised those experiences to facilitate a critical analysis in collaboration with students. This might have inclined students to feel recognised and included, not in a superficial celebration of diversity, but because students possess unique forms of knowledge born from the symbolic and material social locations from which they can speak.

In this sense, the analysis presented in this article attempts to proffer more than an abstract, decontextualised provocation that identity and power must be examined as inevitably entangled (which is not to claim that abstract theorisation is not indispensable in some scholarly venues). This is done by highlighting that when black-identifying students expressed their ambivalence, they took a measure of ownership of their learning by instigating an opportunity for critical learning. They created a platform on which the theories they were encountering, and more familiar worldviews could be brought into productive tension. To be clear, both the knowledges produced at universities and the familiar perspectives generated at "home environments" can be interrogated and contrasted, without wholly accepting or rejecting one or the other. In turn, this could have yielded a strong foundation from which first-year students can enter the second year of studies during which, presumably, questions of power are more forcefully unpacked (cf. Odrowaz-Coates 2019).

Second, with regards to LFs, all of them explained that they initially felt exhilarated at the prospect of teaching students about how identities are socially constructed. They were under the impression that by framing identity in this way, they would be introducing students to the beginnings of what CDL would term a "diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression" (Steyn, 2015: 387). This excitement is significant, but LFs mentioned that they were never explicitly encouraged, during training for example, to mobilise their own intersectional experiences as a resource for connecting with students and for enhancing teaching. Moreover, despite the LFs' excitement, once the possibility arose to link identity and power, LFs remained doubtful about their remit for venturing into this terrain since their teaching was intended to focus on the socially constructed nature of identity in isolation from power.

If the module under study, and similar teaching projects, is seriously devoted to affording a well-structured and impactful engagement with critical theory – whether though post-colonial literature or other modalities – then more consideration is vital for linking identity to power from the beginning instead of separative the two. Additionally, LFs should be encouraged to envision their own lived realities as resources for teaching and should also be trained in how they might do this. CDL and structure-facing virtue not only proffer precepts to achieving both these goals, but also outline principles that can be translated into specific teaching outcomes.

Finally, the analysis of the interviews also raises complex questions about belonging and inclusion. How should students respond once they become aware of the potential conflict

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between what they are learning at the university and the views cultivated in other settings? For example, are students required to privilege one set of knowledges over the other? More precisely, should students accept that because they have been raised as members of certain cultural, ethnic and racialised groups, they are obligated to embody the values that some associate with those groups? These questions caused some anxiety for many students, at least as reported by the LFs. Adopting the dispositions of structure-facing virtue and CDL first calls attention to the workings of power, as already mentioned. From this vantage point, students can be reminded that the theories under study at university are not intended to push them towards a particular decision, but to empower them to identify as they see fit and, more importantly, to notice and oppose the oppressive dynamics that generate conflict between different positionalities in a hierarchical society such as South Africa.

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