Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology

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Autoethnography as a means of challenging Nordic exceptionalism and color-evasiveness in educational research

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on an editorial process as an instance of knowledge production within the context of Nordic exceptionalism (Ulrichsen et al., 2021) through autoethnography, which is used to probe, question, and contemplate on how the theoretical intersects with the everyday and vice-versa. Specifically, it looks at the operation of race in the Nordic academic context to better understand, reflexively, how our own and others' racialized positionalities have manifested in inclusion or exclusion from institutionalized knowledge production. The foundational starting point in Western knowledge production aligns with the contemporary Nordic academy: knowledge from the racialized Other is often excluded, depreciated within the hierarchy of worth, or appropriated. A diversity of epistemologies, or what Grosfoguel calls pluriversal knowledges (2007), is hence lost. Dialectical reflections can center on, and hence highlight and un-silence, experiences of racialization in the Nordic context.

Keywords: Color-evasiveness; Nordic exceptionalism; knowledge production; Nordic academia; autoethnography; editorial work

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Autoethnographic Reflections on Our Positionalities and Co-Editing: Connecting Anti-Racist Theory to Anti-Racist Practice

This paper aims to reflect on an editorial process as an instance of knowledge production within the context of Nordic exceptionalism (Ulrichsen et al., 2021) through autoethnography, which is used to probe, question, and contemplate on how the theoretical intersects with the everyday and vice-versa. Nordic knowledge production is characterized by structural Whiteness, which was manifested in Zahra's employment situation in parallel to our co-editing a special issue of this journal (Beiler et al., 2025), which also dealt with structural Whiteness in Nordic knowledge production, along with race, color-evasiveness, and Nordic exceptionalism. Taking these experiences as our starting point, this paper explores Nordic knowledge production through autoethnography as a way of speaking back against epistemic exclusion. We wish to continue the conversations taking place in that special issue by reflecting on the embodied, temporal, conceptual, political, and professional events and experiences that took place while producing knowledge on Nordic exceptionalism and color-evasiveness in Nordic educational research. This allows us to investigate connections between theory and practice, which are easily glossed over as part of Nordic color-evasiveness.

When confronting the epistemic racism that Zahra faced in parallel to our editorial work, we've attempted to take a perspective grounded in praxis while filtering such experiences, emotions, discussions, and more through our theoretical understandings. By turning our gaze toward Zahra's employment situation, Eric and Ingrid are faced with how we are each implicated in the structures of Whiteness and Nordic exceptionalism revealed through this process.

In the background are the many meaningful conversations we have had, a kind of ongoing reflexive ethnography of Zahra's case, presented here in the form of an autoethnographic narrative (see, e.g., Gobena et al., 2025). Eric and Ingrid's autoethnographic reflections and reactions to that narrative follow. As such, we situate our autoethnographies as dialogical, growing out of a conversation that is ongoing–a 'collaborative autoethnography' (Mainsah & Prøitz 2015)–that we've attempted to distill here in a way that might be meaningful for furthering our shared goal of connecting anti-racist theorizing to anti-racist practice specifically in the Nordic context of educational research. We've learned that autoethnography does not have a 'formula' per se (Boyd 2008); it must be based on what one has experienced and one's socially mediated memories (Berg 2008), even as it is filtered through theoretical knowledge, analysis and, as is the case here, conversations with colleagues. The following autoethnographic texts set the stage for the more theoretical discussion that comes afterwards. As such, we intentionally deviate from a more common analytical presentation (e.g., Kubanyiova, 2025; Loving Coalitions Collective, 2023).

Zahra, whose autoethnography comes first, is a former refugee who is racialized in the Nordic context. The next autoethnographic reflection is by Ingrid, who identifies as a white Norwegian/American, but whose Ottoman Armenian background nonetheless sometimes triggers racialization in the Nordic context, though not in the United States or most other places. Eric is white and Finnish American; his narrative comes last. We invite you to sit with our narratives before we situate them within a broader theoretical literature.

Zahra

In a world burning with the violent and ongoing processes of climate change, and where wars consume country after country, identities, realities, and lives are erased as if by natural law. It is as if the entirety of world history, where life begins small and is annihilated by its own insatiability, is playing out before our eyes. I do not know how relevant it is to speak of the living when the stories of the dead seem the most instructive. It is even harder to devote time to my own journey within higher education in Sweden. To linger in that difficulty is unsettling, but it also resonates with Khawaja's (2022) reminder that spaces for critical engagement with racialisation require a willingness to remain with the discomfort that emerges around Otherness and Whiteness.

My journey through higher education began in Iran when I had not yet turned 17. I was the youngest in my cohort to be admitted through the fierce competition for higher education (in biology) in Iran, which led to my name being featured in newspapers. My father was incredibly proud of the news but upset with the newspaper because, technically, I had not yet turned 17—I was still 16 if you considered my exact birth date. He was proud because, on his side of the family, I was the only one, among both boys and girls, to have a high school education. On my mother's side, I was the first girl to succeed in overcoming the tough competition for university admission.

With this background, I was admitted to the prestigious University of Tehran, where social issues engaged many students. Social issues were not new to me. I had deliberately chosen to stay in Iran to study, despite having previously qualified through another competition that would have allowed me to study in Europe or other Western countries under very favorable conditions. I chose to stay to fight for justice, something likely rooted in my upbringing in a working-class suburb of Tehran. There, even minor differences in socioeconomic conditions could determine whether there was bread on the table or not. My best friend was the daughter of a laundress, with a father who could never secure a proper job.

With this social capital in my background, it was not surprising that I became involved in the student movement. Demonstrations and protests proliferated, leading to the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic regime—a result of the Guadeloupe Agreement among Western actors who feared a progressive government might replace the Shah. Following the so-called Cultural Revolution, thousands of other progressive actors, including myself, were purged from the nation's universities.

In 1987, after years of persecution and losing loved ones to imprisonment and executions, I arrived in Sweden as a refugee. After studying Swedish and completing more than what was required to qualify for university admission, I was informed by the Employment Service that I should forget my higher education from the University of Tehran. The only option, if I wanted to do something other than cleaning or elder care, both of which I had already done, was to study to become a preschool teacher—a profession that was in high demand in Sweden at the time (see also Shan & Fejes, 2015). I accepted this as the plain truth, as I was still living under the illusion of Sweden as Olof Palme's progressive country. Palme, the anti-racist and anti-war Prime Minister, had been assassinated about a year before my arrival.

I completed my preschool teacher training and subsequently applied for hundreds of jobs but was never called for an interview for a permanent position. Meanwhile, I continued my studies and earned a master's degree in child and youth study. I also began working on my master's thesis, but by that time, the Swedish societal structure began to reveal itself, shattering the dreamlike illusion of Palme's society. I was not offered any permanent positions, and the jobs I did manage to secure were temporary and far below my qualifications.

While working on my master's thesis, I encountered my first academic betrayal. A project leader at a university, whose research topic was similar to that of my thesis, welcomed me into a collaboration arranged by my supervisor. The project leader stated that if I carried out the study, including the demanding empirical component of the project, I would be permitted to use it in my master's thesis. I conducted a study within their project and used the results in my thesis. However, just as I was about to complete my analysis, I was informed that I could not use the study because I had done such a good job that they wanted to write articles on the material themselves first. Only after that would I be allowed to reference their articles. This trend of broken promises and the exploitation of my ideas and research results continued within Swedish academia, also after I retrained in biology and earned a master's degree in cell and microbiology.

After many broken promises there as well, I returned to the field of education. A representative at the Swedish Employment Service, with personal experience as a non-white person in Sweden, who had followed my path through the Swedish labor market and higher education due to my prolonged unemployment, found a solution that allowed me to study and work for an extended period with financial support from the Employment Service. I was promised that if I applied for and was accepted into a doctoral program (which was my goal), the Employment Service would provide economic support. After two attempts, I was accepted into a doctoral program in pedagogy with external funding from the Employment Service.

During my doctoral studies, I changed my focus from science education for multilingual preschools to studying teacher education, based on my observations in preschools. I had noticed a widespread racist discourse among staff directed at non-white children and their parents. My new topic was not well received in my doctoral program, where the value of studying teacher education was questioned, when there were other pedagogical institutions to investigate. Furthermore, some argued that studying issues of exclusion and racism in teacher education would attract even more criticism of the field, which was already under scrutiny due to the quality of the education. However, the topic was important to me to understand. I wanted to examine what preschool teachers were actually being trained for and what was missing in their education, especially since they often entered the workforce without any awareness of their biases and racist ideas. This was particularly problematic in the preschool where I conducted my pilot study for my initial idea for my doctoral research, where more than 80% of the children and their parents at that time had a non-European background.

After those pilot study experiences, my doctoral research—focused on 'The Other in teacher education: A study of the conditions for racialized Swedish students in the era of globalization'—

faced many challenges. The results of interviews with students of non-European backgrounds infuriated those who were in positions of power in the system. I received comments such as: "These students [interview participants] are not grateful and only complain about discrimination and exclusion." The climate was so harsh that some students, despite the promise of anonymity, did not even want the recorder to be on when they used the word 'racism.' They feared that such complaints on record would lead to collective punishment from the media and authorities, which would affect all non-whites, including themselves. This climate of silence—often driven by fear of reprisals—particularly affects students racialized as nonwhite, who are positioned at the lowest levels of the academic hierarchy. There was a silence that was either ignored or overlooked, possibly due to the color-evasiveness of those in charge of these programs. When I defended my dissertation in 2014, it received media attention, and I was invited to present it in various forums. However, in practice, I was treated as a traitor and whistleblower by the teacher education faculty.

Spivak, interviewed in Yegenoglu and Mutman (2001), highlights the paradox often faced by racialized bodies within academia: the expectation to accept a position of victimhood and express gratitude despite structural injustices, while refraining from critically questioning dominant power structures. As she states, "If a person such as me de-anthropologises herself and reads the great texts of the European tradition in a way that does not resemble the general rational expectations way of reading then she is punished and I think that's what all that abuse is about" (Yegenoglu & Mutman, 2001, p. 22). Extensive international research, as noted by Mählck (2017), confirms the same marginalization that Spivak (in Yegenoglu & Mutman, 2001) describes: scholars situated at the intersection of racism and sexism are consistently pushed to the periphery of academia. Yet, such research and the voices it amplifies are routinely ignored.

During my time as a doctoral student (in 2007), I began working as a teacher educator. Despite this, assignments given to others with lower qualifications were out of reach for me, and it would take more than 13 years before I was even considered, for example, to become a course leader with responsibility for curriculum and examination—something many others did in their first year. Exclusion and discrimination became conditions I had to endure to keep my job. After 28 years in Sweden, I finally obtained a permanent position in 2015 as a senior lecturer with a doctoral degree—my first permanent position ever in Sweden. But even then, it was not smooth sailing (see de los Reyes, 2007). I had to involve the union to support me in explaining why my CV lacked certain meritorious assignments, which I had not been given by the management and which made it difficult for me to compete for positions.

Only two years after I had received—or rather forced my way into—a permanent position, I fell into long-term exhaustion, which the doctor diagnosed as caused by my working conditions. In connection with this illness, I also lost my hearing in my right ear. Falling ill, even when caused by known factors linked to the working environment, primarily affects the individual, not only through its impact on health and well-being but also on finances and career.

After more than two years of sick leave and many attempts to return to work, I resumed my job.

However, the working conditions remained the same, despite countless meetings with the employer, doctor, therapist, and union. According to both the doctor and psychologist, the only solution to overcoming the exhaustion was to change my working conditions. As a result, it only took two years before I fell ill with exhaustion again, since the conditions hadn't changed. This time, the new manager was even stricter and refused to discuss any relief in work tasks. According to him, the only alternative was to take sick leave if the workload and type of tasks were overwhelming or unstimulating. Unfortunately, I've realized that other universities in Sweden offer no greater opportunities, and that a critical insider perspective is not welcomed.

During this period of sick leave, I received notification that, as the institution was downsizing, I was among those who would be let go due to a "lack of work." This decision came despite the fact that many people had been hired in recent years, often with less education and work experience than those of us now being laid off. These individuals were deemed "essential for maintaining the quality" of education. The entire process was criticized by union organizations, but the university ended negotiations with unresolved dissent from the unions and then shifted to individual negotiations, all of which likewise ended in disagreement.

Now that it was clear who would be laid off, it became apparent that I—the sole university lecturer with a refugee background, personal experiences of racism, and a research focus on teacher education and the conditions of non-white individuals—was among those being let go. The only common denominator among those of us being laid off was that we lacked strong connections to the central power positions within the institution.

During this same period, members of our institute, along with members of other institutes at the Faculty of Education, were awarded millions of kronor in research funding from state funders for two separate projects: one focused on segregation and the other on racism in education. These substantial grants are primarily awarded to white researchers in the fields of migration and anti-racism, to produce knowledge through articles and reports. At the same time, most of these colleagues remained silent about what was happening to me—as the only senior lecturer with a refugee background focusing on the study conditions of racialized students—and about the students' protests against institutional racism.

This is not an isolated incident. It is more common than we might think that our closest colleagues form research groups focused on migration, segregation, and racism—without saying a single word to us, the racialized researchers with migration backgrounds—thereby excluding us from contributing our perspectives and from being recognized as legitimate voices within these research environments and in the broader processes of knowledge production. If a researcher with a migration background, or more specifically a non-white researcher, is to be included in these major grant applications and projects, the unspoken rule appears, as a general principle in most cases, to be that they must first demonstrate loyalty and subordination, both at the personal level and in theoretical and methodological terms, in order to be approved and thus invited, although exceptions do of course exist. We are not invited to help shape the vision, foundational documents, or direction of these groups—but once they are established, we are welcome to

attend their seminars, as participants rather than co-creators. This reflects a color-evasive tendency within white-dominated academic spaces, where our perspectives are often treated as insignificant or unworthy of engagement (see also Farahani & Thapar-Björkert, 2017; Khan, 2024; Saxonberg & Sawyer, 2006). As before, their articles and books have already become part of the course literature across various educational programmes, including teacher education. Through students who later enter the teaching profession, this body of knowledge is circulated, naturalised, and institutionalised as legitimate and authoritative, thereby reinforcing what Mignolo (2009) terms epistemological whitening or, in Said's (1978/2000) terms, Eurocentric knowledge production, contributing to the continued reproduction of the epistemic dominance of Whiteness within knowledge production. I have not yet fully processed and analyzed these events. Of course, one is free to choose with whom one wants to collaborate or apply for funding or form a research group, but when the same patterns are repeated historically over many years, it becomes clear that this is inseparable from the broader issue of whose competence and knowledge is valued and how Eurocentric knowledge production is reproduced by white so-called 'anti-racist' researchers.

Bonilla-Silva (2011), in his discussion of the academy's color-evasive practices, compares the naming of historically Black colleges and universities—where Blackness is explicitly marked—with predominantly white institutions, which are rarely identified as such. As he notes:

> *However, we never ponder about the whiteness of these places; we rarely question the history and practices that create and maintain these institutions as white. Instead, we conceive of them in universalistic terms as just colleges and universities. These colleges, however, have a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and symbols and traditions that embody, signify, and reproduce whiteness. (Bonilla-Silva, 2011, p. 183)*

The millions of kronor invested in research projects on multiculturalism, diversity, segregation, (anti)racism, and inclusion will be publicly framed as something that this society has done for us who have migrated to Sweden. Such project funding allows white 'anti-racist' researchers to disengage from teaching and student interaction—unlike many researchers with migrant backgrounds—while still being recognized as leading scholars. They are given the opportunity to travel to writing retreats by the Mediterranean and author the future course literature for teacher education. Under these conditions and circumstances, the idea is constructed that they have the legitimacy to define what racism is and what knowledge is required for future teachers. This occurs while many prospective teachers, particularly those who are racialized as non-white, experience the educational system—including teacher education and its course literature—as problematic and, often, racist and lagging behind contemporary realities (Bayati, 2014; Farahani & Thapar-Björkert, 2017).

There are no contexts in which injustice persists without resistance. Resistance in the case of my dismissal came from students. Their opposition took the form of an article in a feminist magazine (Undertecknarna, 2024), a petition with more than 1,000 signatures, email exchanges with university and departmental leadership, and communication with student associations. I do not

read these actions simply as personal support. Rather, they reflected recognition: in my situation, students seemed to recognise something of their own experiences, and those of their parents, within educational institutions shaped by racialisation, silence, and unequal legitimacy. Read through Ramirez's (2021) concepts of epistemic disobedience and grief, their collective action disrupted the institutional silence surrounding my dismissal and challenged the racialised conditions under which certain experiences and forms of knowledge are rendered negligible.

What became particularly striking, however, was how this mobilisation generated media attention while my own voice remained only partially visible within it. Although I was interviewed at length by both a university newspaper and a trade union publication, no full interview with me was published. Instead, one publication chose to foreground two other dismissed colleagues, despite having already published a longer article based on interviews with them, while also publishing an extensive article presenting the leadership's perspective. At the same time, university and departmental leadership responded to the students by repeatedly insisting that all rules had been followed, even as the students continued to argue that basic labour law principles had been circumvented and emphasised the importance of my anti-racist work and function as a role model. What became visible, then, was not silence in any simple sense, but an institutional disregard for the substance of the students' critique. As Berg (2008) argues, silence is not merely an absence but part of the processes through which Whiteness and racialised power relations are maintained. The petition thus became more than an act of solidarity: it exposed a struggle over whose experiences could become intelligible, credible, and speakable within academia, taking the form of what Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe as 'counter-storytelling'.

When I reflect on my journey through higher education in Sweden and on my studies of non-White students' educational conditions, I am led to conclude that the ideals of human rights, individual dignity, and academic freedom remain, in practice, far more available to White Swedes. For many students and teachers racialised as non-white, these ideals are conditional, unevenly distributed, and often materially out of reach. Although these reflections arise from my own experiences in Sweden and from my research, they are not singular. Many international and Nordic studies point to similar conditions for racialised academics and students. Andreassen and Myong (2017), writing from a Danish/Nordic context, likewise show how racialisation shapes academic legitimacy while Whiteness remains the norm of credible knowledge. What I describe here is therefore not merely personal, but part of a broader structure of exclusion that extends beyond Sweden.

There is an unspoken norm that the colonised may not tell their own pain, nor that of their siblings or children (hooks, 1990). Even more forbidden is naming its cause and calling it what it is: racism. Yet silence is not empty. As Minh-Ha (2012, p. 26) suggests, profound silence may signal an impending eruption, one that, in time, opens the possibility of other futures. Resistance persists in many forms: sometimes through revolt, sometimes through articles, petitions, and quieter acts of refusal. Precisely through such conditions of oppression and discrimination, resistance and resilience continue to grow.

Ingrid

Reading about Zahra's experiences make me reflect on hiring and retention as inflection points for race in Nordic academia (see Ahmed, 2007; Khan, 2024; Ramirez, 2021). Although I have some experiences of racialization in Norway, including at work, the basic differences between Zahra's experience and my own demonstrate to me what it means to have the line of Whiteness drawn up in one's favor (see also Lapiņa & Vertelytė, 2020). I believe intersections of race with language and nationality have been important in this respect. In response to Zahra, I therefore add a narrative which crystallizes and, at the same time, challenges me to reflect on my own positionality and complicity in racialized structures of knowledge production.

My first memories of being positioned as a foreigner in Norway recall the identity crisis of a young person growing up between cultures. I was a young teenager, and my family was back for a visit a year after we had moved to the United States, where I had experienced an intense sense of dislocation and reorientation to a new life, school system, and language. Now, back where I considered home, the children of a white family friend asked me to wash my face to prove that my black eyebrows were real and not painted on. (This was the '90s, before blond Norwegians discovered the appeal of thick eyebrows.) On a visit to the North, my cousin's neighbor asked where I was originally from, when I first responded to this clichéd question with 'Oslo'. In subsequent years, there were tell-tale English usages that would make people comment on how American I had become, but it is hard for me to believe that I had shifted substantially from my previously dominant Norwegian so early. Rosa and Flores (2017) have since helped me to understand that people's linguistic perceptions are also shaped by what they see, and not only what they hear.

So, when I returned to Norway as an adult two decades later, I was painfully aware of the possibility of perceived illegitimacy as a Norwegian, and I monitored my language and the visibility of my knowledge gaps accordingly. In many ways, I still do. Although some of these knowledge gaps were consequential, for example my poor understanding of salary negotiations, I discovered that I was often credited with societal knowledge I might not have, thanks to my Norwegian nationality and language skills (cf. Gobena et al., 2025). I also have a quintessentially Norwegian first name (cf. Midtbøen & Quillian, 2021). In fact, when I was hired for my first position as a university lecturer in English, I never had to document my Norwegian skills. It was enough that I spoke Norwegian for part of the interview.

This job offer came after several earlier refusals, but the hiring system initially struck me as very transparent, compared to the United States. One difference that stood out to me was that the Norwegian university system did not appear to allow for directly recruiting a desired employee, for example an expert within a field. Instead, open positions had to be advertised publicly, and applicants were ranked by an external committee according to explicit criteria and submitted documentation, leading to an evaluation report that was shared with applicants, a procedure that appeared exemplary in its transparency. After this, rankings could nonetheless be reordered based on interviews and trial lectures, which were not part of the public record. I myself underwent this kind of ranking process several times as I applied for subsequent positions in the following years.

Despite this apparent fairness and transparency to hiring processes, the education departments that I worked at and interacted with seemed very homogeneous, mostly staffed by white Norwegians or, to an extent, white immigrants. Despite the occasional interrogation of my background, I largely fit this profile as well. Over time, I also observed that internal candidates often appeared to receive advertised positions. It was to my great surprise that I eventually learned that positions might only be advertised once a faculty member or leader had a person in mind to hire. Then the position description could be tailored to more closely align with the person's profile, without entirely excluding the possibility that a different applicant would better meet the criteria. In Sweden, this type of process has been described as "friendship corruption," allowing better employment opportunities for personal connections within a society that, like Norway, is often considered free of nepotism (Bucken-Knapp, 2019, p. 230; GRECO, 2019, p. 4). As Zahra describes in her narrative, such mechanisms can also serve to maintain the peripheral and precarious status of outsiders to the system, including racialized people and refugees, without offering any clear recourse for complaint.

Whereas Zahra has been repeatedly sidelined, I am now one of the lucky ones who has a permanent position in teacher education, secured shortly before departments around the country started downsizing or announcing hiring freezes. As a person with a disability and, for several years, my family's primary income earner, I felt enormous relief to receive this offer without first spending years in a temporary research or teaching position after my PhD, like so many in the sector. Nonetheless, it is with some discomfort that I reflect on how I have benefited from structures that I have previously critiqued. In particular, I think about the fact that my position, despite being in English teacher education, required Norwegian or Scandinavian language skills for purposes of administration and departmental collaboration, thus in effect excluding candidates from outside of the Nordic region. This time I was also an institutional insider, as I had worked at the department before I took my PhD, now with documented 'local knowledge' of the Norwegian educational system from my doctoral research. This meant that I could quickly pick up tasks with little training after I started, but this level of adaptation may also entail pitfalls – questions not asked, habits not confronted, exclusions not noticed. For as much as I consider myself a critical scholar, I realize that my positioning within Whiteness and Norwegianness shield me from everyday forms of harassment that I might not notice if racialized colleagues did not tell me about them (see Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025; Gobena et al., 2025; Matikainen-Soreau et al., 2025). Although I am not unique in possessing partial knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2007), I have been educated and socialized into forms of knowledge that are already privileged in the Nordic academy. Does this mean that I am occupying a place that would better have gone to someone different? This is an uncomfortable question to consider, within a sector characterized by competitive processes and fewer secure jobs than there are qualified people.

I expect that my narrative might resonate differently with various readers from within Norwegian higher education, recognizing also that I write from the particular disciplinary space of teacher education, which is more nationally oriented than most. To readers who have shared Zahra's experiences of racism, my initial impression of transparent hiring processes may appear naive (e.g., Ramirez, 2021). To others who have been involved in hiring, my eventual judgment may

seem unfair. When I conclude that I have benefited from Whiteness, despite my somewhat marginal position of Whiteness in the Nordic context, it is not an indictment of Norwegian academia as being particularly racist but, rather, as being unexceptional (cf. Habel, 2012; Ulrichsen et al., 2021). For the claim of Nordic exceptionalism is not simply that our institutions are democratic and egalitarian, but that they are uniquely so. In my academic circles, a belief in American exceptionalism tends to be politically marked, whereas Nordic exceptionalism is often upheld with great sincerity, for instance in the professed uniqueness of child-centered Nordic pedagogical approaches. This can make the erasure of knowledge, experience, and values perpetrated by Nordic exceptionalism all the lonelier to bear, often amounting to racial gaslighting (Gillborn, 2024).

In my experience, a further compounding factor of this erasure can be a particular discourse of foreignness and advantage, which conscripts antihegemonic discourses of situated, local knowledge and inverts the dominant power relationship as being against native-born Norwegians. This discourse suggests that the English language–and foreign academics–are displacing Norwegian language and local knowledge, thus positioning so-called 'ethnic' Norwegians (a covert term for white Norwegians, Lane, 2009), as a disadvantaged party within a higher education sector largely staffed and controlled by the same. In a prominent example, the white Norwegian legal scholar Cecilie Hellestveit received an award for 'academic freedom of expression' from Norway's main higher education daily (Khrono) in 2021, after sparking a debate about internationalization by claiming that Norwegian academia has become too dominated by foreigners who lack knowledge of and investment in Norwegian society.[2] Ironically, Hellestveit herself publishes and frequently comments publicly on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, seeing her own national outsider status as no barrier to relevant expertise. Thus, I also understand my preferential position as a white Norwegian in the sector within this greater concern to protect and shore up national identity.

Contrary to the above discourse, a report on academic careers for immigrants in Norway confirms in its title that "to be a foreigner is no advantage" (Maximova-Mentzoni et al., 2016). National statistics from 2021 show that children of immigrants are particularly underrepresented in academic positions, at only 0.7% of academic staff, including only 17 people in top positions (e.g., full professor) in the entire country (Steine, 2023). Yet statistics are also used to support the impression that immigrants are taking over academia. The headline used by Statistics Norway to launch this same report highlights the fact that "every third researcher in Norwegian academia is an immigrant" (Steine, 2023). One must continue reading to discover that most of these immigrants (60%) are in fact European, especially from Sweden and Germany, thus hardly challenging the Eurocentric nature of Norwegian higher education (see also Ramirez, 2021). It is only in the underrepresented group 'children of immigrants' that a majority have an Asian background. Nevertheless, there is much that such numbers cannot tell us about epistemic privilege and racial gatekeeping, not least because these figures elide race as its own category of social distinction in countries of origin as well as in Norway. To disambiguate racially inflected

[2] https://www.khrono.no/hun-er-arets-navn-i-akademia/642662

experiences in Nordic academia, we must instead rely on personal and autoethnographic narratives (Thorsen, 2021) and, moreover, follow up on their implications in acts of solidarity with racialized colleagues. We found co-editing to offer a space for such acts of solidarity, through shared labor and active listening, as Zahra's experiences of academic exclusion accelerated.

Eric

As a white, heterosexual male who has benefited from my positionality all my life without being much aware of it until relatively recently, it is my intention to question the ways in which others have been impeded and hurt or have suffered due to the systems that favor me and people like me.

I am unable to perceive the fullness of my privilege, which, I think, is inherently tied up with what white privilege is: in part, it is the inability and unwillingness to view outside one's subjectivity and the subsequent lack of necessity to take race seriously. With such limited knowledge and perspective, it would be 'safer' to remain silent and avoid exposing one's limitations. However, this autoethnography is written in support of making Zahra's experiences visible by exploring the Whiteness that perpetuates such situations including in my own life and sphere which, following Boyd (2008), means that autoethnography can bring disorienting dilemmas to the fore that, in turn, can trigger transformations of perspective. Color-evasiveness in the Nordics is perpetuated by colleagues who see systemic racism in Nordic higher education and remain silent (Berg 2008). Speaking out can be seen as risky as these topics are potentially contentious from various perspectives across the political spectrum. Rather than being Zahra's 'ally,' co-editing with Zahra has taught me the importance of being a 'co-conspirator' (Ekpe & Toutant 2022; Love 2019) in which the emphasis is on the actions committed. The action here is my public discourse, which, though small, is an aspect of the power I currently hold.

My autoethnographic narrative includes three themes. First, I try to be honest (primarily to myself) about the psychological attitude vis-à-vis society that I've been bequeathed as a white person growing up in the USA and Finland. Second, I contemplate on the process of working with Zahra, her situation in higher education in Sweden, and what she's taught me about participating in this kind of systemic racism. Lastly, I consider whether commenting on race, as a white person, is a kind of privilege in and of itself as I outline the process by which I decided to study Finnish Romani literature.

I have three boys. In the age of YouTube shorts, wealth has a certain allure to them that wasn't the case when I was their age. They know Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos by name because of their incredible wealth. One of them asked me, "Could you be rich?" I didn't have to consider my answer, it was a clear "yes, of course."

While age might start to become a hindrance, I have always felt that, if I wanted to and set my mind to it, I could become rich (not Elon-Musk-rich, but rich enough). Why? How? This is where race comes into it, along with other factors. In the USA where I grew up, the ethos for people like me generally—that is for white males of a certain class—is that you can do anything you set your

mind to (Beiler et al. 2025). This attitude has permeated my psyche in any number of micro- and macro-level ways.

The period that most shaped this attitude was attending a private Catholic (Jesuit) high school that my parents sacrificed to put me through. Generally, students were from wealthy families, and it was normal to meet a U.S. Senator or interact with a CEO. We had to wear ties to mass on Wednesdays, and it was understood, without question, that everyone would attend university. The Jesuit motto *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, meaning "For the greater glory of God," and the school's motto "Do Well Whatever You Do" were meant to instill a striving for excellence.

There was only one Black student at the school at the time. He'd been given a scholarship to play American football and came to school each morning from a Black community, where he was culturally connected, to a space that was almost entirely white. There was one Latiné student whom I knew of. In other words, the school pushed its students towards excellence and was almost entirely white. These were my formative years, and I inherited this premise, even if it remained passive and not openly acknowledged. I was sent off into the world at the age of 18 with the engrained mindset that I could do anything I wanted to excellently, as could my other white classmates.

In terms of personal achievement, this kind of attitude or worldview is incredibly helpful. Believing you belong in the room with the other people who also look like you is a big step towards achieving whatever it is that you've set out to achieve. Understanding that this is not the case for everyone is one small step towards understanding what white privilege actually is. It is institutional power embedded in white psyches (Beiler et al. 2025).

Zahra, Ingrid, and I met regularly to work on our editorial work, but as time passed, we also observed the process as Zahra was told her 'permanent' job would be eliminated. The array of injustices, as only partially outlined in Zahra's autoethnographic text above, began to take on elements of farce, especially ironic from the perspective that we were co-editing a special issue on race in Nordic educational contexts together. How can it be that so few racialized people work in academia in the Nordics? Zahra's experiences show how–the mechanisms by which racialization can, through the 'neutral' seeming mechanisms of institutional power, be directly correlated with lack of opportunity. I imagine that most Nordic people's initial reaction to Zahra's story might be along the lines of: "it can't really be racism; there must be some other valid reason for what took place." Gillborn (2024), in his book *White Lies*, would call this 'racial gaslighting,' which aligns with Lentin's (2018) idea of 'not racism.' My primary job as a white person in the Nordics is to hear what racialized people have to say and to take it seriously.

Interacting with Zahra over this period, I could see (though not fully understand or feel) how my assumption that I belonged in any room I chose to enter amounted to white privilege. Zahra's text above begins to allow me to imagine what it is like to be the only person in the room that *doesn't* look like the others, who, in bigger and smaller ways, is continually made out as the Other, as not belonging. Moreover, a lack of jobs and opportunity has the material effect of changing one's access to salary, pension, health services, and much more, in addition to occupational identity and

meaning.

Is it an extension of my white privilege that I assume I can study race if I want to? That I can enter that conversation with something meaningful to say about it? That I take the liberty of commenting on Zahra's situation? Perhaps. That's a question well worth grappling with, as I have for some years now.

I asked myself such questions after I'd decided to research Finnish Romani literature in my Ph.D. dissertation and, though my decision-making process was not ideal, I present it here as a real-life example of anti-racist praxis. Anti-racist praxis can differ from theory because it is carried out by a contradictory subject navigating, in this case, his own intentions while not yet knowing much about racism despite being viscerally aware that it is problematic precisely for Roma in Finland (among others). When I started out, it did not occur to me that perhaps I *shouldn't* study Romani literature or that there might be some issues there to navigate, which I then learned when reading Spivak's (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* during my studies. I felt I could study anything I wanted, which, again, is an expression of white privilege.

There were very few mentions of Finnish Romani literature generally, let alone research conducted by Romani scholars (none). Following Spivak (1988), one way to look at it would be that I was taking advantage of the situation to further my own career. But much more important for me at the beginning stage was my understanding that Roma are Finns and Finland is my country and my fellow citizens were suffering from racism that I could see, hear, and feel but could not understand.[3] Because I did not understand it, I wanted to study it. In a mixture of selfishness and altruism, I wanted to enlighten this area of my mind since I, too, strangely and mysteriously, understood all of the racist tropes about Roma in Finland. I feared Roma people because I knew very little about them, apart from the stereotypes. At my university, my findings about Roma culture, history, politics, achievements, and much more were new information to all of my colleagues in my unit, at all academic levels. Knowledge about Roma people is simply not common. Via my research and–crucially, I think–reading stories by Roma about Roma, I've been unburdened of many of those ideas and fears. I think that as a white person, who is at the root of the racism that Roma in Finland suffer from, it is my responsibility to engage with these issues, however imperfectly.

As scholars we're in the business of understanding the world better. My research did that for me and hopefully for others who read my texts or hear my presentations. By studying race and racism, I am now in the position that, if I ever find myself able to hire someone or can include someone in a research project, I will be more than willing to include a Romani scholar. Before my research I probably wouldn't have been as willing. When a Roma has something to say about her experiences with racism in Finland, I now take it with utmost seriousness. To me, this is what anti-

[3] I'm aware that this is a nationalistic framing. However, this is autoethnography and hence I'm attempting to convey a realistic picture of what actually took place and, in Finland, we do tend to think along national lines. More specifically, in my research the question came up: why are Roma considered *not quite* Finnish despite having lived in Finland for 500 years, speaking the language, holding the passport, etc.? This is the paradox that motivated my research.

racist praxis combined with anti-racist theory means.

Linking back to Zahra's autoethnography above to conclude, her experiences show that theoretical knowledge about diversity and systemic discrimination does not necessarily lead to anti-racist praxis (see also Khan 2024).

Epistemic possibilities of autoethnography

In this section, we outline autoethnography as a method and, both here and in the next section, refer back to our autoethnographic texts to analyze them in light of previous scholarship. Autoethnography is the analysis of culture through the explicitly framed positionality of the researcher. As such, it refers to a processual method as well as the resulting textual product (Ellis et al., 2011) and is used by researchers to better understand culture through introspection, reflexivity, analysis, and contextualization, all interrogated through the broader scholarly discussion in one's field. Autoethnography is premised upon the simple yet profound insight that the researcher herself is positioned within culture(s) that she may analyze and report on. The benefit of the method stems from the richness of the data: the researcher's own experiences, memories, thoughts, observations, body, and interactions can be mined to create a visceral and captivating portrayal of the topic under scrutiny. This is where the 'auto' aspect of autoethnography meets the 'ethno' (study of culture).

In the autoethnographic texts above, Zahra's experiences as a scholar of color in the context of color-evasive Nordic academia recenters the bodily knowledge and counter-storytelling, two central tenets of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2012). The hegemonic norms of Nordic academia will not allow, in its constitutive ontology backed by institutional power, for such stories to be validated as *possible* given the premise of Nordic exceptionalism. That Zahra has, as an embodied individual, nevertheless experienced these things hence sets up a contradiction that may be highlighted through the autoethnographic method. That it is presented in narrative form takes it from the level of abstract theorization to that of the epistemic authority of testimony. Abstract scholarship can, in practice, favor those in positions of power, while autoethnography opens a door for first-hand accounts of lived experiences (Andreassen & Myong, 2017; Loving Coalitions Collective, 2023).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" that relies on "'evocative' and emotionally engaging, more subjective autoethnography" (p. 742; as cited in Chang 2008, p. 46). Anzaldúa's (1999) seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera* includes many insights from her personal life, while the second section of the scholarly book consists of poems (see also Roberts, 2014). Some autoethnographies lack citations almost entirely (see, e.g., Mingé & Burton Sterner 2014). Metaphor, which can often be found in, e.g., poetry, can be a way of expressing meaning that may be otherwise impossible to express in language (Budick & Iser, 1989). Anzaldúa (2000, pp. 132–33) said that she was unable to communicate exactly what she wanted, which links to her attempts to describe or formulate certain states of being through poetic images. Such examples put more

emphasis on writing that creatively presents subjective insights than creating the citation-based dialogue familiar from most academic texts. Though there is a wide spectrum of autoethnographies, critics (Ellis et al., 2011; see, e.g., Ellis, 2009; hooks, 1994; Keller, 1995) have pointed out that, at times, the 'graphy' aspect of autoethnography, the systematic analysis of the first-hand description through writing, is sometimes lacking. Good autoethnography should balance these three aspects (auto-ethno-graphy) while delivering a narrative that is captivating for readers, which aids in the spread of knowledge that is the aim of research. In this paper, we have opted (to differing degrees) for some references within our autoethnographic narratives and then moved on to a more scholarly analysis of the core issue, which is the politics of knowledge production in the Nordics. Tying the theoretical together with the personal narratives will take place collectively in the conclusion. Though there is no 'formula' for writing autoethnographies, we believe that this approach works well for achieving our goal of conjoining anti-racist praxis with the theoretical.

In line with Grosfoguel's (2007) idea of pluriversal knowledge, autoethnography can potentially be more honest about its lack of totalizing or objective truth. There is nowadays some consensus that research cannot be carried out from an impersonal and hence neutral and objective perspective (Ellis et al., 2011; see, e.g., Bochner, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rorty, 1982), though some researchers still argue that a neutral and objective position can be obtained (Ellis et al., 2011; see e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009). Instead of attempting to gloss over the positionality of the researcher (and hence biases in the text, etc.), "autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis et al., 2011, paragraph 3). Challenging the status-quo mode or manner of presentation of research can allow us to overtly frame the research as a politically motivated act premised upon social justice (Ellis et al., 2011, paragraph 1; see also Adams & Holman Jones, 2008), as is the case with structural whiteness and race in Nordic education research in this paper.

In the autoethnographic vignettes above, Eric's narrative attempted to be honest in its motivation for social justice while acknowledging the limits of his perception. This lack of objectivity and a theoretical ideal is made explicit, which is not as likely in a traditional scholarly methodology that presents itself as objective. Eric's text follows Boyd's (2008) insight that autoethnography can promote white subjects to narrate, interrogate, and publicly reflect on their racialized experiences and assumptions, hence bringing unconscious levels of racism and moral responsibility to the conscious realm. Similarly, Ingrid attempted to reflect critically on the reproduction of Whiteness through hiring procedures, despite her necessarily partial knowledge of these closed procedures. This entails a choice to name experiences that cannot be fully corroborated, but which nonetheless are confirmed through multiple lived experiences of similar, if not identical, processes. Hence the abstract is brought 'down' to the human level where race and racism manifest themselves via the institutions, power structures, hierarchies, and other mechanisms of which we are all a part. Autoethnography is not meant to replace abstract theorization, but it is a reorientation towards re-centering that which is the center of anti-racist work–the human.

Since culture, according to Geertz (1973), is group-oriented and based on human interaction, the interaction itself can be thought of as the spark that brings culture into being. For this reason, studying the ways in which communication takes place, through stories, for example, which is the form of interaction the autoethnographer is creating, is studying culture. Autoethnography can be used to reflect on race in terms of ourselves and our relation to others. In the autoethnographic narratives above, we have attempted to unpack our racialized researcher positionalities via dialogue with one another as authors, formerly co-editors (Beiler et al. 2025), but also as part of the community (culture) of Nordic scholars in order to also create culture within the broader scholarly community. Autoethnography as anti-racist praxis aligns with Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) 'counter storytelling' as a method of telling unheard stories, exposing dominant narratives of privilege, and challenging the dominant and incomplete narratives that shape our cultures and societies. As such, we've attempted to reconceptualize the methodology of autoethnography as a means by which to integrate anti-racist praxis to theory.

Dialectical reflections of the kind included here can center on, and hence highlight and un-silence (Berg, 2008), experiences of racialization in the Nordic context. Reflexivity, in this way, can become a methodological tool by which to raise awareness of race, the invisibility of Whiteness, privilege, Nordic exceptionalism, and the scholarly interaction with a diversity of epistemologies (or the lack thereof) rather than aligning with hegemonic color-evasiveness and racial silence. Such dialectical reflections align with the insight from Eriksen et al. (2020) cited above, namely that it is researchers' ethical imperative to promote the kind of pluralistic knowledge production that results from including and allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives, which is a premise of the autoethnographic method.

The politics of knowledge production in Nordic academia

The central issue that our specific autoethnographic dialogue brings to the fore is the politics of knowledge production. Who it is that produces research, which is shaped by their assumptions, lived experiences, theoretical perspectives, and interests (see, e.g., Ellis et al., 2011; Ramirez, 2021), and inherently shapes the kinds of knowledges that are produced (Grosfoguel, 2007). In our months of editorial collaboration, each of us contributed important labor and reflections, although Zahra's lived experience and scholarly expertise were particularly crucial to the overall framing of the special issue. However, as highlighted by the narratives above, the collaboration coincided with a retrenchment of our unequal privileges in Nordic academia, as Zahra's employment because increasingly precarious, Eric found a position at a university in Croatia, and Ingrid gained increasing responsibility in her relatively new permanent position. Indeed, Ingrid is the only one of us to remain employed in Nordic academia. Therefore, it is imperative to question the power dynamics that allow or constrain access to the positions in the academy, but also elsewhere, where knowledge is created and diffused. In this section, we consider some of the paradoxes and problematics involved in the politics of knowledge production in the Nordics as part of the global exchange of ideas.

In the era of intensified globalization, neoliberalism has taken control of the world order, despite

its unsustainability, while we simultaneously live with the consequences of changing migration patterns. Within this context, there remains a significant epistemological problem: knowledge production. Education and knowledge production have become part of the market, like any other product, and thus moral and ethical considerations have increasingly been sidelined (Ball, 2012, p. 85). This does not, however, mean that knowledge production has always and everywhere been a sacred arena surrounded by high morals and ethical responsibilities, but a notable shift has taken place within neoliberalism.

We hence ask a central yet often unasked question: Where does the knowledge taught at Western universities originate from, and who has contributed to its development? School textbooks and historical accounts seldom acknowledge that many of the most significant fields of knowledge—such as algebra, medicine, natural sciences, and social sciences—developed their foundation outside of Europe (e.g., from Al-Khwarizmi, Ibn Khaldoun, Ibn Sina [Avicenna], and Confucius). When these intellectual traditions are acknowledged, it is often through isolated references to philosophers or mystics, who are depicted as distant and mythical figures from a bygone era (Amin, 2010, p. 167; Loomba, 2005, p. 66; Said, 1978/2000, p. 50), or their knowledge is portrayed as particularistic, as opposed to the purportedly universal knowledge developed by Europeans (Connell, 2007). What is rarely emphasized is that non-European scholars not only laid the foundations for many of today's academic disciplines but also solved fundamental problems that continue to shape our lives. At the same time, contemporary researchers from non-Western regions—both those working in their home countries and those who have emigrated to the West—often remain invisible. Another dimension of this marginalization is the exploitation of Indigenous knowledge in colonized regions. Indigenous understandings of nature, technology, the humanities, and social structures are frequently reduced to trivial citations or commodified in commercial contexts without proper recognition of its origins. Zahra (2014) highlights the issue of the discourse surrounding Western knowledge construction, referring to Mudimbe (1999, p. 142), who describes it as a "colonialism of epistemological ethnocentrism." The idea is rooted in the belief that scientifically, there is nothing to learn from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or originates from 'us.'

In reference to the autoethnographic vignettes above, it is clear that there is a disjunction between Zahra's experiences on the one hand and Eric and Ingrid's experiences on the other. The main difference is explicit racialization within the Nordic scholarly context. However, racialization also stands in for different perspectives–or those perceived to be different–from the 'norm' that is deemed, perhaps at times even unconsciously, 'safe' for the status quo. Different lived and bodily experiences will result in different ideas and insights. While this is a potential boon for Nordic academia, as this section illustrates, it is too often perceived as a threat, which is made clear in Zahra's autoethnographic account above. Because Eric and Ingrid are perceived as white and hence embody the 'safe norms' of the Nordic status quo, their positionality is less questioned. However, as Ingrid made clear in her narrative, this can mean that Eric and Ingrid leave certain questions un-asked and go along, for convenience or without much thinking about it, with premises that are directly harmful to their colleague, Zahra. This nexus of texts is meant to illustrate this problematic.

The marginalization of the Other's knowledge is part of the colonial power structure that continues to shape the research world, albeit in more sophisticated forms today (Smith, 1999, p. 43). A global study on the origins of ideas and on who receives recognition for them could provide insight into the extent to which Eurocentric knowledge production relies on the exploitation and appropriation of other cultures. As a result of contemporary migration patterns from the Global South to the Global North, many academics from the Global South have left their countries of origin for Western countries as migrants or refugees (see Thörn, 2004, p. 24). Despite the fact that Western knowledge is reproduced even in their home countries (Connell, 2007), most migrants, particularly refugees, face significant obstacles in continuing their academic careers unless they originate from other Western nations. This dynamic is illustrated above by the fact that Zahra was a 'refugee,' with all that the title entails, while Ingrid and Eric have been variously been deemed 'foreigners', 'expats', or, at best, citizens in their moves between the Nordics and the USA, with significantly different positionings of our transnational trajectories in academia (see, e.g., Farah 2020).

Saxonberg and Sawyer (SOU, 2006) examine recruitment procedures in academia and highlight the substantial challenges migrants and refugees face when applying for academic positions. One such challenge is that job advertisements are often designed to target internal candidates or individuals who are already favored by the system (see Ingrid's narrative above). Consequently, racialized academics are hindered from continuing their academic careers. According to Saxonberg and Sawyer (SOU 2006, 40), this results in a lack of role models for students who are also racialized as non-white. As a further consequence, the experiences and worldviews of these individuals are excluded from the trajectory of knowledge production. The lack of diversity in knowledge production, according to Tesfahuney (1998, p. 69), is a consequence of exclusionary practices within Western academia. As part of the continuation of colonial oppression, these practices contribute to sustaining an epistemological ethnocentrism, wherein Western perspectives are prioritized and privileged at the expense of excluding non-Western perspectives.

When it comes to the marginalization and the exclusion of the knowledge and experiences of non-white women, Collins (2000) uses the concept of the 'outsider within' to describe their unique position, an experience highlighted across Zahra's multiple positions in Swedish academia. This concept provides a critical lens to understand the experiences of non-white women in Western academia and beyond. Their bodies and knowledge occupy an 'outsider-within' space in relation to white women's communities due to their non-whiteness. Consequently, the knowledge and experiences of non-white women often remain invisible and marginalized unless these women actively resist, or individuals in privileged positions critically examine their roles and the structures that perpetuate such marginalization. In her study with the evocative title 'Sailing against the wind,' de los Reyes (2007) highlights the everyday racism experienced by women of non-European backgrounds in Sweden's academic sphere. The women interviewed describe how their career opportunities are systematically limited, and how their perspectives are either ignored or, in some cases, plagiarized by others, as Zahra has experienced all too acutely. This demonstrates how their contributions can be rendered invisible, even within institutional spaces ostensibly committed to equality.

Ahmed (2011, pp. 144–146) further reminds us that even when non-white individuals gain access to institutions historically designed for white people, their bodies and presence are often symbolically excluded, even in the spaces they inhabit, which can also happen in sidelining their stories in exchange for more normative versions in, e.g., well-meaning union publications (see above). Ahmed argues that when non-white individuals raise concerns about racism and misconduct within these institutions, their grievances are frequently dismissed as personal problems or interpreted as signs of ingratitude or disruptiveness. It is for this reason that we suggest the necessity of autoethnography as counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Ahmed (2012) also critiques the expectation placed upon non-white individuals to contribute to institutional narratives of successful diversity. According to Ahmed, the system often demands 'happy diversity' stories as proof of inclusion, overshadowing the actual accounts of racism and discrimination that persist. These narratives of 'positive examples' serve to reinforce the institution's self-congratulatory image, effectively silencing critical reflections on structural inequities. This expectation becomes even more pronounced in systems where the self-image of the institution is deeply rooted in notions of its own progressiveness and moral superiority, discursive features that are at the core of Nordic exceptionalism (Habel, 2012; Schierup & Ålund, 2011).

Despite the so-called superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) in most Western countries, Tesfahuney (1998, p. 69) points out the persistent and significant gaps in representation among academics in higher positions at Western universities. These gaps are particularly evident when examining the number of scholars with European backgrounds compared to those with non-European backgrounds, considering the demographic composition of these countries' population (see also Ingrid's narrative above). This imbalance perpetuates monoculturalism in knowledge production, undermining the diversity that should reflect broader society.

In reality, it is still the white monologue (Ulrichsen, 2024) that dominates the discourse, and there is a lack of a genuine willingness to listen, despite hearing. This becomes particularly evident when someone from the dominant group repeats what racialized peoples, for example, have already expressed, but only then receives comments and reflections that were previously lacking (de los Reyes, 2007). hooks (1990) describes this practice as a systematic way of silencing the knowledge and narratives of non-white individuals about their experiences:

*Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority... /---/ Silenced. We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. /---/ I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are the center of my talk. (*hooks, 1990, pp. 151–152)

The danger of appropriating racialized colleagues' stories of pain and injustice, as evoked here by

hooks (1990), remains present in dialogic auto-ethnography of the kind that we have advanced in this paper. As Eric asks above, who is he to comment on Zahra's experiences? In filtering Zahra's experiences of racism and epistemic marginalization through their own experiences of relative privilege, do Eric and Ingrid reinforce the epistemic authority of the white speaking subject? While acknowledging these dangers, we offer this dialogic format as a reflection of how our collaboration transpired, in which the contrasts of our experience became acute because of the retrenchment of the injustice that we sought to bring to light in the special issue in parallel with the process of production (see also Andreassen & Myong, 2017; Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025; Gboena et al., 2025). We remain deeply embedded in unequal structures of knowledge production, even as we seek to foster more ethical forms of engagement.

In questioning these entrenched structures, Eriksen et al. (2020) raise a critical question: who determines the ethical quality of knowledge production, and how does their position within the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2007) shape their judgments about the Other and their knowledge? They use the concept of a 'safe ethical space' to describe a form of ethics that serves to maintain the dominant group's position of power. Silencing the marginalized contrasts sharply with the strict standards of accountability and citation that are taught to students in research methodology courses. Historically and even today, it is evident that the power to define ethical standards in research often lies with Western institutions, while voices challenging colonial power structures are frequently silenced (de los Reyes, 2007; Saxonberg and Sawyer, SOU, 2006).

Conclusion

By including researchers' racialized positionalities as an integral part of analysis through reflexivity, autoethnography can contribute to unmasking racist systems and institutional power dynamics, thereby allowing us to question our privileges within Nordic exceptionalism, structures of Whiteness, and racism, which marginalize and silence pluriversal knowledges (Grosfoguel, 2007; Berg 2008). This is where method overlaps with, and in fact becomes synonymous with, research outcomes. In this way, the analysis of a culture melds into a potentially politically transformative scholarly interjection into the culture as an artefact challenging hegemonic power relations. As scholars engaged in anti-racist praxis, our everyday life is the production of knowledge, which can be taken as a template for activities in other walks of life as we work towards dismantling colonial legacies. Fostering a diversity of knowledges begins by questioning global, Nordic, and local systems that sustain colonial practices (Eriksen et al., 2020). By exploring the praxis of race, racism, color-evasiveness, and Nordic exceptionalism during our co-editing process together, we've attempted to ground our theoretical understandings in the real-world lived experiences that have affected us alongside the production of the special issue (Beiler et al. 2025). Our autoethnographic narratives point to the mechanisms, structures, discourses, and hierarchies that demand our attention as scholars who reject racism in the workplace and society. Qualitative research of this kind goes beyond the sterility of statistics to create an affective link between researcher, topic, and reader (cf. Ingrid's narrative above; Ramirez, 2021). We must continue to ask the uncomfortable questions from a critical perspective–uncomfortable because, as in Zahra's narrative above and elsewhere, they demand justice where injustice is occurring, which means

fundamental change in the power dynamics of our institutions, including places of learning.

Autoethnography can be reconceptualized as a method by which scholars can collectively analyze their own practical experiences, through a dialogical and diffractive presentation, to bring into relief the operation of color-evasiveness, racial silence, and Nordic exceptionalism. Building on previous collaborative auto-ethnographies (e.g., Andreassen & Myong, 2017; Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025; Gobena et al., 2025; Loving Coalitions Collective, 2023; Mainsah & Prøitz, 2015; Matikainen-Soreau et al., 2025), we have attempted to further extend this work through a format that centers extended autoethnographic narratives, as a way to invite ourselves and our readers into attentive listening to counter-stories (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Kubanyiova, 2025). The aim of this article has been to share stories that bring into focus the need for a pluralistic production of knowledge capable of addressing the complex questions of our time. It also highlights the importance of broadening academic perspectives by including racialized scholars within academic institutions and valuing the knowledge they bring, while encouraging racialized students who are considering a career in academia. At the same time, we invite White scholars to question their own privilege within the structural Whiteness of Nordic academia (Eriksen, 2023; Fylkesnes et al., 2025; Ulrichsen, 2024). For everyone, it is a call to strive to change the systemic nature of opportunity in Nordic academia by connecting anti-racist theorizing with anti-racist practice within our own ranks. Racism in Nordic academia thrives in silence. This paper is presented as an attempt to open a candid conversation by presenting our own lived experiences. Only in this way, we believe, can we take the step from so-called Nordic exceptionalism to something more closely resembling epistemic justice, which would be truly exceptional.

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