

# **IoPT beyond the therapy room: Trauma, invisible racism and Norway's forgotten past**

Cristina Archetti

[cristina.archetti@media.uio.no](mailto:cristina.archetti@media.uio.no)



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# The plan

- A story and a study
- The repercussions of past collective trauma on our society
- Questions and suggestions for the way forward



# A short story and a study



“Media representations of immigrants and their impact on integration”  
(with Banafsheh Ranji, NTNU)

- What were the portrayals of immigrants in Norwegian media during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Did these portrayals affect the immigrants? If so, what impact did they have on the immigrants' thinking, emotions, everyday life?



# What we found: Media coverage

- “Pure,” “healthy” inside of the country (*norsk*) threatened and contaminated by an “infectious” outside (*ikke-norsk*)
- Constant association of infection to non-Norwegians, with focus on specific ethnic minorities
- No explicit denigratory term, yet stigmatizing coverage
- Systematic discrimination through features of the news text: headlines, themes, order in which the information is presented, assumptions behind statements...



# What we found: Interviews

## Reactions to coverage

- “here we go again”
- ‘irritation’, ‘sadness,’ ‘rage’, ‘resignation’, ‘always being blamed’

## Devastating consequences on daily life

- ‘I feel it in my body, in my soul, in my mind [...] It made me feel worthless’
- Perception of ‘being watched’
- Very material consequences: on health, on finding a job, on belonging, microaggressions...
- When ‘the box of what it means to be Norwegian is so small perhaps I do not want to fit in it’

# What we found: Most interesting aspects

- The coverage was (still is) racist
- This is (largely) *not* intentional
- Complete lack of awareness by journalists and editors of the far-reaching consequences of the language they use
- However, not just a problem of language, but one of *mindset*
- Complete *blindness* to the experience of the “other”
- ...lack of compassion
- How does one become aware of discriminatory assumptions that are in the back of one’s mind?

# Reactions to our results & some questions

- Denial, dismissal (despite plenty of evidence of *systemic discrimination*)
- Defensiveness, shutting down
- Deep discomfort

Our interlocutors were being *triggered*

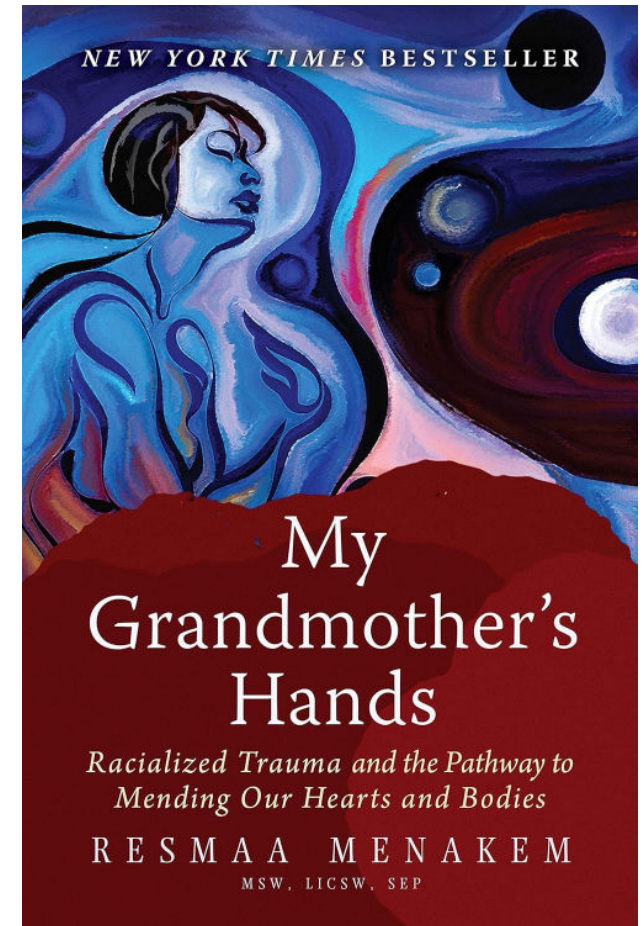
**Q: Could trauma theory help make sense of the racism “hidden in plain sight” and of these reactions?**

# Reactions to our results & some questions

- Violence and oppression in the relationships between whites and blacks (in the US)
- Role of transgenerational, collective trauma that goes back to the Middle Ages
- Both blacks and whites are traumatized

Of course, the context is different, yet...

**Q: Could a collective trauma from the past be at work here in Norway?**



# Trauma: beyond the individual

- Trauma affects the individual, but is also always social
- ‘The relationship with our mother is the lens through which we perceive “the world” for the rest of our lives’ (Ruppert 2023: 47-48)
- Trauma has political implications
  - either distrust and disconnection
  - or support

# Trauma, narratives & politics

- Trauma also generates a crisis of meaning: we are at a loss for words, at a loss for a plot
- Stories (narratives) can help us survive
- Political (collective) narratives as “low hanging fruits” for identification:
  - Designed to appeal to unprocessed emotion and to mobilize it
- Narratives are not just words: they become organizing principles of reality
- The media as a major arena for the spreading, amplification, consolidation of collective narratives (also for their contestation!)

# Narratives of remembrance...and of forgetting

- Collective narratives as survival strategies
- Some might help to remember the past, some to forget
- The narratives of forgetting are relevant to our case



# Norway: Forgetting the past

- Racism exists, but it is “invisible in plain sight”
- Why is it so elusive?
  - 1) Because there is an apparent rejection of racism
  - 2) Because it is supported by “benign” narratives
    - “Norwegian exceptionalism” (Bjerring-Hansen et al. 2021)
    - Norway as ‘regime of goodness’ (Witoszek 2011; Tvedt 2022)
    - Norway as peace-loving and rational advocate of international solidarity, gender equality, environmentalism, democracy...

# Why are these narratives a problem?

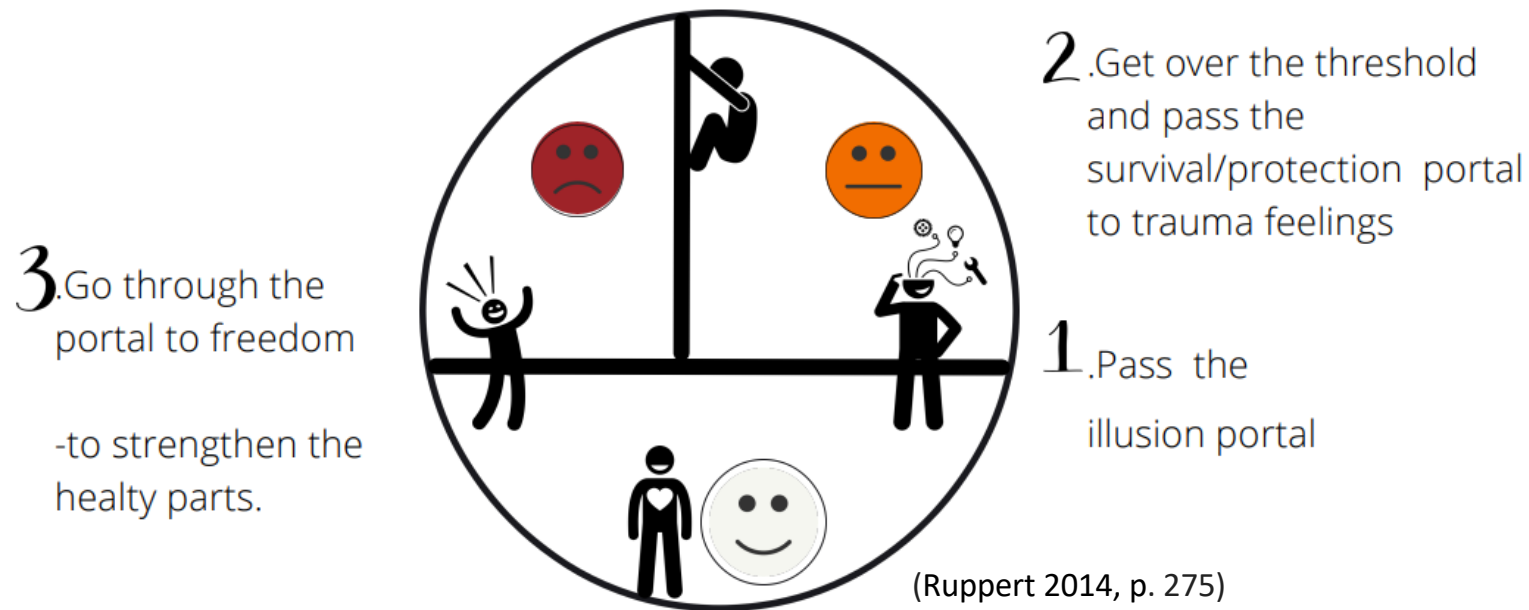
- In-built essentialism, superiority, perfection...
- These narratives prevent seeing any «dark spots» and raising any critique
- A beautiful story, like the «happy childhood» we meet in the therapy room...
- **Q: What is this story protecting us from? What lies behind it?**

# Possible collective traumas

- Invasion by and collaboration with Nazi regime
- Pain of emigration (by those who left and those who stayed): 1/3 of the population left, in some areas 40%
- Poverty (still taboo today)
- Participation in slave trade and in US imperialism against native Americans
- Black death and its aftermath: 2/3 of population died; elites and clergy wiped out, leaving nobody to protect the interests of Norwegian people; foreign rule...
- ...

# Embracing the ghosts from the past

- In order to ask “What happened to us?” we need to realize that something DID happen
- Processing emotions does not need words, however *naming* our experience is key



# How to embrace the ghosts from the past?

Individually:

- In the moment: Settling our bodies (Menakem 2017), remaining present
- Longer term: Consolidating our healthy parts

Collectively:

- Researching the “blind spots”, public debates, commemorations/ceremonies, landmarks/monuments...
- Promoting healthy-parts-based narratives: compassion, curiosity, connectedness, creative solutions

# Conclusion

- Understanding trauma can help
  - make sense of how our collective past is shaping our present
  - become aware of and address the suffering of both victims and perpetrators
  - become a more inclusive and caring society
- However, understanding alone is not sufficient
- Change starts with us: with the intention to work on one's own traumas
- Then we are better equipped to embrace our collective ghosts



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