

Esha Sil (Helsinki) on:

»Decolonising the ›Great White North‹ Subalternity, Otherness, and Nordic Whiteness«,

.....
University of Helsinki, 27th to 28th August 2019

Conference Report

Abstract

This report offers an analytical overview of the interdisciplinary conference »The ›Great White North‹? Critical Perspectives on Whiteness in the Nordics and its Neighbours«, held at the University of Helsinki in August 2019. It considers how the conference scrutinised the relational dynamic of »whiteness and otherness« in the Nordics, engaging with complex questions of identity, belonging, and linguistic/cultural difference, from a »decolonial« vantage point. The report thus examines how a decolonial interrogation of whiteness opens up an alternative subaltern scope for re-evaluating the colonial-racial hierarchies of the »Great White North« via the marginalised narratives of its indigenous, migrant and »non-white« ethnicities.

Aim of the conference

As a multidisciplinary initiative, the »Great White North« conference provided a stimulating intellectual milieu for opening up a conversation on the Nordic region in a broad sense, showcasing »its diversity in modes of belonging«

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as well as its various (indigenous) languages »across Scandinavia, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, Lapland and (Western) Russia«. ¹ Bringing together both established academics and early career scholars, the event occasioned a critical re-evaluation of the Nordic Studies field by mobilising methods from a range of areas, including history, cultural studies, anthropology, linguistics, medical humanities, political economy, and sociology.

The relational dynamic of »whiteness and otherness«

The conference scrutinised the relational dynamic of »whiteness and otherness« in the Nordics along two key axes: (a) questions of linguistic/cultural difference in the expression and representation of whiteness in the region; and (b) questions of belonging and their change over time. ² These conceptual paradigms were thought-provokingly deployed by the speakers and panellists to demonstrate how the cultural, linguistic and spatio-temporal agency of a decolonial approach to whiteness, by not taking »modern« nations and regions as its point of departure, can deconstruct a quintessentially Nordic narrative of belonging, to »accommodate different practices of migration, different understandings of indigeneity, and different Nordic ethnicities«. ³

AINUR ELMGREN's paper, for instance, offered a decolonial critique of Nordic whiteness via the case study of the Tartar minority in early twentieth-century Finland. Among other things, Elmgren explicated how the otherisation of the Tartar community, and indeed of migrants from the Russian empire, helped Finns distance themselves from the Mongol origins attributed to Fenno-Ugric people by various racial theories. ⁴ The discursive complications underlying the socio-historical representation of the Finns' »ambiguous Europeanness«, owing to their perceived Mongolian descent, were also examined by the keynote speaker, SUVI KESKINEN, in her lecture, »Nordic Whiteness, Colonial/Racial Histories and the Rewriting of Finnish History«. ⁵ The Finns' Mongolian categorisation, as Keskinen has noted elsewhere, meant that they were »placed outside the White race and connected with the Asian or »yellow race«: ⁶

Finns were thus inferiorized in the racial hierarchies developed in the Nordic region and Europe. This interpretation was later contested by scientists in racial biology and physical anthropology, who developed theories of the »East Baltic« and »East European« races from the 1920s to the 1940s. [I]n the period following [Finland's] national independence, the Finns themselves engaged in knowledge production and politics that built hierarchical distinctions between themselves and the Sámi and the Russian people. The desire of the

¹ Call for Papers for the conference *The »Great White North«? Critical Perspectives on Whiteness in the Nordics and its Neighbours* at the University of Helsinki, 27–28 August 2019, University of Helsinki website, <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/the-great-white-north/call-for-papers> (date of last access 02.04.2020). The conference programme is available at <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/the-great-white-north/programme> (date of last access 02.04.2020).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Elmgren 2019.

⁵ Keskinen 2019a. Keskinen's lecture was based on her article, »Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories, and National Narratives: Rewriting Finnish History«. For further details, refer to Keskinen 2019b.

⁶ Keskinen 2019b, p. 172.

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newly established nation to belong to European modernity and the »West« was manifested through distinctions toward those perceived to be »non-civilized« Others.⁷

Keskinen's lecture analysed these colonial-racial histories, in conjunction with Finland's »intra-Nordic power relations and their entanglement with local, state and global factors«, to delineate how the ideological trajectory of a Finnish national identity narrative reproduced its »Nordic whiteness« by peripheralising the indigenous and minority populations regarded as »biologically and/or culturally inferior«.⁸ She observed that »[t]he colonisation of Sámi lands, discourses of racial/cultural otherness and strong assimilation policies, have been the silenced underside of the modernisation process in Finland«.⁹

Keskinen's projection of the »regionalization schema«¹⁰ of Finland's »Nordic« modernity, as inflected by the subversive margins of its indigenous and migrant story spaces, is quite reminiscent of Dipesh Chakrabarty's theorisation of the »subaltern breach« that »constitutionally mark[s]« the historicisation of a Western European worldview.¹¹ Indeed, the conceptual link between Keskinen's depiction of Finland's »otherised« communities and Chakrabarty's study of the subaltern histories which radically persist as Western modernity's insurgent »underside« opens up a productive space for the »subaltern« to enter the discursive realm of the »Great White North«.¹² In other words, the repressed »subaltern« presence of the Nordics' marginalised ethnicities constitutionally marks the production of its »whitewashed« histories. The lineaments of such a subaltern presence was alluded to by many of the papers delivered at the conference, whether through the slippery interstices layering the racial classification of the »East Baltic«, »Lapp«, and »Nordic types« in early twentieth-century Sweden, the Finns' ethno-linguistic »counter-identities« in nineteenth-century Siberia, or the exoticised trope of the »dark foreign man« in Finnish sexual life stories from the 1990s.¹³ The »subaltern breach« of the »Great White North« was also revealed by MIKKO MALMBERG's analysis of black migrant rappers in twenty-first-century Finland, SAMI LAKOMÄKI and RITVA

⁷ Keskinen 2019b, pp. 174–175.

⁸ Keskinen 2019a; 2019b, abstract. I am grateful to Professor Keskinen for sending me the abstract of her article, »Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories, and National Narratives«, which I have referred to here, in addition to her keynote lecture.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ I have borrowed the term »regionalization schema« from Sheldon Pollock's work. See Pollock 2006, p. 221.

¹¹ Chakrabarty postulates the theoretical paradigm of the »subaltern breach« in his essay »The Time of History and the Times of Gods«; see Chakrabarty 1997, p. 58.

¹² The term »Great White North«, though used primarily to denote Canada or the Arctic, came to be adapted by the conference committee »as a way to refer to a part of the world – containing the Nordic countries, but also Western Russia – that understands itself as typified by being in the North, and attaches a number of ethnic expectations and norms to being »northern««. As Josephine Hoegaerts (2020) observes, the committee members felt that using the terms »Nordic« or »Scandinavian« would »exclude some of the areas« they were interested in, and »might also be seen to silence minority groups who are not readily associated with the political reality of the Nordics or Scandinavia, like the Tatars or the Romas«. Hence, they chose to redeploy the »Great White North« to gesture towards the geographical area indicated above, and thereby to interrogate both the »given« use of the term, and the narrative of »Nordic whiteness«.

¹³ I am referring here to the papers presented by following speakers: Hagerman 2019; Lukin 2019; Taavetti 2019.

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KYLLI's reading of Sámi drinking rituals from 1600-1900, and MIIKA TERVONEN's exploration of the Nordics' Roma history.¹⁴

Subaltern (de)constructions of Nordic whiteness

In addition, the need for a subaltern deconstruction of Nordic whiteness became evident, for example, from HEIDI HAAPOJA-MÄKELÄ's critique of the exclusions entailed by the inventorying of Finland's »intangible« white middle-class heritage, or from TUULI KURKI and KRISTIINA BRUNILA's exposition of the hegemonic colonial imaginaries governing the contemporary psychoeducation of Finland's non-white migrants and refugees.¹⁵ The very discourse of »whiteness«, for that matter, came to be critically scrutinised by several presenters, including the keynote speaker, ANNE-MARIE FORTIER. In her riveting lecture, »The Unmarked White Monolingual? Thoughts about the (New) Common-Sense Politics of Language and Citizenship«, Fortier extended David Gramling's thesis on the »invention of monolingualism«, to incisively problematise the »unmarking« of whiteness as a »category«.¹⁶ In his monograph, Gramling observes that:

a new model of citizenship is afoot in the age of postmultilingual statecraft, a model that conceives of prospective citizens no longer through their supposed blood-rights to citizenship (*ius sanguinis*) or territorial rights (*ius soli*), but through their demonstrated language competences (*ius linguarum*).¹⁷

In response to Gramling's comment, Fortier posed the following questions: »How is *ius linguarum* normalised? What gets marked and unmarked in the process of this normalisation? How is the unmarking racialised?«¹⁸ Drawing on the case of Britain's language requirements for settlement or citizenship, Fortier elucidated how *ius linguarum*, »despite its ostensible ›post-ethnic‹ framing, can quickly become a sign of national belonging, entitlement and identity«.¹⁹ At the same time, however, »the disappearance of ›national language‹ as a *constructed* category«, she emphasised, »allows for the disappearance of other categories, such as whiteness«. As a result, she argued, *ius linguarum* in Western Europe »reconstitutes ›national languages‹ and whiteness as unmarked and ›worldly«.²⁰

Alternative identity narratives

The universality and pre-eminence accorded to the »worldly« language of whiteness through such a normative »unmarking« also needs to be considered, Fortier concluded, »in relation to the status of English as a ›world

¹⁴ Malmberg 2019; Lakomäki and Kylli 2019; Tervonen 2019.

¹⁵ Haapoja-Mäkelä 2019; Kurki and Brunila 2019.

¹⁶ Fortier 2019; Gramling 2016.

¹⁷ Gramling 2016, p. 25.

¹⁸ Fortier 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

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language«. ²¹ This has crucial implications for questions of linguistic-cultural difference and belonging, as the preponderant »worldliness« of the »standard« monolingual variety of »white« English leads more often than not to the »social stigmatization« of speaking specific ethnic varieties of English characterised by non-white registers and dialects, as illustrated by ELIZABETH PETERSON's paper, »Teaching about Race and English language in »The Great White North«. ²² That such »ethnic varieties of English persist«, nevertheless, ²³ is but indicative of their enduring subaltern resistance to the linguistic-cultural hegemony of the »unmarked white monolingual«. Indeed, the »subaltern breach« of the non-white language world, that, in Chakrabarty's terms, »constitutionally marks« the unmarked »worldliness« of the white master-discourse, generates the scope for mobilising the »otherised« spaces of belonging, liminally underpinning the »construction and expression of Nordic whiteness«. ²⁴ Such alternative identity narratives were evocatively depicted by a number of presenters: MAÏMOUNA JAGNE-SOREAU's paper, for example, portrayed the mixed-race rapper Erik Lundin's »in-between« story space of »growing up brown in a white Sweden«. ²⁵ Jagne-Soreau demonstrated how the liminal ethnolinguistic agency of Lundin's otherised *Suedi* self-representation »advocates the idea of a postnational Sweden, one in which the non-white postmigration generation could identify itself as Swedish with neither reservation nor shame«. ²⁶

JAANIKA KINGUMETS's presentation, on the other hand, engaged with the problematic negotiation of alterity, sameness, and difference, inflecting the contemporary socio-cultural production of East European identities in the »Great White North«. ²⁷ To that end, she deployed as her case study the complex rhetorics of belonging which, since the 2015 »European refugee crisis«, have been present in the negotiation of competing marginalities of Estonian, Russian, and »non-white« communities in Finland. Kingumets analysed how Estonian and Russian-speaking migrants in Finland, via their everyday Facebook conversations, strategically capitalise on the ambiguous liminality of their »East European« identity narratives to distinguish themselves from other non-white and non-European migrants, and at the same time »dismantle« their perceived differences from the white Finnish mainstream to emphasise their cultural affinity and »sameness« with a white Nordic ethos.

Decolonial re-evaluations of whiteness

Kingumets's paper highlighted how difficult the discursive process of negotiating »the (imagined) continuities and changes in the meaning of whiteness and otherness« can be. ²⁸ Thus, in order for a »subaltern« identity narrative to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peterson 2019.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Among the key aims of the conference *The »Great White North«?* was a critical exploration of the manifold »language ideologies« inflecting »the construction and expression of Nordic Whiteness«; see Call for Papers on the University of Helsinki website, URL as in footnote 2.

²⁵ Jagne-Soreau 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kingumets 2019.

²⁸ Call for Papers for the conference *The »Great White North«?*, URL as in footnote 2.

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»breach« the »universalist archives« of the »unmarked white monolingual«²⁹ and render visible both the problematic and radical liminalities of the »other« ethnic modernities constituting the »Great White North«, a »decolonial« re-evaluation of whiteness emerges as a particularly significant step. In his keynote lecture, »A Phenomenology of Whiteness from a Decolonial Point of View«, NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES demonstrated how a »decolonial« methodology can be effectively employed to subvert the »coloniality« of normative white power-structures.³⁰ A deconstructionist critique of the Nordic colonial rhetoric of »whiteness and progress« was also among the key concerns addressed by PETER STADIUS's presentation, »A New White City? Modernity and Race at the Stockholm Exhibition 1930«.³¹ Stadius's nuanced reading of Swedish modernism and its everyday material practices, as exemplified by the »functionalist architecture« of the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition,³² explored how the history of Nordic exceptionalism standardised »whiteness« as a signifier of purity, illumination and colourlessness, unmarking the racial identity of the Nordic subject, and perpetrating thereby the »omnipresent essence« of the whiteness discourse and its hegemonic colonial association with the narrative of »progress«.

The North's complicity in European imperialism

The colonial nexus of »whiteness and progress«, to draw upon Chakrabarty's line of argument, served as the bedrock of the »civilizing process« that »the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world-historical task«.³³ From the perspective of the »Great White North«, the rhetoric of »Nordic whiteness« and its concomitant inclusion in the progressive notions of a worldly Eurocentric modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries facilitated what Keskinen and others have identified as the Nordic complicity and participation in European imperialism »through multiple economic, political, cultural, and knowledge-production processes«.³⁴ In fact, the »coloniality of power« constituting the »logic, metaphysics, [and] ontology« of whiteness, according to Maldonado-Torres, enables the »continued unfolding« of a Western European modernity in the present-day world.³⁵

The globalised hierarchies and exclusions underpinning the normative »coloniality« of the white master-narrative and its manifold neoliberal formulations also formed the focus of TEIVO TEIVAINEN's reflections on the construction and representation of Nordic whiteness.³⁶ Using Finland as his case study, Teivainen astutely applied

²⁹ Chakrabarty 1997, p. 52. I have applied to this context Chakrabarty's analysis of how the »subaltern« can breach the »universalist« colonial archives of a Eurocentric modernity, to »blast...out of the homogeneous course« of the latter's (white) history, »times that produce cracks in the structure of that homogeneity«.

³⁰ Maldonado-Torres 2019.

³¹ Stadius 2019.

³² Ibid.

³³ Chakrabarty 1997, p. 55.

³⁴ Keskinen 2019b, p. 164; Vuorela 2009, pp. 19–33.

³⁵ Maldonado-Torres 2016, abstract, p. 10.

³⁶ Teivainen 2019.

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Aníbal Quijano and Maldonado-Torres's hypotheses³⁷ to examine the contemporary colonial power structures determining »the racial stratification of the capitalist world-system«³⁸ and the »logic, metaphysics, [and] ontolog[ies]« governing the ideological paradigms of a »whitewashed« Finnish historiography, which, as Teivainen and other speakers contended, mostly excludes the alternative world-views of Finland's »non-white« minorities.³⁹ To represent these »otherised« modernities and their subaltern ethos, a »decolonial« re-evaluation of whiteness needs to be proactively mobilised. to inaugurate what Maldonado-Torres envisions as:

efforts at rehumanizing the world, ... breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities, ... and produc[ing] counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world.⁴⁰

The various marginalised story spaces opened up by the proceedings of the »Great White North« conference perceptively interrogated, in Maldonado-Torres's terms, the colonial stratifications of »Nordic whiteness« in order to engage with complex issues of identity, belonging, and linguistic/cultural difference and explore the philosophical possibilities of a decolonial approach to the relational dynamic of whiteness and otherness in the Nordics. The eclectic set of critical perspectives brought to bear in the keynote lectures and other papers opened the space for a productive exchange between decolonial and subaltern methodologies of rehistoricising the »Great White North«. It would indeed be profitable to consider how Maldonado-Torres's decolonial imaginary could be further extended in relation to Chakrabarty's theorisation of the subaltern. In fact, the conference offered an excellent opportunity to contemplate how the subaltern breach of the »Great White North« might potentially mobilise a decolonial epistemology of whiteness to reconstitute the regionalisation schema of the Nordics via the »counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, [and] counter-practices« of its indigenous, migrant and non-white ethnicities. By doing so, the conference pivotally pushed forth the frontiers of the »Great White North«, thus expanding the conceptual and disciplinary boundaries of engaging with broader postcolonial questions of modernity, selfhood and alterity.⁴¹

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³⁷ Quijano 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2016.

³⁸ Teivainen 2019.

³⁹ Teivainen 2019; Tervonen 2019.

⁴⁰ Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 10.

⁴¹ Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank Josephine Hoegaerts (University of Helsinki) for her insightful conversations on the »Great White North« and her valuable suggestions for the conference report. I am also very grateful to the keynote speakers, Suvi Keskinen (University of Helsinki), Anne-Marie Fortier (Lancaster University), and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (Rutgers University), for providing me with the abstracts of their lectures, and to Jana Lainto (University of Helsinki) for sending me the synopses of the other papers presented at the conference.

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