

# **‘The White Flesh of a Fish’: Reflections about Whiteness and Methodologies**

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## **Introduction**

I am in the pastoral zone in the Sahel area in Niger, and I have a rare opportunity to bath in a little stream. Lush vegetation surrounds the stream in one place so I can take of my clothing and wash myself properly instead of the half a litre of water that usually I splash on different body parts. It should be celebrated opportunity but I feel uncomfortable. My body looks, somehow, like I have never seen it before; white and sweaty, with every blemish and rash visible. Suddenly, I start thinking about the fish that the WoDaaBe find so repulsive. ‘We don’t like fish’ someone told me once, ‘because it has white flesh.’ Looking at my own pale body, this sentence starts to echo in my mind. I feel like I am that fish, my body looking like its white, shiny flesh.

I had lived in Niger for more than a year but my encounter with whiteness had started much earlier. It was uncomfortably embodied in various encounters and images, such as in reminders of how wealth and power in the world is divided according to a colour line,

where ‘white’ people like myself occupy roles of powerful beneficiaries in Niger, doing research, tourism or working within international development. It was also in the everyday experiences of little children walking behind me, calling ‘anasara, anasara’; a term originally referring to Christian person but which now was used referring to ‘white’ people in general. Particularly startling was how whiteness was, for those Nigerians I interacted with, generally associated with ‘westerners’, thus dividing the world into powerful ‘white’ north and poor ‘black’ south (Loftsdóttir 2003). As scholars have pointed out, critically looking at the social construction of whiteness, the power of whiteness is so strongly invested in how ‘white’ bodies are normalized, making the power of such categorization often invisible to those defined as ‘white’ (Puwar 2004). In Niger, I had been startled by these relationships of power so clearly visible, and the intersection of my categorization as ‘white’ with other categories of difference such as my gender. In my experience other ‘white westerner’ did usually

not reflect on their own racialization in this context and its association with power (Loftsdóttir 2003). Prior to living in Niger, I had never systematically thought about whiteness as a racialization process, my origin in Iceland making it very easy to avoid thinking this way. When I was growing up, Iceland was homogenous compared to other countries; a small island with population of 250,000. Even though historical immigration has probably been underestimated, it was not common to hear any other language spoken, and darker skin tones were rare. My shock in Niger revolved around that whilst even in a place where the reproduction of colonialism and racism through social constructions of whiteness were almost screaming in your face, many 'white westerners' still refused to acknowledge their position of power as 'white' individuals or that racialization had anything to do with everyday dynamics (Loftsdóttir 2003 and 2008). In addition, as my example at the start of this paper indicates, it involved the painful recognition that within a racist system of the world everyone is racialized, regardless of whether they think about themselves in such a way.

In my discussion here, I illustrate a few points based on my own experiences in researching whiteness. I stress in particular three aspects that I see as important methodological tools: auto-ethnography, extended case method, and ethnographic

analysis. These three tools are discussed in relation to my research in Niger among WoDaaBe pastoral nomads which focused on mobility and strategies of survival in increasingly globalized world, and in my native country Iceland where I have focused on post-colonial narratives and racialized identity. Even though these aspects are to some extent interlinked, I present them here as separate for a more coherent argument.

### **To Situate Whiteness**

Analysis of whiteness constitutes one part of a deeper analysis of racism and racial identity in general (Hartigan 1997:498). Whiteness as such is thus not the object of analysis, but the historical constitution and the hegemonic status of whiteness as a social and historical construct and its invisibility; how it functions and becomes meaningful in a particular local context. Even though deconstructing whiteness does in itself not change the structural inequalities that are so important in reproducing racism and racialization, it is still imperative to make those structures more visible. The critical investigation of whiteness seeks thus to 'deterritorialize the territory 'white' to expose, examine and disrupt' (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995: 292). I find it extremely important that we, as scholars, continue to emphasize that whiteness is not a fixed category but historically constituted, and thus shifting and contest-

ed (Hartigen 1997). As such there is no essence in whiteness because it intersects with other categories of difference, being simultaneously 'local, temporary and self-contradictory' as phrased by Sara Trechter and Mary Bucholtz (2001:5).

### **Auto-ethnography**

As previously mentioned, I was struck by the importance of whiteness when conducting my research in Niger in 1996-1998, for the daily life and desires of many WoDaaBe migrant workers in Niamey, were embodied in interactions and structural relationships between Nigeriens and those from the 'west'. As a physical landscape, international development in Niger constructs a particular view of whiteness which, even though invisible to many of 'white westerners', is clearly visible to those their work was directed towards (Loftsdóttir 2008:203-206). Analyzing whiteness had not originally been the goal of my research. However, to some extent, even though not theorizing it clearly prior to arriving in Niger, my research was already revolving around this issue, which took on a sharper focus after a period of living there. Feminist scholars and anthropologists have emphasized the importance of self-positioning to make visible the relationships of power involved in research and dissemination (Okely 1992). The writing of auto-ethnography – where the researcher positions him or herself within the text

– has, in a similar way, been seen as important for critical scholarly reflection. Auto-ethnographic writing engages with the political context in which the research takes place, making this context visible to the reader (Lambek 2005:230). Auto-ethnography can also be seen as an important methodological tool and, as stressed by Laura Voloder (2008), a conscious self-positioning that can be used as a heuristic resource (p.33). Thus, instead of seeing the 'intrusive self' as a hindrance, it becomes an important resource for the research (Cohen 1992: 226). Such an approach requires that the researcher uses his or her position consciously during the research process – not only afterward – as a source of information and insight. In studying racialization and racism, I see such critical self-positioning as extremely valuable. My own interaction with WoDaaBe was, for example, particularly informative in helping to understand racialization and to gain deeper insights into the larger relations of power. To give one example: a few times WoDaaBe who did not know me did not want to enter my house due to the fear that I would later accuse them of stealing something. That in itself (which was later elaborated on in conversations with other WoDaaBe who knew me better and thus trusted me more) told me something about the asymmetrical relationships of power between the 'anasara' in Niger and the WoDaaBe. This was in stark con-

tradition to how WoDaaBe would normally explain their relationship with 'white westerners', usually emphasizing that these were relationship of 'equals' and of 'friendships.' Also, my own relationship with other 'white westerners' in Niger was equally informative in understanding how whiteness operated within this particular context.

### **Extended case method**

Analyzing whiteness in Iceland was more difficult, perhaps because I was a part of a naturalized majority in a society where 'white' skin color is not much mentioned or reflected on. In a country like Iceland, it is still no less important to try to understand how whiteness is generated and made meaningful to different individuals based on particular localized and global contexts. Icelanders themselves have not always been firmly situated within the equation 'white/civilized' as can be seen in historical sources, where Icelanders were often described as semi-savage (Loftsdóttir 2008). Contemporary Iceland is shaped by a sudden increase in immigration, numbers of foreign nationals multiplying from 1.8 % of the population in 1996 to 8.1 % in 2011 (Statistical Series 2009). Polish people have been the largest immigration group in Iceland (see discussion for example in Skaptadóttir 2004), and in some public media one can see racialized discussions of Polish people, where they are in some sense

seen as less 'white' than the other Icelanders.

Asking Icelandic people directly about their views of race and racism is, however, only fruitful to a certain point as most people have never reflected on their social categorization as 'white.' As John Jr. Hartigan has pointed out, a focus on specific events can be useful to explore racialized identity (Hartigan 1997), but such an emphasis can be seen as deriving from the extended case method that anthropologists have used for some time (Englund 2002). When a huge debate arose in Iceland in 2007 in relation to the re-publication of the nursery rhyme 'The Ten Little Negros', I saw it as an extremely valuable opportunity to gain deeper insights into how whiteness was articulated within an Icelandic context. In this instance, the extended case giving my research a more solid 'ground' to stand on and to address this issue in a meaningful way to other Icelanders. Victor Turner has pointed out how 'crisis' or 'social drama' can in fact make basic value systems or certain organizational principles more transparent and visual (1974:35). Focusing on a specific case embodied in 'social drama' can be seen as particularly important with issues like racism, which as stressed by scholars, increasingly becomes coded under different labels, making it more difficult to target (Balibar 2000; Harrison 2002). Taking a particular 'social drama' as a point of analy-

sis in research in relation to racism can thus help to detangle or make visible aspects that can be difficult to approach in another context. In addition to analysing blog debates written by Icelanders, I interviewed 'white' native Icelanders and 'black' people with immigrant backgrounds from Africa, asking questions such as what they felt about the debate regarding the book republication and about the book itself. Asking about the nursery rhyme generated much more interesting and vivid responses than just asking more generally about racism. Focusing on the rhyme also opened an historical angle, as the rhyme was originally published in Iceland in 1922 and republished few times since then. I saw the analysis of the social environment of the original publication of the rhyme as an important part in deconstructing the persistent views in Iceland that racist ideas did not exist in the past, thus pointing out that the publication in 1922 fitted well within other reproductions of racist images in Europe and in Iceland (Loftsdóttir 2011a).

### **Ethnography**

My last point on methodology and whiteness is to emphasize the importance of ethnographic analysis for a more nuanced analysis. That does not mean that all research has to be ethnographic, but as a research tool ethnographic research is different from media analysis and interviews (both methods that I have also em-

ployed in my own research) in the sense that it generates different kinds of information. As stressed by Bronislaw Malinowski who shaped this particular methodology in the early 20th century, scholars should analyse the discrepancies between what people say on one hand about what they do and what they actually do in everyday situations (1984), the inconsistencies not always being visible to themselves. Malinowski highlights how people verbally describe certain social structures within society and their own thoughts and feelings about them, while acting on those in a completely different way and often not consistently. Ethnographic analysis thus gains deeper understandings of the lived realities of people, and how whiteness is expressed in particular localized circumstances while intersecting with other aspects, often in contradictory ways. Without this approach, we risk fixing whiteness as something essential, as a thing in and of itself. My example of certain WoDaaBe hesitating to go into my apartment in Niamey, contradicted, for example, what most people had stressed in conversations, emphasizing their friendship with 'anasara', downplaying any relationship of power. In addition, through ethnographic analysis it was more possible to analyse the intersection of gender and racialized identity, where whiteness was not uniformly associated with power.

Post-structuralists, under the influence of Michel Foucault, have emphasized that categories are discursively created. However, as highlighted by Paul Rabinow (1984:10), Foucault's sense of discourse involved not only textual representations but lived relationships and practices. This indicates that it is not enough to analyse discourse only from the perspective of language or visual images, but we have to look at the negotiation and destabilization of hegemonic discourses by various actors as evident in practice. Ethnographic methods can thus make agency more visible and help to draw out the intersection of various forms of differentiation (Loftsdóttir 2011b:200).

### Conclusion

Whiteness constitutes a shifting category, as various scholars have identified (Jackobsen 1998), in addition to intersecting with other categories such as gender, sexuality and age. My own discomfort of associating myself with 'the flesh of a fish' reflects these overlapping and entangled issues at play: I was reminded of the structural relationships of racialization that I was a part of, regardless of whether I wanted to be or not, the desire to be liked and even seen as beautiful just to mention few. I have discussed three methodological tools that I have found useful to approach whiteness; tools have intersected in the process of my own work.

Critical self-positioning is important in order to situate oneself in relation to the subject, simultaneously as have important methodological potentials. Using extended case examples helped me tease out notions of whiteness in interviews, in addition to anchoring, more effectively, my analysis in an historical perspective. Lastly, ethnographic analysis gives us a different kind of date, helping to complicate and gain a more nuanced understanding of racialization in the present. As a scholarly subject, we need to use a broad range of methods to analyze and understand whiteness in all its complexity and as a historically constituted phenomena, with both local and global expressions.

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