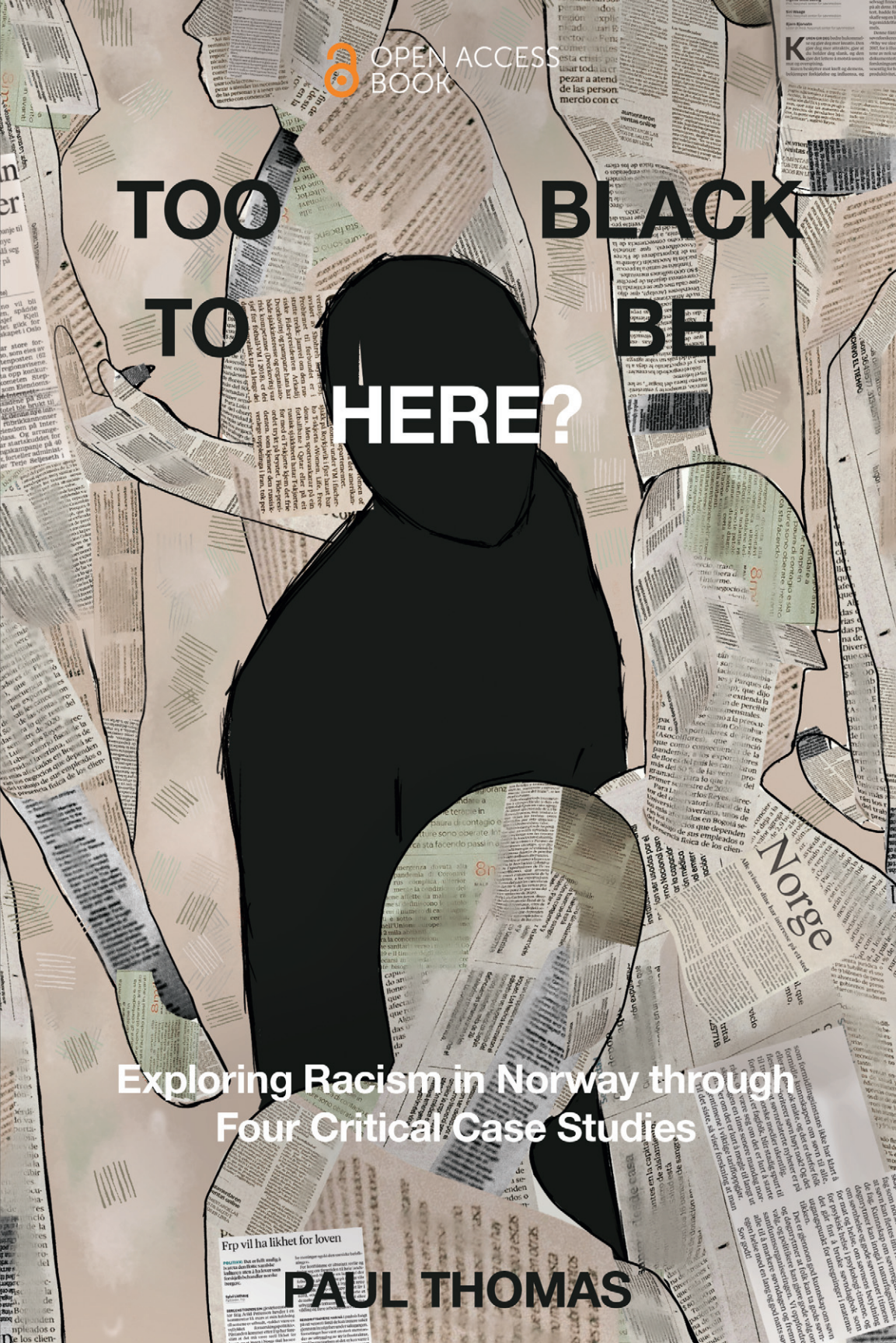


TOO TO BE HERE?

Exploring Racism in Norway through
Four Critical Case Studies

PAUL THOMAS



Too Black to Be Here?

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Too Black to Be Here? Exploring Racism in Norway through Four Critical Case Studies

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

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Published by Emerald Publishing Limited.



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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83662-165-2 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83662-162-1 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83662-164-5 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Author

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Introduction

At the university, I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much-praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that no one, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned, could tell the story we had to tell. (Achebe, 2016)

The citation above by Chinua Achebe, the renowned Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic, echoes a profound truth that resonates deeply with the author as a Black-Norwegian academic. Achebe's assertion encapsulates a sentiment that has guided my own journey of reflection and analysis. Literature, media representations, and academic discourse perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresentations of people of color, including those of African descent, compelled me to confront the inadequacy of external narratives in capturing the complexity and richness of our lived experiences. Like Achebe, I came to the realization that outsiders, no matter how gifted or well-meaning, cannot authentically tell or understand the stories of marginalized communities.

This realization served as a catalyst for me to embark on a journey of "re-analysis," particularly in the context of the four cases examined in this book. Each case serves as a microcosm of the broader societal issues surrounding race, privilege, and identity in Norway. The aim was to scrutinize these narratives through a critical lens, informed by research and theory, to uncover the nuances and complexities often overlooked or misrepresented in mainstream discourse. Furthermore, Achebe's assertion underscores the importance of marginalized voices reclaiming their own narratives and asserting their agency in shaping representations of their communities. In a world where dominant narratives often perpetuate stereotypes and distortions, it is imperative for individuals from marginalized backgrounds to assert their own perspectives and truths.

In every utopia, including the societal model often admired in Norway, there exists a suppressed realm of shadows. This book ventures into the depths of these obscured realms, aiming to elucidate the experiences of the racialized amid the

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83662-162-120251001

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darkness of utopia. Through diligent inquiry and scholarly discourse, it endeavors to unveil the complexities and injustices that persist beneath the surface of Norway's purported "colorblindness." By incorporating marginalized voices and challenging prevailing narratives, it argues that we can work toward a more inclusive and equitable discourse that recognizes the complexity and diversity of human experiences. It is not merely the "brown" shift in demographics that presents challenges in Norway; rather, it is the unprecedented nature of this transition in a country historically characterized by homogeneity in terms of skin color, religion and other identity markers. Moreover, what complicates matters further is the failure of some "native" White Norwegians to recognize their own biases against non-White individuals. As an educator in Norway, the above presents serious challenges. I find inspiration in the warnings voiced by the Black educator Carter G. Woodson almost a century ago.

As another has well said, to handicap a student by teaching him that his face is black is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one's aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime. It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. (Woodson, 2023, p. 8)

This book is not merely a recounting of events but a critical exploration and analysis of the intricate web of racism in Norway through the lens of four contemporary and well-publicized cases. These cases serve as focal points for dissecting the systemic issues at play, unraveling the layers of prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization faced by people of color in Norway. Each case study is meticulously examined to understand its roots, manifestations, and repercussions. By delving into the specific details and contexts of these incidents, the book aims to provide an incisive exploration of how racism operates.

Furthermore, the book engages with Carter G. Woodson's powerful metaphor of mental "lynching" to underscore the gravity of the harm inflicted upon people of color when they are taught that their race determines their worth and potential. This metaphor serves as a lens through which to analyze the psychological and emotional toll of racism, highlighting how it undermines self-esteem, aspirations, and a sense of belonging. The convergence of a mixed-race teenager (Benjamin Hermansen), a Somali female poet and social critic (Sumaya Jirde Ali), and non-White-adopted individuals in Norway may initially appear disparate, with little in common except their shared pigmentation. However, their collective experiences serve to expose the insidious influence of White supremacist ideologies and seemingly innocuous "off-the-cuff" racist remarks as elucidated by Bonilla-Silva's concept of "racism without racists." These individuals, despite their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, are united by their encounters with systemic racism and discrimination.

Paradoxically, the racists failed to anticipate that their physical and verbal racialized violence would serve to unite disparate non-White groups that seemingly have nothing in common. What commonality could there possibly be between an adopted girl from South Korea or China and a Muslim woman wearing a hijab? Yet, it is the pervasive gaze of the White racist, such as White Islamophobe Anders Breivik, rooted in a socially constructed fantasy, that inadvertently creates a shared experience among individuals from diverse backgrounds. In Norway, this shared experience manifests in unexpected solidarity, as exemplified by a South Korean person and a Somali person standing together under a Black Lives Matter banner. Despite their contrasting backgrounds and motivations, these individuals find themselves compelled to confront and resist the systemic oppression they encounter.

Through their collective experiences of discrimination and marginalization, they are united in their resolve to challenge and dismantle the structures of racism within Norwegian society. In doing so, they inadvertently catalyze and organize anti-racist action among Norway's diverse non-White communities, forging bonds of solidarity that transcend their individual differences. The book invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of racism and consider their role in challenging and dismantling oppressive structures. The book urges educators, policymakers and advocates to join the fight against racism and work toward a future where all, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, sex, or religion, can thrive.

Frantz Fanon's assertion that the coexistence of White and Black races has birthed a profound psycho-existential complex underscores the urgent need for critical examination and deconstruction. "I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the White and Black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it" (Fanon, 1986, p. 149). In alignment with Fanon's poignant sentiment, this book endeavors to serve as a potent instrument for dissecting the intricate workings of racism within the Norwegian context. Rather than merely recounting incidents of discrimination and prejudice, this book seeks to delve deep into the underlying mechanisms and ideologies that perpetuate racial inequalities in Norwegian society. By unraveling the complexities of systemic racism, it aims to illuminate the pervasive nature of racial biases and their detrimental effects on individuals and communities.

Despite being born into slavery, Fredrick Douglass (1818–1895) taught himself to read and write, defying laws that prohibited enslaved individuals from receiving an education. His intellect and eloquence propelled him to the forefront of the antislavery cause. In his memoir, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass describes a poignant exchange with his owner, Master Hugh, regarding the prohibition of his education. Master Hugh vehemently opposed Douglass's learning to read and write, expressing the belief that education would render an enslaved person unfit for servitude. He infamously declared "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world" (Douglass, 2014, pp. 117, 118). Master Hugh feared that education would empower Douglass to challenge his enslavement and ultimately seek freedom.

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Much like Douglass's master, those invested in perpetuating systemic racism prefer people to remain unaware of racism's nuances.

This book seeks to modestly contribute to greater awareness of racism's language and structure, encouraging more individuals to familiarize themselves with the intricacies of racial injustice. Just as Master Hugh feared the empowerment that education would bring to Douglass, so too do proponents of the status quo fear an enlightened populace who may challenge prevailing systems of oppression. By illuminating the pervasive manifestations of racism in Norwegian society, I hope to evoke a sense of discontent and dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs. Much like Douglass's quest for literacy threatened the foundations of slavery, the pursuit of racial literacy among Norwegians has the potential to unsettle entrenched power structures and catalyze meaningful social change. Just as Douglass's acquisition of literacy marked the first step toward his emancipation, so too can the acquisition of racial literacy serve as a catalyst for collective liberation and justice in Norway and beyond.

Each chapter offers a compelling narrative that not only sheds light on the persistent manifestations of racism and systemic oppression but also calls for critical reflection and collective action to dismantle structural inequalities. In terms of methodology, this research employed a systematic literature review where pertinent keywords were meticulously entered into the media archive *Retriever*. The process continued until a saturation point was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive scope of relevant articles. Subsequently, a meticulous selection process identified representative articles, which then underwent thorough content analysis. An interdisciplinary framework enriched the analysis of the resulting findings, drawing insights from critical race theory, whiteness studies, post-structural theory (exemplified by the work of Michel Foucault among others), and postcolonial theory. These theoretical lenses provided nuanced perspectives and facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding race, privilege and identity in Norwegian society. The author conducted all translations from Norwegian to English, ensuring maximum accuracy and fidelity to the original texts. Where doubt existed, several colleagues were consulted, and decisions based on interrater reliability. This meticulous approach aimed to uphold the integrity of the research and minimize the potential for misinterpretation or distortion of the data.

Chapter 1 introduces us to Benjamin Hermansen, whose tragic murder serves as a stark reminder of the deadly consequences of unchecked racism and White supremacy. Through his story, we are confronted with the urgent need for greater awareness and education surrounding issues of race and ethnicity. Benjamin's narrative compels us to engage in meaningful dialogue and advocacy for genuine inclusivity and social justice. Chapter 2 delves into the aftermath of Anders Breivik's ghastly attacks, highlighting the deeper societal issues rooted in White supremacy that fueled his actions. By examining Breivik's motivations and the societal conditions that enabled his radicalization, we gain insight into the enduring legacy of racism and the imperative to confront and dismantle systems of White supremacy. Chapter 3 brings to light Sumaya Ali Jirde's traumatic experience of racial abuse, underscoring the enduring silence and complicity that

often accompany acts of injustice. Sumaya's ordeal serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive racism that continues to plague communities of color, demanding a shift in societal attitudes toward recognizing the humanity and equality of all individuals.

Finally, Chapter 4 explores the tragic case of Johanne Ihle-Hansen, shedding light on the pervasive nature of racism within Norwegian society and the transnational dimensions of structural racism inherent in adoption practices. Through Johanne's story, we confront the systemic failures within adoption oversight and regulation, emphasizing the need for ethical and equitable adoption practices grounded in principles of social justice and human rights. These chapters challenge us to confront uncomfortable truths, confront our own biases, and advocate for meaningful change. This book serves as a call to action, urging readers to engage in nonstop education, dialogue, and advocacy in the ongoing struggle for racial justice and equality. By embracing the responsibility to confront racism in all its forms, we can work toward fostering a more equitable and inclusive society for future generations.

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Chapter 1

Black Skin, Targeted Hate: The Benjamin Hermansen Case

He [Negro] is a social and not a personal or human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence... his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease – cancer perhaps, or tuberculosis – which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured... Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his. (James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 2017, p. 26)

On January 26, 2001, two young men and a young woman from a neo-Nazi milieu, the Boot Boys, intoxicated by White supremacist ideology, goaded each other on to physically assault random immigrants. They drove to Holmlia, a neighborhood in the southern part of Oslo, Norway's capital city, roughly 12 kilometers southeast of the city center. Benjamin Hermansen was a 15-year-old boy of mixed heritage – a White Norwegian mother and a Ghanian father – who passed away when Benjamin was just 4 years old. Benjamin was chatting with a friend when the neo-Nazi youth, easily distinguishable by their stereotypical appearance, pulled up in a car: shaved heads symbolizing rebellion against societal norms and concomitant dedication to perceived militant or authoritarian ideology, combat boots that reinforce an aura of strength and aggression, along with Nazi paraphernalia such as swastikas and other hate symbols, all with the aim of projecting an image of power and dominance and striking fear in the hearts of “non-Aryans,” to borrow from their vocabulary. A 16-year-old friend of Benjamin, who also faced the predators but managed to escape, stated that the neo-Nazis were “on a manhunt” and “could have assaulted anyone with a different skin color” (Buggeland, VG, 2001). He goes on to state:

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83662-162-120251002

I screamed “run” to Benjamin and took off running. However, the two almost got hold of him a couple of times and managed to block his way. They pushed the 15-year-old Norwegian-African into a corner near the Spar store, positioning his back against the fence at the food center’s warehouse entrance. Stumbling and cornered, Benjamin had no choice but to leap over the fence. But he fell to his stomach and was motionless on the ground. Then one of the neo-Nazis sat on Benjamin and stabbed him several times, first in the side and then in the stomach and chest. Benjamin screamed, according to the 16-year-old. (Buggeland, VG, 2001)

Today, the name Benjamin Hermansen is one of the most recognizable in Norway. His murder enraged many in the country: the royal family, the Prime Minister and his cabinet, members of Parliament, and various figures from the world of sports, culture, and entertainment publicly denounced the perpetrators and called for the nation to unite against the forces of bigotry. The news garnered attention abroad. The BBC, for instance, reported: “Nearly 40,000 people, including politicians and royals, took to the streets to show their disgust for what had happened. Until then, most Norwegians never considered racism to be a serious problem in their largely White nation” (BBC, 2002). The demonstrations were the largest ever since World War II until then (Nrk, 2021). Much ink flowed from day one with regular secretions into the public domain, paying homage to the memory of Benjamin Hermansen. Typing the key words *Benjamin Hermansen* and *Holmlia-drapet* (Holmlia murder) in *Retriever*, the leading company in media analysis and communication insight in the Nordics, turned up 2,802 hits. As indicated by the peaks in Fig. 1, interest in the case reached its highest points in 2011 and 2021, aligning with the 10th and 20th anniversaries of the murder.

As previously mentioned, Benjamin Hermansen is one of the most recognized names in Norway today. Every year, on the anniversary of his death, memorial events are held in various cities across Norway. Among others, candlelight vigils are held, speeches are made, and performances are enacted to honor his memory. The Benjamin Prize, established in 2002, is awarded annually to individuals or organizations that have made substantial contributions to advancing diversity, equality, and anti-racism in Norway. The prize serves as a tribute to Benjamin Hermansen’s legacy and ideals. Schools utilize Benjamin’s legacy as a cornerstone for anti-racism education, aiming to nurture empathy, tolerance, and comprehension of associated values within a country that has witnessed a steep rise in its Black and brown population.

Among the sensational headlines bidding to outdo each other in voicing outrage, the national newspaper *Aftenposten* (2001) carried the following headline: “They say it is the first time.” The author, Inger Anne Olsen (2001), wrote:

The last week must have been a turning point for Norway. We presumably have lost our innocence. Neo-Nazis killed a boy last weekend, likely because he was black. But white Norwegians have killed, threatened, stabbed, set fire to, and beat up black people for many decades.