
Choosing different: Het Toeslagenschandaal, ethnodrama and organisational ethnography

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Journal of
Organizational
Ethnography

Received 22 October 2025
Revised 8 March 2026
2 April 2026
Accepted 29 April 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This paper argues for a different methodological approach in organisational ethnography: Ethnodrama – a fusion of ethnography and performance. It shows how ethnodrama is uniquely equipped to expose injustices such as institutional racism via the case of the Dutch Childcare Benefit Scandal (Het Toeslagenschandaal). While traditional organisational research (and the public at large) often reduces such scandals to managerial failures, ethnodrama can better perform the affective, historical and systemic dimensions of racial injustice, making them visible and tangible to audiences. The paper argues how artistic methodologies can complement scholarly analysis in Management and Organisation Studies (MOS) to challenge colonial legacies and racialised governance.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a qualitative, practice-based approach, drawing on the author's experience as a playwright and ethnodramatist. It integrates archival and documentary analysis, interviews and testimonies, theoretical frameworks and artistic practice.

Findings – Het Toeslagenschandaal shows how racialised groups bear the burden of proof and systemic discrimination, obscured by bureaucratic neutrality and under researched concepts like race in MOS. Ethnodrama disrupts this by performing the emotional and relational impacts of institutional racism, centring marginalised voices without reducing them to trauma narratives and creating spaces for public reflection on racial justice, beyond academic or policy silos. This makes it an important methodological addition in MOS.

Originality/value – This paper advances decolonial methodology in MOS by positioning ethnodrama as a tool for embodied knowledge production, critiquing the epistemological limitations of traditional organisational research in addressing racism and offering a practical, artistic framework to engage diverse audiences in systemic critique.

Keywords Organisational ethnography, Ethnodrama, Institutional racism, Decolonial methodology, Performance ethnography, Toeslagenschandaal

Paper type Research article

As a playwright, I am no stranger to seeking truth through fiction. I have been a playwright for more than fifteen years now, writing for companies large and small in the Dutch theatre scene. Playwriting to me encompasses more than just creative storytelling; for me it is inherently a pursuit of truth, through live dialogues with an audience, achieved by performing for said audience the perspectives of various stakeholders – including actors, directors, scenographers, audiences, and most importantly, the individuals whose stories are represented. In the words of researcher and ethnodramatist Saldaña: “playwrights are, and always have been, ethnodramatists” (2005, p. 4).

I have combined my artistic practice with a scientific one. I have been engaging this combined practice as a mode of truth-finding and social justice, as I see a world around me that seems to be actively regressing. Despite the abundance of readily available information, truth-finding becomes increasingly elusive and social justice seems harder to achieve than ever. This concern is particularly pressing as efforts to expose, and right, institutional injustices face growing pushback. Take, for example, how in November 2025 the American Battle

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Journal of Organizational Ethnography
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2046-6757
p-ISSN: 2046-6749
DOI 10.1108/JOE-10-2025-0136

Monuments Commission (AMBC), manager of the US military cemetery in Margraten, the Netherlands, removed information panels highlighting the discrimination faced by Black American soldiers during the Second World War. This was needed as, according to the AMBC, emphasising the struggle against racism no longer fit the memorial's current mission ([Van der Steen, 2025](#)). Just a few years ago, I wrote a play about these Black American soldiers, centring explicitly the racism they faced both in the army and when they returned home.

Why fiction? Rather than serving the self, I interpret the role of a playwright to involve elevating those deserving of recognition and providing platforms for voices and narratives that will otherwise remain unnoticed. In my view, the playwright acts as an advocate, with the intent to influence public discourse meaningfully. They utilise their craft in creating fiction to reflect reality back to an audience, crucial to generating substantive impact and with true potential of affecting social change. As Dwight Conquergood put it so succinctly, “ethnographers work with expressivity, which is inextricable from its human creators. [. . .] Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books.” (1985, p. 2)

In my work within the Dutch theatre scene, I have elected to use *ethnodrama* as a methodological and artistic bridge between ethnography and performance – to go after truth that an audience will experience not just rationally, but emotionally. Ethnodrama transforms ethnographic data – interviews, field notes, observations – into performative texts that embody the knowledge, the lived experiences, of real people and evoke an emotional response in the public; rather than strictly rational ([Saldaña, 2010](#)). Embodied knowledge production refers to the generation of understanding through sensory, affective and relational engagement rather than through detached observation or discursive abstraction alone. In this approach, the body functions as a site of knowledge, where gestures, spatial relations, affective intensity and silence become meaningful epistemic carriers. This mode of knowing foregrounds lived, felt and relational experience as integral to understanding social and organisational phenomena ([Conquergood, 1985](#); [Denzin, 2018](#); [Saldaña, 2010](#)).

Building on embodied knowing, more than merely repeating data, I find the theatrical form activates and deepens it: gesture, rhythm, silences and dialogue allow audiences to *feel* the dynamics and intricacies of interviews and archival records rather than simply read about them. The performative translation of ethnodrama is grounded in rigorous ethnographic practices, but it deliberately foregrounds affect, silence, embodiment and intersubjectivity ([Salvatore, 2018](#); [Saldaña, 2010](#)) – dimensions I find incredibly important for analysis, but hard to capture with the mainstay methodologies of written ethnography (in line with [Conquergood, 1985](#); [Zanoni et al., 2010](#)). Ethnodrama also allows and even pushes me to explicitly include my own subjectivity (e.g. as a voice, character, through the play's form or in other ways), and in doing so be honest about its integral part of the presented analysis.

In my experience, ethnodrama illuminates and activates the co-presence of researcher, participant and audience, making the ethnographic encounter a uniquely shared, sensory and ethical experience. By staging voices rather than summarising them, the playwright enables a form of knowledge production that is dialogical and participatory: audiences are invited not only to interpret but to *inhabit* the complexities of lived reality, including the “why” and “who” of the teller of the story. In this sense, the theatrical text and performance go beyond merely conveying lived experiences; it is an all-encompassing mode of ethnographic inquiry that involves the audience, creates a shared space for truth finding and emotion, where empathy, embodiment and relational truth over theoretical abstraction and distance are centred.

One of the reasons I advocate it, is because this ethnographic methodology is incredibly effective in exposing the “system” of social injustices for people of colour; a system that for the white majority in this part of the world too often remains hypothetical, instead of a truth ([Wekker, 2020](#)). With my works, I have won awards, received death threats and thank-you notes. I have worked with local NGO's, city councils, national and international production companies. For example, I set up an exchange with a theatre group in Istanbul, Turkey, between Dutch and Turkish playwrights (me included) and worked together with local imams and city representatives to set up workshops around a play of mine in Amsterdam. Through my

work I feel I have made a much clearer and deeper impact through theatre, than through science alone.

A few examples. My play *Broken Winged Bird* (Veenstra, 2021), shown in Figure 1, extends the ethnodramatic method to the terrain of archival silence. The play reconstructs the life of Timothy Hood, a Black American soldier who fought in Europe during the Second World War and returned to a segregated United States. Because few historical sources document Hood's life, the creative process necessarily exposed the seams between documentation and imagination. Formally, the play oscillates between realism and abstraction – shifting between dream sequences, stylized tableaux and courtroom testimonies – to reflect the instability of racial memory. In one scene, Hood returns home expecting a hero's welcome but confronts the brutality of segregation: the silence, spatial distance and choreography of exclusion perform what ethnography could only describe. Through these strategies, *Broken Winged Bird* answers Denzin's (2018) call for a "new genealogy", wherein performance itself becomes an epistemological act: "political, personal, embodied, collaborative, imaginative, artistic, creative, a form of intervention, a plea for social justice." (p. 1).



Figure 1. Scene from "Broken Winged Bird". Note. Protagonist Timothy Hood (played by Jouman Fattal) and an unnamed Black American soldier (played by Alidtcha Binazon) discuss how to bury White American soldiers, by Van Duin (2021), Toneelgroep Maastricht (<https://www.toneelgroepmaastricht.nl/agenda/broken-winged-bird-rg47>). Copyright by Ben van Duin/Toneelgroep Maastricht

In my play *Schuld* (see Figure 2) about Yazidi refugees in The Netherlands (Veenstra, 2022), I expanded on this new genealogy. I employed a non-linear dramaturgy that interweaves flashbacks, present-day encounters and poetic monologues based on action research, real-life interviews and archival research, to make visible the traumatic memory of

Aryán, a Yazidi survivor who unexpectedly recognises her captor and rapist in a Dutch supermarket. These elements produce a personified ethnography for the audience; one that does not seek to represent suffering at a safe, rational, distance, but to bring it into the personal through shared time, space and emotion. It gave voice to the experience of Yazidi survivors, reconstituting their humanity in the eyes of an majority White public hostile to refugees. The play could thus bridge the gap from a theoretical knowing of hardships to the compassionate understanding of a person.



Figure 2. Scene from “Schuld”. Note. Ending where protagonist Aryán (played by Gonca Karasu) celebrates her freedom, by Ben van Duin (2022), Toneelgroep Maastricht, <https://www.toneelgroepmaastricht.nl/agenda/schuld-zb34>). Copyright by Ben van Duin/Toneelgroep Maastricht

Methodological approach

My main goal with this article will be to champion the method of ethnodrama in Management and Organisation studies (MOS), specifically regarding the use of race and social justice goals. To help illustrate this, I will use the Dutch case of Het Toeslagenschandaal as an illustrative case study, drawing on both primary and secondary sources (e.g. Van Dam *et al.*, 2020; Arts and Van den Berg, 2025). I will expand on this case in coming sections.

For my argument, I will employ a qualitative, practice-based approach that blends conceptual analysis with insights from my own experience as a playwright. In practice-based research, creative work goes beyond illustration and serves as a platform for scholarly investigation, sparking new theoretical and methodological ideas (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Smith, 2009). Arts-based inquiry is gaining recognition for uncovering aspects of social life that conventional analytical writing often fails to reveal (Denzin, 2018; Leavy, 2025).

Epistemological stance

My perspective throughout my practice is rooted in interpretivist and postcolonial traditions. Interpretivism suggests that organisational realities are shaped by cultural narratives, power dynamics and historical contexts (Van Maanen, 2011). Postcolonial scholarship expands on

this by showing how knowledge production is tied to colonial power structures and racial hierarchies (Cooke, 2003; Zanon *et al.*, 2010). Ethnodrama fits well with these views, interpreting social narratives through performance (Conquergood, 1985; Salvatore, 2018).

I also embrace a critical postcolonial epistemology as I advocate for ethnodrama, acknowledging that producing knowledge is inherently political. Decolonial scholarship on racialised power relations further informs my approach (e.g. Mills, 2022; Wekker, 2020).

Literature engagement and analytical strategy

Through a critical genealogical method, I will examine existing research, highlighting important concepts in institutional racism, postcolonial critique and arts-based methods. In this article, I position these discussions of the (non) use of race as a theoretical concept within wider colonial and postcolonial debates (e.g. Nkomo, 1992; Said, 2003; Wekker, 2020; Manse, 2021; Opriel, 2021), highlighting the case of Het Toeslagenschandaal as part of ongoing patterns of racialised government practices rather than a mere bureaucratic mistake. This case is presented using both primary and secondary sources (e.g. Van Dam *et al.*, 2020; Arts and Van den Berg, 2025). Secondary sources include academic analyses of institutional racism, postcolonial theory and performance ethnography (e.g. Conquergood, 1985; Cooke, 2003; Denzin, 2018; Mills, 2022; Nkomo, 1992, 2021; Saldaña, 2005; 2010; Wekker, 2020).

I will address longstanding epistemological critiques on the field's (wilful) reluctance to prioritise race as a central category of analysis (Grimes, 2001; Cooke, 2003; Nkomo, 1992, 2021; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). Drawing on performance ethnography and ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005; 2010; Salvatore, 2018), which treats performance as both representation and inquiry, I demonstrate ethnodrama's unique capability to expose institutional tensions (Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 2018) and provide methodological answers to these critiques.

Positionality and reflexivity

I build my argument by being transparent about my dual role as playwright and ethnodramatist, and the need for incorporating reflexivity into the research. My artistic experience shapes the way I see methodology and positionality within ethnography. Rather than viewing subjectivity as a bias to exclude, I welcome it as an enriching aspect of the inquiry (Saldaña, 2010) and integral part of the analysis.

Ultimately, my argument draws on interdisciplinary discussions across MOS, postcolonial studies, critical race theory and performance studies within broader historical and cultural contexts. My methodological approach is informed by my own artistic portfolio, including theatrical pieces such as *Broken Winged Bird* and *Schuld*, which illustrate how ethnodrama can engage audiences with themes of responsibility, institutional violence and collective memory.

Theoretical framework

As Denzin (2018) wrote: "Performance is the vehicle for making injustice visible (. . .) When the facts have been exhausted, 'we must imagine a future and work to make it real, to go beyond the evidence, to make history present, to make the not yet now real'" (p. 459–460). The examples of *Broken Winged Bird* and *Schuld* from my practice demonstrate how ethnodrama can reveal these forms of truth finding in a way that written ethnography often cannot. In *Schuld*, the oscillation between monologue and ensemble voice transforms guilt from an abstract concept into an affective tension shared between performers and audience. In *Broken Winged Bird*, the interplay of silence, movement and fragmented narrative are deliberately composed in such a way as to amplify empathy and to generate recognition; the point being that audiences must *feel* the impossibility of reconciliation. This choice contrasts textual ethnography's usual reliance on description and interpretation, which, while analytically rich, often separates knowledge from the sensory and the moral (Tuck and Yang, 2014).

Furthering my argument I will use the Dutch Childcare Benefit Scandal (Het Toeslagenschandaal) as an illustrative case for the application of ethnodrama. The scandal, with its complex entanglement of bureaucratic processes, institutional racism and lived trauma, offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate how ethnodramatic methodologies can expose the often-invisible mechanisms of systemic injustice. I will argue how ethnodrama can act as both a methodological and artistic intervention by highlighting Het Toeslagenschandaal, revealing the deeper social, theoretical and organisational dynamics that conventional ethnographic practices within MOS alone may fail to capture.

A lasting Dutch scandal: Het Toeslagenschandaal

Het Toeslagenschandaal represents a significant instance of governmental failure in the Netherlands, which still today remains unresolved even after the 2021 resignation of the sitting government. The incident harmfully affected about 35,000 thousand Dutch citizens who were wrongly accused of fraud, including minors, and resulted in the government officially acknowledging the existence of institutional racism (Arts and Van Den Berg, 2025; Ministerie van Financiën, 2022; Van Dam *et al.*, 2020; Van Nispen *et al.*, 2024).

The scandal was brought to public attention in the late 2010s through coverage by Trouw and RTL Nieuws, alongside advocacy by Members of Parliament Renske Leijten (SP) and Pieter Omtzigt (CDA) (Van Dam *et al.*, 2020). Since 2005, thousands of innocent families suffered financial hardship due to the structure of the childcare allowance system. Regulations required that minor or even incomprehensible administrative mistakes could compel families to repay their annual received benefits in full, frequently amounting to tens of thousands of euros; amounts out of reach for many of them. The Tax and Customs Administration (Belastingdienst), incentivised to maximise revenue, conducted an expansive and proactive investigation into suspected fraud. This process led to erroneous benefit terminations, illegal blacklisting, systematic disregard of parental appeals and the subsequent out-of-home placement of 2,090 children (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023).

Subsequent exposés uncovered that the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration employed discriminatory profiling practices to hunt for new cases of suspected fraud, disproportionately targeting individuals with non-Dutch and/or immigrant backgrounds. These actions prompted allegations of systemic discrimination within the tax authority. Despite issued warnings in 2012 and 2014 regarding the severity of the Tax and Customs Administration's recovery policy, responsible officials failed to act and members of the cabinet did not inform Parliament about these urgent concerns (Van Dam *et al.*, 2020).

Two ensuing parliamentary inquiries – the aforementioned Parliamentary Interrogation Committee on Childcare Benefits (Van Dam *et al.*, 2020) and the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on Fraud Policy and Service Provision (Van Nispen *et al.*, 2024) – concluded that human rights were overlooked across all arms of government in an increasingly uncompromising political and social context. The reports determined that fundamental rights had been violated and the rule of law undermined. They further highlighted that the social security and allowance systems intended to aid citizens instead caused substantial harm and that the tax authority acted prejudicial. Concurrently, Van Nispen *et al.* (2024) identified “institutional racism” (p. 315) as a contributing factor. However, they did not elaborate on what they meant with that terminology or which processes or policies they defined as such.

It is unfortunately quite common that any explanations of the causations of Het Toeslagenschandaal have been found mostly in operational terms, rather than rooted in a(n) (postcolonial) organisational evaluation of the Dutch government. As succinctly noted by Achbab (2021), those directly involved with the scandal have gone out of their way to blame any faults as “consequences of classic managerial problems” (p.1). Even in their own rapport Van Nispen *et al.* (2024) still seemed unwilling to meaningfully qualify or quantify any instance of institutional racism. As Achbab correctly surmises, “the committee advocates learning lessons from the final report. However, the evasive language regarding institutional

racism makes that difficult, and likewise fails to acknowledge a fundamental cause of the injustice” (Achbab, 2024, translated from Dutch). Ignoring the larger context of institutional racism results in the government unsuccessfully setting up solitary actions such as dismantling databases (Stokmans and Vermeulen, 2023) or trying to pay off the victims (for example, Joosten, 2023). In doing so, it forgoes quick actions to addressing larger systemic undercurrents – which in turn stay hidden and under researched.

Arts and Van den Berg (2025) reach a similar conclusion: they posit Het Toeslagenschandaal as a case study of how colonial legacies persist in contemporary Dutch welfare policies, particularly through the racialised and gendered application of the category of fraud. The authors highlight the devastating impact on victims, as well as the broader erosion of public trust in government. They situate the scandal within a global pattern of racialised welfare targeting, emphasising that welfare states, such as The Netherlands, have historically excluded or exploited marginalised populations while using “fraud” as a tool for control and punishment.

Indeed, in June of 2023 media reported on a new case of institutional racism. In a renewed search for alleged fraud, the Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs (DUO, the government agency handling student loans and debts) directed 97% of its investigations on students of colour or those with non-native roots (Belleman *et al.*, 2023). Again, independent researchers concluded institutional racism was at play in DUO’s selection of cases (Algorithm Audit, 2025). Again, no significant acknowledgement was given nor was any meaningful action undertaken.

As for Het Toeslagenschandaal, an investigation by Dutch newspaper *Trouw* (Hakkenes, 2026) reveals that parents affected by the childcare benefits scandal were still being denied access to essential documents by the government’s processing service. This refusal not only obstructs their ability to appeal or seek redress but also violates legal requirements for transparency and procedural fairness.

The systemic undercurrents, it seems, keep imposing themselves.

The history of Dutch governmental racism

I agree with Arts and Van Den Berg (2025) when they write that “the benefits scandal is not an exception, but an example of a pattern” (p. 183). Historically, the policies of the Dutch government can be quite easily understood through the framework of institutional racism. For example, the implementation of the Dutch colonial tax system known as *Het Cultuurstelsel* (the Cultivation System) was initiated by the Dutch Central Government in response to administrative challenges within its colony in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), and subsequently extended to other colonies in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Arendsen, 2016; Jong, 1989; Manse, 2021; Piccardt, 1873).

In his dissertation Manse (2021) details how, following a decline in revenues from Indonesia, the Dutch state restructured its legal tax system to increase fiscal returns, often at the expense of the indigenous population. He concludes that “these policies prioritized changing the way colonized subjects lived their lives, to fit the patterns and needs of processes of colonial state building” (p. 331). The Dutch state adapted its regulatory frameworks to optimise resource extraction from its colonies. Notably, De Belastingdienst established legal mechanisms that enabled significant adverse impacts on colonial populations under the justification of supporting the broader interests of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (p. 332).

This approach is a precursor to the strategies adopted during Het Toeslagenschandaal, where aggressive and expansive enforcement was employed purportedly to preserve the Dutch welfare system (Van Dam *et al.*, 2020, chapter 1). These developments demonstrate how the Dutch state constructed legal systems specifically concerning people of colour, thereby framing its actions as both legally and morally defensible.

Another illustrative case is the expropriation of German nationals by the Dutch government following the Second World War. Oprel (2020, 2021) examines the functions of the Dutch agency *Het Nederlands Beheersinstituut* (NBI), which was established by decree from the

Dutch Central Government in exile in 1944. The NBI managed the assets of people who vanished during the war, including deported Jews, as well as the property of suspected collaborators and Germans living in the Netherlands. As part of postwar reparations, the assets of all enemy citizens, primarily those of German nationality, were seized, administered by the NBI. All individuals (including returning Jews) whose property was confiscated had to provide documentation to demonstrate that the expropriation was unjustified, usually by having to prove the NBI that they did not fall under the classification of “enemy” or “collaborator”, despite being previously categorised as such by the NBI itself (Opinel, 2020, p. 341).

Opinel notes that the decree also encompassed all German nationals, including those who lived peacefully in The Netherlands prior to the war, refugees and returning survivors of concentration camps, which contributed additional revenue to the state (p. 129). Comparable to Het Toeslagenschandaal, the responsibility for providing proof was placed on individuals from minority groups, who frequently faced challenges in disputing these decisions. Legal proceedings often extended over several years and had various outcomes for the people affected (2020, Chap. 5, p. 257–300).

These examples illustrate how policy approaches have operated in different historical contexts within Dutch society. The Cultivation System represents an explicit form of colonial policymaking documented in law, while later instances, such as actions taken by the NBI, demonstrate similar administrative practices and logic affecting minority populations within a European framework.

As described earlier, although the consequences of Het Toeslagenschandaal continue to be felt, a substantive postcolonial analysis has yet to emerge. The few theoretical analyses of institutional racism have been met with silence, never broaching the broader public conversation – even though the colonial underpinnings of the Dutch state warrant such discussion. This silence is in my eyes exemplary for the broader academic significance in ongoing debates on postcolonialism. Specifically, how we theorise and use the concept of race in MOS. How could we as scientists understand Het Toeslagenschandaal, if we ourselves do not truly understand the concept of race? I therefore start with elaborating on this conceptual context, to underscore the added value of ethnodrama for organisational ethnography.

Silence on institutional racism within MOS

It is an unmistakable fact that MOS has not unambiguously established race as a valid theoretical concept through which to understand organisational policies. In that sense, perhaps we should not be surprised that public institutions and organisations do not reliably define terms such as “institutional racism” when we, scholars of management and organisations, do the same. Already in 1992 Stella Nkomo concluded in her scathing analysis on the silence of race in MOS:

First, we must acknowledge that the emperor is indeed naked. Organisations are not race-neutral entities. *Race is and has been present in organisations, even if this idea has not been explicitly recognised.* Second, rewriting race is not a matter of simply clothing the emperor, but the emperor must be dethroned as the universal, the only reality (Nkomo, 1992, p. 501, emphasis added).

Three decennia later and Nkomo has not seen any progress: “When I look back over the past twenty-nine years, I am struck by the lack of significant progress in making race a core analytical concept in MOS.” (2021, p. 3) and: “I end these reflections unsettled. I must admit I am angry about the slow pace of making race central to the study of management and organizations.” (p. 14).

Nkomo’s analyses echo the foundational work of Charles W. Mills with his conceptualisation of *The Racial Contract*, and who in 1997 denoted that “the silence [...] on issues of race is a sign of the continuing power of the Contract over its signatories, an illusory color blindness that actually entrenches white privilege.” (2022, p. 150). He adds that

while discussions on race and racism usually end in a dead-end dichotomisation on whether race is a biological trait or not, it should rather be understood as sociopolitical, and thus with real power to influence the world (p. 231).

Historically, the academic discipline of MOS has encountered ongoing challenges in fully addressing issues related to racism and colonialism. In their compelling article, [Cooke \(2003\)](#) advocates for applying a postcolonial perspective to MOS, noting that one of the field's foundational figures, Taylor, held explicitly racist views (p. 22), and that the history of slavery is frequently excluded from narratives about the origins of management. The decision within MOS to associate its intellectual roots with Taylorism, rather than with earlier systems of managerial control developed on US plantations prior to Western industrialisation, shapes how the field interprets and understands contemporary organisations (p. 3). This selective historical focus creates significant blind spots, which can result in organisational research that inadvertently perpetuates dominant perspectives on organisational practices, thereby minimising the influence of race and restricting the agency and authentic experiences of minority groups ([Zanoni et al., 2010](#)).

As Mills has observed, “what has usually been taken as the racist ‘exception’ has really been the rule; what has been taken as the ‘rule’ [...] has really been the exception” (2022, p. 216). Consequently, numerous organisational scholars have called for the deliberate integration of postcolonial frameworks into future research on organisations ([Al Ariss et al., 2014](#); [Grimes, 2001](#); [Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014](#); [Nkomo, 2008, 2021](#); [Wekker, 2002, 2020](#)).

I am reminded at this point of a lunch I had, where I was invited by fellow sociologists to lay out my thinking on Het Toeslagenschandaal. As I drew a causation between the colonial past of The Netherlands using my theoretical conceptualisation of race, they offered a set of counterproposals. Perhaps it was not race that could explain Het Toeslagenschandaal, but class, sex, politics, ICT-systems, geography, religion, even an intersectional combination of all these concepts. In other words, everything *but* race. When I challenged this, they quickly expressed doubts about race as a workable theoretical concept. They were sceptical of any (un)intended racism by the civil servants enacting the policy in Het Toeslagenschandaal. Could I prove the civil servants were enacting racist policies as they themselves probably did not mean to be racist? Should I not need to give them the benefit of the doubt, for we are here not to accuse but to discover? And is race not a too broad, too unscientifically proven concept to begin with?

[Nkomo \(1992, 2021\)](#), [Mills \(2015, 2022\)](#), [Cooke \(2003\)](#), [Grimes \(2001\)](#), [Said \(2003\)](#) they, and many other scholars who further postcolonial understanding with their writings, show how they first must assuage the anxiety of White scholars when discussing or theorising the concept of Race. As [Mills \(2022\)](#) pointedly wrote, “the fish does not see the water, and whites do not see the racial nature of a white polity because it is natural to them, the element in which they move” (p. 148).

In respect to the Dutch context, this truth is exposed quite succinctly by Gloria Wekker, a renowned Surinam-Dutch anthropologist who has investigated, and interrogated, the (lack of) understanding of race in Dutch society specifically. The remarks made by Nkomo in 1992 are echoed by Wekker in her oration ([Wekker, 2002](#)). She writes:

The study of Whiteness is not a subject that garners much enthusiasm in the Netherlands. When I hold my orations, I can see the antipathy for the subject; glassy eyes or blinds that seem to roll before the eyes. But it is exactly that antipathy and what it tells us about the dominant white self-image that intrigues me. The saying goes that “Race” has no meaning in the Netherlands since the Second World War, besides a way of determining a species of potato or animal. However, “race”/ethnicity forms a fundamental, if not invisible and unspeakable organiser of life in the Netherlands, so much so that even the organisation of our knowledge, of our disciplines in the academy, and of our daily lives occurs through the lines of “race”/ethnicity (p. 18, translated from Dutch).

Wekker’s affirmation that race constitutes a “fundamental (...) organiser of life” will be recognised by those familiar with the discourse. As early as the 1970s, Edward [Said \(2003\)](#) observed that:

What we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability. (...) Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a *considerable material investment*. (p. 6, emphasis added).

To topple this order, to create something that is truly equal, it is my view that rather than to just point it out, or impotently ponder the question of its existence, we should actively interrogate and undercut its inherent logic and demonstrate how it creates a structure of power (with, e.g., rules or laws) built on white privilege and inequality. We must move beyond the hypothetical and analytical and engage the emotional and the psychological. Paraphrasing Mills (2015, 2022), we must counter the narrative, throw it into the limelight and engage with it fully illuminated, to bring into the light that what Whiteness needs in order to remain hidden. The question: not “if”, but “how”.

I theorise here that an answer can be found in the *form of how* we engage in MOS with Race: not as a conceptual theory that must be proven, case by case, person by person, but as practiced, proven, and pragmatic organising function of power within organisations that many want (or need) to remain hidden. As Nkomo and Mills, Spivak, Wekker and Saïd, show: the white majority chooses their ignorance. “As long as this studied ignorance persists [...] justice will continue to be restricted to “just us”” (Mills, 2022, p. 230). So how to break this studied “ignorance”?

Personally, I cannot think of a better way to shatter any practiced nescience than an actor live on stage yelling in your face.

The need for a different ethnographical approach: ethnodrama

Most scholars would agree that ethnography can be used to communicate the lived experience of those (systemically) unknown to the majority; to add to our collective understanding of the Other (Van Maanen, 2011). In the case of Het Toeslagenschandaal, the ‘suggestion’ has been made to me several times by senior researchers, with different levels of forcefulness, that I should start the research by setting up a classical ethnographical organisational study of the Dutch tax authority. This would be necessary to “prove” the premise of any suspected institutional racism. Indeed, it was said, one should start by interrogating the apparent perpetrators: the civil servants. “Tell me, are you racist?”, I presume I would need to ask. “And your colleague? Yes? No?”

Of course, if the answer would be “no”, does that negate or prove the “institutional” part? I wonder, how many civil servants must be openly racist to speak of institutional racism? Is there perhaps a quota, somewhere? Of course, I assume one would also want to interview the victims somewhere: “did you feel any racism, perhaps?” But when would their feelings be valid? Is there a quota for experienced racism? And when are victims *victims*, not just unfortunate? Afterwards, it would fall onto me, the ethnographer, to build my analysis on the veracity of the “lived experiences” from either side, probably with much aplomb. Would it mean anything?

The fact is, there remains a profound tension within ethnography. Who chooses which words are committed to page, and which are not. Who are interviewed, and who are not. Why and where the research starts and how it ends. An implicit power dynamic too often exists between researchers and researched, between those who conduct research and those who participate in it, particularly when researchers can use the lived experiences of those being studied for their own career’s betterment, for better or worse. I would content that this dynamic reflects broader structures of power within Western society, where individuals in authority pose questions and the Other must provide answers. This all to say, I fail to see how using institutional racism, by means of classical ethnographical methodology, will help ending it.

Thinking back on that luncheon with my fellow researchers I remember quite pointedly how my colleagues of colour present did *not* try to question the theoretical validity of race. They did not feel the need to explore whether race or racism, in whatever form, was present

within the Dutch government or a contributing factor in Het Toeslagenschandaal. Instead, they were the only ones who asked about the victims/survivors. Were *their* voices heard loud enough by me? Was *their* experience taken seriously enough in my research? They wanted to know, *how* will I foreground the racism the victims/survivors very much *did* experience?

In trying to answer those questions, I find myself coming back to the idea that while using observation, translation and investigation of lived experiences are valuable, of course, the question remains whether the concurrent insights (and consequences) can be successfully communicated to the wider public, whether they be scientist or citizens. Will those ethnographical experiences of the Other truly shift the enacted policies of the majority, whether in government or academia? In the case of Het Toeslagenschandaal, it is apparent that the experiences of victims/survivors are widely known and well documented, and yet, this exposure has not resulted in any concerted effort by the government, nor sustained pressure of the Dutch (White) public at large, to investigate any institutional racism. As Arts and Van Den Berg note: “the separation between intent of harm and harmful outcomes [serve] the protection of state actors like top administrators, that have to this day not been held accountable for their racialised targeting” (2025, p. 180). I would add that the absence any sustained public pressure in Dutch society can arguably be understood through what Wekker calls “violent ignorance” (2020, p. 170); where the White public explains away any supposed racism with a “I am sure they did not mean it like that.” It all fuels my belief that we need a new methodological form that is a better fit for breaking through these hardened barriers of (wilful) ignorance.

Seremani and Clegg (2016) argue convincingly that “Postcolonialism is dogged by dualistic epistemological origins that position it as an antithesis that has restricted intellectual dialogue between the ideas postcolonial theory labels as ‘western’ and ‘non-western’.” (p. 174). They feel there is a need for a new “epistemological third space”, *Ubuntu*, where different truths coalesce and inform each other. They see social science researchers not as “arbiters of truth”, but as “mediators between, creating an epistemological third space in which understandings grounded in the dualisms under review can be negotiated” (p. 181). To them, such a space is provided by Ubuntu, an indigenous African philosophical concept that defines personhood in fundamentally relational terms. It is often expressed through the idea that a person becomes a person through their relationships with others, meaning that individual identity is not prior to the community but emerges from (and because of) it. As Seremani and Clegg (2016) write, “from an Ubuntu lens, the individual cannot be understood without taking into consideration the group of which he or she is a part (. . .) The organisation is hence conceived as a circumscribed space or arena in which group interests converge or collide from an Ubuntu standpoint.” (p. 177). To me, their argument for Ubuntu reverberates in the form of the theatre stage.

In their essay “R-words: Refusing Research” authors Tuck and Yang (2014) argue for a different kind of method altogether. They conceptualise refusal as a methodological approach, one that does not lean, for example, on only giving voices to people through their pain. “Academe’s demonstrated fascination with telling and retelling narratives of pain is troubling, both for its voyeurism and for its consumptive implacability” (p. 228) they write. Ending with a stern observation:

In settler colonial logic, pain is more compelling than privilege, scars more enthralling than the body unmarked by experience. In settler colonial ideology, pain is evidence of authenticity, of the verifiability of a lived life. Academe, formed and informed by settler colonial ideology, has developed the same palate for pain. Emerging and established social science researchers set out to document the problems faced by communities, and often in doing so, recirculate common tropes of dysfunction, abuse and neglect. (p. 229)

Tuck and Yang (2014) offer a noteworthy conceptualisation of methodological refusal through Art, exemplified by the artist Ken Gonzales-Day and his work *Erased lynching* (p. 240). It made me think of that golden rule in playwrighting: “show, don’t tell.”

Another significant practice-based example is writer/researcher Bhattacharya’s (2009) research, who thoughtfully concludes that “my need to liberate those I deem to be oppressed

may not reflect the critical needs of those that I am trying to ‘liberate’” (p. 110). Bhattacharya then identifies a promising alternative in ethnodrama and performative ethnography. She provides a thorough and insightful account of how she utilises interviews, participation and analysis to develop new theatre texts and performances. Bhattacharya ultimately determines that “a traditional written report could not do justice to the performative acts of the participants, especially when their shuttling between multiple spaces produces the performative actions and reactions” (pp. 139–140). I hear in her words the echo of Charles Mills, who noted that only those directly affected (by the racial contract) “know where the bodies are buried” (2022, p. 230).

In this sense, ethnodrama aligns with what [Denzin \(2018\)](#) and [Conquergood \(1985\)](#) describe as performance ethnography: a practice that understands performance as both method and representation. In his article [Denzin \(2018\)](#) builds on Augusto Boal’s (1985, as cited in [Denzin, 2018](#)) notion of spectator participation – inviting audiences to become co-witnesses and co-interpreters of lived experience – as well as [Saldana’s \(2005\)](#) view of ethnodrama as a process of dramatic re-contextualisation that transforms data into embodied relational meaning. Within theatrical practice, embodiment functions as an epistemic mechanism. Dramaturgical choices such as spatial arrangement, vocal rhythm, embodied repetition and temporal pacing do not merely illustrate knowledge but produce it by enabling audiences to experience affective and relational dimensions of social realities that are difficult to apprehend through textual description alone ([Conquergood, 1985](#); [Denzin, 2018](#); [Saldana, 2010](#)).

My own practice in *Broken Winged Bird* and *Schuld* takes this embodied knowing into a Dutch theatrical practice, showing how ethnodrama can be a site of both artistic creation and impactful social research. As Denzin concludes:

Here the theatrical, the performative and the ethnographic come together. The dramatist, with the assistance of spect-actors, uses the facts and experiences of oppression to change history. This is critical pedagogy in action, a politics of liberation, inquiry and theatre for justice. There is no going back (2018, p. 461).

Discussion

In cases such as Het Toeslagenschandaal, where systemic driving forces like institutional racism and bias are exposed, I have argued that ethnodrama functions not only as an artistic method but also as a critical tool for social justice, for producing and sharing experiential, participatory knowledge. Using ethnodrama not only challenges the theoretical frameworks dominant in conventional MOS practice, which underutilise postcolonial concepts such as race ([Nkomo, 2021](#)), but can drive meaningful social change ([Denzin, 2018](#)). In practice, how could such an ethnodrama of Het Toeslagenschandaal look like? I present below a case of possibility.

The writing process

Starting off with the parameters for ethnodrama as framed by [Saldana \(2005, 2010\)](#), [Salvatore \(2018\)](#), [Denzin \(2018\)](#) and [Bhattacharya \(2009\)](#), I would conceptualise the writing process as an iterative dialogue between science and art, subject and object, interviewer and interviewee. To mitigate interpretive dominance, I would actively engage in iterative feedback processes, including participant responses to early drafts and staged readings, allowing participants to challenge or refine representations of their experiences ([Bhattacharya, 2009](#); [Tuck and Yang, 2014](#)).

The research foundation of the text should build on both live and archived interviews, literature review and archival study. Dialogues may draw on parliamentary reports, testimonies from affected parents and media investigations, allowing audiences to

encounter the lived consequences of bureaucratic decisions as unfolding relational events rather than abstract policy failures (Bhattacharya, 2009; Saldaña, 2005).

While writing, the development of the theatrical text generates theoretical insights, while theoretical frameworks reciprocally inform the dramaturgy. This working-in-progress of the text can be monitored and evaluated for theatrical and communicative efficacy, as well as ethical and reflexive dilemmas and considerations, through staged readings and extended sessions where specific scenes are openly performed and rehearsed for an invited audience, which is invited to discuss and reflect. Participatory readings could be staged for specific groups, such as the interviewees, survivors of Het Toeslagenschandaal, Dutch civil servants and/or MOS researchers and students, which could also generate new data and insights for the text. This iterative refinement through these staged readings and feedback sessions will inform both the (final) dramaturgical form and the ethical framing of the work (Denzin, 2018; Saldaña, 2010).

During this iterative dialogue, it is important to engage actively with the ethical aspects of process and text, as set out by ethnodramatists like Saldana (2005) and Bhattacharya (2009). This means that the writer should prioritise the ethical treatment of participants by ensuring their lived experiences are represented authentically and respectfully, avoiding emotional harm or stigmatisation through dramatic adaptation. Collaborative and reciprocal relationships with participants, as well as transparency about the use of their stories, are crucial to maintaining ethical integrity in the creative process. These practices aim to balance authenticity with care and ethical responsibility (Denzin, 2018; Saldaña, 2010; Tuck and Yang, 2014).

Additionally, issues of copyright, production rights and reflexivity must be addressed to ensure the final ethnodramatic work remains true to its empirical roots and ethical responsibilities. The ethnodramatist can decide whether to include these considerations as part of the main text, or to write an (short) addendum, explaining specific decisions made.

A play envisioned

Considering the Dutch theatrical context, where postdramatic structures in theatre are a mainstay instead of the more classical well-made play, I would envision for this play specifically the form of the text as a mosaic narrative that interrogates historical failure and the enduring logic of white power structures through overlapping movements [1]. Rejecting the conventions of the well-made play by widening the scope of the story from *one* (the protagonist) to *the many* (the voices of all) also signifies a challenge to the dominant hegemonic narratives that individualise responsibility and obscure structural causation. These movements can flow into and through each other, each composed of scenes grounded in documented historical events and populated by real historical figures or their abstracted representations. I can imagine satire to function as a principal dramaturgical device in the beginning, as in *Schuld*, by setting up a light tone through which to gradually immerse the audience in the unfolding drama. Scenes can vary stylistically – from sharply realist to poetic and contemplative – and incorporate parody, pastiche and temporal juxtapositions that interweave past and present. In that sense, the piece builds upon the dramaturgical approach used in *Broken Winged Bird*.

The first movement examines the colonial past, including deliberations surrounding the Dutch Cultivation System in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and post-Second World War internment camps such as Camp Vught. The second movement addresses contemporary governmental organisational processes, for example, meetings of the CAF team, demonstrating how policy and bureaucracy present themselves as neutral and rational while inadvertently reproducing hegemonic structures. The third movement traces political discourse from the seventeenth century to the present, critically interrogating the rhetoric surrounding institutional racism and exposing how political language obscures structural implications. The fourth movement centres *The Other*, foregrounding lived experience within

White systems of power that regulate, evaluate and discipline. These scenes depict both communal identity formation and the structural precarity embedded in shared spaces such as classrooms or interactions with state institutions. Embodied elements within these movements, such as silence, repetition and spatial distance function analytically by rendering institutional violence perceptible as lived experience. Rather than describing systemic harm, these devices allow audiences to encounter its cumulative affective impact, thereby transforming institutional racism from an abstract category into an experiential reality (Conquergood, 1985; Saldaña, 2005, 2010; Denzin, 2018).

Through the movements, a narrator performs a pivotal role, functioning as the audience's anchor and perspective across temporal shifts. Moving in and out of scenes, the narrator alternately participates in and observes events, thereby connecting the four movements. At times subject, at times object, the narrator anchors the narrative in the present and facilitates reflection, acting simultaneously as guide, interpreter and character. It can also question events that seem to be unfolding, the narrative of history, even the words and process it is made to speak by the ethnodramatist.

With this form, the play deliberately makes the point that this story is not singular, but systemic. Rather than centring traditional character conflict, the drama emerges from the confrontation between stage and audience. The central tension resides in the disjunction between what the audience presumes to know and what is revealed theatrically – an exposition of cognitive dissonance.

Conclusion

The Dutch case of Het Toeslagenschandaal stands as a testament to the enduring realities of institutional racism and the urgent need to interrogate the structures that perpetuate it. Yet, the lack of research on the concept of race within MOS leaves both researchers and the general public at a disadvantage when it comes to accurately understanding and revealing cases such as Het Toeslagenschandaal.

To breach the gap in knowledge, we must both be mindful of the discussions within social sciences and postcolonial studies that highlight the problematic tension between who asks the questions and who provides the answers and of the methodologies that privilege pain as authenticity (Tuck and Yang, 2014), which risk perpetuating trauma and cultural narratives for academic gain rather than genuine change. In the artistic process of ethnodrama, this risk is addressed by avoiding the reproduction of trauma as spectacle and instead foregrounding structural conditions, narrative plurality and participant agency. This shifts emphasis from individual suffering to systemic accountability (Tuck and Yang, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2009).

This is why in this article I championed the use of ethnodrama, using the illustrative case of Het Toeslagenschandaal. Ethnodrama offers better pathways for resistance and decolonisation, in society and MOS, empowering those who have been silenced to reclaim their narratives and epistemologies and connecting with audiences on an emotional level. I have used my own practice, e.g. *Broken Winged Bird* and *Schuld*, to show how ethnodrama combines artistic creation and social research, giving depth and meaning for the audience to arguments around institutional racism and exclusion.

By synthesising postcolonial theory with performance, I have argued that ethnodrama can not only interrogate *what* knowledge is produced but, more importantly, *how* it is generated and disseminated and *who* has the agency to narrate and retell these stories. Ethnodrama emphasises storytelling as a form of resistance, performance as an act of decolonisation and embodiment as a mode of epistemology. I find it worth considering that, rather than seeking new epistemological frameworks solely within the social sciences, potential solutions to the complexities we face may reside in integrating its counterpart: the Arts. As playwright I would say, “show, don’t tell.”

Het Toeslagenschandaal did not arise in isolation, nor will it be the last of its kind if existing power dynamics and epistemological frameworks remain unchallenged (Arts and Van den

Berg, 2025). It is my belief that the lived experiences of victims and survivors must be foregrounded, not simply as object of research but as active narrators of their own stories. Only by recognising the systemic barriers and hegemonic practices within institutions – both in Dutch government and academia – we can begin to dismantle the mechanisms that uphold racial injustice.

When confronting systems of oppression, like the institutional racism as evidenced by Het Toeslagenschandaal, we as researchers must move beyond traditional binaries and embrace pluralistic, creative methodologies that centre the voices and agency of those affected whilst also engaging with the public at large. Only then can research serve not just its fellow academics but give victims and survivors the spotlight and hope to enact lasting social change (Denzin, 2018).

I truly believe that, if we mean to not repeat our mistakes of the past, our work ahead needs openness to new epistemological spaces, where dialogue, performance and embodiment become vehicles for truth-finding, through transformation and reflection. I acknowledge here the caution of Nkomo: “History suggests when progress is being made towards addressing racism, there is backlash (. . .) My life-preserver right now is that MOS chooses a different future.” (2021, p. 15).

Let us choose different.

Note

1. Here, I use postdramatic structures to refer to non-linear, fragmented forms that resist singular narrative authority; well-made play to denote a linear, causally structured dramatic form; and mosaic narrative to indicate a composition of multiple interwoven perspectives rather than a single protagonist-driven arc.

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