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Decolonising teacher education

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Abstract

This study considered the question of how Norwegian student-teachers evaluate racialised knowledge uncovered from a little-known past and the way this informs decolonisation in education drawing on Frantz Fanon's theorisations of the machinations of colonisation. The study employed participant observation during online lectures conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in three Master's teacher education programme classes (years 3 and 4) in the academic year 2020-21 with an average student attendance of 60. Deploying online synchronous and asynchronous tools, data was gathered and examined using content analysis. The findings, while novel and disturbing for the students, reveal some consistency to the effect that racist classical literature, statues erected in honour of colonial-era figures and the 'human zoo' project in Norway in Oslo in 1914, where Senegalese families were exhibited, should not be expunged but taught and understood in their historical context. The study finds a consensus among Norwegian student teachers on the importance of retaining and explaining classical literature with racist content, rather than removing it, to provide historical and societal context. However, it also uncovers a concerning overconfidence in the educational system's ability to address racism effectively, alongside a lack of awareness about Norway's historical involvement in racism and its impact on minority students today.

Keywords: decolonisation, postgraduate education, Norway, Frantz Fanon, internet-mediated research

Introduction

This study, conducted at a university in Norway, considers the views of predominantly white Norwegian student-teachers regarding decolonisation in education. Concretely, the findings were based on online lectures conducted in three Master's teacher education programme classes (years 3 and 4) in the academic year 2020-21 with an average student attendance of 60. The following research question guided the study: *How do Norwegian student-teachers evaluate racialised knowledge uncovered from the past and how does this inform decolonisation in education?*

The ban on physically attending lectures on the university campuses and social distancing rules during the Covid-19 pandemic placed unprecedented challenges on lecturers. However, we leveraged the affordances of visual collaboration tools such as Zoom and the online digital noticeboard, Padlet, as synchronous and asynchronous learning tools respectively to promote participation, collaboration, and sense of community among students (Garrison, 2011; Herrington et al., 2010; Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022). Norway's new national curriculum LK2020 valorises life skills as an interdisciplinary topic. This is described in the following manner:

“Current areas within the theme are physical and mental health, lifestyle, sexuality and gender, drugs, media use, and consumption and personal finances. Choice of values and the importance of meaning in life, interpersonal relationships, being able to set boundaries and respect others, and being able to handle thoughts, feelings and relationships also belong under this theme.” (Udir, 2022)

We argue that sensitising student-teachers to the machinations of contemporary racism necessitates some familiarity with its embeddedness in the past, and that unpacking and dismantling this racism is commensurate with the new Norwegian curriculum's (LK2020) aims of promoting life skills – the 'mental' aspect, 'choice of values' and 'interpersonal relationships', among others. In addition, and aligned with Biesta and Miedema's (2002, p.180) aim of education, we perceived our roles as participant observers, not as one revolving around education's instructive and pedagogical tasks alone, but the notion of transformative education, understood as participation that engenders a transformation of the entire person commensurate with the Humboldtian pedagogical ideal of *Bildung*, “a process in which the whole person is involved, not only his or her cognition, but also his or her feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, volitions, habits, predispositions, and actions” (Biesta and Miedema, 2002, p.180). The methodological process and limitations, among others, are outlined in the next segment.

Theorising decolonisation in education

Fanon's work as depicted in the literature of education provides a critical lens through which to examine issues of race, identity, and colonialism. Teacher training courses in pedagogy in Norway are replete with insights from psychology. As such, few have forwarded more incisive analysis on the psychology of racism than Frantz Fanon. Our research exploring the effects of colonization on education and knowledge production benefits immensely from Fanon's critique of Eurocentric education systems with a view towards decolonizing educational curricula and combating dominant narratives that sideline historically marginalized groups.

In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (2004) states,

“In capitalist societies, education whether secular or religious, the teaching of moral reflexes handed down from father to son ... those aesthetic forms of respect for the status quo, instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents of the law and order.” (Fanon, 2004, p.4)

Are the ‘moral reflexes’ student teachers in this postgraduate programme evince ones that designate them as domesticating agents ‘for the status quo’ or ones that, in the words of Fanon, “alter being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor” (Fanon, 2004, p.2). Where Nordic student teachers position themselves in a colonial continuum is interesting as it allows us to question the link between colonial legacies and race in a different way.

In trying to circumscribe the Norwegian teacher students’ reactions, the concepts ‘implicated subject’ proves valuable. Michael Rothberg introduces the concept ‘implicated subject’ to deal with what Hannah Arendt calls “this vicarious responsibility for things we have not done” (Arendt, 2003, p.157). This responsibility stems from a position, which aligns the subject with power and privilege without claiming direct agency. The implicated subject is neither victim nor perpetrator, but somebody who, through inheritance, affiliation, co-habitation, and contribution gains benefits from a regime of dominance and participate in replicating and histories of violence and oppression (Rothberg, 2019, pp.1-2). An implicated subject can without hesitation get rid of a statue from Cecil Rhodes, but at the same time benefit from racial or gendered structures in e.g., academic hiring. Olúfémi O. Táíwò calls this an ‘elite capture’ of identity politics, that is, when the values and interests of a particular group are appropriated by the elite to serve a very different agenda (Táíwò, 2022, p.23). Rothberg continues that no pursuit of justice or equality can disregard the complex, diverse, often contradictory modes, in which implication is manifested, that is, the entanglement in historical and present injustices. These concepts can help illuminate the complex and ambivalent positions the Norwegian student teachers occupy in relation to colonial legacies and racism.

Regardless, Fanon is more unyielding and unapologetic in his call to violently jettison colonialism’s hold on the colonised whether in material, educational, cultural, aesthetic, or psychological terms.

“The ‘thing’ colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation’. Decolonization, therefore implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation. Its definition can, if we want to describe it accurately, be summed up in the very well-known words: ‘The last shall be first’... This determination to have the last move up to the front ... can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence.” (Fanon, 2004, pp.2-3).

Decolonisation has become a buzz word and Fanon, who wrote in in the 60s addressed a different political world, yet a lot of his insights regarding our psychological set-up carry weight today, as decolonisation of the mind and of knowledge production, which takes longer than declaring independence, has far-reaching implications (Ngũgĩ, 2005). On the one hand, there is a political and cultural divide in experiences between the coloniser and the colonised, on the other hand, there is a divide between black and white bodily experiences. In further dissecting the ‘colonial vocabulary’, Fanon (2004) highlights the preoccupation with zoological epithets in describing the colonised. The attribution

of animal-like traits to the colonised proliferates, “Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odours from the “native” quarters to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething and gesticulations” (Fanon, 2004, p.7). History abounds with examples of dehumanisation as a precursor to genocides and atrocities. The Nazis often portrayed Jews as ‘rats’, Stalin’s detractors were called ‘vermin’ and the Hutus labelled Tutsis ‘cockroaches’. While the antagonists may acknowledge their victims’ biologically human status, de Ruiter (2021) argues that “dehumanisation consists in denying a particular moral status to people”, and that it “consists in a complete disregard for the moral significance of the victim’s human subjectivity” (de Ruiter, 2021, p.3).

It is obvious that the Norwegian organisers of the ‘human zoo’ project denied ‘a particular moral status’ to the families exhibited in 1914 at Frogner Park (see findings section). One discerns this negation of subjectivity as the so-called Congolese, who were in fact, Senegalese, were put in a zoo. This was done not so much because they were Congolese or Senegalese, but because they had black bodies. Their blackness deprived them of humanity, just like in Conrad’s novel. It was not their cultural or geographical affiliation; it was their bodies that reduced them from humans to objects or animals in the Western imagination.

Significantly, one is reminded of the ‘father of biological taxonomy’, the 18th century Swedish biologist Carolus Linnaeus, when Fanon further fleshes out the ‘colonial vocabulary’:

“This explosive population growth, those hysterical masses, those blank faces, those shapeless bodies, this headless, tailless cohort, these children who seem to belong to anyone, this indolence sprawling under the sun, this vegetating existence, all is part of the colonial vocabulary.” (Fanon, 2004, p.7).

Carolus Linnaeus characterised *homo Africanus* in the following manner:

“Black, phlegmatic, lazy, dark hair, with many twisting braids, silky skin, flat nose, swollen lips, Women [with] elongated labia, breasts lactating profusely, sly, sluggish, neglectful, anoints himself with fat, governed by choice [caprice].” (Charmantier, 2020)

Sweden had vested interests in the enslavement of Africans at the time Linnaeus hierarchised and imbued the ‘races’ with meaning (Kenyon-Flatt, 2021) and the Nordic countries were all actively contributing in developing, shaping and benefitting from the colonial *zeitgeist*, so prevalent in Europe.

In sharp contrast to this Nordic racist and colonial trajectory is the commonly held belief (at least in the Nordic countries) of Nordic exceptionalism. Nordic exceptionalism tends to have two renditions; either it refers to a peripheral status of the Nordic countries in relation to the colonial histories of the rest of Europe; or it places the Nordic countries as something unique within Europe, that is, that the Nordic self-perception is intrinsically different from the rest of Europe, and that it produces different encounters and experiences (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012). These two notions are difficult to separate and point to a fluidity between actual geographic conditions and our understanding of them. The first notion of Nordic exceptionalism claims that the Nordic countries were busy killing each other but had no part in Europe’s dominance of the rest of the world. The second rendition of Nordic exceptionalism claims uniqueness; that it is possible to be part of Europe, yet be separate from it, and therefore not responsible for it.

Obviously, if the Nordic countries are untainted by colonialism, by extension, they do not carry any responsibility for it or its aftermath.

Yet, from the examples above it is easy to conclude that the encounters with racial difference seem to follow the familiar traits of racism from the rest of Europe. Carolus Linnaeus has been almost as influential as Charles Darwin in shaping the relationship between species, Indeed, the world's oldest active biological society, *The Linnean Society of London*, addresses scientific racism as “an idea which became fundamental in the history of anthropology and has had devastating and far-reaching consequences for humanity, including the dehumanisation of non-Europeans and justification of evils like slavery and indigenous genocide” (Charmantier, 2020).

It is argued that Norwegian student teachers ought to be aware of the genesis of this scientific racism, which was birthed in the Nordic countries, which suggests that the region was a dominant and protestant European political and intellectual power, completely in line with continental Europe, or Immanuel Kant, who stated that “someone as completely black from head to toe was clear proof that what he said was stupid” (Kant, 1973, p.113). For our purposes, it will suffice to conclude that we have a very strong racist *zeitgeist*, which permeates all Western societies throughout the centuries and that you have Nordic representatives participating in shaping and benefitting from it. So, to claim Nordic exceptionalism in this regard cannot be considered historically accurate.

We argue, with Fanon, that if higher education “will be a mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation” (Fanon, 1986, p.184), then it is incumbent on teachers and students to interrogate and destabilise such racial epidermal schemas, commensurate with Fanon's famous prayer in the closing sentence of *Black Skin: White Masks*, ‘O my body, make me always a man who questions!’ (Fanon, 1986, p.232).

Students in this study were also queried about their stance in relation to the pulling down of statues of slave traders during Black Lives Matter protests, such as Edward Colston, whose statue was toppled and pushed into Bristol Harbour in June 2020 (Olusoga, 2020). David Olusoga, writes that Colston, “helped to oversee the transportation into slavery of an estimated 84,000 Africans. Of them, it is believed, around 19,000 died in the stagnant bellies of the company's slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage from the coast of Africa to the plantations of the new world” (Olusoga, 2020). Similar movements which found their apotheosis in the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) campaign had three aims according to Gebrial (2018, p.20):

- Explicate the role of formalised education in the process of knowledge production, and its importance
- Confront how the British Empire and its legacy is both normalised and trivialised in education; and
- Call for a reorientation in the anti-racist framework from diversity to decolonisation, and explore what this might look like.

Fanon (2004) is incisive in his criticism of the compartmentalised world of colonialism, which he refers to as “Manichaeian and petrified, a world of statues: the statue of the general who led the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge” (Fanon, 2004, p.15). This penchant for building statues makes a cruel mockery of the condition of the colonised: it is the colonised who are reduced to a constricted, statue-like existence, while the coloniser is free and omnipotent. The colonised are rendered immobile and inert by the colonial condition.

The corralling of 80 Africans in the ‘Congo Village’ or ‘Human Zoo’ in Oslo in 1914 bears parallels with the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon. Prison cells were placed in a circular building which encompassed a central tower. The aim was to manipulate architecture in such a manner that inmates would regulate their own behaviour motivated by the illusion of perpetual observation. Foucault (1977) built on Bentham’s architectural apparatus to unravel the broader structures of power at play within institutional frameworks. To Foucault’s mind, partitioning and enclosures were central to the objective of disciplinary power. We argue that the white gaze is akin to the ‘central tower’ that historically has constantly observed and monitored black bodies, as was the case with the ‘Human Zoo’ project. For several months, half the population of Norway streamed into this cordoned off section of Frogner park gawking at the spectacle of black bodies as ‘primitive savages’ – a gaze that no doubt was internalized which explains the willingness of the domesticated Senegalese to repeat this tortuous ritual for several months. The daily surveillance and scrutiny imposed through the white gaze obviously cemented the Africans’ sense of inferiority and self-abnegation.

Of particular importance is the necessity for enclosures that delineate distinct spaces that are assigned as loci of disciplinary action. Frogner park metaphorically took on the role of Foucault’s (1977) panopticon – they were “free to come and go” as they were not slaves, but all parties (white and black) duly assumed and enacted the norms and expectations of the dominant power structures. Furthermore, it is important to note that the indigenous Sami population of Norway were initially suggested as the original occupants of the ‘Human Zoo’ project. This idea was quickly shot down on the grounds that they were white.

“Originally, the Jubilee Exhibition’s committee had wanted to create a Sami village, but the idea was abandoned because ‘The idea of letting Norwegian citizens with voting rights be shown for money is too distasteful.’ (Rønsen, 2011)

The notion of white Sami enclosures was not tenable because their whiteness would invert the normative warden-prisoner dynamic of Foucault’s discursive interpretation of the panopticon: whiteness was not to be incarcerated or quarantined. That whiteness is free by default is evident in the National Anthem of the USA where Francis Scott Key’s phrase ‘land of the free’ did not envision black and brown bodies. While the indigenous Sami were otherwise on the lowest rung of an arbitrary construct of whiteness in Norway, they were nevertheless white. It is for this reason that black bodies had to be solicited and transported to Frogner park – the role of the incarcerated was thrust upon the black bodies of the Senegalese individuals, traditionally framed as the most conspicuous specimens and scapegoats of white supremacy. The transportation of black bodies from Africa to the heart of white Europe gave succour to the stratification of bodies along shades of pigmentation. The ‘Human Zoo’ enclosure, then,

was necessary in order to perpetuate and entrench the dehumanizing narrative of white supremacy. Foucault's (1977) discursive rendition of Bentham's panopticon as a means of surveillance and scrutiny demonstrates the insidious ways in which white supremacy was propagated.

Edward Said's (2003) theory of Orientalism is useful in analysing the portrayal of the Congolese in Joseph Conrad's novel 'Heart of Darkness'. Said (2003) argues that the ascription of derogatory terms to the populations of the East – for example, primitive, exotic, childlike, hysterical – was purposely deployed to justify colonial domination and exploitation. Phrases such as 'mostly black and naked', 'did not eat each other before my face' and 'moved about like ants' are depictions reflecting a classic orientalist coloration. Such epithets serve to linguistically incarcerate black Africans within tropes of primitivism and call their very humanity into question. Ultimately, and commensurate with Said (2003), Conrad's portrayals of Africans serve as the initial snowball in an orientalist avalanche of discourse, cascading downward to cast Africans beyond the pale of humanity. This avalanche of dehumanization not only justifies but also propels the relentless domination and exploitation of African societies by Western imperial forces. We are inspired by Chinua Achebe's critique from within a postcolonial framework that interrogates and undermines orientalist tropes and stereotypes such as that distilled in Conrad's work. While the chains of slavery and colonialism forged in the furnace of orientalist literature have been broken, many black and brown people still struggle to shake off the lingering shackles of systemic racism and neocolonial structures that persist in shaping their socio-economic and political realities.

Methodology

Internet-mediated research (IMR)

Internet mediated research (IMR) has burgeoned in tandem with the global proliferation of the internet (Lee et al., 2017). This study draws on the rich vein of methodological research distilled in analysing the methods of participant-observation in online space (Hine, 2017, p.407). Among others, Lee's (2008) study focuses on moderating an online course while Tschida and Sevier's (2013) study explores the differences between teaching online courses and face-to-face teaching.

Content analysis

The data generated through chat-based text, synchronous online classroom-based discussions, and asynchronous Padlet posts were analysed using content analysis. A semantic thematic approach (Popping, 2017) was employed exploring the occurrence of three predetermined topics pertinent to decolonisation in education:

- Excerpts from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Chinua Achebe's critique of the novel.
- The attitudes behind the 'human zoo' at Frogner, Oslo, in 1914 where Senegalese families were exhibited and,
- Norway's role in the Danish-Norwegian slave trade.

The content analysis of the data generated followed a representational approach defined as one where the source's intended meaning is uncovered – an interpretation applied through a human coder (Popping, 2017, p.330). The unit of analysis was 'decolonisation in education'. Responses from the students were coded for their relevance to the unit of analysis. As Popping (2017, p.335) states, "A big problem with the use of sentences is that they contain ambiguity, i.e., there is doubt or uncertainty about meaning or intention". In such instances, semantic disambiguation involved asking follow-up questions. For instance, the student who mentioned 'woke' in relation to those who pull down statues, was gently nudged to elaborate on her use of this word. Following Popping's (2017) guidelines on generating meaning in online content analysis, sentences (verbs in particular) were mined for (1) *similarity*: how similar were the responses from students? (2) *causal*: to what source/s are historically racist views attributed? (3) *relation*: how was the knowledge uncovered from the past evaluated? (4) *classification*: indicates a genus-species relation – how was the material under scrutiny described or identified? (5) *structure*: a part-whole relation – to what extent did the responses see the themes as intertwined? (6) *affective*: indicates a judgment of the subject about the object – what judgments were evident in the responses of the students?

Commensurate with Popping's (2017) guidelines, the following dimensions crystallized the discussions surrounding racism in classical literature and Norway's historical involvement in racism and colonialism. In terms of similarity, a consensus emerged to the effect that, while disturbing and unacceptable, classical literature with racist content should not be removed from educational settings; contextualizing the racist past rather than a blanket ban should be the favoured approach. In regard to causality, the students ascribed blame to 'woke culture', 'cancel culture' and bigoted right-wing ideologies which they perceived as counterproductive. The third dimension, relation, was evaluated with surprise and indignation. Students affirmed the importance of acknowledging the dark past and learning from history. Next (classification), students classified colonial artefacts and racist literature as significant material which should be preserved as evidence of an unenlightened past rather than advocate for their eradication. In the penultimate dimension, structure, students perceived a nexus between the 'Human Zoo' exhibition and historical themes of racism in literature and were sensitized to the need to confront uncomfortable truths about Norway's past. Finally, in terms of affective judgments, while students articulated concerns about fuelling right-wing extremism, and the injustices of the past, responses elicited some cynicism towards the efficacy of what they called 'cancel culture'.

Limitations and ethical concerns of online teaching

The research project was undertaken in conjunction with pedagogy courses offered to students enrolled in our 5-year master's program for teacher education, which qualifies individuals for positions as schoolteachers. Within this program, students have the option to specialize in teaching either grades 1-7 or grades 5-10. Online lectures were conducted in three Master's teacher education program classes (years 3 and 4) in the academic year 2020-21 with an average student attendance of 60. Verbal responses relevant to the research question were written down at the end of each day. There were, as is expected, limitations to these purely digitally mediated interactions. Our experiences can perhaps best be channelised through other lecturers' experiences during the pandemic:

“The informal sociality of the everyday, face-to-face classroom – walking up flights of stairs together while chatting, lingering outside the classroom while the previous instructor packs up their whiteboard markers, sharing a cup of tea during office hours – is lost in an online setting, and much of this cannot be replaced by any amount of intentional Zooming.” (Daurio and Turin, 2021, p.8)

The pandemic threw into sharp relief the struggle students faced in coping with loneliness, demotivation, depression, and officialdom’s incessant neoliberal evaluative metrics. Commensurate with Daurio and Turin’s (2021, p.8) call for a ‘heightened level of care and a “pedagogy of grace”’, the online teaching experience during the pandemic highlighted the need for ‘compassion, awareness and flexibility’ (Ibid). In addition, Cervera et. al. (2021, p.23) usefully problematise the use of synchronous online technologies drawing on Bernard Stiegler’s (2013) concept of *pharmakon* – “[t]he pharmakon is at once what *enables* care to be taken and that of *which* care must be taken – in the sense that it is necessary to *pay attention*: its power is curative to the immeasurable extent that it is also *destructive*” (Cervera et. al., 2021, p.23). Obviously, online video conferencing tools such as Zoom are poor proxies in remotely replicating the pedagogy of the physical classroom. Among others, some students complained about the ‘strangeness’ of platforms where digital ‘hands’ waited patiently for their turns stiling interaction and dialogue, and opportunities for feedback were likewise impoverished.

This study adhered to national standards for research outlined, among others, in *Guide to Internet Research Ethics* (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee, 2019) which underscores four main aspects of ethics in relation to online research – that it is *stored*, *searchable*, *copyable* and the nature of the *audience*. Furthermore, five more areas are pertinent to ethics: (1) distinction between private and public (2) the concern for children and vulnerable groups (3) responsibility to inform and obtain consent (4) confidentiality and anonymization and (5) sharing of data, open data, and big data. Commensurate with the Committee’s guiding principle of ‘as open as possible and as restricted as necessary’, we strove to uphold the dignity and integrity of the postgraduate students throughout the duration of the research. Only registered students could access the Zoom link which was posted in the University’s web-based learning management system (LMS), Canvas. The Zoom-links are uniquely assigned to every lecturer who also serves as the moderator or host. Students cannot participate without their names appearing but have the option of switching off their cameras. All are automatically muted upon entering but have the option of turning on their mics and cameras when speaking. Eynon et al., (2017, p.23) emphasise online researchers “responsibility to ensure the confidentiality of data and the privacy of participants at all stages of the process, during all interactions with the participants and when the data is transmitted and stored”. Students were informed, commensurate with university ethical guidelines about online research, that those who did not wish to participate could send the host a message in the chat room which was constantly monitored. None opted to disengage, but some felt more comfortable switching off their cameras for undisclosed reasons. A few opined that switching off the cameras would facilitate untrammelled reflections on such sensitive topics. While the students were known to the lecturer, and hence the impracticality of assuring anonymity in Zoom (opinions on Padlet were anonymous), students were assured their opinions (voice and chat-based) would be anonymised.

Online classroom discourse

Classroom discourse, according to Rymes (2016, p.8), is concerned with a critical analysis of 'language in use' in the classroom and the multiple social contexts which inform this classroom-based 'language in use'. The multiple social contexts that students in this research referred to included, but were not limited to, national Norwegian newspapers (for example, Verdens Gang and Dagbladet), TV broadcasters (for example, the national broadcasting channel, NrK) and discussions with friends, among others.

'Communicative repertoires' are salient in classroom discourse, which is defined as "[t]he collection of ways individuals use language and other means of communication (gestures, dress, postures, accessories) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate" (Rymes, 2016; Thomas, 2016). Of significance are two components of communicative repertoire:

1. *The social context:* students' communicative repertoires are often inculcated through the influence of significant others, such as parents, guardians, friends and teachers. However, this study can only explore what students state verbally or write in the classroom setting as opposed to mapping the manner in which students' opinions have been influenced "by forces emanating from more remote regions in the larger physical and social milieu" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.13) commensurate with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.
2. *Interactional context:* Bakhtin identifies remnants of others' words in any individual's use of language (for example, through primary socialisation) and calls this living in 'a world of other's words' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.143). Pertinent to classroom discourse is the machinations of how students incline towards a consensus in a classroom setting (Rymes, 2016, p.22). We argue in this paper that students' reflections fed off each other with opinions adjusted towards a consensus – one that did not advocate decolonising universities by expunging blatantly racist material in classical literature or tearing down statues of historical figures who amassed significant wealth on the back of slavery, among others. The students believed that such iconoclastic actions would lead to missed opportunities for learning.

In what follows, we draw upon Frantz Fanon's psychological insights and other anticolonial theory in fleshing out the findings.

Findings and discussion

The authors of the research recorded verbal responses relevant to the research question at the end of each day. This methodology allowed us to capture immediate reactions and reflections from participants, providing valuable qualitative data for our analysis. In addition, students were invited to respond to questions using Padlet as an online asynchronous web platform (figure 1). Students could post notes under the relevant topics during and after the lectures. The first part of the lecture consisted of reading excerpts from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which were translated into Norwegian and shared (screen share on Zoom) with the class. They were also introduced to critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe. Students were assigned groups

(breakout rooms in Zoom) and tasked with discussing whether such classical literature with overt racist tropes ought to be proscribed.

In the novel, Conrad's protagonist, Charles Marlow, describes the Congolese as 'mostly black and naked', 'moved about like ants' and "they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils" (p.35). There was "a suspicion of their not being inhuman ... the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad, 2006, p.369). These excerpts, among others, invited Achebe's (2016, p.1789) description of Conrad as a 'thoroughgoing racist' and *Heart of Darkness* as "one which parades in the most vulgar prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past [...] a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question" (Achebe, 2016, p.1791). Students were informed that Achebe's *An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (2016) is an example of the 'Empire writing back' – a contrapuntal pedagogic subversive counter telling.

Racism in classical literature

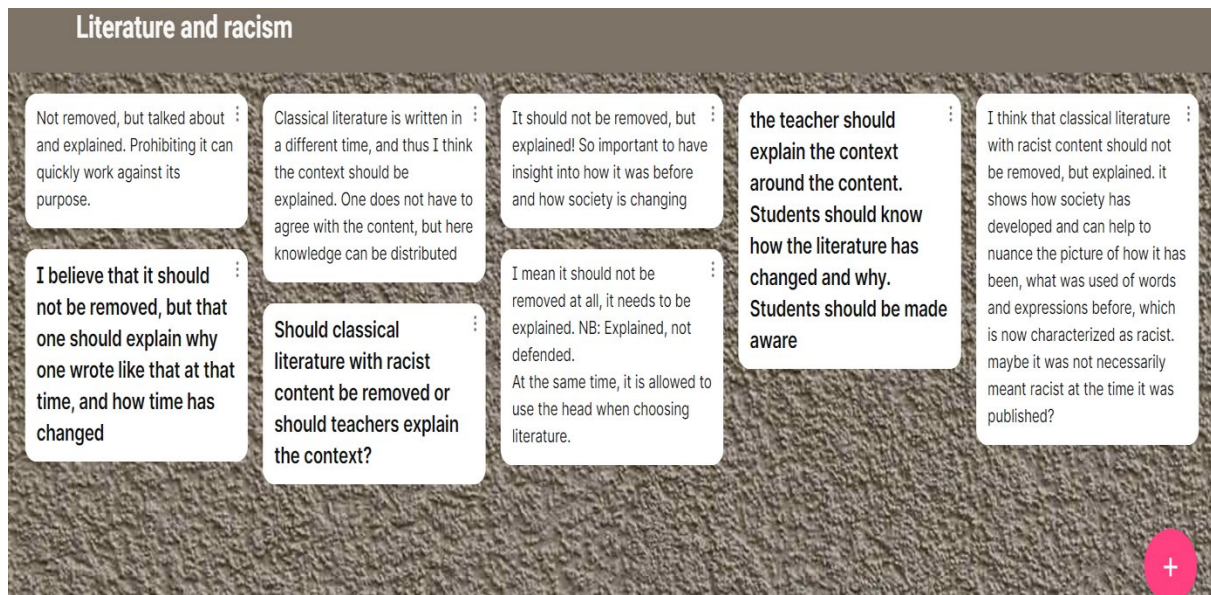


Figure 1: Padlet on classical literature and racism

The figure above reproduces typical responses elicited in regard to the question, 'Should classical literature with racist content be removed or should teachers explain the context?' There was a consensus among the student teachers that classical literature with racist content should not be banished from the classroom. One student opined that the current *zeitgeist* of 'woke culture' is experiencing a backlash. She referred to reports from some schools where students were sympathetic towards what has been called the 'alternative right' (abbreviated to alt-right) movement which is parasitic upon the notion of white genocide and victimhood, especially in the USA. Tatum (2017, p.56), refers to the alt-right movement as "explicitly racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and anti-feminist". The previously mentioned student feared that excluding such literature would only add to the pre-existing suspicions about a subversive 'liberal conspiracy theory'.

'Woke' has been added in several dictionaries, such as *Cambridge Dictionary*, as a new word in the last few years. The term has been catapulted into common parlance in the past decade popularised through the lyrics of Erykah Badu's song 'I stay woke' and the Black Lives Matter movement to indicate alertness to racial or social discrimination and injustice. Hence, some of the statements disavouring proscription of racist classical literature, such as the statement "Not removed, but talked about and explained. Prohibiting it can quickly work against its purpose" (figure 1), can be subsumed under concerns about stoking right-wing conspiracy theories. Another student mentioned the term 'cancel culture' and believed that barring classical works from educational institutions would be counterproductive. When asked to define 'cancel culture' she pointed to "the hysteria of pulling down statues and rewriting history at some universities" as examples.

Clearly, there is a preponderance of responses antithetical to calls for the expunging of racist classical literature and the pulling down of colonial relics. Seen in light of Fanon's (2004, p.4) scathing criticism, such responses would only serve to engender 'respect for the status quo' and "instil in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents of the law and order". Of concern is the lack of empathy or willingness to take the perspective of students of colour for whom the choice of such literature in the official syllabus constitutes symbolic violence in a Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) – the arbitrary imposition of norms on a historically oppressed or subordinated group. The revelations in relation to Norway's involvement in projects such as the 'Human Zoo' and its history of slavery were both new and unnerving for the majority of students. Nevertheless, there was a consensus to the effect that racist literature and monuments depicting slave traders should not be eliminated. Instead, students believed that this history should serve as a reminder of societal progress. Only a small minority advocated for the violent removal of colonial artifacts.

In addition to the first point, about the fear of fuelling white supremacist ideologies in Norway, the responses elicit a sense of confidence in teachers' skills in grappling with the subject of racism in classical literature, despite the fact that none of the student teachers knew of any success stories or had any practical experience from the chalkface. Consider the statement, "I believe that it should not be removed but that one should explain why one wrote like that at that time, and how time has changed" (figure 1). There is the intimation in the last statement that classical racism can be 'explained' rationally to students. One detects a Hegelian worldview where ideological struggles (master-slave dialectic) reach their apotheosis in a liberal solution, a transcendental logico-historical progress (Mautner, 1996). During the online discussion, views were volunteered which called into question whether modern readers were justified in deeming some of these classical texts (for example, Chinua Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness*) racist. This undercurrent of absolution found its way into one written comment.

"I think that classical literature with racist content should not be removed, but explained. It shows how society has developed and can help to nuance the picture of how it has been, what was used of words and expressions before, which is now characterized as racist. Maybe it was not necessarily meant to be racist at the time it was published." (figure 1)

Several students were unable to bring themselves around to sympathising with the Rhodes Must Fall and similar decolonisation efforts. It is clear that the Norwegian students did not feel implicated in any

way by the colonial enterprise, its dismantling and its aftermath. The decolonial struggles seemed very remote and the students merely recognised that the past can function as a sight of learning about language and the 'rationale' that produced racism, and that racism and colonialism can be somehow explained. There seems to be a common understanding that racism is securely written off as belonging to the past, and that bringing up ideas of European and white supremacy will only feed right-wing extremism. Also, the students' reactions appear to rely on the assumption that Norway is detached from the European experiences of colonialism, which renders the past irrelevant for contemporary Norway.

To explore these questions further this study analysed, albeit cursorily, the degree to which student teachers were aware of Norway's culpability in the Danish-Norwegian slave trade. The responses in the study reveal an unsubstantiated confidence in the ability of Norwegian schools, with predominantly white teachers, to 'explain' to a growing body of Norwegian coloured students the machinations of racism as purportedly a relic of the past. This unwavering trust in the Norwegian educational system's ability to deal with issues of racism, signals an alarming tendency to belittle grievances which are not shared. It also begs the question: if student teachers are oblivious to racism in classical texts, how would they 'explain' to students of colour that society has since jettisoned these unenlightened beliefs? How can the educational system effectively address racism if you don't recognise that it exists and that it affects people? Close to 40 per cent of primary and lower secondary school students (classes 1-10) in the capital Oslo come from minority backgrounds. In addition, the distribution of these students is skewed in that minority background students comprised a majority in 52 of 132 schools leading some to speak of voluntary segregation and forced bussing (Fremstad, 2017; Thomas, 2016). If the educational system cannot cater to this group of students and take their realities and grievances seriously, how can the Norwegian society expect them to join in? There have been calls in recent years for more cultural heterogeneity among the teacher education faculty. Gloria J. Ladson-Billings' (2005) critique of the lack of diversity among teaching staff in the USA is increasingly pertinent to Norway.

"Our teacher education programs are filled with White, middle-class, monolingual female students who will have the responsibility of teaching in school communities serving students who are culturally, linguistically, ethnically, racially, and economically different from them." (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p.230)

Racial pedagogy in such environments would create safe spaces of dialogue for the white teachers and students alone with no lived experience of racism. As whiteness scholars remind us, "In their naiveté, many white students and educators fail to appreciate the fact – a lived experience – that race dialogue is almost never safe for people of colour in mixed-racial company" (Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p.147). Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us so poignantly that talking about racism implies discussing the black body and that this is always personal for any person of colour (Coates, 2015, pp.11-12). In her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria?*, race scholar Tatum argues that black children develop racial-ethnic-cultural (REC) models underpinned by "a common fate or shared destiny based on ethnic or racial group membership and that these shared experiences differ from the experiences of individuals from other groups" (Tatum, 2017, p.135). This pattern of 'black kids sitting together in the cafeteria' is also evident on university campuses in Norway. It is incumbent upon stakeholders in

education in Norway to upend what Fordham and Ogbu (1986), referred to as an 'oppositional social identity development' among high school black students in the US context that valorises non-contact with the white majority. Any accommodation or prevarication on issues such as those covered in this study (portrayal of blacks in literature, the 'human zoo' project and slavery) would only serve to exacerbate the phenomenon of 'black kids sitting together in the cafeteria'.

Media assignment on Racism in Norway's past

The assignment above on racism in classical literature was augmented a few weeks later by a follow-up assignment which introduced the topic of whiteness in teacher education. Some of the student teachers were of the view that racism, colonialism and other 'imperial excesses' of the preceding centuries had nothing to do with Norway. Among others, this sense of absolution was premised on the grounds that Norway was under Denmark for 400 years followed by a union with Sweden, hence the absence of culpability. This typical Nordic and Norwegian detachment from colonial racist history also implies a lack of responsibility for the consequences. Norwegians are clearly what Rothberg would call implicated subject as Norwegians have benefitted significantly from the racial hegemony, yet there is no recognition of it among the student teachers. This is commensurate with findings that suggest race is undertheorised in Nordic educational research and supplanted by words like 'immigrants' and 'ethnicity'. For instance, Beach and Lunneblad (2011, p.32) highlight Sweden's eugenicist recent past where 60,000 racially mixed families, single mothers, and travellers (Romany) were sterilised between 1935 and 1974. They add that "things were similar but not as severe in Norway, Finland and Denmark" (Ibid).

In the lecture/workshop, the author assigned students to breakout rooms where they were tasked with reading an article in *The Guardian's* (2014) entitled 'Norway to restage 1914 "human zoo" that exhibited Africans as inmates'. The article, among others, states:

"Norway's 1914 human zoo is not the most widely known historical fact in the country, or elsewhere. But, for five months, 80 people of African origin (Senegalese) lived in 'the Congo village' in Oslo, surrounded by 'indigenous African artefacts'. More than half of the Norwegian population at the time paid to visit the exhibition and gawp at the 'traditionally dressed Africans', living in palm-roof cabins and going about their daily routine of cooking, eating and making handicrafts. The king of Norway officiated at the opening of the exhibition."



Figure 2: Congo Village 1914, Frogner Park, Oslo, Norway. Image in Public domain.

The 'human zoo' exhibition in Frogner, Oslo, was part of Norway's centennial celebration of the 1814 Constitution and intended to showcase Norway's progress and achievements. Having read the *Guardian* article, and discussed in breakout room groups, the students returned to share their views. Significantly, almost none of the students were aware of the 'human zoo' exhibition in Oslo in 1914. One student said, "It is very strange and perhaps irresponsible of our media to neglect reporting on our unsavoury past". Several students were baffled that such an event was allowed to go ahead, and even more so, when they realised that two artists sought to recreate the Congo Village human zoo in 2014 with government funding. The students' indignation was clearly centred around the idea that humans were placed in a zoo. When the Senegalese were treated in a very inhumane manner—almost prisoners—with their dignity as humans questioned, it struck a chord with the human rights discourse so prevalent in Norwegian public debate and self-understanding. The zoo clearly makes the similar connection between blacks and humans as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and it is equally clear that the strong emphasis on human rights since 1948 has shifted the general understanding of how humans can be treated. Nonetheless, this reaction misses the point of the comparison between *Heart of Darkness* and the zoo; the individuals in Conrad's book were enslaved not because they were humans, but because they were black. Similarly, the Senegalese were placed in a zoo, for no other reason but the colour of their skin. The zoo put the black body on display, made it into an object and any discussion around human rights and human dignity will inevitably fall short in the face of this fact. Another student stated, "After reading this, I am beginning to wonder how many other skeletons we have buried in the national closet" (female, 25 years old).

In response, the teacher mentioned the documentary about Norway's role in the slave trade aired by the national TV broadcaster, NrK (November 2020). Norwegian involvement in the Danish-Norwegian slave trade (about 100 000 slaves transported) was documented after a shipwreck was discovered off the coast of Arendal in South-eastern Norway in the 1970s. The film's director, Ole Bernt Tellefsen, stated that he wished to raise awareness about Norway's involvement in the slave trade. Furthermore, he wished to debunk the myth, common among Norwegians, that the transatlantic slave trade was something pertinent to the USA and Great Britain in particular. Below is an excerpt from an interview with *Utrop*, Norway's first multicultural newspaper:

"Norway's role in the slave trade is a very under-communicated part of Norwegian history. Tellefsen himself says that he had never heard of the Norwegian slave trade, but he had heard of the missing ship ... 'but I had no idea of the scope, that we were actually so insanely involved from the Norwegian side. Thirty per cent of the Danish-Norwegian slave fleet was Norwegian. Half of the crew on all ships were Norwegian. There have been several Norwegian governors both at slave forts in India and in Ghana. Søren Schieldrup, son of a Norwegian priest, was governor of the slave fort, Christiansborg." (Utrop, 2020)

The mention of this documentary, which a couple of the student teachers had seen, started a lively debate. Given the proximity of the documentary to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the murder of George Floyd, one student suggested hunting for the statues of those involved in the Danish-Norwegian slave trade and pulling them down. Others disagreed and persisted with the earlier *modus operandi* of uncovering the past, warts and all, and educating students about the societal changes.

Significantly, the two visible minority students in the digital classroom remained silent throughout the discussion. When the discussion veered into the territory of structural racism, there appeared to be a consensus that Norwegian officialdom is equitable commensurate with Norway's egalitarian pedigree. As the only visible minority with a different experience, the teacher felt obliged to share one particular experience and submit it for their evaluation.

"Having secured a teaching position as a high school teacher in Norway years ago (UK equivalent sixth form), I was crestfallen when informed by one of the committee members that another candidate was better qualified than I was but was not given the job because he was a Muslim. 'We don't like Muslims', he informed me in a cavalier tone. Shocked, I reported this to the relevant authorities at the time but never received a response."

There was a long silence in the digital classroom. It was difficult to gauge the reactions as a few had their cameras on. Significantly, the few students who commented on the first-hand experience of structural racism, distilled this time in the form of islamophobia, dismissed this as an anomaly.

"Teacher [said one student], I have had the exact opposite experience where I worked a few years ago. My boss would encourage us to give preference to the CVs of candidates from minority backgrounds."

Students were more concerned for the feelings of the offending party. The feelings of the offended were side-lined. The previously mentioned student feared that excluding such literature would only add to the pre-existing suspicions about a subversive 'liberal conspiracy theory'.

Clearly, some of the exchanges above, albeit a minority, appear to contradict the earlier consensus of the Padlet. It appears that synchronous engagement through Zoom with visual material, such as the Frogner 'human zoo' and mention of slaves in Norway, triggered a nerve. This time the responses were militant and radical. There is reason to cautiously suggest that students' indignation was heightened by the racism on home turf as opposed to the more distant, fictitious world portrayed in the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. The 'colonial vocabulary' and 'zoological epithets' (Fanon, 2004, p.7) were no longer tolerated as the photos assigned faces and familiar places (for example, Frogner Park in Oslo and the city of Arendal).

Decolonisation efforts in teacher education in Scandinavia, where race is undertheorised, must consider the legacy of the previously mentioned Linnaeus who hierarchised and imbued the 'races' with meaning (Kenyon-Flatt, 2021). Classroom discussions over several years of teaching in higher education evinces appallingly little or no knowledge of Linnaeus' scientific racism and its devastating and far-reaching consequences for humanity including the dehumanisation of non-Europeans and justification of evils like slavery and indigenous genocide' (Charmantier, 2020). As Norway continues to experience a seismic shift in the growth of the brown and black demographic, educators must coalesce around a common understanding of what decolonisation in education in Norway will look like. We reiterate with Fanon that if higher education "will be a mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation" (Fanon, 1986, p.184), then student-teachers must be trained in the machinations of a critical racial discourse evocative of Fanon's, 'O my body, make me always a man who questions!' (Fanon, 1986, p.232). Tatum (2017) posits that we may be

living in a 'colour-silent' society rather than one that is post-racial, and to further compound matters, the conversation about decolonisation in education cannot be conducted among whites alone but must include the views and experiences of students and communities of colour.

Conclusion

This study considered the question of how Norwegian student-teachers evaluate racialised knowledge uncovered from the past and the manner in which this informs decolonisation in education. The study employed participant observation during online lectures conducted in three Master's teacher education programme classes (years 3 and 4) in the academic year 2020-21. Deploying the online synchronous video conferencing tool, Zoom, and the asynchronous software too, Padlet, data was gathered and examined using content analysis. The findings reveal some consistency to the effect that racist classical literature, statues erected in honour of colonial-era figures and the 'human zoo' project in Norway in Oslo in 1914, where Senegalese families were exhibited, all must be understood in their historical context.

Together with Frantz Fanon we have argued that the findings, as they metastasise through the views of the student-teachers, are not conducive to the liberation of blacks and other non-white students but assume a naïve position of enlightened progressivism. By 'enlightened progressivism' we refer to a stance advocated by some white liberal progressives who aspire to champion the cause of antiracism. However, such good intentions overlook the systemic embeddedness of racism and corollary issues of privilege. While such individuals eschew racism and other forms of racism, espousing superficial and tokenistic actions, such as colorblindness, further entrench and strengthen the status quo rather than challenge it. DiAngelo (2021) attributes responsibility to what psychologist Joel Kovel termed 'aversive racism' – a type of racism that remains suppressed from consciousness due to white individuals' stated commitment to racial equality ideals. This form of racism is subtle yet pernicious, enabling individuals to engage in racist behaviours while upholding a positive self-image (such as claiming to have diverse friends) (DiAngelo, 2021, p.7). The views of brown and black fellow-students were never considered confirming black scholars' (Tatum, 2017; Fanon, 2004; Bhabra et. al., 2018) lament about conversations about decolonisation being conducted among whites alone. It is further argued that there is the risk of non-white students perceiving such views as attempts at historical revisionism that transmogrify colonial relics (literature, statues etc.) into palatable artistic artefacts for public consumption rather than visual adjuncts to a violent and oppressive past. Given the Gebrial's (2018, p.20) three suggestions are apposite in this regard: clarifying the role of formalised education in knowledge production, confronting the legacy of colonialism and its normalisation and trivialisation and call for a reorientation in the anti-racist framework from diversity to decolonisation, and explore what this might look like.

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