

Normalising racial boundaries. The Norwegian dispute about the term *neger*¹

Contemporary Europe exhibits intriguing differences and striking commonalities concerning contemporary images of Blacks (Dewitte 1990; Nederveen Pieterse 1992; Pred 2000). According to race theory (Goldberg 1993; Winant 2000: 188), racial thinking and practice is historically contingent, fluid, continuously shifting, relational and processual. Present day racialising is deeply rooted in history as a *longue durée* in which racial signification was gradually inscribed on the human body over several hundred years of European expansion and hegemony. With extra-European immigration to Europe since the Second World War, many observers have noted a shift from classic, so-called scientific racism, to a new culturalist rhetoric (Balibar 1991; Barker 1981; Goldberg 1993; Hervik 1999; Miles 1993; Rex 1986; Stolcke 1995; Taguieff 1987; and Wieviorka 1995). According to these analysts a rearticulated link between nation and race can be observed. The language of hierarchy is being replaced by one of difference and the idea of cultural difference is working to prevent specific categories of racially coded people from being included in the nation.

This is an apt description of the situation in several European countries right now, but too generally framed to capture the more specific nature and interaction of the many different discourses relevant to the creation and legitimisation of racially coded forms of national boundary maintenance. Culturalist discourses depend on other discourses, among them discourses involving the use of key terms of racial reference (such as, for example, 'black' and 'coloured'). When people construct racial boundaries, they draw on a mixture of discourses, rooted in different and not necessarily racialised social realms, with different histories and degrees of legitimacy. The current normalisation of certain racial categories as self-evident often derives from the legitimacy of well established historical themes, concepts and lines of conflict in these other discourses. As researchers we should therefore not just look too narrowly at the terms of racial reference (or at racially coded equivalents, such as 'culture'), but look more broadly at the complex mixtures of discourses within which racial boundaries are articulated

1 Earlier versions of this article were presented in 2001 at the presidential symposium 'Initiating cross-Atlantic dialogues on race and culture in anthropology' at the AAA meetings in Washington DC and at the opening conference of the Programme of Applied Ethics, Norwegian University of Science and Technology [NTNU], Trondheim; in 2002 as guest lectures at the CIESAS Sureste in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Mexico and at the University of Ngaoundéré, Cameroon; and in 2003 as a NIAS lecture in Wassenaar, The Netherlands. The research work was funded by the IMER programme of the Research Council of Norway. Important revisions were made during my stay as 'Guest of the Rector' at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NIAS) in Spring 2003. I thank Angela Jansen and Petronella Kievit-Tyson at the NIAS for efficient editorial help, and Peter Pels and an anonymous reviewer for valuable comments.

and normalised. Contemporary racialising practices exhibit a complex and ambiguous play of determinacy and indeterminacy that is worth exploring comparatively in order to dismantle contemporary forms of racial thinking. Differences in Europe concerning racialised national boundaries can to some extent be attributed to the nature of the specific discourses involved. Such an endeavour can potentially also contribute to what Nederveen Pieterse (1992: 9) has aptly termed cultural decolonisation.

In what follows I present an interpretive analysis of a debate in the Norwegian mass media (and around many lunch and dinner tables) in the winter of 2000–1. The dispute centred on the word *neger*, a linguistic category that has the same etymological origin and – more or less – the same reference as the English word ‘Negro’. This is not the most dramatic dispute about minority issues in Norway over the last few years. The most influential public debates have concerned female circumcision, forced marriage, the murder of female relatives in order to save male honour, the authoritarian views of Muslim leaders and ‘immigrant criminality’; most have focused on culture and Muslim religion as explanatory concepts (Dessau 2003). The debate about the word *neger* lacked the serious drama and the associated moral panics of these other debates (see Hall *et al.* 1978: 3–18). It did not focus on culture and religion, but on the way majority peoples label fellow inhabitants of (wholly or partly) African descent. It is, however, linked to these more dramatic discourses: first, because similar concepts often underpin very different discourses; and, second, because these more dramatic debates constitute the cultural and political climate in which the *neger* argument takes place.

As a white, female anthropologist, I have spent the last thirty years studying the everyday lives and moral concepts of majority men, women and children in Norway.² Among other things, I have focused on the centrality of the home in Norway, on the ways equality is conceived as sameness, and on individualism in terms of independence, self-sufficiency and self-determination. The present analysis of the dispute about the word *neger* is part of a much larger project on debates about immigration in Norway.³ I read closely 80 contributions to the debate,⁴ and in selecting examples for this article, have sought to present the most typical arguments and to demonstrate the way in which the debate unfolded over time. I see this kind of public debate as part of an ongoing

2 This includes two long-term fieldwork experiences in the city of Bergen (Gullestad 1979, 1984/2002, 1992) and ethnographic work on a collection of autobiographies written by ordinary people (Gullestad 1996).

3 Gullestad 1997a; 1997b; 2002a; 2000b; 2000c; 2003a; 2003b; 2004.

4 In addition to following the public debate during the autumn of 2000 and the spring of 2001, I have participated in numerous informal *neger* debates with many different kinds of people (in terms of age, gender and class), both during the media debate and later. The debate started in a newspaper that is dependent upon sales to non-subscribers, and spread to other newspapers and radio and television. It consisted of letters to the editor, interviews, commentaries, op-ed articles, radio ‘causeries’ and one prime-time television talk show. I read several national newspapers (*Dagbladet*, *Aftenposten*, *Dagsavisen*, *Morgenbladet*, *Klassekampen*), and also other newspapers when I learned that they had published an article on this issue. The media made a selection of the contributions based on ‘journalistic criteria’, at varying degrees valuing sensation, polarisation, conflict and the views of celebrities; they thus seem to have contributed significantly to the current hegemonic perspective. This implies a bias in the direction of over-representing those who opposed the initial claim. I have also had access to the Norwegian Language Council’s correspondence in the form of responses to inquiries about the term *neger* over several years, together with the documents used in the board’s discussion of this subject. All the quotes in the present article are translated from the Norwegian by me.

cultural and political struggle over the power to classify, define and label minority identities within the nation state. The analysis focuses on the debate as a struggle about the nature of national identity which contributed to the normalisation of specific racial categories.

The Norwegian background

Norway is an interesting case for the analysis of national and racial thinking, as a liberal democratic welfare state with a contradictory Nordic blend of egalitarian welfare state policies and an open capitalist economy. It became an independent nation state in 1905 after having been the junior partner in a union with Sweden for almost one hundred years; before that it was ruled by the Danish crown for four hundred years. After 1905 this independence was interrupted by the Nazi German occupation in 1940–5. Norwegians are divided with regard to the European Union, as two referendums in 1972 and 1994 have shown, so far with the opposition on the winning side. Despite North Sea oil, many people feel insecure about where their society is heading. This insecurity is exacerbated by the perceived influx of extra-European migrants.

Extra-European immigrants started coming to Norway in the late 1960s, and the pattern of labour immigration was different from that observed in countries such as Germany and Sweden. It started later, the relative numbers were smaller and the authorities did not encourage the recruitment of workers. In everyday Norwegian the term ‘immigrant’ (*innvandrere*) is today racially coded, and covers people who have moved permanently to Norway, refugees, asylum seekers who have been granted asylum, and people who move back and forth between continents. Such racial coding occurs despite the fact that the countries of origin are many, with the largest number of migrants coming from Pakistan, followed by Sweden, Denmark, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq and Iran. At present, there are about 35,000 inhabitants from African countries that include Somalia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Gambia and many others. Personal narratives (Wamwere 2000), research reports (Høgmo 1998) and more official reports (ECRI 1997; 2000, Lundered 2000; SMED 2001: 93; SOPEMI 2000; UDI 2000) indicate that extra-European immigrants and their descendants suffer discrimination over housing, jobs and education, as well as in the media and everyday life. Many work in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations, and earn considerably less than native Norwegians of the same age and educational attainment. Initially the difference in earnings is 40 per cent, after 25 years about 20 per cent (Barth *et al.* 2004).

The Norwegian media are characterised by a large reading public and many local newspapers, but a high quality press is lacking and few journalists come from an ethnic minority background. The experience of discrimination is often trivialised by some form of denial (‘the problem is not racism, but . . .’). Minorities who complain about racialisation and racism are often seen as aggressive: ‘too sensitive’, ‘too thin skinned’ or ‘obsessed by skin colour’. The cultural and political climate also changed in the beginning of the 1990s – from a reluctance to deal with the negative aspects of minority life in Norway (especially the oppression of women within some groups) to an increasing focus on such matters. When ‘immigrants’ are mentioned in the Norwegian mass media, the dominant perspective assumes that they are a burden to Norwegian society; the everyday, non-sensational discrimination many immigrants suffer is barely mentioned (Lindstad and Fjeldstad 1999: 44–5).

Since the Second World War, people in Norway have generally associated the term racism with Nazism, the former segregationist policies in the southern United States and the apartheid regime in South Africa. In popular perception racism is located in the hateful intentions of specific individuals, not in structural economic inequalities or in discursive resources available more or less to everybody.⁵ As in other European countries, the word racist is often mentioned as a part of a denial (Blommaert and Verschuere 1998; Hervik ed. 1999; Van Dijk 1993). The assumption that people are generally afraid of being called racists is often used as an explanation both of specific blameworthy acts and the lack of adequate action. This paradoxically implies that the word racism is dominant in public debates, while experiences of racialisation and racism are seldom publicly recognised and discussed in the media.

People in Norway generally imagine that the Norwegian nation is homogeneous and play down both the considerable historical immigration that has taken place from other European countries and the existence of minorities such as the Sami (formerly called Lapps), the Finns (*kvener* and *skogsfinner*), the Rom and Romani, and the Jews. Until the 1970s, official policy in relation to these minorities was assimilation. Today the Sami have obtained the status of an indigenous people, while the other peoples mentioned above are classified as 'national minorities'. For historical reasons, different minorities therefore take up different symbolic positions within the hierarchy of the Norwegian national imagination. While, for example, the maintenance of a separate Sami culture is now encouraged, immigrants are generally expected to become 'integrated' and to adopt 'basic Norwegian values'.

The beginning of the *neger* debate

The debate that I will discuss here started in November 2000. A number of individuals, as well as the organisation 'Afrikan Youth in Norway',⁶ had been trying to start a public discussion in Norway about the word *neger* for several years, but without success. In the media their efforts were partly ignored and partly ridiculed. The one who eventually managed to initiate the debate in Norway was a well-known black athlete, John Ertzgaard, in a letter to the editor of *Dagbladet*,⁷ a newspaper that combines the sensationalism of the boulevard press with a tradition of liberal cultural and political debate. Knowing that the media generally value the points of view of people who are already famous, Ertzgaard used his position as a celebrity to make people in Norway aware of how he feels about being called a *neger*:

5 Social scientists in Norway, such as Inger-Lise Lien and Ottar Brox, have contributed to the confirmation of this popular view, while other social scientists, such as Anders Todal Jenssen, Joron Phil and Thomas Hylland Eriksen have argued against it. See Gullestad (2004) for a discussion of the social science debates about culture and race in Norway, and for references to the works of the relevant scholars.

6 This is the correct spelling of the unusual name of the organisation.

7 *Dagbladet* 15 November 2000, p. 49. Ertzgaard's celebrity is based on sport, one of the two realms traditionally open to black excellence in Europe and the United States (the other is entertainment: Nederveen Pieterse 1992). Ertzgaard's main black opponent in the debate is a well-known Norwegian entertainer called Johan Golden.

The truth is that the word has a malevolent and very negative history. Africans have never referred to themselves as *negre* [plural of *neger*]. Europeans have used this word to describe black people from the African continent. The word was used during the slave period. Africans commanded little respect as human beings; they were treated like animals and a pest . . .

'I am not a *neger* from Toten,⁸ but a Norwegian-African!'

In his opposition to the word *neger*, Ertzgaard introduces a discourse about the historical period of slavery. Norwegians are implicitly grouped together with Europeans in seeing Africans as 'animals and a pest'. It will be clear below that this interpretation challenges widespread popular understandings of history in Norway that place Norway outside the history of European imperialism and therefore see the country as free of responsibility for the failings of colonialism. *Dagbladet* followed up Ertzgaard's letter to the editor the very same day with an illustrated two-page interview with him and some of his friends. None of them cared for the term *neger*. Ertzgaard preferred to be called 'African', 'Norwegian-African', 'coloured' (*farget*) or 'black' (*svart*) – anything but *neger*. 'The term is offensive and depresses me,' he said. 'I hear it constantly, and express my opinion to those who use it. I hope that the word will gradually fall out of use.' As a father, he has one particular wish – 'that our [four-month-old] daughter, Kaitesi, will never be referred to as a negress'.⁹

In the interview Ertzgaard refers to the semantic field of which the word *neger* is a part, and makes a choice among the available colour-coded terms in the Norwegian language. He prefers the Norwegian words 'black', 'coloured' and 'Norwegian-African'. These terms are as racialising as the word *neger*, but for historical reasons do not for him carry the same burden. In many other countries, the use of the words corresponding to *neger* has undergone considerable change in the last forty years. In Paris in the 1930s the term *negritude* was actually central in a literary and cultural movement associated with such well-known black authors as Damas, Senghor and Césaire. This movement was a forerunner of the 'black is beautiful' campaigns in the United States, and thus of the subsequent change of descriptive usage from 'negro' to 'black'. During the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, North American Blacks appropriated the word 'black' (still in use), later shifting to 'Afro-American' (now out of fashion) and then to 'African-American' (still in use). Thus, at a specific historical conjuncture 'black' was created and established as a cultural and political category in opposition to 'negro'. The word was taken out of the way it had been articulated, and was rearticulated in a new way (Hall 2000). Not only in the United States, but also in England, Germany and France, it is now no longer acceptable call another person *negro*, *neger* or *nègre*. This transnational historical development is the discursive horizon for John Ertzgaard and the organisation Afrikan Youth in Norway when they demand that the word *neger* should no longer be used for blacks in Norway.

On the same page in the newspaper as the interview with Ertzgaard and his friends, Finn Erik Vinje, professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Oslo, was interviewed to put Ertzgaard's supplication into scholarly perspective. Vinje was no doubt chosen because he has a high media profile in Norway, and was thus well-known to readers. He did not respond to Ertzgaard's invocation of the period of slavery, but

8 The status of Toten in the Norwegian popular imagination (outside Toten) could be compared to Iowa in the United States – a place allegedly full of country bumpkins.

9 *Dagbladet* 15 November 2000, p. 33.

chose to draw on a specific interpretation of the history of the Norwegian language. His main point was that ‘the tradition in Norway is that the term *neger* is not discriminatory. *Neger* means black, and is a neutral description of people with a darker skin color than us’. Vinje also said that ‘if some people are offended, we may make an effort to try to avoid it’. On the one hand, Vinje thus made a normative plea for a language use that is sensitive to the effects on those being labelled. On the other hand, he implicitly stated that those who are considered to have ‘a darker skin colour’ are not ‘us’. I see the question of who ‘we’ refers to as a key issue in the dispute. Who belong to the Norwegian nation – the ‘we’? Can a black person be ‘one of us’? Even though the interview was short, professor Vinje set the stage for the debate that followed. The fact that his remarks about Norwegian language use were in line with the ideas of those who felt like confronting Ertzgaard may have given them an extra boost to write letters to the editor.

Before we turn to this debate, it should be said that the key term in Norwegian racial discourse is ‘skin colour’. ‘Dark skin colour’ is a metonym for many different aspects of a person’s looks, the main point being that he or she ‘does not look Norwegian’, the way this is currently perceived. As a label *neger* is one particular specification of what it can mean to have dark skin colour. Majority discourse in Norway does not label a person as a *neger* because he speaks, acts, eats, dresses or worships in a particular way, but by recourse to appearance. *Neger* is most often used without malicious intent. Since it can be distinguished from such commonly used terms of harassment as *nigger*, *svarting*¹⁰ and *pakkis* – this last term refers primarily, but not only, to people of Pakistani descent, and is perhaps the most common derogatory term applied to people who ‘do not look Norwegian’ – many people regard *neger* as a neutral term. However, there are differences among the Norwegian majority as to who should be included in the category.¹¹ People who might be included differ in respect of physical appearance, social position and experience. *Neger* is thus a classificatory term used to label a variety of people, including Norwegian citizens. Some came from Africa as immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees or students, others from the African diaspora (for example, from the Caribbean, the United States and Canada); others were born in Norway to a white and a black parent and others were adopted by a Norwegian family as babies. The category thus includes people who have little in common other than an appearance that forms the basis for the majority to classify them as *negre* (plural of *neger*).

A summary of the debate

Ertzgaard’s letter to *Dagbladet* in November 2000 (together with the interviews with him and Professor Vinje) triggered many letters from readers and numerous journalistic interventions in the shape of interviews and comment in the following months. The points of view expressed are thus the points of view of middle-class people used to expressing themselves in writing. The debate soon spread to other newspapers and other media. The leader of the government’s Centre against Ethnic Discrimination

10 The substantive *svarting* is usually insulting in Norwegian, in contrast to the adjective *svart*.

11 Arve Beheim Karlsen, a young boy born in India and adopted into a Norwegian family, was chased to death in 1999 by two other youths shouting ‘Kill him. Kill that *neger*’. *Aftenposten* 2 February 2000, p. 3.

(SMED), Manuela Ramin-Osmundsen, herself black, emphasised at an early stage and in many newspapers that a debate about the term *neger* was long overdue:

Many people feel that using words is like crossing a minefield. Those who want to use words that do not offend, but are unsure about what is acceptable, seek our advice. They are looking for simple and common terms to characterise various ethnic groups. At the Centre, we advise people to avoid using the term *neger*, and suggest they use 'black' instead. Furthermore, we tell them to be aware of the context in which the term 'black' is used. In most of the cases it is probably more natural to refer to nationality, for example, 'my Nigerian neighbour' than to say 'my black neighbour'.¹²

As the leader of a government agency, Ramin-Osmundsen spoke both forcefully and carefully. Many majority contributors to the debate also supported Ertzgaard. Some maintained that the term *neger* is loaded with historical connotations, others that people have the right to determine their own identifying labels as a matter of general politeness rather than of language history.¹³ There was thus heterogeneity of opinion on the issue.

Ertzgaard's opponents saw no harm in the word *neger*, and insisted on continuing to use it. Like Vinje, many of them focused on their own good intentions, not on the performative effects. For example, one contributor to the reader's column wrote: 'If *neger* is perceived as negative, then this is due to an inferiority complex among those who are characterised as a *neger*, rather than to condescension on the part of those who use the term.' He ended his contribution with a challenge to Ertzgaard: 'Understand that the race to which you belong is called *neger* in Norwegian, whether you like it or not. And be proud of being a *neger* from Toten.'¹⁴ In a macho but egalitarian way, he thus drew on an explicit discourse about 'race,' seeing 'race' as an objective natural fact that rules out the possibility of choosing one's own identifying labels. Another contributor wrote: 'Words such as *neger* have never been used in a derogatory manner by others than racists. From now on anyone using the word is in danger of being branded as a racist.'¹⁵ He thus acknowledged that the word is sometimes used in racist harassment, but, like many others participating in the debate, was more concerned with the fact that majority people might unjustly be labelled racist than that some black people's disliked the term.

Several contributors responded to the historical reference in Ertzgaard's initial letter, but put forward a different understanding of Norwegian history: 'Is there something we do not understand since we do not have any experience of the slave trade?', one woman timidly asked.¹⁶ Like Professor Vinje, she was constructing a national framework of interpretation that implicitly excludes Ertzgaard, placing him in the marked position of an outsider. She defended Norwegian national innocence against the grievances implied in Ertzgaard's initial letter by claiming that 'we do not have any

12 *Dagbladet* 26 November 2000; *Drammens Tidende* 4 December 2000; *Fedrelandsvennen* 1 December 2000; *Stavanger Aftenblad* 20 December 2000. No newspaper followed up these many interventions with an interview with Ramin-Osmundsen on this issue.

13 Personally I agreed with the latter view. I was surprised by the degree of opposition to Ertzgaard's request, and particularly by the way this opposition was given centre stage in the mass media. Early in the debate I wrote a small op-ed article in *Aftenposten*, 13 December 2000, p. 13.

14 *Dagbladet* 19 November 2000, p. 53.

15 *Dagbladet* 22 November 2000, p. 47; *Aftenposten* 17 December 2000, p. 11.

16 *Dagbladet* 29 November 2000, p. 45.

experience with the slave trade'. The 'we' is here based on descent.¹⁷ Her contribution continued with a personal view on discrimination: 'For me, it is unthinkable to call you "black". That would really be discriminatory.'¹⁸ Thus, she anchored her definition of discrimination in her interpretation of the value of certain words within a colour-coded semantic field. As in many other languages, the word for black in Norwegian (*svart*) can also mean 'dirty'. In relation to the concreteness of black dirt, *neger* seems more abstract, and therefore more neutral. Her intervention indicates the degree to which the semantic field leaves Norwegians in a quandary, because for many people *svart* carries negative connotations, while *neger* does not.

Another contributor invoked a different set of discourses by maintaining that Ertzgaard was proposing a 'laundering of words', and asked: 'How politically correct (*politisk korrekte*) must we be?'¹⁹ Accusations of political correctness were frequently made in the *neger* debate, implying that people do not find it sufficient just to make a normative plea for more sensitive language use. This argument was often accompanied by an explicit rejection of the 'Americanisation' of the Norwegian way of life. These contributors to the debate thus support the present day transnational meanings of the expression 'politically correct', but not the current connotations of the English word 'negro'. Sometimes the argument about political correctness was accompanied by contempt for the alleged Norwegian *snillisme* (which may be an adaptation of the English word 'angelism', and literally translates as 'kindism') 'kindness to a fault' or 'foolish generosity'. This last expression implies that that it would be 'foolishly kind' to comply with Ertzgaard's request, and thus that his request was in some sense unreasonable.²⁰

On the third of December, an Oslo newspaper published an interview with the leader of the Centre for African Cultural Understanding in Oslo, Barth Niava, who came to Norway from Africa in 1969 at the age of 23.²¹ In the interview Niava said that hardly a day goes by for him without the experience of some form of racism 'on his body'. But he also said that he has nothing against being called a *neger*, because in his experience only a limited number of Norwegians use this word to insult. However, he did take great exception to being called a 'black devil' (*svarte faen*).²² The interviewer focused on Niava's acceptance of the word *neger*, and did not ask him to specify his almost daily experiences of racism.

Following the murder of a young black boy called Benjamin Hermansen in a racially motivated attack on 26 January 2001, the *neger* debate gained new momentum. More than 40,000 people took part in torchlight processions to demonstrate their opposition to racist violence. For a short period the times were characterised by a majority willingness – albeit ambivalent – to reflect on racialising practices. In Norway, the groups of political extremists (such as self-defined racists and Neo-Nazis) are small,

17 See Gullestad (1997b; 2002c; 2003a; 2003b) for the meaning of descent in contemporary Norway.

18 *Dagbladet* 29 November 2000, p. 45.

19 *Dagbladet* 19 December 2000, p. 45.

20 This attitude is also present in other European countries. In the Netherlands, for example, a common expression is *doodknuffelen van minderheden* ('petting the minorities to death').

21 *Dagsavisen* 3 December 2000.

22 The expression is a common curse in Norwegian. Barth Niava here refers to a court case in Trondheim. The cleaning assistant, Sophia Baidoo, was arrested without reason and called a 'black devil' by a police officer in October 1999. The town court determined that this was not a punishable offense. *Aftenposten* 29 August 2001, p. 6.

comprising only a few hundred individuals (Bjørge 1997; 1998; Fangen 1998). Even if a number of prominent members of Norwegian society identified with Nazism during the Second World War, as happened throughout most of Europe, most present day Norwegians distance themselves strongly from Nazism and racism.²³

During this time an advisor from the Norwegian Language Council told several newspapers that the word '*neger*' is quite all right in Norwegian'. In one newspaper he added '*Negre* (plural of *neger*) are regarded as having a value-neutral history in Norway'.²⁴ In this, he and the Norwegian Language Council followed up Professor Vinje's main line of thinking, but not the many interventions made by the leader of the Centre against Ethnic Discrimination (SMED). During the debate, these two government agencies therefore took different sides. Nevertheless, in 2002 the Norwegian Language Council quietly changed their policy concerning the word *neger*. They now advise people to be cautious when using this word.

The climax of the debate took place in a political discussion programme broadcast during prime-time on the state television channel NRK1.²⁵ It was a defining moment. In accordance with the usual polarising strategy of the media, the programme-makers brought together Lamisi Gurah, a 21 year-old black student and member of the organisation Afrikan Youth in Norway,²⁶ who was against the use of the word *neger*, and the Norwegian comedian and television celebrity, Johan Golden,²⁷ who was in favor. Two other people participated in the discussion: Noman Mubashir,²⁸ a journalist on local radio and television in southeastern Norway, and Professor Finn Erik Vinje.²⁹ Vinje and the moderator were the only participants to 'look Norwegian', according to current perceptions. Vinje is well into his sixties while the other three are relatively young. Lamisi Gurah was not only the youngest, but also the only woman, the only one who spoke with a foreign accent, the only one who was not already a celebrity and the one whose appearance came closest to that of the prototypical *neger*.

The television host, Knut Olsen, introduced the discussion by asking: 'Is it no longer acceptable to say *neger*, 'coloured' [*farget*] or 'black' [*svart*]? Will there be any less racism if we invent new words, or is this an impasse? Is it bad [*stygt*] to say *neger*?' What Ertzgaard (and those supporting him) had asked for was not that new words should be invented, but that existing words, such as 'coloured' and 'black', should be used instead. Although Olsen seemed to want to address majority racism in the programme, he thus started in a way that did not take Ertzgaard's request seriously. In the way I interpret his introduction and the composition of the panel, it was more or

23 Sensitivity towards this past may be of relevance when trying to understand the debate. According to the historian Odd-Bjørn Fure (2003), the Norwegian Holocaust has largely been neglected by Norwegian historians, and has to a considerable extent been taboo in the public realm.

24 *Morgenbladet* 9 December 2001, p. 4.

25 The programme 21, 19 February 2001.

26 As a member of the organisation Afrikan Youth in Norway, she had participated in making a brochure about sensitive words and had been interviewed in *Dagbladet* a few days before the television programme.

27 Johan Golden is the son of a white Norwegian mother and a father from the Caribbean. One of his grandparents is black, but he grew up in Norway (*Dagsavisen* 31 March 2001, p. 24).

28 Mubashir was born in Norway to immigrant parents who came to Norway from Pakistan.

29 Between the first interview and the television programme, Vinje had been interviewed again about the issue, in *Dagbladet*, 19 February 2001, p. 4.

less clear from the outset that the answer would be that there would be no less racism if people responded positively to the request to avoid the word *neger*, and therefore there would be no reason to do so.

And this is how things went. During the show, Lamisi Gurah said that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X used the word *neger* in their time 'but it has for long been recognised that this word is linked to slavery and colonialism, and that it was used to remove the identity of the Africans'. Therefore, she maintained, '*neger* is a racist word'. She based her view on a transnational framework of interpretation by stating that the word 'negro' is no longer used in English. She argued that dictionaries should inform their readers about this, and that 'one should not put people into categories because of their appearance, as if they were dogs or cats'. She also found it 'tragic that this is what people in Norway discuss in the year 2001'. Lamisi Gurah thus followed up the moderator's introduction about racism. But because of the negative value of the word 'racism', the individualised way in which it is commonly used, as well as the extreme sensitivity and embarrassment associated with it, many viewers interpreted her intervention as an allegation not only that the word is racist, but that the people who use it are racist too.

Noman Mubashir from the local television and radio channel explained that they had compiled an editor's code (*vær-varsom-plakat*) containing a long list of sensitive words to be avoided on their broadcasts. One of them was the term *neger*. 'The aim of the code is to make people in Norwegian society more conscious,' he said. 'We did not want to lay down the law, just to provide helpful guidelines.' The comedian Johan Golden voiced a different and contrasting point of view. He said that he was 'proud of his background', and that it made no difference to him if someone called him *neger*, or not. 'People pay too much attention to those who suffer from xenophobia. Instead, one should just be a bit smarter than they are. I even call my father a *neger*,' he said cheerfully. Nevertheless, he did not want to be regarded as a hyphenated person (for example Caribbean-Norwegian or African-Norwegian). 'I am one!', he proclaimed with emphasis. Golden's point of view was considerably more light-hearted than Ertzgaard or Gurah's. However, he too regarded 'xenophobia' as a fact that has to be tackled by being 'a bit smarter than they are'. Moreover, within the colour-coded semantic field in question, he too had an opinion on what he wants to be called, even though he voluntarily referred to himself as a *neger*.

Professor Vinje expressed his opposition more emphatically than in the first interviews. He stated that 'no purging of the Norwegian language is necessary', and repeated his contention that 'it is a fact that in the Norwegian tradition *neger* just refers to people with a dark skin colour, and therefore is neutral. The word has nothing to do with racism.' He based his view on the belief that 'most Norwegians would put a tick next to "neutral" if they were asked about the word in a questionnaire'. He also argued that changing terms does not change reality. 'If we delete the word *neger*,' he said, 'then another word will take its place, in the same manner as "lunatic asylum" [*dårekiste*] became "home for the mentally ill" [*sinnsykehus*] and finally "psychiatric hospital" [*psykiatrisk sykehus*]. We changed the words because we did not want to offend these people, but it did not help them just to change the words.'

Vinje is no doubt right when he said that most majority Norwegians would consider the word 'neutral' if they had to fill out a questionnaire about the meaning of the word. However, people's view on the neutrality of a word does not tell how the word is used in different situations by different people, or about the reactions of those so labelled. Even

if the word is most often used with no malicious intent, it can constitute harassment. And it carries historical connotations. Vinje's comparison between a *neger* and being mentally ill indicates that black appearance is invested with negative significance: the *neger* implicitly bears the same comparison in relation to 'us' as 'mentally ill' does to 'normal'. Unwittingly, he takes part in the long tradition in western thought that associates blackness with madness (Gilman 1982: 19–34).

The point that just changing words cannot help is of course true. This truth is the background for some of the arguments in the debate about 'political correctness'. But it is also a fact that language battles about the use of specific words have often been an intrinsic aspect of many struggles for a higher status and better social conditions by marginalised groups, including the mentally ill. To replace one word with another is usually an attempt to change its connotations, and sometimes this effort is successful. Nobody in the *neger* debate in the media mentioned the perhaps most relevant comparison to *neger* in Norway, the word *lapp*. In contrast to *neger*, the term *lapp* has since the 1970s more or less disappeared. In accordance with the Sami people's demand, the term 'Sami' is generally adopted instead. The Sami's ethnic incorporation at the time was based on a strategy of simultaneous dichotomisation and complementarisation in relation to the majority (Eidheim 1971). In this process their status changed, in Norwegian politics as well as in the collective imagination. Because of the present political climate (with its focus on the 'integration' of the extra-European immigrants and their descendants), this strategy does not seem to be open to less well established minorities with extra-European origins.

During the television show Lamisi Gurah retorted to Professor Vinje, 'I must have the right to decide what I am to be called'. To Golden she said, 'I am not ashamed of being black', and she attempted to explain that for her shame was not the issue. She was 'proud of being black' at the same time that she maintained that '*neger* is a racist term'. The host, Knut Olsen, ended the programme with the terse summary: 'There are many answers here'. Thus, the programme was put together in such a way that the majority Norwegians who supported Ertzgaard were not represented. Moreover, nobody mentioned the views of the leader of the government's Centre against Ethnic Discrimination. The young student Lamisi Gurah was thus more or less on her own and came across as aggressive and temperamental. The comedian Johan Golden seemed relaxed and open,³⁰ the journalist Noman Mubashir seemed a bit uninspired and professor Vinje was presented as the neutral, impartial academic expert.

This interpretation of the general reception of the programme was confirmed both in everyday life conversations and in public. For example, in a morning 'causerie' on the most informed public radio channel (NRK P2) on 1 March,³¹ the Catholic priest and author of many books, Kjell Arild Pollestad, opened with the following remarks:

A couple of weeks ago, a negress maintained in a television programme that those who use the word *neger* are guilty of racism. It should be absolutely forbidden to suggest that different races exist throughout the world. We see here yet another example of the absurdities of language dictatorship. The purpose of language is not to describe reality, where with the naked eye we can immediately observe that there are people of many races. No, it must be censured with

30 Golden was later featured in an in-depth interview in *Dagsavisen*, 31 March 2001, p. 24, on his views of the term *neger*.

31 A morning causerie is a five-minute talk to start the day; the speaker is supposed to comment on political or everyday issues in a light hearted way, preferably with a serious sting in the tail.

regard to what the influential group at any time regards as being politically correct. The earliest example that I remember was the ban against referring to someone as 'old' ... Then it was the turn of the crippled [*vanføre*]: first they became the handicapped, and later the physically disabled [*funksjonshemmede*] ... In contrast to the two later terms, crippled [*vanfør*] is a humane expression, the name of a condition where a person has an injury, which in one way or another is an obstacle to the enjoyment of life.³²

Pollestad resisted linguistic changes, and in this respect his determination seems to be in line with the 'we' of the nation. Like several other interventions in the debate, he took for granted the existence of biological 'races', the unmediated relationship between these 'races' and the words that designate them, and assumed that this relationship is independent of how the people so labelled see themselves. In a way similar to Professor Vinje's comparison with the mentally ill, he linked black appearance to being 'crippled', or having 'an injury' or 'an obstacle to the enjoyment of life'. Thus Pollestad drew on several discourses in this quote – a 'race' discourse, a discourse about the distribution of social power, a discourse about linguistic self-determination, a discourse about the nature of linguistic change and a discourse about various sorts of disability.

Rearticulating and reaffirming majority hegemony

The public debate died down in April 2001. It is reasonable to say that Ertzgaard and those who agreed with him lost the debate, at least in the short run. They had challenged a part of majority hegemony, and saw this hegemony rearticulated and reconfirmed. Certain majority opinions emerged as objective and neutral, supported by academic expertise. The present mainstream consensus was publicly demonstrated in a striking way on 8 January 2003. On that day, the word *neger* again burst into the public realm of television news, radio and newspapers because a Norwegian film-maker entitled his new movie *Burned Negro* [*Svidd neger*].³³ The interesting thing in the present context is that the title was put on the public agenda because Afrikan Youth in Norway protested to the UN's 'Special Rapporteur' on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia. By protesting in this way, they forced the Norwegian Ministry of Culture to make a statement on the matter to the UN. Quotes from the ministry's answer include the following: 'Firstly, we note that the word 'negro' ('neger') occurs in Norwegian dictionaries without being described as derogatory. We therefore assume that, according to a normal linguistic understanding of the word, most people in Norway would not perceive the word as derogatory' [original in English].³⁴ Since Norwegian dictionaries do not give normative advice (Grønvik 2002), and since both the Norwegian Language Council and the Centre against Ethnic Discrimination now advise against the use of the term, the ministry's answer was apparently only informed by the outcome of the media debate and was made in contradiction to the views of other state organisations.

32 The NRK P2-programme *de Morgenkåseri*, 1 March 2001.

33 The organisation objected only to the use of the word in the title. I have not seen the movie, and I can therefore not comment on the relationship between title and content.

34 In *Aftenposten* (19 January 2003) Professor Vinje was again interviewed about the word, and repeated his views from 2000–1.

The *neger* debate demonstrated the power of the mass media and the effects of ‘journalistic criteria’ – a focus on celebrities, polarisation, disagreement and conflict – on sensitive issues. Editors, producers and journalists in the various media selected which contributions to print, which people to follow up with interviews, which questions to ask and how to stage the television debate. As experts chosen by the media, scholars can play a small but very decisive role in focusing and guiding a debate. At the same time the debate also revealed the existence of counter-hegemonic ideas. Quite a few majority people supported Ertzgaard in their letters to the editor. The debate carried a subtext about the semantics of the term (its cultural history) and the classificatory and derogatory uses in specific verbal contexts by specific people in specific social situations. Because of the debate, the use of the word *neger* to refer to contemporary blacks has become more politically charged than before.³⁵ In addition, and more importantly, during the debate blacks forcefully entered the public realm to discuss issues important to them. They became visible in the public realm as individuals, each with his or her distinct experiences and ideas.

What is at stake?

Ertzgaard, who started the media debate, and those who stood behind him, did not focus their attention on the many occasions when the term *neger* is undoubtedly used without malicious intent, but on the accumulated connotations of the word within a historical and diasporic framework of interpretation. They have chosen to fight this word in order to make visible the aspects of social life in Norway that they feel denigrate them. Nevertheless, the terms they prefer are equally racializing as the one they do not want. This can be understood in relation to race theory: blackness is not physical looks per se, but embraces specific experiences of being categorised in racialising ways and of relating to the history of resistance to these categories and the practices associated with them (Appiah 1992). Since majority people attach much importance to the way black people look, blacks are forced to reflect upon the social meanings of their appearance and to speak back within the terms offered by hegemonic discourses. The attempt to replace one colour-coded word by another is ultimately an attempt to relieve black appearance of negative meaning. At the same time one has to acknowledge that keeping alive the historical humiliation of blacks and the boundaries, as against whites, that this entails can be a way for black leaders to maintain a following, even in situations when this division is not present. For Afrikan Youth in Norway, fighting the word *neger* provides a part of their basis for formulating black experiences in Norway, for

35 In May 2004 the issue again surfaced in the media. A Swedish-Somali man, living in Florø in Norway, felt insulted because a police report described him as a *neger*. He demanded an apology, but the police in Florø saw no reason to issue one because *neger* is one of the categories the Norwegian police routinely use in their statistical descriptions of people. The answer exemplifies the reification of social and racial categories by statistical registration that has now become an important historical anthropological topic. According to Ivar Husby in the national police office in Oslo, the particular categories used by the Norwegian police will probably be changed in a year's time. Lamisi Gurah of Afrikan Youth in Norway, Henrik Lunde at the Antiracist Centre and politician Inga Marte Torkildsen all spoke up against the decision of the police in Florø (*Dagsavisen*, 19 May 2004, p. 19).

mobilisation and for claiming a space in the public realm where their experiences of discrimination can be presented and discussed.

However, as we have seen, not all to whom the word might apply share the above strategy. Barth Niava is representative of influential Norwegian blacks who do not object to being called *neger* when nothing offensive is meant by it. He shows considerable ability to accept majority people's well-meant intentions, and a willingness to disregard the fact that he personally prefers not to be referred to in this manner. Johan Golden, the comedian, has, as it were, reclaimed the word, and plays on common stereotypes about blacks in his work as an entertainer. In present-day international youth culture, words such as negro and nigger are often used to create an image of being rebellious, unpolished and authentic. However, these words are still sensitive.³⁶ White people, in particular, are not expected to use them freely.

The majority support for Ertzgaard's plea can be the result of international experience, close acquaintance with blacks in Norway, or just an interpretation of the issue as a question of manners. But what is at stake for the considerable majority opposition to Ertzgaard? Why do so many people in Norway not simply respond 'Sure, if you prefer not to be called *neger*, then we will not use the word – end of story'? In this debate common decency was obviously opposed to other important concerns. On the one hand majority Norwegians do not want to be racists. Since racism is popularly defined as having hateful intentions, the debate was held at an abstract and cautious level, suffused with politeness and the expression of good intentions. 'Skin colour' was invested with much significance, but exactly which significance was not made explicit. On the other hand, many people obviously wanted to make a clear statement in opposition to Ertzgaard's plea. They defended the word as a neutral word in the Norwegian language. My interpretation is that the neutrality of the term is linked to the perceived innocence and goodness of the nation in relation to slavery, imperialism and colonialism. Accepting Ertzgaard's plea would imply accepting the accusation that Norway was a part of the Europe who once treated blacks 'like animals and a pest'.

The uses of the word *neger*

The interpretation of the term *neger* as a neutral term can be put in perspective in various ways – by looking at dictionaries, encyclopedias and interactions in everyday life. Most Norwegian dictionaries state that the word *neger* means black, that it is a loan-word from the Latin via Spanish and Portuguese, and that it was used by colonists to describe the people of Africa south of the Sahara. Since, as already noted, Norwegian dictionaries do not give normative advice, one has to look at the compound words in order to assess its connotations. In all the dictionaries, the word is associated with slavery and colonialism, through compound words such as *negerslave* (negro slave) and *negerarbeid* (negro's work).³⁷ However, the Norwegian encyclopedias do not have the

36 In English-speaking countries there was a dispute in 2002 about the word *nigger* because a black professor at Harvard Law School published a book using this term in the title (Kennedy 2002).

37 To judge from the Danish dictionary *Ordbog over det Danske sprog*, it appears that the term *neger* was first used in the 1720s. The first Norwegian to use it was Claus Fasting in a text dated 1778. Of contemporary Norwegian dictionaries, I have examined the *Norsk illustrert ordbok* from 1993, *Bokmålsordboka* (1986; 1993) and *Norsk riksmålsordbok*, 1947.

same traditions as the dictionaries on this point. The largest Norwegian encyclopedia, running to sixteen volumes, is surprisingly explicit and normative. It states that *neger* is a racist and derogatory expression and should be avoided.³⁸

According to a lexicographic study of the use of the word *neger* based on written literary sources over the last 150 years (Grønvik 2003), the word is most often used generically for categories of people, and more seldom about individuals. When used for individuals, it usually describes a person with few characteristics, often portrayed as a victim. Grønvik observed a shift around 1995. Since then the word *neger* is not used denotatively, as a label for a group of people. She argues that this can be interpreted as an indication of awareness on the part of the users in these literary sources that the word is disliked by the persons so labelled – in other words, that the term is no longer regarded as neutral. It is now most commonly used metalinguistically (*neger* is a neutral word in the Norwegian language’ or ‘most people in Norway use the word without malicious intent’) or ironically (Grønvik 2003). Grønvik (2002) has also summed up the experience from the debate by suggesting that Norwegian dictionaries start giving normative advice.

While *neger* is not used as a word of abuse in the sources examined by Grønvik, in a still unpublished study of a large web-based corpus of newspaper articles from the last ten years, several hundred occurrences of the word *neger* were found, but only a few in neutral or positive contexts. Most contexts were negative, involving crime, sex or violence (Vatvedt Fjeld, personal communication). And in a study of stereotypes about people of African descent in Norway from the 1700s onwards, based in part on oral sources, two folklorists summarise their findings as follows: ‘Expressions such as *neger* and *nigger* are constantly used in a derogatory manner, as condescending nicknames, and in discriminatory “jokes”. These concepts are also associated with the period of slavery and the oppression of black people” (Christensen and Eriksen 1992: 133). A neat distinction between a negatively valued *nigger* and a neutral *neger* is not therefore apparent in these scholarly works.

In my own work on everyday conversation in Norway in the present, remarks such as the following are now common: ‘What should we call them, if we are not allowed to say *neger*?’; ‘Skin colour has become a taboo’; ‘People are becoming more and more afraid to speak their mind, because words and concepts are continually at issue’; ‘Things become too difficult for people, if they constantly have to worry about saying something out of taste. They should rather feel free to talk about what is on their mind.’ There are at least two questions involved here. One is which term to use to describe a person of African descent. The other is in which contexts such a description is relevant. Many people voice an uneasiness about talk *to* and *with* black people. The perceived neutrality of the word is connected to its traditional use in talking *about* blacks. Many people would feel uneasy about using the word *neger* in the presence of a black person; I am, for example, confident that a Norwegian diplomat would never use the word about a black person in his or her presence.

38 *Store Norske Leksikon*, Oslo. *Aschehoug and Gyldendal*, published in 1994, revised 1998. In connection with the first interview with Professor Vinje in *Dagbladet* (15 November 2000 (pp. 20, 33), the definition was cited by the journalist, but without the sentence advising avoidance of the term. The positive stereotypes associated with Africans in Norway (relating to aesthetics, sexuality, vitality and musicality: see Fredriksen 2001; Gotaas 1996) are not mentioned in dictionaries and encyclopedias, nor were they referred to in the *neger* debate.

Both in the past and today, the most common everyday uses of the term thus take place where blacks are not present: at dinner tables, in people's private homes, in non-public conversations. In these domestic circles, among family and friends, the rearticulation and reification of national boundaries takes place. Terms such as *neger* mark the dark-skinned person as someone 'coming from' a place that is both far away and culturally different. Domesticity, kinship, and affective intimacy provide both the metaphors of solidarity for the everyday (re)making of the boundaries of nationhood and their experiential grounding (Gullestad 1997b). As long as it was not challenged by the voices of blacks, this white common sense was extended to the public sphere. During the *neger* debate it was challenged and scrutinised by a new sort of public gaze. In my interpretation of the public debate, the symbolic hegemony of the majority became rearticulated and reaffirmed, at least for the time being. The ideas articulated in public and private spheres thus constitute each other mutually.

Collective memory, national self-image and the construction of boundaries

Phrased within the technical terms of semantic-pragmatic linguistic analysis (see, for example, Lyons 1977; Austin 1976 [1962]; Searle 1969), the term *neger* works as a deictic – that is as a word that 'points' from the perspective of the speaker. The pragmatic impact of the word thus varies depending on whether users see themselves as unmarked (typical) or marked (atypical) in terms of how they belong in Norway. Specifically, it contrasts 'I/we' and 'they' (talk about someone) rather than 'I' and 'you' (as in talk to someone else).³⁹ Thus, when it works as a deictic, it has a boundary-maintenance effect, separating the unmarked 'we' from the marked 'they'. This effect is coded by the innocent illocutionary *intent* attributed by the speaker. Thus, Professor Vinje typifies a sort of national illocutionary intent when he says that *neger* is a neutral word and that 'we' would not use it in a discriminatory way. This has the perlocutionary effect of putting John Ertzgaard outside the boundary because of the illocutionary intent Ertzgaard imputes to such usage. That, plus the observation that 'we' may make an effort to try to avoid it if 'some people' are offended, demonstrate the performative dimension of this discourse – how it very politely recreates the ethnic national boundary as a racial boundary.

As a metonym for a complex set of values and images, the uses of the word *neger* can be illuminated with the aid of Mary Douglas's (1966) ideas about dirt and impurity as 'matters out of place'. Things become impure when they arise where they do not belong, according to prevailing classifications. In this sense blacks seem to be regarded as impurities in the white Norwegian nation. This notion of impurity can be linked to the analysis of markedness and deixis, and of illocutionary intent versus perlocutionary outcome. Unmarked majority people point to the matter-out-of-place-marked blacks by constructing an illocutionary intention meant politely and decently to note that distinction, and the outcome is a clarification and maintenance of a boundary.

39 In anthropology this form of linguistic exclusion has been most famously worked out in another context by Johannes Fabian (1983) on the basis of Emile Benveniste's theory of the linguistic shifters of 'I', 'you' and 'he/they'.

It is precisely the boundary between being Norwegian and being *neger* that makes it possible to continue to maintain that *neger* is a neutral word, in spite of a public dispute that demonstrated that it has *de facto* become highly contested. In this sense, to defend this word can be seen as a way of defending the unwritten hegemonic right not to reflect critically on current individual and national self-images and the collective memories on which they are founded.

In popular consciousness people in Norway are historically *innocent* with regard to slavery, colonisation and racism. Norway is a *victim* of colonisation (by Denmark) and occupation (by Nazi Germany), and not a colonizer. 'Norway did not have colonies' is a common refrain. People in Norway supported the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as the African National Congress in South Africa. Norway has played an important role in peace negotiations in various regions of the world, such as the Middle East, Guatemala, Sri Lanka and Columbia, and Norway is among the world's nations that give most per head in development aid. In sum, Norway is seen as an innocent, humane, tolerant, anti-racist and peace-loving society that is committed to helping the needy. The debate offended the sensibilities of a public committed to a national self-image of decency, innocence and goodness.

Like the myths about Norwegian homogeneity, these stories are based in part on fact, while other facts are disregarded. While large numbers of blacks constitute a relatively new phenomenon in Norway, the country has a long history of individual African migrants.⁴⁰ As inhabitants of Denmark-Norway, quite a few Norwegians participated actively in the Danish colonial venture, including the slave trade.⁴¹ In Norway, as elsewhere, Africans were displayed as curiosities at fairs and markets alongside midgets, giants and bearded women.⁴² Norwegians participated in the culture of colonialism as business men, explorers, seamen and as missionaries. And so one could continue.

Paradoxically, but logically, when defending a hegemonic self-image of innocence – of Norway as standing outside the history of colonialism and being just a victim of Nazism – majority Norwegians employ racial ideas with a long history in Europe. Even if the implications of the primordial signification attributed to black appearance was not made explicit during the debate, it is possible to trace it in some underlying ideas and images. First, several contributors applied a reified notion of race as an unquestioned

40 The first reference to Africans in Norway dates apparently from the thirteenth century. From the 1600s and up to the present day a hitherto unknown history of individual Africans in Norway is in the process of being put together (Kjerland and Bang 2002).

41 Norwegian capital followed in the tracks of slavery and political colonisation. For example, Norwegian ships were involved in the slave trade and considerable amounts of salted cod were exported from Norway to be used as slave food in the Caribbean. It is difficult to distinguish sharply between Danish and Norwegian involvement in colonial engagements. While Denmark-Norway was seen as two populations living in two different but politically joined territories, at the upper levels of society bureaucratic administrators, ministers, academics and leaders of the military circulated between the two countries and intermarried. It was these same social groups that were engaged in colonisation ventures in Africa, India and the Caribbean. The wish to disassociate Norway from a past of colonial engagement is historically related to the attempt to distance Norway from Denmark, identified as the oppressor, in order to create a new and separate nation state.

42 For example, in 1914 one could see an entire 'Congo village' at the Constitution Centennial exhibition in Oslo (Christensen and Eriksen 1992).

biological given. Races were essentialised as natural, and they were understood as determining a person's identity. Second, a hierarchy between the categories can be discerned. By means of comparisons with the mentally ill and the physically disabled – perceived as ‘an injury which in one way or another is an obstacle to the enjoyment of life’ – black appearance was implicitly, but effectively, represented as inferior to white appearance.

Conclusion

The debaters who defended the neutrality of the word *neger* defended habitual ways of thinking and acting. They defended a semantic field that includes metaphoric uses and the use of the term about historical events. They defended the implicit definition of the public space as white, and the maintenance of a specific collective memory and national self-image. They protected private and public spaces within the nation state of Norway as spaces where the word *neger* is neutral, and where they do not have to pay attention or be responsive to what they see as foreigners and their claims. They resist being forced to feel like foreigners in ‘their own society’. Thus, the neutrality of the word *neger* is a small but pivotal part of a larger set of discourses and practices. If the common sense understanding of the connotations of the word is to change, other things will have to change, too.

I have in this article tried to demonstrate how ethno-national and racial thinking in Norway is related to and involved in a complex set of other discourses. It is precisely the *embeddedness* of racial discourses in other discourses – in the *neger* debate exemplified by the discourses on the history of the national language, on national and individual self-determination, on not having been part of colonial history, on resistance to cultural ‘Americanization’ and so on – that not only provides them with compelling force and makes them work performatively, but also normalises them as a part of the general common sense. Seen from this perspective, one can better understand the construction of Ertzgaard's plea as a risk that it would be ‘foolishly kind’ to give in to.

On the more general and abstract level there are many similarities among the mainstream discourses in the various European countries. Europe has so far generally not been willing or able to reflect seriously on the history of the last several hundred years as seen from the perspective of the peoples of Africa and Asia. In the context of immigration since the Second World War, majority people often redefine national boundaries in ways that exclude minority claims. On the more specific level, the debate in Norway exhibits both a later timetable, and a specific combination of contradictory ideas and images compared to other European countries. ‘The pathos of inequality’ (Nederveen Pieterse 1992: 51) expresses itself somewhat differently in countries with a more extensive and also publicly acknowledged colonial legacy compared with societies characterised by rugged egalitarian individualism and an innocent self-image. In each case, the very construction and normalisation of racial boundaries is suffused with the power and legitimacy of other discourses.

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