



# **Racialization, Knowledge Production and Researcher Positionality**

## **Symposium**

*Study Circle 5: "Racialization, Whiteness and Politics of Othering in Contemporary Europe"*  
*Nordic Summer University (NSU)*

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## **BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

In alphabetical order (according to the first name)

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**Anna Smith**

### **Becoming the Wild Dog - cultural constructions of a species**

As the environment continues to change, so do the ways in which humans relate and react to it. Whilst research has worked hard to document the physical aspects of these changes, less is known about the people that interact with them, their emotional responses and how this relates to cultural contexts. This project looks deeper at this relationship by focusing on the endangered African wild dog. Choosing species decline in particular opens the research up to topics of loss, grief, mourning and hope. To build a clearer picture of this emotional landscape, the project will use primary and archive data to elucidate the cultural pawprint of the African wild dog and engage with those who interact with the species. Sites of data collection range from public-facing museums and zoos, to representations in media, branding and online, and through people for whom the wild dogs are a fixture in daily life such as local communities, researchers, and conservation organisations. Overall, this research aims to decipher how humans construct species and react to nonhuman loss in the context of ongoing environmental change. The research will contribute to shifting perspectives of human-nature relationships and understanding facets of climate change, such as species loss, from a more holistic perspective that puts emotion and wellbeing at the centre. As a project that comes from

a global North, ex situ conservation perspective, researcher positionality is a vital element of consideration underlying all of the work.

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**Ayan Yasin Abdi**  
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### **Invisible boundaries: Objectification and vulnerability during fieldwork as an “insider”**

I find it hard to make sense of myself and my positionality and as culturally embedded subject with a personal history of the marginalization and privilege – not to speak of the positions and identity categories I ascribe to my research participants. In my respective research projects – I found myself in some way in the position of a partial insider or a hybrid insider-outsider during fieldwork. While I share some aspects of identity, be it gender, nationality, ethnicity or religion/spirituality, with my research participants and their communities, I also diverge from the important ways, through my worldview, value, cultural affiliations and sexual identities to name a few. The hybrid insider-outsider position insists I carefully consider who is allowed to speak for and of whom, and who I do my research for? As feminist researcher, I have been raised to foster honesty and dialogue in research encounters, and to respect and rightly represent the voices of my research participants. Sometimes – and especially when doing research in non- or anti-feminist spaces – I find myself in situations where I might need to compromise some of those commitments in order to care for wider inequalities and power relations that exceeds that of the individual researcher-participant relation. Occupying this ambiguous position has forced me to deeply reflect on the complicated ethics and politics of fieldwork and knowledge production. It highlights the fact that doing research as a full insider or as a completely detached and objective outsider, is neither neutral nor possible. There are consequences that need to be considered and transparently accounted for whether I choose to speak for, talk back or to stay silent.

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**Cosmin Nada**

### **Reflecting on positionality issues as a narrative inquirer**

During almost five years I developed a narrative inquiry focused on the experience of migrant students in Portugal. However, positionality was never at the centre of my methodological reflections during this time. I see this symposium as an opportunity to reflect, retrospectively, on the way my positionality has impacted (and is still impacting) not only my research findings, but also the topics that I engage with and the way I approach them. In my narrative research, I have always sought to value the experiences of my research participants. During our biographical encounters, research participants were invited to share their experiences freely and recount their migration stories on their own accord. I remember being very surprised by the easiness with each (most) research participants started to share their stories, including very delicate and personal matters, with some even ‘putting their lives on a plate’ for me to look at. I wonder what elements of my identity encouraged them to do so. The fact that I was a young, aspiring (and potentially perceived as vulnerable) researcher enacted in my participants a readiness to help and support me as much as they could? Would they share the same information, and with the same easiness, was I a full professor in my sixties? Does age influence the type of relationship that we establish with our research participants and the quality of the data that we can collect?

Another important element that I would like to reflect upon is linked to the biographical connection to my research question. According to some narrative inquirers, all research is autobiographical. In

my case, conducting research on migrant students whilst being a migrant student myself rendered even more obvious my biographical proximity to the research questions and participants. What was the impact of this proximity on the knowledge that I produced? Being an insider of the phenomenon under study precluded me from objectively analysing the phenomenon under study? The subjectivity underlining my research positionality allowed me to identify elements that an outsider to the studied phenomenon would not have identified?

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**Iben Holck**

### **Being a white researcher on/in a racialized housing market**

In this paper, I want to discuss the challenges and opportunities of engaging my position as a white researcher analytically as I study the so-called “ghetto laws” increasingly political racialization of the Danish housing market. The Danish so-called “ghetto laws” are structured around five political citizen categories such as “non-Western immigrants and their descendants” and categories of class markers. The goal of the laws is to change the resident composition according to this categorization system in selected public housing areas. I am present in this field as a white person with a long education and an owning class background. Coming from an Anthropological educational in a white, European institution, I have been presented with the strong tradition of making Black, Indigenous, and People of Color study subjects through processes of othering. Thus, racialization has been vividly implemented in my educational programme. A few years back, I conducted my ethnographic thesis fieldwork in a public housing area targeted by the “ghetto laws” on tenants lived experience of the transformations. This in turn became my lived experience of being positioned both through structural-racialized differences between I as researcher and the tenants as study subjects, but also, I as the target group of the urban regeneration that would potentially cause eviction for my informants. My attempt to engage the tensions I experienced around my position in the thesis’ analysis was met with critique by the censor as not ‘real analysis’. In my current research, I turn the gaze to the professionals translating the “ghetto laws” into architecture and urban space design and question representation in this work. As a white researcher studying the mainly white professional architects and urban planners, what methodological and analytical tools exists to challenge that the very act of putting theirs (and my) whiteness into the spotlight transgresses boundaries for what will be evaluated as relevant for my project and as ‘real analysis’? Can auto-ethnography be a productive approach to this kind of knowledge production? And what limits exist for my engagements with this field?

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**Ileana I. Diaz**

### **Positionality in the Archives: Photographic Representations of Rural Peoples and Agricultural Workers**

Archives are inherently entangled into relationships of power; in colonies archives reflect the violence of empire and also frame how colonized places are understood. As sites where knowledge is often constructed and produced it is important to unpack how archives are already racialized and imbued with colonial values. It is equally important as researchers to interrogate our own relationship to archives in general, and to specific archives. I propose to explore knowledge production as it pertains to race, racialization, and whiteness in one photographic archive of Puerto Rican rural peoples and agricultural workers. This archive of photographs was commissioned by the United States Farm Commission and reflects how understandings of white photographers were

superimposed onto the racialized bodies of Puerto Ricans. I will also explore my own positionality as an academic researcher and descendant of Puerto Rican farmers. Ultimately, archives often tell us more about power and the kinds of knowledge that were important to imperial powers than the people and places disrupted by empire. As such, entering into conversation with the archive requires careful consideration of whiteness in particular, and how it can produce racist understandings of colonized subjects in geo-political imaginations.

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**Ioana Țișteea**

### **'Ain't I also a migrant?' An autoethnographic drama**

Previous Nordic migration and minority studies focus little on who produces research about migrants and minorities and in what ways, on how migrants and researchers themselves as knowing subjects are constituted through research practices, and on how to destabilize established modes of knowing and of performing research. Through an autoethnographic drama (or ethnodrama), in my PhD studies I explore what counts as valid knowledges and ways of knowing, and who is considered a legitimate knowing subject in migration research practices in Finland, by exploring the effects of performing abilities to pass as non/not-quite/white, and the related abilities to pass as a knowing subject or not. I join a growing body of auto/ethnographic research exploring Eastern European proximities-to/distances-from whiteness in the Nordic space through embodiment and discomfort with established ways of knowing. Through ethnodrama, I explore how migrants, teachers, social workers, and researchers navigate educational and research practices in Finland, by bringing into dialogue discussions on white ignorance, hermeneutic ignorance, whiteness, and epistemic racism, while also speaking into current discussions and controversies on racialized researcher positionality in feminist circles.

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**Katherine Stansfeld**

### **Encountering and performing convivial relations: The politics of positionality and visual ethnographic fieldwork**

This paper explores the politics of the co-production of knowledge about convivial relations in urban neighbourhood spaces through engaging with a qualitative participatory research project based in north-east London, UK. The paper discusses how visual ethnographic research approaches can observe and draw out practices of relationality and performances of racialization in urban publics through methods of 'encountering' (Wilson, 2011). The camera is in a sense always 'encountering' but by being consciously aware of this process, I argue that positionality can be placed at the forefront of fieldwork, exploring the negotiations of power relations that shape collective dynamics unfolding in urban spaces. Through film-making practices, the research explores different kinds of banal yet racialized interactions that act as processes of differentiation. Firstly, it addresses how as a researcher I was involved in performances of identity (Butler, 1990) in the field. I argue paying attention to these encounters between researcher and participant as well as the ways that we both bring our self (or selves) to the field but also create our self in the field (Reinharz, 1997) can contribute to understandings of 'the indeterminacy and inventiveness of race' (Swanton, 2010:2346). Secondly, the paper contends that performances with the camera are often so explicit that it can heighten performances of race, multicultural and belonging that are occurring in everyday ways. The research found that people perform for the camera in ways that bring to light underlying social relations. Although these performances can be skewed from the everyday minutiae otherwise

witnessed in the field, they can reflect certain dynamics of conviviality and reveal underlying contestations for further exploration. In this paper, I hope to open up a space to discuss the potential and politics of visual ethnography to explore the intersectional dynamics that play out through fieldwork interactions. I contend these critical reflections on positionality and reflexivity are of particular importance, as we must also interrogate the ways in which visual research also represents and reproduces knowledge on superdiverse cities.

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**Morten Stinus Kristensen**

**A white Dane in US academia: Navigating race, gender, and privilege in a transnational context**

I am a white, cis-male scholar whose research centers on how members of minority groups engage with social media in forming “counterpublics” that provide alternative and more authentic representations of their minority group than mainstream media. In my Media Studies dissertation project, I interview ten Danish Muslims on how they use social media platforms for these types of counterpublic purposes. My methodology is semi-structured interviews and thus my positionality requires careful attention and analysis of both the interview material and the conclusions I draw. I chose qualitative interviews as the method partly based on a desire to center minority voices in Danish scholarship on race. While I of course analyze the interview material, I strive to maintain my informants’ distinct voices in my work and to make their lived experiences the starting point of my discussion of racial formation in Denmark rather than beginning from theoretical premises. I am a PhD student at a US university and so my training and experiences surrounding these issues differ quite a bit from the typical Danish PhD student. For instance, my four-person dissertation committee consists entirely of scholars of color and I have often taken courses where I was the only white male participant and where the syllabus consisted almost only of scholars of color. Neither of these have been deliberate choices on my part — I have chosen the courses and the members of my dissertation committee due to their expertise and relevance to my work, but it demonstrates how my awareness of issues surrounding race might be shaped differently. Yet, my perspective, of course, contains major blind spots. Being a white, Danish male affords me with immense privilege both in my scholarly work and daily life in Denmark as well as in the US. At this symposium, I would love to share my thoughts, ideas, and experiences and hope to receive valuable input on how I can become more thoughtful of blind spots, both in terms of positionality and methodology.

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**Patience Mguni**

**Limits to liberation: The discomforts and affordances of doing research in a black body in post-apartheid and post-colonial cities**

My colleagues and I are currently drafting a paper entitled ‘The role of reflexivity in co-designing hybrid urban water infrastructure – a case study from Cape Town, South Africa’ to present our experiences of a co-designing a stormwater pond with historically disadvantaged mixed-race community in Cape Town. While the paper is about transformation research and the inclusion of diverse voices and ways of knowing, I feel it could also benefit from an interrogation of our different experiences of the co-design process as researchers of diverse identities. As a black woman working for a Danish institution but stationed in South Africa, I, along with other black members of the research team have experienced overt racism from some community members during some field days. Yet the white members of the research team have also experienced various shades of discomfort as well. My experiences of doing research within a diverse team in East African cities for

instance has also shown me that there is a different set of discomforts and privileges that we each experience as a 'mzungu' (white person) or 'the black sister' (fellow African). As such, I am seeking a safe space to unpack these and other dynamics, and perhaps to gain a sensitive vocabulary with which to think and talk about the discomforts and indeed benefits that come with doing research in a black, female body in a post-apartheid and post-colonial societies.

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**Sarah Philipson Isaac**

### **Engaging vulnerabilities: On sharing and caring for each other in fieldwork**

Building on feminist ethnographic work, sharing time together with the interlocutors has not only been walking around, sitting around coffee tables, or discussing migration politics over the phone together. Sharing time has here used as a notion to capture the complexities of solidarity, responsibility and vulnerabilities shared throughout the research process. Inspired by Richa Nagar (2014) and her work on radical vulnerability, I here see decolonial practice as part of forming radical vulnerability in exploring different ways to listen, to deepening my understanding of the experiences that are shared with me, and explore different ways of building trust and accountability throughout the research process. Being of mixed Swedish-Indian heritage has made visible several shared experiences of racialisation, while at the same time our radically different conditions of live, particularly based on the privileges that come with citizenship, a 'Swedish sounding' name, and class privileges. Exploring radical vulnerability has thus involved interrogating this privilege, and trying to share the effects of it in different ways – in encounters with welfare bureaucracies, in understanding the asylum system, in being of emotional support. Living with a chronic disease with episodes of intense pain, radical vulnerability has also involved being open with all of the participants about my bodily limitations. This openness about functionality and (vulner)ability has, similar to what Ruth Behar has observed invoked a joint practice of solidarity in the research process. She argues that “when you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably” (Behar 1996, 16). Sharing my vulnerabilities have also made shared metaphors of intelligibility possible in a beautiful way that has enriched the research process. Many interlocutors have drawn on my experience of pain in order to make their experiences of their religious beliefs intelligible: How can we give testimony to experiences that are not visible for others? Articulating my own bodily limitations has also been part of challenging paternalistic discourses in the research-researcher divide, in which the research takes on a hierarchical position of rather different articulations of care and vulnerabilities.

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**Taísa Oliveira**

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### **Say my name and a lot more: Positionality as resistance to the myth of universal/neutral knowledge**

When it comes to research social background, political ideology, world vision, and beliefs shape epistemological, methodological, and analytical approaches. Positionality means that researchers are (somewhat) aware of the dynamic and complex fact that their multiple overlapping identities will be reflected in their work. In my case, the subject of my doctoral research is directly related to key aspects of my identity (being a Brazilian migrant living in Europe). My main research objective is to explore democracy and plurality of Portuguese public universities by analysing the processes of inclusion/exclusion of migrants from the Global South in academic careers. My theoretical references, the academics I feel more inspired by, and my main research interests are deeply

connected to my personal experience in Portugal as a colonial subject. This influences how I relate to my knowledge production and reflection. Although this 'bias' is inherently present in my work, as Hills and Bilge (2021) point out, it is a political commitment to locate us in an ecosystem of unequal power relations. Also is a political commitment to highlight and locate these inequalities. What political interests some knowledge production is committed with: to transform or maintain the world the way it is? Given that I am at the very beginning of my doctoral research journey, I am still trying to understand how this positionality will be reflected in my research project. Freire (1996) says that no one can be in and with the world and with others in a neutral position. What seems vital to me regarding that me is how to ensure that I am highly reflexive about it. Preferably, my reflections upon that, should emerge not only by solo work but also from collective discussion. Also, it is vital to consider that this positionality will be imbued in a framework of unpredictable events (how the pandemic world will be? How will it be the international political conjecture?). Therefore, I think it is important to relate to these concerns in an open way, leaving space to play out some scientific and political imagination.

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**Wiola Ujazdowska**

**In-between. Post-soviet identity in the nordic geo-political region. Artistic research and practice**

In a short presentation I would like to share my praxis as migrant artist living in Iceland and focused on central and eastern european diaspora in nordic countries. Presentation would include recent projects of mine in which I am in forms of visual objects or video are presented stories from migrant workers in Iceland (both in capital and ruler areas). I also would like to talk on methodology of my practice that is a fusion of arts, social engaged practice, visual anthology and cultural studies.