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Naming the “*Brown Thing*”: racial consciousness in the Ivory Tower

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Introduction: This paper explores the ethical and emotional dimensions of engaging critical racial consciousness in South African higher education. Racialised educators, particularly Black academics, continue to navigate pedagogical spaces shaped by institutional Whiteness, subtle yet persistent norms that privilege Eurocentric standards and misrecognize non-White authority and experience.

Methods: Using collaborative autoethnography and critical incident analysis, two Black academics engaged in a series of recorded reflective conversations. These dialogues served as both data and analytic spaces. Through retrospective discussion, ethically charged incidents from teaching and supervision were identified, revisited and interpreted.

Results: The narratives reveal how misrecognition and racialised silencing surface in everyday academic encounters, through both overt critique and quiet erasure. These moments disrupt normative routines and compel educators to examine their complicity, positionality and pedagogical stance. Key themes include the emotional labor of teaching, the tension between care and compliance, and the institutional conditions that render Black authority negotiable.

Discussion: Rather than seeking closure, the paper argues for staying with the discomfort of ethical ruptures as a pedagogical and political strategy. It positions critical reflection and vulnerability as necessary for decolonial praxis. We propose that humanizing education begins by naming the “Brown Thing”: the embodied, affective, and often unspoken realities of race in the Ivory Tower.

KEYWORDS

critical racial consciousness, higher education, South Africa, decolonial pedagogy, collaborative autoethnography, critical incidents, ethical ruptures, racial identity

Introduction: beginning with the “Brown Thing”

In post-apartheid South Africa, questions of race and identity remain deeply entangled with the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Higher education, in particular, reflects ongoing struggles to dismantle entrenched inequalities and Eurocentric norms that persist despite formal political change. Frantz Fanon’s seminal critique of colonial society reminds us that the “colonial world” created enduring psychopolitical scars, as the oppressed come to see themselves through the distorted mirror of the oppressor (Fanon, 1952/2009). Over a century ago and in a different context, Du Bois (1903/2007) similarly described the “double consciousness” of racialised persons (a fractured self-perception of “two warring ideals”

within one body) which is still resonant for Black and Brown educators and students navigating historically White institutions. These postcolonial insights underscore that in the Global South, as elsewhere, race is not a passé issue but a living structure of power and identity. South African universities have thus become key sites of contestation: from the #RhodesMustFall student protests that decried colonial symbols and curricula, to ongoing debates about decolonizing knowledge, the academy is challenged to critically engage with racial identity and transformation (Heleta, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Within this milieu, educators and learners alike face the imperative to develop a critical racial consciousness that can confront hegemonic Whiteness and its attendant injustices (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

We offer a South African perspective on how youth and educators navigate critical racial consciousness through everyday encounters, both in the classroom and beyond the classroom. Freire's (1970/2005) vision of education as a practice of freedom is instructive here: he argued that through conscientização (conscientization) - a critical awareness and dialogue about oppression - young people and their mentors become "co-investigators" who can transform their world. Our study extends this Freirean spirit to the university space, examining how moments of racial confrontation or confusion can become generative opportunities for learning. In particular, we explore critical incidents in teaching and supervision - those charged encounters when a seemingly simple question or comment (such as the titular query about the "Thing") exposes deeper racialised tensions and ethical dilemmas. We call these moments ethical ruptures; they shake up university norms and force us to think deeply about how and why we teach, and supervise, the way we do. Through these stories, we ask how educators can support students in speaking about race honestly and critically.

We explore how race, ethics, and pedagogy come together in our experiences as educators in South African universities. We do so through a collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016), a methodology in which we (as two racialised educators working within historically White institutions) collectively reflect on our lived experiences and co-author our narratives. It lets us weave our lived experiences with theory, examining both ourselves and the systems we work within. Drawing on moments in teaching, assessment, and supervision, each of us recounts pedagogical encounters that prompted us to question assumptions, confront our biases, or renegotiate our praxis. Through dialogue and mutual critique, we then analyze these stories for what they reveal about systemic power relations and the potential for transformative learning. In adopting this method, we acknowledge the inherently situated nature of knowledge: our accounts are grounded in our specific histories and positionalities (e.g., as "Black", "Brown", or "Colored" South Africans), yet they speak to broader patterns in how race is lived and learned in the Global South.

In our conversations, one of us raised initial thoughts about the complexities of identifying as "Brown", musing aloud, "I wonder if we can start with the 'Brown' thing". This reflection opens a window into the nuanced nature of racial identity and its intersections with personal experiences. The other scholar shared their discomfort with being labeled as "Colored" (a South African racial classification referring to people of mixed ancestry, shaped by apartheid-era categories) (Posel, 2001), questioning whether this term dilutes or overly simplifies their racial identity to make it

more palatable. "Even though I identify as Black, my Colouredness still announces itself in the spaces I enter", they explained, highlighting the ongoing struggle between self-identification and societal perceptions. These discussions not only reveal the personal challenges we face but also underscore the critical role educational institutions play in shaping identity by providing a platform for critical dialogue about race.

The collaborative aspect ensures that no single narrative dominates; instead, we seek a nuanced, multi-voiced understanding of how racialised educators experience and respond to moments of rupture in and beyond the classroom. We hope these reflections offer new ways to teach with care, dignity, and attention to power, one that recognizes students' and educators' full humanity, including the racialised dimensions of our identities, and that strives for dignity and justice in educational practice (Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022).

We ground our thinking in the work of postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race scholars who help us make sense of race in education. We engage classical thinkers like Fanon, Du Bois and Freire alongside contemporary critical scholars to ground our inquiry. Fanon's (1952/2009) analysis of the internalization of racism and Du Bois's (1903/2007) notion of double consciousness provide language for understanding the identity conflicts and self-reflections that emerge in our narratives. Freire (1970/2005) offers a vision of critical pedagogy where dialogue about difficult issues (including race) is a means of consciousness-raising and co-creating knowledge. From the field of social justice theory, Nancy Fraser's work reminds us that experiences of racial alienation are not only personal but structural: they indicate misrecognition, a form of injustice whereby institutions deny equal respect and voice to certain groups (Fraser, 1997). Such misrecognition constitutes an ethical failure of the education system - one that demands redress through both cultural change and material restructuring. We therefore consider our "ethical ruptures" as openings that expose these failures, prompting questions about how to achieve what Fraser (1997) calls parity of participation for marginalized groups in academia. Critical Race Theory further informs our approach with its assertion that racism is an ordinary, systemic feature of society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). It compels us to interrogate how institutional structures and everyday practices in higher education perpetuate racial inequality, even under the guise of neutrality or meritocracy. In this study, Critical Race Theory supports our analysis of "misrecognition" and the hidden curricula that shape belonging and authority in the university. It affirms the importance of counter-storytelling, our own narratives, as a method of disrupting dominant discourses and making visible lived realities of racialised academics. This lens encourages us to scrutinize how institutional policies, curricula, and everyday interactions in the university may unwittingly perpetuate White normativity, and to value counter-narratives from educators of color as vital knowledge (Ratele, 2018).

Crucially, we situate our analysis in the South African context, drawing on scholars who theorize race and education in ways that resonate with the African experience. Decolonial scholars such as Maldonado-Torres (2007) provide important conceptual framing around the enduring "coloniality" of power in knowledge systems, a framework that has been taken up and extended by African scholars in local contexts. For example, Kumalo (2024) contends that academics have a pedagogic obligation to develop

contextually responsive, decolonial approaches to teaching on the African continent. He frames decolonization as fundamentally about democratizing the knowledge project, ensuring that those historically excluded can now shape curricula and epistemologies on their own terms. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) reinforces this view by conceptualizing the “epistemic freedom” project as a necessary response to colonial and apartheid-era knowledge systems that continue to marginalize African ways of knowing. Similarly, Heleta (2016) challenges South African universities to move beyond symbolic transformation and commit to genuine epistemic justice, the centering of African knowledges, languages and histories in curriculum design and pedagogic practice.

Ratele (2019) likewise emphasizes Africa-centering in intellectual work, calling for what he terms the “Afrocentric question” in our studies and classrooms; essentially, asking how knowledge production might look when African experiences, identities and languages are placed at the core rather than the periphery. These South African perspectives enrich our theoretical toolkit by attuning us to local histories and the urgency of change in our institutions. They help us interrogate how racialised educators negotiate their roles within universities that are still often perceived as Eurocentric or unwelcoming to Black and Brown bodies and ideas. Moreover, they inspire an ethos of resistance and hope: Kumalo, Ratele, and others show that engaging racial identity in education is not a mere academic exercise but part of a larger emancipatory project to reclaim dignity and power for the marginalized.

This paper engages the intersection of racial identity, ethics, and pedagogy within the context of South African higher education. Using collaborative autoethnography and critical incidents as our methodological anchors, we reflect on ethically charged pedagogical encounters that surface misrecognition, power, and pedagogical unease. These ruptures offer more than discomfort; they open generative spaces for critical racial consciousness and humanizing pedagogical transformation. By naming and analyzing these moments, we aim to illuminate how educators and students might collaboratively disrupt entrenched norms and move toward more just, inclusive educational practices.

In doing so, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on decolonial pedagogy and racial consciousness in higher education. It foregrounds the seldom-examined experiences of racialised educators as sites of ethical inquiry, highlighting how reflexive, narrative-driven methods can expose the affective and institutional dynamics that often go unspoken. By framing critical incidents as openings for transformation rather than anomalies, we offer a lens through which to theorize care, recognition and relational accountability in teaching and supervision. In this way, the paper extends conversations about equity in the academy by centering voice, vulnerability and the pedagogical work of unsettling inherited norms.

Theoretical point of departure: Fraser meets Freire

In thinking through the ethical and political dimensions of teaching in higher education, we draw on the work of Nancy Fraser and Paulo Freire. While Fraser offers a structural analysis

of justice rooted in institutional redress, Freire brings to the fore the pedagogical and relational work of humanization and critical consciousness. Together, they help us frame our reflections on the intersections of justice, pedagogy, and recognition in South African higher education.

The social justice imperative in higher education

Fraser (2007) argues that injustice is overcome by dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent particular people from participating equitably. Fraser (2007) premises her discussion by providing a broad definition of justice: it “requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life” (p. 20). This lends itself to Fraser’s concept of participatory parity. Fraser (2007) highlights three dimensions of participatory parity: distributive justice, (mis)recognition, and the politics of representation and belonging (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). Distributive justice involves the extent to which participation is limited by class-based structural inequalities, such as access to technology and the ability to manage the financial demands of university life. In South African institutions for higher learning, this affects Black students disproportionately (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan, 2019). Recognition refers to how individuals are considered in relation to their social markers, like race, gender, and (dis)ability. Misrecognition, on the other hand, occurs when people are not afforded the same opportunities to participate or when there appears to be a lack of respect given to individuals based on their cultural values and differing identities (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan, 2019). The political dimension focuses on issues of belonging, whose voices are heard, and whose needs are provided for. It also looks at who is considered a fully legitimate member of society (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). These three dimensions, while autonomous, are interwoven and cannot be separated (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). Redress in these dimensions - to increase participation - becomes integral when considering a rights-based, decolonized and inclusive higher education (Masuku and Makhanya, 2023).

Pedagogy as the practice of freedom

Freire (1970/2005) begins with the premise that education is never neutral; it either functions to domesticate or to liberate. Central to his critique is the “banking model” of education, where students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, which serves to reproduce oppressive structures (Freire, 1970/2005). In contrast, he advocates for a dialogical pedagogy grounded in *conscientização*, the development of critical consciousness that enables learners to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against them (Freire, 1970/2005; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022). Through dialogue, learners and educators engage in a co-intentional process of knowledge-making that humanizes both educator and student (Freire, 1970/2005). This pedagogy is not merely about acquiring knowledge, but about becoming more fully human through

the act of naming and transforming reality (Freire, 1970/2005; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). In higher education, this means cultivating learning spaces that invite marginalized students to name their experiences and interrogate structural exclusions, aligning closely with Fraser's (2007) concept of participatory parity. Freirean pedagogy foregrounds voice, recognition, and the redistribution of epistemic authority, challenging institutional cultures that often misrecognize or silence Black and working-class students (Fataar, 2016; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022). Importantly, Freire (1970/2005) reminds us that liberation involves risk and discomfort; teaching is a profoundly ethical act that requires humility, vulnerability, and openness to being changed. It is in the *racially troubling moments* of pedagogical unease, when students resist, when norms are questioned, or when educators confront their own complicity, that possibilities for transformation emerge (Lewis, 2012; Zembylas, 2018). These moments are not incidental but pedagogically vital, surfacing the invisible logics of power in the classroom (and beyond) and calling educators into an ongoing praxis of reflection and action. Freire's pedagogy, especially when contextualized in South Africa's historically racialised institutions, compels us not only to teach, assess and supervise differently but to risk being undone and remade through the work of humanization (Kumalo, 2018; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022).

Methods: collaborative autoethnography and critical incidents

In approaching this paper, we draw on two interrelated methodological resources that allow us to locate ourselves and make sense of our pedagogical experiences. We chose collaborative autoethnography (CAE) because it aligns with our commitment to reflexive, relational, and situated inquiry, allowing us to explore the intersection of our identities and pedagogical experiences through shared reflection. As racialised educators navigating institutions shaped by colonial legacies, we required a method that not only honored subjectivity but also foregrounded the ethics of co-authorship and the politics of voice.

Firstly, we employ CAE not only as a method but as a stance that foregrounds our subjectivities and honors the complexities of our positionalities within the academy. CAE enables a deeply reflexive inquiry, recognizing that we, as scholars and educators, are not outside the research but rather implicated in and shaped by it. Through this approach, we foreground our racial identities and how these intersect with the institutional cultures of higher education. By telling our stories together, we resist the isolating tendencies of academic work and instead emphasize the power of relationality, co-authorship and collective witnessing (Chang et al., 2016; Shabalala and Mapaling, 2024).

CAE allows us to make visible the affective, structural, and ideological forces that shape how we enter, experience and navigate academic spaces. We do not merely recount events; we reflect on how those events make and unmake us intellectually, emotionally and politically. In this way, autoethnography becomes a form of self-writing that archives lived experience, disrupts dominant narratives and opens up space for alternate ways of knowing and being (Simons, 1994).

We paired our CAE approach with the lens of critical incidents: ethically charged, often unexpected moments that disrupt normative routines and demand attention (Joshi, 2018; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). These incidents were not chosen for their dramatic content but for their capacity to reveal the moral texture of academic life. They emerged both inside and outside the classroom, in moments of conflict, silence, shame, recognition or refusal. Each incident is revisited through retrospective reflection, using memory, affect and relational context as interpretive tools (Zembylas, 2007).

Our positionality as researcher-participants

As collaborators in this project, we are both registered clinical psychologists and early-career academics in South African higher education. Nokulunga Shabalala is a Black woman emerging scholar who has been in the academy since 2019 while completing her PhD. She has since engaged critically with assumptions about clinical and research supervision. Her research foregrounds reflexivity, decoloniality and affect and temporality in pedagogy and higher education as a whole. Curwyn Mapaling is a Black man emerging scholar working across mental health, critical pedagogy and well-being in higher education. He joined the teaching and learning side of academia in 2021 while completing his PhD, following prior experience in student support and institutional research.

CAE and research design

This project is framed as a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry (Hernandez et al., 2017), grounded in a series of three recorded conversations between the two authors. Each conversation lasted approximately 2 h and took place over Microsoft Teams. We approached these dialogues with a set of guiding prompts designed to elicit reflection on our experiences as emerging Black scholars navigating racial identity, pedagogy and institutional culture. For example, one guiding question asked: *"How have your personal experiences with race and racial identity shaped your teaching philosophy or approach in the classroom?"* Others explored institutional constraints, emotional labor, and student responses to racial consciousness work.

The conversations were transcribed verbatim and revisited repeatedly as part of a recursive, dialogic engagement. While we did not use formal interviews or structured observation, these guided conversations served as both data and spaces of analysis. The methodological emphasis was on co-constructing meaning rather than extracting individualized "answers".

While duoethnography might seem appropriate given the involvement of two researchers, we intentionally chose CAE for its emphasis on collective vulnerability, positionality and relational ethics (Lapadat, 2017). Duoethnography typically foregrounds dialectical juxtaposition and structured dialogue (Norris et al., 2012), whereas CAE allowed us to work with moments of overlap, discomfort and hesitation, not to resolve them, but to sit with them and explore their meaning. This allowed us to name affective

undercurrents and institutional tensions that might otherwise remain unspeakable.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Our analytic process drew on the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), though we did not code for themes in a traditional sense. Instead, we engaged the transcripts as living documents, returning to them through layered readings and conversation. Patterns of meaning were identified through resonance, tension and cumulative reflection. The critical incidents presented in this paper are analytically linked and build upon one another to surface recurring motifs, including institutional refusal, surveillance, emotional labor and the politics of care. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were not “discovered” in the data but constructed through our interpretive engagement with it, informed by our positionalities and theoretical commitments (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Joy et al., 2023).

Ethical considerations

This study relied exclusively on the reflections and experiences of the two authors. There were no external participants. Nevertheless, ethical reflection was central to the process, especially given the sensitive nature of the content. We were mindful of the affective and reputational risks that come with disclosing moments of vulnerability, rage, jealousy or exhaustion in academic spaces. We worked from a position of relational accountability, checking in with each other before, during and after writing. This commitment to care was not only interpersonal but epistemological, refusing the extractive tendencies of research that treats emotion or identity as data points rather than ethical matters.

Findings: framing the critical incidents

The critical incidents presented in this paper are not extracted as isolated moments of drama or rupture. Rather, they surfaced through memory and reflection as moments that linger, where something in the everyday pedagogical interaction unsettled us, stayed with us, or became a reference point for thinking about our roles as educators and as racialised subjects. We did not go in search of them; they emerged in conversation, sometimes hesitantly, and took shape through our dialogue. In selecting these moments, we were not aiming to be representative or exhaustive, but attentive to what moved us, challenged us, or revealed something about the ethical texture of teaching. The incidents are therefore offered not as definitive cases, but as fragments through which we have tried to think more deeply about care, authority, discomfort and responsibility in pedagogical relationships (Joshi, 2018).

To ground these reflections, we each revisit a moment from our teaching and supervision practices that challenged us in ways we could not immediately name but later returned to as sites of ethical significance.

Incident 1 - Shabalala: The Apology that Opened the Door, Repairing the Relational in Teaching

In most of my scholarly work (Shabalala, 2018, 2019, 2022; Shabalala and Mapaling, 2024), I have written about Blackness and institutional barriers to equitable participation in education, Blackness and gender in the South African academy, and have recently started reflecting on teaching practices. Reflecting on dominant traditions within higher education and challenges to radical transformation has allowed for an emergence of a critical racial consciousness - an understanding of how race and racism influence social structures and individual experiences (Arthur, 2023). However, in reflecting and dialoguing for this paper, I realize how difficult it is to maintain a posture of critical racial consciousness, especially in pedagogical encounters where I am predominantly situated.

I work in an institution where the enrollment profile of students is from schools that are largely in the 1st and 2nd quintile (Jonazi, 2021; University of Johannesburg, 2021). Schools in the 1st and 2nd quintiles are those considered most socio-economically disadvantaged, with lower levels of general literacy and embedded in communities characterized by poverty (Jonazi, 2021). Therefore, Kumalo's (2024) argument about our pedagogical obligation - one of creating a contextually relevant curriculum and responsive teaching approach - becomes more apparent. The student racial profile in most of my undergraduate classes is Black, and more recently, in our postgraduate classes, we are starting to see more Black students being accepted into professional programmes. However, it was not until a recent encounter with a master's student that I, as a Black educator and trainer, started asking myself, “Do I actively work toward social justice and equity in my classroom and my interaction with students, especially Black students?”

And so, the story begins. . .

It is a cold winter's morning in June, and the clinical master's students are getting ready to present their cases. This module's (Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy and Psychopathology) assignment also marked the first time master's students would be engaging with case material for a case conference. A case conference is a space where a patient (not a real one in this case) is discussed, in the first instance, to tease out how the student thinks of the patient diagnostically and the implications for treatment. In the second instance, perhaps more importantly, it is supposed to be a developmental space to help the student grow in specific competencies expected of clinical trainees. This being the first time students presented also meant that we could expect great levels of anxiety, uncertainty, and feelings of being under immense scrutiny.

Psychology has struggled to transform itself, and this is both in terms of its offering as well as the students that are selected to train at master's level (Dlamini, 2020). This has resulted in classes (at master's level) being predominantly White (Dlamini, 2024). In 2023, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) instituted a policy that master's training classes should consist of 75% Black (Colored and Indian inclusive) students (Professional Board for Psychology, 2022). There has been a slow shift toward this in our classrooms; however, the shift in class demographics seems not to be mirrored by shifts in teaching philosophies and praxis. When the 75% was still “just a rumor” a couple of years ago, our then team leader asked an important question in jest, “Are

we ready for an all Black class?” - the irony being that we were a predominantly Black team.

Fast forward some years, and a moment happens between a student and me. A young Black student sat in front of the clinical team and their classmates and presented. The presentation had a lot of mistakes, was not well paced and focused on things that did not showcase how much the student had metabolized after nearly 6 months of the training programme. They were among the last to present, and it had been a long 2 days of presentations. In a cruel and demeaning tone, I pointed out all their mistakes and told them they ought to take assessments and assignments seriously, alluding to the student's commitment or lack thereof to their assessment. I remember them acknowledging the feedback, and they subsequently sat, frozen, until the day of presentations was over. As I walked out of the lecture venue, I saw them and the other students huddled as they consoled and reassured the sobbing student. It was and is this moment that I carry with me. Students looking at me and looking away - a frightening, demeaning presence that made their classmate cry. My heart sank; *“I remember that feeling”*, I thought to myself as I got traumatic flashbacks of my formulation (a written hypothesis of the etiology of an individual's pain) being sent back to me over and over again for revisions, bloodied in red ink (because it was red ink those days when I trained). From being the only Black student in a master's class, feeling out of place and misunderstood, not recognized and silenced, to becoming the perpetrator of violence against another Black body. It made me sick, and I had sleepless nights all weekend about it. I felt it was a gross display of power that was not helpful to the student, nor did it hold in mind or affirm how the student learns.

I was seeing the class again on Monday, and fortunately for me, I had my colleague and co-author on this paper with me in class as he was doing a peer evaluation on my lecture. I told him that I plan to apologize to the student and that I felt it was important to apologize in front of the whole class because the humiliation and dehumanization happened in front of all of them. He did not say much, but gently reassured me that I was doing the right thing. I apologized to the student for how I spoke to them, and clarified what I meant, offering them an opportunity for a consultation. The reason this moment will stay with me is because of their response to my apology. They said something to the effect of, *“At the beginning of the year, I had a nightmare. I dreamed I had failed and I had failed in front of everyone”*. Once again, my heart sank - I felt like a sell-out or a “house nigga”, as rapper Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter puts it in his song in *The Story of O.J.* (2017). “House nigga” - not in the literal, historical sense, but in the symbolic role I had come to play: complicit in the very system I had once resisted. I was Black, but positioned on the inside of institutional power, tasked with gatekeeping rather than making space. And as an educator, that accountability - that responsibility - includes recognizing when I have caused harm, even unintentionally. The apology became my act of refusal: a refusal to reproduce the violence I survived, and a commitment to do differently. Part of why I felt like a sell-out was because of my own experiences of training and how that made me feel when I was in their position (see Shabalala, 2018). So, I know this feeling all too well. *Why did I fail to recognize it and them before harm was done?* The other reason for feeling like a sell-out is because representation matters, and I too was born and raised in a township and resonated

with some of the experiences they would share in class about where they were from and what influenced their clinical work, as those influences positively impacted how they worked with patients when they were placed at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, the 3rd largest hospital in the world (Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, 2023). They had ways of knowing and being; their truth and perhaps why we selected them for the programme, but I, as with many who taught and trained them, was not engaged in the co-intentional process of meaning making with the student, paying attention to and affirming how they come to learn, which would have (as we have argued) humanized me (Freire, 1970/2005).

As the weeks went by, the student, who was never formally allocated to me for supervision (clinical or research), reached out months later for guidance and reassurance. What made this significant was not just the request for help, but the sense that it was only possible because of the decision I had made earlier, to apologize to the student after that case presentation. That apology, though small at the time, was an ethical gesture that acknowledged harm and offered repair. In retrospect, it opened a door, one that allowed the student to return, to trust, and to seek connection. The incident revealed how care in teaching is often registered not through grand gestures, but through attentiveness to the quiet spaces in-between assessment and feedback, connection and care (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). It is through this connection and recognition that the possibility of participating equitably exists.

Incident 2 - Mapaling: What should I call you?

There are moments that rearrange something internal, even when they appear quiet from the outside. This one unfolded at the end of a supervision session, our first, and as it turned out, our last. We were sitting in my office. The student, preparing to leave, paused and asked, *“What should I call you?”*

At first, I was unsure what they meant. Then they clarified, asking how they should address me. I turned the question back to them and asked, *“How do you address the other lecturers?”* They answered easily, *“Prof [So-and-So], Dr [So-and-So]”*. I nodded and asked gently, *“So?”* They paused, then said, *“Prof Mapaling, then?”*

They had already referred to me as “Prof Mapaling” in emails, but in person, their hesitation felt like they were trying to get out of it. Their tone shifted, their eyes didn't meet mine, and the words felt thin, as though spoken more out of obligation than recognition. Fanon (1952/2009) reminds us that the Black body is never just seen; it is interpreted, overread, misread, and often unreadable within colonial frames of meaning. In that moment, I felt this misrecognition not only as a denial of my professional identity, but as a deeper, racialised failure of relational ethics. What unsettled me most was not their hesitation. It was what their hesitation revealed. Even here, in a one-on-one space, the rules of recognition were not neutral. My qualifications were the same. My title was the same. But something about me, to them, remained illegible. Or negotiable. They were a young White student, a detail I did not have to say out loud to my colleague and co-author, because she recognized it without me saying it.

After our supervision session, I felt something sink inside me. A heaviness. It was not just confusion; it was shame, doubt, and anger. I could not name it fully at the time, but it felt like I had

been made to disappear. Not loudly, but in a silence that made me doubt my own presence. I had offered support, opened a door, and somehow I still felt like an outsider standing in my own office. They ignored multiple emails. When I eventually copied the Head of Department and Programme Coordinator (both White, in case you hadn't already guessed it) they replied almost immediately. That deepened the wound. My authority as their supervisor only mattered when Whiteness endorsed it.

More recently, they walked past me in the corridor. They did not greet me. But they wore a smile, not one of warmth, but of discomfort, the kind that tries to mask something it cannot quite hold. A smirk. Polite but strained. It stayed with me. It stung. It reminded me that the problem was not just interpersonal. It was structural. That kind of smile is not just awkward. It is loaded. It performs a civility that erases the harm it quietly maintains.

I cannot speak for the student, nor do I claim to know their intention. But I know how it landed in my body. Still, I find myself revisiting the moment repeatedly, checking it against doubt. *Was it trauma? Maybe. Anxiety?* Certainly. It reminded me of what Sartre wrote in his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*: that the condition of the colonized is a nervous condition (Fanon, 1963/2007). That phrase lives in my bones, not as a metaphor, but as affective truth. It captures the self-surveillance, the bodily vigilance, and the emotional second-guessing that follow racially charged encounters, even when they appear minor to others. This is not simply about personal hurt. We are writing from personal experience, yes, but as Massumi (1995) reminds us, the personal is political. My unease was not only mine, it was a trace of the structure that produced it.

It was my colleague who first asked whether it could have been something else (age, authority, gender, or even attraction), and I took those seriously. But I kept returning to what my body already knew. Because I know what some of my White colleagues might say: *"Maybe they didn't know what to call you, maybe they were just nervous, maybe you're being too sensitive"*. This is the burden of racialised interpretation: I cannot simply feel the moment; I must also substantiate it, justify it, defend it. To myself. To others. To the institution. As Eddo-Lodge (2017) observes, these conversations are often met with glazed eyes and quiet resistance, a boredom that signals disinterest rather than disbelief. In these moments, the labor is not just emotional but political. You are made to argue for what your body already knows, and then asked to make it palatable.

So I go back over it, again and again. I keep returning to the fact that they had already written "Prof Mapaling" in their emails. I had a choice. *Do I let them call me Curwyn? Or do I insist, however softly, on being called Prof?* I gently nudged them there with a "So?" and they eventually said it. But their body betrayed the words. I didn't correct them. I didn't push it. I chose gentleness over confrontation. Because I was caught between care and the imperative of humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2005), between allowing them to stay comfortable, or nudging them toward a discomfort that might awaken something deeper.

In choosing care, I carried the discomfort alone.

What hurt most was not what they said or did not say, it was what it did to me. The confusion, the questioning, the self-surveillance that followed. I remember thinking: *Is it because I am young? Is it because I am Black?* I kept asking myself, trying to reason it away, but the feeling in my gut kept answering. As Kiguwa (2019) argues, racially troubling moments often register affectively, through silence, hesitation, bodily unease,

and what remains unspoken but deeply felt. These are not merely interpersonal slights. They are part of what she describes as the hidden curriculum of race in higher education, the unspoken but persistent ways that racial hierarchies continue to shape recognition, belonging, and legitimacy. In this context, Durrheim et al. (2011) remind us that Whiteness is not simply a demographic identity. It is a system of visibility, one that assumes its own neutrality and correctness. It decides who is legible, who is credible, and who must earn their right to be seen. I was not read that way. My professional identity required assertion, and even then, acknowledgment remained conditional. Hlatshwayo (2020) names this as the burden placed on Black academics in historically White institutions. We are made to carry the institutional ambivalence about our presence, always negotiating legitimacy in spaces not built for us. Ratele (2018) extends this critique, arguing that even amidst policies of inclusion, higher education institutions often reproduce older traditions dressed in newer language. Racial transformation, he suggests, can become assimilation into "slightly tweaked" traditions that leave the center intact. This was not a neutral misunderstanding. It was a racialised moment.

I knew it because my body knew it. Because long after it ended, I was still carrying it.

That moment took place at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University, formerly known as Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PUCE). Today, it is one of three campuses that make up the North-West University (NWU), alongside the Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark campuses. PUCE was a historically White institution, rooted in an Afrikaans-speaking Christian conservatism, while the University of North-West, previously the University of Bophuthatswana, was established for Black students from rural communities under apartheid's logic of separation. Although the merger exists officially, the cultural DNA of the Potchefstroom Campus remains largely intact, even after its rebranding to *Eagles*, the institution is still widely known, in name and spirit, as *Pukke*. I work in that part of the institution, and its atmosphere speaks less to transformation and more to preservation (Kumalo, 2018; Ratele, 2018). Arday (2022) argues that such spaces, while outwardly transformed, continue to marginalize Black knowers through the persistence of historical logics embedded in architecture, administration, and curriculum. These exclusions are often disguised as neutral, yet they work to protect traditions that were never designed with us in mind.

The discomfort of the institution is not only cultural but architectural. This is not unique to this university. At the University of Johannesburg, the residue of RAU (Rand Afrikaans University) lingers. At Nelson Mandela University, the ghosts of UPE (University of Port Elizabeth) still walk the corridors. What ties these places together is more than memory. It's concrete. Even when the sun shines outside, the buildings feel cold, formal, and unyielding. As if apartheid's ghosts keep the warmth out. These are not just impressions, they are spatialized forms of exclusion. The walls hold history. And the air remembers who it was built for (Mbembe, 2001).

In our recorded conversation, I reflected aloud, *"As I look over at the chairs that say PU4 CHC"*, chairs I was told to protect and watch over when I was first shown my office. The history that must be preserved. Between the two chairs in that space sits a small coffee table. On it, deliberately, I have placed books by Black authors. Reading material for those who sit in chairs never intended for Black bodies. That arrangement is more than esthetic. It is a quiet

refusal. It was a refusal to allow the space to remain untouched by me, by us. A refusal to let its history be the only story told in that room. I will not be the custodian of White nostalgia. A counter-inscription. That act of placing those books was born out of rage as much as hope. Rage at having to claim space in a room never meant for me. Rage at the absurdity of needing to explain my presence despite the titles, the work, the credentials. And hope that someone might pause long enough to reconsider what belongs where, and who belongs at all. It was a refusal not just of decor, but of erasure. A way to say, I am here. I always was. And I will not decorate the silence with politeness. Kumalo (2018) speaks of historically White universities creating *Natives of Nowhere*, subjects who are expected to perform assimilation without recognition, whose presence is tolerated but rarely embraced. These forms of exclusion are often subtle, manifesting not through overt hostility but through everyday acts of erasure: unanswered emails, strained civility, or the absence of a greeting in shared institutional spaces. These moments produce a dissonant affect, a sense of being physically present while remaining socially invisible, which mirrors the very dynamic Kumalo describes. They signal that inclusion is conditional and that legitimacy remains precarious for racialised academics within institutions shaped by historical logics of Whiteness.

What I felt in that moment was a racialised dissonance. I had worked hard to sit in that chair, behind that desk, yet my presence still needed translation. Du Bois (1903/2007) called this double consciousness, the ache of being seen through someone else's eyes. It's a cruel irony: you are Black enough for our transformation agenda, but not Black enough to be trusted with White furniture.

Scholars like Biko (1979) and Freire (1970/2005) remind us that liberation begins with naming, with reclaiming the capacity to define one's reality against systems that deny it. Fraser (2000) argues that recognition is not just symbolic but material, and its denial undermines justice. In that moment, the student's question was not merely interpersonal. It was institutional. Structural. And it continues to shape what kind of academic I am still becoming.

Discussion

Interpreting the critical incidents

The two narratives, while they differ in tone and context, both reveal what we have called ethical ruptures, encounters that shake assumptions, expose affective fault lines, and demand reflection. These are not isolated moments. They are symptoms of a racialised academic architecture in which power, visibility and legitimacy remain unevenly distributed. Fanon's (1952/2009) notion of the racialised body as always overread or unreadable helps explain why these incidents linger in the body. Du Bois's (1903/2007) "double consciousness" surfaces in the unease, the posturing, the second-guessing that racialised educators perform just to stay legible.

Incident 1 unfolds publicly, anchored in pedagogical power and the difficult decision to apologize. It shows how institutional pressure, if unexamined, can reproduce the very violence it seeks to undo. Incident 2 happens quietly, in a passing question, a hesitant smile, an unanswered email, but its impact is no less corrosive. The silence, the dismissal, the lack of greeting accumulate. One incident registers as disciplinary failure, the other as structural invisibility.

Both lay bare the emotional cost of teaching while Black or Brown in South Africa.

Though only the first narrative explicitly invokes the notion of a "house nigga", the second reflects its symbolic undertones. Both authors occupy institutional spaces not originally built for them. One finds themselves enacting practices shaped by past harm, despite intentions to do otherwise. The other, though formally recognized by title and role, continues to navigate the unease of being misread or not fully acknowledged. The implication is clear: proximity to power does not always equal protection. In fact, it can sharpen the contradictions between institutional belonging and racial visibility. These incidents show that even in positions of authority, racialised academics must still prove, negotiate or soften their presence.

These are not just personal moments. They mirror broader dynamics in South African higher education, where institutional cultures remain shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies (Durrheim et al., 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2016). The persistence of Whiteness in university norms, spatial design and interpersonal dynamics continues to marginalize racialised students and staff, even in "diverse" or "transformed" settings.

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements laid bare how many students experience alienation in higher education. But our narratives show that staff are not immune from this alienation. In fact, racialised academics often become both participants in and observers of institutional contradiction. These incidents highlight how deeply embedded logics of mistrust and misrecognition still shape who is seen as credible, who is allowed to belong, and how care is practiced in academic spaces.

In both cases, the "Brown Thing" becomes more than a metaphor. It surfaces as a site of affective dissonance, where misrecognition and over-visibility coexist. The incidents remind us that pedagogical relationships are never neutral, they are mediated through race, memory and the institutional architectures we inherit and inhabit.

Implications for practice

These findings carry several implications for educators and institutions:

- For educators, there is an urgent need for reflexive practice that acknowledges how racialised histories inform everyday interactions. Apologies, when issued with care and accountability, can serve as ethical gestures that re-humanize pedagogical relationships (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011).
- For academic developers and curriculum designers, the incidents highlight the need to integrate racial literacy, affective pedagogies, and ethics of care into teaching and supervision frameworks (Fataar, 2016; Freire, 1970/2005).
- For policy-makers and institutional leaders, symbolic transformation must be accompanied by structural and epistemic shifts. The placement of books by Black authors, while small, reflects a counter-inscription of space—a refusal of erasure (Mbembe, 2001; Ratele, 2019). Policies must attend to both demographic inclusion and spatial-symbolic change.
- For student support systems, race-conscious mentoring and structured spaces for dialogue can help mediate the emotional

labor borne by racialised educators and students (Arday, 2018; Kumalo, 2024).

Limitations and future research

While this study offers intimate insights into the lived experiences of two educators, its methodological scope is deliberately narrow. CAE privileges depth over breadth and focuses on meaning-making rather than generalizability. Future research could extend this work by including voices from multiple disciplines, institutions, and racial locations. Additionally, engaging students' perspectives on critical incidents may yield a fuller picture of pedagogical rupture and repair.

There is also scope for exploring the materiality of race in higher education, through office design, spatial geography, and symbolic artifacts, as affective and ideological sites of (non)belonging. Finally, the development of a contextually grounded pedagogical framework that explicitly draws from these narratives could serve as a resource for training, mentoring and policy development.

We would love to wrap this up neatly...but

Coming to the end of a paper, what is expected is some sort of conclusion to be drawn from what we have discussed in the paper. But, as much as we would love to wrap this up neatly, it is complex. Some of what makes it difficult is that some of the reflections that have come to us as we had our discussions, we are engaging with for the first time in his paper. However, in this section, we will attempt to bring our thoughts to a close. What has emerged through these moments of telling, listening, and remembering is not a clear resolution, but an invitation to remain with the discomfort, to continue the dialogue, and to consider how the personal ruptures we recount might carry pedagogical significance far beyond the moments themselves.

By examining our reflections on racial identity through the lens of "Brown", we aim to contribute to a richer understanding of how youth can cultivate critical racial consciousness. This exploration not only informs our academic work but also highlights the importance of inclusive practices within educational settings that affirm diverse identities and empower youth as advocates for social change. While grounded in the South African context, our reflections speak to wider struggles around race, recognition, and pedagogy that unfold within, and beyond, the classroom.

Incident 1 illustrated how misrecognition not only hinders equitable participation, particularly for Black students, but also creates a deep sense of non-belonging. What emerged for us, as Black educators, was the appreciation that enduring racial trauma is not without consequence. This is especially the case when the misrecognition is structural and institutional. It results in pedagogical encounters being uncritically engaged with, and we do things in a particular way (that is sometimes harmful) because it has always been that way.

Incident 2 highlighted a more insidious form of misrecognition: the quiet, lingering erasure that occurs through institutionalized

norms of Whiteness. Unlike the overt rupture in Incident 1, here the racialised harm was subtle, but no less profound. The absence of acknowledgment, the hesitation to affirm professional identity, and the conditional nature of recognition all pointed to a systemic discomfort with Black authority. What emerged was a recognition that institutions often perform transformation through numbers, while leaving unchallenged the affective and symbolic architecture that maintains White normativity. For Black educators, this means continually navigating an ambivalent belonging: present, but always questioned; seen, but never fully recognized. The critical incident here is not just about one student's hesitation, but about the institutionalized structures that make such hesitation possible, even expected. It demands that we ask: *What must be unlearned, institutionally and affectively, for recognition to be more than compliance?*

While this paper has focused primarily on surfacing and analyzing ethical ruptures through CAE and critical incidents, we recognize that these insights gesture toward the need for specific pedagogical strategies and policy frameworks that can be developed in future work. We hope to build on this work by developing a teaching philosophy that draws from these moments of rupture and reflection. This paper thus marks not a final word, but a generative point of departure.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the reflections and narratives are based on the authors' own lived experiences. No external data from identifiable individuals was collected or analyzed. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements because the study did not involve research on human subjects, but rather autoethnographic reflection by the authors themselves, consistent with ethical guidelines for self-reflective and interpretive methodologies.

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