Decolonial methodology and the reflexive wrestles of whiteness

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Abstract

This article explores some of the challenges encountered when being positioned as a (mostly) white researcher engaged in decolonial research highlighting marginalized, indigenous, and racialized people and perspectives. Drawing upon a combination of critical autoethnography and theoretical investigations, the author offers reflections on what implications a decolonial stance might have for how a white researcher can possibly approach questions of social and cognitive justice without reinscribing privilege, reifying whiteness, or resorting to self-righteousness. Inspired by Pillow (2015), the author argues that in order to do this, reflexivity need not only be interpretive, but also genealogical, and allow for a "reflexivity of reflexivity". Genealogical reflexivity is practiced in the article through a "doubled research process", where the autoethnographic narrations draw links between lived experience, culture, and power relations. The narrations also shed light to complexities and tensions in navigating a (mostly) white researcher positionality, as the author discovers her Sámi ancestry.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Decolonial; Whiteness; Autoethnography

Introduction

The reflections narrated through this article lay out some of my experiences and positional wrestles as a (mostly) white, emerging researcher gesturing towards a decolonial stance during my PhD research. The significance of decolonial methodology lies in the intersections of theoretical framework, application of methodology, and ethical principles (McGregor et al., 2018), moving beyond Eurocentric western modernity (Keskitalo et al., 2021). Santos (2018) describes the decolonial researcher as craftsperson, resorting to methodologies creatively rather than mechanically. This demands rigorous knowledge of methodological techniques and deep respect

for research tools, "crucial to avoid repeating what has already been done and to produce instead new pieces, unique to a certain extent, which reflect the personality and emotional investment of the craftsperson" (Santos, 2018, p. 147-148). As decolonial methodology explicitly aims at dismantling coloniality through centering perspectives of the oppressed (Sandoval, 2000), a white researcher positionality makes reflexive work on positionality imperative. The challenges faced by the white researcher indeed amounts to low-intensity struggles in comparison with the high-intensity struggles of for example indigenous groups facing land theft or racialized groups fighting racist violence, or the risk for minoritized researchers of being dismissed as less than rational. However, a white researcher positionality comes with "risks" in terms of the quality of the research and possible reflexive blind spots.

Doing decolonial research as a white researcher might feed on to socialized desires to "feel good, look good and be seen as doing good" (Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 29), and reinscribe unacknowledged structures of privilege (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018). As my particular research project was concerned with interrupting whiteness, racism and coloniality in Norwegian citizenship education, I faced the paradoxical position where I aim at dismantling what I *cannot not want* (Spivak, 1994). This is not simply an epistemological question, but also an ontological question about coloniality of being, that equates the categories of "human", "knowledge producer", and "white" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). However, my reflexive work and understanding of myself as being was also complicated by realizing my Sámi ancestry during the research. This discovery triggered an instant urge to clarify my positionality in categorical terms and discover my "pure self" to qualify my researcher positionality. Could I then still consider myself as *fully* "white", and how would a shift in positionality influence my analytical work? If I wanted, was I allowed to fully take on a position as indigenous, and if so, who would provide approval? These wrestles provided access to new reflections and insights on what whiteness is, or maybe more accurate, what it *does*.

With this article, I aim at contributing to deepening discussions on axiology and reflexivity from the positionality of a (mostly) white researcher engaging in decolonial research. Through a series of autoethnographic narrations accompanied by theoretical explorations, I offer my reflections on what implications taking on a decolonial stance might have for how we can possibly approach questions of ethics, relationality, accountability and quality in research and knowledge production. I do not seek to offer normative methodological prescriptions, but rather invite conversations that open up complexities and problematize possible blind spots involved when assessing research as "just", "ethical", or "good". A related objective is to trace and investigate my own whiteness to access what it does in social relations and knowledge production in my research. I approach these questions through a "doubled research process" where the autoethnographic narrations draw links between lived experience, culture, and power relations, through writing and racializing myself as white (Berg, 2008).

Analytic approach

The analytic approach in this article is critical autoethnography, focused on clarifying my position as both mode and object of inquiry, critiquing hegemonic onto-epistemologies by self-reflectively inhabiting the terms of the debate I wish to interrupt (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019). A critical approach to autoethnography is not about the self-narrative as such, but rather about being aware and accountable for ones situatedness within systems of power and privilege (Spry, 2018). A main feature of autoethnography is the ability to move and transform both the writer and the readers of the "final" product (Andersen, 2015). Choosing narratives from the vast material and experiences of the PhD research, I draw inspiration from the concept of *friction* as described by Guttorm et al. (2021). Engaging stories of friction involves opening different ontologies to become visible, demand for them to be recognized, drawing attention towards "the formation of new cultural and political configurations that change, rather than repeat, old contests" (p. 121). This approach also enables locating whiteness, characterized by being invisible and unmarked for those who inhabit it through an (often) uninterrupted affective state of comfort (Ahmed, 2007).

The PhD study to which I am referring in this article, was conducted in the period 2017-2021 (Eriksen, 2021). The research empirically detected and explored the coloniality of Norwegian citizenship education, emphasizing social interactions, knowledge production and discourses in primary school classrooms. I investigated the coloniality of knowledge production, and explored the possibilities, complexities, and risks of critical interruptions to hegemonic epistemological frameworks. I applied several methods, starting from ethnographic fieldwork in primary school classrooms. The routes taken in my research were influenced by the interplay between increased reflexivity and engagement in the field and with literature. Notably, my understanding of my role changed during the process, moving from participant observation toward observant participation (Tedlock, 1991). The methodology was in this sense explorative and emerging, and as I describe in the thesis, the decolonial stance emerged through my affective encounters with coloniality and whiteness early in my fieldwork. This process also led me to engage in more co-creative and participatory work with teachers, moving from observing lectures to designing, conducting, and discussing them together. The process of *gesturing towards rather than starting from* a decolonial stance, posed challenges to the research, but also provided situations of friction that enabled reflexivity upon my researcher positionality.

Approaching whiteness from a white perspective might involve taking space from "those who are most immediately affected by colonial and racial violence in order to advance one's own career and other personal interests" (Stein, 2016, p. 18), and recentering whiteness. Despite these risks, I think the genealogical work on whiteness is necessary for ensuring the quality, accountability, and ethicality of such work. Being silent about my own whiteness would also mean partaking in the sanctioned ignorance of society in whiteness as unmarked norm (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019). And as Ahmed (2007) points out, reification is not something we do to whiteness, but something whiteness does. It is also argued that epistemological decolonization involves a specific focus on confronting whiteness: Decolonization is not a project that should be taken up only by certain groups but is rather a space of "fighting" taking place through intersubjectivity (Martin et

al., 2017). Dismantling of whiteness can here be understood as a unifying approach against injustice, towards a shared humanity.

Decoloniality and its Implications for Reflexive Methodologies

Reflexivity is at times mistaken for the process of reducing bias or avoiding contamination of the alleged pure "data" (Attia & Edge, 2017). The latter description is revealing itself as potential bearer of a colonial logic as such. The very idea of "pure data" presupposes an accessible state of epistemological purity where knowledge is perceived as always reliably differentiated, grouped and described through universal, discrete and exclusive categories (Shotwell, 2016). Reflexivity is related to questioning not only the researcher and the study, but also the field – the framework of the conversations (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Judging the quality of the research does not depend upon being as neutral as possible, but rather the level of clarity concerning the abilities and limitations of my onto-epistemological lens and historical and geopolitical positioning:

> *In my research, I explicitly aim at interrupting potential epistemic violence embedded in knowledge production in and through citizenship education and argue the importance of self-reflection in educational processes. In a similar vein, this demands hyper-reflexivity related to me as knowledge producer. What underlies my investment in conducting this research? What becomes visible and what remains intangible through the lenses applied in this research, and why? What are my ethical responsibilities as researcher, and to what or who am I accountable? And how can I possibly, as white, argue that I speak for marginalized interests without simultaneously being found out as hypocritical? These questions seem overwhelming. They do not only deal with methodology and the quality of my research, but with who I am. They are existential.*

Pillow (2003) warns how the omnipresence and superficial application of reflexivity might risk obscuring intentions, and especially investments in epistemic privilege and self-affirmation. As she argues, this demands a "reflexivity of reflexivity" (see also Țîștea, 2019), acknowledging the necessity of reflexivity to be not only interpretative, but also genealogical. Emphasis is put on the importance of accounting for theoretical investments, to name them out loud, so that they are not germane to how the project has been conceptualized, interpreted and completed, and how it will be read, taken up and applied (Pillow, 2015). This resonates well with decoloniality: Decolonial reflexivity demands what Mignolo (2012) describes as border thinking, aiming at the erasure of the distinction between knower and known, between an alleged hybrid object and a pure subject or knower, perceived as uncontaminated by the matters described. To uphold the critical intent of reflexivity is necessarily discomforting; it demands I "stay with the trouble" and accept complicity and complexity and my own embeddedness in and with what I study (Haraway, 2016; Shotwell, 2016), rather than giving into the modern desire towards turning away in search of immediate resolution. In this way, my self-reflexive account is an intrinsic part of the exploration of the concept of coloniality in my research. How am I shaped by and invested in structures of coloniality, and what are my interests in interrupting them?

First friction: "Feeling" whiteness

Ahmed (2007) has described the comfort associated with white privilege and positionality as a sinking feeling, "a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape" (p. 158). Inhabiting whiteness can be understood in terms of affect, and the presence of a comfort that makes positionality invisible from a white standpoint, collapsing boundaries between body and space. A starting point for my reflections upon my own whiteness was a situation of friction where this "sinking feeling" was somehow interrupted. This situation initially presented a crisis for my self-understanding as researcher, and consequently for my research and its aims, through a discomforting encounter with my own whiteness:

> *In a research seminar with a group of highly experienced researchers who I deeply respect and admire, I am invited to present parts of my PhD study. As I lay out descriptions of the underlying racism in discourses and conversations on citizenship observed in primary school classrooms, my fellow researchers seem a bit wary. As some of them respond, although the work holds high academic rigor and quality, it might also be "ethically problematic". What are the implications of possibly exposing well-intended teachers or students in classrooms as reproducers of racist discourse? How can we, as educational researchers, aspire to get teachers and students to cooperate and participate in research if we describe them as racist? This critique, coming from experienced researchers that I sought to learn from, hit me hard affectively. It initially made me question my whole project. How could they talk about my research as possibly "unethical" or unjust, as my aim as such is to promote social justice?*

Although undoubtedly discomforting, this situation eventually activated reflexivity of fundamental importance. It made me look deeper into with what interests and investments I conducted the research, and from what positionality I speak. This path led to the rare encounter with my own whiteness, and in particular my white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility refers to the lack of training as white in "seeing race", and the emotional struggles one as white may experience when assumptions about race are challenged (Sibeko, 2019). The friction experienced through the discomfort I experienced with having my self-understanding as "well-intended" interrupted, invited me to access and locate my own positionality, and made me realize from what space the critique posed by other white researchers could possibly be constructed. The experience also led me to discover what the alleged universalist concept of ethical conduct operating in this space concealed, and who's interests it protected and not – albeit not in the sense that my researcher colleagues understood it.

Later in my research, I described how white teachers, even when having explicitly stating their commitment to anti-racist values and attitudes, may safeguard white equilibrium and thus reproduce white privilege through upholding ideals of celebrating diversity, discourses of individuality, and value-neutral education that are related to their self-images as "good" (Eriksen & Stein, 2021). In these situations, an *affective* economy of whiteness was significant in shaping classroom discourse and upholding the classroom as a white space (Ahmed, 2007). In a similar

vein, the above-described research seminar can also be understood as a space protecting white emotional equilibrium. Like I experienced with the teachers, although often invisible, it is possible to interrupt this state. However, this requires not only intellectual knowledge about systemic racism, but also (self-) reflexivity about one's positionality within that system, as well as affective work. In the research seminar, I was exposed to the white emotional equilibrium through the affective friction I experienced by critique from researchers that were, in relation to me, in more powerful positions academically. This experience led me to further investigations of whiteness, and as accessed through a decolonial lens.

Theoretical investigation: Decoloniality, whiteness, and the Norwegian context

The understanding of decoloniality applied in my research, starts from analyses of coloniality as constitutive of modernity. Coloniality describes how epistemologies and power relations produced through and by colonialism continue to inform present day society and institutions (Quijano, 2000). Coloniality can be traced in educational practice and research through the reproduction of knowledges that continue to justify European and white *de facto* supremacy, and renders colonized peoples` knowledges and livelihoods backwards, inferior, or non-existent. Santos (2007) describes this as how modern western thinking is a system of separation where social reality is divided into the realms of "this side of the line", represented by the Global North, and "the other side of the line", the Global South. The line produces "the other side of the line" as non-existent, positioning the Global South in the abyss. This epistemological difference, or the divide between "true" and "othered" knowledge, is rooted in ontological difference. The ontological difference, i.e., the coloniality of being, renders certain subjects as liminal and representing the borders of being as such, positioning the white, European male as the unspoken norm (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In the Nordic context, coloniality has been upheld and eschewed by widespread denial of the colonization of Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Sámi, and the Nordic colonial endeavours in Africa and the Americas (Keskinen & Mulinari, 2009). This sanctioned ignorance (Spivak, 1994) has been a condition for the production of the idea of the Nordic states as homogenous and "natural" entities. Externalization of racism continues to be common, which is evident in the problems with developing a vocabulary for race and racism in Norwegian public discourses and educational practice (Bangstad, 2015; Gullestad, 2006; Svendsen, 2014a). This taboo concerning racism explains why whiteness, despite being a powerful structural presence as well as deeply embedded in the imaginary of the alleged "true" Nordic and Norwegian people, is rarely articulated (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019; Fylkesnes, 2019; Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017; Rastas, 2009). Although from a decolonial perspective the structures and discourses of coloniality and whiteness have global reach (Mignolo, 2012), this is not tantamount to claiming them as universal. They are rather narratives with universal ramifications (Lóftsdottir & Jensen, 2012), and consequently, although this paper starts a discussion from the particularities of the Nordic and Norwegian context, the context-specific examples engaged also have implications for understanding coloniality and whiteness in other contexts.

The decolonial perspective urges us to move beyond traditional modes of social critique by approaching current problems not simply as issues of ignorance to be solved with more knowledge, or emphasis on the "right" moral values; they are problems of denial that are rooted in desires for and investments in the continuity of a colonial habit of being. Understanding knowledge production from a decolonial perspective entails collapsing the perceived borders between epistemology and ontology as depictured in traditional modern science (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Pursuing decolonial options encourages thinking against modernity, "delinking from its fictions", while simultaneously acknowledging that there is not outside to this modernity (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 109). In her analysis of Nordic feminist research, Dahl (2020) argues that whiteness can be understood as an "epistemic habit", referring to "the ordinary and taken for granted dimensions of what, in this case, academic feminists do, frequently and without reflection in 'our' relationship to knowledge" (p. 114). I argue that this analysis also holds true for the larger body of modern/colonial research practice. The significance of my experience in the research seminar described above, was related to how the interruption of this habit through an experience of friction provided access to "seeing" my own whiteness.

What *is* this whiteness, then? Although race is certainly a social construction that was "invented" by and through the history of race biology and eugenics, I also regard it as epistemically salient and ontologically real in the material and lived sense (Dankertsen, 2019). Whiteness is an institutionally and materially embedded structurally privileged place, from which people look at themselves, others, and society (Frankenberg, 1993). In terms of subject formation and relationality, whiteness is described as an ongoing and unfinished history, that "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 172). Such a perspective on whiteness theorizes whiteness as assemblages of affects, materialities of bodies and spaces, and discourses and encounters that constitute and reproduce white privilege and supremacy in different contexts. Whiteness is linked to hierarchies in which whiteness becomes an attribute that some people are more or less excluded from, regardless of skin color (Dankertsen, 2019).

Second friction: Complicity, complexity, and avoiding white saviourism

Doing research within the context of Norwegian teacher education research, makes me obliged to the national standardized ethical guidelines of the *Norwegian National Research Ethics Commitees on Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology* (NESH, 2016), as well as local institutional guidelines derived from these. Such procedural guidelines provided me with checklists that were practically helpful in modifying my moral compass along the way, and I revisited and studied these continuously during the process. However, the concept of a universalist ethics might result in the illusion of ethical practice that can be catastrophic for the voices or perspectives created as other by or through research processes (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018). Decolonial work on positionality and reflexivity moves the focus towards relationality rather than individual or institutional accountability, as exploring "the self in relation to others, the Earth and different temporalities" (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019, p. 137). As Foucault (1986) has explained, ethical work is the process of constituting your own moral being and

transforming yourself into an ethical being through the historical and critical examination of the constitution of the self. This subjectivation entails self-criticism, described as caring for yourself. What is methodologically needed of me is therefore not narrating my life history, but engaging analyses of social and historical structures that condition my reflexivity (Pillow, 2015).

My learnt desires as white of being good, and lack of experience in seeing myself as a racially situated being, poses the risk of the research turning into self-righteous paternalism or saviourism. However, an important question appearing in this nexus, is what perspectives are rendered invisible in this positioning of the ethical problems in the study. It was through the encounter with the othered students in my research, that I was able to gain insight on this:

> *During the period of fieldwork in primary school classrooms, I observed several classes discussing what it means to "be Norwegian". I noticed how the students immediately located the minoritized our racialized students in their discussion groups. I also noticed how the students that were located as Others performed resistance and navigation of categories of social identities in different ways. One of these students, Sarah, powerfully and confidently resisted the positioning as "less-than" the majority students by proclaiming her ability to become prime minister in Norway ("despite" her black skin color, and her parents being born in Somalia). Another student, Sophie, resisted the insistence from her co-students on her right to be Norwegian despite her parents being foreign-born, by refusing to identify as Norwegian. On the verge of tears, the pain inflicted by being forced to account for herself was strongly present. Although these young students managed their situation differently, what was common across these encounters, was how these racialized students were forced to do the emotional work of being the containers for Otherness, representing the navigation of boundaries of inclusion as national subject. I realized that although coloniality sheds light to the inadequacies and lacks in knowledge production and thus relates to the quality of knowledge produced in the classroom, this focus can never entail losing sight of the actual human beings for whom coloniality is a very real part of their everyday lived realities.*

Santos` abyssal line does not only explain how certain knowledges are placed in the abyss, but also how the humanity of subjects from the Global South are made invisible. This Global South is here understood as historic and structural rather than geographical, a colonially and racially defined South. This also entails that in the multicultural classroom, the Global North and South are present in terms of the students` racial and social positionalities. The subjects positioned in the colonial abyss might be prevented by representing the world on their own terms, such as in the cases of Sarah and Sophie. To me, the major ethical consideration presented itself in these situations through how I cannot let the minoritized students continue to bear the burden of *containing* diversity, or representing the problem, in an otherwise democratic classroom (Ahmed, 2012). Not least, as psychoanalytical perspectives on decoloniality and whiteness has powerfully displayed, epistemic violence hold power to influence the self-image of the colonized, non-white subject in

devastating ways (Fanon, 2008 [1952]; Yancy, 2008). In other words, the fear of being exposed as complicit in racist structures cannot hold stronger protection than the right to *not* experience the dehumanization posed by racism. This is also where aiming at seeing things from the perspective of the oppressed, can provide better and deeper knowledge on the issue, in this case of the unnamed racist discourses at work in classrooms.

From these situations, I experienced the risks with treating ethics as an external tool applied to research as a kind of checklist. In addition to procedures and guidelines, I therefore uphold that research ethics must be treated in a "continuous process of becoming" (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019, p. 125), intrinsic to reflexivity. Ethical challenges emerging through the study demonstrate how reflexivity is non-prescriptive, and that micro-level situations entails situational, ethical reflexivity as "ethically important moments" emerge during the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), such as the ones displayed above.

The situations with Sarah and Sophie also actualized how research is also a form of intervention in the world, and the dilemmas related to my relative power in relation to the students both as researcher, but also as white. This especially concerned my relation to Sarah, who was black. When her co-students unintentionally reproduced race as a social category through their positioning of Sarah at the borders of what a proper Norwegian citizen could possibly be, the ethical importance was clear, leading to a dilemma: Should I interrupt?

> *Sarah was one of the students I developed a closer relation with during the research, as she was outgoing and interested in my work. Due to the connection I felt with her, it was emotionally difficult to think of her as the "oppressed," although I noticed that my decolonial theoretical perspective inclined me to do so. In the conversation with her co-students, she chose a strategy of strongly opposing their doubt, helping them to realize that she was indeed entitled to claiming a Norwegian identity. In this situation, I chose not to interfere, as I saw that my interference would have positioned Sarah in a victim positionality she did not claim. I found it appropriate to act as an ally and reinforce her statements by confirming, for example, the right of any citizen to aspire to become prime minister.*

Relational ethics involve being responsive to, while avoiding construction of, the other (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018). Importantly, even though my aims inclined me to act in solidarity with Sarah, this also reminded me that her fight against being othered was not mine to define. Although Sarah was positioned as the inevitable "Other" inscribed on her body, she also performed resistance toward the rigid and limited space offered to her through the discursive construction of identity categories. My encounters with Sarah taught me that being white, also involves knowing when to act as an ally, and when to step aside or *not* speak, to avoid centering myself as a "white saviour".

Afterthoughts: Sitting with complicity

Despite my engagement with literature related to coloniality and racism, the extent of the presence of race, racism, and whiteness in some of the classroom conversations hit me affectively

through a feeling of discomforting surprise. Being confronted emotionally with what I knew cognitively, was for me another powerful, affective encounter with my own white fragility. I realized that the same fragility was probably at play with my white researcher colleagues criticizing my exposure of racism and the possible guilt ascribed to teachers or students when implicitly naming them as racist. It took me a while to realize that what is at stake here, is not really the distribution of guilt. From a decolonial point of view, complexity and complicity is the constitutive situation of our lives, but it hit us differently. Rather than something we should try to avoid, it can be seen as a place to start from in the dismantling of violent, unsustainable, and unjust social structures and habits of being (Shotwell, 2016). They must be named properly in order to be interrupted. White individuals choose their historical situatedness as little as marginalized or indigenous do. However, we can still take responsibility for and acknowledge that history and dismantle the sanctioned ignorance of coloniality.

Based on the above, acknowledging complicity represented a starting point, not an obstacle, in my reflexive process. This is where the experience of becoming a researcher as a white person speaking from a critical, decolonial stance also necessarily involves unlearning. The concept of *unlearning* might superficially be read as erasing the knowledge already there and replacing it with something else. However, when speaking of unlearning in the decolonial sense, it rather involves the reflexive ability of becoming comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing, letting go of epistemic authority, trying to minimize the urge for quick solutions and accepting the complexity and plurality of knowledge and perspectives (Jimmy et al., 2019; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Third friction: The Impossible Impurity of Categorizations

Moving towards decolonial critique in my research, has at times been a path of frustration and doubt regarding the question of whether my study can in fact be described as a decolonial project at all, if I am not a colonized subject. Who do I really speak for, and with what interests and investments? Although troubling, such doubt can be approached as a reflexive tool, becoming more aware of questions of the limitations of the work (Fylkesnes, 2019). My doubt led me to seek out decolonial, racialized and indigenous discussion partners through the process, both in my choice of literature, conference conversations and research groups. Some of the spaces of decolonial and indigenous research and activism that I encountered also tenaciously actualized social and racial borders and binaries, such as between white and black/person of color, and insider and outsider to indigenous groups and communities; or even identification as indigenous as such. These borders affected me strongly not least because I in the initial part of the research discovered my Sámi ancestry:

> My late grandfather, who grew up in North-eastern Finnmark, the Northernmost part of Sápmi, was a close person to me, as we lived in the same house for several years. He used to tell stories about his childhood and his time as a war sailor during the Second World War. However, they always bore a sense of adventure and mythicality; he never shared details about his family or ancestry. Searches in the databases of the Norwegian official Digital Archives, gave me access to information on his fathers` Sámi family background. None of the living

relatives of him knew about this, and their reactions varied from distanced curiosity to fully embracing indigeneity as identity. For me, although excited and curious, this also led to existential wrestles with whether I should still consider myself as researcher as completely on the side of "outsider", "non-indigenous" and "white" in the common system of binaries. Who can I legitimately claim to be? What responsibility do I have in relation to representation of any of these categories?

Importantly, I experienced how this information about my ancestry held vastly different meanings in different contexts. In some situations, giving this information was tantamount to being perceived as the Sámi in the room; I felt that this was all people around me found notable about who I am. Other times, I was seen as the white researcher trying to take advantage of something that was nothing more than a historical coincidence. I felt the urge to clarify my positionality in categorical terms, and discover my alleged pure self, to qualify my research and the knowledge produced.

As pointed out by Dankertsen (2019), whiteness is a complicated topic in relation to Sámi identities: "On the one hand, the Sámi are often classified as white, and on the other hand, they have been perceived and see themselves as "looking different" and share a history of racialization and scientific racism with other Indigenous people of the world" (p. 110). Even if the Sámi often see themselves and are seen as white, notions of Saminess as connected to physiognomy and "looking" Sámi still influences Sámi identity formation in Nordic countries today (Dankertsen, 2014). Some of these complexities were also unpacked in the process of exposing my identity to peers and others:

Although considering my positionality growing up in Norway as privileged white, and very much recognizing my experienced positionality through Ahmed`s notion of the "sinking feeling", I have not always passed as white. My phenotype does not correspond to the stereotypical white and blond Nordic norm, often creating frustration in people I meet (where are you really from? You don't look Norwegian?). One time in secondary school, I was brought to the blackboard as a living example of how people of different "races" had travelled throughout recent history, creating more "mixed" populations in Norway, "even with people like Kristin that are dark-eyed with high cheekbones". During my research stay in Vancouver, Canada, I had an encounter with a peer asking me where I was from. When I answered Norway, the peer exclaimed: "No way! But you are not as pale as them?". In cases where I discussed my discovery of ancestry with other researchers, I got responses like "of course you are Sámi, the way you look", and "Oh… That is why you look like that!"

Although this does not change my structural positionality as (mostly) white, these experiences can only be understood on basis of how racist archives of knowledge influences our thinking about bodies and identities. It shows me how whiteness is not something I *am*, but something that moves me and orientates myself and others in particular ways in particular contexts through affect

and discursive acts (Ahmed, 2007). As Dankertsen (2019) explains, the idea that it is possible to find the "mythic bloodline" in people's faces and bodies is quite common in the Nordic countries today. Having a face and body that have repeatedly spurred discomfort in encounters with people who struggled to position me according to the racial schemata, I experienced that stating my Sámi ancestry triggered reactions of relief with some people, that they somehow got a confirmation of or explanation for their discomfort. This also led me to later, at times, state my Sámi ancestry in the initial phases of conversations, to protect the discomfort among both myself and the way I perceived it with my speaking partners when questioning my whiteness. To me, this experience made me realize how whiteness exists as something that *moves me*, that I navigate differently in different contexts and encounters. As described by Ahmed (2007), "whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with." In this sense, I realized how whiteness is more or less within reach for me at different moments and in different encounters.

Through these wrestles, I realized that the desire to define, categorize and classify myself according to given categories, is reflective of the modern-colonial desire for purity and universalism (Shotwell, 2016). Accepting this ambivalence with my own positionality and self, was also the most crucial step in coming to terms with myself as researcher and knowledge producer. The aims of research in improving social justice must always start from the perspectives and interests of the oppressed. However, this is not only a question of who I am as a researcher, but also a methodological question of where the research question is asked from. I found it helpful to think with the concept of strong objectivity as theorized by Harding (2015) when encountered with allegations and challenges related to the possible lack of pureness, objectivity, and rigor of my research, such as posed by colleagues in the described research seminar. As she writes: "Strong objectivity is indeed "real objectivity": it is more competent to achieve such fairness goals than the version of objectivity that is linked to a value-free ideal" (Harding, 2015, p. 33). Decolonization calls for alliances among different social groups. It is more important to know on which side of the decolonizing struggle you are and what risks you are ready to run, than focusing on social identity naturalized by dominant relations (Santos, 2018).

Ethical relations and responsibilities: Having, claiming, and holding space

If I can possibly aspire to partake in decolonial work as (mostly) white, what ethical responsibilities springs from my positionality and relations? Questions about accountability in decolonial research collapses the often-perceived boundary between ethics and concepts of good knowledge, as it follows from this question: To whom or what perspective can the knowledge be considered good, or towards whose or what interests do I consider myself accountable? I once more return to the situation where my fellow researchers posed questions about my possible unethical conduct in naming racist discourses operating in classroom conversations. To me, this display how what often dominates discussions and concerns for research ethics is concerned with protecting the researcher or research institution from accusations of mistreatment (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). I

was also influenced by this perspective, in acknowledging that my desires and focus was initially fixed towards safeguarding my reputation and formal qualification as researcher while doing a PhD. The demands placed on me through academic performativity required a logic of individualism (Francett-Hermes & Pennanen, 2019). However, this might obscure the interests embedded in conceptualizations of universal research ethics that may legitimate privilege based on class, race, or gender. Being forced to state my values and perspective more explicitly through the critical encounter with my colleagues in the research seminar, I realized how this initial judgment of the ethical considerations at play in the situation safeguarded white, majority interests, and was subject to the desires of white fragility.

Critical reflexivity is located in the "continuous alliance with counter-colonial position and bodies and with the always/already historical acknowledgement of intersecting forms of privilege/oppression within contemporary contexts" (Canella & Lincoln, 2018, p. 84). This should not be misinterpreted as a vision of saving the oppressed, but rather a collective reconfiguring of who we are or should be in a decolonial perspective. Here, ethics can be more accurately approached through relationality. As described by Wilson (2008), relationality is a set of values seen in indigenous epistemologies that puts focus on being accountable to ones` relations. Relational accountability turns the focus towards building respectful relationships and considering my responsibilities towards myself, the research topic, and my participants. Hence, ethics and self-examination cannot be separated. Relationality is ontological, in the sense that to be a subject is constituted on the relation with the other (Butler, 2005). Relational ethics hence involves being responsible to, while avoiding construction of, the other (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018). A decolonial stance demands an ethical imperative *to* rather than *for* the Other, an ethical relation that exists "before will" (Andreotti, 2011).

Acknowledging the existence of colonial and racial power structures, this also demands awareness of the fact that being able to do research in the academy is a privilege of "having space"; and relationality is also related to whom or what interests I provide, give, hold, or make space for. Engaging with research ethics from Indigenous studies provides a range of conceptualizations of relationship and reciprocity, often described as giving back (Jimmy et al., 2019; Kuokkanen, 2011; Smith, 2010). Although these insights come from researchers working with (or themselves being part of) marginalized or indigenous communities, I think they have a lot to offer me as a researcher working with and for the teacher profession.Holding a position in the university, I do have a definitional power or influence towards the teacher profession. A critical social science rejects the notion that one group of people can ever fully know, define, or represent Others, and school curriculum should be shaped by the lived challenges that face teachers and students in their everyday lives (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018). However, it did not feel quite right to see this as a matter of me "giving back". The writings of TallBear (2014) taught me that the idea of giving back as such presupposes an imperialist logic of an asymmetrical relationship of a "binary between knowing inquirer and who or what are considered to be resources or grounds for knowledge production" (2014, p. 2). TallBear suggests moving from the idea of giving back towards "standing with". This movement describes well the process I experienced with my positionality struggles and increased reflexivity, representing a movement from aspiring to knowledge about (subject-object

knowledge), to knowledge with (subject-subject knowledge).

It is not the role of the white scholar to speak for marginalized, racialized, or indigenous populations, and I realize that I run the risk of replacing or taking space from minoritized scholars or perspectives with my research, when claiming to speak from the position of oppression and injustice. My positionality as (mostly) white does however allow me to be heard in the predominantly white space of the university in a different way than the ones in already vulnerable and subjugated positions (Stein, 2016). As Ahmed (2012) has explained, racialized and indigenous peoples are often only welcomed as "space invaders" or representing particular interests or challenges in spaces such as educational institutions, and reporting or giving voice to a problem becomes tantamount to being the problem, something which also have been powerfully narrated from the Norwegian context (Joof, 2018; Sibeko, 2019). Hence, I can choose to use my position to make space for necessary but uncomfortable, critical conversations in the academy.

Implications: The decolonial option and whiteness as affectively present absence

The aspects accounted for above; reflexivity, positionality, ethics, and relationality, are interwoven threads that form the basis on which we can judge the quality of knowledge from a decolonial perspective, commonly described as validity in traditional research. In this perspective, the validation of knowledge criteria is not external to the knowledges they validate, and "the success or failure of the quest for truth is always related to the strength or weakness of a given, concrete ethical commitment" (Santos, 2018, p. 138). Truth, or any agreement on what is valid or good knowledge, arises between members of stakeholding communities (Harding, 2015), and knowledge production is therefore relational. Working for social justice and decolonization, there is an ethical imperative to be non-neutral in the face of oppression or epistemic violence (Santos, 2018). This aspect has been a main source of intense reflexive work and realizing the limitations of my study, urging me to be more aware of my relations from the outset in my future work as researcher. From a decolonial perspective, we do not simply need alternative knowledge or theories, or expanding our knowledge, but dissolving the colonial, abyssal lines between the epistemologies of the Global North and South (Santos, 2007). This does not entail rejecting or dismissing the knowledge offered by the perspectives of the North, i.e., white majority, or by modernity as such, but rather to open possibilities for thinking differently and broadening, democratizing and contextualizing knowledge. This is where decoloniality offers not simply a new paradigm of critical thought, but is rather to be understood as an alternative, option or otherwise (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 5).

It is in the theoretical clarity of the "reflexivity as genealogy" (Pillow, 2015), relational ethics and self-reflexivity I found valuable tools for ensuring the quality and truthfulness of my work. However, this is not to be understood as a planned or highly "controlled" process, but rather as how the interrogations of subject positions and self evolves and becomes intrinsic to the research throughout the process, through the refracted medium of encounters and conversations along the way (Trahar, 2009). The moments of friction spurred by the doubled research process involved in writing and racializing myself as white, did not only provide me with wrestles of the existential kind – they also contributed to a deepened understanding of whiteness as researcher positionality

and in the Norwegian context. As mentioned before, race, racism and whiteness have for long been taboo and/or under-researched concepts in the Norwegian context. In my research material, I experienced and identified race, racism, and whiteness as what I will describe as an affectively present absence: Its tenacity was detectable exactly in the way its absence was actively produced in and through discursive practice, while not explicitly stated with words (Eriksen, 2021). The narrations shared in this article shed light on how whiteness works as an epistemic and structural habit, an orientation (Ahmed, 2007). The encounters with my own whiteness – as well as its edges and boundaries – were experienced exactly in moments of frictions, or interruptions to, this habit of being in the world. Whiteness is not something I "am", it is not mainly about skin color – it is something I navigate.

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