




# Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality

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Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism

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*Edited by* Erika Alm · Linda Berg  
Mikela Lundahl Hero · Anna Johansson  
Pia Laskar · Lena Martinsson  
Diana Mulinari · Cathrin Wasshede

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“There is a hegemonic narrative of Sweden as an exemplary and exceptional feminist nation-state, one that exists in a secular, migrant-friendly, and market-friendly, liberal democracy. Yet this narrative’s racial and religious exclusions and conflicts—of which there are many—have led feminists and LGBTQ activists to question the terms of normative belonging, and to probe the tensions and frictions of contemporary Sweden. This necessary and powerful collection of essays reveals both the exclusions of this exceptionalist national narrative, one that the editors and authors trenchantly term “neocolonial,” and the demands of feminist, queer and trans artists, researchers, migrants, and activists striving to produce lives that think a different Sweden: of communities that are plural, transnational, multi-racial, transformative, radical and ever-changing.

—Inderpal Grewal *Professor Emerita, Yale University*

Erika Alm • Linda Berg  
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Editors

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# 1

## Introduction

**Erika Alm, Linda Berg, Mikela Lundahl Hero,  
Anna Johansson, Pia Laskar, Lena Martinsson,  
Diana Mulinari, and Cathrin Wasshede**

The focus of this book is on the many far from predictable transformative political processes on gender, sexuality and coloniality that grow out of the broad range of bodies and actors engaged in politics outside the

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hegemonic order and in everyday activities. These processes are not conducted by states, governments or transnational nongovernmental organisations; rather, they are examples of politics in-between states, organisations and national imagined communities. In this first chapter we will introduce some of the main themes, regarding these processes we in our joint research programme have worked on over the last couple of years.

The context in which we write plays a crucial role in forming our focus on political movements emerging in-between and outside dominant political bodies locally as well as transnationally. As scholars positioned in Sweden, we are submerged in a narrative of this country as a secular, gender-equal and LGBTQI-tolerant nation, which is often considered a political role model for the rest of the world to follow (Puar 2007). Although scholars have shown how this progressive nationhood is strongly conditioned by racialised processes, heteronormativity and cis-normativity (Keskinen et al. 2009; Martinsson et al. 2016; Giritli et al. 2018), Sweden is still constructed through this neocolonial narrative, which is reiterated by political leaders, women's organisations, journalists, scholars and students both inside and outside Sweden. The notion of Swedish exceptionalism and exceptionalism (Habel 2012) contributes to a national imagined community of modernity and secularism, bringing promises of a happy future for those who are included and invited into this society. However, not only is this hegemonic idea of being a role model imperialistic, but it also makes a range of political struggles and models less recognisable, easier to ignore and often even demonised.

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As feminist scholars drawing on postcolonial literature, we find these narratives of Sweden deeply problematic. They are blocking the development and political recognition of a pluralistic and radical democracy (Biesta 2006; Mouffe 2005, 2018) and need to be addressed and deconstructed in order to acknowledge transnational political and pluralistic understandings of the ongoing transformation of genders, sexualities and colonial orders. We need scholarly work and knowledge production that both scrutinise tropes such as this and acknowledge and study different transnational and national pluralistic struggles for equality, different forms of futures and multiple modernities and democracies (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012; Sigurdson 2009).

Our interest in the many struggles in-between and outside states and large organisations does not imply that we are uninterested in these bodies. Activists' relation to the state, as well as to transnational and nongovernmental organisations and the market, is decisive. However, rather than focusing on Sweden as a nation-state, we follow how activists—through a variety of different actions and labour—consciously and sometimes unconsciously disrupt, connect, make interventions into, recognise, use or interpellate the state, the welfare society, the market and local and transnational organisations and phenomena. One example presented in the book is that of trans activists in Sweden who interpellate the state as ethically accountable and thereby make state violence as well as state benevolence visible and acknowledgeable. Erika Alm argues that:

the strategy to hold the state accountable can be understood as a way to repoliticise the state in a time when neoliberal processes of globalised economy, the expansion of multinational companies, and the commercialisation of civil society often are claimed to weaken the sovereignty of the national state.

In other words, the struggles we follow are not isolated, but very much engaged with and partly formed by states and both national and transnational norms and forces. As Linda Berg and Anna Sofia Lundgren write in their chapter about street art, this art:

constitutes an interesting form of politics, situated somewhere in-between, or alongside, party politics and the practices of civil society.

The struggles that we have followed and analysed during the years we have cooperated led us to a range of types of political communities or collective political subjects. To exemplify, the notion of the modern Sweden creates feelings of belonging for some, like those positioned and self-identified as white, modern, secular women. Meanwhile, others are excluded (see chapters by Martinsson and Lundahl Hero) and face criticism for not fulfilling hegemonic notions of gender equality or modernity. They are otherized since they are understood as too religious, too black, too traditional or too exotic, and this status of otherness includes notions of not belonging nor feeling at home (Farahani 2015).

Experiences of disbelonging can work as a foundation for joint political work and lead to the emergence of new political communities of belonging. Such communities can contest the normative structures from the constitutive outside; for example, queer activists may stand outside a heteronormative hegemonic community (hooks 2009; Ahmed 2004; Butler 1993). The political communities revolving around the rainbow flag are examples of communities partly outside the hegemonic order. The rainbow flag has been, and is, a fabric that has worked as a bonding object in heteronormative exclusionary contexts transnationally, nationally and locally. It has offered promises of a political community wanting a society beyond heteronormativity. When we began this project a couple of years ago, we had the impression that the rainbow flag in our part of the world had lost its critical potential. We believed the flag had been depoliticised due to homonationalism and pinkwashing until it eventually included everyone and thus hardly anyone. However, that has changed. In recent years, the right wing has grown stronger, and the flag is again beginning to be used as a node for anti-fascist work and communities with radical claims. However, the rainbow flag has not only played various historical roles relating to the sense of belonging or disbelonging. It has also played numerous roles in different contexts, irrespective of the right-wing movement. Cathrin Wasshede shows in her contribution that there are places and situations where the rainbow flag is radical, transformative and of importance for new communities to emerge. In her words:

It is obvious that the rainbow flag is a very topical and emotive actant—and an empty signifier—in the Swedish political arena.



It is important for us to focus on processes of othering and emergences of communities not only inside Sweden, but also on a transnational level. Ignoring this could be tantamount to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty labels methodological nationalism (Mohanty 2003). Studying the process of othering transnationally makes it possible to discern communities, migrant movements and hierarchies and borders marked by colonialism, neoliberalism, racism, gender and class constructions on a level beyond the national while still recognising the impact of the construction of nations and of local and global discourses. Like Trinh T. Minh-ha, we want to challenge the idea of a global community that presumably has overcome frontiers (Trinh 2011). By following the processes of othering on a transnational level, one can study how both the frontiers and Sweden as an imagined community are formed in relation to other nations.

The interrelational character of places, nations and transnational spaces has relevance to the constitutions of political subjectivities (Massey 2005). Transnational connections are highly important for the contemporary labour of belonging and for the politics in-between and beyond hegemonic bodies. Members of religious and indigenous local communities, gender variant people, queers, feminists and body positivists are examples of actors that we have followed that find and create political liaisons and communities of belonging on a transnational level (Grewal 2005). A nation might be oppressive or practice exclusion, but local communities often transcend the nation to form part of transnational communities of belonging. For example: Cultural products such as the rainbow flag can function as reminders and markers of these wider communities. Sámi activists struggling against Swedish coloniality relate to an indigenous community across the borders of the Nordic nation states. Street art, as a political practice, is an example of an activity that, in spite of its very localised character, can transgress and connect over borders through digital means, whereas the dissemination of pink porn magazines during the second half of the twentieth century used more material ways to transgress borders, which could result in censorship if the materials were intercepted, as described in Pia Laskar's chapter. The digital space can be of immense importance for both the emergence and the existence of transnational communities and transnational activism. Another example of this is the body positivity activists that Anna Johansson writes

about in her chapter. They have become a transnational community on and through the internet. Their messages and practices spread rapidly, challenging oppressive body ideals and advocating diversity and acceptance of all body types. 'Digital media (including social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) plays a significant role in connecting actors who are far from each other and furthering protests localised in the peripheries', as Johansson writes, i.e. in the countryside or in parts of the world which are not at the centre of media attention. The digital sphere disseminates important information and serves as a medium that contributes to the population of space without being dependent on or confined by the geographical coordinates of that space (see Berg and Lundgren's chapter; and also Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2016; Sjöstedt Landén 2017).

However, the processes of disbelonging certainly do not always lead to political activism or to local or transnational political communities or practices. Processes of racism, sexism and homo- and transphobia are deeply harmful and experiences of othering can also result in depression, pain and trauma, which Diana Mulinari and Despina Tzimoula dig into in their chapter on Greek migrant women living in Sweden.

The emergence of communities in-between hegemonic political bodies, or in-between the national and transnational, are processes loaded with messiness and friction. As we draw on two quite different thinkers, Chantal Mouffe and Anna Tsing, the method of following leads us to places and situations ruled by disorder and contradictions. According to Mouffe, the existence of many contradictory interpellations makes it possible to understand oneself, the community and the society in multiple ways (Mouffe 2013). It is possible to understand oneself through both Islamophobic or sexist discourses and democratic ideals and decolonial or queer politics. Such contradictory interpellations make it obvious that society could be organised differently. Frictions and contradictions therefore become important for political subjectivity to emerge and for the ongoing production of communities. Tsing stresses the importance of cross-cultural and long-distance encounters in the production of cultures:

Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call 'friction': the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference (Tsing 2005: 4).

Inspired by Tsing's work, we follow emerging movements and communities and how they are produced through connections and contaminations pertaining to not only national, but also global or transnational bifurcations (Tsing 2015). The concept of friction is important for us when we approach and analyse contexts and cultural processes. Through memory work (Haug 1992), some of us study the friction in-between the religious and the secular as manifested in our memories of childhood and adolescence. The contexts in which we grow up, which we studied through our memories, were marked by ambivalent interactions in-between secularism and Christianity. By studying such encounters and interconnections in context, we are able to form notions and political visions for another society or, for that matter, another world order. The idea of Swedish exceptionalism, disbelonging and friction and other tropes are fundamental elements of the political processes and struggles that we were interested in. Hence, this book draws on a range of different examples of friction, including those relating to different understandings of the state and to the interconnections in-between the local, national and transnational spaces where unexpected—or predictable—articulations become possible.

As scholars, we come from different disciplines and theoretical traditions, but all of us focus on situations and movements that are far from pure and straightforward. We understand them not only as examples of frictions, ambivalences, unpredictable rhizomes, wounds, paradoxes or contradictions. The mobilising around the struggles and state interpellations on which we focus is far from logical, transparent and pure. This means that the processes that make up the politics in-between nations might reiterate neoliberal ideas, be pragmatic, use money from the porn sector or make alliances with enemies. The struggles we follow are not always formulated or exercised in intersectional ways and therefore do not only challenge transnational and national ideas of genders, sexualities, racialisation and coloniality, but also reproduce them. For instance, one might consider the aforementioned body positivist movement, which is struggling for the right for people to look any way they want to or have to—a movement that still seems to continue to celebrate the white, able, tall, cisgendered body. The exclusion of the black body becomes even more prevalent, as Anna Johansson shows in her chapter, when this

movement is played out in a Swedish context, where whiteness is closely connected to the Swedish nationality and the concept of race is nearly erased from the public rhetoric.

Politics in-between communities of belonging and national imagined communities are formed through notions of temporality. Just as different pasts and futures are crucial for the imagined community (Anderson 2006), a community of belonging need not be limited to a now or a here. It could breach from the past to the present, over to the future, bringing with it ideas about who the members in the community were in the past and who they as a group may become. Narratives about now and then are constitutive for futures that are possible to imagine. Temporality is not a neutral and innocent way of ordering time, as temporal narratives ordering time are thus complicit in ordering space, as well as creating hierarchies of us and them, of an inside and an outside; they comprise a worlding process (Massey 2005; Hall 1990). How we imagine the past and who is included in narratives of the past has consequences regarding who is imagined as part of the future. According to David Scott (2004), different notions of 'future' always refer to a specific notion of the past—a certain idea of where it all began and which people were the subjects of those beginnings and societal transformations. When we articulate the past and its subjects, we also give form to the future.

When Sweden constructs itself as the political subject of transnational transformation of gender equality and welfare society, it reproduces itself as a historical and future subject. Sweden is portrayed as the more or less natural leader of this modern and secular project, telling others to follow its lead for a global happy ending in the future. These 'fundamentalist'—in the sense that only one way is thinkable—secular ideas can only accommodate one single future, a future that reproduces notions of the dangerous religious and traditional other that stays 'behind', thereby silencing notions of multiple futures and making them impossible. Secularism is thus not only used as a tool against fundamentalist religious notions that question, for example, the right to abortion and LGBTIQI rights, but also becomes a fundamentalist and dogmatic force in itself, making some lives more liveable than others (Scott 2018; Martinson 2017; Asad 2009; Mahmood 2009). With the imagined community of Sweden comes an idea of being at the forefront of a linear development

of modernity and secularism, meaning that the Swedish take on modernity is so closely intertwined with secularity that it is almost impossible to conceptualise one without the other.

This linear story of progression gives hope and political direction to those who identify with and are identified as part of the hegemonic secular modernity and those who are included in the putative modern communities. For others to take part in this hegemonic linearity, a radical assimilation is demanded, but this level of assimilation is beyond reach—and not even desirable—to many subjects that have other experiences and horizons of expectations (Koselleck 2004). It demands, as Mikela Lundahl Hero shows in her chapter, that those who aim to participate in Swedish public life as professionals should shake hands like ‘Swedes’ do, without gender discrimination. To demand separate hours in the public swimming pools is to position yourself outside the modern secular timeline. Or, as described in Lena Martinsson’s chapter, you are not counted as part of modern, gender-equal society and its hopeful future if you keep wearing the veil and do not adhere to the norms and regulations of what is identified by the hegemonic order as neutral clothes. If this exclusionary discourses and practices are adhered to, many of the struggles that we have followed seem not to have a future. In artwork painting by the Sámi artists Sofia Jannok and Anders Sunna, this non-future is visualised. The canvas depicts a skeleton of a reindeer dressed in traditional Sámi clothing throwing a lasso. The dead reindeer can be understood as a symbol of the non-future of traditional reindeer herding, as discussed in Berg and Lundgren’s chapter, thus contesting the notion of a sole hegemonic future. In other words, the artwork suggests that another future could have been possible (cf. Edelman 2004). The same goes for the work toward gender equality: the pursuit does not have to be secular and there are other paths to walk. Another example that can be considered is a prosaic, less outspoken, but transformative political practice that points out a possible future challenging the notion of the religious as something traditional. In this example, the veil is articulated with and used in sports or swimming contexts or other settings in dominantly secular European societies (Berg and Lundahl 2016). A future may also be visualised when the notion of secularism as a necessary part of modernity and the secularity–religion binary becomes severely questioned through political

analyses and work. With a political strategy or activity come ideas about a future full of both hope and despair.

To imagine, articulate and think about the future does not necessarily mean creating a romantic idea of prosperity. It can also, as Anna Tsing writes, mean acknowledging that 'there might not be a collective happy ending' (2015: 21). Scott (2004) argues that a romantic view of the future omits conflicts and frictions. It might be possible to imagine a future as neither dystopia nor utopia, neither without conflicts nor with endless wars. Pluralism, conflict, friction and agonism are not only unavoidable, but also a condition for democracy.

## 1.1 To Follow and to Be Interrupted

To study politics beyond and in-between organisations and states demands its own methodology. Such a methodology must make it possible to focus on unexpected connections, mergings and interruptions as well as observe when something seems to become sedimented and normalised. Inspired by rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), we use what we call a method of following, convinced as we are that political movements spark action, make new connections, are being transformed and transform. We also believe that these transformations and connections can contribute to creating new hegemonies. By using the method of following, we acknowledge that the work we do has both temporal and spatial dimensions. As scholars we literally come after something has happened, and even if we are situated in time and place, formed as scholarly subjects in an entanglement of societal contexts and connections, we also become touched and moved in the practice of following (Haraway 1988; see Wasshede's chapter).

The spatial dimension implies that we move in-between different contexts and places as well as over borders. We are interested in connections, reiterations, disruptions and transformations rather than trying to understand a more or less sharply marked culture (Marcus 1995). We follow artefacts such as the rainbow flag and the veil, as well as money, porn, bodies and street art (Grewal 2005). Discourses and series of episodes such as debates in media and political processes are also important

empirical material. The material has taken us over a range of different borders and boundaries, such as those in-between different nations, the secular and/religious divide, in-between civil society and the state, as well as through different norms, times and temporalities.

The concrete work of following can be done in many different ways and result in different forms of knowledge. Through the following of some pink porn producers, Laskar shows how money and sexual liberation have been intertwined in unforeseen ways, a connection that does not always align with how activists usually imagine the past of gay liberation. The pink porn economy shaped certain queer communities of belonging and politics while excluding and colliding with others. Further, in Alm's chapter, following a political process on trans rights over time and across the border in-between civil society and the Swedish state makes it possible to discern actions that impact the struggle against neoliberal governance. To follow the veil through different contexts also takes the scholar to a range of conjunctures for geo- and body politics, making it possible to conduct comparisons in-between different articulations in different parts of the world. The veil is also a product in a market for fashionable hijabis and, not least, a familiar textile possible to recognise and (dis)identify with around the globe. Another piece of fabric, the rainbow flag, connects to neoliberal transnational forces as well as to progressive notions of communities beyond heteronormative societies. The artefacts impact differ with context and the connections they support are impure and ambiguous.

Additionally, these examples illuminate the importance of the economy. While classifying this as an essential category would risk oversimplifying, it can be considered one of many important governing forces that transform and become transformed in articulations with other discourses, artefacts and materialities in different contexts (Brown 2015; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). For instance, Lundahl Hero's chapter shows that some versions of Swedish mainstream feminism adapted to current neoliberal and individualistic power structures and thereby lost a lot of its radicalism.

By following artefacts, debates and processes of importance for the politics of gender, sexuality and coloniality, we have met with a plethora of activists and political communities. The artefacts have an impact on connections to national and local contexts, but the same is also true in

reverse: those contexts transform the role of the artefact (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013).

In the chapters of Wasshede and Martinsson, the authors analyse their own reactions to, notions of and emotions generated by Pride events and a demonstration on International Workers' Day. Wasshede uses auto-ethnography to analyse herself and her own positions and experiences 'as a lesbian, feminist, former activist, academic, Swedish, able-bodied, middle-class, mother, etc.' in order to understand the feelings and frictions of belonging and disbelonging. Martinsson analyses her own hopefulness when she follows the demonstration, perceiving it as an expression of being in a privileged position in the society of modern Sweden, a nation with an assumed bright future.

In pursuing our interest in activism, we have also been interrupted. Two of us followed the path of a group who did not become political subjects or create political communities of belonging. Diana Mulinari and Despina Tzimoula's chapter consists of a revisiting of data collected years ago. They had interviewed Greek women living in Sweden. These Greek women not only refused to become welfare dependent, but also chose not to become political subjects or 'good activists'. Instead, the informants were depressed and longed for home, feeling that they had made mistakes. Their life choices made us confront our own modernist views, with implicit implications for the desirability of Swedish society. The interruption forced us to pose questions as: What frames are we using, and what are they hiding? Which life is normalised and nourished through our work and the frames we construct? Mulinari and Tzimoula's chapter challenges the expectation that scholars tend to project on those we study—especially if they are framed as foreign or other—and on their presumed radicality and activism.

The usage of diverse material from cultural artefacts, memories, interviews, political processes and debates can help us avoid falling into analytical and ethical traps. We are convinced that these different sorts of material can together contribute to the recognition of many political struggles and processes in-between but never exactly in hegemonic orders. It is impossible to predict whether these processes are or will be good or bad, democratic or undemocratic. However, these pluralistic and diverse political struggles make clear in all their variety that there is not just one



way to organise society or to understand oneself or one's communities. They can contribute to a radicalisation of democracy by making more images of the future possible, thereby hopefully making more lives liveable.

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# 2

## Public Intimacy and ‘White Feminism’: On the Vain Trust in Scandinavian Equality

Mikela Lundahl Hero

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women’s movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

The Combahee River Collective Statement  
Combahee River Collective

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## 2.1 What Happened in Sweden?

For a long time Sweden was seen both by others and by itself as an exemplar and an exception when it comes to all kinds of equality (Bengtsson 2019; Habel 2012). But lately both the far right and many on the left have articulated scepticism regarding the success of that paradigm. Most infamous is perhaps the American President Donald Trump who seemed to relish highlighting the presumed failure of Swedish migration politics (Noack 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Lately, something called ‘white feminism’ has been articulated in social media, especially by women of colour, who use it to articulate the lack of solidarity and understanding of white privilege in the hegemonic feminist discourse. As someone who is literally a white feminist and who wants to be able to continue being a feminist while white, I have become increasingly interested in how feminism and equality is evoked in different contexts in ways that seem to make it possible to articulate racism without referencing race or bodies, but rather behaviour and values. In a number of recent events/debates in Swedish public life—either directly or indirectly through the usage of gender discourse—actors not usually associated with feminism have made statements about Sweden and Swedishness. In this chapter I will critically examine some samples of this mainstream feminism discourse—or equality politics—with the help of concepts like femo- and homonationalism, secularism and decoloniality (Connolly 1999; Farris 2012; Puar 2007). My point of departure will be some of these conflicts, which—in relation to their actual relevance for real people—have taken up a disproportionately large space in Swedish public life, which concerns Muslim individuals who have tried to participate in public life in Sweden. The conflicts concern two issues: one involves women who want to use public swimming pools in a way that works with respect given to modesty and in relation to Muslim beliefs of gender separation; the other concerns a politician who had to step down after avoiding shaking the hand of a female journalist, since he viewed this as contrary to his religious beliefs.

Both of these conflicts attracted considerable media controversy, and concepts such as ‘feminism’ and ‘equality’ were referenced in these debates



and in the interventions that took place both in social media and traditional media. Even if there is a gap between the debates and reality, the debates are part of changing the discourse about Swedishness, democracy, gender and equality; I argue that they have political consequences and are therefore important to analyse. To contextualise these Swedish debates, I will reference recent research and similar events in other northern and western European settings, such as Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Austria and Italy, among others (Brems et al. 2018; Farris 2012, 2017).

## 2.2 Feminist Challenges of the Future

Apart from being threatened by anti-genderism, which will not be further addressed here, feminism is being challenged from a place that appropriates feminist discourses and can therefore be mistaken for feminism. This needs to be taken seriously. The fact that both women's and LGBTQI rights have, to some extent, become policy and part of a common discourse is a real victory, but like most victories it has come at a cost and has not solved all problems. In order to secure its impact, feminism—or some versions of it at least—has adapted to current neoliberal and individualistic power structures, thereby losing a lot of its radicalism. In her provocative book *Why I am not a feminist* Jessa Crispin argues that feminism has been part of shifting the 'focus from society to the individual', and she regrets that

[w]hat was once collective action and a shared vision for how women might work and live in the world has become identity politics, a focus on individual history and achievement, and an unwillingness to share space with people with different opinions, worldviews, and histories. It has separated us out into smaller and smaller groups until we are left all by ourselves, with our concern and our energy directed inward instead of outward. (2017: 9)

The hegemonic feminism has limited its scope to gender, and omitted the intersectional analysis that highlights how interwoven gender oppression

is with other forms of oppression, such as class, race, ethnicity, health, religion and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991). Moreover, the feminist struggle has become an individual matter rather than a collective one, which fits nicely into the neoliberal paradigm and ignores women who do not fit into the everyday understanding of the term ‘woman’ (white, middle-class, cis, secular, straight, healthy, etc.). However, intersectionality does not solve everything and, as Leticia Sabsay argues, there is a tendency for intersectionality to contribute ‘to the creation of reactionary figures such as the (presumptive heterosexual) “oppressed Muslim woman”’ when it ‘should offer us a way to analyse how, for instance, islamophobic arguments serve the defence of feminist emancipation discourses, or how new homonormativities are functional to nationalist ideals and therefore complicit with contemporary forms of cultural racism’ (2012: 613). Moreover, many contemporary intersectional practices seem limited to elaborating on only one *other* intersection at a time. Brown women are assumed to be cis and hetero whereas \*trans\* and queers are assumed to be white and middle class, or, in the words of Jasbir Puar, ‘the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight’ (Puar 2007: 32; Sabsay 2012).

Feminists and others have, for a long time, noted that despite major progress and some important victories having been won observed that not everything is perfect in Scandinavia (compare the unfortunate tendency to use Sweden as a brilliant example in, for instance, *SIGNS* (Enloe et al. 2018)). Even if the idea of Sweden as a radical and equal space, a vision shared by foreign scholars and mainstream debaters, is true, to some extent, that narrative hides how biased and conditioned that equality is in reality. In fact, I believe that the image of Sweden as a place where we have ‘arrived’ in the future is a dangerous one, firstly because it is false and secondly because it strengthens the already dominant liberal idea of one universal form that the desired society could take, and the path towards it. Saba Mahmood argues that

[f]eminism, therefore, offers both a *diagnosis* of women’s status across cultures as well as a *prescription* for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginal, subordinate, and oppressed (2001: 206f).

There are many aspects of the feminist agenda that are not fully articulated, that are silently or unconsciously universalised, and this is something that needs further investigation (Mahmood 2001: 206).

## 2.3 Delicate Intimacy

Intimate activities that involve care of the body, as well as dressing and undressing, are almost always and everywhere a delicate matter. They tend to be surrounded by rules and rituals that control who can see and touch whom and what (Foucault 1990, 1992). Sports and bathing customs are included in this affective and troublesome area of being human, and sometimes they contradict or disturb the normalised order, as the case of the infamous *burkinigate* in France showed not so long ago (see Almeida 2018; Berg and Lundahl 2016).

There are different kinds of arguments against veiling practices. For example, in France it was argued that people wearing burkinis were a threat, seen both as potential terrorists and as moral offenders (Berg and Lundahl 2016). In Sweden, by contrast, the arguments are often framed more along the lines that Swedish society and its institutions should protect veiled girls and women from patriarchal cultures—in the latter case, veiled individuals are obviously being stripped of their agency, without even making any observation of exactly how simplistic the understanding of agency often is within a western secular context (Mahmood 2001: 203f).

At first glance, there seems to be a broad consensus on the need to enable Muslim women, and particularly Muslim girls especially, to participate in public life, including sports and swimming. On the other hand, they can be met with rejection when they demand adaptations in order to accommodate their needs—as was the case for the Swedish girl who couldn't participate in the national basketball league because she wanted to play in a headscarf. This is part of an aporic situation, in which it appears that the liberal democratic state is both urging girls to participate in physical activities, but simultaneously reluctant to let them do so in a manner that suits them and their families (Brenning 2016). These restrictions are made in the name of the freed and emancipated girl/woman and in the case of the basketball player there was a reference to

safety, as if the veil can only come in the form of a burqa—a suggestion that shows a total lack of awareness of the modern sports hijabs that are available almost everywhere.

In one study in another Western European country Brems et al. interviewed women in Belgium with regard to their swimming practices and concluded that they wanted to ‘combine a religious lifestyle with an active lifestyle, including sportive swimming and beach holidays’ (2018: 10).<sup>2</sup> This conclusion shows how religiosity is assumed to be connected to some specific values and incompatible with others. They have to be explicit in how they want to be not only religious, but also active and modern. In their preface to *Is critique secular?* Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood argue that secularism is held in place by other core values such as reason and critique:

not that secularism is wrong, but rather that secularism is inherently generative and suffused with religious content, that reason always tenders a particular order of rationality, and that critique is inherently situated and partial. We thus aim to *undo the ways that secularism, reason, and critique stipulate and secure one another* in contemporary Western discourse. (Brown et al. 2013: xix, my emphasis)

This idea of *securing* sheds light on the affective power that affects the societal response to different kind of veilings, or indeed other practices understood as religiously motivated. As we shall see later, there are sometimes similar practices, not associated with religion, that are met very differently, or even go unnoticed.

Just as secularism is associated with certain values, religiosity is associated with others, often the opposite ones. Secularism is associated with freedom and activity; religiosity with passivity and a lack of freedom, as well as being grounded in belief rather than in reason and critique. According to the women in the Belgian study it is impossible to imagine a situation where women who show signs of religiosity also embody agency and desire an active lifestyle.

Yet these women are living the contradiction: they demand both a ‘modern’ active lifestyle, *while* dressing according to their religious values. One should be able to read veiling through this example rather than

through the lens that cannot see anything other than passive victims. These are women with agency, who challenge the strong secular norms in most European countries. Many Muslim European women who choose to veil are showing a lot of bravery, first when they choose to veil in an Islamophobic and veil-obsessed society as ours, *and* then when they insist on transgressing expectations on them when it comes to sports and swimming (and, although it is not relevant for this chapter, they carry this challenge into other areas of their lives, such as education and careers). These women thus challenge both the Muslim and the secular community. In the words of one of the interviewees in the article by Brems et al., it is a matter of 'agency about your own body and deciding yourself which part to show' (2018: 10).

The banning of burkinis or other hindrances to accommodating the needs for women and girls to achieve an active lifestyle (Berg and Lundahl 2016) enforce the boundary between secular and religious lifestyles and strengthen the associations of religiosity (not that veiling or modesty belong exclusively to the religious sphere) with passivity and backwardness, and hinder modernity to develop in diversity and including many experiences and expectations (Fabian 2002 (1983); Koselleck 2004).

Another finding from the Belgian study was the concurrent reference to 'neutrality'— it is often argued by the attendants at Belgian public swimming pools, who were interviewed by Brems et al., that burkinis are not allowed because:

the swimming pool is neutral, and that there is no place for religion in the water. (Brems et al. 2018: 11)

It is commonly argued that secularity is neutral, a sign of freedom, reason, universality and unmarked, whereas the religious is seen as culturally situated, unfree, deterministic, irrational, particular and primitive (Berg et al. 2016; Lundahl 2017). We found in an earlier study that, when a shopping centre in Sweden had let pupils from a nearby school illustrate a wall with people from the neighbourhood, just before the holiday season of 2015, which included a veiled woman which was subsequently erased, the arguments for erasing the veiled woman, were neutrality and

secularity—with ‘Ave Maria’ playing on the sound system (Berg et al. 2016). According to Brems et al.’s material:

is actually often about women [...] who are somewhat more open-minded, often somewhat higher educated and who mainly actually will decide themselves what they consider the essence of their belief, and what they consider true and what they consider not true. (2018: 13)

This is a group of women who are silenced through the conceptualisation of ‘Muslim women’ or veiled women, just as Gayatri Spivak (1988a) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) have argued when it comes to similar tropes, such as ‘third world women’—that hide the huge diversity within that ‘group’ when it comes to class, education and living conditions. The women interviewed in the Belgian study do not support the idea that all veiled women are oppressed:

It is not about people who blindly follow certain religious leaders, but about people who really have their own idea about how they want to experience their religion and they actually try to integrate all aspects of their lives as well as possible. So, they want to participate actively in society; they are usually people who work, who are also active in the community, and who also want to participate in sports activities, and who then actually go looking for clothes to actually integrate their religious conviction with their active lifestyle: how they want to stand in life and actively participate really in society. (Brems et al. 2018: 13)

The default banning that Brems et al. identify is excluding the most expansive and active part of the veiled group. Women who in their daily lives are actively bridging the gap between traditional and/or religious people, are forced to choose—there is no place in-between, where you can be both Muslim and modern, no borderlands (Anzaldúa 2012: 101). In practice, this has been part of western approaches towards Muslim women for decades (Lundahl 1995). The administrators at the public swimming pools are referring to something they label ‘swimming culture’, which in itself is an interesting oscillation between arguments. The first argument, articulated from a liberal democratic perspective and which refers to neutrality, seems to morph into an argument about

Swedish, Belgian and European culture, or something which is labelled 'swimming culture'. The argument changes gradually from an idea of an imagined neutrality to one that merely expresses how we've always done it, which in itself is seen as a reason to finish off the discussion (Brems et al. 2018: 16). To end up in a culturalist argument is quite far from arguments of neutrality, and to make sense of that one has to remember that European culture is often equated with universal values.

## 2.4 Appropriate and Inappropriate Clothing

As we will see, the situation differs between Sweden and, for example, Belgium, since to date, the reality in Swedish institutions such as public swimming pools differs from the public debate. In Sweden, there is a gap between the practice at institutions (and their regulations) and the public debate. Time and political development will tell whether these debates will lead to institutional changes.

In their research, Brems et al. checked public swimming pools' regulations of how to dress inside the pool. From a similar brief search on public swimming pools in my own area, south-west Sweden, some of them in bigger cities, both central and in different suburbs (poor and rich) and some in smaller towns,<sup>3</sup> I found that the rules were quite including, they were often explicitly mentioning the burkini or sometimes formulating the concept in words that related to the fabric of the clothes that were worn (Lycra). The most frequent and strongly stressed rule related to the issue of wearing underwear under your swimming clothes—an issue related primarily to a fashion among teenage boys and young men. More or less everything that is actual swimwear is allowed and it seems as even if in some cases the burkini is not mentioned specifically, it is still included in the overall term *swimwear* (*badkläder*). Or as it's stated under the headline '*trivselregler*' (rules of comfort) at Gothenburg's biggest public swimming pools:

In all common space swimwear without underclothes should be worn. Male visitors should wear swim pants and female visitors should have a one or two piece swimsuit, or burkini. In the sauna and in showers, no swimwear should be used. (Valhalla)<sup>4</sup>

Through this phrasing the burkini is subtly transformed from something alien to one of the alternative female (one or two pieces, or burkinis) swimsuits. So, in that sense the text is quite inclusive. But it also reflects a ‘swimming culture’ that is rarely spoken of—that Sweden has gender-separated venues for changing and showering, where everyone is supposed to undress in front of each other. In combination these two facts, the gender separation and the nakedness, are taken for granted, but one does not need to travel far to see other solutions to the delicate intimacy of the nude body. This is not the case in all European countries—it might be a part of a ‘Swedish swimming culture’, which in Sweden is understood not so much as a culture but as a rational—or even universal—way to keep both humans and nature clean, that for example contains an ambition to minimise the usage of chlorine—a practice that differs from other parts of the world, hence the strong emphasis on nude showers before entering the pool and the usage of proper swimwear. This argument lines up fine with another (together with equality) brand of Sweden: maybe not so sophisticated but indeed clean and sustainable.

At the other public swimming pools I checked (Uddevalla; Angered; Askim), there were similar formulations, often without explicit reference to specific clothing, but still subtly inclusive. What came through is that the municipalities are explicitly open to all kinds of swimmers in all kind of swimwear as long as the swimwear is clean and made of Lycra. I found only one example of gender separation: in Angered one of their pools (or rather a pool system—a spa area) offers one evening for ‘men only’ and one for ‘women only’, weekly (Angered). But that might belong to another discourse, of girls’/boys’ night out, treating themselves; that is, heterosexual gender binarism at its finest.

## 2.5 The Dangerous Separation

There have been demands for the introduction of girls-only hours at some public swimming pools around Sweden. Mostly, these demands have not been met, or have not been normalised. However, they have sparked debates on gender separation and the consequences of opening that door.



In an op-ed piece, liberal debater Karin Rebas refers to women's movements' long struggle for equality:

For me it is simple. The Swedish equality is a result of many decades of conscious struggle. It builds upon the fact that men and women are regarded as equals and are mixed in public spaces: in workspaces, in schools, in hospitals and in public swimming pools. Those who prefer other norms and principles have to—with the words of Mustafa Panshiri—learn to handle it. (Rebas 2016)

The liberal rhetoric with regard to these subjects tends to begin with common sense arguments on which that we can all more or less agree, as the narrative of Swedish equality politics' long and proud history, where men and women are seen and treated as equal. Rebas then argues that with equality follows gender mixing. She argues in an insidious way that makes it sound as they must follow upon each other, in a way that relies on the securing mechanism that Brown et al. pointed out (2013). However, there are many examples of gender separation in Swedish society, not least when it comes to public swimming pools. One example is pointed out by Anna Ekelund Nachman who recalls from her own childhood how, in her local public swimming pool, in the south of Sweden, nude women exited the pools just before the third graders jumped in, and on other days it was nude men who enjoyed the swimming pools (Nachman 2016).

In fact, there are many different 'bathing cultures' existing side by side in Swedish society, and they all have their own logic. If we look at the traditional outdoor baths scattered along the Swedish coastline, dedicated to nude bathing, gender separation is a given. Women have their space and men theirs. Smaller facilities often have separated hours. For example, the new public sauna in the docks of Gothenburg (Frihamnen) has mixed, female-only, and male-only hours.<sup>5</sup> These separations are rarely questioned by the liberals who express concern of an impending gender apartheid system, as they have no connection to religion, or anything that seems 'foreign'. They pass as neutral when in fact they're part of a tradition—or perhaps of a 'bathing culture' where gender separation is a given.<sup>6</sup> Recently, however, they have been challenged by queer

activists, who argue that they are too marked by binary gender thinking. This critique has sometimes been met with certain mixed or queer hours (Malmö; Frihamnen).

The former social democrat Ronja Ismail, who migrated from Iran to Sweden, situates the demands for separate hours in the public swimming pools in the Middle Ages, alluding in her argumentation to what Johannes Fabian has labelled *denial of coevalness*—that is, conceptualising the world in a way where different societies are placed in a development staircase, and understood as living in different historical epochs—thereby denying their coevalness (Fabian 2002 (1983)). Further, she argues that since we are not Iran or Saudi Arabia, it is therefore obvious that we cannot listen to the demands for women-only hours at public swimming pools:

Since if the municipal swimming pool give way to these medieval demands, what will be the next step? Is it uncomfortable to travel with women in public transport? Then voices will be raised for gender separated buses and trains. Should the daughter not go to school with boys? Voices will be raised for gender separated schools.

I already grew up in a country where gender apartheid became everyday life. When the islamistic mullas gained power in Iran everything changed in a day. Public spaces, as beaches, sports halls and swimming houses were the first to be gender separated. Soon girls and boys had to go to gender separated schools. To separate the genders in public transport, women were forced to sit back in the bus. The demands for gender separated swim hours in Nybro would be applauded by the Iranian ayatollah. (Ismail 2016)

Her chain of arguments ignores the long history of gender separation in Swedish institutions that coexist with spaces where no one would consider separation, which is seen as something completely different—but natural. When I went to school in the 1970s, for example, sports were often gender-separated. Ismail's usage of different timescapes situates other *contemporary* societies in an imagined past (Hemmings 2018). This line of argument fosters the assumption that development can only move in one direction—either forwards or backwards. There are no parallel routes; no diversity can be imagined. The idea of separate bath hours, which nobody is actually offering and few are requesting—apart from

what has 'always' been there and is not included in these discussions—will necessarily take us 'back' to a fully gender separated society.

That's why I care about protecting the progress in the Swedish society. Here, I and many [...] women got to live a life in a freedom that we could only dream about in our home countries, countries where the societies are ruled by strong patriarchal norms and values.

But Sweden is neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia. And shall not become. Therefore it is obvious that our public swimming pools are open for women and men. [...] Anything else would be a betrayal to all of us who fled the religious oppression in the Middle East. (Ismail 2016)

Ismail's arguments are built up with the help of straw men and imagined terrible scenarios. One question that needs to be raised in relation to the last claim above is why Sweden should adapt to the specific experiences of those who fled the Iranian revolution. It was (and still is) an awful regime, but the politics of gender separation goes far beyond Iran and Saudi Arabia. Even if we recognise that the oppression by the Iranian regime, now and then, is a crime against humanity, especially against women, it is questionable to argue that Swedish politics with regard to veilings and gender separation should be formulated in such a way as to not 'betray' those who fled Iran, since the history and rationale behind people coming to Sweden is so diverse—even among those coming from 'the Middle East'—as is the rationale behind gender separation, which, as we've seen, is also common in Sweden. Her phrasing silences these women through the homogenisation of these diverse contexts to one and the same. Swedish politics need to accommodate many other stories and human experiences. Someone who was traumatised by the Iranian regime would perhaps make connections between incidents in our current society and past events; for everyone else, however, it is far-fetched to claim that Sweden is on the brink of becoming like Saudi Arabia due to some small changes in our public swimming pool regulations.

Ismail further states that 'Sweden should actually be equal and secular'. This quote is an exemplary articulation of what Brown et al. try to challenge, namely the idea that 'modern' values, such as equality, can only exist together with secularity. Further, she silences all other voices and the

diversity among people in Sweden with an origin in the Middle East, including people who came from other parts of the Middle East, where the religious system looks different, or with other experiences, and for different reasons. In Ismail's narrative, Sweden is modern, and modernity is secular, and therefore cannot accommodate any kind of religion—which we know it does, both in classic religious forms but also in alternative ways, as Bengt Kristensson Ugglå (2015) and David Thurffell (2015) have shown. Ismail's arguments about religion—or Islam—draws exclusively on her experiences from Iran. I have no reason to question those experiences, but there are other experiences that we also need to accommodate in contemporary and future Europe.

Heidi Avellan from *Sydsvenskan* refers to Ismail and reveals her progressivist view on world history:

Happily enough the municipality did not back down, Ronja Ismail remarks, who grew up in Iran where *gender apartheid* quickly became normal when the mullahs came into power: beaches, sports facilities and public swimming pools, were the first to be targeted for gender separation. She is worried that voices also in Sweden can be raised for gender separated buses and a *return* to girls and boys schools. (Avellan 2016, my emphasis)

I am not arguing for separate schooling, but there is interesting research, practical experiences and good arguments for gender-separated schooling, or at least hours, in the name of equality. For example, in a much-reported incident in the 1990s, some kindergartens in a small town close to Gävle in Sweden tried gender-separated activities in order to make children go beyond the expectations of their gender. This included, for example, encouraging girls to be bolder when it came to outdoor activities, or to stop helping out so much during lunchtime, where boys, on the contrary, had an opportunity to expand their capacity to articulate their needs, when there were no girls present, ready to interpret their needs. The rationale behind their practice was to compensate for the influence of 'gender ideology' on the young boys and girls, and give them opportunity to grow beyond the narrow boundaries of the two sexes (Blomquist 2008). Instead, many misunderstood the practice as being aimed at enforcing stereotypical gender models (Nilsson 2017). Are

debaters making the same mistake when they can't see that separate bathing hours or special clothing might be what determines whether girls/women from minorities can be integrated—a highly esteemed value by so many debaters—whereas if they cannot wear the veil, burkini or be in groups, they will be unable to participate at all? The notion that one has to appear the same to become one, seems to rule these liberal debaters—who usually make it their business to accuse the left and feminists of wanting to make everyone the same.

Lately, we have seen debates on how the current school system supports girls more than boys and how it has become a problem that boys don't seem to fit in in today's school systems, something that seems to be happening all over the world—often referred to as the 'girl effect'. That phrasing, however, might overshadow the negative consequences for boys and men, who lose not only in power but in knowledge and belonging in their societies (Kagaba 2016).

Why don't these liberal debaters simply come out and admit that they prefer one culture to another, or that they accept gender separation the Swedish way, but not the Muslim way? Why do they need to evoke feminism and equality? To not sound as racist and Islamophobic as they are? I believe that what we see from these debaters are efforts to try to address 'the problem with Islam' through the usage of gender equality, without sounding racist. A separatist strategy, in this discourse, can only be read as a *return* to something long overcome. They make it seem as if a strategy that has been used outside the liberal modernist hegemony will carry with it everything that might be problematic, as if it were contaminated by something not belonging to liberal modernist hegemony. But the liberal modernist hegemony can never be contagious in itself in that sense—since it is not understood as an illness, in the way that religion and some supposedly alien forms of patriarchy are.

However, if we were to scrutinise most of the common practices in the liberal modernist hegemony, most of them would probably be contagious and therefore disqualified, since they most likely have been used in misogynist, racist or homophobic contexts and are therefore not useful.

Heidi Avellan seems to recognise some of the challenges with her own position as a liberal, when she argues against freedom:

Separate bath hours. Separate gym hours. Separate venues.

By choice and voluntary? Liberal then?

No, actually not.

[---]

It is simply about sticking to how it is. Like the fact that in Sweden, women and men swim together.

Arguments around the importance of exercise or swim training—and that it is therefore important to gender cleanse the pool—have to be set aside, as does the argument that this is somehow about religious freedom.

It is more important that women from patriarchal cultures are recognized as individuals, not as representatives of a medieval gender view. (Avellan 2016)

The way she uses the phrase ‘patriarchal cultures’ is illuminating—and here I will leave aside the complex concept of culture. She is constructing a patriarchal other, in contrast to an ‘us’ that is not? According to Joseph Massad, these ideals are part of the western imperialist impulse, which governs and secures who can define sexual freedom, equality, happiness, future, etc. (Massad 2008: 192f).

The war on veils and different body covering practices is spreading across Europe (see Brems et al. 2018). Denmark has recently introduced a new law that forbids garments that cover the face, including Islamic veils such as the niqab and burqa, although it’s said to not aim at any specific religion and does not ban headscarves, turbans or the traditional Jewish kippa.

At the same time, however, veils are more debated than ever before, also in a more self-critical way, as in an article in the leftist daily newspaper *Information*, where Karen MacLean tries to make her own whiteness visible through exploring the privileges enjoyed by a body covered by a ‘white niqab’: ‘I did not see that I myself is covered in a white niqab, that makes me deeply privileged’ (MacLean 2018). She tries to articulate how white unveiled north European women such as herself live their lives—unaware of the cultural niqab they carry around every single day in spite of their imagined freedom.

Recently, we have seen veils used in commercials (see Berg et al. 2016), as in the case of the Danish candy company Katjes, which featured a

veiled woman in a very important ad campaign in central Copenhagen. The company leader explains that:

To us there is nothing political in using a model who wears a hijab. We are targeting the modern woman. The modern woman is diverse and future oriented, just as our products are, Dan Kongsted says. (Termansen 2018)

What is notable here is the fact that the featured veiled woman is saying yes to vegan candy, so the company is targeting several groups simultaneously, and establishes a bond between different groups that can be accommodated in a diverse and future-oriented community; groups that usually doesn't have a natural connection in Danish society—apart from saying no to pork, a staple in the Danish diet.<sup>7</sup> Currently, the battle of the veil goes in several directions, and takes place in different arenas—and also apparently in commercials.

## 2.6 Handshake Gate

In the spring of 2016, a rejection of a handshake mobilised a storm of feme- and homonationalism, and new articulations of Swedishness were expressed publicly, with the Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven leading the way: 'In Sweden we greet each other. We shake both women's and men's hands' (Löfven 2016). It was the Green Party member Yasri Khan, at the time a candidate for the Green party's board, who had politely refused to shake hands with a journalist. His stated reason was that shaking hands with a woman felt too intimate (Khan 2018).

One phrase that was used a lot during this 'gate' was 'the Muslim no handshake custom', which was presented as mandatory and widespread. This is a clear exaggeration. There are some branches of Islam where this is the practice of some of its members, but the formulation indicates that this is a common and dominant feature for all Muslims, which is not The case (L. Ahmed 1992).

This all happened in the spring of 2016, a little more than a year before the eruption of the #metoo movement changed the conversation in Sweden. Before #metoo it was suspicious to avoid handshaking with

women—after #metoo we've had to rethink body contact and realise that there is no neutral or unproblematic way to touch between the genders (I am painfully aware of the gender binarism and heteronorm in this discourse (see Clare Hemmings 2018: 971)), as was the Swedish 'go to' reflection. New norms and formulations are in the making as 'unwanted intimacy' which has become a notion, used by the late Sara Danius, former secretary of the Swedish Academy, in relation to what unfolded in that institution in the wake of #metoo, and which describes the discomfort women feel when they have to accept cheek kisses—which is not a part of Swedish mainstream culture—or too long or close hugs—which are more mainstream nowadays—from men who stretch the limits and hide behind social norms to touch women. This has now become articulated and given a name and therefore something we talk about. #Metoo has shown that the unity shown by Swedish society on a shared greeting system in the handshake gate is partly a myth and a silencing of the history of patriarchal norms that grant men access to women's bodies in public in ways that not everybody actually consents to.

In a related case, the refusing handshaker was a young Muslim woman who had avoided shaking hands with a male colleague, and who chose to quit her job after the incident. The principal at the school where she worked was eager to stress that this had nothing to do with her being a Muslim, but rather about equality:

I would like to clarify that the school did not sack Fardous. She chose to leave after I explained what the school's core values are. I would also like to carefully point out that the issue was not her religious beliefs, but rather it is about choosing to treat men and women differently by shaking the hands of women but not men. [...] We at the school treat all sexes on the principle of gender equality. If the the [*sic*] Equality Ombudsman were to decide that we have acted wrongly, we would naturally look at how we approach or interpret that. (Roden 2016)

Greetings become symbols that in the name of equality becomes battlefields, where, following the 'rules' without grounding them in judgement, seem to be the more important, than thinking through consequences and meaning. Sara Ahmed has argued that in the neoliberal state is put a



lot of effort on the formulation and introduction of policies, whereas the actual realisation of them in a just practice, is not as emphasised, and this makes people follow the policy without reflecting on the reasons behind it (S. Ahmed 2004). It is hardly meaningful to accuse this specific teacher of implicit racism, based on the above statement. But I do believe that we shouldn't ignore the fact that these arguments, used in situations like the above, have excluding effects that target Muslims, and if we link that to the fact that we, for some time now, have seen a growing Islamophobia throughout the western world, we have to acknowledge the problem. As Leticia Sabsay argues:

The mobilisation of orientalist views on the other's supposedly backward gender culture has been prominent within the hijab debate in France and Spain for years. (Sabsay 2012: 607)

She further argues that 'all these tendencies attest to the racialisation of progressive sexual politics and its functionality in the process of cultural othering'. Progress is white and western and the other is 'sexually conservative, intolerant and [has] constitutively anti-democratic sexual values' (Sabsay 2012: 607).

What do we do with the contradictory notions of the classic orientalist imagery of the Muslim man as a perpetrator, who oppresses women, and on the other hand the effeminate (insufficiently masculine, according to Swedish standards) pious Muslim man? How can they live side by side in our contemporary modernity? Can the Muslim man speak? Beyond our notions or assumptions of who they are and what they believe. It seems as if 'the Muslim man', just as the subaltern brown woman Gayatri Spivak once wrote in a famous article, is over-determined and everything he says will either not be heard or will be interpreted according to the already created discourse about him (Spivak 1988a). Spivak's question 'Can the subaltern speak?' highlights the impossibility for Yasri Khan to actually be heard—whatever he says is channelled through our fixed mindset regarding Muslim men. We have several recent cases when the other actually turned out to be different, not only when it comes to skin colour or name, but in their views on politics and behaviour.

Spivak's article is quite relevant within this context since we have seen a growing desire for representation in the political sphere, but less real preparation to accept real otherness. How other can someone be while still being accepted in the mainstream of political discourse? The acceptance has its clear-cut limitations.

Handshake gate concerns the integration and political representation of Muslims in western democracies, and is an opportunity to discuss the construction of masculinities, as well as how feminism is invoked in different ways, from both 'sides'.

From a contemporary intersectional feminist perspective, Khan's feminist politics are quite heteronormative; just as the feminist politics of those criticising him. Whereas the contemporary intersectional feminism that could have made a point about this, stays rather silent—perhaps (speaking for myself here) since we worry about the racist, Islamophobic overtones in events like this. As if the modern were ever a pure essence, void of traditions, and that Islam is the first to bring tradition into modernity (cf. Latour 1993).

## 2.7 Futures of Feminisms

It might be that the term feminism has to go, or at least go to rest for a while, in order to undo these universalising tendencies that hide the diversity in women's lives and conditions. Or at least an unqualified feminism. It might be necessary to use different prefixes, such as postcolonial, decolonial, black, queer and intersectional before it, in order to call out the whiteness and liberalness and middle-classness etc. of the term 'feminism'. All in order to challenge and undo the universal feminism that is to troublesome according to Clare Hemmings:

One reason why I think it is so important to track the appeal of 'universal feminism' that sutures feminism and femininity in some instances of contemporary representation, then, is that the citation of gender inequality's temporality allows for a reinstatement of gender difference, all the while appearing to challenge the limits such binarism represents. (Hemmings 2018: 973)

The concept of feminism might be a lost cause, as Jessa Crispin argues, since we are many white feminists who do not agree upon the public representation of white feminism, 'Swedish feminism' or even just as feminism—the one and only. If feminism has become a floating signifier—that it can mean almost anything and be used by almost anyone, we need to work on more specific terms and continue, in the words of Leticia Sabsay words, to

question the colonial or orientalist over-determinations that confirm a hegemonic understanding of the kind of subjects who can make demands and the forms those demands can take. (Sabsay 2012: 619)

We are still too framed in a

narrative of progress that dismisses other sexual struggles and justifies both normalising and condescending or overtly discriminatory racist cultural assessments. (Sabsay 2012: 619)

This narrative needs to be disrupted:

This task demands that we *question the universalising normative framework that forecloses what we can understand as political*, and reminds us that the language of western sexual citizenship is by no means the only way of making sexual claims. This challenge implies keeping open the basic political issue of how bodies and their pleasures can and do become the locus of political practices of citizenship *beyond liberal and orientalist presumptions*. (Sabsay 2012: 619, my emphasis)

I wish to join forces with all critics of universalistic feminism—or of other universalisms for that matter. Even if that project has been ongoing for decades it still seems as if feminism and many who identify as feminists, still ignore that they are deeply embedded in western thought, and are reluctant to realise that they are rather local than universal—just as everybody else. That also goes for their knowledge, and their solutions, which are developed in, and adapted to, local situations. The concept of local knowledge (Geertz 1983) is not only applicable to the third world

and the other—it's the reality everywhere, even for the first, the privileged groups, such as white middle-class western feminists.

Feminism and/or feminists are seen, and identify, as radical and critical by default, but tend to be blind to the white mythologies framing their discourses and practices (Barthes 1957; Derrida and Moore 1974; Young 1990). One aspect of white feminist mythology is that everything that is different from it, is seen as belonging to a realm of tradition or culture in contrast to itself, which is understood as liberated and enlightened. This tendency to situate anything that oppresses women in temporal or spatial otherness is prevalent across the political spectrum. Inderpal Grewal describes this poignantly in her analysis of neoliberal consumer culture:

Although some of these cultural productions were not explicitly marked as 'feminist,' the discourses within these works were *closely connected to liberal feminisms in which the movement from tradition to modernity signified a woman's move from repression and exploitation to freedom*. Thus quite often it was not globalization or military repression or lack of resources or state policies that were used as an explanation for the continued subordination of women in the so-called third world, but rather the power of 'tradition'. (Grewal 2005: 65, my emphasis)

Western ideas are neither necessarily worse nor more problematic than any other cluster of ideas and practices per se. But it is their universalising tendencies and the silencing of their local nature—both in time and space—that is dangerous—even if they might also share that with other traditions. Those traditions, however, are not hegemonic on a global scale. Historical and geopolitical conditions have made it possible for those ideas to fly and be used with specific political ambitions disguised as neutral and global, in contrast to other ideas, which are declared to be foreign, other, traditional, cultural or local. It might be strategically necessary to separate the ideas from their effects in a specific geopolitical situation, so that those who are invested in the ideas can go on with them, but be open for a dismantling of them and end the universalising of them—if that is a possibility—or is the universalising a core value that liberal modernism cannot abandon?

One way of doing this is to scrutinise the saviour complex (Teju Cole, 'The White-Savior Industrial Complex', *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012)

which seems to be so strong in white feminism and as Gayatri Spivak argued long ago is more about the white feminists than about the 'saved' (Spivak 1988a, b). Or as Lila Abu-Lughod asks in her book *Do Muslim women need saving?* (Abu-Lughod 2013). Who are the Muslim woman that one wants to save, and why? And from what? There are millions of Muslim women, all living in very diverse conditions. The impeccable principles of many liberal white women will rarely help anyone in a real crisis.

It is urgent to question and destabilise notions of what a Muslim man and woman is or can be—as well as what white feminism is. Not because we are suffering, but because all work done in order to undo patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy is needed. Regarding the latter, I believe that if we do not specify or situate the feminism we are using, we will see more pink washing, as 'gender awareness'—to some degree and in a certain form—grows. We need to call out the tendency to use 'feminism' or 'equality' in order to control femininity/masculinity, cis- and heteronormativity, whiteness or other nationalisms. In current times of migration and transnationalism, Sweden has to become more open—or as open as it imagines and represents itself to be. Our future imagined community cannot have only one accepted way to greet each other, or one way to organise bodies in sports and swim facilities.

White feminism and nationalistic gender equality exist in a temporality and an idea of the future where everybody should become more or less as the Swedish modern man and woman, and live as they are imagined to live in hegemonic narratives, and smaller anomalies can be accepted as same-sex couples as long as they follow the heterosexual manuscript/matrix in every other way. Similarly, Muslims can be accepted if they do not ask for real changes to accommodate them as they are, rather than changing to what we want them to become, what we see as a good Muslim—that is, a secular, unveiled/shaved handshaking Muslim.

## 2.8 The White Burden Revisited

What are we supposed to do instead? The South African white activist Rick Turner argued in the 1960s and 1970s that we need to define a new whiteness (Turner 2015), one that listens to the other, but that doesn't try

to erase differences. These differences might disappear or not, but it is not up to anyone to change anyone else (see Sartre 1989). Dare to own the white burden—that is the inherited white supremacy, coloniality, patriarchy and try to affect change from within. That is, a white feminism for the future that recognises itself, its privileges and power relations, taking responsibility for them, and acknowledging the white niqab, everything that we are unable to see or grasp, whichever intersections are applicable to our situation. Without a proper understanding of where we are, we have no clue on where to head next.

We ought to keep the wound of belonging to the oppressive line, and stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016). And keep cultivating the art of noticing outside the political and discursive ready-mades, and try to accept that:

the assumption that the trope of progress is sufficient to know the world, both in success and failure. The story of decline offers no leftovers, no excess, nothing that escapes progress. Progress still controls us even in tales of ruination. (Tsing 2015: 21)

## Notes

1. By 'presumed' I am not arguing that Sweden has been very successful. Rather, what I'm questioning is the presumption that a successful migration politics could be possible in a neoliberal (or any kind of liberal) state.
2. In the referenced article the scholars interviewed staff at the public swimming pools whether they have a ban against burkini or not and why; they have interviewed burkini wearers, and they have looked at some actual juridical cases. It's worth noting that none of the referenced cases passed the juridical procedures. There were no arguments, regardless of whether they evoked gender equality, hygiene or safety, that held up in court (Brems et al. 2018: 17–18).
3. Göteborg Valhalla, Angered, Askim, Uddevalla, Malmö.
4. All translations from Swedish and Danish are mine.
5. At the time of writing the rules were updated to Transgender; She/Ze; He/Ze and Mixed hours.

6. It has, however, been questioned by queer and trans people, since those categories exclude non-binary people and have also been problematic for people with a body not aligned with their gender, when they have not been accepted on women's hour since their bodies are not seen as fully female. Femonationalism has become a part of the logic in these debates, but not, yet, homonationalism.
7. The ad was brought to my attention by a Danish veiling friend from a Middle Eastern 'background', who couldn't hide her joy when she shared this ad, put up in the same city which on a daily basis harasses her and questions her right to be there, in the country where she was born and of which she is a citizen. That joy tells us something about the current state of the Danish kingdom, in particular, and Euro-America in general.

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# 3

## We Were Here, and We Still Are: Negotiations of Political Space Through Unsanctioned Art

Linda Berg and Anna Sofia Lundgren

### 3.1 Introduction

Scandinavian exceptionalism effectively conceals a colonial history in which, for centuries, the indigenous Sámi population have suffered discrimination from the dominant culture and the Swedish state (Naum and Nordin 2013). Swedish artist Anders Sunna is devoted to addressing aspects of colonialism in the Swedish state's relation to the Sámi. His work concerns both history and conceptions of the future.

Before January 2011, the Ministry of Culture controlled all public expressions in Egypt and protest art was hard to find. When thousands of people mobilised against the Mubarak regime, street art became part of a

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change in political and artistic expression (el Hamsamy and Soliman 2013a, b). During the Arab Spring, feminist artist Bahia Shehab was one of many who painted messages at Tahrir Square in Cairo, voicing demands for an end to military violence.

In this chapter, we start with the work of Shehab and Sunna in order to address strategies of artistic criticism of the relations between states and their citizens. Both artists are protesting against contemporary processes relating to space, state and nation, and they express themselves in ways that are embedded in the aesthetics of unsanctioned street art.

This expression constitutes an interesting form of politics, situated somewhere in-between, or alongside, party politics and the practices of civil society. Our aim is to describe and discuss what we see as specifically effective and dynamic themes in the chosen expressions—the use of space as object and methodology, and the production of iconic imageries within fantasies of protest. The stencils and spray paintings of Shehab and Sunna offer us keys to exploring efforts to artistically reveal and dismantle national and neocolonial power.

We work from the supposition that space is always ideological (Cresswell 1992) and that it needs to be thought of as something ongoing, a ‘heterogeneity of processes’ (Massey 2005: 107) that together form, and reform, notions of what space can be/come. We also discuss the uses of space and style in relation to the critique of state and colonial power, focusing on how these two artists’ anti-colonial strategies are articulated via uses of space and place, both physical and digital. The studied expressions are regarded as political, both in the sense that they constitute examples of public contestation of otherwise taken-for-granted or covered-over power relations, and that they visualise, and criticise, a dimension of conflict that is constitutive of society (Mouffe 2005). Their political dimension is fuelled by ideological fantasies that ‘give them direction and energy by pointing to things that are desired or rejected’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145–152), e.g., a desired freedom or a rejected colonialism. Such contestations, however, are not always appreciated, either for their content or for their form or place of display. Mouffe (2013: 299) has identified what she calls a ‘moralization of politics’ at work when expressions are dismissed, which defines opponents in moral rather than political terms. As a consequence, argues Mouffe, opponents

are seen not 'as opponents but as enemies', whose work can be prohibited by the state rather than responded to; the content of the criticism neglected not as an act of censorship but because its form is deemed illegal. This does not mean that passers-by do not interpret the forbidden paintings as important political statements. In fact, their forbidden status may even encourage such an interpretation.

The focus on street art partly implies a centring of visual expression, which necessarily excludes other ways of communicating and experiencing protest (e.g., written, spoken or sung communication, physical pain, emotional reactions). We draw here upon Lisiak (2015: 4), who concludes that: 'analysis of revolutionary iconography is important because it is [...] protesters' lingua franca' (see also Buck-Morss 2002). However, the delimitation to visual expressions still offers a variety of possible perspectives. We start by briefly delving into the analytical possibilities opened up by relating the studied expressions to the associations, practices and aesthetics associated with street art.



**Fig. 3.1** 'To colonialism'. Stencil and photograph: Anders Sunna. Courtesy of the artist

## 3.2 Street Art

Street art—often referred to as urban art, guerrilla art or independent public art—has become a growing artform with a broad audience. As expressions of street art are primarily performed in open and easily accessible areas, its aesthetic has almost become an admissible voice within the urban landscape. However, despite its familiar appearance, its expressions carry both political and democratic possibilities. Through its frequent targeting and politicising of aspects of the social that have become invisible and untellable, street-art expressions open up spaces for reflection and negotiation. In this sense, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) old question, of whether the subaltern can become comprehensible and speak, can be revisited via street art, which constitutes efforts to call attention to voices that are otherwise excluded from established venues or made unintelligible in certain geographical locations.

Hence, street art dislocates public space and makes it vulnerable; it unsettles 'the settled spaces of the city' (Young 2014: 129), not only through its unsanctioned—and in some countries forbidden—status, but also because of what it makes visible and tellable. McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) suggest that an important role of street art is that it reminds passers-by that the material urban landscape is co-produced and shaped by each and every one of us; a suggestion which implies that the social is necessarily an ambiguous thing.

This function of reminding us of the inherent incompleteness of the social is not only accomplished through the content of the artworks. The expression 'cultural jamming' is sometimes used to indicate practices whereby urban surfaces that are owned and funded by others—such as buildings and commercial ads owned and funded by private property owners and commercial interests—are used to creatively and artistically change the messages that these otherwise communicate (Klein 2000; Ferrell and Weide 2010). There is thus reason not only to delve into the meanings inherent within street artworks themselves, but also to acknowledge how such meanings occur partly as an effect of, and a response to, the spatio-political contexts within which they are produced and with which they communicate.

While street art is mostly associated with the surfaces of urban public spaces, researchers have pointed to how such spaces are constantly getting narrower—because of both risk and security discourses and marketisation. As a consequence, Mitchell (2003) has stressed the importance of defending public spaces as democratic sites for political expression with active participation through spontaneous and unanticipated activities by citizens (see also Olsson 2008).

But the notions of a narrow public space also have other spatial biases. This is surely the case in discussions about street art, where the spaces of public artistic contestation are often unproblematically taken to equate to urban or even metropolitan space. It leaves protests about spatial injustices, expressed by people who inhabit so-called ‘peripheral’ spaces, almost incomprehensible in terms of protest or artistic activism. Protest and protester identity are thus revealed to be anything but neutral. Apart from being caught up in notions of youth and masculinity (Bobel 2007), perceptions of protest and protester identity have long been intimately entangled with urbanism and expected forms of resistance (Scott 1985; Nilsson and Lundgren 2018).

Street art has been defined as a movement rather than merely an art-form. As such, it is multifaceted and changing. Despite its inherently mutable character, street art has become increasingly established during recent decades, with a growing art market, galleries, workshops, guided tours and products springing out of artistic expressions. Because of this, it is often stated that ‘street art is dying’ because it has become a safe art product that it is possible for anyone to consume (Jones 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Its central feature of communicating (often illegally) on the surfaces of public space has been transformed as more and more street art is being produced and disseminated digitally. Waclawek (2011: 184–185) contends that, today, the internet is ‘not only a source of information about graffiti and street art, but also swiftly becoming the primary vehicle for an encounter with the work’. Some researchers have cautioned that the digitalisation of street art depoliticises it and detaches the audience from the artwork and its original context (e.g. Bengtsen 2014),<sup>2</sup> or that it merely calls for ‘feel-good’ slacktivism, where liking a piece is as far as political engagement goes (but see Serup Christiansen 2011). Yet others suggest that the digitalisation of street art disguises the ephemerality that is an



in-built part of the genre as it is often removed by property owners and changed or overpainted by other artists (Riggle 2010; Young 2014). It has been suggested that this ephemerality works to invite citizens to become active in the artistic process and to partake in the debate over public space. However, such invitations also occur in the virtual world (e.g., Menor 2015; MacDowall and de Souza 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The above criticism targets the significance of space and the meanings attributed to acting and being in a space. In this chapter, we argue that it is nevertheless important to reflect on the power relations that structure space—privileging some places and people as *proper* locations and subjects of protest—and how uses of the internet also constitute important aspects of the power-laden situatedness and force of artistic protest. Space—the location of forms of artistic protest as well as the spatial negotiation of power and meaning that they engender and constitute—thus seems to be an important analytical entrance point. Focusing on the intersections between art, space and protest, we are interested in following and scrutinising the decentring and destabilising movements of street art as it claims space and performs politics.

As a focal point for the discussion, we draw on the two empirical examples introduced at the beginning of this chapter—the artistic expressions of the Egyptian artist Bahia Shehab and the Sámi artist Anders Sunna. The artworks in question have been encountered through digital ethnographic research on art with a special focus on state-critical street art. Via previous research on contemporary street art and with a transnational approach we found thought-provoking parallels between street art from Cairo during the so-called Arab Spring and current art from the Swedish part of Sápmi. The material contains both still and moving images, primarily exhibited online, and we made contact with the artists, who agreed to be published in this chapter. It is, of course, a difficult and perhaps counterproductive endeavour to try to establish or define the artworks studied here as street art. In some senses, they may be defined in that way, in others perhaps not. What is important, however, is that analysing them through the lens of unsanctioned art helped us to reveal what we perceived to be important aspects of the artistic critique of the state and neocolonial government.

### 3.3 A Thousand Times No

In Egypt, street art, graffiti and calligraffiti exploded during the Arab Spring (Saphinaz-Amal 2016; el Hamsamy and Soliman 2013a, b). Images appearing on the buildings and walls of Cairo included strong political messages for people in the place to see, as well as for the globalised media to show people around the world the news about Egypt. Some of these images have been removed, but many were documented in digital archives, blogs, books, articles and exhibitions.

In a TED talk, artist Bahia Shehab explains the background to her participation in this artistic explosion (Shehab 2012). In 2010, she was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Haus Der Kunst in Munich, commemorating 100 years of Islamic art in Europe. The invitation came with one important condition: she had to use Arabic script in her work. Contemplating what her contribution would be, she describes how she immediately knew that: ‘As an artist, a woman, an Arab and a human being living in the year 2010, I only had one thing to say—I wanted to say “No”.’ Shehab further explains that, in Arabic, a common expression is ‘No and a thousand times no’. For the exhibition, she therefore decided to collect a thousand different representations of the word ‘No’ that had appeared over the past 1400 years under Islamic or Arabic patronage. She called the finished installation *A Thousand Times No*, a work (process and pieces) described in detail in her book *A Thousand Times NO: The visual history of Lam-Alif* (2010).

The Egyptian revolution began in the following year, 2011. As military sanctions against the protesters became more violent, Shehab decided to participate more actively. She started to spray her thousand Noes publicly on walls all over Cairo (Shehab 2014). ‘I did not feel that I could live in a city where people were being killed and thrown like garbage on the street’, she explains in her TED talk and describes her first spray-painted work, which said ‘No to military rule’ in a script taken from a tombstone. That No was followed by a series of Noes that ‘came out of the book like ammunition’. Among the Noes that followed were: No to a new pharaoh. No to violence. No to killing men of religion. No to burning books. No to the stripping of veiled women (Fig. 3.2).



**Fig. 3.2** 'No to stripping...' Stencil and photograph: Bahia Shehab. Courtesy of the artist

The latter is one of the more famous pieces in the series, originally commenting on a notable incident in which a veiled protesting woman was violently stripped and beaten by military men. The incident was filmed and circulated on the internet, and international broadcasters such as CNN and the *National Post* covered the story of the beaten young woman. The media images show three policemen dragging the woman's unconscious body: her hijab and long black abaya ripped off, exposing her stomach and her blue bra. Shehab's artistic comment consists of a stencil of a blue bra and a footprint representing the military that reads 'Long live a peaceful revolution'. In her TED talk, Shehab says it represents a 'reminder of the shame' of Egypt for allowing such actions and that 'we will never retaliate with violence'. The blue bra quickly became a cultural product itself and a symbol of the protests after the Egyptian

uprising of 2011—against injustice, patriarchy and Egyptian military violence—and was also used by other street artists.<sup>4</sup>

Through the articulation of a plethora of different Noes—which related to phenomena both from the historical past and of the present—Shehab managed to produce/visualise power structures that positioned the sympathetic viewers of the artworks as united. They became parts of the same frontier, although they may not otherwise have taken an individual stance towards *all* of the articulated Noes. Even though Shehab herself, according to her TED talk, believes that very few can identify these connections, she thinks the resonance can be felt on the street. In this sense, the emptiness of the word No—or rather, its openness to inscription—allows for it to be recognised as a forceful signifier of protest. The ‘emptiness’ of No became a small part of the larger creation of a community of belonging.

In her talk, Shehab also mentions a well-known street-art piece on a wall in Cairo: ‘Tank vs. Bike’, originally by Mohamed Fahmy, known as Ganzeer. The piece started with stencils of a person riding a bike and carrying a large tray of bread, being confronted by a life-sized tank. A soldier is pointing a weapon at the cyclist. After reactions against the piece, protester Winged Elephant painted people protesting in front of the tank, siding with the cyclist, with blood pouring from them as they are run over by the tank and the words: ‘Starting tomorrow I wear a new face, the face of every martyr. I exist.’ This painting also attracted protest. Supporters of the army, the Badr Battalion, reacted to the new artwork by painting over the red blood with white and making the protesters into pro-regime supporters with flags. They added words about the people and army being united for Egypt. This was, again, followed by Winged Elephant, who painted a military leader as a monster in front of the tank eating a young woman in a river of blood. The Badr Battalion came back, leaving the tank but again painting white over ‘the blood’ and covering the face of the military leader with black paint. Other artists also joined in during the process—amongst others Sad Panda and the Mona-Lisa Brigades, who painted protesters with no facial expressions holding Guy Fawkes masks in their hands.<sup>5</sup> Shehab also participated by spraying the whole piece with a range of her by now well-known ‘No’ stencils (amongst



**Fig. 3.3** Elements from the ‘No’ campaign. Stencils and photograph: Bahia Shehab. Courtesy of the artist

others, the blue bra) and the words of Pablo Neruda: ‘You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming’ (Fig. 3.3).

‘Tank vs. Bike’ visualises political conflict and how co-produced street-art assemblages not only illustrate but also partake in the ongoing struggle over meaning. Years after the public protests and military-driven counter-reactions started in Egypt, this artwork still materialises the two dominant narratives in trying to define the gist of the conflicts. The dialogical movement in this artwork, between pro-army defenders and regime-critical protesters, constitutes a political space on the abutment of the Sixth of October Bridge in Zamalek (an area in Cairo). In doing so, the artwork also calls on passers-by to take a stance, or to join in. In a sense, such an invitation significantly destabilises not only the understanding of the conflict as such, but also the notions of what art is and who could be/come a political protester; the non-democratic order is thus also protested and challenged through the call for participation and collaboration.

To narrate is often seen as fundamental to the ability to socialise, to create ourselves and in some ways to survive. Homi Bhabha talks about

narrativity as a sign of civilisation, arguing that societies denying the right to tell are societies creating a deafening silence (Bhabha 1990: 291–322). In the context of Egypt, and more specifically political life in urban Cairo, street art has clearly been used as a way to disrupt the silence and create alternative narrations about contemporary situations in an authoritarian society. The book *Walls of freedom: Street art of the Egyptian Revolution* (2014) contains images and interviews with a range of street artists in Egypt, including NeMo, who claims that this artform became a forceful tool against a depressing culture, both before and during the Arab Spring. Street art provided hopeful images, often symbolising people united against Mubarak and the military regime, and it did so in the middle of the city, on walls that were visible to anyone passing by. Using the canvases of publicly available walls, street art turned into an alternative media that spread messages in sharp contrast to those of the state-owned press (Hamdy and Don Karl aka Stone 2014; de Ruiter 2015). Simultaneously, and importantly, it also constituted new points of identification and produced an alternative understanding of the political landscape.

The artists producing street art worked within norms signifying the Egyptian revolution, stressing peacefulness and inclusion, and aiming to mobilise the people at large within the state (independent of religion, class or other social factors) against the imperial ruling elite that was diminishing space for almost everyone.

Via street art meaning-making, small details became important symbols for this unity of the people. The blue bra used by Shehab and others is powerful because it reminds people of the well-known event of excessive assault. As the gendered aspects of the symbolised abuse are acknowledged in this cultural artefact, the bra has become equated with a feminist critique. A strength of the constitution of the blue bra as a symbol is that it transformed the memory of the person in question into feelings of having been wronged *as a people*; to critique and mobilise people at large against military rule and violence and to itself become a sign for the reclaiming of *democracy* (see Berg and Lundahl 2016: 274). Criticism of the Egyptian state, non-democratic leadership and military violence are articulated in this art piece in a simple but striking way, demanding a changed nation-state. Similar demands are made by Sámi artists in Sweden.



### 3.4 We Are Here, You Are Not

‘From the outset on, it is of importance to state that: The Sámi have not been subjected to discrimination by the State.’ The recorded voice of the State attorney from a court case between the Sámi reindeer community Girjas and the Swedish state (Gällivare Lapland District Court, June, 2015) introduces the YouTube clip WE ARE STILL HERE (Jannok 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Visually, while hearing this voice, which subsequently merges into Sofia Jannok’s singing, the viewer sees a snowy forest landscape with grazing reindeer. A man and a woman are creating two large canvases of approximately 3 x 5 metres, by winding transparent plastic between the trees. On one of these plastic canvases, artist Anders Sunna then begins to write, in red capital letters: YOU HAVE NOT BEEN IN THE AREA! He then continues painting.

On one canvas: portraits of two Sámi women. One is Elsa Laula Renberg, a South Sámi and a pioneer in the organisation of the Sámi people. She is stencilled after a well-known photograph of her as an older woman. The other woman represents a young contemporary North Sámi (Fig. 3.5). According to Sunna, these two portraits represent a united consensus that stretches across both time and space; it applies as far south and as far north as you can get in Sápmi (Eriksson 2016). The choice of women as the prominent figures is telling about Sámi culture, but also acknowledges the often-unrecognised role played by women, and specifically indigenous women, in protest movements (Jenkins and Rondón 2015; Sjöstedt-Landén and Fotaki 2018).

On another canvas: a skeleton of a reindeer dressed in traditional Sámi clothing is throwing a lasso (*souhpan*, *kasttöm*) towards a cat with its arms crossed, wearing a crown and dressed in a red suit with a tie. Or should it rather be read in the opposite direction? The Sámi people portrayed in Sámi clothing but also with a dead reindeer as a symbol of the future of traditional reindeer herding. And: a representative of capitalism/the state symbolised wearing a suit, its face covered by the mask of a predator? (Fig. 3.4).



**Fig. 3.4** 'We are still here'. Screenshot from video by Sofia Jannok feat. Anders Sunna. Painting by Anders Sunna. Courtesy of the artists

While Jannok sings, the viewer watches these paintings emerge, the transparent canvases making the snowy landscape and the grazing reindeer into part of them. As the sun sets in the forest and the music fades away, Sunna and Jannok finish the paintings, writing WE ARE STILL HERE! and the stigmatising and patronising word LAPP that has been used condescendingly for the Sámi population and that, appallingly, was also used in the speech by the State attorney that introduced the film clip. Towards the end of the video, a spotlight is focused onto one of the canvases, lighting up both the painting and the nearby reindeer.





**Fig. 3.5** 'We are still here'. Screenshot from video by Sofia Jannok feat. Anders Sunna. Painting by Anders Sunna. Courtesy of the artists

Anders Sunna is a renowned artist in Sweden. His art is dedicated to the struggle against colonialism and engages with the injustices of the Swedish state, the racism against the Sámi people and the exploitation of natural resources in Sápmi. Although he also works with more traditional artforms, Sunna is perhaps best known for his street art and street-art aesthetics. When trying to put into words what his art is about, he claims that a central theme revolves around his own family history and 'what the Swedish government has been doing to the people in the community' (Struggle 2018<sup>7</sup>). In some of his works on this theme, characters in Sámi clothing are seen with weapons, masks, balaclavas and allusions to Pussy Riot hats, clearly positioned as rebellious and protesting, sometimes with skulls instead of faces. One example is a stencilled image of a person, dressed in male Sámi clothing, back turned to the viewer and holding a bomb in his raised left hand. Sometimes this figure is accompanied by the

text ‘To colonialism’, as a way to explain the target of the bomb. Photos of this figure stencilled on various public surfaces can be found several times on Instagram under the hashtag #sápmistreetart, posted by different accounts, but always ascribed to Anders Sunna. Sunna himself shares photos of the image hashtagged #tocolonialism (Fig. 3.1).

The aesthetics partly resemble other artistic protests, e.g. the works by street-art collective Suohpanterror, a (partly) anonymous art collective that directs harsh critiques against colonisation via community art, posters and performative actions. Central to all of their cultural expressions is a critique of nation-states that do not respect indigenous rights. They have made numerous posters using recognised motifs and symbols alongside comments on contemporary events. Like Sunna’s, their work represents a deep conflict between the state and the Sámi people, with suggestions of a possible escalation of conflict symbolised by illustrations of mask-covered faces, weapons and physical violence.

There are many reasons why the described Sunna/Jannok YouTube clip works well as a starting point for a discussion about street-art protests. Most obvious, perhaps, is the way in which the street-art aesthetic connects the two paintings with notions of protest—even without the song’s lyrics or the written slogans, and regardless of the non-urban location. But equally important, or so we think, is the location of the filmed artwork. The forest space manages to make visible how the normative space for artistic protest in this form is the city, with its walls and streets constituting the canvases and spaces for producing and consuming artistic messages. The choice of the forest space requires Sunna to himself construct the canvases on which to paint. Using transparent plastic film is a solution that not only makes his art possible at all, but also allows for the forest context—trees, snow and animals—to become a part of both motif and message.

Space is also made central at a denotative level through the explicit texts that are being written onto and thus included into the artwork. ‘You have not been in the area!’ and ‘We are still here!’ both attribute significance to the place. The location of the artwork and whether or not one has been there are thus rendered of immense importance. Referring to the long history of the Sámi people having their land circumscribed, narrowed down or taken away from them, this has an ‘always already’ feeling

to it that simultaneously points towards history and into the future (cf. Sandström 2017). It also nods specifically to more recent events in Sweden when the management of a mining company seeking to explore an area answered a question about the local people with an ignorant counter-question: 'What local people?' Angelika Sjöstedt-Landén (2017) has shown how the management's counter-question made it visible that it is not possible to either see or recognise the existence of people in certain places from within a strictly capitalist logic. The effect is not only that people's needs and rights are not taken into consideration, but also that they are discursively deemed redundant, unnecessary and not worthy of consideration. When the YouTube clip made by Sunna and Jannok highlights the phrases 'You have not been in the area!' and 'We are still here!', this must be interpreted as a conscious participation in the debate about existence in space.

The painting of the two women may be seen as an effort to inscribe the inhabitants of the allegedly 'empty space' into the landscape; a strategy of radically populating spaces that are seen as empty in the eyes of the coloniser (Sjöstedt-Landén 2017). In a sense, the painting therefore symbolises and *insists upon* the presence of a population whose violent subjection the state refuses to recognise as discrimination. It works as a claiming of space and a represented identification with space, but also, simultaneously, as a humble reminder that the Sámi were always already in that space.

We have focused specifically here on an artwork produced within a music video posted on YouTube. On the one hand, it is certainly an established practice for musicians to spread their work digitally through music videos. On the other hand, if we view the artwork as being itself a protest, the space of the forest is unlikely to attract many viewers, sympathisers or co-protestors if the information is not made available digitally. Digital media (including social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) may thus be specifically necessary for protests localised in peripheries, not just to disseminate information, but also as a medium that itself contributes to the population of space without being dependent upon, or confined by, the geographical coordinates of that space (Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2016; Sjöstedt-Landén 2017). In the latter sense, it is telling us about the spatial conditions for performing protest (Fig. 3.4).

### 3.5 Space as Objective and Methodology

Engaging a focus on space as constitutive of unsanctioned public art activism means recognising how space may be evoked both as an objective and as a methodology. In several of the cases presented in this chapter, the politicisation of space and of power relations between state and citizens was the explicit goal of performing the art. The artworks consciously and overtly dealt with questions of who has the right to land, access to human and democratic rights, and to exist in the public eye. They addressed how some spaces are specifically vulnerable to precarity; how, indeed, there is a 'demographic distribution of precarity' (Butler 2015: 67) which includes geographical differences that render some spaces more exposed than others. The art activism also focused on time, as in: what has happened in the history of Sweden and the history of Egypt, and who is to be included in the future? What stories will be told? In this, their art is associated with a broader postcolonial criticism of past colonial relations and how these extend into the present.

Judith Butler (2015; Butler and Athanasiou 2013) has argued that *the form* of resistance may exemplify the values under contention. For example, struggles for solidarity that are fought through the constitution of alliances of solidarity, and struggles to become acknowledged and have one's rights recognised that are fought through public demonstrations where protesters make their claims by placing their bodies where they will be seen and heard.

The way in which the described artworks work methodologically with space in order to achieve their objectives is therefore worthy of reflection. Shehab's stencils on the walls around Cairo, especially Tahrir Square, manifested a public contestation of the regime by highlighting aspects symbolising values that she forcefully rejected. To have the symbols of such rejections painted on the walls of centres of power is a demonstration of a logic of politics (Glynos and Howarth 2007) that destabilises orders which are constructed as natural. Shehab's stencils certainly took part in the public contestation of the regime, and they pushed the boundaries of who could act and speak publicly. In that sense, they also shed light on how taking space may come with considerable risks (Butler 2015), as the woman in the blue bra exemplifies.

However, the stencils also worked to regulate the public memory. Through embodying certain narratives about experiences of the past, they constituted a kind of historiography or public memory of the meanings of space. The painted reminders of the murders and violations that have taken place on those streets work as a protest against what the Egyptian nation had become but also as a testimony to what it did (cf. Awad 2017).<sup>8</sup> When protester Winged Elephant wrote 'Starting tomorrow I wear a new face, the face of every martyr. I exist' in the 'Tank vs. Bike' assemblage, he similarly laid claim to having existed, and to wanting to represent that existence materially.

Similarly, it is possible to read the choice to locate the recording of the Sunna and Jannok video in a forest as a dislocation of the established notions of what constitutes public space in the first place, and of which populations are allowed recognition and to be heard. The place of the recording was fundamental to the very construction of the political message, which itself centred an otherwise peripheralised space.<sup>9</sup> It reveals the conflict between, on the one hand, *knowing about* a place and the people living there (e.g., the knowledge of the state and of mining companies) and, on the other hand, *knowing the place* through being anchored there and embodying its culture and history. This distinction is central to the written message because it emphasises being in place as crucial to legitimacy. Thus, not adhering to the norms of the 'proper' space for art is itself a statement, and a way to push the notions of the proper space for protest. Here, the general claim that the street-art aesthetic cannot be understood outside its urban context (Ferrell and Weide 2010) clearly works as an important backdrop to the interpretation of the video, its aesthetics and place of recording. In the video, the street-art aesthetic contributes with an extra dimension precisely *because* it is performed in an unexpected space. The fact that we find it compelling and unusual for street art to be performed in other realms than the urban is not only telling of where we usually find this kind of expression. It also reveals how protest as such may actually be difficult to articulate in certain spaces; how protests and protest art are conditioned by and dependent upon space (connected to urban spaces and identities). In Sweden, the politics of zero tolerance against graffiti was perhaps most noted in Operation Safety 1995 by Stockholm Public Transport, and hence graffiti has been discussed and dismissed as vandalism, primarily in urban areas (Kimvall 2014).

Engaging a focus on space as constitutive of street-art activism also means acknowledging that street art is increasingly being disseminated and produced in online contexts (Waclawek 2011; Glaser 2015). The digitalisation of artworks invites viewers across space to take part and join in the protest. In this sense, the digital medium manages to transgress space and interconnect otherwise disparate subjects/struggles. For example, the Sunna/Jannok video has received over 100,000 views on YouTube and it was also posted on Jannok's and Sunna's respective Facebook walls. Without digital media, it is likely that the location of the forest would not have been chosen. The exclamation 'You have not been in the area!' turns the physical detachment into one important political point, but it needs digital technology to disseminate the message to a wider audience. The same goes for the works of Shehab, even though, obviously, her art is also found on urban street walls. There is also the extensive online sharing of her pieces and the TED talk that itself worked to spread both images and explanations of her art. While her stencils constitute important protests against state violence at the very location where they are painted, their digital dissemination is an equally important part of the mobilisation, with the hope of international support.

The usage of different digital media tools such as hashtagging also work as labels that de facto link the art pieces to other contexts so that they are immediately contextualised in specific ways (MacDowall and de Souza 2017; Lindgren and Cocq 2017). The music video 'We are still here' is tagged with #girjasmotstaten (*eng*: #girjasagainstthestate) and #wearestillhere. On Instagram, Sunna frequently uses hashtags such as #sápmistreetart (collecting photos of Sámi-related street art), #indigenousart (collecting photos of art produced by indigenous peoples from all over the world) and #contemporaryart (collecting a broad variety of contemporary artistic expressions, of which street art is just one). The hashtags thus succeed in unifying the disparate experiences of the people who use it. They function as important symbols connecting the artworks with expressions and audiences from very different geographical areas and with partly different struggles and demands.<sup>10</sup> And, just as street art itself may be said to attract participation (as 'Tank vs. Bike' made visible), hashtagging invites people to participate and make their personal expressions part of a bigger movement.

### 3.6 Fantasising Revolution Through Iconic Imageries

There has been some discussion about whether iconic images can work as monuments to protests.<sup>11</sup> Still, there is reason to explore the meanings of such images, regardless of whether they are short-lived or more permanent, as they have important things to say about the ideological, and gendered, fantasies of protest.

The protester icons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often bare-breasted women who worked as allegories for the struggle, for freedom or for the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). According to Hobsbawm (1978), these female allegories were succeeded by a masculinisation of the protester icons during the twentieth century. Lisiak (2015), elaborating on Mitchell (2012), contends that there has been a recent resurgence of revolutionary images that again centre on women.<sup>12</sup> In her analysis, she shows how the current trend actually embodies women in two different ways: as revolutionary allegories and as victims of revolution. As a revolutionary allegory, the female body symbolises a new beginning that ‘transcends earthly limitations, inspires crowds, awes with her beauty, and speaks the unspeakable’. As embodiments of the failures of revolution, the female body is ‘rendered speechless, choking on her own blood, beaten into unconsciousness, or reduced to a single gesture, color, or piece of clothing’ (Lisiak 2015: 16).

The works chosen in this text—by Shehab and Sunna—partly reflect this division. The two women in Sunna’s painting are indeed historical persons rather than mere allegories, but they are used as inspiring symbols of hope and struggle. Shehab’s blue bra, on the other hand, can certainly be seen as a symbol of revolution that thrives on the feelings of dismay evoked by seeing the abuse of the girl wearing the blue bra. Iconic images such as the blue bra that represent horrifying points of remembrance can, of course, also come to forcefully symbolise conviction and political will. Hafez (2014b) has shown how feminist activists used the blue bra and reversed the shame and the stigma of the vulnerable, half-naked woman’s body and transformed the state’s metaphors of control into battle cries of dissent and resistance.



But other personae also recurred within the studied artworks. There is a facelessness to many of the portrayed figures, because of either their masks or their overpainted faces. In Sunna's paintings, such anonymity is applied to the painted representatives of power and the state, associated, perhaps, with the facelessness of power. But anonymity is also central to portrayals of protesters, accomplished through the use of Guy Fawkes masks, balaclavas, allusions to Pussy Riot hats or, in a few cases, through turning their backs to the viewer. When allied to portrayals of protesters, such symbols carry intertextual references to heroes and villains of popular culture, whose individual identities are, at least partly, unknown to the surrounding community.

Being 'partly' unknown is something upon which Sara Ahmed (2000) focuses in her discussion about the cultural position of the stranger. She argues that the stranger is not someone who is *not known* but rather someone who is *known as unknown*. Translating this discussion to the construction of nations, Ahmed argues that nations are constructs that are 'invented as familiar spaces' in relation to, or against, something which is constituted as the unfamiliar. The unfamiliar, she argues, is embodied in the stranger, so that the stranger appears to be what 'the nation is not, and hence as a way of allowing the nation to be' (2000: 97). Seeing the stranger as a known unknown of the nation—the nation's constitutive outside—opens up space for new interpretations of the portrayed anonymous and masked figures. On the one hand, these anonymous figures embody the core of the artistic critique; namely, that it is not about being poorly treated as citizens of a nation; the issue here is not being recognised as citizens at all. On the other hand, the interpretation that the anonymous figures embody strangers to the nation leads their masks and suggested violent intent to take on new and potentially horrifying meanings.

In nations that have faced traumatic, sometimes genocidal, acts executed by their own governments—such as apartheid in South Africa, the atrocities of the Balkan Wars and military repression that destroyed several countries in Latin America, dictatorships such as in Egypt and harsh suppression against indigenous peoples such as the Sámis—there are obvious needs to learn about what happened to all the people who disappeared, were murdered, violated and/or became museum objects. Merely



setting the injustice right is not always enough. Some form of revenge may become a motive—even a necessary one (Jasper 2018: 154).

One example representing revenge is Sunna's previously mentioned stencil 'To colonialism' depicting the male Sámi carrying a bomb. Sprayed onto walls in public spaces, such figures seem to stand in loco *personae*, as symbols installed to deliver messages and harbour emotions that it is otherwise not possible to speak about openly. The simultaneous articulations of, on the one hand, allegations of state violence and, on the other, the illustrations of weapons and violence and the uncanny anonymity of the figures, provide protesters and supporters with an agentic and decisive model subject who stages a fantasmatic resistance. The fantasmatic character of this desired resistance is not only important because it provides people with positions of identification that give them direction and explain the social to them. Ideological fantasies also become important through people's identification with *the enjoyment* that resides in the collective transgression of the boundaries of sanctioned political practices (Glynos 2001, 2008). The enjoyment offered by these fantasies of a brutal resistor may work well to drive identifications and protests. It constitutes the 'grip' that the fantasy may continue to hold, even when, or because, it is admittedly recognised as problematic or even prohibited due to its 'transgression of publicly accepted norms' (Glynos 2001: 209–210). In this way, the anonymous and threatening figures become important because they symbolise potential leverage against the cultural and legal processes that have long proven difficult to manoeuvre.<sup>13</sup>

Thus interpreted, the figures enact what has sometimes been termed *survivance*—efforts to simultaneously perform survival and resistance (Vizenor 1993; Chisum 2013). Chisum has suggested one of the key elements of survivance practices to be self-representation on social media for the purpose of combatting stereotypical representations and 'subverting the dominant paradigm' (2013: 123). But connecting resistance with survival also introduces associations with morality. If resistance is performed as a way to survive previous and contemporary injustices, it becomes more possible to understand it as reasonable, legitimate and fair. Such legitimisations shed light on how survivance practices, such as certain street-art expressions, also contribute to the visualisations of space as entangled in moral geographies that are themselves complex and

changing. The transgressive acts of street-art performances of survivance may be condemned by parts of the establishment, but this will be so for different reasons. While some may focus on the prohibited paintings on public surfaces, others may take a more nuanced stance, actually siding with the expressed criticism. As Cresswell (1992: 330) writes, ‘just as dominated groups are not a homogenous and unified body, the dominant are multiplicitous—different parts of the establishment have different reactions to graffiti’.

The uses of symbols of threat also constitute strong and recognisable trademarks, either for individual artists or for specific struggles more generally. In that sense, they appeal to the savvy onlookers’ feelings of being insiders who know what the symbols imply.

### 3.7 Conclusion: Symbolising Protest, Making Space for Mobilisation

Lyman Chaffee (1993: 4) argued in the early 1990s that ‘street art can shape and move human emotions and gauge political sentiments. Language and visual symbols help shape perception. Clichés, slogans, and symbols—the substance of political rhetoric—help mobilise people.’ The suggested mobilising capacity of street art motivates people to take it seriously, and not accept the ‘moralization of politics’ (Mouffe 2013) that would reject its content due to its prohibited form of expression. Its destabilising effects and alternative narratives about the social make street art interesting as an expression of civil society or, rather, as practices performing politics in-between or alongside the more traditional civil society and party politics. The literature on civil society acknowledges a change in the organisation of civil commitment (Wijkström and Zimmer 2011), and has broadened its scope to comprise less organised initiatives (Pichardo 1997) based on the ‘recognition of oneself as part of the social fabric, oriented toward influencing the way society works’ (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017: 3). Still, it is likely that some would object to defining street art as an expression of civil society. It certainly expresses opinions

and challenges norms, but it is unclear what or who street artworks represent (other than what the artwork itself claims or implies).

In this chapter, we have delved into some examples of how street art may protest issues to do with space and citizenship, thus constituting a political voice and challenging the political landscape. Doreen Massey's (2005) notion of space as a heterogeneity of processes has served as an important figure of thought that urged us to recognise how spaces were engendered and evoked within particular artworks as well as between artworks and their social and physical contexts. Rather than focusing on the acting and appearing (taking place) in space, or focusing on where something appears, we argue, with Butler (2013: 194), that what was at stake was a kind of spacing of appearance, a 'performative plane of "taking place"'. The examples we have chosen are very different. Still, they offer insights into the meanings of space as objective and artistic method, the significance of aesthetics, and the immense importance and cultural meanings of iconic imageries and ideological fantasies. One important insight was how the forms of protest—and the notions of space, aesthetics and revolution upon which they are built—are also impregnated with notions of citizenship and morality. In this sense, the unsanctioned art we have analysed can be viewed as claims to alternative ways to understand and structure space, but also, with Cresswell (1992: 329), as transmitting 'ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate'. As such, they certainly prove that street art contributes to the constitution of political space.

## Notes

1. Studies on graffiti, and subcultures in general, often state that subcultures which become incorporated into the market risk appropriation, having their autonomy compromised and their potential for change disarmed (see Kramer 2010; Lachmann 1988). However, discussions regarding street art being disarmed exist primarily in a western context, and research about street art is mainly concentrated in metropolitan environments in the USA, Europe and a few larger cities on other continents. But street art is, of course, not exclusive to these areas, and art-forms differ and change in relation to both geographic and spatial contexts.

2. Peter Bengtson (2014: 154) states that the potential for street art to instil curiosity towards the environment is very much 'contingent on the promise that a physical (and somewhat unpredictable) interaction with the environment is taking place'. Anna Waclawek (2011: 185) has similarly argued that the movement into the virtual realm 'unifies those who have access to it, but fundamentally distances its users from physical experiences with the works themselves'.
3. In a book chapter on the Ana Botella Crew, Menor (2015: 59) describes how internet tools were used to disseminate and articulate 'artistic interventions that challenge the hegemonic uses of public space', e.g., through disseminating a template of Ana Botella's signature (Botella is known for having pushed through restrictive legislation on graffiti) so that it could be downloaded by any Internet user to sign their own street art. A similar example of protests that encouraged people to engage in digital street art was the critique of a condescending statement about social media by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Hashtagged #electronicgraffiti, a spray-painted stencil of Abbott and the Instagram ideograms indicating '0 comments, 0 likes, 0 new followers' began to circulate on social media soon after the statement (MacDowall and de Souza 2017).
4. The incident and the production of the blue bra as a symbol of revolution has evoked a lot of scholarly interest, inter alia, (Mitchell 2012; Abaza 2013; Hafez 2014a, b; Lisiak 2015; Nicoarea 2014; Awad 2017; Linsen 2018).
5. Guy Fawkes masks, also known as Vendetta masks after their role in the graphic novel (and film) *V for Vendetta*, are often associated with the hacktivist group Anonymous (Majid 2019), but appear repeatedly in political street art. They have been described as central to the political iconography of public protest (e.g., Kohns 2013; Koch 2014).
6. Ironically, Sunna had created the paintings that adorn the walls in the courtroom where the Girjas case was held (Eriksson 2016).
7. 'Struggle # 1' with Anders Sunna, YouTube video. 'Anders Sunna sees his art as a tool to fight against the colonialism of the Swedish State and the exploitation of natural resources in Sápmi. This portrait of the series Struggle highlight his view on Sápmi and the future of it.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owKXQGztVx0>, 181008
8. Abaza (2013) has described the importance of digital media (e.g., recordings on mobile phones) in saving and disseminating the memories of street art produced during the Arab Spring, because the physical expressions were soon whitewashed over by the authorities.

9. Furthermore, the 2011 protests in Tahrir Square, albeit taking place in the middle of Cairo and covered by the national media, were quickly disseminated worldwide via #bluebra on Twitter (Lisiak 2014). Primarily used to mobilise protests, this hashtag was also used to spread information, to support the protests and to take a stance.
10. E.g., the hashtags #wearestillhere and #nottrespassingwithoutconsent have been used by protestors against mining exploitation (Sjöstedt-2017), climate politics and indigenous rights (Sandström 2017). It thus comprises different movements and goals, but connects and consolidates the anti-colonial critique of states that do not acknowledge the rights of local and indigenous peoples in Sweden and Scandinavia, as well as globally.
11. Mitchell (2012) has argued that the ‘empty space’ of the public square is the primary monument to the 2011 revolutions. Although recognising the significance attributed to more short-lived iconic images, the bluebra girl being one of them, he suggests that there are ideological reasons for protesters to *refuse* the construction of ‘avatars’” and that these reasons are rooted in the democratising ambitions and horizontal ideals of the protestors. Others have questioned the effectiveness of graphic design in creating unifying symbols, and instead emphasise the strength built through online communication. Reflecting on Adbuster’s ballerina ad for Occupy Wall Street—depicting a ballerina gracefully balancing on the raging bronze ‘Charging bull’ in New York with #occupywallstreet texted beneath it—Bierut (2012) writes: ‘The ballerina didn’t matter. The bull didn’t matter. The headline didn’t matter. Only one thing mattered: that hashtag at the bottom’ (<https://designobserver.com/feature/the-poster-that-launched-a-movement-or-not/32588>).
12. Lisiak (2014) primarily questions Mitchell’s notion that representations of female bodies often achieve symbolic status in protest because of their connotations of non-violence. By solely equating femininity with non-violence, ‘Mitchell dismisses historical and contemporary representations of women as aggressive, possessed, and sadistic’ (2014: 5). It could further be added that the connotations of non-violence are related to the much wider traditional notions of femininity and the positions of women in society that have made them suitable as general representations (e.g., of cherished common values and nations) rather than as representations of historical subjects (e.g., kings, writers, presidents) (Warner 1996). The choice of the female body as a symbol of common values such as ‘freedom’ is thus unlikely to be related *only* to the issue of

violence/non-violence, but also to the general position of women and femininity in culture and public design.

13. Anonymity is also accomplished, however, via overpainted, and thus hidden, faces applied to painted representatives of power and the state, and can be associated with the facelessness of power.

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# 4

## 1 May: Muslim Women Talk Back—A Political Transformation of Secular Modernity on International Workers' Day

Lena Martinsson

### 4.1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Today, truths are said [cheers], and today, we stand here together, the first of May 2017. It is a historical day, and all of us who have taken part have written history [cheers and clenched fists raised in the sky]. We rewrite history with rights for Muslim women and Muslim women as main figures who write the history of resistance [cheers]. And we demand, as Aftab just said, that the self-appointed feminist and anti-racist government break its long, violent silence and condemn this verdict and stand up for Muslim women's rights to work and to their own identity. (Sabrin Jaja, May 2017)

The quote above is part of a speech given by Sabrin Jaja after a march through central Gothenburg in Sweden on International Workers' Day

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on 1 May 2017. Several hundred Muslim women wearing veils<sup>2</sup> had filled the streets, marching alongside members of socialist parties and workers' unions. At the same time as the women marched under their banner *Don't touch our bodies!*, similar demonstrations were taking place in two other big cities in Sweden.<sup>3</sup> All three marches were organised by highly knowledgeable young women in Muslim civil society. The women addressed the experience of exclusionary processes in the workplace and the gazes, threats and violence that made it dangerous for them to walk on the streets and take part in public events in their everyday lives. They also criticised European governments and nations' long-established exclusion of Muslims and Islam from the history of European modernity (cf. Abu-Lughod 2013; Fanon 1963, 1965). As an ally, I walked at the end of the march.

Starting with the organisers' own analyses and strategies, I want to re-examine this day, the march, artefacts, speeches and actions, to study not only the struggle against a Eurocentric and Swedocentric hegemonic secularism and its colonial history but also the ongoing emergence of communities and collective political subjectivity. I aim to follow the use of time and temporality, how futures and histories were created by the activists along with feelings of belonging and disbelonging. The organisers lived in Sweden and were Swedes, but were continuously questioned and othered. Their political struggle was in-between—as both insiders and outsiders in Swedish society (cf. Spivak 1993). The veil was a paradoxical node in the march and the speeches, so I treat it as such in this chapter. That day the veil connected the demonstrators to each other, worked as a bonding object and marking them out as a strikingly distinct and visual political group. Yet the demonstrators' struggle did not concern the veil but rather the excluding processes to which they as Muslim women were exposed.

The verdict referenced in Jaja's speech is one example of the history of the exclusion of Muslim people in Europe and Sweden. This ruling from the European Union (EU) Court of Justice states, in short, that it is not discriminatory, directly or indirectly, to dismiss a person from her job if she is wearing what the verdict calls a headscarf in the workplace. The headscarf has been an important artefact in European colonial history,

highlighting notions of what Europe is and what the future of Europe should be (Abu-Lughod 2013; Amer 2014; Fanon 1963, 1965; Scott 2007, 2018). One important trait is that the veil as well as Islam are made into something that does not ‘belong’ in Europe. On one side it is made into a direct threat against Christianity; on the other hand, and not least in Sweden, Islam and the veil are also constructed as threats to modernity and gender equality. The veil is posed as a contrast to the strong idea that there is only one modernity developed in a secular rationality; the veil is associated with traditionalism, reactionary forces and oppression against women (Asad 2009; Çağatay 2018; Farris 2017; Kundnani 2015). The EU verdict potentially excludes Muslim women in Sweden from not only the European labour market but also what is sometimes understood to be the most modern project of all: the Swedish gender equality regime (Martinsson et al. 2016). Being part of this regime and, therefore, part of society requires gainful employment. The vision of Swedish gender equality is built on the idea that every adult should work, preferably for eight hours a day. Through work, one gains access to parental leave, health insurance, retirement, respectability and recognition. It is an important aspect of the Swedish body politic (de los Reyes 2016; Giritli Nygren et al. 2018).

Since the Swedish government did not react against the verdict hindering Muslim women wearing the veil to work, its silence became, as stated in Jaja’s speech, one more violent act of exclusion. Such acts of exclusion create the Muslim women as the others, those who do not count in the EU and Sweden. The others become a we forced in this moment in history, as Jaja points out, to bang on the wall from outside the ongoing production of Swedish secularism and modernity. This we has a long history of exclusion and disbelonging. The march, speeches and themes thus highlight the close connection of the problematic history of time and temporality to the emergence of communities of belonging and communities of disbelonging. In this chapter, therefore, I argue that these demonstrators took part in a possible reconstruction of the history of modernity and the view on secular positions as a prerequisite for democracy. They urged an understanding of religion other than that dominant in nations such as Sweden and thereby stressed the importance of

rethinking the secular and its 'truth claims, its promise of internal and external goods' (Mahmood 2009: 65).

It becomes quite clear that I understand secularism not merely as a description of a governing system that divides religion from the state but also as a steering discourse itself (Scott 2018). Secularism is often understood as part of modernity and contributes to constructing Europe and Sweden as non-Muslim and non-Jewish and Christianity, as Talal Asad (2009) wrote so clearly, as almost secular and therefore neutral. In line with Rivera (2012) and Mouffe (2018), I do not recognise only one possible modernity or, for that matter, one form of gender equality and democracy. To assert such a universal claim is an expression of power used, not the least, in colonial rhetoric. Modernity and the associated understandings of history and future are a recurrent theme in the material from 1 May 2017 in Gothenburg. This, of course, is not strange; how time is organised and understood is a strong normalising and political force (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Puar 2007). Dominant understandings of time become part of creating territories and national imagined communities such as Europe and Sweden, we and them (Anderson 2016). Swedish exceptionalism, in particular, is built on an understanding of time as linear, making the world's most modern, developed, gender-equal, secular nation a role model for other countries to follow, the one that has found the way to the future (Martinsson et al. 2016). This narrative links notions of time with notions of nations, people, gender and sexuality. What emerges is an imagined, universalistic, neocolonial future in which some nations lead others. The idea of this rational future constructs realities in the present (Puar 2007), and other communities emerge through these understandings of time, history and futures. The Muslim woman wearing the veil is constantly made into a threat to this linearity. She is rendered the stereotypical other, the non-modern who is understood as oppressed and therefore cannot be listened to. She poses a danger to development (Ahmed 2004). As the other, she is the non-normative, and the stereotypical notion of her is a condition for the norm, the privileged (Butler 2015; Berg et al. 2016; Martinsson et al. 2016; Giritli Nygren et al. 2018; Puar 2007).

At this juncture, the veil works as a node for different struggles and existences. As in the case of the future, numerous, different understandings of the veil and its role and agency vary significantly (Amer 2014;

Abu-Lughod 2013; Lilja and Martinsson 2018). The understandings of the veil merges and transforms in different contexts. But the veil is also performative itself, functioning as a bonding object and thus creating communities that go beyond national borders and specific times. The veil is always part of assemblages; for instance, in this chapter it connects to the different placards, songs, streets, bodies, narratives and discourses discussed in this chapter.

As mentioned, I am interested in the emergences of political subjects, political we. My starting point is not an assumption that there exist given political subjects and communities of belonging or that some political subjects such as class and gender are most important to social change (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Mohanty (2003) critically wrote about how the western white woman has understood herself as the political subject of transformation for all women. In the 1990s, Judith Butler (1990) warned of the risk of understanding the category of woman as an essential political subject. The category was produced by the discourses at hand, she argued. I argue for an unessential and far from predictable understanding of political subjectivity. Many groups can be formed and recognised as political forces and as allies.

Methodologically, I follow how political subjectivity emerges individually and collectively in specific historical situations and assemblages. It is not possible to know beforehand which groups will be formed and what political impacts different groups will have (Martinsson and Reimers 2016). I am especially interested in this process when communities are shaped, and groups are interpellated by others and by themselves as groups with common interests, as in Jaja's speech. To understand I follow how talks, artefacts, bodies, reflections and material conditions such as the pavements, square and right to an income become parts of productive assemblies.

As a scholar from a Christian–secular context, clearly recognisable and interpellated as white and Swede with all the attached privileges, I find it necessary to share my own position and what it can imply for what sorts of knowledge are achievable from this hegemonic position. I, therefore, use my reflections, first-impression analyses and hopes as material to scrutinise and compare them with the organisers' thoughts and analyses. I am not studying who the organisers are or attempting to represent anyone. Instead, I am interested in the political struggle, subjectivities and transformations and the need for some to start following instead of trying



to lead oppressively. Accordingly, I have followed the reproduction of Islamophobia in the media and political rhetoric, listened to debate panels and analysed television shows. I have not been a scholar standing outside this struggle. I took part in the march as an ally and later I accepted an invitation to moderate a very questioned conversation in connection to a screening of the film *Burka song 2*, which some of the organisers had arranged. As a member of the board of Antirasistiska Akademin (Anti-Racist Academy), I came to know and subsequently interview the march organiser Maimuna Abdullahi. She was a central figure on the march and she became crucially important for this text. I took many pictures during the course of the march and later used five of these photos as a basis for sharing my reflections with Abdullahi. I analysed the slogans and speeches called out during and after the march. Abdullahi described the Muslim women who walked in the march while wearing the veil as those ‘who own the march’, so I have called this group *the owners*.

## 4.2 The Verdict

As mentioned earlier, the march was organised to protest against an EU court verdict ruling that it is not an act of discrimination for businesses to prohibit women from wearing headscarves when they hold official, representative positions in their workplaces such as receptionists:

The court therefore concludes that the prohibition on wearing an Islamic headscarf that arises from an internal rule of a private undertaking prohibiting the visible wearing of any political, philosophical or religious sign in the workplace, **does not constitute direct discrimination based on religion or belief within the meaning of the directive.**

By contrast, such a prohibition may constitute **indirect discrimination** if it is established that the apparently neutral obligation it imposes results, in fact, in persons adhering to a particular religion or belief being put at a particular disadvantage. **However, such indirect discrimination may be objectively justified by a legitimate aim**, such as the pursuit by the employer in its relations with its customers of a policy of political, philosophical and religious neutrality, provided that the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary. It is for the Belgian Court of Cassation to check those conditions. (Court of Justice 2017)

The verdict legitimises indirect discrimination that has an ‘objectively justified aim such as the pursuit by the employer’. Companies’ supposed needs, which could arise from racist notions among customers, are evaluated as more important than rights such as gender equality and freedom of religion. The interests of capitalism, represented in the verdict, are placed first, and the rights of these women are only secondary. The capitalist ideology as an organising materiality is understood to be neutral, but wearing a hijab, veil or headscarf is not. This secular discourse allows no room for religious signs in public but freely gives it to capitalism (Asad 2009).

The veil has long been an artefact of struggle between the colonisers and the colonised, as Frantz Fanon (1965) had shown in ‘Algeria Unveiled’. Veiling, as Sahar Amer (2014) emphasised, has been in the middle of a range of complex historical processes. The verdict, therefore, should be analysed as a reiterative act of colonial and historical violence. The march organisers and I understand the verdict’s demand for neutrality from a postcolonial perspective as a means of reproducing the colonial order inside Europe. Again, Europe is articulated as different, in the forefront, more modern, secular and democratic. To continue to exclude Muslims and Jews is to recreate the idea of Europe as white, Christian and secular. The verdict and the establishment of what is understood as neutrality excludes the others from the imagined European community. A political construction violently pushes aside other possibilities (Mouffe 2013). The colonial history making Muslims into non-neutral, non-Europeans is raised again. Abdullahi discussed this issue at length in the interview:

But I think we want to convey the message that neutrality is not something to wish for [...] if [we] think that where there is a principle of neutrality, there will also be human beings that fall outside, and some will be on the inside. Who are these people? And historically, even if you are not talking about neutrality, there have always been people who are let into a community of belonging and people who have to stay on the outside. And in the Islamophobic history of Europe, it has been the way through which the task of civilisation has been legitimised. Some can join, and others are not with us because they are not like we are. That is why it is so cynical in 2018 to talk about principles of neutrality.

In understanding the verdict, Europe's history of inclusion and exclusion is particularly significant. Abdullahi told me about the situation in Andalucía in 1495 when Muslim groups were driven out by Christian forces after a 700-year-long period of Muslim high culture. She continued:

With the nation-state, there are some people who get a place, who are included, and it is not Jews, and it is not Muslims. They can't get evangelised. They don't have pure blood—we are not talking biological. We are talking about that they don't even have the right values; we must control what they eat, what clothes they have. These debates have been going on, and they have had enormous consequences. And when these debates are up, the next question is 'What do we do with this people who are not supposed to be here but are obstinate and are here anyway? We have to find a solution for it'.

Abdullahi laughed and continued to emphasise that the question of so-called neutrality is a very important one: 'it has a history'. She continues to ironically state that 'it is just a single case [...]. No one is racist. The court is also neutral. Everyone is equal before the law.'

Abdullahi and the other participants in the march recognised the verdict as a historical reiteration of Islamophobia in Europe. The assumed outside of neutrality, modernity is a history of never-ending exclusions. Whereas those invited into the modern community of secularism are presumed to identify with the bright future believed to be coming, the excluded have a future of new exclusions. In the interview, Abdullahi positioned herself and the other march participants as political subjects in this never-ending, reiterative process of exclusions. They are here for a while, taking part in a struggle they assume succeeding generations will need to continue:

We are merely one in the line of several generations who have contributed to putting us where we are today, but what we can do anyway is to leave an impression, a footnote in the history to our children and grandchildren and their children—if we still have this planet by then—to look back and see 'how the Muslims had it'. Because I think the situation will be worse, so that there at least exists some sort of documentation that there was actually a resistance; people didn't give up. And that is the least we can do today. So even if it is symbolic actions, they become very important for the writing of history.

The future is non-existent. It will not be better. Abdullahi's analysis connects the activists into a long chain that extends beyond themselves. The historical dimension carries a reminder that there always has been resistance, and it will continue with the next generations in even harder futures. Future generations need to know that they who live now have tried. This historical analysis constructs a community of belonging stretching over time, what has been and what will be—the past and the future. As Muslims are excluded from the dominant order, they create a political we comprised of those who have gone, those now living and those who are still to come—an imagined historical political community of resistance and religion but without a nation and without much hope. Through the march and other struggles, they become placed in a historical context, and the owners became both smaller as a footnote in the history and bigger as part of a long history.

It is noteworthy to compare this understanding of the future with that of the Swedish gender equality model. With the Swedish model follows a linear development. Here, the imagined community becomes the modern we, the forerunners. A future full of hope awaits those on the inside. The others who are excluded should adhere to or assimilate with this Swedish model. The descriptions of history are very different, but the Swedish gender-equal, modernistic, secular version is double-edged and performs nationalistic and exclusionary functions. The march owners saw that they had been abandoned by a government that had not pushed against the verdict but, instead, as Jaja stated, was violently silent about it. The march owners were thereby excluded from the gender equality model and not recognised as workers (see Butler 2015: 25).

### 4.3 The Demonstration

The march owners experienced the historical reiteration of Eurocentric Islamophobia on their own bodies in their own suburbs and through images of themselves. In the media, politics and business, the veil has been a node for different forms of struggles and stereotypical imaginations. Muslim women wearing the veil have been threatened and abused, exposed to gazes, hate and notions of exclusion (Amer 2014; Berg et al.

2016; Lilja and Martinsson 2018). Like Abdullahi, Jaja had been deeply involved in political and social movements where she lived. In an interview conducted by the Antiracist Academia (2019), she explained that she and the other activists in the suburb had acted against the notions behind various integration projects and felt that the ordinary political parties that some of them had joined had not acknowledged their experiences. Jaja and Abdullahi addressed the importance of not only responding to problematic attacks and oppression. As a collective, they needed also to take time to reflect, studying, analysing, gaining knowledge, raising consciousness levels, verbalising situations and, as Jaja stated, ‘understanding that the oppression you feel is there’. Together they studied academic theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Paulo Freire. Jaja pointed to the need for a new political we, beyond the left and anti-racism:

Directly, when you thought about antiracism and resistance, the first thing that came in your mind was ‘the left’. We tried all the time to put our self in a sort of left pattern.

Quite quickly, it became clear that it wasn’t the place for us to struggle from. We could identify us with the workers’ movement to a certain extent but not totally. We had one more dimension, and that was that we were racialised. The working class is very coloured today. We were very lost about this. What sort of struggle are we in? So, when we found these theories Fanon, Said, Freire, it was so strengthening and relieving just to study this stuff. (Interview, Antirasistiska Akademin 2019)

The quote is one of many examples in the material of being simultaneously part of, and detached from, something. In this case it is the leftist movement that had created this ambivalence. This experience, together with their new knowledge, was decisive in the emergence of a new political subjectivity. Both Abdullahi and Jaja had stressed the need to go into the community of activists of which they were a part, to conduct analyses and figure out the community’s own path. Yet Abdullahi always prepared to also connect to others. By the time I met up with her for an interview some time after the demonstration, both Abdullahi and her friend Fatima Doubakil had been labelled extremists by the city’s Social Democratic mayor. They were no longer allowed to use rooms owned by the

municipality for their meetings; they had become *persona non grata*. The situation was a tense one, and they had become very exposed in the media. Abdullahi, who soon after would get a master's degree in social work, shook her head and observed: 'We will never get a job in this municipality.' During the same period, some colleagues and I had been criticised for organising a seminar on whiteness studies and gender studies, and both neoconservative and anti-gender movements had attacked our research. Abdullahi recalled what had happened to us in academia and connected it to the struggle in which they were engaged. Her analysis was that the attacks were against different forms of knowledge production. We had become allies, for a moment exposed to and struggling against the same forces, a we. She laughed at the tumult she and Doubakil seemed to have caused: 'We just want to sort of talk about post-colonialism and arrange study circles.'

In this instance it was knowledge production that had made activism possible. The EU verdict was expected, the organisers waited for it to come, and they were prepared to do something about it. When it arrived in March 2017, the analysis and mobilisation were in place.

#### **4.4 About the Assemblies in the March: Five Pictures**

I was told that many of the participants in the march had never before taken part in such a demonstration. Indeed, many had never even set foot in the inner city. These areas had not been open to them.

Participating in the march was also an affective moment for me. At the start of the march, I had no intention of writing about it. I was simply there to support the struggle. Halfway through the march, I changed my mind. What I saw, felt and experienced was something quite new to me, and while walking in the march, I analysed it as a decolonial political practice, resistance and possibilities for transformation. The many bodies, voices and placards became significant. I recognised how the organisers worked strategically with connections and perhaps interventions in some organisations such as the workers' and the women's movements. I felt hope and courage.

After my meeting with Abdullahi, I had reflected on my experience and feelings and saw that they were correct but very superficial. Abdullahi had a quite different perspective, which became clear when we discussed why they had walked with the syndicalist movement. When I attended the 1 May demonstration that year, most was business as usual. Numerous parties, organisations and unions marched from different parts of the city to many meeting points in the city centre, where speeches were given throughout the day. As in every year, the syndicalist procession started from Masthugg's Square. Usually, the group in this section was quite small, but on this day, it was swollen by many hundreds of women in the veil and their allies. The Syndicalists in Gothenburg had declared that solidarity was necessary to hinder competition among workers, so they identified themselves as a feminist and anti-racist organisation. However, this was not the reason why Abdullahi and the other organisers had chosen them. Instead, as Abdullahi explained, it was the Syndicalists' experience and knowledge of state-sanctioned violence and oppression. Another argument was that the Syndicalists would not panic if identified as extremists in the media. I compared Abdullahi's answer with my own interpretation that the owners had built an alliance with the workers' movement to make the question of the verdict into a workers' rights issue. That analysis was not incorrect, but it did not explain why the owners had chosen a marginal party rather than the Social Democrats or the leftist party Vänstern.

Our answers highlighted our different lives and relationships to the state and media. The owners wanted an organisation with similar experiences to their own as they knew that the state was not a supportive force but a threat, and the media was not a friend that would spread the news but a force that could create panic. However, I was right with regard to the idea of political communities merging with each other. The demonstration made the question of the veil into a question of workers' rights. As workers, the women needed the same rights as anyone else. This demand clarified the strategy for the day. The owners refused to be excluded and would take their place together with other workers. They stood up to resist the dominant order that counted them neither as workers nor as part of the welfare society.

Another important but simplified reading of the situation concerned how I understood the many bodies assembled in the streets. During the march, I was thrilled by the strong symbolic meaning of all these women with veils filling the streets with their bodies, minds, experiences and, not least, their voices. I connected it to the queer nation's slogan: 'We are here. We are queer. Get used to it.' Refusing their exclusion, they took possession of the streets. While I had seen the march and valued it as a brilliant strategy, Abdullahi made it more complex when she told me about it. The context of the march was also the fact that as individuals the march owners could not walk through the city without hateful gazes and even attacks. She recalled the everyday experience of being excluded as different which she had shared with many others. While planning for the march, they had carefully discussed what would happen if they together, as a collective, went through the city. How provocative would it be? It was not merely a discussion about politics but a question of safety; by their actions they had put themselves at risk.

The differences in our analyses of what it meant to walk through the city again demonstrated our different positions: my privileged position looking for visions and hopes for new connections for the group participating and Abdullahi's and the owners' need to consider questions of safety and their clear, everyday experience of coloniality as an active marginalising force that hindered them from taking part in ordinary city life. To appear on the streets had a cost, indicating how places remained white, cleared of all religious (apart from Christian) expressions. While I saw how the march challenged stereotypical notions of those women in the veil, Abdullahi was prepared for attacks and gazes. She said: 'We don't go here and march for the sake of marching. It can cost us something too.' Abdullahi told me that they had discussed walking in the neighbourhoods where they lived, but they had argued that for them the EU verdict was not an issue solely for them. Instead, they wanted to go out into another forum and take a place in public that should be theirs. The squares and the bodies in the march were far from their usual places. When watching the march, it was important to understand these many senses of nonbelonging that Abdullahi said were challenged—at risk.

In *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, Judith Butler (2015) wrote about the constructions of the people and the constitutive outside,



or those who are excluded as not belonging to this people and thereby indicate where the 'borders' are. There is no inside without this outside; the not-normal is the condition for normality. I came to understand that the group in the march was part of this constitutive outside. In the march, this group claimed the streets. Together and very visibly, they performed an intervention and thereby refused to be the constitutive outside on which the inside depended (Butler 2015).

I took many photos during the march and I discussed five of them with Abdullahi. The first photo we looked at was taken just before the start of the march. It showed the first line of participants. Their many placards were in different languages and connected to various political discourses. Abdullahi and I studied the picture together, and she pointed to a placard: 'This is in Somali "*Farta naga qaad*". It means, she translated, 'don't touch me. *Farta* means finger, so it also means "Don't point".' It was about, explained Abdullahi, the politics pointing out and accusing people. It had a double meaning. Abdullahi continued to the next sign, 'Who is neutral?', a question, of course, related to the verdict discussed. At that moment, though, I became aware of what happened when the question 'Who is neutral?' was detached from its former context of the verdict and placed in the very visible march by hundreds of women wearing an article of clothing repeatedly made into an object of hate and abjection. The question 'Who is neutral?' became a question beyond the verdict. The materiality, public place and texts worked together as a discursive materiality.

Abdullahi next pointed with her finger to a placard held by a woman demanding 'the right to our bodies'. This was a demand that was repeated by many of the placards, which gave the message in a variety of languages. Abdullahi stressed that this sign was pragmatic. Many women recognise the message and thereby it became possible to identify with the demonstrators. It was also possible to read these placards as an intervention into a transnational hegemonic white and secular women's movement. It posed the challenging question: Who should be counted as women with rights?

Abdullahi (MA) and I (LM) continued to discuss signs about work:

*LM*: 'Muslim women's right to work' and 'The right to our bodies'. They are a little similar, I think.

*MA*: Yes, exactly, the Muslim woman's right to work. We discussed this a lot. We March on 1 May. It is the verdict that is connected to work.

Abdullahi rhetorically asked if any other group of women in Europe could have been so exposed as they had been to laws threatening women's economic independence.

A Europe that thinks they are the best and the most enlightened and struggles for women's rights [...] No one asks what is going to happen now? How are these people going to earn one's living now? On one hand, they deprecate, 'They don't work'. Then they close the door that would have made it possible to work. The racism has a logic, and we will not discuss the veil here.

From Abdullahi's analysis followed the obvious question: Who was Swedish gender equality for? Who was allowed to be part of this gender-equal community or the welfare system? Who could be recognised as modern and independent? The owners addressed rights central to European and Swedish self-understanding. They positioned themselves in this context to show how they were excluded and not allowed to belong. However, this position of disbelonging became—not the least on this particular day—a making of a political *we*, banging on the wall of the inside. With all their experiences of exclusions over generations, the march owners assembled on the streets, stating that 'they [we]re still here', 'they persist[ed]', and they were 'not disposable' but demanded the right to appear and be recognised (Butler 2015: 25ff). By doing so, they also challenged the idea that secularism was a condition for gender equality, they challenged the notion that there was only one way to go. They questioned the structural connection between gender equality and being positioned as white.

#### 4.5 'Siblings, Friends, Comrades, Allies, Look What Happens when We Come Together'<sup>4</sup>

Abdullahi smiled when she saw the picture of a young woman with a megaphone. 'It is fine', she stated. The organisers had hoped and planned for a democratic march in which it would be possible for many to call out and take leading roles. The demonstrators had three megaphones— at the beginning, middle and end of the march—and passed them from

hand to hand. This picture and practice challenged notions of the oppressed Muslim woman in need of help (Abu-Lughod 2013). The voices on the march were strong ones, and the echoes among the buildings increased their effects. Two times after each other, they called out (Fig. 4.1):



Fig. 4.1 Young woman with a megaphone

Eh, we will fight.  
 Eh, we will fight.  
 Eh, we will fight  
 'Cause we're strong together, and we'll take our rights. (twice)

Resistance is our hope (*hopp*).  
 The right to our body (*kropp*).  
 Work is our right,  
 And together, we create solidarity.<sup>5</sup> (twice)

The megaphone was a political apparatus that made it possible for hundreds to raise their voices together in interpellation and, not the least, act as a group, aware of each other's bodily existence (Butler 2015). It may also be stated that this calling out was a materialisation of a collective political subject. The voices interpellated us, the others, to recognise this collective political subject. The lyrics also carried the meaning that the demonstrators should talk to themselves and should act, fighting, resisting and creating solidarity. They made it clear to the world that they existed as a political subject with the right to be in this space. The veils, megaphones, owners, streets, songs and lyrics called out became an assembly that worked deconstructively, tearing apart stereotypical notions of women in the veil as silenced, *and* simultaneously stressing the importance of the ongoing emergence of a political collective.

## 4.6 The Last Shall Be First, and the First Last

We who were called the allies, who had that in common that we didn't wear the veil but were supportive to the struggle, were welcome to walk with the owners in the march. We walked behind them at the end of the march. I asked Abdullahi why they let us come with them? (Fig. 4.2)

Yes, I will be totally honest. I don't totally remember. But [...] it was not a separatist demonstration. We were very clear about that; it was 1 May! OK, and the focus should be that it is Muslim women above all who are in the front, not because of visibility, but because this is their question. It is our question, and it is we who should own it. Then it is open to all, everyone



**Fig. 4.2** The allies come last

who wants to contribute [...]. Also this, to perceive that we have many persons around us, with whom we both work and cooperate and who we have in our everyday life, who in different ways identify themselves as anti-racist and who are anti-racists. And here, you have a possibility to join in something you will not necessarily get cred for, but it is the principle that you are with. [I] think it was something like that.

Many of us who came behind in the march were positioned as white, and due to this identified as Swedes, part of an imagined community recognised by many as gender equal and a role model for the rest of the world to follow. Now, in this very symbolic march, we, the privileged allies,

followed the lead of the demonstration owners (cf. Anzaldúa 1999). Drawing on Fanon's reference that 'The last shall be first, and the first last' (Fanon 1963), we were not the role model. The decolonial struggle had removed us from our imagined leading role. The strugglers, the march owners, were now first, the political subjects opening new understandings and futures.

Many who followed could be described as another kind of connecting community. Their engagement and support emerged from sharing everyday life with the organisers. Abdullahi reiterated the collective work on the march. Not the least, she talked about the people with whom they shared 'everyday life'. In particular, the feminist *Women's folk high school* [kvinnofolkhögskolan] located in the centre of Gothenburg, and attended by adult women with persons that identify themselves as non-binary or with transgender experiences, persons of different ages, speaking different languages, with various backgrounds, goals and study habits. This school became a place for the organisers to plan the demonstration, materialise their message and form a broad we including both women wearing the veil and others. Together, they had discussions, painted signs, made placards and wrote songs. Some teachers also played very active roles, becoming important collaborators and supporters. The work thus influenced the school, and the preparatory work for the march became important to the ongoing emergence of a wider political community of belonging, a community enabled through the joint work. Abdullahi explained:

There were a lot of students who came from the school (Kvinnofolkhögskolan) who took part in the march, and that had to do with the fact that we sort of [Abdullahi laughs] *lived* at the school the last two weeks before the march. We were there all the time, and it was the students who helped us translate into Arabic and Somali, who asked what we were doing when we carried around a lot of stuff. We said that we were organising a demonstration and asked them to spread the word. And then it is like this: a lot of people share each other's everyday lives, and when you do that, you become close in another way. And then the women who wear veils at school—I don't know what they said to their classmates, but I suppose that it had to be something in line with that we are going to have a demonstration against

something that is threatening our existence. Come! And then people came, and it has to do with that people are classmates. Everyone can come.

The school could be described as a pluralistic, unchosen cohabitation that made possible far from predictable political alliances. The classmates became a new possible community that went beyond but did not dissolve from where the students came. No one asked the other students to identify with their positions, but all were welcome to take part in a struggle important to some of them (cf. Larsson 2010). To a certain extent, this co-work and cohabitation also pointed to another future directed not at the question of being included in something but at the everyday work of transversal border crossing, of the new, possible we, coming from different communities (Larsson 2010). Again, the many different 'wes' were in constant making (Butler 2015: 123). Abdullahi saw this extended we, but also emphasised that the number of people was not essential. Everyone could come, but it was not necessary that they did. Abdullahi, the other organisers and owners of the demonstration were not dependent on it:

We had said that the demonstration, to get people out demands such mobilisation. We had said that and that we, the point is not, we are not after quantity. We are after the symbolic in that we actually do resistance. Whether we are three or five hundred doesn't matter actually. It doesn't take away the worth of what we stand for.

I recalled the historical we, the long chain of historical political subjects doing resistance yesterday, today and tomorrow that was as important as the pluralistic we of today. The two 'wes' did not erase each other. What Abdullahi expressed, I think, was that the extended community was not necessary; another bigger, historical community was more important.

## 4.7 'Taking Back One's Dignity'

The march ended at Bältespännarparken. Jaja went up on stage with Abdullahi and a third organiser, Aftab Soltani. Abdullahi remembered this moment very well. Her mother was there. Even though her mother





**Fig. 4.3** The speeches

worked in social activities, she did not usually take part in demonstrations; this time, however, she had joined and brought her friends. ‘Yes, you know, it just spread and spread’, Abdullahi explained. She continued to tell about the strong feelings she had while standing there in front of them: ‘You know, ladies who have seen you growing up—to stand before them and speak, it was so much emotions.’ She repeated that the movement had a historical meaning, and participation was important, but it also had collective importance: ‘taking back one’s dignity’ (Fig. 4.3).

You see how the collective is demonised in relation to mostly black and brown people. It is something negative [...] We are ... not barbaric but not



developed. We are not modern in that we haven't understood the place and strength of the individual. But, for us, the collective means so much, the collective who has organised liberation movements. It is the collective we have grown up in. It is the collective we have become who we are in, and they try to demonise that which has given us an identity. And here, it becomes one more aspect. I choose to stand here with people whom I see myself in, and there is a radical thought that I recognise these people as important for me [...]. The propaganda says the collective is bad, but we walk together as a collective. It is an active form of resistance, which also will be demonised.

Within Abdullahi's words, the collective who, with their bodies, had appeared in both the streets and history demanded the right to appear and to exist as a collective. A political history followed this collective. When Abdullahi recalled what she felt in Bältesspännarparken, it again became clear that the purpose of the march was so much more than to be recognised by others. It was also to be visible to each other and to recognise the power of the collective. The many bodies, women and sisters were there together. They assembled during a time of demonisation and individualisation and recognised themselves as a collective with importance and dignity. They were not only the others, in relation to a dominant social order that violently excluded them. They were also a we, a visible assembly. The struggle made them into a political subject (Fanon 1963). However, the demonstration was also, of course a moment of talking back. The owners of the march refused to acknowledge Christianity and secularism as modern and democratic in contrast to Islam (Asad 2009). They questioned the idea of neutral, democratic modernity that wanted to transform and civilise Muslim groups. Like Fanon (1963), they pointed to the necessity of societal transformation. Abdullahi's speech contrasted the assumed neutrality to the capitalist labour market and its exploitation of workers' and children's bodies. She rhetorically asked: 'Can you who walk around in your neo-capitalist clothes made by children be neutral?' (Asad 2009). In her speech, Soltani stated: 'The verdict of the EU is nothing else than racist and represents the rights of the company instead of the people.' This analysis made 'the people' a category that one could be part of and align with against EU politics and

companies. It also stated that the verdict was nothing other than neocolonialism and a victory for the criminalisation of Muslim women who wore the veil. The three speakers connected their speeches to traditional feminism and gender equality, asserting that they had rights to control their bodies, earn their own money, dress as they wanted and be individuals. Of course, instead of merely referring to the nation, they also referred to a transnational colonial history. They pointed out alternative political positions and entry points such as articulating the critique of capitalism in combination with a critique of neutrality and support of the right to wear the veil.

## 4.8 The Interpellation to the Steering Party: An Intervention

When the demonstration and speeches in Bältespännarparken had finished, many of us stayed around, buying ice creams, laughing and enjoying the atmosphere, while some others drifted away. After a while, some of us gathered again. Five hundred metres from us in the largest, most famous square, Götaplatsen, Sweden's governing party at this time, the Social Democrats, were holding their big 1 May rally. The march organisers and owners still present thought we should go there to see if there was a possibility of performing an intervention. The party had been violently silent about the verdict, as Jaja had stated in her speech a half an hour earlier. The owners decided to go to Götaplatsen, bringing the placards and banderols, and some of us allies continued to follow. A government minister and a trade union leader were talking on the stage in the big square. The allies were told to stay in the background. We were given a task to do, but I cannot remember what it was, though I do recall that our role was not to protect the march owners. They, we were told, did not need any protection (Abu-Lughod 2013). The owners rolled up the banderols and went straight into the assembly of people. They became very visible with their placards, veils and hijabs but did not say a word or interrupt. They simply stood silently among the many Social Democrats—bodies that assembled and wanted action from the governing party (Fig. 4.4).



**Fig. 4.4** Intervention in to the Social Democratic party's meeting at Götaplatsen

I took pictures with my phone, and when Abdullahi and I looked at them several months later, she tried hard to remember the details of what had happened. She recalled that she had felt a bit embarrassed standing there in silence. I remembered that I had been quite affected by this very performative intervention into a hegemonic social order normalised to act and dress in certain ways. I had understood it as an interpellation to the governing party to act and recognise also these women. Through their political act, they raised a number of questions: Who counted as workers in the Swedish workers' movement? Which women should receive possibilities for gender equality? Who counted as Swedes for whose rights the

government should struggle? Who were actually recognised as political subjects? Perhaps most of all, it became clear that society could be different, it could already have been different, and it may be different.

At that affective moment, what we did not know was that during the next year and a half, Abdullahi and her friend Doubakil would be defined as extremists by the chief magistrate of Gothenburg, the Social Democrat Ann-Sofie Hermansson. We did not know that Abdullahi and Doubakil would be hindered from speaking at meetings and prevented from using any room owned by the municipality. We did not know then that many forces, from the ultra right to the Social Democrats, would demonise them and do their best to silence them. We did not know the future, but we could see the risk.

## 4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the Swedish modernity project place a strong value on the idea of secularism. However, while secularism and Christianity become inseparable and part of the imagined Swedish community, Islam and Judaism are excluded from the Swedish and European centre. This exclusion is part of a long historical process. The verdict discussed in this chapter that sparked the idea of a 1 May demonstration is one example of this process and the ways in which Muslim women wearing the veil are not counted in the modernist work of gender equality in Europe and Sweden. This contemporary example is especially serious in Sweden, where gender equality is understood as a national quality, an important trait in the hegemonic, national imagined community. This version of modernity offers a bright future for the hegemonic centre and requires others to adhere, assimilate and stop holding certain beliefs and wearing certain clothes. However, when hundreds of Muslim women wearing the veil acted against this ongoing process of exclusions in the demonstration on 1 May 2017, they challenged the notions that modernity and Swedish gender equality must, by definition, be secular. They also questioned the Swedish self-understanding as a tolerant and democratic nation, of a we and the others. The march organisers and owners performed a decolonial alternative to the story of Swedish anti-religious

modernity and showed that modernity, democracy and gender equality can be developed and transformed in other ways. This intervention and similar ones challenge the notion of the genuineness of Swedish modernity and gender equality and question at a more general level what modernity and gender equality are and could be.

In varied political situations, different political subjects emerge, and it is far from given that, as predicted by Marxist tradition, these subjects will be the working class (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Instead, different political subjects with transformational possibilities emerge in different societal and political situations. Following the march and listening to the intellectual societal analysis so important for this movement's possibility to emerge, it is possible to discern numerous different, significant 'wes' or communities of belonging, all of which are important in one way or another to the emergence of the collective political subject that became so clear on 1 May 2017. As Abdullahi, Jaja and Soltani's analysis showed, there was a we beyond the present, a we extending to those who had experienced and resisted processes of exclusion for centuries, and alliances with Muslims not yet even born. Even though it was possible to note that the veil was a transnational bonding object, making visible possible transnational, pluralistic imagined communities of belonging, it was the we constructed over time that became increasingly obvious in the speeches and analyses made by the organisers. The nation, Sweden and even Europe were not, never had been and would not be the limit, and so neither would the present. A second example of communities of importance this day was the national community expressed in the three similar marches in different cities in Sweden. A third community obvious on this day was the local community in Gothenburg, built on sharing everyday life in the suburbs, doing political interventions over a long time, knowing each other's families and sharing experiences of exclusion by the municipality and the state. Another group also worth mentioning emerged between the owners and their allies. The different communities of belonging and the collective political subject emerged and became visible through the struggle, and as the owners of the march and the movement emerged as political subjects, the notion of the centre became less stable and even transformed (Fanon 1963).

The analyses of Abdullahi, Jaja, Soltani and the other organisers were made from the outside of Swedish society, and it was also from that position that this special, political we has emerged historically, in the present and in the imagined future. Their analyses have exposed the unrighteousness of the situation and the violent making of modernity and gender equality as belonging to only a few, a process demanding total assimilation into a Christian–secular understanding of society in which others' clothes become dangerous, others' beliefs are threatening, and others should be civilised, as Abdullahi stated. At the same time, such assimilation always seems to be out of reach. To be excluded over and over again while simultaneously being a political subject on the outside has impacts on the possibilities for creating an image of a future for the community and political struggles. Processes of exclusion and resistance also mark the future. Meanwhile, the forward-looking, linear discourse on a secular modernity and secular Swedish gender equality embraces others, creating the privileged, like me, who seem to move on into a supposedly happy, equal ending, leaving the others behind.

However, the organisers' analyses also identified processes and practices that challenged the notion of secularism as a condition for both democracy and gender equality and thus also the binarity and construction of the white European modern secular we. This in-stabilisation was caused by the numerous interventions into the women's and the workers' movement and the presumed truth of the gender-equality norm. It was done through the owners' takeover of the streets and squares. The interventions revealed the acts of exclusion in colonialism and nationalism committed not only by states but also by political movements. Without these exclusions, neither gender equality nor the modernist women's and the workers' movements would be the same.

Not only the state and the EU were interpellated by the placards, speeches and march itself. Not the least, the women addressed themselves as subjects. They were not just the others, the excluded ones, the passive. Through mobilisations and postcolonial education, they talked to themselves, as in Jaja's speech, as historical subjects. They talked to themselves as those who made interventions into societal conditions, those who should call through megaphones, those who should take their place in the streets and the squares. Rights, however liberal they might have

sounded, were not only for other women, for whites, for Christians. The imagination of Swedish gender equality, in all its uncertainty, was also an object to demand the right to enter and develop. However, that was not enough. They also pointed to a possible transformation and critique of civilisation asserting that religion in general and Islam in particular should not be treated as hostile to gender equality or individual rights.

Here, it is possible to trace their strategy. The march showed the importance of continuing to be a political we, not looking like the privileged, being a visual group through the veil, connected to and followed by allies who had neither the possibility nor the ambition to dissolve, assimilate or integrate them. The owners of the march, therefore, did not understand the privileged positions as desired or given or their own as essential. The existence of more than one linear path to gender equality undermines the narrative of colonial modernity and Swedish white exceptionalism. The owners and the organisers for the march were struggling for another modernity and less predictable future for both themselves and the privileged.

## Notes

1. My special thanks and gratitude to Maimuna Abdullahi. Without your generosity and analyses this chapter had not been possible.
2. I use the concept 'veil' in the critical tradition of Fanon (1965), Scott (2007) and Abu-Lughod (2013).
3. The groups Revolutionary Hijabis and Voice of Hijabis organised similar marches in Malmö and Stockholm.
4. Maimuna Abdullahi Bältespännarpaken, speech.
5. Motstånd är vårt hopp/Rätten till våran kropp/Jobb är vår rättighet/Och tillsammans skapas solidaritet.

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# 5

## Fat, Black and Unapologetic: Body Positive Activism Beyond White, Neoliberal Rights Discourses

Anna Johansson

### 5.1 Introduction

All bodies are good bodies. There's no wrong way to have a body. All bodies are beautiful. Beauty comes in every shape and size. Honor my curves. Plus is equal. It's time for us to reclaim our bodies. (Dionne 2017)

The above quote is a typical body positive statement. Over the past few years, messages of body positivity have spread rapidly in different types of media, being articulated by grass-roots activists and digital communities, as well as by a growing number of advertising campaigns and celebrities who are endorsing body positivity. News media circulate articles across social media platforms, with stories announcing women who, through the use of selfies, open up about their experiences with dealing with body

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shame, fat phobia, eating disorders and how they have challenged beauty ideals and ‘bikini body’ myths, achieving self-love, acceptance and pride.

Grown out of the western feminist critique of the ‘tyranny of slenderness’ and oppressive beauty standards, of the struggles against discrimination by the fat acceptance movement—as well as the fight by the queer movement—body positivity is about all bodies having a value and right to be visible and accepted. The goal of the movement is primarily to show diversity in the portrayal of women and to encourage the acceptance of all body types, skin colours and body flaws—especially marginalised bodies that are often invisible in current society. This movement particularly addresses issues of weight and size:

The body positive movement uses rhetoric rooted in empowerment to affirm women of size and encourage us to accept ourselves as we are, regardless of our dress size. (Dionne 2017)

Initially emerging in the West, body positivity is now an example of digital or online activism characterised by rhizomatic flows of images and narratives that circulate transnationally, primarily through various global social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. The manifestations of body positivity that gain the most attention are usually selfies posted by celebrities—for example, Khloe Kardashian showing ‘flaws’ such as stretch marks and teaching self-acceptance, or covers with plus size models, such as Tess Holliday, who was seen on the cover of *People’s Magazine* 2015.

Even so, body positivity activism is mainly practised through and within the so-called ‘fat-o-sphere’ and feminist or queer forums, some of which function as counter public spaces in which participants challenge and reinterpret bodies considered ‘deviant’, producing subcultural identities (see Le Besco 2004; Sastre 2016; Johansson 2017).

Although body positivity is being acknowledged for its achievements, such as pushing the fashion industry to include plus size fashion, it is also being subjected to criticism from people that were, or still are, body positive advocates themselves. It is argued that even though body positivity in the beginning was a radical position taken by fat feminists who refused to be invisible and who practised hardcore fat politics, body positivity has

now been ‘co-opted by the mainstream and become increasingly depoliticized’<sup>1</sup>. As the popularity of the body positive movement and the influence of its advocates have grown, corporations have commoditised these body positive advocates and used their influence to push products, capitalising off the movement. The body positive rhetoric is being used in attempts to ‘appropriate and repackage feminist discourse for personal consumption’ (Sastre 2016, 3–4).

Hence, it has been claimed that body positivity goes hand in hand with neoliberalism, and that since body positivity centres on the individual right to self-expression and self-acceptance, issues of power, social difference and institutional conditions tend to be made invisible and ignored (Sastre 2016; Johansson 2017). Moreover, a number of both non-white and white critics who themselves identify as body positivity activists have pointed out that the dominant norm for the ‘positive’ body still is the white, slender, able-bodied cis-women, and even though the movement often speaks about ‘diversity’, and of intersectionality, it does not often show it. Black body positive activist Sonia Renee Taylor argues that ‘As long as there is a movement that is only positive for some bodies, it’s not body positive’ (Feldman 2017) and Black Lives Matter activist Shackelford (2016) labels body positivity as ‘white feminism’.

With this context in mind, this chapter will explore the potential of body positivity to create new feminist futures beyond Eurocentric and neoliberal paradigms. Drawing on Butler (2015), the text explores how gendered and racialised bodies which are not recognised as political agents in hegemonic political spaces shape their own modes of appearance in the counter public spaces of body positivity.

With inspiration from rhizomatic thinking (Breslow and Mousoutzanis 2012), the ideas and practices of body positivism will be followed as they circulate and travel from place to place, moving between different media with the aim to explore, identify and create new connections and gendered and racialised relationships and meanings. The readings are made from the position of being a white, Swedish and fat cis-woman.

Although being characterised as a transnational community or movement, body positivity is also practised within the context of locality. Thus, I will provide some examples of how the central elements of the body positivity discourse are reiterated within the Swedish (mainstream) media

landscape. However, I am particularly interested in exploring attempts to contest and disrupt what has been defined as the white supremacism/norm of whiteness of body positivity as articulated and practised by women of colour through their social media platforms. By focusing on the privilege of whiteness, I also hope to illustrate how the transnationalism of body positivity is embedded in relations of power (de Jong and Dannecker 2018).

For the most part, my material consists of images and posts from the style and fashion blogs 'The Beauty and the Muse' by Leah Vernon, who is based in the USA, and 'Nerd about Town', which is run by Stephanie Yeboah who lives in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Both identify as black and fat (plus size) (cis) women and address body positivity. Leah V also identifies as Muslim and describes herself as a 'semi-modest model' and 'hijabi'. Thus, in addition, the issues of the 'religious' and 'secular body', respectively, are being raised, with both the religious and the secular seen as practised through specific body politics and as the embodiment of certain sets of conventions (Amir-Moazami 2016). Even though the bloggers live in the West, their conditions are shaped by being black and fat (cis) women, and are as such, on the fringe.

This chapter raises questions about the possibility of the expansion, redefinition and 'repoliticising' of body positivity. Does body positivity have to be about the right to be a consumer and individual liberation, something that is first and foremost for white, middle-class cis-women, or is there a potential for it to be about changing those structural conditions that deny certain bodies their value, space and right to existence?

The text will proceed as follows: In the next section, I elaborate on the importance of visibility in the body positive movement. Then, I give some examples of how body positivity is expressed within the Swedish context. In section 4, the issue of the privilege of whiteness is raised, followed by several sections that focus on various themes in the blogs of Leah V and Stephanie Yeboah. In the last section, I give the conclusions.

## 5.2 Politics of (in)Visibility

Visibility is of vital importance for the body positivity movement. Although public space historically has only granted visibility to thin, white, tall, cis-gendered, symmetrical and able-bodied individuals, body positivity challenges this privilege. Instead of remaining invisible or trying to hide bodies that are defined and seen as deviant, ugly, disgusting or weird, participants in the body positivist community expose their bodies.

Visibility is a significant tactic and goal for a number of social movements. The striving to get ‘out of the closet, into the streets’ has, for example, historically been central to LGBTQI politics in the US and Europe. And suggested by Stella (2012), political strategies based on visibility and recognition have actually become even more prominent since the 1990s:

Visibility is a force necessary for full subjectivity within a modernity built on a currency of surveillance and disclosure. The right to be seen—and the right to be recognized—is thus inevitably coded as a fundamental human right in the contemporary West. (Sastre 2016, 27)

However, visibility is a complex force; it can be used as a strategy and tactic of resistance, as well as a mechanism of power. As outlined by Foucault (1991), during different historical periods, distinct modes of visibility are produced by power to control society. For example, in her analysis of visibility and queer culture, Hennessy (1994) argues that increased visibility often goes hand in hand with commodification.

One main question for the current chapter is how visibility performed within the body positivity spaces can be understood both as a practice of resistance and as a way of reinscribing the body positivity into the discourses of neoliberal citizenship and the acceptable/white body.

Furthermore, I am attending to the (in)visibility paradox of institutional racism and the privilege of whiteness that, on the one hand, white bodies are all too visible, at the same time that bodies of colour are invisible or hypervisible through being fetishised and commoditised as ‘exotic’. On the other hand, whiteness as a particular racial identity is being and made invisible as the norm (Frankenberg 1993). My reading of the blogs

departs from the assumption that women of colour are rendered simultaneously invisible and hypervisible and that this positioning more specifically shapes the representation and experiences of their bodies. Thus, the invisibility of black femme bodies is juxtaposed with them being seen as spectacles; either on display to be ridiculed or as targeted in discussions on welfare as ‘welfare queens’ (Mowatt et al. 2013, 645).

### 5.3 Body Positivity: Contesting the Ideal of the Perfect Body

Body positivity is to be considered not only as a set of ideas, notions and values, but also as a set of discursive practices that are performed within and through primarily digital spaces, travelling across national borders in interconnected ways.

In Sweden, as in many other countries, those who gain the most attention for their messages of body positivity are celebrities. This is true not only because they have thousands of followers on Instagram and other social media platforms, but also because their pictures and body positive messages are often being picked up by local newspapers and television.

One of the first Swedish celebrities promoting body positivity was the artist Molly Sandén, who showed herself naked in her video for ‘Freak’, a song about self-hatred. As she explained, while she was worried that she would be shamed because of her weight, she instead received a lot of ‘love’ (Nilsson 2014). To inspire others to ‘be oneself’ and ‘feel pride’ over their bodies and to ‘boost each other’, Sandén then initiated the local Instagram campaign #överminstoltakropp, ‘over my proud body’.<sup>3</sup> This type of story of a journey from shame to pride, from self-hatred to self-acceptance, is a central narrative in the body positivity discourse and can be found in a variety of stories by women across the world (see, e.g., Sastre 2016).

Another body positive advocate is Lisa Ajax, a singer who was only 16 years old when she won Swedish Idol 2014. In a series of pictures posted on Instagram, she is shown in underwear in a pose exposing her stomach folds. Below the pictures, she writes (my translation): ‘All bodies



are good bodies' and continues by saying, 'One year ago, my view on a beautiful body was so incredibly skewed! For my body to be seen as beautiful it had to have bigger boobs (...) and a flat tummy ... all that I did not have and never will have (...)'. This post received nearly 20,000 likes.

The critique against body ideals and expectations—and the call for rebelling against these—are at the heart of the body positivity discourse. Molly Sandén contends that we are 'fed by monotonous images of how a body should look', and she encourages her readers to 'dare to expand the norm' beyond the current ideal, as well as 'accept' the diversity of bodies. Lisa Ajax argues along the same lines and writes about how 'tired' she is of the ideal of the 'perfect' body and how it 'has to stop'. Moreover, she states the following:

All bodies should be visible, on Instagram, on the beach, at the gym and so on. I don't want one person to feel less worthy because of hir appearance.

Similar to the many personal narratives of body positivity found across sites and campaigns, both Sandén (Nilsson 2014) and Ajax (Ek 2018) send the message of self-love. Hence, body positivity does not have the aim of changing one's body (its appearance or behaviour) but to transform the relation to and perception of one's body (Sastre 2016).

The ideas and practices of body positivity are organised around the act of exposing the body itself as empowering, 'imbued with the potential to liberate the newly exposed body from the cultural burdens of shame and disgust that kept it long hidden' (Sastre 2016, 56). Both Molly Sandén and Lisa Ajax perform the practice of exposing the type of bodies and/or body parts that are seen as shameful, as well as posing at angles that are considered 'unflattering'. The visible body becomes a symbol of—and seen as generating—a body positive feeling. Although the acts of Sandén and Ajax exposing 'flaws' are celebrated as individual acts of 'courage', full or partial nudity is actually both explicitly called to and inferred through a set of 'best practices' of body positivity (Sastre 2016).

I suggest that whether articulated in Sweden or elsewhere, the body positive discourse in mainstream media asserts itself as part of a transnationally circulating postfeminist culture (Dosekun 2015), with a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment, and with 'a psychologizing

discourse and promotion of female “confidence”, self-love and self-esteem as one-size-fits-all solutions to gender injustice’ (Gill 2016, 6). For example, as explained by Nigerian body positive advocate Temi Aboderin-Alao (Ndeche 2017) who aims to ‘empower curvy women’ with her plus size brand, ‘It all starts in the mind. If you’re feeling down about yourself, you’re not going to get confident enough to get up and change your life and be who you want to be.’ However, the body positive messages and practices do in no way travel in an unidirectional way from the global North/West to the global South/non-West (see Dosekun 2015). Rather, their movements across transnational contexts are both multidirectional and unpredictable.

## 5.4 The Privilege of Whiteness

Drawing on a feminism which in a complex way is intertwined with neo-liberalism, the body positive celebration of the differentiation of bodies, and the message that ‘all bodies are good bodies’, often ignores social differences and how economic, cultural and political conditions and forces shape the possibilities of the body (Sastre 2016; Johansson 2017). While dominant body ideals are contested it is rarely acknowledged that these ideals are measured along Eurocentric, white standards, meaning the narratives, images and ideals of ‘good bodies’ are heavily racialised. As posited by Shaw (2006) the conceptualisation of idealised femininity as exclusively white is an important means of sustaining racialised hierarchies since it can concurrently devalue both race and gender. Pointing out and criticising the norm of whiteness of body positivity Shackelford (2016) argues that:

Tess Holliday’s success would be unheard of if she was a person of color or Black. Being shorter, having more visible cellulite and not having an hour-glass shape would make Tess’ success impossible if she were a person of color too. (Shackelford 2016)

According to Shackelford and many other critics, since body positivity has gone mainstream, and become more commercialised, white (cis)

women's bodies have become even more visible than before. The face of body positivity has indeed become more agreeable to a mostly white audience.

Thus, when Gibson (2017) examines the images displayed on top posts found under the hashtags #bodypositive and #bodypositivity on Instagram, she finds that they frequently reproduced normative body representations. While sixty-four of the ninety-eight top posts featured a thin and white woman, only fourteen featured persons of colour, and only nine were of fat women of colour. In my own snapshot of images displayed using the Swedish hashtag #kroppspositiv (body positive), of 8917 posts I find that among the first 200 images featuring bodies, there were only four images of non-white bodies.

Even though many body positivity advocates such as the Swedish artists Sandén and Ajax call for diversity, they seldom address the fact that by being white they themselves actually conform with the main aspects of the dominant gendered body and beauty ideal. At the same time that they claim that all bodies are valuable and beautiful, and, as Lisa Ajax suggested, 'all bodies should be visible', they fail to recognise that being white is what Kwan (2010) calls a body privilege.

The colour blindness of body positivity, as articulated across different transnational contexts, needs to be understood in relation to whiteness as a site of power, and its intersections with other categories such as gender, race, culture and citizenship. As in the specific local context of mainstream Swedish media, it may be understood in relation to whiteness as a significant (and invisible) structuring principle for Swedishness, and particularly in relation to the regime of 'good whiteness', associated with gender equality, humanism and antiracism (Hübinette and Lundström 2014). The 'proud' bodies of body positive advocates Sandén and Ajax are indeed expressions of white, Swedish femininity.

Since whiteness as a norm and a privilege to a large part is being treated as a non-issue by many body positive advocates, and in the mainstream body positive discourse, the racialisation of bodies tends to be made invisible, and the experiences of women of colour/non-white people within the body positive community being silenced. Hence, it is against this backdrop that the blogs of Leah Vernon and Stephanie Yeboah become of particular interest; they are examples of how fat, femme and

black bodies claim visibility and create space for themselves in social media, highlighting issues of race and racism in relation to body positivity and the contradictions that lie in a heightened visibility for the ‘invisible’.

## 5.5 Fatshion Blogs as Arenas for Community Building and Performance of Identities

A black, large woman standing outside in a park, with a background of bushes and trees. She wears a kind of fitted jumpsuit in velour in a deep red color with a blouse with flowers under. With that, she wears a red turban as well as sunglasses and lipstick in red. Her hands are firmly planted on her hips, looking straight into the camera.

This is a typical image of Leah V posted on her blog. She calls her social media a platform for ‘a social and fashion movement’ that ‘encompasses all the different facets of my style and ideas’:

You’ll see how I rock street style to vintage glam but this just isn’t about beauty, every photo is paired with meaningful content about feminism, social justice, divorce, and body positive activism.<sup>4</sup>

She emphasises that it is about fashion and beauty, but also about ‘meaningful content’. Moreover, that the aim for the blog ‘Beauty and the Muse’ is not about ‘numbers or stats or saying the right thing ever so perfectly, but to create and build a community of creatives’. Key words for Leah V are creativity, dialogue, reflection, sharing and, not the least, community. She guarantees her readers that ‘You get a front row seat to my life’s journey. Pull up a chair ...’. Stephanie Yeboah, for her part, explains the following about her blog:

serves as a personal space for me to share my personal style, rave about some beauty bits, and to talk about issues important to me such as body confidence, mental health, loving yourself (...).<sup>5</sup>

She hopes 'to inspire and teach others to be happy and confident in how you look, to wear whatever you want and feel amazing and to just go on living your best life'. Stephanie's presentation does not emphasise political issues and social change but mainly uses the rhetoric of body positivity focused on individual fulfilment. Both Leah V and Stephanie Yeboah make a living through blogging and modelling. Thus, they practice self-branding (or personal branding), meaning that they have developed a distinctive public image for commercial benefit and embrace body positivity and/or to gain cultural capital (Khamis et al. 2016). As Leah V comments in her introduction:

That intro wasn't to get you to feel sorry for me. For us. It was to pique your interest. To pull you in. Get you to see something you've probably haven't even fathomed.<sup>6</sup>

She does not want to be seen as a victim; rather, she intends instead to 'pique' the interest of the reader. It is a way of representing herself as interesting, even as an enigma.

Style and fashion blogs have been identified as arenas in which marginalised consumers, in this case, young, racialised women self-identified as fat, have managed to become influential (Kretz and de Valck 2014). As fatshion bloggers, Leah V and Stephanie bring forward plus size clothes and spread body positive messages. Both bloggers have created a public image that respond to the needs and interests of target audiences, mainly other fat/plus size, femme-identified persons of colour, and are benefiting from those images. At the same time, both Stephanie Yeboah and Leah V take part in the building of the body positive community as an alternative community that attempts to create new social realities and intersectional identities (Harju and Huovinen 2015; Kretz and de Valck 2014). In a post in which Stephanie brings up the issue of shopping outside your size, here giving advice on which mainstream brands are 'stretch friendly', she assumes her readers to be 'fat', sharing the same experiences and challenges that she experiences:

When you're fat, clothing labels inadvertently end up becoming a huge part of our identity because of how restrictive fashion is when it comes to

extended sizes (...). We collectively give an exasperated sigh when a designer x high street collaboration abruptly ends at a size 16 (...).<sup>7</sup>

The use of expressions as ‘our identity’ and ‘our sizes’ indicates that she takes a shared identity for given and speaks of a ‘we’ that ‘collectively give an exasperated sigh’. The body positivity/plus size community is perceived as a community of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006). However, while creating and articulating a sense of belonging in a ‘plus size’ and body positive community on the basis of size, she also expresses disbelonging based on race.

Being in a community full of people who have the same body shape as you in terms of they’re fat, but then realising that you’re the only person of colour (...) it kind of makes me feel like, why are we not good enough to be at the forefront? (...) It’s ironic seeing as the body/fat positivity movement was spearheaded by black fat femmes years ago yet we are somehow erased from all of it. (Barrett 2017)

Identifying herself as a ‘fat black woman/femme’, she is among those in the body/fat positivity movement that has been ‘erased’. Leah V also addresses experiences of invisibility and marginalisation based on both race, gender, religion and body size:

I’m the unseen. The lost and broken. I’m the minority who is buried under media outlets like Fox News and CNN. You don’t see us on the cover of American magazines or hear the pleas of our communities.

I’m Muslim. I’m Black. I’m fat. I’m a female living in America.

## 5.6 Making Visible Black and Fat Bodies: Shaming, Disgust and Dehumanisation

To make yourself visible, and expose yourself as a fat, black woman on the internet who embraces body positivity, challenges various orders of power, and provokes many reactions. In a video addressed to her social media ‘trolls’, Leah V reads out some of the comments she has received:

I want to vomit. That's just disgusting. That's not a message of positivity. Such a disgrace to humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Leah V's fat body is being labelled 'disgusting' and 'a disgrace' and works as a surface onto which a multitude of signs and emotions are *stuck*, most of them with negative signification (Ahmed 2004). It is a body to expel through vomiting, what Kristeva (1982) defines as abjection. Yet another hostile comment is as follows:

I'd kill myself if I looked like that. How is that healthy? That is obese. And she'll die of heart failure.<sup>9</sup>

One of the recurrent points of critique directed at the notion and practice of body positivity is that it works as a 'defence' for obesity and a refusal to participate in the 'war against obesity'. Body positive activists are, as in this comment, defined as 'irresponsible' citizens.

In the prevalent obesity discourse, fatness is represented as a contagious disease, as dirt and uncleanness that threatens the social order (Douglas 1966), a 'matter out of place'. The fat body is associated with gluttony and a lack of control of desires and emotions. Fat people are, for example, often the targets of what Björck (2013) call 'metaphoric animalizations' of a degrading character; thus, they are being dehumanised. Leah gives examples of this in one of her blog posts when she describes how a woman put 'pig emojis' below her exercise video and that another person commented: 'I didn't know land whales exercised.'<sup>10</sup>

The fat body is linked to women and femininity (Johansson 2017), but obesity and the 'obesity epidemic' is not only feminised, but also racialised. As Sanders (2013) analyses how political, public health and cultural discourses recursively emphasise the higher prevalence of obesity among minorities in general—and among African American and Latina women in particular—she defines these discourses as a contemporary 'racial project', strengthening white normativity.

Stephanie accounts for how accustomed she is to receiving comments both of racist and fatphobic character online:

Over the last year, I've been called a gorilla (...), the N word countless times.<sup>11</sup>

Once again, metaphoric animalisation is used, but in contrast to 'pig' and 'whale', the epithet 'gorilla' is racialised, here specifically attributed to non-white bodies.

Although white women in the body positive movement who are considered to be fat are fighting back against fat stigma, they still have a body privilege (Kwan 2010) as whites, something of which Leah V and Stephanie are deprived. And although they are celebrated as body positive advocates and plus size models, as declared by Stephanie:

Being black and plus size in this industry means that you're sometimes treated way different from others, even if the people treating you differently do not want to admit it.<sup>12</sup>

She continues by arguing for her and other black women's right to be 'treated with a little bit of humanity', thus addressing a central aspect of racism: dehumanisation.

The appearance of the bodies of Leah V and Stephanie in digital public spaces do not only contest gendered body norms of thinness, but also the privileged white gaze that view black bodies as a disruption of the presumed harmony and symmetry of the white space (Yancy 2008). Because fat and black femme bodies are equally being constructed as 'bodies out of place', they might be defined by what Puwar (2004) calls 'space invaders'. In Stephanie's words: 'I have had things thrown at me for defending my right to exist and take up space as a fat, black woman.'

## 5.7 Not the Perfect Hijabi

Leah V also addresses racism, for example, by writing about the situation after 9/11, with a special focus on Islamophobia, violence and prejudices against Muslims. However, whereas she strongly identifies herself as part of the Muslim community, she also brings up a sense of disbelonging based on her blackness, stating that 'Although it is totally against Islam to



judge someone based on the colour of their skin, it happens more than you think.’ She tells various stories about occasions when she has experienced racism by fellow Muslims because she is black. Leah V’s celebration of body positivity is intertwined with a critique of gender norms and white privileges. Because she also identifies as a feminist, she raises critique against the norms of how Muslim woman should be within her family and in the community:

Hijab is crucial. You don’t wear hijab, life is almost over and you have elders questioning your religion.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Leah V always wears a hijab, she claims the right to be a ‘hijabi’ in her own way and for her own reasons. When speaking on a panel organised by a Muslim student organisation on the theme of how body positivity and fashion is related to authenticity, she brought up the ideal of the ‘perfect hijabi’:

You know I’m really tired of the Hijabi bloggers being so damn perfect. (...) They are all thin, usually white passing with the perfect wardrobe and the most perfect pastel Instagram aesthetic.<sup>14</sup>

According to Leah V, ‘the perfect hijabi’ is white/whitewashed, thin and performs a traditional ‘femininity’. The ‘perfect hijabi’ bloggers do not address topics such as ‘sexual abuse, misogyny, racism, and body-shaming’, and she calls them out, challenging them to ‘be real’ to instead of ‘pushing perfection’ promote ‘individuality’ and create their ‘own unique path’.

This call echoes the emphasis on authenticity within the body positive discourse. Yet the way Leah V defines this individuality seems to be a result of a hybridisation, of the negotiation of plural social identities and belongings, and of intersectionality:

We are not only Arab or Middle Eastern. We are not only hijabi. We are not only ‘straight-sized’. Or submissive. We are African-American. (...). Fat. And more.<sup>15</sup>

## 5.8 From Self-Hatred and Shame to Self-Acceptance and Self-Love

What then does body positivity mean for these two bloggers? In a post from 2016, Leah V tells the story of how she became a body positive advocate, stumbling ‘into the phrase’ two years earlier and describing herself as ‘immediately enthralled’:

Wait a minute! I didn't have to hate myself when I was around girlfriends that were smaller than me? I could actually do my makeup and wear a bomb outfit and feel equally beautiful? I could love my body and be ok with it (...)? Sign me up!<sup>16</sup>

Body positivity is defined as the opposite of self-hatred and feeling ugly and a way to promote self-love and ‘feel equally beautiful’. Moreover, it is the opposite of being worried and regretful about one's weight, hence the opposite of guilt and of shame, as follows:

One day, I asked myself what if I loved and appreciated my body how it was in that exact moment? (...) What would it look like to accept my body as it is?

As for the precursor to the body positivity movement, the fat acceptance movement, acceptance is a central concept, which is true for Leah V. In another post, she explicitly speaks about the fight against shame:

I made a decision to stop carrying other people's shame on my back, on my chest. (...). I plucked that shame bare, chopped it up, seasoned it, dropped that bitch in some batter and fried it.<sup>17</sup>

Emotions are crucial in creating a sense of community (Ahmed 2004) and in a similar way as the LGBTIQ movement and in the construction of queerness, shame and pride are important elements in the fat acceptance and body positivity movement. Between those who have experienced marginalisation and stigmatisation, a connection and sense of community emerges, one that is based in identification and compassion.

Thus, shame is given a political value because it connects a member to a community.

Still, shame is supposed to be replaced with pride. To ‘take care of yourself’, be ‘worthy’, be ‘beautiful’ and be ‘positive’ rather than self-critical are the fundamental messages of body positivity. The responsibility is placed on the individual to go through this process from negativity to positivity. This involves the risks of reproducing neoliberal stories of success, in which the stigmatised person is assumed to struggle to overcome the inner obstacles of shame and self-hatred to become a ‘positive’ person who loves one’s body and accepts oneself (Sastre 2016), what Dionne (2017) calls ‘affirming, empowering, let-me-pinch-a-fat-roll-to-show-how-much-I-love-myself stories’. Hence, to express experiences of shame and anger in the face of stigmatisation and discrimination might be perceived as a disruption of the body positive norm.

This norm of positivity is very much present in a text in which Stephanie shares her struggles with being accepting of her body and loving towards herself

I’ve been on this slow-ass train to self-love and body acceptance since 2014, and over the past 4 years, myself—like many others on this journey—have had great highs and devastating lows.<sup>18</sup>

She thinks she is much more ‘confident’ than she was when she was younger and states, ‘I’m wearing pieces I never would have ever thought of wearing, and I feel a lot more confident in my body than ever before.’

Self-love is something you are assumed to achieve through hard work, what Stephanie calls ‘self-care’. This practice of disciplining the relationship to one’s body is in line with ‘responsibilization’ (Rose 1996), a central principle of governing in an advanced liberal society. Whereas Stephanie writes and talks in public about the importance of ‘loving yourself’ and ‘give[s] tips’ on body confidence, sharing her ‘favorite ways to practice self-care’,<sup>19</sup> she confesses in the same post that she has a hard time practicing what she preaches:

The last three weeks have been terrible for me (...), mental health wise. I’ve been scrutinising every inch of my body and hating absolutely everything.

(...) I've always said that the journey to self-love is just that: a journey, and not specifically a destination.

I've come to accept the fact that even though I 'preach' body confidence, it's still okay for me to have days where I feel rubbish about how I look, and that's fine. It doesn't make me any less of a 'body positivity' person.

The blogger seems aware that with her recurrent experience of self-hatred and insecurity, she does not achieve the norm of body positivity, but her way to deal with it is to acknowledge the dilemma and (re)define self-love as a journey without a destination—that is, a process, not an absolute state of mind. Included in Stephanie's call for self-love is also her promotion of Curvissa, an online company that offers plus size fashion and uses the slogan 'Feel good dressing':

I believe getting to know yourself and accepting/embracing your, flaws and all is such a huge step towards self-love, and it's because of this that I'm thrilled to be collaborating with Curvissa on their new [#EmbracingMe](#) campaign, which is encouraging women to celebrate what they are most proud about themselves.<sup>20</sup>

She then continues by encouraging her readers to participate in the campaign to win a prize from the company.

For Stephanie, as for many other *fatshionista* bloggers, the promotion of products and campaigns is part of blogging as business, and the body activism is inescapably entangled with commercial interests (Cwynar-Horta 2016). And while the public display and promotion of plus size fashion is considered as one expression of the struggle against body shame and discrimination, it is at the same time part of a commodification process, and in line with the idea of the right to consume—a vital ideological element in neoliberalism (Guthman and du Puis 2016). Thus, the body positive messages conveyed by Stephanie's blog do to some extent intertwine with the idea that even the achievement of self-love and self-actualisation is brought about through consumption.

## 5.9 Doing Beauty and Self-Love Through Exposure

Hundreds of images are posted on Stephanie Yeboah's Instagram account, and in many of them, she is posing semi-nude, dressed in different models and colours of lingerie. Some of the images are also posted and commented upon in her blog. At first sight, these images support the suggestion made by Harju and Huovinen (2015) that because of an aspiration to access 'the realm of normalcy' and social acceptance, *fatshionistas* perform a femininity that resembles that of traditional fashion imagery, for example, mimicking the lowered gaze.

However, in addition to challenging fatphobia, Stephanie also challenges the body privilege of whiteness and the shame of being 'black'. This shows in the comments she makes, for example below an image of her striking a pose, lying down in red lingerie: 'Bitch, I never knew red could look so nice against my dark brown skin tone.'<sup>21</sup> Through the underwear and bras, she rediscovers her 'dark brown skin tone' and describes her appearance in positive wordings. Departing from the notion of black women being invisible, she states, 'We need to see (in my case) more black women and women of color represented.'<sup>22</sup> Hence, it is not about showing any flesh but a flesh in a colour that is not usually seen. And it is ultimately about being 'humanised'.

Stephanie dismisses a critique of the body positive movement from a celebrity/actress who was said to be 'sick and tired of seeing half-naked bodies on social media under the guise of body positivity' and direct herself to the woman, saying that the movement for body positivity is not for her or her 'aesthetically beautiful body':

Your body is seen everywhere: in movies, on billboards, on TV shows, magazines, online, in blogs and in music videos. Your privileged body is normalised. For those whose bodies aren't privileged, we NEED to see our body types on TV, in magazines and online. Social media platforms such as Instagram allows us to have a safe space to celebrate our curves.<sup>23</sup>

Stephanie exposes her own body as one of the invisible and unprivileged bodies in a very deliberate way and further defines it as a ‘need’ to see the images of ‘imperfect’ bodies to identify with:

I need to see a constant carousel of these images; of women with stretch marks, lumps, bumps, cellulite, and rolls. I need to see ‘imperfection’. I need to see women who look like me. I want to see plus size women looking hot in lingerie because it helps me feel better about what I wear, and allows me to see the beauty in myself.

As she looks at and identifies with ‘flawed bodies’, she rejects the dominant body ideal and argues for an alternative beauty. She speaks of the importance to have access to the images of bodies to identify with ‘imperfect’ bodies. This is a way to ‘feel better’ about her own appearance and to ‘see the beauty in herself’. Yet even though she claims the right to pursue ‘a beauty of imperfection’ and work on herself to look beautiful, her main concern seems to be, as for Leah, to *feel* beautiful. The visible body is partly seen as means for developing a sense of self-love and as a way to achieve a positive feeling:

I’ve always been wary of putting up photos of myself in lingerie, partly because of family/co-workers who may come across it (...), and also because I’m still getting to grips to loving myself and putting myself out there for all to see—hyperpigmentation and stretch marks be damned.<sup>24</sup>

To expose your body with all its presumed flaws, fatness, hyperpigmentation and stretch marks, to put yourself ‘out there for all to see’ is seen as part of the process of achieving ‘self-love’.

The right to be seen as, and feel, beautiful is a vital element in body positivity (Sastre 2016). All bodies can and have the right to be beautiful, even if they do not meet the dominant standards of beauty. Nevertheless, because ‘doing’ beauty is a vital component of ‘doing’ femininity, as well as whiteness, it also makes it problematic to claim this right. Stephanie’s struggle with self-love, and to see herself as ‘beautiful’ despite her ‘imperfection’ simultaneously works as a reinforcement of expectations of women to a constant ‘work’ on and struggle to improve themselves.

Success in being body positive does in this sense follow the model of neoliberal citizenship and depends on the ability of self-governance (Rose 1996).

Murphy and Jackson (2011) argue that even though magazines promote 'new' positive 'love your body' messages, they still encourage a gendered surveillance that reinforces the hegemony of the visual, as well as positioning women as objects for the male gaze. This ambivalence is also true for body positive blogs, to some extent; they might be both spaces of comfort and flattery, but they can also be seen as spaces of surveillance, both by oneself and by others (Rocamora 2013). And although visibility seems to be unequivocally understood as a means of empowerment by many whom advocate for body positivity, Stephanie expresses concerns about how her body, as other fat women's bodies, runs the risk of being fetishised when being exposed in the digital sphere or elsewhere. She defines herself as 'perpetually confined to the extreme version of sexuality', doubting her own 'sex appeal' as 'normally defined'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, a racialised fat body runs the risk of being fetishised by a white gaze as well, becoming hypervisible as a body associated with the persistent stereotype of the sexually unrestrained black woman.

*Fatshion/plus size* bloggers can be said to disturb and undermine the politics around body size, gender, beauty and consumerism that dominate the fashion world and are creating a virtual counter discourse and new communities of belonging (Connell 2013; Johansson 2017). Furthermore, they contribute to the emergence of new norms of beauty and practice an aesthetics of resistance (Kwan and Graves 2013). Even so, the claim that also fat (black) bodies should be considered beautiful and attractive contributes to the objectification and commodification of the body and the 'positive' body, as well as illustrating how 'positivity' might become a way to control bodies and keep them 'in order' and under surveillance (Kyrölä 2014, 205).

## 5.10 Refusing 'Sexiness': Claiming Fierceness

Whereas Stephanie deliberately exposes her body and expresses a desire for being defined as 'sexy' in a 'normal' way while not being fetishised, Leah V, on the other hand, is caught up in a somewhat different struggle. Identifying as Muslim, fat and black 'semi-covered model', she deals with the issues of body exposure in relation the expectations of sexiness (especially in the fashion world) and how to practice her own version of *modesty*, as seen in the following:

Because I grew up Muslim, we weren't taught to be sexy. (...) There was no need for a Muslim girl to feel or be sexy at all. The extreme end of modesty was humble, colorless, loose clothes, bare face. The idea that you shouldn't want or feel the need to be seen. Lower your gaze.<sup>26</sup>

In the blog post 'The Unconventional: Thriving As A Covered Model', Leah is pictured coming up from a subway station in New York, dressed in a black dress with a white blouse with long sleeves under. Her turban is black, and so are her sunglasses. As usual, she does not show any other parts of the body than her hands, neck and face. She writes the following:

Sometimes I think it'd be easier to show my ass. I mean my entire meaty ass that's filled with fat craters and stretch marks. Like the whole thing sitting up on a sink like I see the other gals doing.<sup>27</sup>

She dryly notes that it costs both more money and is more difficult to be a model who practices modesty:

Sex sells. Bare skin sells. And, oh, I forgot to add, this only works for certain body types. Not all bodies get to show and be empowered by semi-nudity. Only the right kind of bodies get that right. The right kind of thin. And the right kind of thicc or curvy.<sup>28</sup>

Leah V goes on in the same post by affirming that she 'totally agrees' with a statement she had read 'nudity empowers some and modesty empowers others'. What she turns against is that modesty is defined as 'prudishness'



and that ‘it equals being confined to one stereotype. It equals less popular. The inability to be sexy, feel sexy, be fierce.’ She claims the right to be seen as ‘fierce’, even though she is a ‘Muslim girl’, without showing bare skin and practising body exposure:

But, when I do step up, I am serving looks so hard that I want to make them forget that they have a Muslim girl on set. I am so fierce that all they see is a girl that will kill that shot every single time.<sup>29</sup>

Her striving to be fierce is notable, fierce here being associated with being ‘bold’, ‘cool’, outstanding or ‘brutal’, especially relating to fashion, clothes, hair or [make-up](#), denoting a positive estimation of some aesthetic style (Bost 2019, 56). Moreover, fierce and fierceness are also terms that reoccur in relation to black resistance (Davis 2018), which are seen as strategies to survive both racism and homophobia.

This understanding of fierceness is helpful when taking considering Leah V’s images and videos on her social media platform, for example, her solo dance video.<sup>30</sup> When dancing, she wears different sets of outfits, being dressed in black trousers and a black sweater, different jackets (denim/black) and wearing turbans in different colours and a hijab in combination with a cap. The music is electronic and hard, and she moves with forceful movements, including some voguing.<sup>31</sup> While she does smile in some shootings, her face is for the most part stern, looking directly into the camera, close up. Her dance is not a dance that can be associated with a ‘good and happy fatty’ performance, neither is it an attempt to achieve ‘sexiness’. Rather it is an ‘in your face’ dance, embodying fierce as being ‘to unravel, to self-actualize and to return the gaze’ (Moore 2012, 72).

I suggest that Leah performs fierceness as a method of black and fat resistance, but also as a resistance against the norm of the ‘feminine’ Muslim body. She moves between the position of being a ‘modest’ Muslim/black woman, following the prescriptions of the ‘acceptable’ way Muslim women are to present themselves while at the same time trying to position herself as a feminist and ‘fierce’ model. She delinks fierceness from any presumed expectations of ‘sexiness’ and performs it in her own way, without exposure of any body parts or movements or dressing that

could be viewed as sexually ‘provocative’; in a sense, she is dissolving the division between a religious (modest) and secular (sexy) body.

The fierceness of Leah V is also an embodiment of a stance that in the body positivity community is talked about as ‘being unapologetic’ and is seen as a vital practice of body positivity.

## 5.11 Being Unapologetic

The message of being unapologetic, especially not apologising for one’s body, is reiterated in texts and narratives on body positivity circulating in different media, such as in one of the most celebrated body positivity books, *The body is not an apology: Radical self love* by Sonia Renee Taylor, or as in the following instructions: ‘Body Positivity: How To Love Your Body Unapologetically!’ To be unapologetic can, in this context, first and foremost be understood as a stance or approach in relation to body norms or expectations, a refusal to put up with being body shamed and to be ashamed of your body. In this sense, it is close to the resistance strategy of destigmatisation (Harju and Huovinen 2015).

Becoming unapologetic appears to be a significant element of becoming ‘positive’. Stephanie gives the story of how she began to shape her blog into a style and fashion blog when she visited New York in 2014 and met a group of plus-sized women who ‘were confident, beautiful women who were unapologetic in their bodies’:

I would see them wearing the kinds of clothes I wished I could wear, and it inspired me to seek change within myself, starting with my self-esteem and confidence.<sup>32</sup>

Meeting the women who were ‘unapologetic in their bodies’ is depicted as a turning point, and the inspiration from the women is associated with an inner, emotional process of developing a sense of self-esteem and confidence. Even so, in a post called ‘Being unapologetic can be hard’, Stephanie Yeboah challenges the body positive norm of ‘being unapologetic’, particularly from the position of ‘black and plus size’:

Peers and brands alike can sometimes assume that because we are unapologetic in the way in which we express ourselves, that we aren't capable of having feelings. Or that we don't feel hurt, or feel targeted and excluded. We are labelled as 'aggressive' and then treated horribly and are expected to just put up with it (...).<sup>33</sup>

Even though white fat women within the body positive movement may be celebrated for their adoption of an unapologetic stance, for women of colour and black women, the same stance risks being interpreted through the lens of stereotyping, including the myth of the uncontrolled angry black woman (Givens and Monahan 2005). She risks being seen as a 'killjoy' (Ahmed 2010), 'being in the way':

You will be labelled 'difficult' for standing up in what you believe in and asking for equality in campaigns (...).

Stephanie does not even shy away from bringing up the embraced notion of 'the strong black woman':

I'm tired of the narrative of black fat women being 'sassy', resilient and 'strong'. We have to be strong because we have been born into a world that does not respect us by large. We have been born into a society that continues to dehumanise us, that doesn't see us as equal.<sup>34</sup>

Being 'unapologetic' is here given a different meaning than in the dominant body positive rhetoric. It is not only about contesting the body privilege of slenderness (Kwan 2010), but it is about refuting white body privilege, not only about claiming the right to be seen as 'beautiful' and accepting oneself but claiming the right to exist. As Leah V asserts in the following:

I won't be apologizing for my mere being. For being fat. For being Black. For being Muslim. I've said sorry enough by assimilating. By keeping quiet. By accepting abuse and ridiculous requests (...).<sup>35</sup>

When she tells the story of how she got the idea of the dance video, she emphasises how her presence in the street actually makes a statement:

I believed that a fat girl dancing. A Muslim girl dancing in the streets of Detroit would make for a powerful statement, a conversation on what an American Muslim looks like? What a modern-day fat girl looks like? An overly educated black girl?<sup>36</sup>

In this text, Leah shifts between identifying herself as ‘fat girl’, ‘Muslim girl’, ‘American Muslim’, ‘modern day fat girl’ and ‘overly educated black girl’. To be visible on the street is a ‘powerful statement’ in relation to being a gendered fat, black and Muslim body. She continues with the following:

I knew (...) that I might get backlash from the opposing side, too. ‘Why is that Muslim girl dancing?!? She shouldn’t be doing that. It’s not Islamic!’ ‘She’s so fat, why is she embarrassing herself?’

While Stephanie articulates her desire to be acknowledged as hurting, Leah V is counting on the fact that her embodied presence in public space creates discomfort, anger and resentment. Making people ‘uncomfortable’ with her ‘mere presence’ ‘tickles’ her—that my presence, my essence is that powerful’. Consequently, she begins her dance video by looking straight into the camera, asking the imagined viewers sternly: ‘Do I make you uncomfortable?’ Daring to challenge the historical denial of black (Muslim) women’s right to look, her direct gaze can be defined as oppositional and as resistance (hooks 1992).

## 5.12 Concluding Remarks: Body Positivity as a Challenge to White Supremacy?

As *fatshion*/plus size bloggers advocating body positivity, both Stephanie and Leah V operate in the nexus of the market and civil society. Body positivity is, to a great extent, understood in terms of ‘individuality’, ‘self-love’ and the right to consumption, reiterating a transnational postfeminist discourse in which neoliberal elements are central. Yet at the same time, in contrast to the messages from, for example, the Swedish body positivity advocates, who convey decontextualised body positive

messages without acknowledging their own body privileges as whites, the visual practices and texts posted by Stephanie Yeboah and Leah V contribute to a situatedness of body positivity and an acknowledgement of social difference; they display how the intersectional dynamic of race, gender, sexuality and religion shape the expressions of body shaming and the production of a proud body: they are unapologetic in their bodies. By situating their own bodies in a web of power relations and practices of resistance and talking back (hooks 1990) to a multitude of audiences, they highlight how bodies not only are gendered, but also racialised. In doing so, they also expose the unequal nature of body positivity as a transnational community of belonging.

To further support the argument of the repoliticising body positivity by taking the privilege of whiteness and racism into account, I turn to Black Lives Matter activist Ashley Shackelford (2016), who identifies as queer, non-binary, fat and femme. Ze<sup>37</sup> actually redefines and expands the meaning of body positivity from being about individual empowerment to underscoring those structural conditions that deny some bodies their value, space and right to existence:

In light of the heightened violence against Black folks worldwide, it's imperative that we remember that when we talk about body positivity, fat positivity and the movement to end body shame, that Black Lives Matter is inherently a body positivity movement. Our fight to be humanised, end white supremacist violence, protect our bodies, our children, our families, our people, is a body positive movement.

Ze demands on her blog that organisations and corporations promoting body positivity and plus size, as well as body positive bloggers, have to take a stand against the violence that black people are subjected to around the world. Aside from being mocked and stared at, these bodies are also sexually assaulted, confined and murdered because 'they're are not seen as human'. Thus, dehumanisation does not only cause injuries such as shame and degradation, but the consequences are also deadly.

Although not recognised as political agents in hegemonic political spaces, Stephanie Yeboah and Leah Vernon, through the claim of the visibility of their black, fat and femme bodies, perform a kind of body

politics, a politics on the fringe and in-between. Historically rendered invisible and excluded from white spaces, their embodied presence in digital spaces challenges white supremacy as a central logic and arrangement of visibility. In spite of that they, for the most part, move within 'body positive' spaces, they evoke discomfort and become targets of violence in a way that white fat femme bodies do not.

The body positive stance of being unapologetic is reframed from primarily being about undermining repressive body ideals and manifesting self-love to a struggle for certain bodies to have the right to exist. I suggest that by addressing racism, sexism and fatphobia and by taking the stance of being unapologetic, they contest the dehumanising and racist construction of the black (fat) femme body.

By illuminating and challenging white privilege, they become 'killjoys' (Ahmed 2010), disturbing the (white) (naïve) body positive fantasy of 'all bodies' as 'good bodies', thus pointing towards a possible expansion, redefinition and 'repoliticising' of body positivity and its ostensible acknowledgement of 'difference'. And possibly also pointing towards a feminist future beyond white supremacy.

## Notes

1. Kinzel, Lesley. 2016. Falling Out of Fatshion: How I Lost My Appetite for Writing About Fat Politics. *Lesely was here*. 2 February 2016, <http://www.lesleykinzel.com/>
2. I regard the blogs to be public material and the bloggers as authors. <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/v>.
3. All citations from Swedish media are translated by the author.
4. Leah Vernon, *The Beauty and the Muse*. <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
5. Stephanie Yeboah, *Nerd about Town*. <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
6. Leah Vernon, *The Beauty and the Muse*. <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
7. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Why You Don't Always Need to Stick to Your Clothing Size', *Nerd about Town*, 4 January 2019, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>

8. Leah Vernon, 'Instagram Trolls: Body Shaming and Beyond', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
9. Leah Vernon, 'Instagram Trolls: Body Shaming and Beyond', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
10. Leah Vernon, 'Why Eating in Public has Empowered me', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
11. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Black Fat Women Matter too', *Nerd about Town*, 6 August 2017, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
12. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Black Fat Women Matter too', *Nerd about Town*, 6 August 2017, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
13. Leah Vernon, 'The Deletion of the Perfect Hijabi', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 4 March 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
14. Leah Vernon, 'The Deletion of the Perfect Hijabi', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 4 March 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
15. Leah Vernon, 'The Deletion of the Perfect Hijabi', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 4 March 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
16. Leah Vernon, 'Body Positivity. All Bodies are Good Bodies', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 4 May 2016, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
17. Leah Vernon, 'Why Eating in Public has Empowered me', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
18. Stephanie, Yeboah, 'Preaching and Practicing', *Nerd About Town*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
19. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Preaching and Practicing', *Nerd About Town*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
20. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Embracing me', *Nerd About Town*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
21. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Body positivity=stop showing off your body', *Nerd about Town*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
22. Stephanie, Yeboah, 'Body positivity=stop showing off your body', *Nerd about Town*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
23. Stephanie, Yeboah, 'Body positivity=stop showing off your body', *Nerd about Town*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
24. Stephanie Yeboah, 'I got the Juice', *Nerd About Town* 19 January 2019, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
25. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Plus Size Dating', *Nerd About Town*, 22 February 2019, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
26. Leah Vernon, 'The Unconventional: Thriving As A Covered Model', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>

27. Leah Vernon, 'The Unconventional: Thriving As A Covered Model', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
28. Leah Vernon, 'The Unconventional: Thriving As A Covered Model', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
29. Leah Vernon, 'The Unconventional: Thriving As A Covered Model', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
30. Leah Vernon, '#The Body Project Trailer', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
31. Vogue, or vogueing, is a highly stylised, modern house dance that evolved out of the [Harlem ballroom scene](#) of the 1960s.
32. Stephanie Yeboah, '11 years', *Nerd About Town*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
33. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Being Unapologetic Can Be Hard', *Nerd About Town*, 14 June 2018, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
34. Stephanie Yeboah, 'Black fat women matter too', *Nerd About Town*, 6 August 2018, <https://www.nerdabouttown.com/>
35. Leah Vernon, 'I'm not Sorry. Actually I'm Unapologetic', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
36. Leah Vernon, 'Muslim Girl Dance#Body Project', *The Beauty and the Muse*, 8 September 2017, <https://www.beautyandthemuse.net>
37. I use 'hir' and 'ze' as pronouns since the author does not define herself as a cis-gender person.

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# 6

## Rainbow Flag and Belongings/ Disbelongings: Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg, Sweden 2019

Cathrin Wasshede

Reclaim Pride will take place at Världskulturmuseet (The National Museum of World Culture) in August this year. Reclaim Pride is for all queers who do not feel welcome at West Pride, for those who are critical of the commercialization of Pride festivals, for those who feel their hearts in their mouths when the police show up in the Rainbow Park, for those who wonder what the police or the political parties—that repeatedly vote against the interests of LGBTQ people—are doing at Pride, for those who have not forgotten the LGBTQ movement’s roots in the Stonewall Riots, and for those who would rather visit a grassroots festival for queers, by queers. (Reclaim Pride 2019)<sup>1</sup>

So come to Hotel Trubaduren and join us in the demonstration of everybody’s right to be whoever he/she/it (ze) is and the freedom to love the one you love!!! (Öckerö Pride 2019)

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Join us in the struggle for an equal and inclusionary world, free from prejudices and discrimination! (Öckerö Pride 2019)

In 2019, two events that in a broad sense concern LGBTQ people (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans persons and queers) took place in and around Gothenburg, the second-largest city in Sweden. Their approaches are different in many respects: the language and discourses used, the people they address and the aims that the events are supposed to fulfil. The rainbow flag and the concept of Pride, including their relation to West Pride,<sup>2</sup> are however central to both events. In this chapter I intend to discuss how belongings and disbelongings are created in and around Reclaim Pride and Öckerö Pride in relation to the rainbow flag and the concept of Pride. I will depart from my own experiences and emotions when visiting the events, which means I am inspired by auto-ethnographic methods (Hemmingson 2009; Adams et al. 2014). My reflections circulate around questions such as: What meanings, emotions, actions and temporalities are (re)produced as a result of the relationship between the events, the rainbow flag, the concept of Pride and the activists/participants—including myself? In what ways do the rainbow flag and the concept of Pride work as co-producers of belongings as well as disbelongings—and how does my position as a Swedish, white, middle-class, lesbian, feminist, mother, former activist and now sociologist affect my feelings of belonging and disbelonging?

Cultural artefacts such as the rainbow flag are seen here as empty/floating signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), i.e. as phenomena that are interpreted, used and challenged in different ways in different contexts. They do not have fixed meanings, but are involved in co-productions of meaning/reality/life together with other agents, such as human beings, artefacts, nature, symbols, etc. The fact that something like the rainbow flag is an empty signifier does not mean, therefore, that it is meaningless to study. Rather the opposite; it is when studying it in different local contexts that we can grasp how it is used and what it does to people. Different meanings, emotions and values are attached to it. It is when we see it used in practice that we can get sight of its performative potentials. The rainbow flag is also a materiality. It is a piece of cloth, a picture, a symbol printed on posters or placards, and it can also appear in the form of

jewellery, tattoos, garlands, etc. It is strips of colours put together. Materiality is always active in co-producing communities of belonging; it stabilises, makes assemblies visible and emotionally connects people. Saba Mahmood (2009) adds an important point when discussing the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a specific sign, such as an image, an icon—or a flag. She claims that the sign's meanings go far beyond representation and instead are based in attachment and cohabitation. Signs, such as the rainbow flag, exert a force in our world, they do things, but they do so in a transformative relationship that binds the sign to the spectator; the object to the subject; the signified to the signifier. When this relationship takes place an image is never just an image, a flag is never just a flag.

In spite of the rainbow flag's importance as a symbol for transnational queer belonging and its meanings for the survival of queers all over the world, much critical queer Anglo-Saxon research about the rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride claims that it has lost its radical potential. Queer activism, such as Reclaim Pride, is an integral part of this critique. According to these critics, the flag and the Pride parades have become normalised, mainstreamed, and thus harmless. It is used by capitalist market-driven businesses and cities in order to sell their products and services (Klapeer and Laskar 2018; Peterson et al. 2018), by nations to wash away the country's image of being homophobic, so-called pink-washing, and to build an image of the nation as modern and tolerant, so-called homonationalism (Puar 2007; Alm and Martinsson 2016; Laskar et al. 2016). It also functions as a tool for attempts by right-wing groups to dismiss immigrants and refugees, accusing them of being backwards and intolerant, often combined with statements about Islam (Brown 2009; Puar 2007). The figure of 'the white gay monogamous person' is hijacked—and fetishised—by these nationalist forces. Judith Butler's well-known words about the craving of LGBTQ people and movements for recognition from the state point at how the need for legitimation and equal rights risks creating a figuration of 'the good sexual citizen'/'the good and right homosexual body', and thereby excluding other, less worthy subjects (Butler 2004). When homosexuality becomes a question of equal rights based on identity, as in many celebrations of Pride, including Öckerö Pride, sexual citizenship risks being

individualised, disciplined and desexualised (Blanc 2013). The equality take on these questions also implies that queers ought to be equal to something; in this case the heteronormative subject that marries one other person and gives birth to children; i.e. a subject that fulfils a copy of the heteronormative nuclear family (ibid.).

In their book about Pride parades, Peterson et al. (2018) explain the tension between Pride politics and queer politics with the fact that Pride parades in many countries have been so strongly supported by the state, the capitalist market and the wider civil society that we now have: ‘a convergence between LGBT politics and neoliberal state practices’ (ibid.: 12). They also talk about Pride parades as containers of western liberal values and a ‘litmus test’ of a nation’s democratic status. Since so many allies, organisations, political parties and businesses are participating in Pride parades and waving rainbow flags, the parade and the rainbow flag are no longer necessarily signs of one’s lesbianism, gayness, trans identity or queerness. However, allies can be very important for a movement to succeed, both in making it legitimate and in getting support to reach its goals (see also Wahlström et al. 2018). The presence of allies, of *normal* people, may help to throw off stigmas related to dirt, disgust and sin. Still, the questions posed by many activists and researchers are relevant: Can friends be too friendly? Is there a ‘de-gaying’ risk? A risk of undermining the radicalism of queer politics? A desexualisation of queer subjects? Of shifting the ownership of such events? (Peterson et al. 2018). It is obvious that analyses of the rainbow flag and Pride parades need to be contextualised. In many contexts the flag is under attack and LGBTQ people are fighting for the right to exist, which means that the flag is connected to questions of life and death for queers. Even though these attacks are beyond the scope of this article, they are a fundamental background to both the events and my reflections upon my own participation in them.

Sweden is a country, which, together with Norway, Denmark, Netherlands and Canada, is often deemed to be one of the world’s most tolerant of homosexuality. The tolerance is seen as a signum of the open, educated, enlightened state that the country is so proud of having achieved (Laskar et al. 2016). Even though Sweden *has come a long way* (note my use of a linear timeframe) regarding laws and official policies, LGBTQ people are still hit by homophobic actions and many are still not



open about their sexual identification, especially not at work or in public (Björk and Wahlström 2018). This linear developmental framing of time, of which I just gave an example, is also related to space and the relations between centre and periphery. We often get caught in a trap that positions the queer subject as always moving forward, situated in a linear timeframe where the urban is fixed as fast and new and the rural as slow and old (Crawford 2017). This is, of course, deeply entangled with notions of the West as modern, free, rational and progressive, and ‘the rest’ as backward, traditional, stuck and conservative. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) claims that we are living in a chronobiological society where the state and other institutions impose temporal schemata on us. Properly temporalized bodies move and change within specific frames, in which the accumulation of health and wealth for the future, and marriage, reproduction, childrearing and death are necessary steps. Queer subjects often depart from this framework, something which Lee Edelman (2004) sees as a queer opportunity to resist the present temporal order. In his discussion of *reproductive futurism*, the child represents the possibility of the future. The ‘queer as in no future-approach’ is interesting in relation to the hopes for another society and the politics of (n)utopias (Thörn 1997) that I contend are so present in queer activism—and which are played out quite differently in events such as Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride.

From the beginning, Pride was an urban phenomenon that was concentrated in big cities, but it has now become a concern, a happening, even for people in the rural parts of a country, as for example in Öckerö. Mary Gray et al. (2016) state that rurality has become the constitutive outside of urban life and is defined as unchanging and fostering a religious culture of sexual conservatism that is intolerant and/or phobic towards gender and sexual diversity. Further, they point to the temporal and spatial assumptions that permeate the metronormative stories about queers leaving the rural and entering the urban in order to enjoy ‘freedom as gays’. The urban is seen as the place to which you are heading, i.e. the future, and the location where you can unfold your gayness (ibid.: 12–13). Metronormativity is consciously expressed and explained in Lucas Crawford’s (2017: 917) words: ‘... the city is where queers *do* queerness, and the country is where things *are done* to queers’. However,

he argues that even though queer theory and culture are metronormative, it is important not to get trapped in its opposite either; by romanticising rural queer lives and/or temporalities (ibid.; see also Halberstam 2005; Gray et al. 2016). Instead, he urges us to see the ever ongoing movements and influences between the rural and the urban and to investigate what rurality can do, rather than focus on what happens to queers in rural locales. In light of the metronormative discourse, it is interesting to study rural Prides.<sup>3</sup> Further, it is of importance to acknowledge that new articulations, new forms of struggle and resistance are taking place in both rural and urban spaces.

To conclude this introduction; it is central to this chapter that a cultural artefact, such as the rainbow flag, and its role in the co-production of belongings and disbelongings, has to be seen in its context. The plain presence of LGBT(Q) bodies in the public sphere is provocative in non-gay-friendly contexts (Peterson et al. 2018) and the more gay-friendly a context, the bigger the arsenal of dramaturgical tools (e.g. Wasshede 2017). The local mobilising context and frames are important; do the organisers mostly want LGBTQ people to participate or do they want a broader group to come? What is the goal of the event? In the two cases analysed for this chapter the goals are very different; the organisers of Öckerö Pride want to have a broad reach, educate 'ordinary people' and normalise homosexuality (even if there are aspects that work in the opposite direction); at Reclaim Pride the aim is to offer a political alternative to the ordinary West Pride and offer a safe place for queers of different kinds. Nevertheless, the rainbow flag is highly visible and in focus in both cases.

In the following sections, my visits to these two events are described and reflected upon with a focus on my own experiences and feelings regarding belonging and disbelonging, paying attention to my position as a former lesbian feminist activist now working in academia. It is inspired by what I would call an affective auto-ethnographic (e.g. Hemmingson 2009; Adams et al. 2014) way of analysing and writing. However, in the text you will also find some more traditional sociological reflections. My choice to shift between observing myself in the middle of the events and the more 'distanced' way of conducting analyses makes the text a mixture of academic text and field notes—maybe also diary and political

pamphlet? I use myself as a tool to gain a deeper knowledge of the processes of belonging and disbelonging that are taking place in a broader sense, even though it is a bit uncomfortable (for a discussion about sociological introspection and auto-ethnography see Hemmingson 2009). My hope is that these leaps between the personal, the political and the academic/scientific will produce useful new insights for both academia and activism.

## 6.1 Reclaim Pride

Reclaim Pride, in 2019 celebrated for the second time in Gothenburg, is a reaction against ordinary Pride—West Pride as it is called in Gothenburg—which is seen by some queer activists as a commercial happening that has lost its political potential. In 2019, Reclaim Pride moved its location from a more peripheral site to the centre of Gothenburg, to Världskulturmuseet, which is an established and respected institution owned by the state. Reclaim Pride is a phenomenon that over the world insists that the roots of the LGBTQ movement reach back to before the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and that the struggle was led by queers of colour, trans persons, sex workers, as well as lesbians and other queer persons. As early as 1965 a protest group called *The Compton Cafeteria Uprising* was formed in California to fight back against harassment and police brutality (Reclaim Pride Coalition New York 2019). Reclaim Pride is about remembering these roots and honouring them by not accepting that the struggle for liberation ends when the normalised white middle-class monogamous gay person is accepted by the majority. The struggle is intersectional: anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ableism, anti-capitalism and anti-war, etc. (Reclaim Pride 2019; Reclaim Pride Coalition New York 2019).

Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg has emerged from the queer activist milieu in Gothenburg, which I would say is imprinted by the character of the city. Historically, Gothenburg is an industrial and harbour city with a strong working-class movement. This has led to a political milieu formed by many different social movements and protest groups, among them many feminist and queer activists (Wasshede 2010, 2017). In 2007,

the activist network *Göteborgs Queerinstitut* (The Queer Institute of Gothenburg) was formed and since then many events have been arranged by them or related groups. Reclaim Pride is one of these events.

## 6.2 My Visit to Reclaim Pride 2019

I have been looking forward to the event and planned to go there with my closest friends. I am filled with mixed feelings. I don't feel as if I am part of the queer community; they are younger than I and more politically queer than I am. But at the same time, maybe I do belong? I have been on the outskirts of the queer scene in Gothenburg for many years; I admire the activists, I have done research about them and I actually embrace most of their political perspectives and stands. So, as I get on my bicycle to go there on Friday morning, I am going to work, to socialize with my friends and to take part in the content of the festival. When I arrive and park my bicycle I immediately see some people I recognise—either as people I know or have met before, or as the 'typical bunch'. I smile and feel happy inside. Those brave young people—I love them. I go inside and feel exposed. People are sitting on the broad stairs of Världskulturmuseet, which serves as a stand, and from there you can see everyone that enters the venue. I try to look cool and I search for my friends. When I find them I join them as quickly as possible. Relieved. I have people here that are mine, with whom I can feel safe (Fig. 6.1).

During the day we create a safe space in the bigger space. We stick together and we include some more people that we know, some of them deeply involved in the queer struggle, some of them also performers during the event. Quite high up on the stairs we establish a base, a kind of safe haven where we can drink coffee, talk loudly, laugh, lie down and rest. As if we belong there. We were activists long before many of the young queers in the room were even born, we were/are lesbian feminists, we took illegal actions at night, we participated in the *Frigörelsedemonstration* (Gay and Lesbian Liberation Demonstration) at a time when there were only around 25–50 of us walking up along Avenyn (the main boulevard) in Gothenburg. One year we were spat at by the neo-Nazis who stood along the demo route, raising their arms in a Nazi salute. We arranged several 8 March



Fig. 6.1 Care at Reclaim Pride. (Photo: Hanna Wikström)

celebrations, started feminist cafés, consciousness-raising groups and so much more. I am simultaneously both proud and ashamed. Proud for what I have done and even more for what some of my friends have done. Ashamed that I stopped being an activist. I got married. I had a child. I lived the ultimate heteronormative life, except it was with another lesbian. But still. I struggle with myself and my feelings of belonging and disbelonging, of pride and shame. I also observe how, due to my own feelings of insecurity, I risk being exclusionary myself as soon as I feel safe with my crew. How I greet high-status members of the queer community with extra warmth; how confident I am that I know some of them, can even hug some of them. Ashamed again. What am I doing? What am I trying to prove? And to whom? I guess it is a way to make myself feel that I do belong even though I spend most of my time at the university and with my family.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) way of describing feelings of comfort and discomfort is relevant here. To follow the white, heteronormative line or not, and how being queer is the same as a disruption of that line and how

that makes us uncomfortable in life. Something is always aching. You are always uncomfortably aware of yourself in the situation and whether it is a safe place or not. Of course, this shifts a lot depending on how well you fit into society. I am privileged, since I am defined as white, middle-class, able-bodied and as an academic—I even have a child/am a mother. But even though I know that my frictions and aches are less than some, I always have a feeling of not belonging, of being something not worthy, sometimes even disgusting. I know that my rights as a citizen can be taken away from me at any time. The political developments in society, with Trump in the USA and the expansion of the right-wing populist political party Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) in Sweden, scare the shit out of me. I know that some of the queers in the room at Reclaim Pride have been harassed by neo-Nazis or people from the radical right, beaten at night, threatened, arrested by the police, and I know that some of them have attempted suicide (and many of us know about someone who succeeded). I know that some of them cut themselves with sharp knives, some have been drinking too much or still do. I know that their parents have rejected many of them. Comfort and discomfort are sometimes a matter of life and death. Living in oppression has its costs. And this is what makes the communities of belonging so important. However, in parallel with experiences of oppression and pain, the LGBTQ movement has a long history of celebrating the joy and pleasures in queer lives. Showing and feeling pride is often a central part of this, also at this event.

Activists in the queer community in Gothenburg have over many years developed a certain queer aesthetic, the main ingredients of which are irony, carnivalesque and verbal art. Through exposing emotions such as pleasure, hate, anger and joy in their actions and performances in a very politically, academically and artistically skilled way they have shaped the queer resistance in the city since the beginning of the 2000s (Wasshede 2017). My analysis of this has been framed with the help of Mary Douglas' (1984) discussions about dirt and Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. I have chosen to define the queer use of hate and dirt rhetoric as a resistance strategy that I call abjectionification, which means an active use of and from the abject position. Instead of trying to be normal, pure and accepted by the majority society, queer activists throw the sin, dirt and

criminal stigma back in the faces of the so-called normals. They do not care about how the majority sees them; they use the classic queer *in-your-face strategy* (see, for example, Jagose 1996). So, when the musical *Stön från Duvemåla* (Moans from Duvemåla), a parody of the famous Swedish musical *Kristina från Duvemåla*, is performed at Reclaim Pride it is no surprise that it entails a lot of abjectification and irony. What interests me is the intensified interest in the rainbow flag. Last time I heard queer activists talk publicly about the rainbow flag was in 2010, when they urged people to burn it.

The musical is performed by around ten actors/singers/dancers and a large orchestra called *Queerorkestern* on the first day of Reclaim Pride. A considerable number of people have come to listen to/see it and the audience is mostly composed of supporters and friends. In the end, when *Folkets sång* (The Song of the People) is performed, the audience stand up, we raise our fists and sing along. Below, I will reflect upon some of the musical pieces, in what I described earlier in this text as a more traditional sociological way. The musical texts chosen here are all related to critique of the rainbow flag, Pride events and RFSL (the national Swedish organization for LGBTQ people's rights). In the song *Helt normal* (Totally normal) the text is harsh in its critique of Pride parades:

Whenever you parade I don't understand  
 Do you believe yourselves or are you fooling me?  
 Everyone thinks the same and all love is good  
 Come, join us in our rainbow party and sing hallelujah  
 Once upon a time there was defiance and struggles when we occupied  
 the city  
 Now the straights are in majority in the Pride parade

Later on they sing:

Totally normal, totally normal  
 When did that become the ideal of pride?  
 Totally banal bourgeois nonsense  
 Continued oppression under the rainbow flag  
 (---)  
 Nice rainbow policemen hit us with rainbow batons



In these lines the rainbow flag is positioned as the ultimate symbol of normalisation, assimilation and mainstreaming of the LGBTQ struggle. It is seen as a masque that hides struggles, oppression and differences—even violence. The song expresses the frustration that is felt over the sell-out that many of us are (and/or feel) guilty of. It is not only the fact that the *lagom* (moderate) way of being LGB(T) won; that the good, decent, normal, white, well-functioning, productive gay person was the one who became tolerated and allowed into the *folkhem* (the people's home, 'the Swedish Middle Way'), what could be called homonormativity (e.g. Duggan 2003; Rupp and Taylor 2014). It is also the fact that it goes hand in hand with the sell-out of the Swedish welfare system and the closing of borders to 'undesirables'. Borders are thus enforced both within and around the nation. In the song this is represented by the lyrics about *nice rainbow policemen* hitting queers—in the name of the rainbow. The bad queers are corrected while the good queers are embraced—as long as they/we behave well and discipline our rage and pain. The words *all love is good*, which are so often associated with the rainbow flag, are wonderful words. No one can object to them. Still, the performers do. The musical text highlights that when the rainbow flag is used as a peace symbol, inclusive and full of love, it risks denying anger, hate, dirt and even sadness and sorrow. It is a sign of the (potential) joyful LGBTQ life, or a fantasy of it. A sign of sameness; we are just like you, we are not dangerous, we are nice people, just like you (e.g. Duggan 2003; Puar 2007).

However, in one of the last scenes, the actors make fun of themselves and the queer carnivalesque and provocative way of doing politics. They start by questioning how to be radical, how to make political change, and answer it with *Massa sex* (Lots of sex), a choice that is to be expected in this context:

Massive, provocative perversities  
 Perverse bad habits with queer potential  
 Fictive prediscursive perversities  
 Filth (snusk) is our weapon against all bourgeois morals  
 (---)  
 Oh, we have to have offensive sex  
 So straights are shocked and rebellion starts  
 Disgusting dirty loathsome delightful



In this scene the artists are dressed in what are normally considered sexy outfits, they show a lot of skin, make ‘fuck moves’ (imitating sexual intercourse with each other). We, the audience, smile and enjoy the show. Maybe we raise an eyebrow noticing the massive use of mainstream porn-like clothing and attributes, but we are relieved when we realise how they are combined in anarchistic and queer ways. The nowadays ‘traditional’ (!) and ‘normal’ (!) queer way of provoking and resisting, i.e. abjectification (Wasshede 2017), is used. But this is only in order to suddenly make a total change of direction and criticise their own glorification of sex and instead sing about friendship, care and solidarity as the right way to fight:

Queers’ care  
For each other and for life  
Is as radical as our beautiful perversions  
(---)  
Celebrate friendship  
Real friendship  
We stand together and are ready for struggle

The musical wouldn’t be queer if it hadn’t turned its own messages on its head. Self-reflection, deconstruction and a permanent movement towards something unanticipated are the essences of queering things. It is a future-oriented strategy that at the same time questions a linear temporality. I would say that the musical artists are trying to ruralise, i.e. slow down (Crawford 2017), the tempo of their own queer performance by interrupting their own zestful wallowing in sex. Another way of understanding the shift to care and friendship is to see it as a necessary practice within a minority community. It is not enough to provoke, take action, have fun, have sex; you have to take care of each other as well. Reclaim Pride in 2019 has a focus on racism, borders, asylum seekers, newcomers, etc., which is also a sign of emphasising care and a widening of the ‘we’—the circles of friendships.

In another scene in the musical they make fun of the rainbow flag when they sing about it to the music from *Do-Re-Mi* in *The Sound of*

*Music.* All of the people on stage perform as well-behaving scouts with rainbow scarves around their necks. They are very obedient as they follow the authoritative leader and practise singing various combinations of queer-related letters (LGBTQIRFSL etc.). They are dressed in clothes reminiscent of costumes from *The Sound of Music*, they march in straight lines and at the beginning of the scene they orchestrate a play with the disciplined body versus the 'free' body: someone comes in wearing a dress from the 1940s that is open, exposing the belly and the flesh in a way that I think is intended to be ugly, vulgar and/or funny, and after just a few seconds the person is helped and/or forced to pull in their stomach and make themselves thin and able to fit the dress.

In a scene at the beginning of the musical they also make fun of themselves and their own conformity by showing how a heterosexual couple are persuaded to become queers, and when they do, they are dressed in a 'queer costume', i.e. a special sort of leisure jacket with stripes down the sides (Adidas-like). Their hairstyles are also changed; blond long-haired wigs are thrown away. Among the lines they sing during this scene are:

Suddenly alerted, like from hypnosis  
 What a disgusting heteropsychosis  
 Romance was a chimera  
 To keep genders apart  
 Never again  
 Now we become queers  
 And ahh ... what a pleasure it gives

Through the irony used they problematise conformity and the fact that everybody in the room supposedly agrees on everything, pointing to the dangerous and comfortable context of consensus. Creating new paths, new routes, is necessary and unavoidable, but after a while even those new routes become normalised and hindering. So you have to create more new ones. What does it mean to a group to repeatedly question its own community and its prerequisites? How do you create a feeling of belonging and safety if the rules, conditions, norms, etc., change and are turned upside down over and over again? You sit there, feeling comfortable and cosy, leaning towards your 'crew', when suddenly a voice from

the stage strips it all away and points to its exclusionary effects and how your need for comfort has actually led you to betray your radical vision. Ahmed's (2017) words about the feminist need to endure discomfort and ache, even be the producer of it, describe my emotions here; I ambivalently move between belonging and disbelonging, between being right and totally wrong, being on my way at the same time as being lost.

### 6.3 Öckerö Pride

Unlike Reclaim Pride, Öckerö Pride is inspired by West Pride and has a focus on changing attitudes and making everyone feel welcome to Öckerö municipality, a cluster of islands outside of Gothenburg. They arrange education in LGBTQ issues and have organised the annual Öckerö Pride and Culture festival since 2017. Even though it only takes about 45 minutes to cover the distance between the islands and the city, there are some differences between the places—some of them regarding the situation for LGBTQ people.

In 2015, a motion to the city council, written by two Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna), urged that the rainbow flag should be raised on official flagpoles in the municipality during the celebration of West Pride in Gothenburg. The motion was dismissed by Öckeröalliansen, the ruling political coalition consisting of the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD), the Moderates (Moderaterna, the 'moderate' right wing) and the Liberals (Liberalerna), which led to the establishment of the association Öckerö Pride. It was started as a protest against what was seen as the municipality's unwillingness to support LGBTQ rights. The association is mainly run by heterosexual allies, but there are also some active LGBTQ members. In 2016, a new motion was submitted, and this time the Öckeröalliansen was split and the motion was accepted, with only KD voting against the decision. From the interview with the political leader for KD (Interview, leader Christian Democrats and Head of Öckerö City Council), it is obvious that he is not very happy about the decision to hoist the rainbow flag, but in a democratic spirit he says that he and his party now accept the decision and will move on. The argument

behind KD's resistance to hoisting the flag is expressed in the following text:

To many people the Pride flag is primarily a symbol for everyone's equal worth. For others, like us, the flag is primarily a symbol for the LGBTQ movement, and it signifies Pride and diversity among homosexuals, bisexuals and trans persons. Depending on how you see the symbolism of the Pride flag, the question becomes totally different. (Suggestion for decision KD 2017)

This is a fight over what to fill the empty signifier, the rainbow flag, with. The political leader for KD is a bit upset that Öckerö Pride claims that the flag is a symbol of everyone's equal worth. 'Who defines what the flag symbolizes?', he asks. For him it is important to distinguish between the flag and people's equal worth and discrimination. The flag is a flag—and according to him it represents an association, a movement. The municipality should not support one specific group above all others: 'We could raise a flag for disabled people, we could raise a flag for ethnic identities, for religions. Because people are discriminated against for these things too', he says. Discrimination is key to this argument. If someone is discriminated against, he would immediately act to investigate it and take action to stop it. However, in Sweden there is a hegemonic discourse in the public political debate that the rainbow flag is something good. It is almost naturalised, as in taken for granted—as a part of Swedish culture. It is almost impossible to be against the flag, as the political leader of KD says. Consequently, he is quick to say that he is not against the flag per se, he is of course in favour of everybody's right to love.

The Öckerö Pride association has worked hard to anchor the Öckerö Pride festival in the local context and get sponsors for the annual event. One of the founders of Öckerö Pride talks about how they speak to the locals 'in a language that the locals understand' and continues:

If we kick in doors, they will put up new ones, heavier ones. We don't believe in a fist, but more in a handshake, and if you get a no, you have to back off and try to enter another way maybe. ... They have to open the door freely. (Interview, organizer Öckerö Pride)

Many people on the islands are happy to celebrate Pride; they participate in activities and they speak for LGBTQ people's rights, etc. One example of this is the story told in an interview with one of the organizers of Öckerö Pride about an older man who was in the local shop, which had rainbow flags for sale. Another man entered the shop and started grouching about the flags and that he didn't like them. This led to the first man telling him off: 'I told him he could go home to his own island instead' (Interview, organizer Öckerö Pride). Another example is the female priest who arranges annual love services in the Swedish church around the same time as the Öckerö Pride celebrations. These are examples of how the culture on these so-called 'conservative islands' is not always so conservative. On the contrary, in the interviews I hear a lot of stories about openness, friendliness and inclusiveness. These are mixed, however, with stories about homophobia, young people committing suicide for not being accepted as gays, rainbow flags being stolen or taken down, religious communities condemning homosexuality and LGBTQ people not daring to be visible and open about their identity and/or relationships. So, when Öckerö Pride takes place once a year it is a very special event. It is a family party, a festival, a political statement, a queer show and an opportunity to be able to feel safe holding your lover's hand in public—for a day.

## 6.4 My Visit to Öckerö Pride 2019

In 2019, I participate in Öckerö Pride for the first time. It is a mix of work and leisure—and also a challenge to myself to do something on my own. I usually do things together with my friends, not by myself. I feel a bit uncomfortable about this, I am nervous when I leave home that Saturday morning.

This year is the third annual Öckerö Pride and the organizers hope it will be a success and attract a lot of people. To make it easier for people from the city to participate, a big tourist ferry has been hired to pick up participants in the centre of Gothenburg and take them to Hönö Klåva, the harbour on one of the islands where the festivities are being held. I have decided to take this ferry. When I arrive at the place from where the ferry is due to leave I see very few LGBTQ people. Am I in the wrong

place? Am I too early? Too late? Then I see them. A small group of women, obviously lesbians/queers, so I go over to them and start talking about the details of the trip; where exactly is the boat, etc. They are friendly and I stay on the outskirts of their group, still very uncomfortable. When we get closer to the boat, I see one person I know a little so we greet each other with a hug. But when we get on the ferry I end up sitting alone on the outer deck. There are few of us on the boat, strangely enough. As I sit there, another woman I know vaguely comes up and asks if she can sit next to me. I am thankful not to be alone, and say yes. We talk the whole trip. After a while, a female crew member hoists the rainbow flag on the ferry and within seconds we are all standing there taking photos with our smartphones. It is beautiful. It is impressive. It is dancing in the wind. We are giving it our full attention and we are all happy about it. It is like a script; this is important, this is something to be proud of, happy about, it is *our* flag. At the same time I feel embarrassed. I am very aware of the criticism surrounding the rainbow flag. I am critical myself. It is also a normative, normalising, commercialised symbol. It has lost its radical potential. It is accepted almost everywhere in society. Not only accepted but loved, cherished, honoured. Everybody embraces its message about love and everybody's right to love whomever they want (Fig. 6.2). So there we are, looking up at the flag and the sky and we are so happy—and proud? Some people start to drink a special beer from the islands with a rainbow flag on it, which has been brewed for this special occasion (Hönöbryggeriet 2019).

Just as the boat arrives at Hönö Klåva, the small Pride parade reaches the harbour, passing it on its way to the stage. I feel a rush, a genuine feeling of happiness and love. Wow, here they are, my people, the brave people, demonstrating their love and lives on the small 'conservative islands'. And they have really timed the ferry well; I am convinced that they have been waiting for the ferry and for us to join them. We do so. The parade is colourful, as always, rainbow flags and other decorations in rainbow colours, music, songs, dancing. Someone puts a rainbow flag in my hand and I immediately start to sway with it. I am staying quite close to my new friend from the boat, still worrying about being alone out there, in the crowd. Even so, it is a happy moment.



**Fig. 6.2** Taking photos of the raising of the rainbow flag. (Photo: Cathrin Wasshede)

We arrive at the stage, it is close to Trubaduren, a well-known restaurant/hotel at Hönö Klåva that is hosting/sponsoring the event—and, of course, will also earn a lot of money this day. It is crowded with people. Nearly every political party is there with its own table and pamphlets, everyone but the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD), who govern the municipality, and the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna). Over the course of the day I see and/or meet almost everyone that I have interviewed, except the man from KD. Families, children, older people and a lot of obviously gay and/or queer people are mingling. The music is loud and the place is crowded. I start to feel alienated. What am I doing here? Why did I come here by myself? I am not going to be able to talk to someone or do the mini-interviews that I had in mind as my work for the day ... it is

too chaotic. One of the organizers comes on stage and welcomes everybody. People are cheering. Then there are lots of performances, from speeches about trans rights to dancing by a group of quite young girls from a local dance group. At some point in the middle of all this activity my friend from the boat leaves and says that she is going to circulate. I am on my own, in the middle of the crowd. Feeling lonely and more and more miserable.

At one point a young queer poet comes on stage and starts shouting words. It is outrageous and vulgar, and a lot of dirty words are used in a provocative way. People leave, parents take their children and go for an ice cream or something. I am provoked. Why does the performer have to do it this way? Why on earth did the organisers choose this kind of entertainment? It is a family party, not a queer underground club. Or is it? Why am I so upset? Maybe because the normalisation process is interrupted. This is not nice, normal and acceptable. It is just vulgar, dirty. Abject. The ever-present queer strategy. The strategy that I have written about quite a lot, that I love and cherish. But why do I not love and cherish it here and now? Maybe because of the context, the supposedly conservative Christian islands that make it so hard for LGBTQ persons to live there and be open about their sexuality/identity/relationships. This is NOT going to help them! Maybe also because it is not aesthetic in a way that I can embrace. I am used to the queer performances in Gothenburg that are elegantly provocative and almost professional in their forms—like the musical *Stön from Duvemåla* at Reclaim Pride. They have a very ironic awareness of their performances, which makes them brilliant. Frustrated, I leave. I go to a toy store close by and buy a gift that I have to buy and then I go back to the stage again. The poet is still shouting words. At some point it ends.

*Hellmans Drängar* (Hellman's farmhands), a choir for men that was set up in 1994, is one of the main performances, and they are well received. They had also sung at last year's Öckerö Pride. There are about 25–30 men, all dressed in light summer clothes, some of them wearing rainbow accessories; they are co-ordinated and handsome. They sing amazingly. I enjoy it a lot. But after a while I become bored. They sing and sing and sing, for a long time. It is beautiful but actually a bit boring. Where is the radical message? Where is the emotional shock? Why am I not touched? I circulate again.



I am curious—and a bit embarrassed—about my own reactions. My ability to take pleasure in queer performances is actually not so great. When witnessing a *true* queer performance I feel bad and even need to leave. When watching a beautiful singing performance I get bored. Saying that something is *truly queer* is, of course, an impossibility. Queer is not something you are supposed to be able to pin down, define or frame. It is fundamentally something in movement, escaping definitions and always challenging the existing status quo. Anyway, I would like to argue that the poetry performance on the stage at Hönö Klåva is *truly queer*. It is shocking, it provokes and it makes people feel uncomfortable, even disgusted. The words from the musical at Reclaim Pride about indecency, disgusting desire, etc., are put into practice here. At Reclaim Pride they are not. At Reclaim Pride the queer performance is not shocking anyone. It is performed in a context where everyone is already comfortable with that discourse, the jokes, acts and attributes. This is not to say that it is not good or valuable—I am convinced that we need places and performances, as well as floating signifiers such as the rainbow flag, that make us feel comfortable, safe, at home and that strengthen the solidarity, the feeling of belonging to a community, and thereby help us move on with the political struggle in places that are not so comfortable and safe. Taken together, my reaction to these two different queer occasions in different contexts tells me a lot about the ambivalences in the struggle and in our lives. We want to feel at home in society, to belong, at the same time as we feel an urge to resist the normalisation and mainstreaming of our queer lives. This is, of course, nothing new, but it is a concrete example of the inner clashes we experience (or at least that I experience). When my taste, aesthetics and my need for the event to be family-friendly in order to make the majority accept me/us are challenged—I react like this. It is only in the safe queer space that it is comfortable for me to watch/listen to/participate in queer activities. But are they queer under such circumstances? Maybe. Maybe not. Anyhow, I have to realise that I might not be that queer.

Suddenly the woman that I hugged at the ferry in the morning runs into me and invites me to join her group of people. I go with her, feeling like an outsider, standing beside them, but after I while I sit down on a corner of a bench. They all belong to a network called *Häng i Götet* (Hang in Götet/slang for Gothenburg) that has existed since 2016, a large network for lesbians, bisexual and queer cis-women, transwomen and

non-men over the age of 35. This network is mediated through Facebook and arranges a lot of different activities, such as nature walks, meeting up for coffee or drinks, movie nights, book clubs and parties. In my own networks many people see them as not political or queer enough. I seldom join their activities, but I have participated at least at two afterwork occasions. The group that I now meet is a core of the network, they almost seem like a family. They sit around a big table, in the sun, eating food and drinking wine that they brought from home. I am hungry. The woman that invited me asks if I want to share some food. I say no, I am going to buy something later. Am I? Then she asks if I want a glass of wine. I say yes, and they pour wine for me in a plastic glass. In my head I think very fast; this is the way to become comfortable, to not leave the Pride event. I decide to end the part of the day that might have been called work: observations and mini-interviews for my research. Instead I decide to let go of anxiety, drink some wine and relax into the open arms of the group. It feels better after the first sip of the wine. I talk with some of the women in the group, laugh and get a little tipsy, not much, just enough to relax a little. It feels good. I envy them their feeling of family, closeness and safety. One woman has a baby and some of the women in the group take turns holding the child. It makes me happy to see their solid network and sharing of care-giving. I talk briefly to a woman who I used to know in the early 1990s, almost 30 years ago. There is a feeling of summer and being at ease. I feel so relaxed and happy. Almost as if I am a part of this. Of course, I know I am an outsider.

In the centre of the harbour is a gigantic luxury boat, a white yacht. On the deck some people are sitting drinking and partying. They are dressed in glitter and rainbow-coloured party clothes. One of them is wearing a big pink pelican on their head. Suddenly three women in the *Häng i Götet* group begin to talk about going to the boat and performing a dance from there. I get caught up in this plan; we laugh a lot and plan this 'takeover' in more and more detail. At some point I realise they are serious and I begin to get nervous. I don't dare to do such a thing. Perform from a yacht ... but then I decide that my part can be to document the event with photos, phew ... So when they have decided which dance moves to perform, we walk to the yacht and shout to the people on the boat and ask if we can come aboard. Of course, they say yes, it is a happy

day, it is Pride. So three women, two of them around 60 years old, one around 40, climb on to the boat—which is not easy since it is high and steep—and suddenly I see them up there on the deck. They talk to the boat people and they borrow some of their decorations and accessories—including the pelican headdress—and then they start to do some dance moves. After the dance they return the items and come down again, totally high on their action. We look at the photos that I have taken and laugh a lot, it is hilarious. It is unlikely that many people saw it; we had no music and there was so much else going on, in the bar, in the restaurant, on the quay and on the big stage. Not even their friends had noticed the adventure. But we did. And it was so much fun. I felt simultaneously both included and like a stranger, an outsider, a witness. Afterwards, when I told my own friends about this day and this adventure, I came to realise even more the queer amusement it represented. It was so much more queer than many things we do. So brave and shameless. The queer logic *fuck-you-we-don't-care-what-you-think* was practised in reality—by these women, two of whom were in their 60s. I just loved it. But I also loved the touch of the feeling of belonging. That they gave me wine and a place to sit; a temporary community of belonging even for me.

The ferry is about to leave. This time I am sitting together with the group of women from *Häng i Götet*. The woman that I talked with on the trip in the morning and that gave me a kind of safety net at the beginning of the festivities is sitting somewhere else. I feel a bit guilty about not hanging with her, now that I have access to the group. Where is she? Does she have company? I don't even know. I am just relieved that I am included in the group, even if it is only temporary. Selfish. When I arrive home I feel happy about how the day turned out, that I did not leave in the beginning when I felt so alienated. Me staying there was totally dependent on the invitation from the group, even though I felt at home at times just by being in the crowd with *my people*. The LGBTQ community is my people, my family. Even though I may not know a single person there, we belong together, we have a certain connection, some shared experiences that really connect us all around the globe. What is this, how can I explain this feeling of transnational community of belonging? Still, it was not enough to make me feel *at home*, as if I had a place there. I was given a place by the women in the smaller community of belonging. I am so grateful.

## 6.5 Sweden Now: A Kind of Epilogue

While I was writing this chapter lots of things were happening with the rainbow flag in Sweden. In September 2019, the municipality of Sölvesborg, a small city in the south of Sweden, decided to forbid the raising of the rainbow flag on the municipality's flagpoles. Immediately after the news spread on the internet, people reacted to the decision and there were many protests. One action was a call to bomb the municipality's website with pictures of rainbow flags, another was the quick decision by Karlskrona Pride to hold parts of their next Pride celebration in Sölvesborg, and yet another was that the Swedish Church in Sölvesborg posted the rainbow flag on its Facebook page. At the beginning of October there was a protest in Gothenburg, publicly defending the rainbow flag. It is obvious that the rainbow flag is a very topical and emotive cultural artefact—and an empty signifier—in the Swedish political arena.

Until now, few Swedes have openly objected to the raising of the rainbow flag, since that would have positioned them as homophobic and backward. But the political climate in Sweden has changed significantly over the past decade. Conservative and populist parties such as the Christian Democrats and Sweden Democrats have grown and recruited many voters. In the context of the conservative, Islamophobic and racist climate in Europe, with the increasing presence of openly neo-Nazi political parties and associations, it seems to be possible to dismiss the rainbow flag as well as to express strong hostility towards immigrants and Muslims. It was just five years ago that the then Swedish prime minister, the Moderate Fredrik Reinfeldt, challenged his party's politics on immigration and urged the Swedish people to open up their hearts and homes to all the refugees that were coming to our country. It was not long ago, but it feels like another era, another universe. Since then, the tone has changed radically, and things that people would not have said before are now commonly heard in the news, at lunch tables, from stand-up comedians and in schools. Foreigners are no longer that welcome. Borders are to be closed. Young Afghani people are taken from Swedish schools and families to be sent to a country they have never visited and where they fear for their lives. LGBTQ people who seek asylum in Sweden are not deemed trustworthy since they don't have an *accurate* coming-out story to tell.

The rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride are involved in a specific construction of time and place, one which positions some at *the front* and others as *behind*. I find myself repeatedly falling into the trap of a traditional linear timeframe—using words such as *before*, *backwards*, *another time*, etc. Maybe Lucas Crawford’s words can help me (us) change my (our) thinking around temporality. In his text about queer rural temporality Crawford challenges the self-images of queer activists and scholars as always *in the front*. He says: ‘To queer time, it is crucial to ruralize—even “slow” down—queer theory’ (Crawford 2017: 905). To look for the queer to take place even in unanticipated places, such as on the small islands outside of Gothenburg with their queer poetry performance and queer middle-aged ladies dancing on the yacht might be a way to slow down queer theory. Maybe the staged shift of focus from sex and provocative acts to friendship and care in the queer musical at Reclaim Pride is also a way to slow down queer theory and activism.

The circulation of the rainbow flag is, as has been shown in this chapter, a deeply ambivalent process. It can be seen as a ‘globalized cultural commodity that can be purchased on the capitalist market and as a signifier of (neoliberal) tolerance and diversity aimed at inviting and producing as many consumer subjectivities as possible’ (Klapeer and Laskar 2018: 528). At the same time it is a symbol of and an expression for transnational queer belonging. As Klapeer and Laskar write, queers’ experiences of loss and separation, due to exclusions from family, nation, representations, etc., may lead to the rainbow flag symbolising important belonging and new transnational ways of queer being (see also Blanc 2013). It is in this nexus, in these tensions, that we can look for local, and at the same time transnational, meanings of the rainbow flag (e.g. Vertovec 1999).

By focusing on the rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride—and their attachments to and cohabitations with activists, places, practices and emotions (Mahmood 2009)—borders between and around belongings and disbelongings are brought to the fore. In this chapter I have touched upon some aspects of this. My own different positions and experiences as a lesbian, feminist, former activist, academic, Swedish, able-bodied, middle-class, mother, etc., make me dis/belong to different communities, and my circulation between them is not free from frictions. These frictions make me feel, think and move, and I become one of

the many actors involved in the co-production of meanings, emotions, actions and temporalities around the rainbow flag, Pride events and activist communities. Processes of inclusion and exclusion can, however, be much more hurtful and dangerous than the feelings of comfort and discomfort that I have reflected upon in this chapter. In order to grasp the very different effects that these processes have on queer people in different places and situations they should therefore always be contextualised and seen in all their complexities.

## Notes

1. All translations from Swedish throughout the chapter are made by the author.
2. West Pride takes place over several days and at the end there is a big parade in the centre of the city. In 2019, 15,000 people participated in this parade; LGBTQ persons, allies, political parties, associations, unions, sections of the municipality, state authorities, sport clubs (especially football clubs), religious communities and some corporates, etc.
3. In the Nordic countries there are some ongoing projects about rural pride; for example, Anna Olovsson Lööv's project about Decentralized Pride at Lund University. In 2015 a report on being queer in the countryside in Norway, *Skeiv på bygda (Queer in the countryside)*, was published.

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# 7

## Pink Porn Economy: Genealogies of Transnational LGBTQ Organising

Pia Laskar

### 7.1 Introduction

Can the pink porn economy and its dissemination of commercial products, its ability to generate consumers and subjectification processes be regarded as a matter of importance for studies of national and transnational formations of queer belonging and politics?<sup>1</sup> What about the special pink economy of male same-sex pornography—does that have anything to do with the struggles of transnational LGBTQ rights today? In this chapter I will offer an affirmative answer to both these questions and reveal the importance of examining the pink porn economy when describing the development of forms of transnational networking and political activism for sexual rights. This chapter will analyse the understudied Nordic dissemination and politics of male same-sex porn

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magazines and its rhizomatic entanglement in transnational struggles for (homo)sexual rights in the last half of the twentieth century.

Today the pink economy is a widely used concept which has a variety of meanings.<sup>2</sup> To some it describes a consumer market which responds to the purchasing powers among certain groups of queer people. This type of seemingly classless consumer market is sometimes described as one that moved from being a marginalised fringe marketplace expressing the gay and lesbian activist movement—where things such as drinks and badges were sold to cover costs for social gatherings and activities—to a thriving industry including transnational companies that cater to prospective wealthy gay and lesbian consumers as well as to self-identified queer tolerant people. IKEA and Absolut Vodka are just two of the Swedish companies that (in Sweden and other western societies or globalised spaces) market themselves towards such groups.<sup>3</sup> Others use the idea of the pink economy to describe spaces such as gay villages in large cities (Binnie 2004), or corporate hotels, nightclubs, shops, restaurants and cafés using the rainbow flag as part of their brand (Laskar et al. 2016).

The visibility of the neoliberal pink economy today might overshadow its deep roots in the past. However, the pink economy and its creation of sexual identities, consumers and dissemination of commercial objects has a history that is of importance both in unfolding gendered struggles against heteronormativity, and for comprehensible genealogies of today's transnational LGBTQ organisations.

In *The Globalization of Sexuality* (2004) human geographer Jon Binnie discussed how two polarised intellectual streams have been active in analysing the oppression of—and strike backs by—queers in history by regarding oppression as either merely cultural or merely economical. Where the former lacks class analysis, the latter tends to miss out human agency, motivation and desire. Rather, according to Binnie, culture and economy constitute each other and should be studied together when examining the production of sexual identities, cultures and communities. Failing to acknowledge the sometimes impossible task of differentiating between desire, subjectivity processes, consumption, organising and activism in same-sex history of the last half of the twentieth century thus distorts the analysis of the past's gay and lesbian strategies against heteronormativity (Binnie 2004, pp. 52–54). This chapter studies the

rhizomatic flows of pink porn economy magazines within an extended chronological frame, albeit focusing on the 1960–1980 period. Following pink economies via the dissemination of male same-sex porn facilitates a new intersectional analysis of transnational struggles for (homo)sexual rights in the last half of the twentieth century, intricately entangled as they were in desire, gendered subjectivity processes, consumption, organising and activism—to paraphrase Binnie. An analysis of *the pornographic content* in the magazines, however, deserves a separate study—especially the pictures of young, often brown boys, or the frequent orientalism in the short stories (supposedly written by the subscribers themselves describing their own sex tourism).<sup>4</sup>

Further, this chapter also examines the transnational activism and networks which connected the makers, disseminators and subscribers of male same-sex porn magazines produced in Denmark and Sweden in the 1960–1970s. The data are retrieved from the magazines' articles on economic and political activities, as well as their interviews with some of the agents and activists involved. To reveal the interdependence of culture, politics and economy I use Claire Colebrook's feminist engagement with and developments of Deleuze and Guattari's device of concepts. The description of the concepts (in italics) below follows Colebrook's *Understanding Deleuze* (2002).

*Desire* is used to describe *machinic processes* of increasing expansions, connections and creations (both in a human and post-human sense). The making and dissemination of pink porn links into a machinic desire that strives to expand contacts and relations for business, sex, politics and activism, and is thus a clear but previously neglected example of the politics of in-between. The pink porn desire machine sees no defined borders between the above activities: one person, idea or situation can connect to some or all of them. These desire processes comprise *rhizomatic connections*, i.e. random and in a decentralised manner: a subscriber can turn out to be an organiser of male-to-male sexual or political gatherings and actions, and thus become a link to new subscribers or future guests of a pink B&B. Hence each connection that is made rhizomatically may be a beginning of something unplanned such as a new idea, relation or activity. The desire process' rhizomatic connections and interactions, lacking beginnings and endings, shape *assemblages*: compositions of connections

and interactions such as relations, ideas, abilities (like pink social gatherings, B&B accommodations, contact ad magazines, organisations, political congresses and/or -actions, etc.). Those assemblages can rhizomatically also connect to or mutate into other assemblages (such as other pink businesses, ideas, persons, political or social activities, organisations, networks or congresses) in a never-ending transnational process. By using Colebrook's (2002) engagements in Deleuze's and Guattari's device of concepts the study can broaden, deepen and complicate the description of earlier queer strategies against heteronormativity by following the pink economy's rhizomatic connections with political activism—and vice versa: political activism's rhizomatic connections with the pink economy. Furthermore, by unfolding the one-sided targeting of male subscribers of pink porn and subsequently male formations of belonging and its consequences for future transnational LGBTQ organising and some of its aims and tensions, the chapter also seeks to shed more light on the genealogical partitions of lesbian vis-à-vis gay transnational networks and the frictions in their politics.

The chapter will begin with a discussion of the commercial production of male same-sex porn and its impact on the history of male same-sex sexuality transnational organising in Northern Europe. I will then show that it is important to expose this impact so as to both shed light on the production of (homo)sexual desires, subjectification processes, identities, cultures and communities and on the historical division between the lesbian feminist vis-à-vis gay national and transnational activism and politics that followed transnational organising into the new millennium.

## 7.2 Risky but Profitable Politics: A Backdrop

Much has been written about how, in 1948, Axel Lundahl Madsen founded the Danish homophile organization 'Kreis av 1948', which quickly changed its name to 'The Association of 1948' (Förbundet av 1948), and his involvement in setting up a Swedish and Norwegian subdivision of the same organisation. Within two years, the Swedish subdivision changed its name to RFSL (Riksförbundet För Sexuellt Likaberättigande)—the national homophile and later gay and lesbian

liberation organisation established in 1952 and today the largest LGBTQ organisation in Sweden (Kristiansen 2008; Söderström 1999).<sup>5</sup> There has been less focus on the part he played in transnational queer organising in setting up a pink porn economy.

By 1949 Lundahl Madsen and Helmer Fogdegaard had already started the Danish homo magazine *Vennen* (The Friend) for which they openly served as editors. The Danish 'Association of 1948' and its magazine quickly engendered public offence, spread by conventional media, and resulting in Lundahl Madsen's exclusion from the liberal party's youth league, of which he had been an active member until then. Axel Lundahl Madsen also fell foul of other activists in the 'Association of 1948' when he wanted to run the organisation commercially by using income from dances, other social events and the sale of drinks to pay for its campaigning work. When he could not convince the others, he left the association. Shortly afterwards the split he and his lover Eigil Eskildsen were involved in restructuring *Vennen* as a commercial magazine. It contained a mix, featuring articles on police harassment and abuse of homosexual activities, whilst also including pictures of young men and boys (Kristiansen 2008).<sup>6</sup>

Turning a profit out of the pink economy during the 1950s–1960s period should also be particularly highlighted in a context where homosexuality was criminalised or regarded as an illness, and where participation in homosexual networks—as in Lundahl Madsen's case—could lead to persecution by connoting moral decay and perversion with the practitioners which, if exposed, could lead to social stigma and/or unemployment.

The risks of being revealed as a pervert also contributed to an anonymising of activists or writers, and to a praxis where someone seeking homosexual encounters took considerable precautions (Kristiansen 2008; Söderström 1999). In 1955 the police raided the offices of the magazine *Vennen*, finding archives of pornographic images and the subscription register as well as contact addresses for customers, advertisers and models (some photographed in sexual poses when they were under 18 years old, the current age of consent). Following the prosecution and conviction of several individuals the Danish homophile movement became divided into two camps: for or against Lundahl Madsen and Eskildsen. Both men

had been detained in connection with the raid, charged with adultery with minors, and sentenced to jail terms. The consequences of the raid on *Vennen's* office left the magazine the victim of scandal and bolstered the opinions of those who considered homosexuality perverse (Kristiansen 2008).<sup>7</sup>

Despite the risks inherent in the pink porn economy the machinic desire captured in male-to-male same-sex pornography enabled the then publicly stigmatised couple Axel Lundahl Madsen and Eigil Eskildsen to lead a good life after doing their time in prison. They boldly adopted the joint surname Axgil (based on their first names) and expanded the production of pink porn and the mail order business. They continued to distribute contemporary Danish and foreign homo magazines, both pornographic and political, including *Vennen*, the Swiss *Der Kreis* and the German *Der Weg*. They also sold their own publication *Male Models* which, according to ads, contained more pictures than the other magazines on sale.

The commercial side grew in rhizomatic ways and assemblages in the couple's company, a company discreetly called DFT.<sup>8</sup> According to an interview with Axel Axgil, they had soon built up a clientele of some 20,000 transnational mail order customers.<sup>9</sup> According to yet another article, the Axgils advanced their mail order company for 'homoerotic literature' during the 1960s to 'become the largest of its kind in Europe, perhaps in the world' (*Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 2).

### 7.3 Discretion or Openness, Homophiles or Gay Liberation, Rural or Urban? An Ex-course

The Axgil couple's business and activities seem to challenge earlier descriptions of phases in western struggles for homo/sexual rights. The Norwegian historian Hans W. Kristiansen has described a shift from an older homo struggle phase to a younger phase in terms of a transition from a *discretion ideology* to an *openness ideology* (Kristiansen 2008). Yet when the American historian Leila Rupp discusses a homopolitical shift at the end of the

1960s and the early 1970s, she instead uses the terms the *older homophile phase* and the *new gay movement phase* to mark differences. Interestingly, Rupp also concludes that when studying transnational activism, it is harder to notice differences between such phases (Rupp 2011). This is, indeed, relevant when following the Axgil couple's production and transnational dissemination of male-to-male same-sex porn where discretion lives side by side with openness. Continuity rather than disruptions let the machinic desire expand transnationally. Assemblages of people, in political or economic activities, dwelled on a cosmopolitan culture of rhizomatic connections between subscribers, contact ads, conferences and tourism (cf. Meeker 2005).

The gay movement phase can thus also be linked to the spread of pink economy porn with roots back in the 1950s (and earlier) and the so-called homophile phase and its rhizomatic connections with early transnational organising and assemblages and its distribution of male-to-male pink porn magazines (for contacts/subscribers, politics and pleasure). The history of the Axgils, i.e. Lundahl Madsen and his partner Eskildsen, challenges both Kristiansen's and Rupp's division of homopolitical historical shifts. They were indiscreet and open, and rhizomatically connected in assemblages with people and organisations, nationally and transnationally, trying to spread magazines with pink porn and politics at large personal costs—whilst simultaneously making a living, enabling social and sexual encounters and political activities in both rural and urban regions transnationally.

Kristiansen (2008) also points out that the history of same-sex sexuality is often confused with the history of homo-activist movements, where the latter is seen as the politically more interesting and important story. The homo-movements' activism often takes place in urban areas and in large cities. While Kristiansen examines the history of same-sex sexuality and focuses on rural practitioners, Rupp studies the history of homo-activist movements where she marks *the coming-out phase* as a political milestone in it: there is a before and after coming out—both for the individual and for the collective. These two historians thus encompass the lives and politics of different kinds of practitioners of same-sex sexuality in the past. The practitioners lived in separate spaces—spaces that required different strategies for the practitioners to be able to live their



lives and spin threads of belonging. This was important to the pink economy's dissemination of porn and sex tourism. Rural areas did not offer the urban areas' opportunities for social encounters and growth of subcultures. Rural practitioners risked social stigmatization if visible and were perhaps not interested in taking on a homosexual identity in their everyday lives in an otherwise heterosexual hegemony (Norrhem 2001). Instead, some of them subscribed to magazines with male models and/or queer politics, got addresses for visits to urban areas, or made contacts via ads in the magazines. Thus, pink porn economies provided spaces for sexual and political relations across urban and rural areas, and across national borders.

Earlier narratives of the history of homosexuality in Sweden have described the Swedish organised homopolitical activism of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s as weak, barely extant and isolated from the more solid sibling organisations found in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands. These narratives often include a glance back to the 1950s and vibrantly organised Swedish homopolitical activities, transnationally and nationally (Wasniowski 2007; *Homo i folkhemmet* 2000). The data used in those narratives are retrieved from traditional sources such as various (or rather scarce) documents from RFSL and the International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE).

By following the pink porn economy and politics, however, other views on and conclusions about Swedish queer politics of the 1960s and 1970s and its transnational networks emerge.

## 7.4 The Machinic Desire of Pink Porn Economy and Politics

If we are to believe Axel Axcgil's claims that DFT's mail order business was the largest in Europe, we must compare its potential profits with those a similar American business: Directory Services Inc. (DSI). Minneapolis-based DSI was a successful mail order business directed towards gay men (they sold magazines, gay tourism guides, books, records, clothes, jewellery, etc.) that in 1967 had 14 employees in addition to the owner couple

Lloyd Spinar and Conrad Germain. The business's income totalled several million dollars, according to Germain in a 2008 interview. DSI also developed into an offensive representative for freedom of expression in its work against the censorship of homoerotic images (which they disseminated). At the end of the 1960s DSI won an acclaimed pornography court case—which was the start of a new generation of American gay magazines (such as *The Advocate*, which is still in publication) (Johnson 2010). Even if the Danish DFT only brought in about 10 percent of DIS's income, this would still have been a good base for several employees, for their trips abroad and for the production and distribution of free magazines, political flyers or other informative texts.

When Axgil's mail order company DFT expanded in 1967 by purchasing a large property, a former school in Sjælland, in the rural north-west of Copenhagen, the staff also expanded with the employment of another couple: the Swede Michael Holm and his lover/partner Dutchman Geurt Staal. Holm later became the editor of the Swedish magazine *Revolt!* and an increasingly important figure in the transnational activities of the national lesbian and gay organisation RFSL—for which he was elected as the international secretary. But before holding these positions, Holm became the political spokesperson in defence of DFT's pink porn economy activities.

Some of Axgil's former activities had been to receive or visit what they called active members (amongst their subscribers) to get to know them and introduce them to other men. These kinds of connections increased in the old school building in Sjælland, but still had to be undertaken carefully given that police agents might be amongst the subscribers. The new location allowed these connections to expand and include a B&B business, focused on male subscribers or contacts. Two years later, in 1969, DFT's plans included more inexpensive guest rooms, a camp site (as the B&B was constantly fully booked), a sauna and a swimming pool. DFT also helped tourists in other countries to find places to stay and carefully to meet other men for social and sexual encounters.<sup>10</sup>

After nearly three years, DFT's machinic desire and expansion of activities at the old school in Sjælland led to a business spinoff. Having lived and co-worked with the Axgils and playing a part in building the transnational network around DFT, Michael Holm and his partner/lover

Geurt Staal moved to the south of Sweden sometime around the turn of 1969/1970. Here they built a similar pink economy and political space—eventually expanding and moving to an even larger property.

Holm and Staal followed the model developed by the Axgils and purchased a former school building where they started to provide a space for social and political encounters and meetings. They offered B&B for national and international guests, ran a printing press, and both produced and disseminated their own magazines containing porn, politics and personal ads to subscribers. There does not appear to be any sense of this having been an acrimonious split—Holm honours and defends Axel Axgil in articles in the magazines he brought to or started in Sweden.<sup>11</sup>

The machinic desire of pink economy and politics was thus in a process of self-improvement and by this time a sufficient number of connections had been produced to *mutate and deterritorialise* (other concepts of Deleuze and Guattari mediated by Colebrook 2002) activities into a new space—where it still connected to DTF (at least on a personal and political level). When they moved, Holm and Staal took the transnational soft porn magazine *Viking* with them from DTF. Shortly afterwards they changed its name to *Revolt!*—as the name “Viking” was already in use as a registered trademark in Sweden.<sup>12</sup> *Revolt!* contained (as had *Viking*) pornographic stories and photos—both of men and young boys (many of colour)—contact ads, announcements for gatherings and articles of political interest.

Claire Colebrook’s analytical description of how machinic desire continually expands by randomly discovering new opportunities and creating more and more connections, eventually self-improving through mutations and deterritorialisations, captures not just the pink porn economy of DTF and later Holm’s and Staal’s business. It also comprises the expansion of transnational queer organisations in connection with the pink porn economy.

## 7.5 Transnational Political Organising: IHWO and the Pink Porn Economy

Through the mail order business the Axgils had corresponded with ‘several thousand isolated’ homosexuals in different countries and met with several of them and had had ‘hundreds as guests’, Michael Holm explained in an article (*Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 3). The Axgil couple had, when necessary, provided addresses of lawyers and doctors (professionals capable of providing information on legal or medical issues of importance to the subscribers) or to nearby males for sexual and social meetings. This had led to more contacts, subscribers and B&B guests, and the realisation that a transnational organization was necessary began to develop.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1950s Lundahl Madsen had already started a contact service called the International Hobby Club’s World Organization (IHWO), but interest had been minimal. He was at that time also a member of the International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE)—then a strong and active political transnational organisation with members in several European nations. Lundahl Madsen tried to get *Vennen* accepted as a member of ICSE, but because of the above-mentioned scandal at the *Vennen* office shared with Lundahl Madsen’s pornographic magazines, ICSE delayed responding to the request. Lundahl Madsen wrote back in 1954, saying: ‘If our cooperation in [ICSEs] international work is not wanted, we intend to put our [*Vennen*’s] work on an international basis in the service of the homophile cause’ (quote taken from Rupp 2011, p. 1035).

By 1968 ICSE’s position of influence was in decline, but there was still a need for a transnational organisation. The Axgils then sent out an inquiry to the DTF network of subscribers and contacts asking whether there was any interest in setting up an organisation ‘for mutual assistance and friendship’ (*Viking*, no 1, 1969, p. 3). More than 1000 positive responses were received, and the time and context were ripe for dusting the name IHWO off, now slightly changed to the International Homosexual World Organization (IHWO) (cf. Söderström 2012). IHWO wanted to:

... work alongside already existing organisations for homosexuals and [had] in several cities contributed to forming new associations and clubs. We have members practically world-wide, albeit not in the Soviet Union or China, but in all other Eastern bloc states. We have great collaboration with clubs, associations and government institutions in Scandinavia, Finland, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, France, Italy, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, Colombia, Madagascar, Thailand, Japan. Our organisation was the sole European organisation to join the North American Homophile League and to attend their congress in Houston this year. (Viking no 1, 1969, p. 3, author's translation)

Michael Holm's description of IHWO captures a political part of the machinic desire that fed on the pink porn economics of DTF. IHWO had helped to start activist groups and clubs to support individuals (in Germany, Switzerland, France, England, Belgium, Argentina and Cameroon). Some of the clubs arranged dance evenings and other social events for self-identified queers, combined with activities aimed at informing/educating the local community. In a collaborative action with a club in Austria they sent a letter to all of the country's bishops (since they were the strongest opponents of softening the laws opposing same-sex sexuality), as well as to the Austrian newspapers. Later, an IHWO congress would send letters to the newly elected government (with copies to the Austrian press) to protest the penalties for homosexual acts—penalties which, according to Holm, were only exceeded by European dictators such as Franco's Spain. Moreover, IHWO provided legal aid support to imprisoned practitioners of homosexuality in states such as Italy.<sup>14</sup>

IHWO's magazine *UNI* was disseminated free of charge to members six times a year. In addition to photographs of half-naked young men and boys, there are, among other things, articles on homosexuality and legislation in different states, reports on queer subcultures, such as men in leather and their activities, reviews of film and literature, as well as cartoons and jokes. The magazine contents contained a mix of contacts, meeting places, politics and pornographic images and the majority of its contributors were members of IHWO. No less important were the ads or flyers attached within the envelope, through which IHWO also retailed

more pornographically oriented magazines.<sup>15</sup> The contact matching reinforced DTF's commercial options. The different businesses and social and political activities on offer expanded and connected rhizomatically in a process of continuing support.

The board of IHWO consisted of Holm and Staal as well as the Axgils. When the label IHWO was revived in 1968, it quickly attracted criticism, especially in Denmark where wounds from the scandal around Lundahl Madsen and Eskildsen in the mid-1950s still lingered. Among other things, IHWO was criticised for being undemocratic and in 1968 this was a troublesome issue that quickly had to be addressed by the board. According to Michael Holm, the temporary board of IHWO had not been appointed through elections as members from various countries were unable to vote because of the criminalisation of homosexuality in their homelands. Democratic transparency could thus lead to imprisonment, unemployment and social stigma (something with which the Axgils were particularly familiar). In addition, Holm continued, electing a board in Denmark would lead to an overwhelming majority of the voters being Danes—which was not democratic either.<sup>16</sup>

## 7.6 Politics Connected to the Pink Porn Economy

Censorship became an urgent political issue for IHWO, perhaps since DTF's transnational stock of customers was the basis for the organisation's recruitment of members. The porn from Denmark and Sweden was forbidden in certain states and frictions arose when it was caught in border controls or invoked police harassments when subscribers were disclosed as male same-sex sexuality porn readers. Thus, some of IHWO's activities were related to getting the right to disseminate DTF's magazines across borders and the arguments used made reference to freedom of speech and the press. Interest in distributing the magazines was not just commercial, however. The dissemination was part of creating references for gay subjectification processes. Self-acceptance was considered important in breaking with previous degrading objectification processes.

As the chair of a Stockholm-based gay club wrote in *Revolt!* in 1972, the feeling of being isolated from one's surrounding community had to be removed in order to create a positive gay identity. Furthermore, any feelings of inferiority should be dispensed with and space for friendship and intimacy created. Local communities also needed to accept same-sex sexuality and positive references to same-sex sexuality while role models had to become available for young people. The strategies for change included introducing same-sex sexual education in schools and more public information so that same-sex sexuality could be normalised as a sexual alternative. Hence, conditions for an open culture had to be provided so that those practitioners of same-sex sexuality who might have internalised negative behaviours, such as self-hatred and self-imposed restricted lifestyles, could blossom in accepting and friendly environments and lifestyles.<sup>17</sup> Strategies to achieve such goals were also debated in *Revolt!* and *Viking*. Thus, the work of distributing the magazines was not only about selling a commodity, but also about creating references for subjectification processes and stimulating organising strategies for self-identified queers to become a part of the surrounding heterosexual society.

Some of the political themes in the magazines and in the network of IHWO related to legislation—international comparisons were made. Other discussions focused on equality regulations regarding sexual rights. Comparing different international regulations on homosexual acts is common in the history of sexual politics. Claiming equality, or the same rights as are already enjoyed by others, has been a successful political strategy to achieve equalities. It was a method used by some of the subscribers of the magazine *Viking* when their copies were found by customs officers. In 1969 the magazine reported that 'In Holland, one of our members has protested sharply against the mail-censorship that was introduced there some time last winter—and he won. The mail censorship was quickly abolished after he made sure that the issue was brought up in Parliament' (*Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 5).

In Germany, 30,000 flyers against censorship were distributed by the magazines *UNI* and *Viking*, paid for by the profits from DTF's businesses. When the German chancellor, Willy Brandt, visited Denmark IHWO approached him with a letter about the issue and shortly

thereafter they received a reply that the censorship had been abolished. Although IHWO did not want to take credit for the success they nevertheless saw their efforts as contributing in part to a large movement for sexual equality in Germany (*Viking*, no. 6, 1970). ILGA, the international organisation for lesbian and gay rights, later made good use of this strategy of approaching politicians while they were on overseas visits.

These examples show how the pink economy and strategies used to connect men for social and sexual encounters and political activities for gay rights, such as freedom of speech and the press, were rhizomatically connected and messily entangled within the pink economy's dissemination of male same-sex pornography.

## 7.7 IHWO Transnational Congresses: Bridging Decades of Politics and Organising

In 1968, IHWO arranged two meetings in Denmark for their members/subscribers. The first one was the more politically focused event and included lectures, discussions and excursions, while the second gathering was purely social with socialising activities and excursions to castles, bars and the Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen. Members from 'several countries participated' in the meetings (*Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 5).

In May 1970, however, the time had come to call for an IHWO congress in Skåne, in the south of Sweden. Although Michael Holm may, in his article, have exaggerated the number of activities, working groups and individual efforts enabled by IHWO and discussed at the congress, the existence of a well-functioning transnational politically active network is revealed through his account. Congress participants arrived from Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy and Canada. As in the 1950s heydays of ICSE, scholars and lawyers were also invited. The lawyers' lectures would, promised Holm, be translated into Swedish and published as a serial in *Viking*. The various congress representatives reported on problems in their respective states and on proposed strategies to overcome them. The 1970 IHWO congress continued a process that begun the previous year to compare homosexuals'



situations in different countries and planned the production and distribution of questionnaires on legislation on homosexuality. The congress also discussed the contacts they had with members of Eastern European states and decided that *UNI* should be transformed from being a member magazine of IHWO into a proper magazine with texts in the Scandinavian languages, as well as in English, German and French.<sup>18</sup>

Another legacy of earlier sexual policies was the congress's public activities. The last day of the congress was transferred to the hotel Tunneln in Malmö, run by a 'friendly owner'. As announced in the regional daily newspaper a discussion was held in this public space, which was entitled 'What can the homosexuals themselves do to improve their situation in society?' (*Viking*, no. 6, 1970, both quotes at p. 7). The panel consisted of Bertil Hansson, chief physician and psychiatrist, the lawyer Edward Brongersma, as well as the editors Axel Axgil and Michael Holm, together with RFSL's chair Ove Ahlström. The assembled audience also participated in the debate—especially the younger members, as Holm later recalled. Answers to the question under debate included, for instance, that they should live more open lives, and that in order to gain tolerance from others they needed to accept themselves; and that they had to combat internalised prejudices against themselves as 'deviated from the norm' as well as fighting their own prejudicial treatment of other homosexuals (*ibid.*). An additional strategy was to disseminate information in schools, the media and workplaces. RFSL would later also make use of all of these strategies. The congress's public day closed with an equally public party, which was attended by about 350 people.

To return to the question of whether clear phase transitions can be seen in the history of the LGBTQ movement, such as a discreet versus an openness ideology, the pink economy of the Axgils, and of Holm and Staal, highlights a complexity which reveals that in their transnational work, openness and discretion strategies existed in parallel. This picture ties in with historian Leila Rupp's studies of transnational LGBTQ activism, where there were no clear divisions between an older homophile phase and a newer gay liberation phase. She compares the continuum in transnational organising with the development of queer national organising in

the USA—where an opposite trend in the development appears to have occurred: ruptures instead of continuity (Rupp 2011, pp. 1035f). As noted above, queer national organising in Sweden displayed more continuity than ruptures. In RFSL's national as well as transnational activities, strong links connected the networks of an older homophile and a younger gay liberation phase and their politics and activities. Ideas and strategies, as well as key persons, spanned the 1950s and the 1970s (Rupp 2011; Söderström 2012). Where RFSL's chair Ove Ahlström served as a link between the 1950s and 1960s, Michael Holm bridged the 1960s through the 1970s and into the 1980s. After working with IHWO and the UNI Club, he also became a board member of RFSL, elected to the position of international secretary by several congresses in the early 1970s—while earning his living from the pink economy business he ran with his partner Gert Staal in the south of Sweden.

To paraphrase Jon Binnie (2004) and, as this chapter shows, constructing an analytic binarity between culture and economy when examining the production of sexual subjectivities, cultures and communities is inappropriate when studying the rhizomatic connections of the pink porn economy in the doing of queer belonging in last half of the twentieth century. The description of the pink porn economy's rhizomatic connections with male transnational networks and policies are a clear example of the political activities in-between. Not just because the politics were not conducted by the state or recognised organisations or associations in the civil society, but because of the difficulties in separating pink economy networks from political networks. The fights for positive liberal rights such as the freedom to connect and assemble, or working for freedom of speech and the press by combating censorship of pink porn economy magazines, or by setting up tourist infrastructure for persecuted self-identified queers who longed to receive visits from, or to travel to meet, other males for sexual encounters, friendships and/or political activities, were all part of the machinic desire to rhizomatically expand and connect—politically and economically. Thus, the obstacles the pink economy met helped to shape political strategies and actions in a liberal direction.

Nevertheless, political work needs funding. In times when societal economical support was non-existent, the pink porn economy was a way to overcome hindrances by supporting certain activities and enabling male homosocial desire (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1986), subjectification processes and community building. Simultaneously the main policy demands that were shaped in doing so were based on getting the same rights as heterosexuals or becoming equal with that group. Pink porn economy was in that sense liberal—although some of the ideas on sexuality radically broke with heterosexual ideals and norms.

The genealogy of the male homopolitical transnational network in the pink economy's dissemination of male same-sex pornography also illuminates the frictions to come between gay men's and lesbian's involvement in the development of transnational organising in the 1970s and 1980s and continued into the new millennium. Different genealogies and contexts had given rise to different machinic desires and growths of rhizomes that might connect—or reject each other.

Piecing together layers of contexts—such as the pink porn economies' demands for positive sexual rights with feminist lesbians' demands for negative sexual rights to protect vulnerable groups (which will be discussed below)—shows that the machinic desire of the male-focused pink porn economies rhizomatic flow encountered obstacles. One such obstacle was, as described above, the transnational homophile organisation ICSE's reluctance to accept the Axxgil couple's *Vennen* as a member. And another obstacle was the 'Association of 1948', active both in Denmark and Norway, and its criticism of DTF's business and IWHO's undemocratic organisation. Furthermore, much later, feminist lesbians in the International Gay Association (IGA)—who pushed for renaming the organisation International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA)—offered similar criticism of the very basis of positive sexual rights on which the pink porn economy was based, by stressing the importance of negative rights for vulnerable groups, such as children and women.

## 7.8 The Lesbians: A Monkey Wrench in the Machinic Desire's Rhizomatic Processes

In the second half of the twentieth century self-identified lesbians, or homoerotically oriented women, do not appear to have constituted a target group within the pink porn economy, at least not within the data examined here. This seems to be one major difference between the genealogies and contexts of self-defined gay men's versus lesbians' transnational networking. The content of the magazines explicitly, and as a norm, offered references for male same-sex sexual subjectification processes and male communities of belonging.

Nevertheless, at the end of the 1960s the editor, entrepreneur and activist Michael Holm tried to involve lesbians as writers and readers in the magazine *Viking*, but he did not recognise that the white European gay male was the pink porn economy's norm and point of departure, neither did he understand gendered contexts and differences. His first strategy was to publish a soft-porn short story on lesbian sexuality written (according to the signature) by a woman, followed by some nude photographs of females. Holm also explicitly appealed for female co-workers:

*Viking*, just like other magazines for homosexuals, seeks FEMALE COWORKERS. Why is it so hard involve women? They often complain that they have no magazine that represents them. But then, come on ... we offer that space... (*Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 6, author's translation)

He eventually learned that using lesbian porn in a gay male normative magazine as a way to involve lesbians in the politics of the machinic desire of pink porn economy was not a particularly successful tactic. Later, Holm and other male gay activists were confronted by articulate feminist-inclined lesbians at the 'First International Gay Rights Congress' in Edinburgh, Scotland, in December 1974. Holm covered it for *Revolt!* under the headline 'We're here because we're queer' (no. 3, 1975, p. 25).

It was a well-planned and organised congress, according to Holm. Notably, of the approximately 350 participants from 15 different national

states, only 50 were lesbians (from Canada, the USA, Ireland and host state the UK). Holm's report covers the tensions that arose between feminist lesbians and a gay male faction led by Frank Kameny (of the US Mattachine Society) where the latter claimed that the main aim of gay liberation was equality with heterosexuals. On the contrary, the feminist lesbian faction, led by Elaine Noble (a politician from the US Congress), claimed that society's demands on women's and men's sex roles had to be dealt with to shape entirely new identities for lesbians and gays as individual humans and as a group. The lesbians were supported by the congress's feminist-inclined gay men (*Revolt!*, 3, 1975, p. 26). The tensions and debates led to a statement voted for by the congress on the second day: '1. Sexism will be the main theme of the congress. [Sexism was defined as oppression due to sex or sex-role interpretation.] 2. Future congresses must be organized by men and women together. 3. The congress states its support for the international women's movement' (*Revolt!*, no. 3, 1975, p. 27).

Shortly before the issue featuring the Edinburgh congress, *Revolt!* had published a report from a separatist lesbian gathering in Oslo, Norway, held in November 1974, which had been attended by 70 lesbians from Sweden, Denmark and Norway. They discussed lesbian organisational activities in the Nordic states and two major issues had taken centre stage. One was the difficulties of raising lesbian questions in male-dominated mixed homopolitical organisations such as the 'Association of 1948' in Denmark and Norway, and in the Swedish RFSL (these difficulties resurfaced in the debacle in Edinburgh over a month later). Another issue discussed in Oslo considered the negative response the lesbian groups received (especially the Swedish ones) when contacting the dominant (hetero)feminist organisations regarding joint rallies and marches.<sup>19</sup>

The two primary struggles of lesbian feminism have been analysed in many different national contexts: for the Swedish context, see, for instance, Hanna Hallgren (2008) and Emma Isaksson (2007); for North America see Leila Rupp et al. (2017) and Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier (1992). However, the relation of these struggles to genealogies of the pink porn economy's transnational networks remains an under-researched field.

Obviously, the intersectional and gendered growths of different genealogies and contexts gave rise to different political claims and strategies. The calls for same rights as and equality with heterosexuals facilitated the pink porn economies' flow of magazines, goods and gay tourism. The ideological basis behind these calls lay in sexual liberalism and its tolerance for all sexual acts—as long as all involved gave their consent (Lennerhed 1994). The demand for gender and sexual roles to be considered when shaping altogether new identities for lesbians and gays as individual humans and as a group leans rather towards a vibrant discourse in the 1970s: the Freudo-Marxist tinted sexual radicalism where (all) people's oppressed inherent sexuality had to be liberated in order to enable a liberated society, free from oppressive behaviours and repression (Reich 1933; Marcuse 1968). In the late 1970s Michel Foucault's analysis of the horizontal dissemination of power would contest both the notion of consent, and of an inherent sexuality.

The rhizomatic growths, connections and flows of these different pre-Foucauldian claims and of lived experiences, genealogies and contexts, served as a feminist lesbian monkey wrench in the machinic desire of the pink porn economy of gay males and its rhizomatic network. As Diane Richardson has shown, the feminist sexual politics of the 1960s and 1970s were not based on claiming individual liberal rights (Richardson 2004), as in the pink porn economy's sexual politics (against censorship and in favour of the subscriber's right to receive and read porn magazines as well as the right to trade and travel across borders). Instead feminist lesbians, together with hetero feminists, criticised the private/public division insisting on the personal as political, that sex roles (gender) and its sexual roles and expressions had to change. Just like the suffragettes at the turn of the twentieth century, the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were not demanding positive sexual rights—rather they demanded the right to be protected from sexual harassment, sexual violence and the sexualisation of women in the public space. They thus demanded what philosophers call negative freedoms, or negative rights, to protect women as a vulnerable group (from sexual exploitation) (Richardson 2000, p. 91), as compared to the positive sexual rights for individuals which the machinic desire of the pink porn economy sought.

The struggle for positive versus negative sexual rights and freedoms has been a constant tension within mixed-gender queer communities where people are also inevitably situated in differently powered intersections of structures and discourses. These struggles can be framed as emerging from different genealogies or root systems, where different machinic desires' rhizomatic connections have been growing in different directions and perhaps been resisted, rejected or destroyed when approaching each other.

## **7.9 I(L)GA's Credibility and the Troublesome Genealogies of Pink Porn Economy Networks**

In August 1978, a new international collaboration was organised during the annual meeting of the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) in Coventry, England. At this time CHE was a reforming organisation with members from Wales and England, but this annual meeting was attended by another 36 activists from Australia, Canada, Denmark, as well as other parts of the UK, France, Italy, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA. The political aim of the meeting was to create a transnational association for homosexuals where different nation-based demands and actions could be strengthened to achieve common political goals and strategies.<sup>20</sup> The new body was called the International Gay Association (IGA).<sup>21</sup>

During the IGA's 1980 spring conference in Barcelona, the question arose as to whether or not lesbians should work together with gay males for the liberation of both lesbians and gays. Of 136 delegates from about 70 member organisations and associates, or loosely linked organisations from 22 countries, around one-sixth were women (21 women and 115 men, respectively) which was considered a problem. Shortly after the conference the IGA established a lesbian secretariat, the International Lesbian Information Secretariat (ILIS). ILIS was established with the intention of facilitating communication between 'gay women' and to organise a transnational 'gay women' conference before the upcoming

regular IGA annual meeting. The lesbian secretariat was given its own space in the IGA newsletter from July 1980.<sup>22</sup> Six years later, at IGA's 8th Congress in 1986, the organisation decided to include the word lesbian in its acronym, and thus became ILGA.<sup>23</sup>

The first international lesbian conference of IGA, however, was held in Amsterdam in December 1980. The general themes were the question of how lesbians would grow stronger transnationally, and how they could influence IGA's policies. Again, the attending lesbians wanted to discuss how they could collaborate with the males within IGA—in which ways and on which issues? Gendered issues were on the agenda, such as the unequal social positions of women and men and the problems this could cause when looking to collaborate. One specific discrepancy between lesbians and gay males was brought up relating to issues regarding lesbians as mothers responsible for children.<sup>24</sup>

In one of the Amsterdam conference workshops questions were asked about children's sexuality and the oppression of children. The workshop participants questioned whether it was possible for children and adults to ever have an equal sexual relationship (as claimed by the paedophile members of IGA). The discussion about adult sexual rights in relation to children's needs for the negative right to be protected from abuse was prompted by the fact that paedophilia groups were part of some of the IGA's member organisations. In that workshop, lesbian IGA members raised an issue that became increasingly problematic for the organisation in the years to come—namely whether the age of consent was protective or oppressive of children and whether paedophile rights were an issue that was appropriate to pursue by a gay/lesbian/feminist movement.<sup>25</sup> However, in the 1980s, this was an issue not considered by the then gay male-dominated transnational movement which, as I have shown, was rhizomatically entangled in decades of exchange of and politically networking around the distribution of male same-sex porn, including images of nude boys.

Following the feminist IGA lesbians' raising of the paedophile issue during the Amsterdam conference not much happened until ten years later, during the ILGA World Conference in Stockholm in 1990. Paedophilia was again discussed as an abuse of the rights of children (who were seen as a vulnerable group to be protected), which resulted in a



resolution distancing the ILGA from paedophilia. However, it was not until 1993 that the ILGA was firmly forced to take a stance on paedophilia—and this only after the organisation had experienced problems with its long-held (since the IGA Barcelona conference in 1980) and hard-won accreditation as a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) in the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The joy over being accredited was brief as news media in the United States rapidly exposed the American paedophile organization North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) as a member of the ILGA. Notably, NAMBLA had been the first North American organisation to join the IGA (Sanders 1996).

At this point the ILGA had to guarantee that no paedophile groups remained as members of the organisation. The umbrella organisation addressed the issue in several ways. The ILGA's executive committee emphasised children's rights to protection from abuse in a statement from 1993. During the 1994 ILGA World Conference three paedophile organisations were excluded and a statement declared that 'Groups or associations whose predominant aim is to support or promote pedophilia (sic!) are incompatible with the future development of ILGA' (Sanders 1996, p. 99).

Still, it was not until 1995 that the ILGA made a public and official declaration against paedophilia. By then the paedophilia issue had caused a national political backlash for LGBTQ organisations in the USA. The Christian right was especially active in lobbying against the ILGA. As a result, 5000 LGBTQ organisations fell under scrutiny by, among others, US embassy officials around the world. This investigation led to results. In the fall of 1994, the US Embassy in Germany found that ILGA member VSH in Munich had a paedophile group which had used VSH's premises for meetings. Consequently, the ILGA was considered incapable of fully controlling its members and finally lost its consultative NGO status in ECOSOC (Sanders 1996). Despite these pressures, it was not until 1997 that the ILGA demanded written assurances from its member organisations in which they officially declared that they did not engage with paedophilic groups. The length of time in achieving this strong stance seems to have been an effect of the transnational network's deep roots and messy entanglements in the pink porn economies where the

sexualisation of young boys was regarded as a non-issue or as a positive sexual right of consenting parties. Despite the ILGA's final decision to exclude paedophile groups, the damage had already been done to its reputation. It took another 17 years before the organisation gained consultative status in ECOSOC, on 27 July 2011.<sup>26</sup>

## 7.10 Conclusions

In this chapter, I chose to survey pink porn magazines covering a time span focusing on the 1960s to 1970s, including retrospectives to the 1950s and glances into the 1990s and the new millennium. Concepts like rhizome and machinic desire help to analyse how pink porn economies expanded in decentralised and unpredictable ways, and brought together or connected producers, disseminators and subscribers of male same-sex porn magazines produced in Denmark and Sweden. The magazines contained politics, debates, pornographic stories and photos—including images of young boys, which later became increasingly problematic with regard to transnational political work and networks rooted elsewhere.

The method following over time enabled new insights into the understudied genealogies of politics in-between queer transnational networks. This study has highlighted the sometimes-impossible task of differentiating between desire, subjectivity processes, consumption, both organised and grass-roots activism in the last half of the twentieth century's history of human sexualities. Taking a chronological approach to the pink porn economies' politics has shown that analysing the past is important in illuminating how culture and economy have been constituting each other. Moreover, the method has shed light on how culture and economy need to be studied together when examining the networks of importance in producing sexual identities, cultures, policies and communities of belonging—while excluding others.

Furthermore, this chronological study of pink porn magazines has broadened the view of same-sex sexual politics to include more than traditional organisational work and ad hoc political activism, or arranging for social encounters, by also including politics in-between, such as the

mix of commercial interests with organising political and recreational activities. This chronological approach has thus helped to contest the shift from what Hans W. Kristiansen refers to as a discretion ideology and an openness ideology. In my data the shift becomes vague both nationally and transnationally, and it is continuity rather than ruptures that links the past, present and future via key persons and the machinic desire to connect and expand.

The transnational communities of queer belonging created by the common interest in consuming male same-sex porn and making contacts with fellow magazine readers, was one precondition for the development of policies to challenge the state's censorship laws. For instance, the pink porn economy used liberal demands such as freedom of speech and the press, as well as the right to assemble freely, in their struggles to disseminate magazines and to meet socially or to engage in politics. Gathering people, whether for recreational, political, or economic activities, depended on a cosmopolitan culture of rhizomatic connections between subscribers, contact ads, conferences, activism and tourism, and at the same time shaped certain queer communities of belonging while also excluding others. Furthermore, the networks established by agents and through political strategies via the trail of consumers of male pink porn would later become parts of the genealogy of traditionally organised associations such as the ILGA in which the Swedish National Association for Sexual Equality (RFSL) became a powerful vehicle in the 1980s and 1990s.

Feminist lesbian members of the ILGA were already in the 1980s criticising the very fundament of positive sexual rights on which the pink porn economy was based by stressing the importance of negative sexual rights for vulnerable groups such as women and children. The issue arose due to the ILGA's then liberal attitude towards organising paedophilic groups. Although feminist discourse and power analysis had grown stronger in the ILGA by the 1990s it was not until 2011, however, that the ILGA's political desire to be accepted as an NGO in the UN's ECOSOC seriously uprooted and overtly did away with the last threads of the traditional male same-sex transnational network's roots in sexual liberal attitudes towards paedophilia.

## Notes

1. Queer in this chapter is used as an umbrella term for sexualities that have been regarded as deviant from the heterosexual norm, and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* (meaning various transidentifications) and queer identities over time. The different terms in the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer), will be used when the data uses it.
2. 355 000 000 hits on the web in a couple of seconds (retrieved 23 May 2019).
3. [https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/27/business/media/absolut-heralds-its-marketing-to-gay-consumers.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/27/business/media/absolut-heralds-its-marketing-to-gay-consumers.html?_r=0) (retrieved 23 May 2019); <https://www.out.com/news/2019/5/21/ikea-bags-now-come-rainbow-thank-you-gay-jesus> (retrieved 23 May 2019).
4. See Laskar (2017) on the magazine *Revolt's* 1970s–80s framing of men and boys in Arabic countries as promiscuous homosexuals to be compared with today's homonationalist accusations in the West of Muslims as homophobic and its making of *the Orient* as an antidote or sexual Other to Western sexualities (cf [Massad 2007]).
5. The acronym is still in use, but in 2007 the name of the organization changed from National Association for Sexual Equality (Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande) to National Association for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights (Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners och queeras rättigheter).
6. See also *Viking*, 3–5. No. 10, 1970; Interview with Axel Lundahl Madsen by Michael Holm.
7. Lundahl Madsen said in an interview 15 years later that the raid was executed after an article in *Vennen* where the medical doctor Jarl Wagner-Smith seriously criticised the police for provoking men into committing homosexual crime (beautiful youngsters were used as seductive lures). *Viking*, no. 10, 1970, p. 4.
8. I have no source for the meaning behind the acronym.
9. *Viking*, no. 10, 1970, pp. 3–5.
10. *Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 5.
11. For the move to southern Sweden, see *UNI* no. 12 (no year, probably sometime between 1968 and 1970).
12. *UNI*, no. 12 (no year, probably sometime between 1968 and 1970).
13. *Viking*, no. 1, 1969, pp. 3–5.
14. *Viking*, no. 6, 1970.

15. *UNI*, pp. 1–12 (without year). About the move to Teckomatorp, see *UNI*, no. 12 (without year, probably between 1968 and 1970).
16. *Viking*, no. 1, 1969, p. 4.
17. *Revolt*, no. 3, 1972.
18. *Viking*, no. 6, 1970.
19. *Revolt*, no. 1, 1975, pp. 16–18.
20. *IGA Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. 1, Nov. 1978.
21. International Gay Association (IGA) and the increasing internationalisation of the struggles for same-sex sexual rights is remarkably unexplored.
22. *IGA Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 2, July 1980.
23. ILGA's official site, <https://ilga.org/ilga-history> (retrieved 3 October 19).
24. *IGA Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 1, June 1981.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Se *ILGA NEWS*, <https://ilga.org/ilga-ecosoc-status-controversy> (retrieved 29 October 2019).

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## Internet and Other Sources

### Magazines

*IGA Newsletter* 1978–1981.

*Revolt!* 1970–1980.

*Viking* 1969.

*Uni* without year, probably sometime between 1968–1970.

### Web Resources

ILGA NEWS.

ILGAs official site.

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# 8

## A State Affair?: Notions of the State in Discourses on Trans Rights in Sweden

Erika Alm

### 8.1 Introduction

Since the 1990s the concept of sexual citizenship has been instrumental for queer scholars and activists exploring state recognition as a critical aspect of social justice work. Critics have argued that while the strategy of striving for state recognition has its merits, it tends to obscure the fact that who gets ‘folded into’ the nation (Puar 2007: 10) is a matter that is negotiated through intricate techniques of governance, and that policies of sexual and gender equality play a vital role in upholding the liberal nation-state and legitimise its violence (Beauchamp 2019; Haritaworn et al. 2014; Puar 2007; Brown 1995). In a political climate marked by neoliberalism, the argument has been put forth by queer scholars and critical race theorists, that little is gained in addressing the state, and much lost.

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Swedish politicians and other representatives of the state, such as physicians and jurists, often describe Sweden as progressive when it comes to issues of LGBTQ rights in general, and trans rights in particular. Representatives from the political right as well as the political left describe Swedish society as tolerant and open to sexual and gender variance.<sup>1</sup> The idea that trans rights are an integrated part not only of Swedish society but also of Swedish political discourse—that it is integrated in the state and its governmental agencies—is reliant on a very specific understanding of gender variance: that of the plight of gender-variant people and the role of the state in alleviating that plight. Swedish activists and scholars have problematised this self-image of Sweden as the pinnacle of trans rights. The following quote is from a manifesto for trans rights published in 2016 by the trans organisation *Transförsvaret* (Trans Defence):

[S]o we put this ultimatum to Stefan Löfven, Åsa Regnér and Gabriel Wiksström [sic] as well as all politicians, doctors or people in power across Sweden. That doctors and bureaucrats have more control over our bodies and our identities than ourselves is unacceptable. (*Transförsvaret* 2016: n.p.)

In its manifesto, *Transförsvaret* addresses the Swedish government, its politicians and state representatives directly, holding them accountable for the living conditions of gender-variant people. Distinctions between nation, state and government appear porous; in some sentences, the nation is interpellated; in others, it is the state that is addressed through the mention of specific governmental agencies and ‘bureaucrats’ in municipalities and county councils; and in still others the government is addressed through the calling out of specific politicians, as in the quote above. *Transförsvaret* describes the state as all-encompassing, with a reach that is broad and deep, embodied in the bureaucracy of governmental organisations and agencies. It is an understanding of the state, shared by other trans organisations, that is formed by experiences of how the state impacts vital aspects of life, from experiences of health care and education institutions to problems with obtaining the identification documents necessary for travelling, banking, employment, renting houses and so on. The vastness of state influence is described as a quality of the Swedish state itself.

Transförsvaret's understanding of the state takes its departure in a description of how trans civil rights are conditioned by state recognition. As pointed out by scholars, Swedish civil registrations rely on gendered manifestations: juridical gender markers and gendered personal identification numbers (Alm 2006, 2019; Edenheim 2005). Citizens' interactions with the state are, hence, per definition, gendered. Given that gender-variant Swedish citizens describe the discrepancy between their gender identity and official papers as one of their main problems in everyday life (Government of Sweden 2017; Riksförbundet för homosexuella, bisexuella, transpersoner och queeras rättigheter 2017; Transgender Europe 2017), their relation to and their description of the state will be permeated by this strain of misrecognition. United States-based trans scholars such as Dean Spade (2011) and Toby Beauchamp (2019) have argued that gender-variant people to a larger extent than other citizens experience, in a tangible way, state governance. Spade characterises the administrative realm as the site where discrimination against gender-variant people is not only lawful but also an essential feature of the bureaucratic logic. Administrative systems distribute life chances and produce vulnerability so that those who are the most vulnerable in society are also the ones at the highest risk of having their lives dominated by administrative systems (Spade 2011: 13). Spade's analysis, which draws on the practice and analyses of people mobilising against institutionalised racism and cisnormativity, points out that administrative systems that claim to be neutral in fact produce stratifying categories like gender, race, etc. They are not 'the arbiters of justice, protection, and safety but [...] instead sponsors and sites of violence' (Spade 2011: 21).

Since the violence of administrative systems is so central to a comprehensive understanding of gender variance and the living conditions of gender-variant people, the impact of state governance has been scrutinised by scholars and activists. However, the function of *narratives* of the state have not been analysed as thoroughly. In the Swedish context, they range from notions of the benevolent state that pushes for legal reforms that benefit gender-variant citizens to notions of state violence and neglect. I argue that exploring the function of narratives of the state in discourses on trans rights can yield insights into the relation between state and civil society and the practicalities of governance.<sup>2</sup> A focus on

narratives of the state can provide material to explore notions of effective politics and social change among activists and scholars, and also among politicians and state representatives. One of the aims of this chapter is to examine whether the distinction, put forth by scholars working on US material, between trans activist work that is oriented towards the state and has a focus on legal reforms, and trans activist work that relies on an ardent critique of the state and argues for what scholars such as Spade have called 'transformative' strategies (Spade 2011)—strategies that break with institutional systems of oppression, arguing that they cannot be reformed—is applicable in the Swedish context. The empirical material for this chapter ranges from governmental reports and legislative material addressing the situation for gender-variant citizens to textual materials produced by Swedish trans organisations, individual activists, newspaper articles covering events and conflicts, and observations at local Pride events. The material reflects a range of positions; however, since I have focused on material that explicitly discusses the state's role, certain types of writing and thinking are not covered—namely, work that takes as its departure aspects of gender variant lives and experiences that are less influenced by interactions with the state.

In order to understand what is at stake in contemporary conversations on trans rights, I argue here, as I have before (Alm 2006, 2019), that it is of utter importance to understand the historicity of a particular context. The notion that gender-variant people suffer and that the state has a responsibility to attend to this suffering and marginalisation, has a well-established history in the Swedish context. It has been the dominant narrative in legislative discourses at least since the end of the 1960s, which is when the first governmental report that explicitly mentioned gender-variant people as a specific group in need of state intervention was published. The discourse of the suffering gender-variant person who is dependent on the aid of the state and its governmental agencies has been, and still is, also prevalent in the mainstream media. The dominance of this narrative is by no means unique to the contemporary Swedish context; it is and has been one of the hegemonic narratives of gender variance, internationally expressed in clinical work, mainstream media and popular culture alike (see for example Gill-Peterson 2018; Raun 2016; Haritaworn et al. 2014; Straube 2014; Serano 2013; Stryker 2008).

Activist mobilisation has also taken departure in the role of the state. Trans organisations have questioned the political investment in a self-glorifying self-image, and demands for legal reforms addressing the problematic implementations of the Gender Recognition Act (*Lag om fastställande av könstillhörighet i vissa fall* 1972: 119) have been on the agenda of LGBTQ organisations. Citizens have fought the state to be able to register their first name of choice (litigation won in 2003), to gain access to gender-affirming care without having to go through what used to be an obligatory sterilisation procedure (litigation won in 2013), and to be able to be registered as their children's parents under the correct juridical gender (litigation won in 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Swedish scholars have detailed the effects of state interventions in the everyday lives of gender-variant citizens with two distinct focuses: on the one hand scrutinising the discourses of pathologisation and medicalisation manifested in the evaluative system that determines whether or not people are eligible for gender-affirming health care, and on the other hand examining the subjectifying effects of state recognition through the introduction of a legal right, for gender-variant citizens, to have their gender identity juridically recognised and registered. Some scholars have studied how the state, through legislation and proscriptive instructions to physicians, has reinforced categorisations of gender variance that are intelligible to heteronormative and cisnormative systems of knowledge; categorisations that then become fundamental for state recognition and political subjectivity (Kroon 2007; Alm 2006; Edenheim 2005). Others have studied the lived experiences of being subjected to these state interventions (Linander 2018; Bremer 2011). I would argue that narratives of the state's role in the plight and marginalisation of gender-variant people echo in each of these studies, and hence this scholarly field has been instrumental in reinstating the relation to the state as a fundamental one.

An awareness of and an inquiry into the historical continuity of narratives of the state in discourses of trans rights, as they play out in the Swedish context, provide tools to understand and situate the tension between, on the one hand, liberal rights discourses of trans rights, that either demand assimilation or only allow for conditional recognition in which gender-variant people are understood as exceptions to the rule and in need of specific regulations (reduced to their uniqueness through

exotification, minoritisation and pathologisation) and, on the other hand, transformative politics asking for restorative justice.

## 8.2 Interpellating the State: The Dilemma of State Recognition

Two concrete examples of how Swedish activists have problematised state recognition can help highlight some of the themes of the chapter and the questions at stake. Both examples are from scenes of EuroPride—the first from EuroPride in Oslo, Norway, 2014, and the second from EuroPride in Stockholm and Göteborg, Sweden, 2018. For decades, Pride events have been the site of advocacy for social justice for sexual and gender-variant people, but they have also been the site of sharp critiques of activist organising and prioritising (see for example Puar 2007). Dean Spade (2011) identified queer activists, in particular trans activists of colour, as the driving forces of these critiques, arguing that they addressed the limits of state recognition and the perils of the commercialisation and pinkwashing of activist work, since they are the ones who are most affected by the demand for state assimilation.

EuroPride in Oslo 2014 brought some hard conversations about state recognition. The inauguration speech for Pride House was held by the newly appointed Norwegian Minister for Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, Solveig Horne, of the populist right-wing libertarian party Framskrittspartiet (The Progress Party). Some activists reacted strongly to the choice of inauguration speaker given Horne's previous statements about the LGBTQ community. Old news clips were circulated, in which Horne had talked in a pejorative, demeaning manner about LGBTQ people in general and trans people in particular. Some organisations decided to boycott EuroPride, claiming that it pinkwashed the racist, nationalist, conservative outlook on sex, gender and sexuality associated with Framskrittspartiet. Others problematised the pinkwashing within the frames of the programme for EuroPride. A statement of boycott written by a Swedish trans and intersex activist is an example of both the former and the latter strategy. The statement was read to the EuroPride

public by a representative of the organisation of which the boycotting activist was a member. It asked, rhetorically, what happens to a movement that describes itself as critical of disciplining norms around sex, gender and sexuality if it strives simultaneously for acceptance by the norm, manifested in the strategy of inviting representatives of the ruling government:

Some bodies will never be accepted in Solveig Horne's world. Some bodies will never live safe in a society with Framskrittspartiet or Sverigedemokrater [Swedish Democrats, a Swedish nationalist party that is represented in the Swedish parliament], no matter how many Pride Parades they march in. Pride ought to try to include all LGBTQI people instead of prioritising hetero cis politicians [translation by author]. (private communication)

In the intense media debates that followed, the organisers of the Pride House programme stated that they had simply followed the tradition of inviting the Minister of Equality to be the inauguration speaker. A press release prior to the inauguration described the presence of Horne as symbolically important (Oslo Pride 2014). This argument was turned on its head by critical scholars arguing that the invitation provided an opportunity for Horne's populist party to appropriate key values such as 'diversity' and 'freedom', resignifying them in a process of pinkwashing: 'Without concrete political demands or conditions, Horne's inauguration of EuroPride appears like the symbolic end to the political struggle for LGBT people's rights and living conditions [translation by author]' (Svendsen et al. 2014).

The letter of boycott highlighted the role of state recognition in activist organising and community building, and how the presence of state representatives, in an effort to obtain symbolic inclusion, puts constraints not only on what can be said and done under the flag of EuroPride but also on who feels welcome and safe during the event. As such, the letter offered tentative and contextual answers to the question of how conditional state recognition plays a part in who gets included and excluded from community gatherings, questions identified by scholars and activists as productive for theoretical explorations of how politics is being done and as performative for how community building is practiced

(Spade 2011; Butler 2004, 2009, 2015). At the core of the letter was a call to the LGBTQI community to discuss the question of how the search for conditional state recognition influences the ways the community imagines the future; that is, if one lets one's understandings of oneself be formulated in the discourse of normalisation and tolerance, what does it do to one's sense of self and of community?

The second example, from EuroPride in Stockholm 2018, actualises some of the same types of questions, but it also engages the commercialisation and professionalisation of social justice work, and how the state, through state funding, functions as an interlocutor in social justice work. During EuroPride in Stockholm, an application for permission to participate with an organisational booth, sent by the relatively small and newly founded political party *Medborgerlig Samling* (Civic assembly), was denied. The board of Stockholm Pride justified its decision with two arguments: that *Medborgerlig Samling's* political programme was devoid of an explicit LGBTQ politics; and that party representatives had expressed a distinct lack of understanding and respect for the gender-variant community. The decision drew reactions from conservative voices who claimed to be concerned about an encroachment on the freedom of expression in civil society in general, and in conversations about LGBTQ rights in particular. An opinion piece in one of the country's largest magazines publishing on so-called pink issues argued that it was remarkable that a political party with a liberal conservative position was excluded given that Stockholm Pride had previously housed organisations that the author categorised as left extremist (Kolsjö 2018). One of the arguments advanced in the media debate that ensued was that work done within the sphere of civil society ought not be politicised. A member of parliament—part of the nationalist party *Sverigedemokraterna*—asked the Minister of Culture if governmental funding to Stockholm Pride ought not be stopped, arguing that governmental funding should only go to projects that 'contribute to openness, tolerance and freedom of expression [translation by author]' (Wiechel 2018).

The example of *Medborgerlig Samling*, and the argumentation put forth by those who defended their right to participate as an organisation at EuroPride, raises questions about state involvement in social justice work done within the realm of civil society. The Minister of Culture



stated in her response that an independent, strong and multifaceted civil society is a central aspect of a vital democracy, and that the government ensures that all organisations that are funded by governmental money also uphold foundational values and human rights (Bah Kuhnke 2018). Studies of the so-called NGO-ification of civil society have shown that organisational funding, particularly when supplied by the state, creates distinct constraints on social justice work (see, for example, Bernal and Grewal 2014). When state funded, social justice work done in the regime of civil society is, in a very practical, concrete way, conditioned by the logics of state recognition. The reactions from conservative actors, arguing that the right to freedom of expression is compromised by a politicisation of civil society, draws attention to the fact that social justice work is always at risk of being delegitimised as identity politics, as too radical, as overtly political, as disturbing the social equilibrium and so on. But it also shows that there are radically different ideas about the nature of public events like Pride. The parliamentarian who demanded that all governmental funding to Stockholm Pride be pulled seemed to rely on an understanding of Pride as being a public event that ought to have no other restrictions than those that compromise fundamental civic rights (i.e. expressions that can be understood as hate crimes). Pride is depicted as a platform that ought not be exclusive for queer individuals and NGOs, but rather it ought to function as a platform for governmental agencies, political parties and commercial companies to showcase their organisations. The board of Stockholm Pride, however, was adamant that organisations that want to be present at Pride need to have a substantial and explicit agenda when it comes to LGBTQ rights, and that they demanded a higher grade of involvement in the work for social change from political parties (Board of Stockholm Pride 2018). The statement in which they argued for their decision begins with a note on the fact that several political parties are members of the association that organises Stockholm Pride, and that this broad political diversity is a strength, but that it cannot be considered to constitute a right to participate in Stockholm Pride. The board then proceeded to state that they would welcome *Medborgerlig Samling* as a dialogue partner should they be willing to engage with 'LGBTQ issues, and not only L and G issues [translation by author]', and

that all members of the party were welcome as civilians (Board of Stockholm Pride 2018).

Given that Stockholm Pride depends in part on state funding, the tension between these radically different understandings of the conditions for social justice work becomes acute in a political climate where social justice work related to gender equality, sexual rights and reproductive justice per definition comes under attack from conservative forces. As such, Pride and other state-funded civil society organisations targeting LGBTQ issues can be understood as formulated in alliance with the state, and part of their function is to reflect the state as tolerant and open minded. As I will show in the section on ‘Fighting State Repression’, Swedish activists have problematised this relation between civil society and the presumed benevolent state, and in order to understand the contextual conditions for that critique, it is necessary to scrutinise how the state talks about its own role in work for trans rights.

### 8.3 The State on Gender Variance: In the Gutters of the Welfare State

In 1972 the Swedish Gender Recognition Act was enacted. The *Statens offentliga utredningar* (SOU) (State Public Report), which proposed the legislation and detailed its medico-juridical framing, was published in 1968. One of the main conclusions of the SOU was that the state has a particular type of responsibility for its citizens in these cases, on account of their vulnerability (Government of Sweden 1968). The 1968 SOU stated that gender-variant people are marginalised not only because of the discrepancy between their gender identity and gender expression and official papers like passports, driver’s licences, tax rolls and so on, but also due to the lack of understanding from society at large, and state representatives such as physicians in particular, show them:

The obstructed social adaptation is reinforced by an unsympathetic attitude from the general public and physicians. Suspiciousness towards physicians and society sometimes comes into play, which adds to the feeling of loneliness and isolation. It is important to understand the development of

the latter symptoms as, in most cases, a valid reaction to the main problem [i.e. the lack of understanding] and not the other way around [translation by author]. (Government of Sweden 1968: 27)

The physicians who served on the commission that authored the report were aware of the stigmatisation of gender-variant people. Referring to clinical encounters with people who had sought their help, these physicians, themselves representatives of the state, insisted that the state needed to respond to these cries for help by adapting juridical procedures and legislation according to the needs of gender-variant citizens (Government of Sweden 1968). As practitioners partaking in the legislative process, these physicians relied on their professional experience to inform political decisions; their proposed legislation can be understood as a way to formalise already established procedures of alleviating bureaucratic problems and ensuring access to proper health care, turning what was an established medical practice into a formal civil right.

An important point of departure for the legislation was that the societal pressure gender-variant people live under was not only reflected in the administrative systems of the state but emanated from them: ‘There is a strong pressure from parents and family but also from society, in particular from the parish registration, to quickly designate a child as a boy or a girl [translation by author]’ (Government of Sweden 1968: 24). However, this awareness was no safeguard against a legislation that demanded assimilation and conformation to what was understood as the norm. The commissioners argued that an individual’s sexed and gendered being is not only of importance to the individual but ‘to other individuals and to society [translation by author]’ (Government of Sweden 1968: 39), and that while the state has an obligation to help citizens in need, a reform ought not be pushed so far that ‘the result is in too sharp a contrast to foundational values among the general public [translation by author]’ (Government of Sweden 1968: 40). This insistence on the importance of sex and gender as categories for identification—in some instances described as the core of individuality and of personhood—frames sex and gender as a discernible property of the individual and simultaneously as the site where the individual is articulated as a property of the state—that is, as a citizen and a political subject to be governed.

Following suit in an administrative tradition of biopolitics (the management of life through governance), the SOU of 1968 was explicit about the conflict at hand: To function, the existing administrative systems in Sweden are reliant on binary sex and gender categorisations of citizens, so the state's responsibility to alleviate the pain caused by its administrative systems needs to be balanced against its desire to uphold those very same systems and, by extension, the order of society as we know it. Administrative systems distribute life chances across the population, creating a particular type of vulnerability in gender-variant people. The vulnerability that is ascribed to and experienced by gender-variant people is the very same vulnerability that is used as an argument, by the state, in the favour of specific legislative actions and legal reforms targeting gender-variant people (Spade 2011: 21).

In tracing the historical continuity of the state's way of describing its own role in matters of governing gender variance, it is important to note that the commissioners of the 1968 report were open to changes in social attitudes in general, and to changes in scientific knowledge production in particular. They proposed that new developments in the fields of sociology and medicine that put more emphasis on so-called 'psychosexual elements [translation by author]' ought to be reflected in the legislation (Government of Sweden 1968: 35). Hence, I argue that is not the contextually conditioned expression of the sex and gender binary that the experts were defending but rather the binary itself. This distinction is significant, it provides a background for the contemporary discussions about whether the Swedish state is as tolerant towards its gender-variant citizens as it claims, and also for the question of whether it really is the *lack of knowledge* among politicians and state representatives that is holding up the development of trans rights. In 1968, the commissioners who authored the SOU described their proposition as a liberalisation of the issues at hand, a shift towards self-determination as a liberal right, but they did not question the notion that sex and gender is the site where the individual is subjectivated as a citizen (Alm 2006; Edenheim 2005). A concrete example might serve the analysis: When the 1968 SOU was sent out for review, the tension between those who claimed that an individual's gender identity—and by extension their juridical gender marker—was the core of the sex and gender binarity and those who insisted on

preserving biological characteristics as objective markers became obvious. Medical and juridical experts voiced critiques, arguing that an objective determination that has juridical effects ought not be based on an individual's subjective opinion. Here is the wording of the professional organisation for forensic psychiatrists:

That a psychopathological syndrome, concerning the core of the personality, the gender identity, in several parts of the report is the sole, and decisive, criteria for the 'real sex' instead of the somatic and juridically registered gender, must—despite a humanist approach, compassion and the will to help—instil serious qualm [translation by author]. (Konseljakt: Justitiedepartementet, 3 December 1971)

These objections to the proposition that a person's gender identity ought to be the basis of the juridical gender marker did not compromise the overall aim of the legislative proposition—to uphold sex and gender difference—since there was, and I would argue still is, a shared investment in sex and gender binarity itself.

So what I previously identified as at the postulate of the state's way of describing its own role (i.e. the state has a unique responsibility to alleviate the pain of its gender-variant citizens) needs to be reformulated: The state has a specific responsibility to alleviate the pain caused by its administrative systems without jeopardising the cultural significance given to sex and gender difference. This expression of biopolitical logic, with a combination of paternalistic and disciplining techniques, was evident in the implementation of the legislation. Two distinct tropes can be distinguished in the state's way of talking about its own responsibility, from the report of 1968 and onwards. Both tropes rest on the notion that gender-variant people are pretending to be something that they are not: real women and men. The quote from the Swedish forensic psychiatrists is an example of how this notion delegitimised gender-variant people's lived experience and positioned so-called objective experts (i.e. psychiatrists) as the only ones able to make decisions on gender-affirmative care on behalf of the state. A 1978 review of the legislation described a problem that had been identified by practitioners: There were applicants who had gone through certain gender-affirming medical procedures but who did not

fulfil the criteria of having stable, manifest gender identities (Socialstyrelsen 1978). Consequently, psychiatrists who were meant to diagnose care seekers could be misled by the bodily transformations and the gender expressions of said care seekers (Government of Sweden 1968: 44). The notion that gender-variant people might be out to intentionally deceive state officials, the general public, friends and family—the trope of the evil deceiver—was coupled with the notion that they are deceiving themselves and that gender-variant people cannot be held accountable for their decisions—the trope of the make-believer.<sup>4</sup> Trans scholars such as Sandy Stone (1991) and Susan Stryker (1994) have pointed out that gender-variant people are constructed as unintelligible subjects, both within medicine and in mainstream culture. The type of argumentation provided by the Swedish forensic psychiatrists falls into this category of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) and has been documented in many national contexts (for the Swedish context, see Linander 2018; Bremer 2011; Alm 2006; Edenheim 2005).

The Gender Recognition Act relies on the presumption that the state is obligated to protect its citizens from making hasty decisions, and the paternalistic tone that informed the 1968 report is traceable in the most recent legislative texts. Recent years have seen the rise of a rhetoric, put forth by politicians, governmental agencies and physicians alike, of the need to reform the legislation; ‘modernise’ is the word most often used. A government report from 2014 aimed to put self-definition and self-determination at the center of legislation (Government of Sweden 2014). However, when the commissioners discussed access to a particular form of health care—genital surgery—they echoed previous legislators’ insistence on expert knowledge and the state’s obligation to protect its citizens (Alm 2019). This was also the rhetoric of the separate legislative proposal from the spring of 2018 that dealt with genital surgery (Government of Sweden 2018). Here the commissioners concluded that any regulations of medical care ought to rely on a profound trust in the profession’s ability to do what is best for the patient; too much regulation would circumscribe the agency of clinicians (Government of Sweden 2018). In short: Trust is placed in clinical evidence and scientific knowledge production, not in the lived experience of the care seekers, which is a textbook example of state governance (Alm 2019; Linander 2018; Garland 2016).

## 8.4 Negligence as State Violence

As I have shown, the state describes the vulnerability and pain that administrative systems inflict on gender-variant citizens and acknowledges its responsibility to alleviate that pain, yet it reiterates a paternalistic approach to trans rights. The fact that there is discursive room for the state to reflect on its role does not mean that it is responsive to the pain induced in the practice of governance. This discrepancy is something Swedish activists describe and negotiate.

One of the expressions of state violence described by activists is state negligence. Their descriptions often point towards the lack of sustainable work against the cisnormative structures permeating public institutions like the school system and the health care system, and governmental agencies like the Swedish Migration Board, the National Insurance Office, the National Employment Office and the National Tax Office. The discourse on negligence as state violence is prevalent in both the written material and in the material gathered in observations. Activists identify state negligence as one of the techniques used to govern trans rights and lives and as an effect of biopolitics; as such, it has commonalities with the theoretical conceptualisations of necropolitics and the politics of abandonment (Povinelli 2011; Mbembe 2003) in the sense that it insists that death and suffering are inherent in biopolitics itself.

For instance, a bleak picture of gender-affirming health care is painted in Transförsvaret's (2016) detailed description of how waiting times, lack of information and degrading psychiatric evaluations force people to self-medicate with unauthorised medicines at high prices, without medical supervision. Descriptions of state violence in the form of negligence can also be found in discussions about Swedish migration politics and the implementation of new guidelines for assessing asylum seekers who claim sexual and gender variance as grounds for their right to asylum. Two panel sessions at EuroPride in Göteborg addressed this issue. In some cases, the negligence of the state was described as an effect of the rigidity of administrative systems; in others, as an effect of the lack of knowledge. An example of the latter is when the Swedish Migration Board organised so-called safe houses for sexual- and gender-variant asylum seekers; the

panellist who used the example concluded that the strategy of gathering non-conforming people in one place not only risks isolating them but also makes the safe houses potential targets for homophobic and transphobic attacks. So what in policy documents and guidelines might be described as a proactive strategy from a benevolent state is experienced by the beneficiaries as negligence and lack of knowledge. As one of the panellists said: ‘The system doesn’t consider our vulnerability’.

It also becomes obvious that what at first sight might look like a biopolitics of negligence can be described as an enactment of other power technologies, like surveillance. An example used by one of the EuroPride panellists was that border police have instructions to register the original documentations of identity (if available), meaning that an asylum application is registered with reference to the current juridical gender, despite the incongruency between juridical gender and gender identity. During the evaluation process, state representatives—migration officers and interpreters—often use pronouns associated with the juridical gender, hence misgendering asylum seekers throughout the process. Reactions to such misgendering are monitored: if you don’t react at all, you risk losing credibility, but if you react too strongly, it might be held against you in the process to come. The violence of migration and asylum politics has been documented by scholars studying how notions of sexual and gender variance are constructed in tandem with processes of racialisation and neocolonial notions of the Global North and West as the sites from which LGBTQ rights, secularisation and liberal tolerance are exported and spread (see for example Shakhshari 2013).

## 8.5 Holding the State Accountable

The understanding of the state as all-encompassing and negligent, so prevalent among activists, manifests in specific strategies of negotiating one’s relation to the state. One of the strategies is to hold the state accountable for the harm and pain it has caused. The discussions about Swedish migration politics described above is an excellent example of this. The panellists insisted on holding the state accountable by pointing out that progressive policies might have discriminatory effects; although



the revisions of the guidelines have had the effect that questions based on blatant prejudice have been replaced, the suggested lines of questioning demand a cultural sensitivity and deep knowledge about LGBTQ life conditions, not only on behalf of the bureaucrats but also on behalf of the asylum seekers and their juridical assistants. One of the juridical assistants on the panel described how the asylum seekers are asked to be reflexive and expressive not only about their experiences of threats and discrimination, but also about their feelings.

In these conversations, the discrepancy between legislative formulations and the practice that manifests in the interpretation of said formulations is exposed. The legislative regulations declare that discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality ought to secure the right to asylum, but the guidelines for credibility evaluations were formulated by the Swedish Migration Board, by bureaucrats, not by jurists. It is the implementation of the guidelines—the practice—that sets the precedents. This is the sphere of governance, of the distribution of life chances. I argue that the tension that the activists identify between the Swedish state's rhetoric on human rights as fundamental for its asylum politics, and the violent, discriminating effects of the processes of governance condoned by the very same state, are the basis on which some activists have formulated their calls for state accountability. One of the panellists urged Swedish civil society to hold the state accountable in a very concrete way, by asking questions about what the intention was when the state appointed the Swedish Migration Board as a so-called LGBTQ strategic governmental agency. With such a confrontational approach, activists can hold individual state representatives responsible for the state violence directly inflicted on people by administrative systems and Swedish bureaucracy.

These descriptions of state violence can be read as a critique of the liberal welfare state's focus on legislation, rights and policies, and its lack of engagement with questions of redistribution and actual living conditions. The focus on state violence, and the insistence that the state needs to assume responsibility for it, is a problematisation of the trust in legal reform and individual rights as a method to abolish injustice, echoing the analysis that Spade has described in the US context, where trans activists, following critical race studies scholars and activists, have pointed out that

‘legal declarations of “equality” are often tools for maintaining stratifying social and economic arrangements’ (Spade 2011: 14). I would argue that the strategy of holding the state accountable can be understood as a way to repoliticise the state in a time when neoliberal processes of globalised economy, the expansion of multinational companies and the commercialisation of civil society often are claimed to weaken the sovereignty of the national state (Bernal and Grewal 2014; Lang 1997). When activists hold the state accountable, they insist that social inequality is a state affair by stating that governance is political.

The same type of insistence on the political character of state violence and governance was found in another conversation held at EuroPride in Göteborg, which dealt with Swedish policy and legislative work on politics governing queer families. The panel participants, an EU parliamentarian and a jurist, described how the Swedish state approach legislation as a means to reflect and uphold social norms but also as a means to challenge them. On the matter of family politics, the panellists were in agreement that legislation at best has tried to conform to changing social realities—to new family constellations and new practices in reproductive rights—and that the state has not used its potential to influence norms. The jurist described the state interest in transformative politics as lukewarm and insisted that what is needed is an engagement with ‘the third step in norm-critical work [translation by author]’, that of turning the focus from the so-called deviant to analysing and questioning the norm. The example that was used to illustrate this point was the right to have one’s gender identity recognised by the state through the amendment of the juridical gender marker, and the jurist argued that a truly transformative approach would be to get rid of juridical gender markers altogether. It seems as if the analysis done by the jurist was that the legislatively protected right to amend one’s juridical gender—a legal reform that has had a positive impact on the life conditions for gender-variant people—upholds gender binarity as a binary, and gender as the site of engagement between citizens and the state.

As suggested above, the strategy of holding the state accountable can be understood as reinstating it as an actor in political, transformative work. In this last example, a very concrete interpellation of the state is performed, with an explicit methodological suggestion in mind, namely

the invocation of norm-critical work as the basis of political work, and an insistence that this is a task that the state has a responsibility to take up. Perhaps this insistence can be understood as a reaction to what Spade has described as the effect of neoliberalism on social justice work and activism, where the focus has been on developing supplementary legislation that targets gender-variant people's specific needs—what can be understood as amending legislation—rather than on transformative strategies that uproot the foundation of discriminatory structures (Spade 2011). The argument is that liberal legal reforms uphold discriminatory structures through amending, and covering up, the violent effects they have, and that what is needed, if one aims at social justice, is a transformative approach. Spade's analysis leaves little or no room for the state as an actor in this turn towards transformative politics: 'Meaningful transformation will not occur through pronouncements of equality from various government institutions. Transformative change can only arise through mass mobilization led by populations most directly impacted by the harmful systems that distribute vulnerability and security' (Spade 2011: 28). Swedish activists, however, insist on the role of the state in transformative work.

## 8.6 Fighting State Repression

I have argued that Swedish activists are using different strategies to politicise the relation between citizen and state. Through insisting on holding the state accountable, they are insisting on a continuous conversation with the state as an interlocutor. However, there is also a streak of critique that problematises this orientation towards the state. In their manifesto, *Transförsvaret* formulated it as a need to turn away from what they called lobbying and "gentle" activism: 'Gentle activism only works when the people in charge care, which they currently don't. What is needed is to make them care; Rights [sic] don't come just because you ask nicely' (*Transförsvaret* 2016: n.p.). Here, *Transförsvaret* identified establishing affective relations—or at least affective responses—as a productive strategy in social justice work. Conversations on their social media accounts focused on democratic values and civil responsibilities, urging citizens to

mobilise around their critique and urging politicians to acknowledge their duty to engage with concerned citizens. This line of reasoning echoes arguments made by activists in the US context, working within the prison industrial complex, who make the case that in order for change to come, social justice activists need to engage with incarcerated trans people not only as professionals and civil servants; they must also form personal relations (Spade 2011). Personal relations will demand an affective engagement with the issues at hand, and hence also ensure a more connected, rooted analysis of lived experiences of state neglect and violence. Philosopher Ellen Feder (2014) has made a similar case for the importance of affective engagement when discussing how to sensitise physicians to the rights and needs of young intersex children, and how to have them engage in a change in medical standards of care that is responsive to children's rights to bodily integrity and autonomy.

The conversations on Transförsvaret's social media accounts contained explicit descriptions of state violence and of state repression. They identified the police as complicit in state repression, through physical coerciveness, and asked for people to be present in solidarity, as witnesses: 'We have work ahead of us, but we must not let the police walls and the politicians' silence dampen our morale. It is up to all of us to take the space we need, to keep our hopes up for a better future. Do what you can to come to the demonstrations; the more there are of us, the more opportunities we have and the further our common voice can sound [translation by author]' (Transförsvaret, Facebook, 24 January 2017). In other words, the strategy of seeking social change through engagement with politicians and bureaucrats is not a strategy that per definition is *less* critical of the state; perhaps it is rather the opposite. What Transförsvaret described as 'gentle activism' can be interpreted as the lobbying of NGOs that relies on having professional relations with state representatives, and it is in contrast to a call for civil disobedience as a strategy for social change.

Activism often takes a back seat to parties and celebrations. This in stark contrast to 1979 when Social Services were occupied by activists, demanding to remove the classification of homosexuality as an illness. Action and following change was [sic] quick. But why, you may ask, did we stop using a tool that worked? (Transförsvaret 2016: n.p.)

Transförsvaret organised an occupation of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare in November 2016 and also attempted to occupy the Social Department in 2017. During these acts of civil disobedience, or direct action, Transförsvaret interpellated the sitting government to secure trans rights by means of not letting up on the political work. They made the case that politicians in government had the knowledge needed; what they lacked was the engagement and political will. In order for momentum towards change to come about, civil disobedience was necessary (Transförsvaret, Facebook, 9 January, 2017). While Transförsvaret continuously interpellate the state as a vital actor, others reject the idea that true liberation can come out of an engagement with the state as we know it, with its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and its investment in violent processes of upholding a nation-state with preconditions for citizenship and immigration status. An example of this is Reclaim Pride, described by the organisers as a flat organisation following principles of self-organisation, formed in 2018 as an alternative to EuroPride in Göteborg. The intent was to provide an alternative platform for the community, a platform without the presence of ‘governmental agencies, companies and political parties [translation by author]’ (Reclaim Pride 2018). Reclaim Pride was more than a reactive response to the pinkwashing and commercialisation of Pride events; it was a performative gesture of self-proclamation: ‘instead of protesting against the existing europride and hence let them become the subject, we create our own pride and accomplish our goal the very moment we go through with it [the event] [translation by author]’ (Reclaim Pride 2018). The statement of intent explicitly called out state violence in its different forms, and can be read as a call to arms for justice and transformative politics; it was a vision of a different type of future, a site for community building.

There are so many reasons why we are needed; one of the reasons being that the presence of police in commercial Pride festivals is scaring off LGBTQ asylum seekers without papers, due to the risk of ID controls; or trans people, since police on duty are the perpetrators in 25% of the cases of physical violence against trans people. But actually, it doesn't really matter why we are needed, because as long as there are queers that think that commercial pride festivals are not for them, for whatever reason—queers who

would rather visit a festival without police presence, capitalism and hypocritical politicians—we are needed [translation by author]. (Reclaim Pride 2018: n.p.)

One of the key components in the organising of Reclaim Pride was the turn away from the symbolic recognition of state participation. However, since Reclaim Pride was housed on city-owned premises, the goal of keeping both state and capital at arm's length was compromised when Göteborg city exercised its governing power and critiqued two of the events on the programme. The event that drew the sharpest critique was a screening and panel discussion of *Burka Songs 2*, a film that scrutinises discourses around the veil by focusing on the voices of veiled activists. The city argued that one of the panel members did not comply with the core values of the city, specifying that they felt the safeguard against extremist religious expressions was compromised (the decision was announced through email, but the chair of the municipal assembly defended it and described the logic behind it on her personal website: Hermansson 2018). The city also opposed another programme event, a workshop on anti-repression arranged by a local anarchist group, claiming that it was in conflict with democratic values. The organisers behind Reclaim Pride condemned the repressive tactics of Göteborg city in a press release, stating that the screening and panel discussion would be held as planned. In the winter of 2019, Reclaim Pride filed a complaint with the Parliamentary Ombudsmen, in which they argued that Göteborg city had acted in violation of the Administrative Procedure Act and that the decision to critique Reclaim Pride, and the process behind it, was in violation of the Instrument of Government in the Swedish Constitution (Reclaim Pride 2019). The Parliamentary Ombudsmen ordered the city of Göteborg to submit an explanatory report on the processes leading up to the decision.

The conflict between Göteborg city and Reclaim Pride testifies to the complexity of state recognition and state involvement in social justice work; in the Swedish context, large parts of the work done by civil society is dependent on state funding and is housed on premises owned by cities or municipalities. Compared to the conditions for activist organising in the USA, described by Spade as oriented by the influx of private money

and sponsorship (Spade 2011), trans organising in the Swedish context *is* state-oriented, despite the strong streak of state critique. Even in the case of Reclaim Pride, which was an attempt to turn away from the state as the main interlocutor, activists had to negotiate a complex understanding of the role of the state in their organising for social justice and change. Of the examples used in this study, the way Reclaim Pride envisioned the state, and its role in the struggle for trans rights, is the one that is the most expressive when it comes to calls for transformative strategies. However, I argue that while the hypothesis that radical social justice work cannot be done through reformative strategies, only through transformative approaches that break with institutionalised systems of oppression—a notion prevalent in international queer and trans theorisation of organising and often brought up in Swedish discussions—has its points; it is problematic when it is used as a universal model for understanding the conditions of activist organising. It is a hypothesis developed from a particular empirical framework—the US one—and this empirical framework is imperative for the normative formulations themselves. Situated, context-sensitive empirical analyses and studies are needed to develop, and expand on this theoretical hypothesis.

## 8.7 Concluding Remarks

I have argued that it is crucial to investigate discourses about the Swedish state's role in the work for trans rights through an exploration of, for example, governmental reports. I have shown how legislative texts since 1968 have acknowledged that administrative systems are violent, in the sense that they induce pain and suffering in gender-variant people, while insisting that this is a necessity and that higher ends justify the means. Such higher ends have been identified as the state's interest in upholding social order and bureaucratic stability, protecting the nation's border and protecting citizens from hasty decisions that they might regret.

Because the state is explicit about its role in the suffering of gender-variant people and its responsibility to alleviate that suffering, Swedish activists have to actively negotiate its hypocrisy, and one way they do that is through the interpellation of the state. I have argued that one can

understand this interpellation as a strategy to stabilise the state by holding it accountable, as a way of putting state sovereignty back into the equation when questions about state agency and governance are discussed in these times of neoliberalism. Through interpellating the state, not only as a bureaucratic machine but also as a potentially ethically accountable or at least responding interlocutor, activists are making state violence visible and acknowledgeable. Swedish activists are indeed looking to ‘transform current logics of state, civil society security, and social equality’ (Spade 2011: 19), but a majority of them do so through engagement with the state, through an insistence on the state’s responsibility and accountability.

In an article entitled *Statlig nåd* (Stately grace), activist and cultural worker Maja Karlsson sketches a grim picture of a society that has dehumanised generations of gender-variant people who did not meet the criteria for state recognition, people ‘who kept their uterus to carry children, or were not deemed eligible for surgery, or chose to not pursue surgery, or never received a diagnosis since they were non-binary or had other gender expressions that didn’t appeal to the evaluators’ fancy [translation by author]’ (Karlsson 2018: n.p.). The very same society now passes itself off as inclusive and tolerant, ‘[A] society that only on paper has cut down its transphobic violence, with new laws and rainbow flags covering up the cuts [translation by author]’ (Karlsson 2018: n.p.). The Swedish state of today assumes neither moral nor juridical responsibility for the harms experienced under the administrative systems and medical practices of yesterday, Karlsson states, so the new generation of gender-variant people will get no apology. No ‘pity money’ in the form of compensations will be available for them as it has been for previous generations that were forced to go through sterilisation to be recognised by the state (Karlsson 2018: n.p.). Karlsson’s poetic description of state violence points towards the need for a political approach that goes beyond liberal rights rhetoric and symbolic politics of inclusion, a reparational approach of true engagement with the culpability of the state. I would argue that the promise of such an approach is not to put state violence to rest as history but rather to facilitate an understanding of gender variance and the history of gender-variant rights as categories that are not foreclosed but open for resignification and repoliticisation in contemporary times.



## Notes

1. A note on terminology: I will use the terms ‘gender-variant’ and ‘gender variance’ when referring to practices and subjectivities that do not fit the gender binary; these are descriptive terms. The term ‘trans’ is used when referring to discourses that use the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘trans’ to connote specific experiences, expressions, subjectivities and activism. For example, I use the terminology of trans rights instead of gender-variant rights specifically because discussions about human and civil rights are focused on a particular type of gender variance, namely the experiences, expressions, subjectivities and activism that are oriented towards the term trans or transgender.
2. While this is a study of the functions of narratives about the state and hence not an examination of the state per se, a note on my frames of reference on the issue might still be informative. I am departing from an understanding of the state that focuses on governmentality and governance, inspired by Foucault’s understanding of the state as ‘no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction’ (Foucault 1991: 103).
3. Parental registrations are gender specific, following the juridical gender of the individual, but prior to the litigation, the praxis was to *not* change registrations of motherhood or fatherhood after someone had their juridical gender marker amended, which meant that a man could be registered as the mother of his child and a woman as the father of hers.
4. Both tropes, as they play out in the contemporary US context, are described by trans scholar Talia Bettcher in her canonical article ‘Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers’ from 2007.

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# 9

## 'Pain Is Hard to Put on Paper': Exploring the Silences of Migrant Scholars

Despina Tzimoula and Diana Mulinari

### 9.1 Introduction

Despite the successful collection of thirteen life stories of working-class women of Greek background, in their late sixties, who had migrated to Sweden in the 1970s, the two researchers engaged in the research project—Despina, herself a child of migrant Greek parents, and Diana, a political refugee from Argentina—were unable to publish the results. The life stories they collected provided a rich and relevant empirical material on the significance of transnational migration, family bonds and labour. The recorded material was transcribed and more than fifty pages of preliminary analysis was written. The central topic emerging from the material was that of suffering: bodily as well as psychological; the pain of living

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outside the ‘homeland’; and the sacrifices they made for their children. We never published the results.

We ‘forgot’ the project, engaging in other academic journeys as the years went by. In the period that followed, we ‘remembered’ the project every time we met and attributed our inability to conclude it to the demands of a neoliberal academy. We had carried out the research without any financial support and our survival as migrant women in the academy demanded other priorities. It can be argued that unstable working conditions—Despina, a doctoral student, Diana, a post doc with a one-year contract at the time—may explain in part our inability to explore the voices we had heard in our extensive dialogues with these women. This rational interpretation was (and is), to a certain extent, true and decrease our emotional discomfort when ‘remembering “the almost finished articles”’ we had never submitted for publication. But rational explanations regarding our working conditions do not tell the whole story. We have now, more than ten years after the collection of the empirical material, tried another interpretation. We will argue that our inability to submit our work for publication can be also understood as our inability to conceptualise the immense experience of suffering that the empirical material provided. We were unable to analytically grasp the level of pain, the impressive suffering, the depressive emotional edge that the research subjects both expressed and acted upon. We were also unable to respond to our own feelings of shame and guilt created by the encounter with these experiences.

The aim of chapter is to listen to women’s narratives by introducing into the conversation the concept of social suffering employing a psychosocial approach (Frosh 2010). The aim of the chapter is also to explore our inability (as migrants and daughters of migrants ourselves) to acknowledge what over-exploitation, gender and racial regimes can do and do to people, regarding their sense of self and well-being. The chapter moves through four sections. First, the text provides a short introduction to the Swedish racial formation followed by relevant efforts to conceptualise human pain, inspired by the work of the Black British feminist scholars Yasmin Gunaratnam and Gail Lewis (2001), which suggests the value of a synthesis of politicised psychoanalytic approaches to the dynamics of ‘race’ and emotional labour; bridging a reflection of our own

emotions, with a special focus on shame and guilt. The central focus of the chapter is on the section 'What We Think Hurts the Most' exploring the stories collected and organised through three topics—(failed) motherhood, broken bodies and (racist) respectability.

## 9.2 Swedish Racial Regime: Migrant Mothers, as Problems, Burden and Threat

Sweden is frequently identified as one of the most successful projects of social-democratic welfare regimes with state-led gender-equality politics (Melby et al. 2008; Lundqvist 2011) and multiculturalism (Ålund and Schierup 1991). While Sweden continues to still score high in various evaluations of social justice, an increasing number of scholars point to the country's radical shift towards neoliberal policies at the beginning of the 1990s (Boréus 1997) with an impressive increase in class inequalities, the success of ethnonationalist political parties and a deep transformation of migration and refugee politics towards the securitisation and criminalisation of vulnerable groups (Ålund et al. 2017).

The contribution of a new generation of Swedish postcolonial fiction writers to the re-reading of gender, nationhood and migration is impressive (Pascalidou 2009; Wenger 2001; Farrokhzad 2013). We want to take a point of departure in migrant mothers' stories because their voices challenge one of the deepest forms through which gendered racism (Essed 1991) has been written on migrant women's bodies in Sweden: racist fantasies about their inability to productively engage in paid work, understood within Swedish workfare ideology as the only path towards women's emancipation. These childhood memories, these personal biographies of growing up as children of migrant mothers that paradoxically were not recognised as 'real' workers witness on the historical role migrant women had in the establishment of Swedish welfare (Knocke 1991; de los Reyes 1998, 2000; Strollo 2014), but also on the lack of collective societal memory in acknowledging their contribution.

Despite diverse sources pointing out the fundamental role that paid work played in migrant women's lives, Swedish labour market and



gender-equality policies have for more than forty years analysed the problem of migrant women as their inability (or resistance) to participate in the formal labour force. The location of the category of migrant women within the Swedish racial formation in the last fifty years provides both systematic continuities and vital transformations. Continuity can be traced in the implementation of racist classification systems based on the binary opposition between the West and the Rest (Hall 1992). Similar to the discourses on migrant women in the UK analysed by Umut Erel (2011: 32), hegemonic discourses on migrant women in Sweden represent migrants' culture as patriarchal and oppressive, provide an understanding of migrant women located (or imprisoned) between modernity and tradition, a reading of migrant women's as recipients of benefits rather than contributors framed by an Eurocentric arrogance shaped by the conviction that Sweden, with its gender-equality ideology, opened through the provision of paid labour, a path towards the empowerment of migrant women. Intersectional analysis (Collins Hill and Bilge 2016) illuminates the diversity and multiplicity of migrant women's background with regard to class, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and religion beyond the construction of the category. Racialisation processes had different impacts upon women and men and also for different groups of migrant workers. Migrant workers from Finland suffered processes of racialisation during the 1960s and the 1970s but were constructed as 'Nordic' in the 1990s (Borg 2016; Laskar 2017). Transformations can be identified among others in the subject positions opened for women target by the category: a problem in the 1970s, a burden in the 1990s and a threat today (Mulinari and Lunqvist 2017).

Central to our understanding of how differences have been acted upon in the different historical phases is, on the one hand, the continuity of a race formation based on Eurocentric frames at the core of a national narrative of modernity and progress but also the transformation of this racial regime over the course of the past fifty years. A way to understand the continuity in these different shifts is to differentiate analytically between three periods: the first one with social-democratic hegemony from the beginning of the 1960s, a context of subordinated inclusion where migrant values and cultures are to be acknowledged, and up to a certain extent learn from, and where migrant women are often invisible in social

policy and when visible identified not as what they are: a segment of the Swedish working class, but as family members, their supposed 'isolation' a problem to be acted upon by state institutions aiming towards integration. The second period, following the 1991 financial crisis and the high level of unemployment and sick leave among migrant women introduces the notion of people being torn apart by what are supposed to be two cultures, with the codeword of cultural conflict and a conceptualisation of migrant women as a burden for the welfare state. In the last decade, we witness the establishment of a third category within an increasing racist racial regime where migrants' cultures are only defined by the patriarchal violence as a central quality of their cultures. However, migrant women are not only conceptualised as a threat, but also especially qualified for care and domestic work.

The experience of racialised gendered labour migration of our research subjects and particularly the levels of over-exploitation of their labour was located within the functioning of 'normal' capitalism, in the context of a welfare state with multicultural social policies. One possible interpretation evolving from our material is that for all those engaged (it is normal, things are like this, it is their country, it is natural we were guests here), racism was not only naturalised, but also seldom recognised.

### 9.3 Social Suffering and Racist Practices

In our study, racism is experienced in visceral, affective and embodied terms, and the consequences of these experiences is at the core of the stories of the working-class migrant women that we spoke to. The lack of societal public recognition of their suffering reinforces the levels of pain and bodily discomfort that we find in our research subjects.

In recent years, scholarship has both challenged understanding of the self as separated and abstracted from the social and deterministic understanding of subjectivity solely reduced to the reproduction of social hierarchies.

Scholarly traditions searching to transcend the binary opposition between rationality and feelings and drawing feelings to the core of the social has provided new ways of understanding trauma, loss, pain and

vulnerability at the crossroads between self and society (Frost and Hoggett 2008; Ahmed 2004).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social suffering as developed in his work *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (Bourdieu et al. 1999) draws attention to the lived experience of inhabiting social structures of oppression. The strength of the concept lies in its ability to grasp the subjective experience of loss and harm experienced by the (hidden) injuries different groups of people confront within neoliberal capitalism. An analysis of process of self-denial and bereavement had already been identified in industrial workers when excluded from the prospect to value themselves through their labour (Sennett and Cobb 1973). In Bourdieu's version, the concept provides an analytical frame where the pain produced by unequal relations of power is identified, recognised and acknowledged, or rather the term provides a conceptualisation of the levels of social misery, of feelings of humiliation, resentment, despair that result from what political, economic and institutional power do to people.

It is in the field of health care where the concept has had its most powerful impact. The concept has inspired anthropologists, critical psychologists and health care professionals identifying ill-health among unprivileged groups to create a space of understanding outside the scope of medicalisation and individualisation. The concept provides an antidote towards the reading of grief through psychiatric diagnosis of clinical depression, post-traumatic stress and mental illness (Wilkinson 2014). While the concept has been criticised for a number of reasons (McRobbie 2002), the term recognises the need to conceptualise suffering without falling into individualised and pathologised forms of victimisation.

Feminist scholar Yasmine Gunaratnam further develops the concept when working with migrants in palliative care. In her own words:

It is perhaps not surprising that such forms of suffering can manifest at the end of life for socially disadvantaged migrants, where lives are looked back on, regret and losses can (re)surface, and selves and bodies can become both more salient and more vulnerable as illness progresses and also at different stages of the care pathway that involve varying degrees and rhythms of exposure. (Gunaratnam 2012: 110)

Increasing number of studies identified migrant women to be at a greater risk of developing mental health problems (Lindqvist 2013). While our research subjects were not suffering the distress of dying, most of them were retired and facing the dilemmas of both ageing and old age, dilemmas that reinforced their condition of migrants and particularly the ways through which they remembered their earlier experience of migration, family and labour. It seems possible that by adding a feminist and inspired explorations of affective practices (Wetherell 2015) to the notion of social suffering to conceptualise gendered racism(s) as a specific form of human suffering.

A central contribution of psychoanalysis to postcolonial work Stephen Frosh argues (2013) is to provide a vocabulary that facilitates discussion of what might be called the 'excessive' dimension of racist discourse.

A psychosocial frame provides a productive point of departure to explore fundamental 'visceral' and unconscious emotions of love, hate, aggression and envy at the core of racist affective practices. Michael Rustin suggests that 'Theories which don't take note of these psychic roots of racist practices can't adequately account either for the deep pain and damage they cause to their victims, or for their persistence as a social pathology' (1991: 68). And, according to Simon Clark (2003), a Kleinian psychoanalytic interpretation of racism is a fundamental point of departure 'to explore the ubiquitous and visceral elements of racial hatred and discrimination. ... It is the communicative aspect of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory which can help explain the ways in which we think of others, feel about others and, crucially, how we make others feel' (Clark 2003: 123). The reading of the social inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon's work (1952/1968) is fundamental because it both challenges psychoanalysis at its core and further develops the tradition, moving originally between the sociopolitical and the psychological and developing a critical awareness of the role of societal setting (colonialism, racism) play within the domain of the psychological. Fanon's existential reading of psychoanalysis explores how central the construction of the other as an object is at the core of the construction of the coloniser as a subject and puts the issue of colonial power and racist desire at the centre of this relationship. In his path-breaking development of Marx's 'theory of alienation', Fanon poses an emphasis on the denial of the colonized humanity:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?" (Fanon 1968: 250)

An argument and insight further developed by feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1997: 139) identifying historical context when experiences of loss are foreclosed, because there is no public recognition through which the suffering can be named and mourned. The notion of the moral third, so central to the work of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1988), explores how a Kleinian-inspired psychoanalytical tradition could conceptualise reparation. Acknowledgement of injury and misrecognition becomes an essential quality of repair, providing affective practice, that resists racist fantasies that only one can live, Benjamin (2004) argues.

## 9.4 Methodological Reflections

In recent decades, the turn to reflexivity, which emphasises the researcher's experience in the encounter with its research subjects, has expanded (Macbeth 2001; Berger 2015). Our location within a tradition of reflexive feminist methodologies (Jagger 2008) confronted us with a number of methodological puzzles. Trained in feminist research methods, issues of reflexivity and positionality have been at the core of our scholarly work. Despina is (in Sweden) categorised as second-generation Greek-Swedish, a gendered Swedish citizen that has 'an unusual surname' and a skin complexion that will make her have to explain to the border officers, in her affluent Swedish that she 'belongs'. Diana is a political refugee from Latin America and she recognises very well the pain of forced migration and exile that of being separated (cut off, in the words of one of our research subjects) of family and kin.

The risk of a narcissistic shift from the voices of the research subjects to what is supposed is the internal life of the researchers has been identified by a number of authors. Daphne Patai reads the focus on self-reflexivity as the privilege of academics engaged 'in the erotic of their own language

games' (1994: 69). While we agree with these and similar arguments, we also identify with a tradition of scholarly research that explores the possibilities of doing research in different ways and underlines the centrality of listening, or rather the art of listening (Back 2007), conceptualising the meeting between research and research subject as one of dialogue and working through notions of learning as equals. Wand Pillow (2003) introduces the notion of uncomfortable reflexivity, asserting that it is fundamental to challenge the use of reflexivity as a method to legitimate qualitative research and get access to better data; arguing for the need to move away from comfortable uses of reflexivity to what she defines as a reflexivity of discomfort, a concept and an invitation to a practice that we would argue is relevant for our research.

When we did the collection of the life stories in 2010, we decided to shift so that Despina, who has a Greek background and was a single woman during the period of the fieldwork, and Diana, who has a Latin American background and was already a mother of five, would encounter the women separately, so that we could be able to grasp the diversity of narratives that these two research positions created opening for the women to speak Greek with Despina, and sharing broken Sweden when Diana conducted the interviews. Our fieldwork notes witnessed positive feelings during the collection of stories, it seems that we both enjoyed the conversations and find pleasure in the company of our research subjects:

I stopped the machine after two hours ... We could continue forever. What a storyteller ... So much to tell

We stopped the recording when she began to cry. But she wanted us to continue and we did as she wanted. And she was right ... Beautiful how she remembers.

There were many potential benefits evolving from our insider positions not only for the 'access to the field' but also in our capacity for empathy and our acknowledgment of their pain (Chavez 2008). The feeling of being not only welcomed, but also in different ways the feeling of being at home or of coming home, a feeling of being at ease with the research subjects created the space for the successful collection of stories but also for what was to come, our own silence, our inability to publish.

What follows is an attempt to develop analytical tools to be able to grasp our informants' experience without victimisation. We would like to argue that alongside an historical and sociological analysis of the narratives, a psychoanalytically informed reading, within the tradition of psychosocial studies creates a relevant approach to the conflictual nature of their experience (and ours).

## 9.5 What (We Think) Hurts the Most: The Political Economy of Social Suffering—Always Wrong, Always Out of Place (Mothers)

It is a curse to be a migrant (Maria).

Scholars on the Greek diaspora suggest that there has been a tendency to provide essentialist understanding of the Greek experience of migration based on the notion of a 'traditional family'. There is, however, no doubt that family and kinship relations are at the core of survival strategies regarding migration and that the experience of transnational households in terms of allocation of material and symbolic resources between Greece and migrant locations is at the core of the cultural understanding of obligations and rights in family matters (Markopoulou 1981; Tzimoula 2008).

In our empirical material, women's narratives change from description of events to visible emotions, stories told when crying, when migration stories entangle with the topic of doing family within transnational families: As an effect of the Second World War and a devastating civil war in the 1950s, Greece experienced yet another massive flow of emigration. It is to this flow our subjects in this study belong to, all of them arriving in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s (Boukas 1993; Corvino and Kazana 1984).

Somebody we knew told us that we could work for him in a pizzeria. We left our two daughters with my husband's parents, the one was six and the other was one and a half. I really regret that. I am not leaving my children again. (Panagiota)

Feminist scholars have identified the centrality of mother-work within migration studies that often untheorized gender (Brah 1996; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2003; Phoenix and Bauer 2012). The experience of migration has, up to the present day, not been thought through the impact migration has on the rights of women to mother and in the right of children to be with their significant others. In our empirical material, women's narratives change from a description of events to visible emotions, stories told when crying, when migration stories entangle with the topic of doing family within transnational families:

My mother wanted to keep him (the child)—it was very common that women left their children with their mothers in those days. It is wrong to condemn these women for that—they all did it out of necessity. I could not leave my child so I took him with me. First, I got a job for two months, then my sister worked for a while but we could not manage, we both had to work but what were we going to do with the kids? With pain I cannot describe I wrote a letter to my mother and told her that I would bring the boy to her so that I could work. So, my husband took him and went to Greece and left the boy with my mother. What a mother feels when she is separated from her child... there are no words that can describe it ... it is horrible. I am old now but those memories still haunt me. My son is now a grownup man and has a family but the pictures of the past. I cannot forget them and they still hurt. There was probably another solution than this, there was probably some authority that could have helped us. But we didn't know. I was always very close to my mother. She had several medical problems so we use to help each other out. She looked after the boy while I got a cleaning job here. The boy got used to her and she to him, they had a strong band between them. Can you imagine what I did to her when I took the boy with me Sweden? It hurt her tremendously We communicated by letters. In one letter that I send to my mother, I drew the contours of my boys' little hand. I will never forget my mother's reply. 'May you live happy, my daughter. May your children grow up and may you someday have grandchildren. And may they send you letters with the drawings of your grandchildren's hands'. I have asked my children never to do such a thing. It may sound melodramatic, ridiculous to you, but it really was horrible. I did it to make her happy but I pushed her deeper in her sorrow. (Irene)



In Irene's narrative, the shame she feels for the suffering of her mother seems to be as devastating as the pain she expresses when being forced to leave her child behind. The metaphor of the children's hands as representing an absence is a powerful illustration of the experience of loss at the core of the everyday interactions of transnational families. Migration not only dislocates Irene as a mother but also damages the relationship with her own mother. Most of the women we spoke to shared similar stories and most of them returned again and again to this topic. Irene cries in different parts of the story. She is telling us what a traumatic event it is and how it hurts, how it does not stop hurting, how it hurts through life and how it hurts through several generations. The phrase: It is wrong to condemn women for this grasps the normative gender ideology within the diaspora, that both encourages migration but demands good mothering. While the researcher was also nearly in tears, Irene's need to 'defend' her right to her pain showed that she was, to a certain extent, ashamed of appearing melodramatic—a quality that racist representations locate among migrant women.

In her study of serial migration, The British social psychologist Ann Phoenix (2019) shows how the experiences of separation and reunion (and for the children the repetition of experiences of separation from significant others to be reunited with a mother they had never met) creates serious emotional wounds that shape relations between mothers and daughters throughout their life. Not only is migration gendered, but it is based on specific and particular gender ideologies, particularly and specific of motherhood: Who is a bad mother? Or, as feminists would put it, who is not a bad mother? To whom in the audience is Irene speaking when she defends hers and others' decisions of leaving the children behind. Why does she need to legitimise what would be for most observers an act based on care and love? Is this an explanation aimed to her son and towards the Greek-Swedish youth born and raised in Sweden? Why does she need to apologise for crying when any observer would understand her experience of suffering?

In the more than two-hour interview, Irene's pain (of leaving her son, of hurting her mother) was seldom linked to feelings of anger, the social (migration, over-exploitation, racism, male dominance) was constructed and accepted as natural: This is how things were, the Swedish are like

this, it is their country, we were ignorant, we did not know better. Migrant women's traumatic experiencing of separation and loss was reinforced by the Eurocentric discourses they encountered in Sweden, which demanded not only their entrance into paid work, but also their 'integration into the mythical space of Swedish modernity, an "integration" that was fundamental, it was argued, to break their 'isolation' and allow them to be good mothers. The notion of being ignorant (the term most used) appears also in how women in most stories explained, how they worked shifts, seldom using child-care facilities, but there is not only shame, there is also pride in being 'good migrant workers', of not 'exploiting the system' in 'made it in our own'.

The construction of the migrant women/mothers as culturally different can be found in a government commission report in 1979, investing the future immigration policies (SOU 1974/1979). Note how Irene is constructed (despite her experience of migration and active labour market participation) as a passive object, acting upon external demands, from both her children and husband. Note also how the binary opposition between tradition and modernity locates her outside the realm of the Swedish gender equality discourse; not only does it obscure her skills as a worker, but also stigmatises her as a mother:

The collision between on the one hand the immigrant woman's upbringing and background, and the norms and values of Swedish society on the other, make it very difficult for her to function as a mother and wife. While she is tied to her own tradition and role as a woman, she is also asked to meet the changes to respond to the demands of her children through school and friends. Moreover, her husband demands her to maintain her traditional female role. (SOU 1974. Quoted in Knocked 1991: author's translation)

In the following quote, Eleni challenges Swedish welfare/social work discourses on the needs of children and good mothering, by telling a story of going out for dinner with her son:

Sure, I could go out for dinner from time to time. Once I went out with a Swedish friend and her daughter who is 4 years older than Dennis. Dennis was six years old. It was around 20.30 or 21.00 in the evening and every-

body was looking at us very strangely. I couldn't understand why. 'is there something on my clothes+'. I ordered a steak for me and one for Dennis, what can I say ... he ate a lot! (laughs). That's why they look at us, they thought I was crazy to spend money on my kid's food, not ordering something small and for kids. They probably also thought that we were bad mothers going out with our kids at that hour. In Greece we are out at 23.00 or 24.00 It's my right to go out at any hour I like, it doesn't make me a bad mother. (Eleni)

Eleni was very conscious of the power of the gaze looking at her and her child. She seemed proud when telling the story but also mediates the discomfort of feeling controlled and judged. The story grasps the tensions of the goodwill of multicultural policies during the late 1970s, based on respect and tolerance of migrant cultures, when these cultures were not acted upon in public spaces and particular when the so-called 'migrant cultures' had an impact on the 'migrant child' already created as an object of institutional intervention and preoccupation.

If there is pain in leaving the children, and pain in being categorised as a bad mother in Sweden, there is also shame when unable to fulfill the ethnonationalist demands of the Greek nation-state, which underlines that the reproduction of the nation in the Diaspora is a vital role for women (Umut 2011), a reproduction of the cultural boundaries of Greekness that demanded strategies of motherhood aiming at raising children identified with the fatherland, despite children's experiences of belonging to other places and spaces.

Being a Greek mother in a Swedish context demands extreme efforts and sacrifices and all of them make the statement that they did all they could. In the words of Eleni:

It has been extremely difficult! I have tried to be as Greek as I could in my methods, and we made sure to go to the Greek Orthodox Church on the major holidays. you know. I try to keep all the traditions I can. But the Swedish are strong.

A more tired and capitulating attitude towards raising children in what she (despite living in Sweden for more than forty years names as a foreign culture) is articulated by Soultana:

It is really hard to transmit a culture surrounded by another one. But the truth is that the Swedish culture has taken over. That have made me sad many times but that how it is. (Soultana)

This practice, the doing of Greekness, recreating culture and tradition in the Diaspora towards the creation of a new generation of Greeks, trying to maintain the 'Greekness' in the children proved to be a difficult and almost impossible task. If that task is unsuccessful the blame can only fall on the mothers. Olga illustrates her frustration with the following words:

...When these kids can't connect with Greek tradition, language, culture, the only ones to blame are the mothers. I have seen themselves into a Swedish way of life, thus dragging their children with them, and when the time for them to move back to Greece, the children do not wish to follow and that hurts the parents. But it is too late. These children cannot master any language right, not the Swedish and not the Greek. (...) but who is to blame? The mothers of course!! Then there are families that do not have that problem and their children really want to go to Greece. Why? I will tell you why – they go to Greek school they get feedback from home, they go to Greece frequently and their parents really try to transmit the Greek culture to them. (...) pride for the homeland. And if this is allowed to continue there is not going to be a Greek community in Sweden. It's going to be lost. If the second generation is on the edge of going lost, what will happen to the third? they will probably not even be called themselves Greeks (Olga)

All of the women we spoke with tell us that they did all they could but that most of the time what they did was not enough. There is little joy in the stories, the space of motherhood is inhabited by shame; both when leaving the children in Greece, when experiencing the majoritarian gaze in public spaces identifying them as bad mothers and when 'failing' to educate the children following the cultural mandate of the Fatherland. Their narratives highlight the experience of gendered migration in terms

of the experience of being violently cut off from family bonds. A form of social suffering where ethnonationalist patriarchal demands, labour migration and racism create an affective space regulated by shame, or rather by gendered coded shame.

## 9.6 Good Workers: Sacrifices, Bodies and Racism

You want to know how we got here?! Then you are going to write a big book, sweetheart. The pains and tortures of the Greek are hard to put on paper. (Fotini)

I have noticed that I have been treated differently because I am foreign. At work for instance I would always get the hardest jobs, the heaviest. We always got the hardest and dirtiest jobs there was. Maybe it was because we didn't know the language. We were ignorant. And we never complained, we took whatever job they offered us. We needed the money and the Swedes knew that and took advantage of it. (Eleni)

During the 1960s Swedish labour migration was regulated by migration policies that recognised migrants' rights and provided autonomous legal status to migrant women. While migrant women had access to formal citizenship rights, they were located in subordinated positions in all spheres of life (Ålund and Schierup 1991). A racialised division of labour located different groups of women in different sectors of the labour market. While Swedish women also entered the labour market to take up paid work in the public sector at this time, migrant women tended to be located in the private sector, with higher employment rates (de los Reyes 2000). This specific period of time may be conceptualised in terms of subordinated inclusion, grasping the establishment and development of what was emerging as a Swedish racialised working class (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014).

If the pain and the suffering created by the experience of transnational motherhood is one of the most relevant topics in the life stories, their

own bodies, or rather the pain produced by hard work in their own bodies is also a highly present topic:

I was young when I came here, 23 years old. You think differently when you are young. I thought that I could just leave whenever I wanted to, but ... of all the dreams I had then, nothing came true. I stayed here. I worked, destroyed my body and I was an old lady before my 50th birthday. (Olga)

The destruction of their bodies appears to be of a different character than the pain expressed by the (negative) experiences associated with mothering. In their narratives, despite the physical pain, there is pride in their bodies' scars, they see the destruction of their bodies as a proof of what they themselves define as 'good workers', as one of them put it: working hard, not minding the fragility of our bodies. Being a good migrant was to be a good worker. To be a good worker called for certain sacrifices, particularly of the (working) body:

Those were difficult times. I remember one night when I was working at a hotel, washing dishes. I didn't have any specific timetable, I was supposed to work as long there was dishes to wash. That night it wasn't that much to do and one man wanted to tell me that I could home earlier. He was talking to me but I didn't understand and continued to wash the dishes. Finally, one older woman working there came, took me by the shoulders, untied my apron and put both her hands to her ear and bowed her head as if she was sleeping. Then I understood, she was trying to tell me to go home and sleep. When I came home, I remember I cried. I felt ashamed and sad. They were speaking to me and I didn't understand a word. I felt ... I don't know... lost. (Maria)

It is not the hard work that is the point of this story, even if the hard work is a central organising topic in how Maria remembers her experience. What is crucial here is the feeling of shame, of not being able to understand. No labour union regulation, no working contract frames the event; with Maria 'remembering' the inability to translate the existing cultural codes, her inability to understand the language:

(...) and then we moved to Åseda. I don't really remember. and we stayed there for a year or something. It was there I had an accident. I worked with men, you know they were melting iron, what is that called? They did metallic stuff for construction, you know. I worked with the owners' twins' sons. They were fifteen years old, I was seventeen. And it was there I had my accident. My hand got caught in the machine and the skin of the hand and the arm, up to my neck was ripped off. They were really nice to me, they took me to the hospital ... I was so ashamed, you know I didn't speak the language or anything. (Eleni)

Shame was the feeling most present when speaking about mothering, shame (of not understanding what is being said, of not speaking the language) is present in the narratives about work. While she was seventeen and the accident shaped all her life, Eleni's memories focuses on her embarrassment in not being able to communicate with the health care professionals. She uses the term 'nice' to describe how she was treated. Maria also tells us about her own accident as an effect of her working conditions:

I started working in a factory where they made typing machines. There I had the first big tragedy of my life. My hand got caught in a machine and ripped of pieces of two fingers (showing the injured hand). Then reality hit me. I had left a rather good life to go to a country I did not know anything about and become an invalid. I felt useless, invalid, all sorts of things. One could say that that was the first marking Sweden did upon me. (Maria)

I was young when I came here, 23. You see things differently when you are young, I thought that I could just leave whenever I wanted to, but. All the dreams that I have then, nothing came true. I stayed here, I worked, destroyed my body and I was an old lady before my 50th birthday. Why didn't I leave? I don't know. Started working, I didn't have social security in Greece, then I thought, "next year" and "a little bit longer", then I started school. While in school I had a car accident, so I stopped for a long time. Then I started working again, then I started school again and had another accident at work which damaged me a lot. Then I reached an age which made it difficult for me to find work in Greece. I don't know. Why I'm still here... coincidence maybe. We think that we are going to be young forever,

you know, the usual stuff. Then I have to say that my ego held me here, that I worked here and contributed to something here, but nothing in Greece, I couldn't just leave. I felt that Sweden had its obligations against me since I had worked here for so long, I gave them hands, my youth. To Greece I gave nothing, so I can't demand anything from Greece as I can from Sweden. And then of course there was the accident at work that kept me here. (Olga)

Olga is of a different character; the accident forces her to read her migration as one from leaving a position of relative privilege in Greece to one of being disabled. However, Olga is not angry either. The anger turns her in on herself, making her feel that she is the one without value. She reads the accident nearly as a proof of her loyalty to Sweden, of what she has given this country: concretely, her hands.

## 9.7 Social Suffering and (Racist) Respectability

Then I came to Malmö, I had bought a hairdresser salon, not the one you came to, another one. and so, life goes on. But you cannot imagine. just in that little salon I have, do you know how much racism there is among the old ladies?? It's unbelievable! And unfortunate! So many years, 33 years in Sweden and—because I understand the language better now. it hurts more, it gets to us more now. I think it is so because. no. and they show it too, very much 'don't go to her—she is an immigrant. Got to our girls' ... 'what are you saying?' They are funny (laughs). They don't know me, how can the judge me? I mean, I haven't worked in Greece at all, I came here when I was very young. I had never been a burden, never cost the state anything. free labor power you know. We went directly to work and paid our taxes... (Eleni)

Eleni speaks about racism in terms of an increase in pain when she could understand the culture and the language. Lack of 'integration' in the earlier years protected migrant women from the most vulgar everyday forms of racism, according to Eleni: not understanding made the possibility of ignoring racist practices easier. Today, Eleni understands and understanding produces more pain.



The success of the ethnonationalist political party the Sweden Democrats (today the third party in Sweden with more than 20% of electoral support) illuminates societal shifts from the social democratic hegemony that received the Greek labour migration in the 1960s and 1970s to a neoliberal regime with authoritarian ethnonationalist edges. Both in public discourse and among mainstream political parties the category of migrants is often spoken through notions of burden (how much they cost) or/and notions of threat (migrants threatening gender equality, Swedish values, etc.). Irene describes this experience in the following way:

They see us as different. They see our dark hair, the color of our skin and ... lately things have been happening to migrants that are scaring us. If I go to somebody's house, my sister's our/my cousin's, my husband always warns me of coming home after dark. We are scared. This racist thing is getting worse ... you have to watch yourself. It's wrong. It's a huge injustice. I don't speak of all Swedes, there are good people too. I can't describe how it feels, we have helped Sweden develop, we have been a part of the machinery and now they, the Swedes turn against us. It makes me feel even more inferior. To live in a place for thirty years and not feel at home, to feel a stranger. It's a big part of a lifetime. Many times, I feel that; that part has been wasted. (Irene)

Being afraid of neo-Nazi violence is today a sensible response to what is a real threat. Irene is right. Things can happen in the streets, migrants have been attacked and even killed by neo-Nazis (Gardell 2015). But what makes her statement relevant is how she links this feeling of being threatened by a feeling of lack of meaning, as if beyond the threat lied a deep pain of not being allowed to belong, their work not recognised, their contribution to society denied. Thirty years of her life defined as missed. In her narrative racism is experienced as an unfair classification system that includes her in a category, she does not recognise herself in belonging. In her narrative racism is a classification system so monolithic that her phenotypical characteristics (her dark hair) puts her and her family in the category of Others, despite her contributions to Swedish society.

We can't fight with the Swedes. They are too powerful. So, we fight with the refugees (laughs). (Fotini)

Fotini's intervention mirrors the power of humour to name specific forms of pain. The conviction that the conditions imposed by the Swedish nation-state was (and is) impossible to resist or to challenge is followed by the reflection that these years of suppressed anger are now articulated against what is experienced as a much vulnerable group: the new wave of refugees.

He should be happy that I, among others came and saw that he and his country got a bright future. (...) I mean we worked and increased this country's welfare. Sweden was nothing before. Zero. We came and worked practically for free and made it what it is. They did nothing for us, I mean we didn't even go to school and now, now they kick us. Of course, that is why it gets to us, because we know that we contributed for so long and now they treat us like this. it's unbelievable. We cleaned up all their shit so that they could have a nice country to live in ... And then the new migrants are coming and getting everything for free in allowances. I know one family that gets 34 000 a month from the state!! And I am working and paying taxes that are sky high! Can you imagine that!? They get paid for every child and they are six of them, they are divorced and they get something for that and so on, the money for the rent, the electricity, the phone, everything. 34000!! It's unbelievable! Yes, it is it's true. If I would need any help, I would probably get a big kick in the ass (laughs). (Eleni)

We carried out these interviews in 1999, one year after the creation of the ethnonationalist party the Sweden Democrats. Debates about nationhood and belonging were framed within a neoliberal discourse of costs and benefits, the category of migrant inscribed both in terms of burden for the welfare state and particularly for the Muslim population as a threat to Swedish values and norms (Integrationsverket 2005) in a context of increasing neo-Nazi violence and the presence of white supremacist terrorism (Gardell 2015).

In the last decade support for the ethnonationalist party the Sweden Democrats among foreign-born Swedish residents, both women and men while far lower than among Sweden-born men has increased

(Mulinari and Neergaard 2018). While not all of them, some of our research subjects organise their stories through a timeline defined by the presence of new groups of migrants. The binary opposition between us and them and the qualities through which this binary opposition is created—good migrants/bad migrants—was often used to express feelings of anger and bitterness, towards as Swedish society that seem not to recognise their value, or rather was unable to differentiate them (as good migrant workers) from the newly arrived refugees.

Relevant to our analysis is how Olga reiterates what other research subjects have said, these longing for recognition, their conviction of being both exploited but proud in creating a wealth, that is not defined as theirs. The us and them in the narrative is constructed through what she experienced she received (nothing) and what she thinks this new wave of migrants receive (everything):

Some simple examples. For instance, the sick-leave, some years ago if somebody of 50 years had problems with his arm, he got retired and full pension. And now, look at me. I have it all, arms, legs, back problems and I have evidence, X-rays, statements from doctors, but still they don't believe me. I have worked, so I have pension points. You have to become pathetic to be believed, cry and so on. Otherwise they don't believe you; and there are others like me. I can't do that. And I have no problem saying it to them. and of course, then, they want names, they want me to betray the ones that are acting sick, that do not want to work, and tell them a lot of lies. I will not betray other people, I want them to believe me. I told one of the social welfare ladies that I know there are people that they believe are sick, receive the benefits and work on the side. That's wrong. I won't do that, I can live on my pensions' points I have, it's enough. but there are a lot of wrongs in this country. Many migrants use the system. We do not do that. (Olga)

One of the Sweden Democrats' propaganda video for the 2018 elections represented an elderly lady walking very slowly and trying to get to a table that represented the welfare state, being run up by women in (black) hijabs with their children. Instead of neoliberal policies legitimated by social democratic governments, a difficult reality to accept for a section of the Swedish population, the migrants are the one to blame for the crisis of the welfare state. Among the ways through which this blaming is acted

upon is about false information (sometimes reproduced in the media) over the 'privileges' the refugees receive:

But when they needed us, we were welcome. we worked as animals. made this country work. and yesterday, I'll tell you about yesterday. I have had a bad back and I'm retired since xxx... so they send me to the orthopedic to determine exactly how this happened, if it was the heavy work or something else etc. so yesterday, I went to the hospital and I understood one thing: doctors are the greatest racists! Not towards the new refugees, but towards us. They came here with money, lied to the authorities and now everybody, me, your mother, father, my husband, everyone is paying for them... I am not a racist but this has made me one... since yesterday that is. The doctor asked me questions using medical terms I have never heard, where would I hear them – in the factory?! How can he demand from a worker to be familiar with medical terms?! I never went to school here because they only wanted us to work and produce, to go to school didn't produce anything... For them it was only the daily things we needed at work that had to be sufficient, other than that they didn't care. When I said I didn't understand the medical word he used for something, he turned to me and said: Don't you know the alphabet? Almost pissed off. I said that I did but not that words. So, he did something and said he was done with the examination and told me to get lost! No x-rays, no nothing. What do you think, isn't this racism?! We made Sweden what it is today, today they are rich. they take care of all those who haven't contributed to anything to this country and us. We worked and damaged our bodies and they don't care. What do you think? (Olga)

The narratives are similar. All of them begin with an understanding of the role their labour has had in the creation of Sweden as a prosperous country and conclude with the anger created by the fantasy that the new refugees are protected and love. Note that the ones allowing the level of over-exploitation that destroy their bodies is not also the target of the anger. Or rather the anger seems to evolve by what for them is the breakdown of a moral economy in which they thought that working hard and never complaining would create a space of respectability and inclusion—a space that could protect them and their children from being the Others.

At a descriptive level, the term respectability refers to seeking to make oneself socially acceptable through good or 'proper' behaviour. The concept of racist migrant respectability (Mulinari and Neergaard 2018) grasps the subject position that an increased number of labour migrants from the 1960s and 1970s take as a response to, on the one hand, the lack of acknowledgment of their contribution to society and, on the other, the danger that new migrant groups create from within, threatening their already marginal position.

## 9.8 Concluding Reflections

The analysis of emotions in fieldwork has expanded with the shift towards affect in social science and the humanities. However, the level of analysis focuses mostly on emotions that are clearly and consistently acknowledged and often documented by the researcher. The psychoanalytical conceptualisation of the unconscious evolves within and through the clinical practice of psychoanalysis and the process of travelling and translation to the social is not only slippery but highly problematic, when psychopathologic terminology travels from the clinic to the social science and the humanities (Gordon 2001).

Our argument here is that we were unable to recognise these emotions. Or rather, these emotions acted upon our unconscious fears and paranoidias in ways that decreased our capacity of concluding the research project. We are 'migrants' ourselves and we could not manage the pain that emerged from these narratives. While conscious of the role of racism, and even theoretically working in the area, there was something in the experiences evolving from the narratives we could not deal with. In other words: it is productive to differentiate between emotions, that are identifiable and acknowledged and unconscious processes of denial, paranoia, desire and projection that are nearly impossible to articulate, and that silenced not only the pain of our research subjects but also our own.

For both of us it was a painful experience to listen to these stories in the context of the powerful silence that existed both in society and social science regarding the contribution of migrant women to Swedish welfare.

While we wanted to challenge representation of migrant women as passive and oppressed, our empirical material pointed to a category of people paralysed by their own suffering. While our interpretation was on the racism they have experienced and not in the Eurocentric discourses of their patriarchal cultures, we were unable to find ways to write their suffering without falling in narratives that reinforced Eurocentric representation of oppressed migrant women. Moreover, we did not find any productive strategies to the question of what researchers ('like us') should do when informants, people that we had learn to respect and love, express (racist) ideas that are stigmatising to other groups of people. Should assessments that we know most majoritarian readers will read through an Eurocentric gaze be excluded to protect the group, a group haunted by labour exploitation and racism?

We would like to suggest that our response to the pain expressed in the stories was (in our location as young migrant women) to dis-identify as much as possible from this earlier generation of migrants that was so paralysed by their nostalgia and loss. Increasing research identifies the tensions between so-called first- and second-generation migrants regarding responses to racism. The notion that the elder generation did not open challenge racism is a relevant topic among a generation born and raised in Sweden with a migrant background. This is our future, we told ourselves and laughed when reading the transcriptions.

In their reading of notions of guilt and shame, black feminist scholars Yasmin Gunaratnam and Gail Lewis (2001) suggest that while guilt is, within a Kleinian understanding, an opening for possible resolution, being guilt about an event may open an emotional conduct towards recognition. We did not felt guilt. We were ashamed.

We would like to argue that this paralysing emotional regime that made us 'forget' the research project was one of shame. We were ashamed of our research subjects. We were ashamed of our research subjects who could be our mothers and aunties. It was the same shame we felt every time family and kin made the majoritarian population uncomfortable by speaking too loud in the streets; laughing in the wrong places, or being so subordinated in their strategies to please; that the majoritarian population, the 'Swedes', felt awkward. We were ashamed that they (we surely felt even if we may be wrong) did not struggle against racism. A shame

that was also framed through the experiences of dis-identification evolving from our newly achieved (class) location within the academy. A shame that was our unintended company in our interaction with the transcripts.

The internalisation of racism (the internalisation of misrecognition) identifies the coercive process, of projective identification through which projection of the bad into others acts upon the power to force the other to 'take in' what the self disposes of. In our own internalisation of racism, we could see our research subjects as those embodying the position of whiteness would see them. Perhaps not publishing was a defensive response, a strategy of protecting them and ourselves, an (infantile) resistance of both loving them and being angry and disappointed. Mostly we were ashamed of being ashamed.

Well, it's time to publish...

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# 10

## Contesting Secularism: Religious and Secular Binary Through Memory Work

Linda Berg, Anna Johansson, Pia Laskar,  
Lena Martinsson, Diana Mulinari,  
and Cathrin Wasshede

### 10.1 Introduction

The notion of Sweden as a secular nation-state, or rather the linkage between notions of secularism and gender equality, is strong in public discourse in Sweden. Within this frame, religion is located in a traditional past and often understood as a hindrance to liberal and modern

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This chapter is the result of a truly cooperative working process: the collection of the data, the analyses and the writing has been done collectively, on equal terms.

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values. However, a number of scholars have identified the powerful presence of specific forms of Christianity in both work and family life, a presence that is so hegemonic, natural and normal that it is seldom identified as religious (Thurfjell 2019).

Since the year 2000, when state and church were separated in Sweden, the country has been officially without a state religion. Yet, even if there is an image of a sharp separation between religion and politics, Christianity holds a prominent position in the dominant culture in Sweden. In other words: Sweden has never been secular (Sigurdson 2009). In the past few decades, the Sweden Democrats, an ethnonationalist party, has shifted the issue of religion from the margins to the centre. They have emphasised Christianity as fundamental to Swedish culture and criticised the Swedish Church for being 'soft' on Islam (Haugen 2015). Large parts of the Swedish Church have challenged these statements, for example in their solidarity with refugees and in their expansion of welfare activities in the context of serious cuts in public services (Ideström and Linde 2019). In addition, feminist postcolonial scholars suggest, a number of mainstream feminist interventions on gender and religion in the Nordic

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region reinforce ideologies of secularism (Keinänen 2007; Mulinari 2013; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016).

The problematic exclusion of the role of religion with regard to women's rights in Sweden has a long tradition. For instance, mainstream Swedish feminist historiography has excluded the second-largest organisation for women's suffrage during the first decades of the twentieth century: the temperance organisation Vita Bandet (the White Ribbon) and its foundation in Christian values. The importance of Vita Bandet's politics has been downplayed, while other contemporary feminist organising, such as Fogelstadskolan and the magazine *Tidevarvet*, following developmental narratives of modernity and progress (Eskilsson 1991; Bengtsson 2011), have been incorporated. It not only fits better with the narrative of social-liberal feminist Swedish modernity, but we would also argue that the incorporation is performative: it has contributed to the dominant understanding of Swedish feminism as secular. Another important exclusion is the figure and visions of the Sámi pioneer Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1931), who identified the forms of settler colonialism at play and their effects on the lives of Sámi women. The construction of the other as embodying forms of primitive religion may also explain the exclusion of Elsa Laula Renberg from the visions of a modern, secular Swedish feminism (Hirvonen 2008).

There is also another very important reason for us to question and problematise the strong normative force of Swedish secularism, or rather to critically analyse how discourses of Swedish secularism entangle with colonial and racist agendas. At the time of writing, authoritarian and repressive frames that threaten (some) religious communities are growing fast in Sweden. In the municipality of Staffanstorps—a small city in the southern part of Sweden, the region with the highest support for the Sweden Democrats—the mainstream right-wing party (Moderaterna) voted to ban girls under the age of 13 from wearing hijab in school. While their decision breaks with Swedish school regulations, this and a number of similar proposals aim to define 'the problem' (women wearing hijab) and identify the solution (violent assimilation) (Gemzöe 2018). Events like this, and they are many, create and reinforce the boundary between secular 'Swedishness' and gender equality and its Muslim other, so present in the Swedish public and political arena today. Clearly, gender

and sexuality play a central role in the maintenance of this boundary (Giritli Nygren et al. 2018), a boundary that, to a certain extent, is reproduced within Scandinavian Gender Studies, which continue to locate religion as a minority issue instead of problematising the hegemonic discourse on secularism. We are aware that there is currently an increase in religious fundamentalism (Yuval-Davis 2011), but so are also Eurocentric forms of secular fundamentalism (Mahmood 2012), not least in Sweden (Berg et al. 2016). With a strong secular fundamentalism combined with an ignorance of the dominance of Christian dimensions, there have been increases in incidences of both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. A change towards assimilationist policies based on ‘European/Swedish values’, framed through repressive forms of Eurocentric secularism (Asad et al. 2009), makes the exploration of the frictions between the religious and the secular, as well as the roles of gender, sexuality, nation and region within these discourses, an essential feminist task (Scott 2018).

In this chapter we focus on our own situatedness as feminist researchers living in Sweden and thereby explore how, where and why ideologies of secularism entangled with notions of European values and superiority become dominant. Inspired by the feminist tradition of memory work, an aim is to explore the boundary between the secular and the religious through our own experiences and from our location in Sweden. The aim is also to search for counter-memories, both in the doing of secular (gendered) selves as well as the ongoing production of the “religious other”.

The title of this chapter grasps our exploration of the why and how of the diverse forms of gendered subjectivities that emerge in and through these frictions and discursive fields of secularism and religion. It also grasps our efforts to explore the contradictory ways through which some forms of Swedish banal nationalism (Billig 1995) represent Sweden as embodying a specific form of Christianity: one in accordance with the values of liberal democracy and gender equality.

Memory work challenges the dichotomy between researcher and researched, putting the researcher’s self at the core of the investigation. This is relevant in a context like ours where the connection with specific forms of Christianity is silenced and obscured; where religion and religious identity, primarily Islam, but also Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Judaism, are often located in the exotic, problematic

and even dangerous Other. On the other hand, memory work opens for an exploration of experiences and emotions that are often marginalised, or neglected: in this case, the ambivalent relationship between feminists, located in the supposedly secular Sweden, and religion—or rather our own religious identities.

## 10.2 Memory Work: Crafting Methodologies Through Feminists' Dialogues

Our entrance into memory work developed out of numerous discussions and readings around the secular and religious binary in the political contest of increasing forms of femo-nationalism (Farris 2017) regulated through the construction of a patriarchal religious other. The challenge was to move beyond the theoretical conceptualisations and arrive at the point where we could articulate what we began to name as 'counter-memories' and thereby make room for an identification of differences and similarities, of subordination and resistance between the counter-memories produced and the societal hegemonic memory. Further, we wanted to use our own memories as counter-memories in order to understand the role they play in creating belongings and disbelongings, and to explore our role in our own subordination and in the subordination of others.

Memory work as developed by German socialist feminist scholar Frigga Haug, first published in *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory* (1987), has inspired feminist scholarship for decades (Crawford et al. 1992; Willig 2001; Cadman et al. 2001). Haug's theoretical vantage point was connected to her conceptualisation of how individuals take part in the social construction of their identity and construct themselves into existing social relations and power relations (Haug 1987: 33). Memory work (Schratz 1996; Kaufman et al. 1995; Davies et al. 1997) takes its point of departure in the collective analysis of individual written memories on a chosen topic. It also focuses on the contradictory construction of the self and others, particularly of subordinated groups, as well as the role that subordinated groups play in their own subordination.



This construction of the self is done in relation to hegemonic cultural norms regarding what is deemed normal, right and natural. The collective analysis of the memories helps us see both adaptations and resistance to hegemonic norms and to the location of the subject within these norms (Esseveld 1999: 109–111).

The strengths of the method are its theoretical basis and its collaborative frame. The theoretical frame allows for analysis that goes beyond the experiential, and the collaborative edge opens for naming experiences that are often silenced or difficult to articulate. The method is not self-referential, but takes as a point of departure the analysis of collective experiences, identifying the ambivalent processes of internalisation of cultural norms and societal agendas.

While our group has been inspired by the method, we also have problematised some of the a priori assumptions regarding the conceptualisation of experience, or rather the ways that the method conceptualises experiences at the crossroads between subjectivity and memory. In line with scholars working within the field of memory (Onyx and Small 2001; Petö and Phoenix 2019), we understand memories as fractured, contradictory and often selective. Hegemonic discourses regulate not only what we can remember, but also who can remember, and whose memories will be considered ‘true’ or worth remembering (Scott 1992; Butler 2001). While memories are central for constructions of identity and subjectivity, unconscious processes hinder ‘remembering’ and shape and regulate the ways through which memories are articulated through desires and emotions outside the scope of what is to be remembered. We do not consider the process of writing and analysing memories as one in which our ‘repressed voices’ come to the surface. Rather, we see remembering, or memorialising, as a performative and situated act through which we create relations and identities. As formulated by Sara Ahmed (2017: 36–44), feminist work can be seen as an effort to remember things we sometimes wish would disappear, rather than things we have forgotten.

However, we have worked in line with Haug’s tradition, taking as a point of departure that the memories written down are *true* memories, not in the sense that the memories provide evidence of past events, but in the sense that the memories are defined and selected as such and differentiated by the members of the group from a fantasy or a fiction. The work

process did thus not move from experiences impossible to name in collective articulation, from trauma to the emancipatory experiencing of wording pain. Instead, our collective work opened up for the possibility of sharing memories that we had experienced as extremely personal and not worthy of interpretation outside individual frames. The method provided a space to reflect on how the binary opposition between secularism and religion is inscribed in the ways through which gendered subjectivity is created and reproduced in Sweden. This allowed for a productive move from the object of study of our research project on gender, religion and secularism, to what religion and secularism do to our bodies, our personal histories and collective stories, as feminist scholars living in Sweden.

Memory work also provided a space in which we could talk to each other, transcending what we experience as the traditional forms of academic collaboration (Jansson et al. 2009: 231). The method created a field of collaboration where we could see/learn/listen to each other beyond our individual academic positions. Memory work shifted the language with which we spoke to each other, from an abstract, disembodied one, to one doing 'theory in the flesh' as Chicano feminist Cherrie Moraga would name it (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983).

The methodology developed by Haug (1992) prescribed a strict protocol for how the work should be done. However, over the years the different steps and procedures have been adapted and modified (Crawford et al. 1992; Cadman et al. 2001). This methodology has also inspired our group. Even so, our work process has by and large followed the three phases recommended (Langdrige et al. 2012): (1) production of memories (formation of a group, selection of topic/theme and writing of the memories); (2) collective analysis of the memories (sharing each other's texts, searching for similarities and differences in the individual memories and developing themes together); and (3) rewriting, integration and building of theory.

All of the group members are located within Swedish academia and have been socialised in its secular and middle-class academic culture. We also belong to the field of Gender Studies and to a number of feminist traditions. There are, however, some important differences in the group regarding class, sexuality, nationality, regionality, ethnicity, age and how we are racialised. Social scientist Niamh Stephenson (2001) suggests

that the emphasis on the 'collective subject' of memory work risks an overemphasis on identifying commonalities between group members at the expense of exploring differences. However, the discussion of differences regarding social identities in the group opened for a number of dilemmas, taking into account the heterogeneity among us, the members of the group. We know very little of what would have happened if class background, heteronormativity or whiteness and religious background, the relevant differences among the group members, had been at the core of the analysis. We would like to argue, however, that our emphasis on similarities and commonalities functioned as a successful analytical tool in identifying a number of relevant topics that have not been explored in Scandinavian Gender scholarship.

We followed the memory work techniques in the sense that we tried to create detailed descriptions of the environment, emotions and embodied experiences, and avoided explanations, interpretations and generalisations (Willig 2001: 127–128). We also followed the techniques in the disidentification of the writer/author, for example through writing our memories in the third person (*ibid.*). In first-person narration things/details are often taken for granted, left out or considered unimportant and embarrassing. We might call this choice of third-person narration historicising or distancing the narrator. We decided on the writing of two memories each. The size of the memories varied from half a page (what had been decided) to two pages (what some members provided). Another strategy through which we have tried to further develop the method is through the experience of co-writing, an experience that created dilemmas (sometimes disagreements) regarding the selection of the memories and the ways to organise them. The analysis was framed by traditional qualitative methods, mostly content analysis with a focus on topics, commonalities and differences. A narrative inspired by discursive frame interpretation would provide other readings but was outside the scope of this first explorative theoretical effort.

It is needless to say that we opened Pandora's box through this work. We were astonished by the many similarities but also by the many frictions we came across in the material. While it was seductive and easy to create a similar pattern based on a linear developmental narrative to relate memories, for example, from the little believing child to the secular adult,

our memories pointed to an ongoing performance embodied with contradictions in a continuous becoming of a gendered secular subject—frictions ranging from diffuse feelings of discomfort to quite violent experiences of exclusion and marginalisation. It is not the pushing away (of religion) per se that causes the friction, but the sticky, contradictory and uneven struggle and pressure between what is understood as religious and as secular (Tsing 2005: 1).

### 10.3 A Room of her Own

In the following text, from two members of the group, memories are shaped by an emotional frame regulated by place and materiality. In the memories, the girl's intimate and private bedroom becomes a sacred space, through the ritual of secretly praying to God at bedtime. In contrast to forms of institutional religion located in public religious settings, the girl's bedroom might be understood as the absolute opposite, a 'room of her own', where secrets can be kept in the practice of praying.

Every evening she secretly prays the evening prayer. She has the door closed and lies down in her bed under the blanket and she puts her hands together in prayer. Next to her lies a dog of cloth, a dog whose tail she uses when she masturbates. She whispers the prayer because it feels more real then: that God would hear the prayer better if it is also audible in the room. She is careful to give thanks for everything that has been good, all the good she has in her life—like a home, a family and such. She also tells about everything that burdens her—anxieties, feelings of being lonely and abandoned – and she asks for help. 'Please, good God, help me,' she whispers. Sometimes she cries silently and feels some comfort that God may hear her, may be there, may be helping her.

The praying, and probably the masturbation, is narrated as performed behind a closed door, even under the bedcovers, presumably without the secularised parents knowing about it. The closed door may be seen both as a symbol of the boundary between the secular and the religious room/space, and as a materiality (re)creating this very boundary. It is a

sign of the friction between the parents' secular world and the girl's own religious world. She needs to shut the parents out to be able to pray, to be able to dwell in her own created religious space. Through the narrative, religion is created as something secret.

Both in this and in the following memory, the bed and the blanket are materialities that frame the act of praying. Hidden under the blanket, the girls can put their hands together to pray. It is dark, and the 'ordinary' social interactions that take place during daytime have come to an end. The girls are alone and free during this time of the evening—a time that in itself can be seen as a friction: between day and night, light and darkness, being awake and falling asleep, being among others and being alone.

While her mother did not see, she secretly prayed in the evening, especially those evenings when it hurt the most. No one could say anything, if there was anyone who might come to her. [...] It would not hurt to try to pray a little. As long as no one else saw. It became a secret between her and Somebody. A conversation about things that made her sad, about things she dreamed about and about the hope that everything was really much bigger.

In both memories, the girls detach and distance themselves from their families, even if the act of praying also includes the parents in a very active way through thoughts about and concern for them. Another intense relation takes place instead: the one between the girl and God/Somebody. She talks to God/Somebody. The ritual of praying creates and establishes a connection with a God/Somebody who listens to sorrows and feelings of loneliness, who provides understanding, comfort, help and hope. Another belonging than that to the family is made possible. Parallel to these comforting feelings, the girls experience feelings of shame when praying:

She is ashamed of praying to God. Her parents think believing people are naive, childish and irresponsible. Maybe even a little bit stupid. They have said things like 'Christians do not take responsibility for themselves, but leave their responsibility to God'. They are represented as corny and a little unworldly. [...] It is a kind of forbidden area. Sometimes it happens that

her mother or father enters her room when she lies there whispering to God. The shame is felt like a burning flame and she rips her hands apart, becomes silent and then talks to them in a cheerful voice. Her heart is beating, and she is afraid that they will understand what she is doing.

The girls have learned that religious people have the wrong ideas, that they lack a critical perspective, and that they are, in one way or another, stupid—almost as the non-modern irrational position—and that they are aloof from the world.

Her mother, father and uncle talked about how superstitious and credulous the religious people were. ‘Do not act stupid,’ her father said. Words that felt challenging, almost threatening, but at the same time filled with pride.

To feel a belonging to this religious detached world makes the girls feel ashamed. Thus, the modern position is created through shame of being (too) close to the other side, maybe even through feelings of fear and of doing the ‘wrong’ thing. Shame has been a fundamental and contested emotion in feminist theory and practice (Fischer 2018), since gendered shame is seen as reinforcing patriarchy. In our analysis, shame is linked to the desire to belong to what is defined as undesirable, outside the needs of modern citizens, a shame of desiring maybe not so much the forbidden, but what is coded as ignorant, traditional and backward.

## 10.4 Communities of Belonging and Disbelonging

Feminist sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis’s (2011) study of the politics of belonging conceptualises different analytical levels which need to be explored as social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, as well as ethical and political values. In the following, memories of belonging are remembered through the role of rituals, or rather through how rituals create inclusion (for some) but may reinforce exclusion and marginalisation (for others).

Specific spaces and times are designated for the sacred, and organised through certain activities and objects: buildings, songs, prayers, food. Confirmation (affirmation of baptism) in the state's Swedish Church, which is Lutheran, is one example of religious practices that we found in some of our memory work, a practice that could be described as a religious 'rites of passage' from childhood to adolescence. In Sweden, while ideologies of secularism are foundational to societal life, the Swedish Church is located as providing a spiritual frame that does not challenge the core of secularism. Often religious rites such as confirmation are spoken about (and understood) as Swedish 'traditions'.

In some of our memories, the Lutheran confirmation is associated with a multitude of objects, relations and places through which belonging as well as disbelonging are performed. In the following, the narrator describes the confirmation camp as a mythical place of happiness, sweetness, adventure and community:

They spoke about camps on islands outside the town, confirmation camps with names that felt mythical, far away, where there was sun, everyone was bathing, playing and eating ice cream. She remembers how they talked about it with excitement in their voices; they would be involved in things that could hardly be mentioned. They would get gifts and have parties with family and friends and also go to a camp.

Parallel to the romanticising words about the confirmation camp, the memory also ends with dismissal:

Corny with confirmation: long white dresses as some fucking Lucia procession. And taking tests about Christian things in the church. Boring.

The white dresses often worn in confirmations are here compared to 'Lucia', a Swedish tradition celebrated on 13 December, with girls and boys clad in full-length white gowns, singing for the light to return, a tradition which in the narrative is dismissed by the word *fucking*. Instead of feeling a painful disbelonging, the girl turns her emotions into contempt and probably also anger:

The classmates lived with their families in terraced houses in the posh area. They did not live with their mother in a small flat in public housing. Clearly, she would not be in a bloody camp with them.

Here, the girl's struggle also involves a class dimension. The desirable girls at the confirmation camp are portrayed as middle-class people living with their nuclear family in *terraced houses in the posh area*, while the girl herself lives alone with her mother in a public housing estate. In an effort to handle the friction between the religious and the secular, class positioning becomes an aspect of the doing of secularism. Religion is pushed away at the same time as middle-class people are pushed away.

In another story, a religious course taking place within the setting of the Catholic Church in a Latin American country is associated with friendship, of being admired and being part of the group:

She loves going to the course. She meets girls different from her school friends, girls that think she is 'smart' [...]. She is good at this thing of telling stories. And she loves the stories. She also enjoys the gossip very much.

One aspect of gossiping with the girls is to share rumours regarding religious practices such as: 'if you take a bit of the wafer/hostia [host] instead of eating it whole, then Christ's blood will get into your body and will get you pregnant'. However, the girl has explained to the other girls that 'this cannot be the case', since her mother has provided her with books 'on human biology': 'Women and men make children'. The biology books can be understood as materialities mobilised by the girl to 'do the secular'.

Even though the girl argues against the idea of getting pregnant through Christ's blood, she still has decided to break the wafer/hostia and get Jesus' blood 'into' her, with the aim of 'being a better Christian'. Thus, the wafer/hostia is another significant artefact that is mobilised, but now in order to create the religious, pious self. It could be said that the girl handles the frictions and contradictions that arise between the religious beliefs and the scientific explanations through a reinterpretation of the story and the ritual. In this way she may still be 'smart' and provide scientific explanations from books and reject certain religious ideas, and at



the same time be part of the group of girls and the community of the Church.

The mother appears in the story as a character who represents a secular position. While the aunt has regularly taken the girl to the church classes, the mother has not been involved. When the mother follows her for the first time it has a particular meaning to the girl:

She remembers being happy and proud. This day is the first day, of the long months of going to the preparation course, that her mother has followed her to her church class.

The reason the mother goes to the church with her is to put her on the list of those who will take communion. The girl does not remember the content of the conversation that takes place between her mother and the priest, only that the room they are in is 'cold' and all the different emotions that are evoked as she hears her mother's voice becoming louder. The girl describes herself as being 'ashamed' as well as 'angry' over her mother, who is 'destroying' what the girl has so 'patiently' created. The mother is defined as 'powerful'. The girl remembers walking back home afterwards and her mother scolding her:

'You never told me that the girls from the orphanage were going to take communion in their school uniforms, but you and all the others in fancy communion dresses. How come?' [...] She goes slowly, dragging her feet; she knows her mother hates that. 'You do it together with the girls in school uniform or you do not do it at all. Faith is not a fashion show for those with money to buy expensive dresses'.

Once again, a friction between the secular and the religious arises, and once again the mother represents a secular position introducing a class aspect. The mother expects the daughter to show solidarity with the 'girls from the orphanage' and demands from her that she too wears her school uniform. But the girl is torn:

She wanted the dress. Her aunt said she could look like an angel. She did not want to hurt anyone. Particularly not the girls from the orphanage,

whom she liked so much and who had been so kind to her. She just wanted the dress and the party and being part of something, being as everybody else. She felt guilty of her desire. [...] 'I will not do it in the public-school uniform,' she whispered.

To wear the school uniform would mean to surrender to her mother and her attempt to force her to choose the values of equality and solidarity before the longing to belong and be 'like everybody else'. Similar in significance to the wafer/hostia and the blood of Christ, the white dress is both a symbol of a religious self, the looking and feeling like 'an angel', and a way to embody (materialise) this angel-like experience:

She never dressed in white. She never again felt like an angel.

To the mother portrayed in the narrative, the dress is seen as a class marker/division, while for the girl/daughter it is mobilised to create a gendered, religious self and become part of a group and a community.

## 10.5 The Religious Maternal Body

As we have seen, the frictions between religiosity and secularity arise, and are being played out, in specific situations and relationships. The character of the mother, as well as the grandmother, return in several memories, and repeatedly play significant parts in the work of subjectification of the girls. Their bodies, spaces or interventions work at the same time as nodes as well as frames of abjection in the different narratives, and their positions and roles, rather than being predictable, are both shifting and contradictory. Thus, there is not one single maternal body but a multitude of bodies that are mobilised to produce different kinds of selves: gendered, classed, religious, as well as secular, etc.

In the following memory a young woman receives a visit from her deeply religious mother, who recently joined a religious group that she now lives with, a group that the daughter considers 'a sect':

One day, the mother just stands outside her front door. Dressed in a green, fluffy shirt. She smiles. Looks like usual. But the daughter knows nothing is as usual. She knows that at any moment the mum's voice can get a brassy and easy ecstatic tone. [...] At any time, the mother will begin to proclaim 'the word of God' and it will no longer be possible to connect. [...] The mother cannot talk about something else than God, God's will, God's plan, God's word.

The mother who appears in the narrative smiles and looks 'as usual', but it is an illusion, since when she preaches the word of God she is no longer possible to reason with or keep up a conversation with. The religious body in this situation and relation is positioned as irrational and unreliable:

The mother is standing outside her door. The daughter wishes that she could lean her head against the voluminous bosom that looks so soft. But it is impossible. 'I don't want to see you,' she says, with tears stuck in her throat. The mother's face falls apart. She stretches out her hand. The daughter quickly closes the front door, locks it from the inside with hands that are shaking, and rushes into the small toilet in the hallway.

In this passage, the mother's body is depicted as soft and maternal, a body to seek comfort from and fuse with. Yet, at the same time, the mother's ecstatic (religious) lack of (secular) reason embodies a threat to absorb the daughter. The daughter's emotions are contradictory.

Historically, the female body has been seen as leaking and permeable in contrast to the male body as solid with sharp boundaries (Longhurst 1995). However, in the memory the mother's body appears to be rejected not for being associated with the maternal/feminine but because of her religious pathos and hysterias/husteràs lack of logos (Hendrix 2015: 50). Religious ecstasy and a void without reason—not the mother's desired bosom—become dangerously absorptive. As a young woman, in the creating of a self in relation to the world outside of family, the daughter needs to keep a distance and protect herself. Once again, the door plays an important part as both a symbolic and a material boundary. The mother is not allowed to come into her daughter's home but needs to be

kept outside, the door being both shut and locked. The emerging self needs to disidentify itself from a religious other.

In contrast to the memories in which the girls had to distance themselves from the maternal bodies to be able to engage in a relationship with God and practice the religious and/or be part of a community of faith, the girl in this memory is older, and she rather distances herself from her parent to 'get away' from religion, as it is being perceived as scary and dangerous.

In all the memories, the body is located and remembered through specific spaces, spaces of independence, freedom or danger, as well of safety and protection. The private, intimate bedroom appears as a significant location for the doing of religiosity. In a different memory, with a much younger girl, that takes place in relation to the grandmother as a significant other, religion is performed through objects in the room in conjunction with the embodied ritual of praying:

In the grandmother's little room everything reminds her of her faith. The heavy brass bowl with a lid containing small folded papers with Bible verses, the black Bible with its thin pages where the grandmother's curly writing appears on each side. On the walls there are several paintings of Jesus, the Son of God. [...] She and her grandmother read 'God who loves the children' together, with hands clasped, and they are very serious. The girl is a child God loves – it feels warm inside to know it. The grandmother's room is a room to feel safe in.

The grandmother also appears in another memory, in which the kitchen is described as a possible and significant place for the religious. The little girl is growing up in an environment where the religious life in the evangelical church of her grandmother and grandfather is dismissed in a covert way by her parents. It is a hidden truth, and a complex divide between the parents and grandparents that the girl is well aware about. However, sometimes this divide is bridged and some of grandma's narratives are reproduced also by the girl's mother. One example of this is a story of when the grandma, when she was young, refused to let the priest from the national church baptise her newborn child, who was going to die within a couple of hours. The little daughter had done no harm, the

grandma explained; God will embrace her. Grandma always stressed that she had her own relationship with God, as this time when she and the girl are alone in the kitchen:

The grandma says that she speaks to God when she is in her kitchen and prepares the food. She doesn't need any priest. The granddaughter likes what she is told. She sits on a high stool painted in red and turquoise. The grandma stirs in a red plastic bowl and says that God is not so special. God is with her, has always been with her. It feels fine and cozy there in the kitchen.

Grandma is firm: no one person is better than any other. The belief, the narrative about God, becomes a general description of how to understand oneself and others. The girl can grasp it without coming into conflict with the mother.

In the space of the bedroom, as well as of the kitchen, there is a making of religious subjectivity. Yet it is not made primarily through personal experiences of God, nor through performing certain rituals or holding certain beliefs, but rather through bonds and relationships of love and need, in these cases between girls and their grandmothers. In the latter memories the closeness with the grandmother depends maybe not only on the warm and personal God image but also on a narrative about equality and strong women that the girl recognises as being told by her mother as well. The divide between the mother and grandmother is bridged for a moment. In our material, religious significant others—sometimes mothers and grandmothers (and sometimes fathers or aunts)—appear as active in the construction of the girls' subjectivities.

In the making of religious subjectivity, both divides and frictions are created and bridged. In contrast to the young woman who disidentifies with a religious other, forcefully disrupting the mother–daughter bond, the small girls are depicted as strengthening their bonds with significant others through their talk about religion, God and Jesus and even longing to become part of their grandmother's/family's religious world. In our memories, religion seems to function as a nodal or a floating signifier where childhood memories articulate feelings both of safety and belonging but also emotions of exclusion, danger and threat.

## 10.6 Nation, Eurocentric Modernity and the Secular (Gendered) Self

A recurrent theme in our memory work is the doing of territories, regions and frontiers in the ongoing emergence of the secular self. What we see is how the religious in the memories is located in specific spaces, or the longing for these spaces, where gendered subjectivity is created through a number of frictions, as well as shame for this longing.

‘Ohhhh, it is so beautiful, the Catholic Church [...] the rituals, they are so powerful. I love them.’ She knows that it is wrong, but she feels a guilty pleasure that a Swedish person celebrates something that for a second in her life she can feel belongs to her. She feels guilty for this sick desire to be liked, accepted, that some part of her, or rather what the Swedish person thinks is her, is valuable to them.

In this memory we found both reiterations of colonial discourses which produce Sweden and Europe, Swedes and Europeans, as rational, modern and a bit boring, and notions of Latin America as the ‘other’, exotic, mythical and religious. We would like to focus on the double alienation in the memory as an ongoing struggle to become a recognised subject. The memory is about a meeting between the ‘she’ (the producer of the memory) and a woman, called the ‘Swedish person’, who expresses admiration for the ‘non-Swedish’ Catholic Church, which causes an amount of contradictory feelings for the ‘she’/narrator. She feels desired in her identity as Catholic, but also as a ‘bad’, and therefore shameful, representation of the Other, the non-Swedish that does not share the ‘Swedish person’s’ delight for the Catholic Church.

While the memory of the fetishised Catholic Church in Latin America is an example of Europe and Sweden re-established as the core of modernity and rationality, the next examples show how different places *in* Sweden are understood as lagging behind, less modern, more religious and therefore subordinated. In the following memory, modernity and the secular discourse are connected with urbanity, while religion and death are things that belong to the countryside, far from the newly created suburbs with their brand-new houses:

There is no heirloom in the home. No flea-market bargain, no old stuff. It is modern. The family dresses modern. The house is new; no one has lived there before. The grandparents are coming to visit. The mother hides the wine-rack in a cupboard in the kitchen. The pack of cards is also put away. It's the 1970s.

Modernity is materialised in buildings, things and clothes, and so are the disconnections, breaks and processes of otherings. It might have been difficult for the girl to understand why the wine-rack and the pack of cards were hidden. But the free-church community to which the grandparents belonged were total abstainers. For them, the use of a wine-rack in the kitchen was an act of non-believing and of not living in accordance with the religious community. The girls' parents were very well aware of this. The wine-rack was a way to disconnect. The children learnt that there was a need to hide things that the old religious people would not tolerate, such as the wine-rack and a pack of cards. While grandma and grandpa were there, the children would pretend to live another life, belonging to another community. In contrast to 'the old grandma and grandpa', the young mother becomes an expression of modernity:

The mother and her daughters leave the suburb of the big city to visit the parents of the mother, who live in a small society in L-land. The transistor radio is on the front seat. The mother listens to P1 [radio] while she is driving. It is sunny. Just before they arrive, she drives into a parking lot and picks out the curlers. She pulls her fingers through the locks. She is pretty and modern. It's the 1960s.

The mother's modern style, that she looks so pretty, drives the car and listens to the news on radio—all in a happiness marked with the sunny feeling—makes the young mother a representation of the future. The feeling becomes different when L-land is described:

In L-land, everyone is a believer. None of the cousin families lives in L-land; everyone has moved away from there. Believers may not be stupid, but nerdy, miserable, they are not really modern. They are wrong. The mom thinks that nature is falling down on her in L-land. She feels trapped. She is contemptuous of something and so are her daughters, perhaps the father

too. No one knows. The atmosphere in the car is always tense when they go home.

For the little girl, the countryside far away from the home in the suburbs becomes inseparable from faith, from religion. It is a place from which people move; it has a nature that is disliked by her mother. It is a place with a lot of free churches. In L-land the mother becomes stressed. From the girl's position, people who believe are strange and corny, living far away. It is not a modern place.

In the Mission church [Mission Covenant Church of Sweden] in L-land, funeral services are being held. [...] In L-land, people die. It does not happen in the suburb outside the big city. In the area with new villas, fast-built houses, there is no church either, or free churches. Everyone is young at one and the same time.

The new suburbs, with only young people and new houses, are portrayed as the frontier of modernity and the future, a place where you do not die. In the examples of how territories are intertwined, religion is located in the Global South, and projected onto the Swedish rural spaces. These places are supposed to be in line with an imagined past, though still existing, and less developed time. Modernity is placed in the Global North, and in the cities and the new suburbs. In the suburb the secular little girl seems to be 'at home'. In the memory with the grown-up woman and the Catholic Church, 'home' is instead taken away from her. As Saba Mahmood (2012) emphasises, faith cannot be separated from subjectification, and religiosity/spirituality is nothing that can be left at home—in other spaces, other territories.

## 10.7 Politics, Religion and Gender Subjectivity

In a memory of being a teenager during the late 1980s, the tension between politics and religion, or rather how this tension is understood in terms of class belonging and political struggle, is identified.



The girl moved from the county of Norrbotten to a city in Västerbotten, an area of middle-class people with 'suitable' Christian knowledge:

Recently moved from the northern county, called 'lappjäntan' (invective for Samí girl), she could not remember a single sentence from the Bible or calculate mathematics on time. The classmates lived with their families in terraced houses in Gustavslund.

Here, the religious others (her classmates in Gustavslund) become connected to middle-class identities from which her mother clearly distances the family, positioning the family as atheist—and as people who do not participate in confirmation camps. To feel trust in God is wrong. Instead they should identify as political and, as such, more rational. In the memory the girl remembers her mother asserting:

If we want something to change, we have to do it ourselves, organize ourselves politically, not as the 'right-wing bastards' then. Knowledge is important; hocus-pocus and paying money to the church is just stupid.

It seems that a secular position was ideologically important in the doing of a working-class subjectivity—in contrast to the doing of middle class. The divide between religion and politics is very clear. The girl learns about religion as hocus-pocus at the same time as she learns about class politics, or rather she learns that religion is against her mother's (and her class') notion of social justice. On the other side of religion stand knowledge and collective organising; the left-wing movement is constructed as the rational one. It can be understood as a creation of a secular position in contrast to imagined religious others, but it can also be seen as a reaction against inequalities—with a verbalised act of pride against the regional differences and as a critique against privileged Christian middle class.

The division between religion and politics is reiterated in another memory of a young girl and her path to political commitment:

In the 1970s, she left the Swedish Church and sold the gold cross she had received at her confirmation. Religion was now an opium for the people—she participated when the Stockholm-based Socialism or Barbarism distributed flyers [saying 'religion is an opium for the people'] during a

gathering that Children of God and other revival Christian communities had at Sergels Square in the early 1970s. She felt that they were mentally disturbed when they stood there and collectively prayed to God and spoke in tongues.

In this memory, the political practice is set up against the religious at the same city square. The notion of religious faith and practices as absurd or, as here, *mentally disturbed*, is a recurrent theme through all our memories. Being political (or being a feminist) seems to be equated with being secular and therefore rational in the memories.

## 10.8 Concluding Reflections

We have read the shared memories as counter-memories illuminating the infinite strategies that the members of the group develop to transcend the binary opposition between the religious and the secular in a context where secularism as an ideology is embedded in societal power relations.

Through this memory work, we have learned about the contradictions and frictions shaping feelings and emotions in the ongoing production of Swedish secularity, and how these, often silenced contradictory feelings may act upon our reproduction of problematic (and dangerous) boundaries. We have analysed how othering processes through the binary opposition between religion and secularism become a complex net, dividing individuals, families and territories. What we believe we found was the abjection of religion and the normalisation of secularism in the making of Swedish modernity.

There is a risk of infantilising these stories, not listening to the powerful forms of spirituality evolving in the search for comfort and support, a search where the self often prioritises other members of the family. There is much to learn about how children experience the boundary between the sacred and the profane, but particularly about how relatedness and connectedness towards others are explored. It's important to stress that in our data, in these memories from child- and adulthoods, the stories about interactions with religion and secularism are part of a performative language frame where (behavioural) norms are being played out through,

among other things, the making of religion and secularism as hierarchically placed opposites.

The construction of gender-equality frames through the reinforcement of the heteronormative binary (man/woman) challenges other forms of family bonds, particularly matrilineal ones. While these gender policies have been successful in developing women's autonomy, they have also aimed to prioritise women's dependency on 'experts', and have sometimes made attachments to mothers, grandmothers and female communities coded as traditional. Maybe it can be defined as a violent effect of Swedish modernity, with its shift from matrilineal bonds to public patriarchy.

There is much to learn about how relatedness and connectedness with others are often coupled with feelings of shame, with the autonomous individual at the core of Swedish notions of gender equality and modernity. In the memories there is also a longing for other forms of existential meaning and interdependence. However, also present in the memories is how the journey towards secularism was a path towards utopian dreams, among them our encounter with feminism as a theory and as a community of belonging.

We have also learned about our own role in reproducing the subordination of the 'other', even when we ourselves at times embody this 'other'. The striving for the rationality and autonomy of the Cartesian self, mirrored in our desire to belong to communities of knowledge (at the university), is combined, however, with different forms of resistance to this very position. Although Christianity is not at all othered to the same extent as, for example, Islam in postcolonial Sweden, we can see how our processes towards performing secular subjects have also been part of a distancing primarily against generations of women carrying religious traditions as evident parts of life. Reactions against religious values, worldviews and material practices (artefacts/symbols/traditions) in many cases became reactions against women's worlds, private as well as public, and the raising of the secular flag in the disidentification from the maternal, could sometimes be seen to be just as patriarchal as the Church itself.

In a time of increasing religious fundamentalism and Eurocentric fundamentalist secularism in Europe, the counter-memories show that feminist resistance and visions of other futures may be located in the systematic transgressing and the everyday challenging of the religion/secularism binary.

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# 11

## An Epilogue

**Erika Alm, Linda Berg, Mikela Lundahl Hero,  
Anna Johansson, Pia Laskar, Lena Martinsson,  
Diana Mulinari, and Cathrin Wasshede**

I den bästa av världar [In the best of worlds]  
Den bästa av dagar [The best of days]  
Vi slapp ju nazister [We did not have Nazis]  
Så vad ska vi klaga? [So what should we complain about?]

In the above poem, trans\* activist and spoken word poet Yolanda Aurora Bohm Ramirez (2018) names the ways the lives of specific groups of people in Sweden are threatened by the increasing neo-Nazi violence, and

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illuminates the response of the majoritarian population to these threats: their demands of silence where protest and criticism is made nearly impossible.

Calling ‘the best of days’ those in which ‘we’ (i.e, the feminist, Latina and trans\*communities to which she belongs) are not the target of the Nazis, Yolanda asserts that the ‘we’ she belongs should not complain—rather, they should behave. Yolanda’s words act on the social contract imposed on Swedish ‘others’, where those who identify as being part of what is constructed as the ‘majority’ demand the performance of gratefulness in those constructed as Swedish Others, those who are tolerated.

Narratives of Sweden and representation of Swedishness need to be continuously challenged, revised and rewritten. From different perspectives other than those of banal nationalism, the everyday doing of nationalistic forms of exclusionary belonging. At the core of Sweden’s banal nationalism is its messianic fantasy to educate the world on gender equality. Swedish’s missionary agenda reflects the construction and reproduction of the binary opposition between the West and the Rest. A Rest that despite the success and visibility of feminist movements in the Global South, continues to be constructed by Swedish public and academic

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discourse as lacking ‘feminist’ knowledge. Our ambition is to unpack hegemonic ideas and practices that construct and represent this place in the word called ‘Sweden’, a place that many of us in diverse ways call our home.

Sweden is one of the countries in the Global North where neoliberalism has been implemented both radically and successfully. The country has witnessed an increase in social inequality and the systematic introduction of new public management within welfare institutions. There is no doubt that the historical period (1932–1990) during which the welfare state was imagined and constructed through the inspiration of social-democratic policies created conditions where class inequality decreased and gender equality improved. An improvement made possible through free access to health care, public education and the role that the state played in the decommodification of social reproduction. The social-democratic Swedish welfare state also established a humanitarian refugee policy and multicultural frames located in citizenship rights.

A frequently used narrative (employed by a number of feminists both in Sweden and abroad) is that the neoliberal shift witnessed in the 1990s is responsible for Sweden’s present-day class inequality, racist violence and anti-gender mobilisation. We disagree. We would like to suggest that today’s Sweden is also, to a certain extent, a product, an effect and a consequence of the structures of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy at the core of the construction and expansion of the Swedish welfare state.

A colonial past and a neocolonial present mirrored in the systematic appropriation of the Sámi population’s land and water, the support to Swedish located transnational corporations in the Global South and the over-exploitation of migrant labour. This is at the core of the construction of the Swedish nation-state and of the ‘success’ of the Swedish welfare state. Notions of gender equality and family–work balance were, and to a certain extent still are, created through the pathologising of homosexuals and transgender people, the ongoing exclusion of racialised bodies, the regulation of paid work through an ethnic and gendered segregated capitalist economy, and a narrow and problematic state regulation defining what a family is and who is a member.

We hope that this anthology opens up a different dialogue within and among feminist scholars and activists. A dialogue that challenges and

transcends both the problematic representation of Sweden as the promised land of gender equality and multiculturalism and the problematic representation of the paradise lost. These representations marginalise fundamental continuities between heteropatriarchal welfare capitalism and neoliberal anti-gender ethnonationalist capitalism.

In this anthology, we argue for feminist research that fractures images of the 'modern', progressive, secular nation, and in line with Michelle Bastian, 'disturb[s] the unilateral excesses of contemporary capitalist presentism' (2014: 4). There is no 'one way' or 'happy ending' for histories marked by colonialism and sexism. It is at the crossroads between a critical review of past narratives and a promise of possible futures acting upon the present that we have written this anthology. Narratives about the feminist, past(s) and future(s), where nostalgia for the 'paradise lost' can only be reached through colonial amnesia.

It is fundamental to identify, defend and celebrate many of the Swedish labour movement's visions at the core of the expansion of rights within the historical construction of the social-democratic welfare model. However, struggles against neoliberalism cannot be framed within forms of ethnonationalist nostalgia that are in search of a homogenous *folkhemmet* (home of the people) that never existed. Focusing on borders and transnational frames reads Swedish social formation - within specific (colonial) locations in the changing global division of productive, and reproductive labour and within Sweden's specific racial regime.

Transnational studies typically include a critique of the nation, and as feminist scholars situated in Sweden, we have problematised the imaginations of this specific nation. Through interviews, press material, social media, participant observations, street art, our own memory work, official state documents, and photographs, we have analysed how different categories of people talk and fight back and dream and demand livable lives doing what they can with the hope of creating futures that acknowledge. We have also explored the struggles just to exist as well as the expressions of depression and desire to enact revenge on a state that repeatedly embraces some and excludes—even repeatedly humiliates—others. Transnational feminist activists make feminist spaces, rewrite the past and present and affect imaginations in and for possible futures.

As feminist knowledge is often the target of harsh critiques, a (defensive) strategy might involve turning towards more inaccessible theories or focusing on well-established methods and problem formulations (that are apparently beneficial to society). It is not easy to stay with the messiness of the social, but as important as gender research is, it cannot be reduced to theoretical pirouettes or expected problem-solving. While feminist scholars in this anthology challenge notions of radical relativism, they also share a common epistemological understanding of the need to produce a plurality of knowledge that challenges Eurocentric notions of neutrality, objectivity, arrogant assumptions, and takes intellectual responsibility for possible future societies. Transnational feminists, activists and scholars, make feminist spaces, rewrite the past and present and affect imaginations in and for possible futures.

To make politics ‘in-between’ is to take politics seriously and make efforts to repoliticise what is seen as normal (e.g., a secular subject) and challenge borders and systems of classification. In our research on mobilisation, communities of belonging and politics in-between, we have seen attempts to exceed contemporary classifications. As feminist scholars, we also try to construct theories that ‘do’ the ‘in-between’—between science and politics, between our commitment to academia and our commitment to our communities, and between theoretical efforts and the messiness of everyday life.

In the last few decades, the inhumanity of neoliberalism and ethnonationalism has, in Sweden, been resisted by the heterogenous and vital mobilisation of transnational feminism that, through diverse experiences of injustice, name the world and create futures. This anthology is inspired by these communities’ courage and knowledge and writes itself in the search of many liveable (feminist) futures.

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