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Graphic novels as counter-stories: Jerry Craft's *New Kid* as a way to teach critical racial awareness

Abstract

This article examines Jerry Craft's graphic novel *New Kid* from 2019 by applying Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT scholars claim that racism is a structural issue which affects all sectors of public life, education being one of them. *New Kid* is based on autobiographical experiences of being African American at a mainly White (elitist) school in the United States and can therefore be read as a counter-story. It is written from the perspective of a 12-year-old Black boy, Jordan Banks, who is a 'new kid' at the private Riverdale Academy. The book has caused a nationwide debate in the United States, having been accused of preaching CRT. Craft, however, claims that he did not write it with any political intentions. The article takes this debate as its point of departure to first explain the main tenets of CRT, and then to explore in what ways *New Kid* can be read as a counter-story. The analysis shows that *New Kid* highlights structural racism towards African Americans (for example, microaggressions, othering and deficit orientation) in an educational context and reveals the consequences of racism, in this case for students' self-perception. In the second part, the article investigates possibilities for teaching *New Kid* in a European setting, taking the 2020 Norwegian curriculum reform (Fagfornyelsen) as an example. *New Kid* is identified as an appropriate medium to discuss racial issues in Norwegian schools.

Keywords: critical race theory, graphic novels, BIPoC, counter-story, education, *New Kid*, Jerry Craft.

Sammendrag

Artikkelen undersøker Jerry Crafts grafiske roman *New Kid* (2019) med utgangspunkt i Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT-forskere hevder at rasisme er et strukturelt fenomen som påvirker alle områder av det offentlige livet, blant annet utdanning. *New Kid* er basert på autobiografiske erfaringer av å være ‘african american’ på en hovedsakelig hvit eliteskole i USA og kan derfor leses som en ‘counter-story’ (en mothistorie). Historien fortelles fra perspektivet til Jordan Banks, en 12 år gammel svart gutt, som er en ‘new kid’ på det private Riverdale Academy.

Boken har blitt anklaget for å formidle CRT, noe som har ført til en landsdekkende debatt i USA, mens Craft selv hevder at han skrev den uten å ha noen politiske intensjoner. Artikkelen tar denne debatten som utgangspunkt for å først forklare de viktigste prinsippene som ligger til grunn for CRT, og for deretter å se nærmere på hvilke måter *New Kid* kan leses som counter-story. Analysen viser at *New Kid* belyser strukturell rasisme mot ‘african americans’ (f.eks. mikroagresjon, Den Andre og underskuddsorientering) i utdanningsammenhenger. Den viser også konsekvensene av rasisme, særlig for elevenes selvoppfatning. I artikkelen undersøkes ulike muligheter for å undervise *New Kid* i en europeisk kontekst, med den norske læreplanreform fra 2020 som eksempel. *New Kid* viser seg som egnet til å diskutere spørsmål om rase i norske skoler.

Nøkkelord: Kritisk raseteori, grafisk roman, BIPoC, motfortelling, utdanning, *New Kid*, Jerry Craft.

Introduction

“For a window of time, people really wanted to hear what Black authors had to say. And then, they dramatically did not want to hear anymore” (Berry, 2022). This quote from the US podcast *This American Life* refers to how Black books ‘skyrocketed’ in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder and the backlash that followed soon after.

Jerry Craft’s *New Kid* (2019), an autobiographical graphic novel for children ages 8 to 12, is one example of this. It was the first graphic novel ever to receive the prestigious Newbery Medal, awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children to the “author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” (Association for Library Service to Children, n.d.). The book has been translated into 12 languages and Craft was invited to give

readings in schools around the US. Apparently, people really wanted to hear what African American Jerry Craft had to say. The book is semi-autobiographical and based on the experiences of Craft and his children. It tells the story of seventh grader Jordan Banks, who is a ‘new kid’ at Riverdale Academy, a renowned elitist high school with little ethnic diversity. The reader follows Jordan through one year of school, accompanying him as he makes friendships and experiences the typical problems of a boy of this age. At the same time, the book relates how Jordan is confronted with racial microaggressions from students and teachers alike. *New Kid* can therefore be read with different focal points, but the racial aspect caused a number of parents to accuse the novel of teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT) and to argue for it to be banned from their school libraries. Craft, however, states that he “had to look up the word” (Berry, 2022), saying that he had never even heard of CRT before, much less that he had based his text on it. The entire debate was marked by so-called White rage, an expression of White people’s fear of being disadvantaged compared to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPoC) (Anderson, 2016), by the misconception of CRT in general and the graphic novel *New Kid* in particular.

The present article takes this controversy as its point of departure to discuss what CRT is and how it can be applied to *New Kid*. It is therefore located at the intersection of CRT and literary studies. A particular focus will be on how so-called counter-stories (Delgado, 1989) can portray structural racism, microaggressions and their effects on marginalized groups.

The second part of the article will shed light on the potential of using an autobiographical graphic novel like *New Kid* in an educational setting. It will also examine how this kind of teaching fits into current European school curricula against the backdrop of the Norwegian curriculum.

Tenets of CRT and graphic novels

The origins of CRT can be traced back to the 1970s, when legal scholars, lawyers and civil rights activists were striving to combat the subtler forms of racism that occurred after the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 3–4). CRT soon inspired a range of other disciplines such as philosophy, political science, women’s and ethnic studies, to name but a few. It also had a major influence on the fields of education and literature studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 7).

In short, CRT scholars state that race is a social construct, and that racism is a consequence of structural deficits, not individual biases. While racism is the prime focus of CRT, CRT scholars also take into account that racism intersects with multiple factors like class, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, or disability, which contribute to oppression and mutually reinforce each other (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 60; Gillborn, 2015, pp. 278, 284; Cabrera, 2019, p. 49). By exploring the nature of racism, CRT scholars do not only want to gain knowledge, but also to inspire change in society (Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 313; Gillborn, 2015, p. 279). This activist component has recently turned CRT into a political combat term in the context of the aforementioned White rage: American conservatives accuse adherents of CRT of lacking patriotism and of making White people feel bad about themselves (Berry, 2022).

One of the main tenets of CRT is that race is not a biological construct, but a social one. This is the case when society connects “pseudo permanent characteristics such as personality, intelligence and moral behavior” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9) with race. Scholars have examined how negative historical racial stereotypes still persist in American society, how they impact political and legislative decisions mainly made by White males, and to what extent they are even internalized by African Americans themselves (Green, n.d.; Plous & Williams, 1995, pp. 812–813).¹ Gloria Ladson-Billings has repeatedly emphasized the damaging effects of this “deficit paradigm” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, pp. 206–209; Ladson-Billings, 2004/1998) in the US school system. The concept deficit paradigm (or deficit model) refers to the fact that BIPOC students are assessed according to White people’s norms and judged negatively if they do not adhere to these norms. This often coincides with low expectations resulting from racial stereotypes like the “brutish African American male and the dominant, lazy African American female – the Welfare Mother” (Green, n.d.), which obviously are harmful. Plous and Williams (1995) have pointed out that even seemingly positive stereotypes like the media-dominating picture of the successful African American athlete is no less detrimental (Plous & Williams, 1995). This kind of stereotyping is not limited to African Americans: Asian American students are frequently treated as “model minorities,” Latina/os are “Mexicanized” and perceived as illegal aliens, while Native Americans are seen as “mascots” and “historic relics” (Patton, 2016, p. 326).

¹ The latter has already been described by William Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* from 1903 as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other”, a phenomenon he calls “double consciousness” (Pittman, 2016).

Furthermore, CRT holds that racism is not merely based on individual biases, but is a structural phenomenon. According to Critical Race Theorists, racism is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of American law and politics and permanently influences institutions and relationships (Vaught & Castagno, 2008, p. 97, 99; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 90, 120–124). Racism, therefore, is a consequence of developments reaching far back in history. While the civil rights movement ended “extremely egregious racial harms” like the deprivation of civil rights (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 26–27), structural racism today usually appears in the form of so-called “microaggressions” (first defined by Pierce, 1970, p. 265), racial offences that are “subtle and stunning” and psychologically harmful because they are “delivered incessantly” (Pierce, 1970, p. 265). They can occur as verbal and non-verbal insults and are typically carried out automatically and/or unconsciously (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 447). One type of microaggression is othering, in other words, excluding or exposing the underrepresented ‘other’ by suggesting that he or she is not part of the ‘norm’. Even though microaggressions are often expressed by individuals, they can be connected to a larger picture of institutionalized racism and the ideology of White supremacy (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015, pp. 301–302, p. 314). This makes microaggressions a “major vehicle for racism” (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 446) in the US and characterizes almost all interactions between Blacks and Whites.

Applied to an American educational context, CRT can reveal the “structural and cultural significance of Race in education” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50) resulting from positions of White supremacy (Baszile, 2008, p. 372; Patton, 2016, pp. 318–319; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015, p. 298). Scholars of critical curriculum studies describe a history of racism in American schools by pointing out how curricula have been adapted to particularly fulfil the needs of the financially successful Anglo-Saxon Protestant White cis² males in power. Members of underrepresented groups have to attend schools that are not adapted to their needs, do not include their experiences and therefore do not prepare them for higher education, but instead keep them in positions with little prospect of social advancement (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 443; Apple, 2018, p. 685; Yosso, 2002, pp. 93–96; Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 206; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 116; Patton, 2016, pp. 326–327; Pérez Huber et al., 2020, pp. 3–4). By referring to Harris’ concept of “Whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point out how students are not only rewarded for adapting to White norms and

² Cis being short for cisgender, referring to a gender identity which matches the gender one was born with.

sanctioned if they do not conform to them, but how Whiteness is also associated with better material equipment and more sophisticated curricula. Furthermore, predominantly White educational programmes are seen as being superior to predominantly Black ones, which contributes to modern forms of segregation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, pp. 59–60). Teacher education also fails to address structural racism by holding teachers individually responsible for systemic failures (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000, pp. 208–209; Patton, 2016, p. 324).

The aforementioned concept of microaggression in particular can contribute to revealing structural racism in educational settings from a CRT perspective (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015, p. 298). Microaggressions can occur in connection with race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent and/or culture (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015, p. 310). One type of microaggression that has been frequently discussed is the disregard of students' names, by fellow students and teachers alike. Kohli & Solórzano (2012) describe the damaging effects of a teacher's unwillingness or inability to correctly pronounce a student's name. As they point out, names frequently "carry cultural and family significance" (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 444). Disrespecting a child's name can lead to shifting self-perceptions, the internalization of negative perspectives of one's own culture and ultimately cause anxiety, shame, or feelings of not belonging (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 455). By relating current cases to historical practices of slaveowners renaming enslaved Africans, as well as the replacement of Indigenous names with Christian names, they reveal the structural component of something that at first glance might 'only' seem like a series of individual minor offences.

There is an ongoing discussion among CRT scholars on the best way to react to structural racism. Adherents of nationalist (also: separatist) positions claim that BIPoC should be proud of their culture and background. That is why African Americans of this conviction intentionally choose to surround themselves with a majority of other Black people, live in Black neighbourhoods and send their children to local Black schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 66). The alternative approach is called assimilation. Members of underrepresented groups who chose assimilation try their best to fit into mainstream society, hoping to be rewarded with academic and professional success and social advancement. Studies, however, show that this

can also have the opposite effect, something that is particularly true in an educational context (Cabrera, 2019, p. 48).

An additional way to react to structural racism is through storytelling. As already mentioned, CRT is not just a theory for its proponents, they also actively strive for change. Storytelling plays a crucial part in this respect. History books, the literary canon, newspapers and the like predominantly reflect the perspective of the majority identities. This does not only solidify the ‘cultural hegemony’ of straight White (male) cis people, it also contributes to a positive connotation of everything White and a negative connotation of everything else (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 46, 85; Patton, 2016, pp. 320–321). This starts early on. According to Pérez Huber, Camargo Gonzales and Solórzano, the importance of children’s books when it comes to shaping “perceptions and understanding about race, gender, class and other social locations” can hardly be underestimated (Pérez Huber et al., 2020, p. 3).

This narrative underrepresentation of BIPoC is a form of racism itself (Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 323; Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 116) and affects young people in particular (Bakis, 2014, p. 43). Telling “actual stories” as in “once-upon-a-time type stories” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2411) in the form of biographical, autobiographical, or composite narrations has historically been a way for underrepresented groups to fight for “survival and liberation” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). Telling one’s own part of the story means to take part in “creating truth”, gaining a voice and challenging the master narrative. Race-related stories in the US have been told in such different ways that Delgado even talks about a “war of stories” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2418).

So-called counter-storytelling can expose and challenge hegemonial narrations, and it can have an eye-opening effect on the majority population by revealing their role as oppressors (Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 321; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 47; Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). Counter-stories also play a crucial part in the context of education, where they can offer new insights into the fabric of racism and reveal hidden racist ideologies and power structures (Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 116; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58; Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 323; Baszile, 2008; Yosso, 2002, p. 95). As a result of structural racism, school curricula are partial when it comes to who can tell their story and whose views

on history and society get presented, a matter that has been much discussed recently in connection with the 1619 project'.³

Counter-stories, on the other hand, can create an important representation for groups who are structurally underrepresented and silenced/silent in the public discourse, establishing a community of people with shared experiences (Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 116; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 48; Delgado, 1989, pp. 1412, 2437; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156). Scholars go so far as to attribute a 'healing' effect to counter-stories with regard to the damaging consequences of the internalization of mainstream society's stereotypes (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57; Delgado, 1989, pp. 2414, 2437; Pierce, 1970).

Autobiographical or semi-autobiographical graphic novels constitute one medium through which counter-stories can be included in the school curriculum, where narratives that centre BIPoC protagonists are alarmingly underrepresented (Pérez Huber et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). There are several reasons why graphic novels provide an interesting alternative to text-based counter-novels. Firstly, they have the potential to reach a wider audience by being a better fit with the reading habits of younger people (Bakis, 2014, p. 3; Thalheimer, 2009, p. 84; Richardson, p. 24) and by being inclusive: even though they use complex vocabulary, they can be understood on a visual level, making them more accessible to English as a Foreign Language Learners (EFL) and students with reading difficulties alike (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019, p. 5; Chun, 2009, p. 146). Secondly, they can be quite easily and flexibly integrated into a class schedule: compared to regular novels, they are quick reads, which allows repeated reading and deeper engagement (Bakis, 2014, p. 2). Thirdly, they also strengthen visual literacy by providing an additional layer of meaning that is conveyed in the pictures and that can be decoded by the students (Chun, 2009, p. 146; Richardson, 2017, p. 25; McAllister et al., 2006, p. 3; Bakis, 2014, p. 3; Thalheimer, 2009, p. 84; Rimmereide, 2013, pp. 131, 135; Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019, p. 5).

All these aspects make them particularly interesting as an alternative to traditional novels when it comes to teaching race and racism but also other sensitive topics.⁴ The author of a graphic

³ An initiative started by Nikole Hannah-Jones and the *New York Times Magazine* to explore "the unparalleled impact of African slavery on the development of our country and its continuing impact on our society" (Hannah-Jones, 2021, XXII).

⁴ Examples are topics like feminism (e.g. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*), the experiences of the LGBTQ community (e.g. Alice Oseman's ongoing *Heartstopper* series), and ethnic (e.g. Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006)) or religious minorities (e.g. Ms. Marvel: No Normal, with Muslim protagonist Kamala Khan; also see Andreassen, 2019).

novel can convey subtle messages on a visual level by creating an ambiguous relationship between words and pictures (McAllister et al., 2006, p. 4). Autobiographical graphic novels that are written from an underrepresented perspective are particularly interesting in this respect. Visual exaggerations as a stylistic device actually contradict the idea of factually telling the truth. At the same time, they give the author a powerful means to talk about emotions and experiences that cannot be told through language alone. Craft's *New Kid* offers many examples of this kind of counter-storytelling, as shown below.

Critical Race Theory and *New Kid*

In this section Jerry Craft's *New Kid* is read against the backdrop of CRT in order to determine how far elements of the theory can be detected in the graphic novel. One of the main tenets of CRT is that racism is a structural phenomenon. This is also reflected in the US school system, which is, as previously mentioned, tailored to the interests of straight White cis males.

New Kid starts with the protagonist's first day at school. Jordan Banks is a 12-year-old African American boy and a new student at the elitist Riverdale Academy, a school he only attends out of respect for his parents', particularly his mother's, wishes. Every new member of Riverdale Academy is introduced to the school by a fellow student, a so-called guide. Jordan's guide is Liam Landers, who – together with his father – picks him up on the first day of school. Jordan experiences the structural character of racism in education from the start. Whilst in the car, he learns not only that Liam's two siblings also attend the school, but that Mr. Landers himself and his father before him had been Riverdale students as well. Neither Mr. Landers, Liam nor Jordan is portrayed during the short dialogue. Instead, the bold print of "you" (Jordan: "**You** used to go there?") and "my" (Mr. Landers: "Sure I did. So did **my** dad", Craft, 2019, p. 20, bold print in original) together with the illustration of a rich, White neighbourhood illustrate the contrast between Jordan's and Liam's worlds. Mr. Landers' "sure" additionally expresses a matter of course which shows that he takes this (White) privilege for granted.

Later Jordan discovers that every building on campus is named after a donor's family, and he notices that one auditorium carries Liam's family name. The scene shows how Jordan is completely unaware of the dynastic character of school education at US (elitist) schools, as visualized by his innocent facial expression when discovering the LANDERS auditorium and his asking "How come everything is named after someone?" (Craft, 2019, p. 65). *New Kid*

mainly relies on pictures in order to portray the impressive infrastructure and material wealth of Riverdale Academy. The reader follows Jordan looking up at high buildings, seeing tennis courts and feeling like an ant in the massive complex of the academy. The entire experience is accompanied by a scarcity of words; Jordan is literally speechless, as his only verbal reactions are “Wow” and “Man! This place is no joke!” (Craft, 2019, pp. 22–23). The pictures therefore express what Jordan cannot put in words.

Structural racism in *New Kid* is also reflected in Riverdale’s curriculum, which is clearly tailored to upper mainstream society’s experiences and needs. Jordan is not only confronted with the Harkness method (Craft, 2019, p. 3), but also with sports he has never experienced before, and the rules of which he barely knows:

When spring came, we had the choice of baseball, crew, tennis, fencing, and some sport where you catch a ball with a net on a stick. That looked really hard. I’ve never played any of those sports in real life, but at least I knew the rules from playing Major League Baseball 2K6 and Xbox. And watching games on TV (Craft 2019, p. 190).

This is clearly an issue of cultural background and not of physical fitness. Jordan’s athletic, African American friend Drew does not know any of these sports either, “mainly because where he lives, there are even fewer parks than where I live” (Craft, 2019, p. 190). While structural racism with regard to property can be traced back through many decades (Ladson-Billings, 2021), this also shows how race and lower social background intersect to disadvantage the child in question. Even though examples like exposure to the Harkness method and certain elitist sports make the reader intuitively think of classism, it is important to note that from a CRT point of view, they are first and foremost the result of racial discrimination. It is race more than class which limits the possibility of social advancement *and* determines the inferior curriculum at majority Black schools.

New Kid also contains a series of microaggressions that expose the structural character of racism. They occur most prominently in connection with names and physical appearances and are mainly uttered by Jordan’s racist classmate Andy Peterson. During his very first encounter with Jordan, he degrades him based on his physical appearance. Andy does not only call Jordan “**really** small” (Craft, 2019, p. 27, bold print in original) but reinforces that remark with the physically abusive behaviour of patting his head, as depicted in the panel. The visualization therefore adds a further dimension, portraying Andy as overly self-confident and arrogant, which is emphasized by his facial expression as well as his loose-fitting cap and tie. Jordan

corrects Andy when he addresses him by the wrong name (“Gordan” instead of Jordan), but he clearly does this from a defensive position, as his face and body language are marked by intimidation.

Microaggressions in the form of attributing wrong names to people are exemplified in various situations throughout the book. Jordan is repeatedly called Maury by fellow students, who mix him up with another African American student he has absolutely nothing in common with but skin colour. Maury has attended Riverdale since he was a small child, he does not share common interests with Jordan, and his father is CEO in a fortune 500 company. One scene is particularly dedicated to this mix-up: an older, tall, blond student approaches Jordan praising him for ‘his’ performance in the school’s George Washington musical. Apart from the fact that it was actually Maury who performed in the musical, he is again verbally (“Hey, li’l dude”) and physically (the unknown student patting his head) belittled, something that, as the panel shows, Jordan clearly does not enjoy (Craft, 2019, p. 139). The unknown student is marked by his clothing (he wears a sweater with a racket on it) as member of the White elite student body. Similar to Andy, his facial expression shows that he is not aware that the supposedly positive comment is actually a microaggression. Both experiences – Jordan’s first encounter with Andy and the encounter with the unknown student – therefore demonstrate varieties of the same phenomenon in slightly different settings, showing how microaggressions happen on a persistent basis.

This is also made obvious by Jordan not being the only victim of name mix-ups. Drew, another new African American student, is consistently called Deandre by their homeroom teacher Ms. Rawle, who confuses him with a former Black student who “was a real handful” (Craft, 2019, p. 60). Drew, an excellent student, is therefore equated with someone he only shares skin colour with and is also confronted with a deficit narrative. The fact that the microaggression comes from the homeroom teacher, who, by definition, is responsible not only for the academic progress, but also for the social well-being of the group of students they look after, must be considered as particularly harmful.

Name and people mix-ups are not a single occurrence, nor are they limited to African American students. When Jordan mentions to his African American mathematics teacher, Mr. Garner, that he is repeatedly addressed by the wrong name, Mr. Garner advises him: “I wouldn’t read anything into it. I’m sure it’s only because you are new” (Craft, 2019, p. 61). Only moments

later another (White) teacher greets Mr. Garner with “Good luck this season, Coach Rick” (Craft, 2019, p. 61) even though he is not a coach, and his name isn’t Rick either. Following his teacher’s logic, Jordan assumes that Mr. Garner, too, must be new, but the teacher replies: “I’ve been here **fourteen years!!!**” (Craft, 2019, p. 62, bold print in original). The panel visualizes Mr. Garner’s frustration and his colleague’s ignorance. Mr. Garner is at first taken by surprise, but the following panel shows him with his arms crossed in front of his chest, which, together with his furrowed brow, demonstrates his annoyance. His White colleague, meanwhile, occupies almost half of the panel as the absolute centre of attention, while Mr. Garner and Jordan are banished to the background, something that visually expresses the degradation that just happened. This message is underlined by the White teacher’s ignorance; he is happily smiling, with his eyes complacently closed. The stylistic device of depicting closed eyes as a sign of racial ignorance is also applied in other graphic novels (Chiu, 2015b, p. 43). Apart from the identity mix-up, the entire scene can be read in the context of the very common stereotyping of African Americans as good athletes. *New Kid* demonstrates how stereotypes, even those that might be perceived as ‘positive’ by the general public, are harmful, because Mr. Garner is reduced to being a coach and not appreciated for what he really is, namely a mathematics teacher. In the very same context Jordan’s classmate Drew complains: “I always feel like everyone assumes I play ball... And that kinda bothers me” (Craft, 2019, p. 102). As with Mr. Garner, Drew’s intellectual skills are ignored in favour of a harmful stereotype.

New Kid also provides a meta-reflection about the name issue in a two-page extract of Jordan’s sketchbook, which elaborately explains that being called pejorative names is something one can deal with. However, being called by someone else’s name is a different kind of offence “because that means they’re not even taking the time to look at you long enough to even find something to insult.” While they don’t remember a student’s name, they do remember “I’ll have a double mocha caffe latte cappuccino espresso!” (Craft, 2019, p. 217). This can be read as a humorous comment on the name issue, but is also a portrayal of ignorance and carelessness, maybe even of White supremacy ideology.

Another racial microaggression that is frequently addressed in *New Kid* is othering. One of Jordan’s first observations at school is that the students “wear a lot of pink”, which Liam explains by the fact that “mostly everybody shops at grapevine grove” (Craft, 2019, p. 24). Clearly there is a ‘secret’ dress code in place, which only those who know about it and/or can

afford it can adhere to. This secret dress code is occasionally explicitly taken up in the story – such as when Liam gives Jordan pink shorts for Christmas, or when Jordan wears those shorts on the last day of school – but it also serves as a graphic means to portray the different characters, especially Liam.

Othering is also be portrayed in other ways. When Jordan first meets the role model racist child Andy, he assumes that Jordan will come to like Mr. Garner, the above-mentioned mathematics teacher, without further explaining why: “‘Cause he’s...he’s...well...you’ll see” (Craft, 2019, p. 29). This searching for words when it comes to race-related topics has been identified as a typical White attitude (Haviland, 2008, p. 44). Only later does Jordan discover that the assumption that he would like Mr. Garner was based on both of them being African American. Additionally, Andy also others a boy named Ramon when it comes to Hispanic food. When everybody sits together for lunch, Andy addresses the larger group by saying: “Mmm... don’t you guys just love tacos?” and then turns to Ramon commenting: “Well, maybe not **you**, Ramon. I’ll bet your mom’s are a lot better” (Craft, 2019, p. 42, bold print in original). Ramon does not reply, and a look at the panel shows how far his silence goes: he does not even audibly sigh, but the sigh is in a thought balloon and therefore a sign of mental exhaustion. His facial expression and body language clearly show how much he is affected by this microaggression, however. On another occasion Andy remarks to the same boy: “Can your mom make chalupas, or is that just a taco bell thing?” (Craft, 2019, p. 198). Even though they have been in school together since kindergarten, Andy has not yet learned that Ramon is Nicaraguan, not Mexican. As mentioned before, the ‘Mexicanization’ of Latinos is a common microaggression. Ramon acquiesces and his resignation is visually expressed by him closing his eyes (Craft, 2019, p. 198). In all these situations a ‘we’ versus ‘them’ atmosphere is created by either assuming that African Americans all get along or by considering all Latino/a food to be the same. When called out for this particular behaviour, Andy reacts with White rage, saying: “What?!! Why is everyone always so sensitive about everything?” (Craft, 2019, p. 198), completely refusing to understand the consequences of his behaviour.

A still different angle on othering is through previously mentioned homeroom teacher Ms. Rawle. When Jordan and Drew, two of the few African American students, connect with each other and do not spend recess outside with their classmates, she expresses concern about them distancing themselves from the larger group (Craft, 2019, p. 93). Instead of seeing them as

individuals who would rather spend recess inside, she views them as representatives of their community. Jordan and Drew have in fact adopted this racial group perspective themselves and in order to avoid the impression of racial distancing, at first they – unconsciously – avoid each other.

The consequences of structural racism and the accompanying microaggressions can be severe in many ways for the people affected. When adolescents are concerned, they can develop serious identity issues and/or adopt the negative stereotypes they are confronted with. This is also indicated in an exemplary manner in *New Kid*. When homeroom teacher Ms. Rawle overhears Drew and Jordan jokingly calling each other “DAWG” she confronts Drew. Drew subsequently points out that not only does Ms. Rawle herself constantly call him by the wrong name, but also that she tolerates the very same slang word when fellow White student Andy uses it (Craft, 2019, pp. 89–90). Being constantly harassed by Ms. Rawle’s microaggressions, Drew ultimately turns into confrontation mode: “She is never going to like me anyway. So I might as well give her what she wants, right?” (Craft, 2019, p. 127). This does not only give insight into the process of how African Americans adopt the negative racial stereotypes they are experiencing, but also how these stereotypes contribute to perpetuating the racist system. It explains further how the school system fails students even though they are as brilliant as Drew. Walking away, Drew states his regret that he “ever came to this stupid school” (Craft, 2019, p. 90).

The negative attitude Ms. Rawle holds towards Drew from the very beginning by comparing him to a previous problem student of hers is a sort of deficit orientation that is also demonstrated in other situations throughout the book. Jordan’s parents recount how the very same Ms. Rawle commented on parents’ night how “very well-spoken and well-behaved” Jordan was, a remark “which **would** be a compliment if you were in **Kindergarten**”, as Jordan’s father puts it (Craft, 2019, p. 94, bold print in original). Obviously, Ms. Rawle does not expect this kind of behaviour from a child with Jordan’s background. The fellow students share this deficit-oriented view of African Americans. When eating lunch during his second week at school, Jordan’s classmate Ashley Martin asks him who he lives with. Before Jordan even has a chance to answer, another classmate, Ruby Wu, assumes that it is “just” his mom (Craft, 2019, p. 67), referring to the stereotype of the African American single mother. Whilst a question like this can be asked out of sheer curiosity, seen from a CRT perspective it expresses a system-inherent deficit

orientation. The most extreme example of this kind of structural deficit orientation can be found during the school bookfair. The librarian recommends a book called *The Mean Streets of South Uptown. A gritty tale of survival* (Craft, 2019, p. 129) to the African American students. By assuming that the book would meet the interests and experiences of *all* the African American students at Riverdale Academy, she does not only show a deficit orientation, but also others this group. Interestingly, this short episode corresponds to research showing that books with Black protagonists contain less hopeful perspectives than those with White characters and that African American culture is generally portrayed in a less favourable way (Pérez Huber et al., 2020, p. 8).

“Debates about nationalism versus assimilation figure prominently in current discourse about race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 67) and they also play an important role in *New Kid*. Instead of proceeding in one of the local schools, Jordan’s mother insists on him attending an elitist high school with little ethnic diversity, pointing out that “in order to be successful in corporate America, you have to know how to play the game” (Craft, 2019, p. 96). She can therefore be seen as a prime example of assimilation. While she herself pursues a career in “one of the largest publishing companies in the world” (Craft, 2019, p. 96), where only 48 out of 1,200 employees are African American, Jordan’s father has consciously given up a career at the very same company and decided to work at the local community centre, a move which identifies him as an adherent of the nationalist position. According to him, “not everyone can play that game...nor should they have to!” (Craft, 2019, p. 96). By celebrating Kwanzaa, for example, an annual holiday in honour of African American culture (Craft, 2019, pp. 158–159), he ensures that Jordan does not estrange himself too far from his background. A prominently featured discussion between the parents about Jordan’s academic future can be read as a disagreement between parents about what is best for their child, but can also be seen in light of CRT, and be connected to a larger discourse. However the reader chooses to read it, the message is submitted in a humorous way, since a sequence of eight panels shows how Jordan shrinks into baby-size, visualizing the feeling of impotence Jordan experiences while his parents are debating his future (Craft, 2019, pp. 96-97). This can also be seen as a metaphor for Jordan’s own insecurity with regard to this question. How he struggles with his (Black) identity is demonstrated through his difficulty in reconnecting with his old friends once he attends Riverdale Academy, while at the same time he does not really have the feeling of belonging in this new school either.

Teaching race and racism at (a Norwegian) school

So far CRT has been solely addressed in an American context. This section will discuss if and how *New Kid* can be used to create racial awareness in a European educational setting. In particular it will discuss how *New Kid* can contribute to reaching curriculum goals, like the ones expressed in the Norwegian curriculum reform (Fagfornyelsen) of 2020. The revised curriculum does not mention concrete content when it comes to the different school subjects but instead names a series of goals that the students are supposed to achieve. The general part, valid for all subjects, explicitly emphasizes the importance of teaching diversity and making sure that no student is discriminated against because of their background (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 4). To achieve this, students “skal få innsikt i hvordan vi lever sammen med ulike perspektiver, holdninger og livsanskuelser”⁵ (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 4) and learn to empathize with how other people think, feel and experience as a part of social learning (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p.10). Values such as mutual respect, tolerance, freedom of speech and belief are also connected to democratic education and serve as a “counterweight” against “prejudice and discrimination” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 8). Teaching *New Kid* as a counter-story according to CRT can achieve this, and it does not have to be limited to the English classroom, even though that is the obvious choice. Both the general part of the curriculum as well as the specific part for English underline the importance of including marginalized perspectives, especially those of Indigenous people, in one’s teaching (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019, p. 3). *New Kid* is obviously not about an Indigenous student’s experiences with racism, but it can be used as a starting point for further discussions about how the topics addressed apply to marginalized groups in Europe. In the following I would like to give some examples of how this can be done.

Unlike in the US, the Norwegian school system is not characterized by systematic structural racism. Riverdale Academy is emblematic of this kind of racism: it is not only better equipped, both materially and curriculum-wise than comparable schools in Black neighbourhoods, but the majority of students descend from a long line of family members who attended the same institution. This is even ingrained in the architecture, which carries the names of successful former White students. But even though the Norwegian school system does not display this

⁵ “should gain insight into how we live together with our different perspectives, attitudes and world views” (all translations by the author).

kind of racism, a glance back in history reveals that it is not entirely alien to it. In fact, in the 19th and even in the 20th century, so-called Norwegianization policies forced Indigenous groups to adapt to Norwegian language and culture, a practice which was primarily implemented in a school context and which had severe and long-lasting consequences for those affected (Olsen, 2020). This can serve as a point of reference in order to examine similarities and differences with regard to school discrimination.

In *New Kid* structural racism becomes apparent by means of a series of microaggressions like the mispronunciation of names, one of the focal points in the book. What at first glance seems to be pure negligence acquires major meaning when analysed using CRT. This aspect of *New Kid* provides graphic examples to discuss in class and to create awareness among students and teachers alike (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 457; Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 119; Baszile, 2008, p. 372). Members of underrepresented groups might share experiences that are surprisingly similar.

New Kid can also serve as a point of departure to explore how autobiographical graphic counter-stories portray and discuss race and racism. By using exaggerations with regard to physical appearance and behaviour as a stylistic device, graphic novels can potentially contribute to reinforcing and even creating racial stereotypes (Trazo & Woohee, 2019, pp. 114–115; Chiu, 2015a, p. 5; Pérez Huber et al., 2020, p. 6).⁶ Students can discuss how race is portrayed in *New Kid* and consider if there are potential ways to avoid external markers of race when creating graphic stories. An example of how this can be done is provided by Trazo & Woohee (2019). In her comic *Where are you from?* Angelica Trazo chooses to depict Asian and Asian American characters with black hair and White characters with uncoloured or blonde hair. She therefore renounces the racial markers society has been “schooled” (Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 114) to decode but is still able to convey the racism she experienced. Birgit Weyhe’s graphic novel *Rude Girl* can also be read as a comment to this debate (Weyhe, 2022).

Race is not the only factor that contributes to discrimination. *New Kid* offers good examples on how race intersects with class as well. Jordan and Drew are not only African Americans, but they also live in a poorer neighbourhood with fewer parks, less equipped schools and potentially

⁶ It should be mentioned, though, that scholars have also come to the opposite conclusion: that sequential comics – different from panel cartoons – can also have the opposite effect (Chiu, 2015a, p. 5; Dong, 2015, p. 74).

more crime. This is humorously demonstrated in one sequence of panels that shows the gradual change/improvement of environment on the bus ride from Jordan's home to school (Craft, 2019, pp. 56–57). Riverdale Academy's expensive dress code does not particularly exclude African American students (wealthy Maury adheres to it, for example), but rather those who are poor. Jordan and Drew therefore have more communalities with Collin, a fellow White student with a working-class background, than with Maury, an African American student from a privileged family. *New Kid* can therefore serve as a starting point to discuss different factors that contribute to discrimination.

The microaggressions addressed in the graphic novel can generally be further examined by comparing *New Kid* with all sorts of additional material, such as history books, movie adaptations, Wikipedia entries and textbooks. In the context of literature, Goodreads is particularly interesting. Goodreads is an online literature platform that enables readers to comment on and discuss the books they have read. The reviews of *New Kid* provide interesting insights into the controversial debate surrounding this graphic novel and give an idea about the racial discourses in the real world. With regard to *New Kid* there is also the option of using another graphic novel in order to deepen the understanding of microaggressions. Similar to *New Kid*, Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) is "fiction with heavy doses of autobiography" (Davis, 2002, p. 279). It tells the story of young Chinese American Jin Wang, who struggles to adapt to his new school and therefore, like *New Kid*, portrays a young person's search for identity, with racism also a subject of discussion. There is even a concrete connection, as the novel also depicts microaggressions when it comes to name mix-ups. The teachers consistently get their Asian American students' names wrong. Their lack of effort is visualized by their eyes either being closed or obscured by the reflection of their glasses (Chiu, 2015b, p. 43). *American Born Chinese* features Asian Americans as protagonists and therefore offers an opportunity to compare the situation of different underrepresented ethnic groups and identify similarities and differences. While African Americans are mainly confronted with deficit narratives, Asian Americans have to deal with being treated as aliens in their own land ("Where are you from?"; "Your English is really good") and the myth of the high achieving model minority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 94; Trazo & Woohee, 2019, p. 118; Chiu, 2015a; Chiu, 2015b, p. 36; Dong, 2015). *American Born Chinese* also poetically demonstrates how Jin Wang – and this is representative of many BIPoC – has come to accept and even incorporate the stereotypes himself (Davis, 2002, p. 280). Another graphic novel

which is particularly interesting for the Scandinavian school context is Mats Jonsson's "Da vi var samer" (Jonsson, 2023), in which the author talks about the journey of finding and exploring his own Sami family roots. By comparing *New Kid* with additional material, be it fictional or factual, students can construct a picture of the world that is richer than either the story or "real world" alone (Chun, 2009, p. 147; Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 319; Baszile, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156). Reading and discussing counter-narratives can even help to question early adopted racist attitudes (Mills & Unsworth, 2018, p. 319).

New Kid also shows how the African American community reacts to structural racism, as well as its consequences. It portrays othering in various ways, such as causing a feeling of not belonging. The novel points out how deficit orientation and ignorance lead to frustration and the acceptance of (negative) stereotypes. And it discusses the resulting question of assimilation vs. nationalism, as exemplified by Jordan's parents. European BIPoC might well be able to relate to the experience, or use this story as a point of departure to tell their own. Teachers and students alike can read the novel and acquire a better understanding of the structural character of racism, the harmfulness of microaggressions and questions of identity in the form of assimilation and nationalism. Research also shows how the choice of narratives with BIPoC protagonists can prevent White students from developing beliefs in their group's superiority and White normativity. BIPoC students, on the other hand, do not only see their own groups represented, but potentially also have better learning outcomes (Pérez Huber et al., 2020, p. 4).

That the teaching of racial awareness through literature by using CRT does not always come without challenges has been reported by several scholars in the context of US education (Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Baszile, 2008; Haviland, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1996). Similar experiences are perfectly conceivable in a European setting as well, with voices calling racism a mainly US phenomenon. This is especially true since 'race' is a sensitive term in Europe, not used in educational contexts unless related to historical questions. *New Kid* is particularly suited to confronting this sceptical attitude as it tells a powerful, yet by no means ideological counter-story which, in a sophisticated way, shows that there is no such thing as an easy labelling of racism. This is made clear right from the start. Jordan is picked up on his very first day of school by rich Mr. Landers and his son Liam. Liam ignores him for the entire drive, despite it being his task to introduce Jordan to the school. Mr. Landers, on the other hand, tells his son to "stay in the car and lock the door!" on seeing the neighbourhood Jordan lives in (Craft, 2019, p. 10).

The reader is led to assume that neither Liam nor his father really want to have this African American new kid at Riverdale Academy. But at the end of their first day at school together, Liam apologizes for his behaviour, explaining that he is not a morning person (Craft, 2019, p. 46). He and Jordan even become best friends over the course of the school year and have a lot in common in spite of their rather different backgrounds.

Another example of the sophisticated narrative style is the Secret Santa episode, when African American student Drew suspects microaggressive Andy of giving him racist Secret Santa gifts like a basketball poster, a Kentucky Fried Chicken gift certificate and a chocolate Santa. In the end it turns out that the Secret Santa was really a girl named Ashley, who had put a lot of effort into choosing personal gifts (Craft, 2019, pp.132–137). Craft clearly plays with readers' hasty judgments when it comes to racism and makes them critically reflect on their own stereotypes. Additionally, he shows how difficult it is to consciously deal with deeply ingrained racism. Illustrative of this is the behaviour of the White soccer coach, who is constantly worried that his remarks could be misunderstood and almost every other sentence is accompanied by an excuse. Although he and his inner struggles are portrayed in an almost ridiculous way, he still comes across as a nice person. Students (and teachers) who deliberately scan their own behaviour and attitudes for racism can sympathize with him.

Applying CRT to *New Kid* may also mean taking a critical look at *New Kid* itself and the way it portrays ethnic groups other than African Americans. *New Kid* has been criticized for its disrespectful and superficial presentation of Asian American women, something a review from the literature website Goodreads vividly illustrates:

My biggest issue with this book was how the Asian character was portrayed. As an AAPI it really hurt my feelings this was how Craft chose to portray the only female Asian character. She came across as super annoying and stereotypical and what was supposed to be her redeeming quality just didn't hit the mark for me. So it was really hard to sympathize with the main character's racial problems when I was so taken aback and upset with how the only character that "looked like me" was being portrayed (Keaton, July 26, 2021).

New Kid cannot be discussed from a CRT point of view without mention of these issues, as well as the fact that women in general are depicted rather stereotypically as nosy, chatty and irrational. Widening the focus to include other marginalized groups also prevents the book from falling into the Black-White binary gap: reducing race to African Americans alone, ignoring the experiences of others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 77–81).

Despite its deficits, *New Kid* can encourage BIPoC students in Europe and elsewhere to tell their stories, thus providing insight into their perspectives. It can also inspire educators to not only teach *about* democratic values, but also to teach based *on* democratic values by implementing a problem-posing pedagogy such as Paolo Freire (2000) suggests.

Conclusion

Even though Craft was not even familiar with CRT when writing *New Kid*, the book still carries its main tenets. This suggests that when telling a story from a marginalized perspective elements of CRT can potentially find their way into the narrative unconsciously. The fact that Jerry Craft and Jana Joffe-Walt, who interviewed him for the *This American Life* podcast, do their best to reject the accusation of preaching CRT reflects how successful reactionary forces were in discrediting the approach.

This is unfortunate because teaching *New Kid* at school by using CRT can be rewarding in several ways. It can be read as a story about growing up and finding one's identity, something teenagers regardless of their background can relate to. But it can also be read as a counter-story of an African American teenager, something BIPoC-students can relate to and White students can learn to empathize with. Craft wrote *New Kid* in the first place because he wanted to create the kind of protagonist "who seemed just regular" (Berry, 2022), a role model that he himself never had when he was young. And it can be read as a story more generally portraying structural racism, microaggressions, and their consequences for marginalized groups.

Delgado points out that in order for counter-stories to be effective, they cannot be coercive. Instead, they have to give the reader a chance to "suspend judgment, listen for their point or message and then decide what measure of truth they contain" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). *New Kid* gives the reader exactly this chance, because it approaches issues of racism mostly in a humorous, sophisticated, but trenchant way. Applying CRT to *New Kid* can create awareness about racism and empower teachers, students and parents to fight against it (Yosso, 2002, p. 102). In daily life, people readily apply racial categories based on physical appearances. Reflecting race and racism through a graphic novel slows this process down and makes it visual (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 90).

New Kid has been accused of being a political manifesto. And even though it has not been written with this intention, it certainly conveys a socio-political message. However, what the

critics overlook is that all teaching is political and that *not* teaching about race is just as political as teaching about it (Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 49). Only that *not* teaching about race and racism excludes marginalized voices and perspectives from being heard and seen and keeps society from progressing.

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