KATE MAXWELL AND SABINA FOSSE HANSEN

Decolonizing Music History in Scandinavia

Reflections from the Chalkface

"Race is not a problem here." "Racism is rare in Scandinavia." These are some of the comments I (Kate) have heard regarding my efforts to diversify the music history and analysis curriculum at a small conservatoire in Norway, the Academy of Music at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø. One thing I hear behind both of these is the implication that, as a non-Scandinavian, I do not understand the way things work. Even after nearly 15 years of living in Scandinavia, most of them in northern Norway, I admit that there are plenty of things I still don't know about the place I call home. However, as a white person who grew up in a much more culturally diverse area than anywhere I have lived in in Scandinavia, I also know that there is a lot that white people don't see—and just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it's not there. As the black feminist mantra goes, if you can't see the problem, you're part of the problem.

This colloquy contribution is a reflection, written together with Bachelor of Music student Sabina Fosse Hansen, on the process of decolonizing music history at our institution.[1] Sabina has been instrumental in steering these efforts since she began her studies, both as critic, supporter, as representing the views of the student body, and above all (for the purposes of this reflection) as interlocutor. Sabina has given the comments I opened with the context that has helped me understand them. During our discussions, she told me that the Norwegian school system teaches that Norway is inclusive and accepting, which is something that most if not all students want to believe: it is, after all, backed up by society in general, not to mention the various international rankings that Norway regularly tops.[2] The topic of racism is therefore taboo because it dares to question the discourse and talk about race in a culture that shies away from conflict. Yet, as a Norwegian of mixed-race background Sabina has the lived experience that the dominant ideal is not always the case. This is *colourblind*

1 A note on the methodology of writing is appropriate here. This began as a personal reflection, but Sabina was kind enough to accept my invitation to join me as named co-author, given that so many of the insights are either hers, or born of our discussions. While I (Kate) wrote the text following our talks, Sabina has read and commented on it, and nothing is shared without her permission. Therefore the "I" of the text is Kate, and the "we" is both of us.

2 For example, the Wikipedia entry "International rankings of Norway" (Wikipedia 2020) presents six examples of Norway's rankings under "life quality", of which Norway is ranked first in five. Although at the time of writing this particular page has not been updated since 2020, the fact that there is a Wikipedia entry on this subject, and in English, points to the ubiquity of the phenomenon.

racism in action, as Ewell (2020) argues happens in music theory, and its role in the curriculum is only part of a broader picture that many people (of all ethnicities, but in Norway the dominant is white) do not see, or do not wish to see. I will set this into the context of *white innocence* (Wekker 2016) below. First, however, it is necessary to give a little more background on the institutional context in Tromsø.

My efforts to decolonize the compulsory undergraduate modules in music history and analysis began more-or-less upon appointment in 2015 and have continued since. The job is far from done, and my own role has been far from perfect. In 2015 I was a somewhat naïve—perhaps a better word would be idealistic—assistant professor who felt she had been handed the keys to the kingdom. I was and am extremely lucky to be part of a department and institution that takes equality work seriously. Almost on my first day I was recruited to the Balanse-prosjekt (Balance Project), a project funded by the Research Council of Norway that ran in the department from 2015 to 2018, and sought to increase the participation of women, girls, and genderqueer people in music, particularly with a view to increasing the numbers of these groups in professor positions, as guest lecturers, and so on (Blix and Mittner 2018). The energy and drive of that project stays with me to this day. UiT's wider "prestige" projects are still ongoing, and it was with the participation in one of these in 2016–2018 that I submitted my own dossier for promotion to full professor. The Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education and Academy of Music at UiT are part of a music performance project called "Voices of Women" that has just been awarded funding, and will be led by the University of Stavanger. UiT is also at the forefront of Norway's open access work, it was an early adopter of the DORA principles of research ethics, and it is an enthusiastic promoter and supporter of Indigenous issues, as well as research and teaching on the Sámi people, and much more. All of these initiatives mean that I am confident that I have the backing of my department and institution in my work to decolonize music history. Likewise, the broad background support for these initiatives makes the resistance I have met to my efforts all the more surprising.

Is it possible to "do" antiracism in a context where race is not widely recognized as a problem? Of course it is, as Sara Ahmed (2017) challenges all feminists to do, but it is not without its obstacles. One of the foremost of these is that while racism, white innocence, and the white racial frame are certainly problems in Scandinavia, they are obviously not the only problems, and nor are they the most visible to the (white) majority. As Ewell (2020) and others make clear, race is one part of a broader intersectionality that includes deliberate or inadvertent discrimination on a number of other axes, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, class, background, religion, ethnicity, and more—a range that I often shorthand when speaking informally to colleagues or students as "all the -isms."[3] Indeed, it is my experience in Scandina-

3 A colloquy contribution is not the place for a full reference list on decolonization, but it is worth saying something about my personal journey into the topic. As a student in Scotland studying for an undergraduate degree in French and Music around the turn of the millennium, decolonization was a word that came up in the French part of my degree, but never in music. However, I did not come into serious contact with notions of decolonization until I went on postgraduate research in medieval studies at the same institution in the 2000s, and began teaching. The notion of "decolonizing the

via that most of these "-isms" are easier to grasp than that of race (as I shall elaborate below). In the music history context, the occasional focus on a female composer, secondary initiatives such as gender-balanced, multicultural reading lists, and a visit from a professional performer of joik (the traditional music of the Sámi people), have been easy for students to accept from the start, but in the last couple of years the four-week theme of "music and gender," a stalwart on my syllabus from the beginning, has begun to receive strong criticism, mostly for being "irrelevant" to (some students' perceptions of) the field of music history. I am happy to admit that, were music history fully gender neutral, there would be no need to focus on music and gender even for just a few weeks. Yet in 2018, the organiser of a music festival in Tromsø stood up and unironically welcomed the audience to a concert where we would "only hear works written by women" —something that does not happen in concerts where all the music performed is written by men. The vast majority of the standard performance repertoire both for students and professionals consists of male composers, and the norms are overwhelming male. It is therefore clear that the decolonization of music history still has a long way to go in both the local and broader contexts.

"The house that race built" is a phrase used by Gloria Wekker in her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016). Although Wekker's work is based on case studies from the Netherlands and the Dutch context, including Dutch colonialism, reading this book was (and continues to be) a revelation in my own understanding of Norwegian attitudes to race, which is also reflected in Sabina's comments and experiences she shared with me in our discussions as we worked on this reflection. Wekker describes the discomfort felt by many Dutch people, and especially white students, when race is discussed in the classroom. Wekker bases her discussion on research done on students and alumni of a course in women's studies. If students who have chosen a degree course in this area report that they had to overcome feelings of discomfort about race as a result of their heightened awareness (Wekker 2016, 65–67; 72–73), it is hardly surprising that students of music performance are even more perturbed: this is not what they were expecting, nor have they previously been asked to consider such issues as part of their music studies. As Wekker writes, the European academic tradition reenforces the popular image that:

Middle Ages" was cemented by the special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* that bore that title (Dagenais and Greer 2000), though has been around at least since the publication of Biddick's (1993) article "Decolonizing the English Past." However, it became extremely ugly with the white supremacist attacks on medievalist scholars of colour Dorothy Kim (reported by Roll [2017]) and Mary Rambaran-Olm (see the response by Dale [2021]). Some of my more recent steps on this journey, in addition to Wekker (2016), Ahmed (2017), and Ewell (2020) already referenced, have included a sabbatical period in the USA in 2020 (attending concerts and workshops on decolonization and equality in music history at Cornell University and Ithaca College), as well as engagement with texts including *The Journal of Music History Pedagogy* (particularly the special issue *Decolonization* featuring Walker [2020], Stimeling and Tokar [2020], and Figueroa [2020]), Dempsey (2019), Black (2019), Spencer-Hall and Gutt (2021), the blog *In The Medieval Middle* (particularly Kim [2014] and Lomuto [2016]), and the journal *postmedieval*, particularly the issue *Race, Revulsion and Revolution* (Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich 2021). This journey is entirely personal, and it is far from over.

> Being black is associated with being athletic, with low literacy, with stupidity, with being amusing, an entertainer, and with naturally occupying a place on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. There is a long academic tradition within scientific racism that has created, invoked, and defended this natural order; these images circulate widely; they surround us; we—both black and white—are constructed by them as inferior and superior. Representations of race that were common in the nineteenth century have also been preserved in the academy, that bastion of objective knowledge, and in the media. (Wekker 2016, 74)

Ewell's (2020) arguments about the white racial frame in music theory are a clear parallel with this, but we can go even further in music history in Norway. Where black music history features in textbooks and in curricula, it does so in the form of ragtime, hip hop, pop, jazz, blues, and bebop. In other words, it appears in a set of genres that are situated outside the mainstream of the Western musical canon, or the imaginary museum of musical works as Lydia Goehr calls it (Goehr 1992). The imaginary museum, the canon, came into being around the turn of the nineteenth century, at a time of colonialism and scientific (as opposed to cultural) racism; a time when white Europeans looked to the arts, cultures, and bodies of people of other races as not only inferior (and sexualised), but as supporting and reinforcing their own superiority. The Western music history canon, then, that music students come to university expecting to learn about as history, came into being at a time when it was necessary to establish and indeed affirm the superiority and intellectual rationality of colonial white Europeans. It is more than the white racial frame; it is the imaginary museum that race built.

This raises the question of what "race" actually is in a classroom context, and again, Wekker provides an answer that resonates:

> Race in my understanding is not only a matter of ideology, beliefs, and statements about a particular group of people; *race also becomes transparent in practices, in the way things are organised and done*. (Wekker 2016, 50-51; emphasis added)

What is more, Wekker argues that white innocence overlooks the ubiquity of race in "the way things are organised and done." Wekker's examples are from the Netherlands, where, like in Scandinavia, gender inclusion is high. However, unlike in much of Europe, in Scandinavia—and in Norway in particular—the standards of living are generally very high. (That is not to say that Norway does not have class differences or wealth inequalities; rather, that the overall mindset and the welfare state ensure that fewer people fall into the poverty trap than in other comparable countries, including the Netherlands.) Innocence, in Wekker's view, stems from several points: a worldview dominated by a now secular Christianity that considers others and wishes to do no harm; a notion of smallness as a nation that needs protecting; and the licence to laugh off racist (or sexist, other other-ist) utterances as jokes because of course no-one would really think such things (Wekker 2016, 16–17). (I am reminded of the South Park episode which declairs, "AIDS is finally funny".) Wekker points to Sweden as a comparable example to the Netherlands, as it is a former colonial power that has a "widespread and foundational claim to innocence, Swedish exceptionalism, and 'white laughter'" (Wekker 2016, 17). The other side of innocence is "not-understanding" and "not-knowing"—choosing one's norms, history, and cultural archive to fit the dominant model of innocence—"which can afflict white and nonwhite people alike" (Wekker 2016, 17). This state of white innocence is then militantly defended, with race being projected as a problem only in other places, particularly the USA, and thus not a local problem, the naming of which "can call up racist violence, and often results in the continued cover-up of structural racism" (Wekker 2016, 18). As Sara Ahmed (2017) teaches us, by naming the problem you become the problem: it is easier, more innocent, and more comforting to denounce the killjoy than to face the problem that she highlights.

It is clear that this, therefore, goes well beyond the music history classroom, and cannot be solved there. I was struck by Ewell's (2020) remarks that music history (musicology) has come further than music theory in tackling issues of race. Indeed, figures such as Sarah Haefeli (Ithaca College) and the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* are doing sterling work to rethink how music history can be taught (and learned) in more inclusive ways. My experience from the chalkface in Scandinavia, however, is that the adaptation of such initiatives is met with the wall of resistance that is white innocence, and this feeds into expectations of what kind of history (in this case, music history) should be taught. In terms of my modules and how much I can do with them, this is a barrier that also manifests itself in the relatively low importance given to the "support modules" in the BA in music performance. With only 10 ETCS points (out of 240 for the whole BA degree) to cover the whole of music history (including popular music and music analysis) over two years, as part of a group of small modules, and with only one class a week in teaching weeks (usually amounting to around eight two-hour sessions a semester), there is simply not much time to meet both students' and colleagues' expectations and to teach the subject in line with the changes it has undergone in the last couple of decades.

This leaves us, then, with a dilemma. Students—particularly performance students—are well aware that they will meet incredulity from both their instrument teachers and future colleagues if they do not know the (now outdated) basics of music history that previous generations of performers learnt and expect them to have been taught. To say that music history is *not* a line of dead white men, their works, and their ideals of performance practice stretching to the present day is radical, and risks underequipping students with the knowledge they will be expected to have in their future careers. (It also raises the related question of when "music history" as a subject should begin: with the invention of music notation and the first written sources from ca. 800? Eight centuries later in 1600, when the most recent music history textbook in Norwegian chooses to begin? Or even 1800, as some student feedback from 2020 suggested?) Sabina has helped me to understand that it is primarily for this reason that my attempts to decolonize the subject within the bounds of the existing module plans by highlighting societal issues including gender and race have started to receive negative comments in student evaluations. At the same time, to pretend that the subject has not changed dramatically in the last decades is to do injustice to the field and to uphold the white racial frame. I do not claim to have the answer, but as a department we are looking at ways to change the module plans (in the short term) and the structure of the BA programme (in the long term) in order to try and address these issues. However, it will not be easy or quick, because this work involves challenging and changing mindsets—no-one likes to hear that we, as a department and even as a country, are (unwittingly) teaching racist curricula that require constant and time-consuming critical evaluation for rewards that could take years to come to fruition even if they manage to penetrate the wall of white innocence.

In working with me on this piece, Sabina has helped me recognize that there is a dominant mindset that Norway is the best place to live, a mindset that is clung on to in a constant balance of threat and change. Change is acceptable as long as it does not endanger the supremacy of this mindset, in which it is easier to leave the work to those that are directly affected by it. An example from Sabina's personal experience is that her native language is nynorsk, which is a form of Norwegian upheld in law as equal to the bokmål used (as a written language) by the majority, yet which is underrepresented in the media, in translations of foreign literature, and indeed exams and coursework assignments, despite quotas and laws in place to ensure equal treatment. To put it bluntly: if national rules say that exams should be available in both bokmål and nynorsk, it should not be down to the students to have to ask for them. Therefore, to request exam questions in nynorsk highlights a problem that many do not see—or choose not to see. The parallels with racism and white innocence are clear. To question the status quo that everything is supposed to be as good as can be because we are in the best country in the world causes discomfort and kills joy (Ahmed 2017). A further very recent example from Tromsø was the decision to change the name of the children's wind band Guttemusikken ("Boys' Music") to Tromsømusikken, a change that met resistance from those who felt that tradition and local (music) history were being cast aside in the name of political correctness. Nostalgia and holding on to things as they are can be a comfort blanket in times of crisis and change.

History is not and never has been an objective and factual line leading to the ever-changing now. History is shaped, sculpted, and moulded to fit different times and attitudes, and it is almost always inevitably political. Music history is no exception. To learn history is to learn about—and to call into question—the present. The skills of close reading, close listening, and critical thinking that come from music history are vital to students' future careers and, indeed, lives. Such high-minded language, however, denies the reality that students face outside of the safe space of an inclusive music history classroom. I have not yet found a balance between inclusivity and students' and colleagues' expectations, but I have learnt that it cannot be done to anyone's satisfaction under the auspices and underlying assumptions of the current curriculum. Whether or not the proposed changes to the curriculum will be too little, enough, or even acceptable to the faculty governing body remains to be seen. Nevertheless, if racism is manifest "in the way things are organised and done" (Wekker 2016, 51), then we must acknowledge, face, and decolonize the white racial frame in our curricula, textbooks, and expectations, and the white innocence in society, so that change can happen.

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Biddick, Kathleen. 1993. "Decolonizing the English Past: Readings in Medieval Archeology and History." *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1): 1–23. https://www.jstor.org/stable/176017

Black, Daisy. 2019. "Decolonising the Medieval Curriculum: Critical Questions." *Daisy Black*, 13th January. https://daisyblack.uk/decolonising-the-medieval-curriculum-critical-questions/

Blix, Hilde, and Lilli Mittner. 2018. *Kjønn og skjønn i kunstfagene – et balanseprosjekt*. Tromsø: UiT Norges arktiske universitet. https://hdl.handle.net/10037/16593

Dagenais, John, and Margaret Rich Greer (eds). 2000. *Decolonizing the Middle Ages*. Special issue of *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (3). https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/963

Dale, Thomas. 2021. "MAA News – From the President: Race, Racism, and Medieval Studies." *The Medieval Academy Blog*, 1st July. http://www.themedievalacademyblog.org/maa-news-from-the-president-race-racism-and-medieval-studies/

Dempsey, Karen. 2019. "Gender and Archeology: Storming the Castle." *Antiquity* 93 (369): 772–788. http://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.13

Ewell, Philip. 2020. "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame." *Music Theory Online* 26 (2). http://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4

Figueroa, Michael A. 2020. "Decolonizing 'Intro to World Music'?" *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10 (1): special issue, *Decolonization*: 39–57. http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/27

Goehr, Lydia. 1992. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kim, Dorothy. 2014. "Divergent Bodies and Medieval Studies." *In the Medieval Middle*, 20th August. https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2014/08/divergent-bodies-and-medieval-studies.html

Lomuto, Sierra. 2016. "White Nationalism and the Ethics of Medieval Studies." *In the Medieval Middle*, 5th December. https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2016/12/white-nationalism-and-ethics-of.html

Rambaran-Olm, Mary, M. Breann Leake, and Micah James Goodrich (eds). 2021. *Race, Revulsion, and Revolution*. Special issue of *postmedieval* 11 (4). https://link.springer.com/journal/41280/volumes-and-issues/11-4

Roll, Nick. 2017. "A Schism in Medieval Studies, For All to See." *Inside Higher Ed*, 19th September. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/19/one-professors-critique-another-divides-medieval-studies

Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt (eds). 2021. *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Stimeling, Travis D., and Kayla Tokar. 2020. "Narratives of Musical Resilience and the Perpetuation of Whiteness in the Music History Classroom." *Journal of Music*

History Pedagogy 10 (1): special issue, *Decolonization*: 20–38. http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/27

Wekker, Gloria. 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Walker, Margaret. 2020. "Towards a Decolonized Music History Curriculum." *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10 (1): special issue, *Decolonization*: 1–19. http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/27

Wikipedia (2020). International Rankings of Norway. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_rankings_of_Norway (accessed February 3, 2022)