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## Race talk and white normativity: classroom discourse and narratives in Norwegian higher education

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### ABSTRACT

How does the *process* of racialization unfold as a discursive project at the university? How do students and faculty in the classroom use racial categories in supposedly post-racial places? How do People of Color in higher education in Norway narrate their experiences of being ‘Othered’? We draw on two linked studies and use membership categorization analysis and the analysis of narrative interviews to examine the shared dynamics of racialization in classroom discourse and lived experience. We use Nirmal Puwar’s (2004. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*. Oxford: Berg) *Space Invaders* to explore the racialized dynamic of *disorientation* in academic spaces, and how disorientation and assumptions of non-belonging contribute to the condition of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.) in higher education.

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Until recently, the prevailing discourse in North America and Europe maintained that the idea of ‘race’ was dead, and that we lived in a post-racial world (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Goldberg 2006; Lentin 2014; Yuval-Davis 2011). Significant counter-currents to this perspective exist in some activist and scholarly corners, and from the perspective of the People of Color who continue to feel its brunt, it is clear that racialization and racism have not disappeared. *Racialization* refers to the processes – structural (i.e. as constructed by law, policy and institutions) and discursive (i.e. in how we generate the world and action in the world through talk and text) – by which individuals and groups come to be seen, and treated, as belonging to a racial category (Miles 1989). Following from Fanon ([1952] 2017), decolonial scholars describe racialization as the process of being assigned to a (racial) categorical position above or below *the line of the human* (de Sousa Santos 2007, 2014; Grosfoguel 2013). These scholars argue that the origins of racialization as dehumanization date back to early encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Americas; Europeans created a systematic schism between ‘the civilized’ and ‘the savage’ as a rationale for colonization (Grosfoguel 2013; Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015; Hall 2017). Later, the line of the human that first served to

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justify the expropriation of land, resources and human beings during colonization became cloaked in a ‘modern’ scientific taxonomy. In the Enlightenment era in Europe, the white, male body came to symbolize and embody the ideals of Western civilization while other bodies (African, indigenous, female, disabled, queer and otherwise) represented the unruly human in a state of nature (Mills 1997, 2008; Puwar 2004).

The Enlightenment-era scientific racism that facilitated the genocides of World War II has been disavowed in contemporary European discourse. The very idea of race as a category – and ‘race’ as a term in discourse – is taboo in Norway, as in much of Europe, associated with Nazi ideology of biologically separate human races (Bangstad 2017). The common ideological position is instead a ‘colorblind’ ideal: since race is not biologically real, we do not ‘see’ race; color doesn’t mean anything; we are all simply human (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Harper 2012; Lewis 2001, 2004; López 2011; Wekker 2016). In Norway in particular, the national imaginary is a picture of both exceptional innocence – as a country not involved in colonial projects, a country occupied by Nazi Germany – and exceptional goodness as an actor for peace and development on the world stage (Andersson 2012; Gilroy 2006; Gullestad 2002, 2004, 2005). However, national ideals of innocence and goodness have been challenged by scholars offering historical accounts of Norwegian involvement in colonialism and exploitation (Bertelsen 2015). Research studies demonstrate that racialization continues to be linked to discrimination, whether individual, institutional or structural (e.g. Andersson 2010; Fylkesnes 2018; Liebig 2009; McIntosh 2015; Midtbøen 2014, 2016; Sami Allaskuvla 2019; Svendsen 2014). Norwegian People of Color have gone public with narratives of their experiences of being treated as ‘Other’ and their analyses of lived racism (Ali 2018; Joof 2018; Sibeko 2019). The 2020 resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement (Taylor 2016) as a response to the police murders of Black men and women in the United States sparked activism and widespread media discussion globally. Still, it is nearly impossible to argue that the line of the human has been dismantled in either the discursive or the structural realms. Since the mid-2010s, there has been a significant uptick in nationalist discourse by politicians across Europe: Britain, France, Norway, Poland, Greece, Hungary, Turkey and Italy, among others. European governments build racialized social control into legislation – such as isolated detention centers for new refugees (e.g. Denmark), criminalization of poor neighborhoods where predominantly People of Color live (most explicitly, Denmark again), and criminalization of humanitarian efforts to rescue migrants from drowning in the Mediterranean (e.g. Italy).

Anti-racist education scholar Leonardo (2015) identifies the critical role of *discourse* in upholding and maintaining racism: ‘Derrida (1985) is helpful when he argues that the work of racism is constituted through a chain of signifiers that makes language central to its enactment. Put simply, no language, no racism. The injurious function of language means that race becomes a social relation that recruits language to do its work’ (87). In this paper, we ask: how does the *process* of racialization unfold as a discursive project (Goldberg 1993) in the university sphere? How do students and faculty members in the classroom deploy racial categories in talk in supposedly post-racial places and in particular the enlightened, knowledge-inflected spaces of academia? How do People of Color in higher education in a small Scandinavian country narrate their experiences of being ‘Othered’? How do these phenomena play out in the academic ecosystem, where rationality, fairness, justice and truth(s) are guiding values?

We approach these questions through two linked studies: an analysis of classroom discourse and interviews with racialized students and staff. As the analyses of both studies emerged, we noticed throughlines that bridged some of the narratives from interviews and some of the analytic themes from classroom conversations. Dynamics in interactions described by interview participants, from their perspectives as People of Color on university campuses, were reflected in discursive processes of racialization in classes of predominantly or solely white students and instructors. In this paper, we take a deep dive into one of the throughlines – one which has also been explored in the research literature, particularly in Puwar’s (2004) *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*.

### Disorientation as a dynamic of ‘bodies out of place’

Puwar investigates how racialized bodies are received in elite institutions – government and academia – as ‘bodies out of place’. She describes *disorientation* as a central dynamic when racialized and female bodies take up location in spaces that have not been ‘reserved’ for them. Crucially, it is not only that their presence generates ‘the look’ – a sense of surprise, a lingering stare, an obvious Othering (see Fannon [1952] 2017) – but also that this presence shakes a hierarchy such that the white and male body is suddenly ever-so-slightly displaced from its ‘natural’ position at the top. Puwar (2004) writes:

If we turn to the world of academia, it is possible to see how the placing of racialised ‘other’ bodies in the position of subject rather than that of the usual objects of knowledge calls into question the territorial demarcations that mark the identity of the academic, especially the all-seeing globe-trotting academic. Regardless of how amicable academics are to other cultures and people, the sharing of the seat of power (knowledge) with those one studies can be an experience that very easily ‘throws’ institutional positionalities and runs the risk of causing ontological anxiety. (45)

Thus, the presence of People of Color in elite spaces is surprising and discomfiting for those whose bodies are assumed to belong: this presence causes disorientation. This dynamic has been described also in other research, notably by Sara Ahmed on the phenomenology of whiteness (2007a) and the bind of diversity workers in academia (2007b, 2012), as well as in studies of the experiences of academics of Color (Arday and Mirza 2018; Lander and Santoro 2017).

In our research, we find that this dynamic of disorientation helps to illuminate the relationship between what happens in the classroom, where whiteness is centered epistemologically and ontologically, and the narrative interviews by students, academics and administrators of Color, where their own experiences and reflections are centered.

### Methods in the current studies

The two studies represented in this paper<sup>1</sup> took place across two of Norway’s larger public universities, which are public and tuition-free, and relatively elite in reputation. The structure of educational offerings (e.g. predominantly traditional lectures and discussion-based seminars) are fairly similar across higher education institutions in Norway.

The classroom discourse study followed four advanced undergraduate courses in social science subjects; selected because we anticipated that relevant talk would arise.

About 40% of the teaching time was audio-recorded and transcribed by research assistants, using modified Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Hepburn and Bolden 2013; Jefferson 2004). All the classes and our analyses were conducted in Norwegian; excerpts were translated by the authors (one Norwegian, the other Canadian but proficient in Norwegian). For the analysis presented here, we selected a subset of 13 interactions in three courses. The selection of excerpts was based on a number of criteria: they involved interaction with multiple interlocutors (students and instructors), and they contained substantial talk potentially related to race or racialization. Because 'race' is a taboo concept, other terms (nationality, culture, ethnicity and religion) were flagged based on prior research suggesting that these often 'stand-in' for race as a sliding signifier (Hall 2017).

We analyzed these interactions using Membership Categorization Analysis (Bushnell 2014; Schegloff 2007a; Stokoe 2012) and some tools from Conversation Analysis (Heritage 2005; Schegloff 2007b; Wooffitt 2005). First, we read the interactions for Membership Categories and Membership Category Devices (e.g. the categories 'men' and 'women' belong to the Membership Category Device 'genders' or 'gendered people'). We also identified Membership-Based Predicates and Membership-Based Activities: characteristics or activities associated with a given category (e.g. women are nurturing; women care for children). We looked closely at (a) how interlocutors took up or responded to the categories, using tools from Conversation Analysis, such as overlapping speech, bids for responses, response tokens, and extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) and (b) how predicates and activities pointed to other, perhaps unnamed, categories.

The second study opened space for People of Color affiliated with university life to voice their own experiences. We interviewed 15 racialized minority students (7), academic staff (3) and administrative staff (5) from the same two universities. Interview participants were recruited via flyers, emails, campus newspapers, and snowball sampling. Participants self-identified as having been perceived as 'different' on the basis of their skin color, facial features, race, ethnicity, or religion. They were both Norwegian-born and immigrants: they had lived in Norway at least five years, considered Norway their home, and had long-term plans to stay. During the interviews, participants first jotted down all the incidents they remembered where they felt 'different' or felt that others perceived them as different, at the university. Then they were invited to tell us about these incidents.

The interviews were mostly conducted in Norwegian (three were in English), by the two authors and/or a trained research assistant. Interview narratives were analyzed using a combination of concept-driven coding and data-driven coding (Brinkmann and Kvale 2009). The Norwegian author took the lead in analyzing the interview data, supported by two research assistants. In discussions of the data and our analyses across both studies, the authors discussed linguistic issues in detail – exploring the nuances and meanings of word choice.

As white researchers and educators ourselves, we experience some discomfort presenting our findings, particularly from the classroom discourse study where we find that whenever race/racialization comes up in the classroom, whiteness is centered. By making visible (again) the centering of whiteness in academia, we repeat and risk reifying (again) the centering of whiteness in academia. The interviews of students,

administrative and academic staff provide some degree of analytical counterweight. These individuals, in their narratives and reflections, reveal how white people they encounter in academic life experience disorientation (at best) when their own bodies of Color take up space at the university. In our writing, we strive for this critical counterweight to center the agency of People of Color in Norwegian academia and center the incisiveness of their own analyses of the experience of marginalization.

This paper does not provide an overview of our findings; these can be found elsewhere (Harlap and Riese 2021; Riese and Harlap 2021). Rather, we explore two excerpts from a narrative interview and one from classroom discourse as exemplars that reveal how disorientation is produced and experienced. These serve as two cases that we analyze through close reading, making our analysis process *visible* to the reader. We do this (1) to increase transparency and trustworthiness, and (2) to model an approach to researching *processes* (here, of racialization) through discursive research methods.

The narrative interview, Sunita's story, is representative of themes emerging across all 15 interviews. All interview participants had stories of meeting generalized perceptions of 'foreigners' in the Norwegian context. They referred to how their presence as racialized 'Others' evoked stereotypes and revealed the assumption among white Norwegians that they belonged elsewhere. Many of our interview participants described an experience in which they were addressed in English, presumed not to speak Norwegian: not to belong in Norway. Furthermore, many participants reflected on the experience of being either hyper-visible or invisible, depending on setting. Another common theme is that participants expressed feeling a need to overcompensate and overachieve in order to disconfirm the discrimination of others' low expectations of them.

### Sunita's experiences and reflections

Sunita<sup>2</sup> is a student in her 30s who has lived in Norway since she was one year old. Her parents are originally from Pakistan. She has a medical degree and has struggled for several years to find a medical residency which would allow her to become formally authorized as a physician. Each year, only about one-third of applicants for residency positions in Norway find a placement (Storvik 2018). Sunita's father even suggested that she have her name legally changed to a Norwegian-sounding name in order to improve her chances; a number of research studies that made a splash in Norwegian media have shown significant discrimination in the labor market, both at the point of screening candidates to be interviewed for a job and in the interviews themselves (Bye et al. 2014; Midtbøen 2014, 2016). While she continues to apply for residencies, Sunita has taken continuing education at the university in order to stay in her field and make herself a more attractive candidate. At the time of the interview she had finally secured a residency that would start in the fall, after two years of applying.

Sunita told us this story<sup>3</sup>:

And then there is this other thing, but it isn't that serious, that thing when I walk around the University campus or where I live. I live in student housing, that people talk with- that is as soon as the first- people talk English to me. And that is a bit, you know, that is then I start and I ask: 'Can you-' or in Norwegian 'Do you speak Norwegian?' Yes of course. Ok, then we'll speak Norwegian. However, it is like it is automatic that if we are there we have to be international students even though there are so many of us now. So it is very strange that

they think that we are anyhow- have to be international students. There is no such concept I think- or it has in a way not yet become part of the ordinary way of thinking that we participate in higher education now. [laughs]

Sunita's telling is not of a single experience, but rather a description that she frames as a general, repeated experience through her use of the plural subject 'people' and present tense verb: 'people talk English to me.' If there is anything our interview participants experience in common, it is being addressed in English; this type of incident was described in many of the interviews. English is, indeed, the common language spoken by international students and in their encounters with Norwegian speakers; relatively few international students learn Norwegian in their short time in Norway. However, what is apparent in Sunita's story is that racialized Others in university space are liable to be perceived and treated as foreigners based precisely on their appearance. Their presence is disorienting to the observer; they *can* belong at the university but only if they are passing through; their belonging in Norwegian academic space is contingent on an understanding of them as transient.

Sunita's reflection itself brings together an analysis of both race and class. She locates the problem as a failure of sociological imagination in the typical observer: 'it has in a way not yet become part of the ordinary way of thinking that we participate in higher education now.' In addition, she describes the problem almost as an impulse, beyond the reach of reason: 'it is like it is automatic that if we are there we have to be international students.' Sunita draws on the binary of 'us' and 'them', but her 'we' asserts the *belonging* of People of Color at the university, against the ignorance of the unidentified 'they' who assume that the Person of Color in Norway does not belong in an elite space – and that the Person of Color in a university space cannot be Norwegian.<sup>4</sup>

Sunita herself expresses a kind of disorientation, an incredulity, in response to being racialized as a foreigner. She frames it as not 'that serious', and laughs it off, but she also describes the phenomenon as 'very strange'. We can read this as an objective 'strangeness': there used to be few People of Color on campus/in Norway, but not so today, so it is irrational to assume that Norwegians of Color do not attend higher education, and to assume that racialized Others are foreigners. We can also read it as a reflection of Sunita's embodied experience: how strange it is for her given her family, her community, her expectations for herself, her lifetime growing up in Norway, to be perceived repeatedly as someone who could not possibly be both Norwegian and a student.

A second excerpt from Sunita's interview makes visible the way disorientation includes not only surprise but confusion and even outrage when a Person of Color takes up space that is not reserved for them. Here, Sunita tells a white Norwegian friend about a prestigious summer position she was offered at an international company, before she is due to start her hard-won residency position. She told us, the interviewers, as she tells her friend in the following narrative, that she chose to decline the research assistantship because she feels too busy. In this excerpt, she describes her friend's response:

I just told her that I had been offered it and turned it down because I didn't want to use all my summer on it. And instead of being happy for me, and I always support everything she does, and that she is clever and everything. She responded very negatively. 'You can't- How could you do that?' And I've heard that so many times before. I feel it is possible that it's me that's wrong here, but I feel like it has something to do with if I had been ethnic Norwegian.

[...] that is, it wouldn't be that easy to just voice like 'Why do you get these offers?', that is 'Why do you get these kinds of offers then?'

And then she switched to that you [plural]. And with that she meant, us with an immigrant background. She meant Pakistani, Iranian, all, that is, you are very- you are climbers, you- She called it the ALI phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> You know, that one should either be a lawyer, doctor or engineer. She just: 'You are always on –that is you are always trying ...'

Sunita's script for an appropriate response from her friend to receive the news of Sunita's job offer is that the friend should express joy on her behalf. However, Sunita's friend responds with annoyance both that Sunita was offered the prestigious summer job and that she turned it down. Sunita has been offered a privileged position, which would be 'naturally' inhabited by a white body; Sunita's job offer is a threat to the institutional episteme (Puwar 2004). That Sunita turns down this offer that 'ought' to be out of her reach is doubly disorienting, and evidence of her ungratefulness; Puwar cites Chow (1993; 28 in Puwar 2004, 45), who writes, 'What confronts the Western scholar is the discomfoting fact that the natives are no longer staying in their frames.' Furthermore, that Sunita turns down the offer also disrupts norms of what counts as privileged and appreciated, threatening institutional values.

To make sense of Sunita's choice, her friend turns to a stereotype of successful immigrants striving to enter prestigious professions, which she shorthands as the 'ALI phenomenon'. Sunita herself offers the analysis of her friend's reaction as possible only within the frames of Sunita not being a white 'ethnic' Norwegian.<sup>6</sup> The friend also deploys an us vs. them binary, using the plural 'you' to reduce Sunita to a member of the racialized group of immigrant 'climbers'; Sunita's subjectivity is no longer in play. Viewed in light of this stereotype she acts in accordance with expectations. Thus, Sunita's friend is able to moderate the disorientation that the job offer and its rejection produces by recasting Sunita's behavior in light of a different unflattering stereotype that maintains the racialized episteme.

Sunita told these stories, among others, in response to the researchers' prompt for moments when she felt (racially) Othered in her life at the university. In both cases – as in many of our informants' tellings – the white Norwegians around her experience her presence in academic space as disorienting – and very clearly in the second excerpt, causing what Puwar (2004, 45) calls 'ontological anxiety.' Despite the inherently degrading nature of these experiences, Sunita herself claimed agency through her reflection and analysis. Fanon ([1952] 2017) wrote about the 'crushing' objectification of 'the look,' 'I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.' (91). In contrast, Sunita *does* laugh as she expresses her incredulity at her racialized body's being the cause of disorientation – at least when retelling her experiences of racial Othering to two white researchers. In this way, in her laughter, in her indictment of white Norwegians as failing to exercise their imaginations or recognize the present reality, in her distancing herself from her friend's belittling racism, Sunita stakes her claim of belonging in Norway and in academic space.

## Disorientation and classroom discourse

In the classroom discourse study, we see the process of racialization in talk: how some bodies are constituted as belonging while others are racialized as outsiders,



as ‘space invaders’ (Puwar 2004). This is a consistent theme across the analyses of classroom discourse data (Harlap and Riese 2021; Riese and Harlap 2021); here we have selected two illustrative excerpts from a single extended discussion about adoption and diaspora in a small discussion seminar in an Anthropology course. The seminar is facilitated by a white, German master student, and on the day this conversation takes place, there are five students present, all of them white, and as far as we know, all Norwegian. The topic of this seminar is the characteristics of diaspora, and this extended discussion opens when the seminar leader, Tone, poses a question about adopted children living in Norway, which she then makes more specific<sup>7</sup>:

With your eh understanding of the concept diaspora so I [can also?] ask (1.6) can one say that ehh (0.7) Vietnamese adopted children (1.1) that- that live here in Norway, (1.3) with Norwegian parents [in?] (1.3) do they live in a diaspora.

The ensuing discussion is lengthy; here we present two excerpts that are fairly representative though more explicit than most classroom talk about linking ethnicity, race and biology. Here, Heidi ventures to state that adopted children do not comprise a diaspora:

- 1 Heidi: Ehm: (0.5) but they don’t have any- (0.6) any eh (0.7) there- they- they (0.3) there- there isn’t any (0.2)  
 2 cultural: (0.8) [ba]ggage with [them] (.) right?  
 3 Student: M[y-]  
 4 Tone: [Mhhm?]  
 5 (0.4)  
 6 Heidi: Thus <all that they belong to of a so-called> their ethnicity:: (0.6) is comprised ma(h)inly of Norwegian  
 7 impulses right?  
 8 Tone: [Mhm. ? ]  
 9 Heidi: [>So even i]f< (0.4) there is a different genetic pac:kage (0.4) >so there is no< other basis (0.2) to (2.9)  
 10 yhheah: (0.6) The thing with- diaspora is also a a (.) group experience right, (.) And- (0.2) just that (.) n-  
 11 (0.3) n- (0.2) they apparently were taken from a place >then I think probably rather they can have< (0.6)  
 12 e::m: (0.4) an in-group belonging with <tho:se who have been adopted> kind of thing.

Heidi makes some claims about typical characteristics (category-tied predicates; Stokoe 2012) of internationally adopted children (the category in question). These claims include that adopted children don’t have ‘cultural baggage’ (ostensibly from their birth countries), that their ethnicity is ‘comprised mainly of Norwegian impulses’, that they (perhaps) have a ‘different genetic package’, and that they (perhaps) identify as adoptees and experience a sense of belonging with that identity. Heidi conflates the concepts of nationality, culture, ethnicity and biology, and in doing so, racializes internationally adopted children. At the risk of seeming pedantic, we wish to unpack Heidi’s metaphors in some detail in order to understand the relationships that they evoke.

By saying that the children's ethnicity is 'comprised mainly of Norwegian impulses' (lines 6-7), Heidi makes several conceptual moves. First, she claims that adopted children are not in diaspora, that they are Norwegian. In doing this, she maps nationality ('Norwegian') onto the slippery concept of ethnicity. The construction of nation as an ethnically bound entity of a people who share a collective inheritance of culture and values – in contrast to the idea of the nation as a political collective – is a tradition with roots in the Germanic concept of the *volk* (Peters 2002). However, Heidi opens for the possibility that adoptees have some 'impulses' that are not Norwegian, despite their Norwegian ethnicity. Following Heidi's theory of the case, what sorts of impulses might adoptees have that are not inherited from their adoptive Norwegian parents?

Heidi draws on an assumption that what international adoptees share, and bring to Norway, is a cohesive, shared 'genetic package'. The image of a 'genetic package' is evocative of the earlier metaphor of 'cultural baggage', both package and baggage being objects that travel, that enclose and bear belongings, and that come as a complete, closed unit. Genetic inheritance doesn't actually function as a cohesive, unchanging, complete unit, despite the ideas that genetic ancestry companies like 23&Me peddle (Roth and Ivermark 2018). We also notice that this 'different genetic package' evokes a second, almost-invisible category: what category are the international adoptees being compared to? Heidi is working with the set of *phenotypic* assumptions that link biology to nation and ethnicity – that is to say, race (Hall 2017). If 'they' *look different* from 'us,' in a way that appears systematic to Heidi and potentially her interlocutors, then 'they' must be genetically different from 'us'. In addition, if there is a 'genetic package' that makes adoptees 'different,' there must be a genetic package shared among (full/authentic/real) Norwegians.

Thus, in this short interaction we see that the category of international adoptees in Norway, when deployed by white Norwegians, can teach us a great deal about the process of racialization through discourse: nationality is confounded with ethnicity, culture and biology; nationality is racialized such that Norwegians are white; ethnicity is a category that is used to topicalize race, and the classroom is a colorblind space, in that when race is topicalized, it is done indirectly. Finally, we see how racialized Others' belonging in Norwegian spaces is contested, and generates disorientation: do they, or do they not, belong here?

In the above excerpt we do not see how the others in the classroom take up, or potentially refute, Heidi's use of categories. Heidi's talk in this excerpt establishes the grounds for discussing international adoptees as racialized Others, and the rest of the discussion on this topic picks up and builds on the ambiguity between nationality, ethnicity, culture and biology. The next excerpt we wish to showcase takes place close to the end of the extended discussion of international adoptees and diaspora. It demonstrates not only a number of the same themes, and similar disorientation, but does so through a *collaborative* sequence of discourse in the classroom. This is important for this kind of analysis in order to claim that the students and instructor are working from categories of *shared meaning*; it would be difficult thus to argue that the categories Heidi deploys are idiosyncratic to her and not part of a broader set of common understandings and associations.

- 1 Heidi: I think also that it is a difficult situation like when they become a little older and (0.5) like you said that  
 2 (0.2) they- they understand that they are from Korea and are adopted and something or other has  
 3 happened (0.8) but (1.0) but (.) that b b- hhhh (1.4) but a family (0.2) with two identical parents and two  
 4 identical children (.) walks down a street then one can see that here is a group here is a flock.
- 5 Student: Mm mm.
- 6 Tone: Mhm?
- 7 Heidi: You don't need- you don't need to make any effort to-
- 8 Tone: Mhm?
- 9 Helen: It is clear,  
 10 (0.2)
- 11 Heidi: Yes.  
 12 (0.3)
- 13 Ruth: Uhh (quiet laugh)
- 14 Heidi: Right?

The interaction starts with Heidi reflecting on an anecdote that had just been shared by Ruth about a friend who has two young children adopted from South Korea. Heidi then seems to lose fluency in producing the second part of her utterance, with unusually long pauses, repeated words and a long sigh (lines 2-3), followed by a hypothetical case of a family with two 'identical' parents and two 'identical' children, which she posits are perceived as a group or a flock. Let us look a bit more closely at the categories at play here, and how they interact to produce meaning: no longer 'adopted children' but more generally 'parents' and 'children', which belong together via the apparatus of the broader category 'family' (Stokoe 2012). It is challenging on its face to understand what Heidi intends by describing the parents as identical and the children as identical; they are obviously not literally identical, so what is being suggested through that choice of descriptor? In the context of the extended discussion on international adoption and diaspora, where Norwegians have been racialized as white and internationally adopted children have been cast as racialized Others, it is difficult to avoid interpreting the descriptor as meaning that the children and parents are racially matched, either all white, or all not-white.

In conversation analysis, Extreme Case formulations, such as 'everybody's doing it,' 'this is a brand new dress,' or, in our case, 'two identical parents and two identical children', are descriptions that legitimize claims by casting them as obvious, undeniable or believable (Pomerantz 1986). One use of Extreme Case formulations is to attribute causes not to the observer but to the object itself. Heidi's 'identical parents' and 'identical children' function as an Extreme Case. They legitimate the claim: it is the objective, identical nature of the family members themselves that cause them to be perceived as *naturally belonging together*. Internationally adopted children, who look racially different from their white Norwegian parents, don't appear to the observer to be part of a group or a flock. The children's belonging in the flock is not to be taken for granted – it is disorienting. Shoring up this interpretation: Heidi uses the pronoun 'one' to describe

the observer (line 4), which positions the observer as neutral and generalized; she is not holding herself accountable for racial seeing. In both of these ways, she inoculates herself against potential accusations of prejudice: it is not that *Heidi* sees a flock in the ‘identical’ family; any observer would see the same.

In the rest of this excerpt, we see several students affirming Heidi’s use of categories, most actively Helen. Heidi, who was called to continue elaborating by the seminar leader’s questioning (‘Mhm?’, lines 6 and 8) begins to suggest that ‘You don’t need to make any effort to-’ but she abandons her turn (line 7). Helen takes up Heidi’s utterance, stating: ‘It is clear’ (line 9). It is worth noting that in the original Norwegian, Helen uses modal particle *jo* (‘Den er jo klar,’). *Jo* is a complex particle that can serve a variety of purposes in talk, one of which is to indicate that the speaker considers the information in the utterance as knowledge shared by the speaker and interlocutor (Andvik 1992). Thus, Helen supports and grounds Heidi’s claim of objectivity by drawing on grammatical resources that suggest intersubjective knowing: you know, I know, anyone would know. In this case, the shared knowing is the claim that the onlooker uses no effort in perceiving the ‘identical’ family as a family unit; implicit is that the (racially) not-identical family *does* require effort on the part of the onlooker to be perceived as belonging together.

There seems to be a common project here of shoring up the naturalness of the racially-like family, and implicitly the strangeness of the mixed family. Whiteness is centered and normalized, while racialized bodies demand effort to be seen as belonging in (white) Norwegian space. In this excerpt we see Heidi making exactly the same claim that emerges from Puwar’s research: racialized Bodies of Color generate disorientation in the observer – who reacts with uncertainty as to what to do and how to interpret the presence of these bodies out of place (Puwar 2004).

## Discussion

Disorientation at bodies ‘out of place’ (Puwar 2004) is an outward expression of the exceptionalism of Norwegian innocence and goodness, similar to the ‘white innocence’ described by Dutch scholar Wekker (2016). By ‘white innocence,’ Wekker means both an attachment to a national imaginary of a small, peaceful and decidedly non-racist country and an aggressive, anxious claim to racial innocence that embodies both a not-knowing and a not-wanting-to-know. Connecting *white innocence* to Charles Mills’ (1997, 2007) *epistemology of ignorance* and to Essed and Hoving’s (2014) *smug innocence*, Wekker writes ‘I am led to suspect bad faith; innocence is not as innocent as it appears to be.’ We can interpret Sunita’s laugh, too, as pointing to a suspicion of bad faith: how ‘very strange’ it is that white Norwegians cannot imagine People of Color as anything but foreigners, as bodies out of place or only temporarily taking up space in Norwegian academia. This bad-faith innocence, or not-knowing – this racialized episteme – serves to *center whiteness* repeatedly (Ahmed 2006; Frankenberg 1997); we see similar dynamics of disorientation across our interviews and in the classroom discourse where whiteness is made natural in Norwegian space and made equivalent to Norwegianness.

In the pairing of classroom discourse and interviews we can see how the dynamic of disorientation contributes to *epistemic injustice*. Epistemic injustice is a concept from

philosophy developed in depth by Fricker (2007), which she defines as when ‘wrong is done to someone ... in their capacity as a knower.’ Fricker is not the first to describe the disempowerment and erasure of the knowledge of individuals and communities who are subject to structural identify prejudices; Black and women of Color feminist scholars in particular have written about oppressive epistemic patterns (Alcoff 1991-1992, 2010; Collins 2000; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Spivak 2003, among others), and philosophers have explored related epistemic failures, such as Mills (1997, 2007, 2015) and others’ (Peels and Blaauw 2016; Sullivan and Tuana 2007) accounts of an epistemology of ignorance. Further, a number of scholars have picked up Fricker’s invitation and the area of work on epistemic injustice in philosophy has grown quickly, including in education (Boni and Velasco 2019; Kotzee 2017; Walker 2018, 2019).

The injury of epistemic injustice – the delegitimizing of an individual or group as a *knower* – is particular grave in the academy, where knowledge is currency. Melanie Walker (2019, 165) describes what this can look like in the educational sphere: ‘Epistemic injustice might include silencing, having one’s contributions distorted (‘so what you are actually saying is ...’), having less status in the communicative practices, being marginalized, being discriminated against, and so on’. In our reading of our data, the *disorientation* experienced by white classmates and educators when faced with or grappling with the presence of a Black, Indigenous, or Body of Color is a predicate for misrecognition or non-recognition, a kind of erasure, and certainly a positioning in a ‘disadvantaged position to influence discourse’ (Walker 2019). Sunita communicates the alienation generated by her so-called friend’s disorientation at her choices, the misrecognition of Sunita as a ‘foreign’ body ‘out of place’ by strangers on campus, and that her belonging is under suspicion. Walker (2019) further writes, ‘If students experience the emotional and cognitive dissonance of not belonging at school or university, they will struggle to make their own, distinctive experiences intelligible to themselves and to others.’ Although we wouldn’t say that Sunita’s analysis of her own experiences lacks intelligibility – quite the opposite – the dynamic of disorientation is inherently an expression of non-belonging, much like the class of students discussing diaspora reproduces power structures that center whiteness and position People of Color as belonging only partially.

In conclusion, our analysis of disorientation through discursive processes shows how the intellectual and social environment of the university produces – or continues to produce – racialized and eurocentric Othering. We see on the micro scale of personal experience and the meso scale of the classroom a curriculum that centers whiteness, and classroom talk that reinforces the manufacture of innocence in bad faith, while destabilizing the belongingness of students, administrative staff and academic staff of Color. In Sunita’s interview, the classroom discussions above, and the rest of our data, we see processes of racialization in action, and the disorientation that is produced among white people when People of Color are ‘out of place’ in academic space in Norway. That Sunita is approached again and again in English – like many of our interviewees – and that her friend expresses annoyance at her impudence when she is granted and then declines a prestigious opportunity, are expressions of how Sunita’s presence and participation in Norwegian academia is conditional and somehow unnatural. What is made explicit in Heidi and her classmates’ discussion about the ‘flock’ of (racially) ‘identical’

children and parents – is that there is no disorientation about who does belong: white people/white Norwegians.

Although our analysis can be read as an indictment of the present, it is critical to see it as a manifestation of the past that is still with us – and to do so helps us turn away from the understandable but impossibly limited impulse to ‘fix it.’ Puwar’s (2004) analysis of bodies out of place, producing disorientation, is rooted in an historical analysis of how certain unmarked (male and white) bodies were constructed as the European sovereign subject through the colonial project, and associated with certain spaces, including academia. The white, male body of particular habitus, Puwar describes, continues to be the ‘template’ against which other bodies moving into academic spaces are measured (141). Raced and gendered bodies are burdened by a legacy of colonial imaginary, associated with ‘nature, particularism and tradition’ (143), and lacking rationality – what could be more corrosive to a person’s legitimacy in academic space?

The institutional episteme of the university resists the full academic citizenship of bodies who are formally allowed to be there, but break with expectation, and certainly with the nostalgia of what the hallowed university used to be before massification. The question of what to do now has been taken up most recently and vividly by students and young people calling for decolonization, in South Africa (Rhodes must fall!), the UK, Norway: the removal of statues, transformations in curriculum, not just an awareness of but a changing of the colonial episteme (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Cupples and Grosfoguel 2019). Ahmed (2012) argues for the importance of going against the institutional flow: ‘Things might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. When you are not going that way, you experience a flow *as* solidity, as what you come up against. [...] We might need to be the cause of obstruction. We might need to get in the way if we are to get anywhere. We might need to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points’ (186–187). Thus, we see this paper in the tradition of a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2015). We hope that this paper is unsettling to some while it is surely, wearily, familiar to others. That it leaves you asking yourself – especially if you are someone who *can* choose to simply follow the institutional flow, no matter your institutional position – how can *I* cause obstruction to the flow, in the way conversations unfurl in classrooms, in hallways, in the hiring room, at lunch, in the room where the action plan is drafted?

## Notes

1. The project ‘Race, Identity, Belonging and Exclusion in Higher Education’ received funding from the People Programme (Marie Curie Actions) of the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme FP7 / 2007-2013/
2. All names are pseudonyms and personal details may have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity.
3. All excerpts have been translated from Norwegian by the authors.
4. The framing of the imagined international student as non-white (by Sunita and in her telling by supposed white Norwegian observers) is itself an interesting positioning with its own modern colonial baggage tied to globalization, and merits its own discussion about the linkages between racialization and the ‘internationalization’ in higher education, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. ALI stands for Advokat (lawyer), Lege (doctor), Ingeniør (engineer), and refers to the stereotype that families with certain immigration histories press their children to enter prestigious professions. The pun on the name ‘Ali’ doubles up these associations.
6. ‘ethnic Norwegian’ (*etnisk norsk*) is the term typically used in Norway to describe white Norwegians.
7. Note that the (translated) classroom discourse excerpts are transcribed according to modified Jeffersonian conventions (Hepburn and Bolden 2013; Jefferson 2004). Numbers in parentheses indicate length of pauses; a period in parentheses indicates a very short pause. Colons are used to indicate drawn-out words. Underline signifies emphasis via loudness and intonation. Less than symbol followed by greater than (< ... >) indicate slower than typical speech for a particular speaker; the opposite placement (> ... <) indicates quick speech. Brackets point to overlapping speech.

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