

Performing Nordic White Femininity: Two Swedish Divas in the U.S. in the Nineteenth Century

HÉLÈNE OHLSSON

ABSTRACT

This study is an intersectional investigation of how the first two international Swedish superstars, Jenny Lind (1820–1887) and Christina Nilsson (1843–1921), performed gender, race, nationalism, and class during their respective tours of the United States of America in 1850–1852 and 1870–1872. The purpose is to chart early transatlantic performances of Nordic white femininity and Swedishness as well as to discuss the symbolical values and associations that it signaled. I will argue that Lind and Nilsson set out a template of idealized Nordic white femininity in the U.S. and that they contributed to the growing identity and self-awareness of Swedish-Americans.

KEYWORDS

Diva, nordic white femininity, performances of Swedishness, race, class, critical whiteness theories, nineteenth century, touring the U.S., Jenny Lind, Christina Nilsson.

Performing Nordic White Femininity: Two Swedish Divas in the U.S. in the Nineteenth Century

Swedish women in today's U.S. diaspora claim that they first became aware of their whiteness after they had moved across the Atlantic.¹ In their native Sweden, they had experienced their color as more or less invisible. In sociologist Catrin Lundström's investigation, they explain how their whiteness and Swedishness in the U.S. context transformed to become associated with an exotic beauty ideal as blond and blue eyed, and with social values like honesty and good taste. Their Swedishness raised their cultural value as women in American society.² This made me wonder about the roots of the exoticization of Swedish, or rather Nordic white femininity as I have preferred to label it in this article. My thesis is that it started with the first two international Swedish superstars: Jenny Lind (1820–1887) and Christina Nilsson (1843–1921).

This article is an intersectional investigation of how these two opera divas, performed gender, race, nationalism, and class during their respective tours of the United States of America 1850–1852 and 1870–1872.³ The purpose is to chart early transatlantic performances of Nordic white femininity and Swedishness, and discuss the symbolical values and associations that it signaled.

The theoretical perspectives are of critical whiteness- and femininity theories and of diva studies. The method is an analysis of textual and visual discourses combined with historical contextualization. The research questions are: How did Lind and Nilsson perform, both on stage and in public life, Nordic white femininity and Swedishness in the U.S.? What symbolical values did their performances signify? What social class was associated with them?

I will argue that Lind and Nilsson set out a template of idealized Nordic white femininity in the U.S. and that they contributed to the growing identity and self-image of Swedish-Americans.

1 Lundström 2010, 25–45.

2 Lundström 2010, 32.

3 Christina Nilsson made several tours of the U.S., but I have decided to limit the material for this article to her first tour.

Divadom

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the female celebrity on a global scale. Even though European entertainers had made guest performances in the U.S. on a regular basis since colonial times, Lind was early to make a tour of the continent. The successful outcome instigated the era of divas touring internationally. These were women who mostly came from poor and humble circumstances who now, through their talent and professionalism, could become rich and famous queens of the stage.

During the 1830s and 1840s conditions in the media had started to change for female performers. Now, it was no longer merely their artistic achievements that were commented on, but also their personal character, femininity, and lifestyle. With the help of new technology and mass production, their reputation and fame reached places where they had never visited. The magnitude of the impact of both Lind's and Nilsson's celebrity and the "mania" that they inspired was to some extent designed by the emerging industrialization and western colonization.

This coincided in time with the growing polarization between masculinity and femininity. The ideal of upper- and middle-class women was to be domesticized and not to take part in public life. According to gender scholar David Tjeder a woman's respectability was defined by her dependence on a man, not least economically.⁴ The performing woman was in direct opposition to this ideal and was consequently regarded by some as both making a spectacle of respectable femininity and posing a threat towards men's masculinity.⁵ The diva was simultaneously worshipped and despised, praised and abused, and she had to walk the line between being a respectable role model or a social pariah.⁶

Theater historian Tracy C. Davis writes that the diva "possesses exceptional skill, marketed with uncommon personality and an incalculable measure of ego."⁷ Undeniably both Lind and Nilsson had extraordinary artistic skills. Their respective vocal powers were regarded as outstanding and they were both actresses in full control of their performance technique and charisma. Both also had a strong personality and an unusual background, which they made into corner stones of their respective image. And last, but not least, they were professionally ambitious, a quality that during the era was coded as masculine.

The diva embodies symbolic values that derive from both her performances (in roles, songs, and so on) and her personal life (civil state, race, nationality, sexuality, love affairs, and so on). This embodiment of the duality of stage and life creates the diva's authenticity in the eyes of the audience. According to theater and gender scholar, Tiina Rosenberg, stage and life have to show some dissimilarity, but the connections between the two must exist for the diva's specific glory to last over time.⁸ The diva title always comes from the audience.⁹

4 Tjeder 2003, 206.

5 Straub 1992, 89–90.

6 Ohlsson 2020, 38–42.

7 Davis 2012, 145.

8 Rosenberg 2009, 112.

9 Davis 2012, 252–271.

Writer Wayne Koestenbaum has noted that the diva's "method of moving the body through the world" both on and off stage can be read as a defensive strategy and as armor against the punishments that powerful women often are subjected to.¹⁰ As performing women, with the prevailing shadow of social pariah, both Lind and Nilsson needed reinforcement when they moved their bodies across the soil of the New World; especially as Americans were known to be puritan concerning the respectability of women.¹¹

Performing Nordic Femininity

According to sociologist Beverly Skeggs, femininity is "the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women".¹² In this study I adhere to this approach as a guideline.

The very religious Lind fitted the mold of chaste, humble, and "natural" femininity that was idealized during the Romantic era.¹³ Soon after her breakthrough in 1837, the Swedish press merged her personality with her roles and idealized Lind as a Madonna and, as musicologist Ingela Tägil highlights, the foreign press continued that tendency after her international breakthrough.¹⁴

Lind had resigned from the opera stage in 1849 when she was still on top of her game. Tempted by her reputation, the showman and impresario P. T. Barnum produced a concert tour for her of the North American continent that was to become legendary. Barnum promoted Lind's character before her arrival in the U.S. as "charity, simplicity and goodness personified".¹⁵ Journalist Nathaniel Parker Willis writes of Lind's attitude during her former years of triumphs in Europe: "In the midst of these splendors she only thinks of her Sweden, and yearns for her friends and her people."¹⁶

This quote highlights Lind's patriotic mindset, her simplicity, and her natural character that was not tempted by foreign gold and glitter. Lind was presented as a pure, innocent girl of an un-educated country folk who had risen from her class due to the magic of her voice.

According to musicologist Roberta Montmorra Marvin, conventional thinking during the Victorian era suggested that a woman's moral was reflected in her looks.¹⁷ But Lind's appearance was in fact regarded as plain. Barnum had even tried to prohibit his star from having her photograph taken in New York, fearing that a likeness that was too true might hurt her reputation as a beauty.¹⁸ The American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), at the time twenty years old, saw Lind perform. She wrote: "[H]ow we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing didn't fancy *that* so well as we did *her*. No doubt it was very fine, but take some notes from her *Echo*, the bird sounds from the

10 Koestenbaum 2001, 85.

11 Tägil 2020, 297.

12 Skeggs 2001, 295–307.

13 Ohlsson 2018, 63–77.

14 Tägil 2013, 18–19.

15 Willis 1851, 87.

16 Willis 1851, 8.

17 Montmorra Marvin 2012, 28.

18 Kunhardt et al. 1995, 88.

Bird Song, and some of her curious trills, and I'd rather have a Yankee. *Herself* and not her music was what we seemed to love – she has an air of exile in her mild blue eyes, and a something sweet and touching in her native accent which charms her many friends. [...] [A]s she sang she grew so earnest she seemed half lost in song.”¹⁹

According to Dickinson it was mainly the persona of the diva that was the key to her success. Dickinson also highlights Lind's Swedishness by describing her accent as sweet and moving, and underlines that her blue gaze had an air of exile. I would argue that the plainness of Lind's appearance rather added to her image of humility and naturalness. It made her a role model that her virtuous female fans, like Dickinson, could identify with and aspire to resemble without downgrading their female respectability.

The American opera singer Clara Louise Kellogg-Strakosch (1842–1916), who, in her childhood, witnessed Lind perform in New York, remembered “the way in which she tripped on to the stage that night with her hair, as she always wore it, drawn down close over her ears”.²⁰ Lind's tripping entrance as well as her simple and tidy hairstyle accentuated a femininity of innocent girlishness. Another witness described her in the moment before she began to sing: “[T]he divine songstress, with that perfect bearing, that air of all dignity and sweetness, blending a child-like simplicity and half-trembling womanly modesty with beautiful confidence of Genius and serene wisdom of Art.”²¹ This description with keywords like, dignity, sweetness, child-like simplicity and womanly modesty, corresponded with idealized femininity of the era, even though Lind violated her femininity by performing on stage. But another strand of keywords in the quote like divine and Genius revealed that Lind was a diva, a proclaimed artistic genius, and as such she stood above some norms of mortal women.

Christina Nilsson's American success twenty years later can also partly be explained by her femininity. A critic wrote after her concert in Boston in 1870: “The secret of her [Nilsson's] success lies in her superiority as an artist, but also in her loveliness as a woman. Genius is never so omnipotent as when it manifests itself in a beautiful, good and modest nature. Nilsson is such a revelation” [my translation].²²

Here, the keywords are loveliness as a woman, beautiful, good, and modest. Although she lacked the girlish quality of Lind's persona, Nilsson also had a reputation of respectability, but foremost, she made her rural background the corner stone of her image. Kellogg-Strakosch described Nilsson as a curious mixture of “Scandinavian calm and Parisian elegance.”²³

Christina Nilsson's reputation nearly outshined Jenny Lind's. She was the

19 Linscott 1959, 242.

20 Kellogg-Strakosch 1913, 5–6.

21 Parker Willis 1851, 112.

22 s.n. *Amerika* 30.12.1870. Original: “Hemligheten af hennes framgång ligger i hennes öfverlägsenhet som artist, men också i hennes älskvärdhet som qvinna. Genius är aldrig så allsmäktig, som då den uppenbarar sig i en skön, god och blygsam natur. Nilsson är en sådan uppenbarelse.”

23 Kellogg-Strakosch 1913, 169.

daughter of a destitute crofter and had spent her childhood walking in the company of a female beggar on the Swedish countryside to perform at markets, inns, and, according to some accounts, even in brothels, in the hope of earning a few pennies. In her adolescence, she had a benefactor and was educated in Paris where she, in 1864, made a success as Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*. Thereafter, she conquered the rest of Europe as a true queen of the stage.

Fused with her social climb, her rural background was part of the mythology that surrounded her reputation. She strategically incorporated the simplicity of the Swedish crofter girl with the French eloquence of her education. When adding her fame and financial success to her social elevation, she truly embodied the American Dream. This diva had gone from rags to riches and she was proud of it.

Performing Religious Affiliation

When Lind received Barnum's offer of a tour of the U.S., she explained to a friend that "since I have no greater wish than to make much money in order to found schools in Sweden, I cannot help looking upon this journey to America as a gracious answer to my prayer to Heaven."²⁴ For the deeply religious Jenny Lind, money was not just a tool for a comfortable life, it was an instrument to achieve her philanthropic projects. After the opening performance in New York, Barnum informed the audience that it was Jenny's intention to give her profit of 10 000 dollars from the evening to charity in the U.S. Hereby, she captured the heart of the American audience across nationality, age, gender, and class.

According to musicologist Hillary Poriss, philanthropy was a deliberate strategy that divas developed to distance themselves from their association with courtesans, which always followed them as female performers and women in the public sphere.²⁵

Courtesans were, according to the general opinion, selfish beings who sold their bodies and made a spectacle of respectable femininity for financial gain, without giving anything back. The trademark of the diva was that she gave back. Through her extensive and very public charity Lind fulfilled her personal agenda that was based on her Christian ideal, but in that process, she also distanced herself from the connotations of the public woman. This diva signified that she had a divine mission with her performances. Following this spirit, Lind donated for example 1500 dollars to the building of the first Swedish Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Andover, Illinois. It was called "The Jenny Lind chapel" and still stands to this day.

Twenty years later Christina Nilsson followed in her league by helping to construct the first chapel of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran church in North Bridgewater, now Brockton, in Massachusetts. She raised over 2000 dollars through a benefit concert for the small Swedish congregation.²⁶

Lind was known for her philanthropy before her tour. Lind is depicted in a cartoon in the British satirical paper *Punch* in 1849 when she walks through

24 Dunsmore 2015, 180.

25 Poriss 2012, 57.

26 Benson & Thompson 2001, 20; s.n. *Amerika* 30.12.1870.

a crowd of poor people in ragged clothes who kneel around her. In the front, there is a man on his knees who has a crutch and a bare foot with a bandage. Jenny gracefully smiles at him and offers her hand to kiss. The drawing is followed by a poem where Lind's goodness is described as someone "not yet a seraph, is one without wings."²⁷ Her pose has a clear connection with a queenly demeanor.

The drawing emphasizes both Lind's angelic character and her performance as a figurative queen. However, her subjects are not elegant members of high society, but poor and crippled people. This highlights the restorative force that was triggered by Lind's successful self-representation as virtuous, humble, and generous. Lind was the people's queen, to paraphrase the epithet of the late Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales (1961–1998), who represented generosity and a caring goodness in a harsh world. That Lind behind this façade did not hesitate to run a hard bargain and was without mercy to people who didn't share, or live up to, her high religious standards, adds to the complexity of her generosity.²⁸

Performing Nordic Whiteness

There are many accounts of that Lind's soulfulness made her appear beautiful when she sang even though she was regarded as plain. Lind's beauty came from within her, all according to the Christian ideal of inner beauty. She had, what film historian Richard Dyer calls: "the glow of the white woman, where the radiance of her white skin and the spark in her blue eyes seemed to come from within her."²⁹ Dyer argues that this ideal can be seen in older European art, like, for example, in the paintings of Rembrandt, and was later emphasized by lightening techniques in photographs and movies.

On her opening night in New York, Lind wore an elegant, but yet plain white gown that, according to one witness, "well became the frank sincerity of her face." While in her hand, she held a white flower with green leaves.³⁰ Dyer points out that white clothes enhance the glow of white skin.³¹ The white flower associated her femininity with the ephemeral blossom of nature itself. White is in Western culture a symbol of virtue. According to historian Marina Warner, blondness and beauty are, in different ways, considered synonymous in Western myths and fairy tales.³² Lind embodied the ideal of the glowing white woman.

Twenty years later, the Nordic look of Christina Nilsson was also highlighted in the newspapers, like for example in this recount of her entrance on stage in Philadelphia 1870: "She [Christina Nilsson] was greeted with raging cheers. She was wearing a white dress, adorned with orange flowers, also in her bright hair. She appears to the enamored American fan as a beautiful type of the

27 Published in Laurin 1910, 245.

28 Franzén 1982, 260; Kunhardt et al. 1995, 90.

29 Dyer 1997, 122–142.

30 Parker Willis 1851, 111; Dunsmore 2015, 193.

31 Dyer 1997, 72.

32 Warner 1994, 363 ff.

Nordic race. What constitutes her greatest loveliness is the natural simplicity that lays in her every endeavor, throughout her conduct. (...) Her entire soul lies in her song; it seems like she completely lives in it and for it [my translation].”³³

Some keywords from Lind’s tour reappear in this quote, like natural simplicity and loveliness, and also that Nilsson seemed to live only for her singing. Like her predecessor, Nilsson wore a white dress and had adorned herself with flowers. Here, Nilsson’s appearance is no longer called a look, but a specific race – the Nordic race. Dyer argues that the ideal of the angelically glowing white woman was emphasized in “situations of heightened perceived threat to the hegemony of whiteness, like for example in the period after the Civil War, with the defeat of slavery and, at least of an official, racism.”³⁴ Nilsson’s first American tour started just five years after the American Civil War (1861–1865).

Being white in the U.S. before the Civil War had meant not being a slave or Native American. After the war, the growing settlement of Jews and Catholic Europeans triggered a classification of different shades of whiteness that were named Caucasian, Slavic, Nordic, and so on. This “fracturing of whiteness”, as historian Matthew Frye Jacobson calls it, was hierarchical.³⁵ An Anglo-Saxon heritage was considered the most desirable and consequently whitest. Latins, Irish, and Jews were regarded as less white, but white in comparison to Native Americans.³⁶ These changeable categorizations emphasize the inconstancy and social construction of race.

Even though Lind’s tour took place a decade before the civil war, tensions existed between northern and southern European immigrants. One critic put Lind, as a Nordic singer, up against Southern performers, particularly Italians. He writes: “The South has had its turn; it has fulfilled its mission; the other end of the balance now comes up. The northern muse must sing her lesson to the world.”³⁷ This lesson is described as fresher, more chaste and intellectual, and that it had a colder strand, which the writer finds refreshing after the excess of grandiose and superficial feelings that he claimed characterized singers of southern Europe. Lind’s clear voice, performance style, and charisma of natural girlishness set her apart from the emotional grandiosity that was associated with some singers from continental Europe. I would argue that Lind’s whiteness and blue gaze helped her achieve this effect.

Katherine Mitchell and Clorinda Donato write that what distinguishes the Italian diva is spirituality, while the non-Catholic Nordic, or American diva is more sporty and associated with the religious Magdalene figure “or the ‘repentant sinner’, such as the high-class courtesan.”³⁸ In the discourses about Lind,

33 s.n. *Malmö Allehanda* 30.11.1870. Original: “Hon war iklädd en hwit klädning, prydd med orangeblommor, likaså hennes ljusa hår. Hon framstår för den hänryckte amerikanaren såsom en wacker typ af den nordiska racen. Hwad som utgör hennes förnämsta älskwärdhet är den naturliga enkelhet som ligger i hwarje hennes åtbörd, i hela hennes uppträdande (...) Hela hennes själ ligger i sången; det syntes som om hon lefde endast i och för den.”

34 Dyer 1997, 127.

35 Blanck 2014, 44.

36 Dyer 1997, 52–53.

37 Parker Willis 1851, 123.

38 Mitchell & Donato 2015, 293–294.

and later also about Nilsson, this split between the Nordic and Southern divas becomes obvious, but contrary to Mitchell's and Donato's argument, neither Lind nor Nilsson were associated with the Magdalene figure. Both their femininity signaled the virtuous "girl next door", far from the seductive femininity of a *femme fatale*, even though their respective personas were very different. Lind's virginal and angelic aura was definitely associated with spirituality. Her image of inner soulful (and white) glow and sartorial simplicity is often highlighted in her portraits (see Figure 1). Nilsson, on the other hand, was the sporty type. She liked to ice skate and when she later toured Russia, she did not hesitate to go bear hunting.



FIGURE 1: Eduard Magnus, Jenny Lind. Oil painting. 1847. Hangs in The Royal Opera in Stockholm. Reference code: Op046_AMK6540. Kungliga teaternas arkiv, Sweden (Archive of the Royal Theatres).

A symptom of a growing perceived threat to the hegemony of whiteness was the increasing popularity of sensationalistic tales of white slavery where the victim was a naïve country girl alone in the big city. According to film and gender

scholar, Laura Horak, Swedish girls were “popular victims of these tales, which played into melodramatic narratives of racial threat to white womanhood, as the slavers were often swarthy immigrant men.”³⁹ Arguably, their Swedish descent was chosen because it was regarded as a certificate of whiteness, which contrasted against the villains dark look. This underlined the symbolical binary of light as good and pure, and dark as bad and dirty, values that also had sexual connotations.

Performing Swedishness on Stage

On Lind’s first performance in New York, the audience’s favorite number was not one of her opera arias, but a Scandinavian folksong that in the reference is called “Herdsman’s Song” and that Dickinson calls her “Echo”. It was in one revue described as “singularly quaint, wild and innocent.”⁴⁰

The nationalistic movement in Germany had inspired an interest in the art of antiquity and the artistic expressions of country people like folk tales and folksongs. These were regarded as innocent and authentic expressions of “the people”.⁴¹ Inspired by these thoughts, Swedish scholars started with similar gatherings. Lind was instrumental in popularizing folksongs in concerts and opera performances in Sweden before she spread them on her international tours. Lind’s performance of Swedish folksongs in the U.S. symbolized the distinctiveness of the Swedes as a country folk living in wild nature and an innocent realm. I would also argue that through her performances the folksongs became associated with idealized and exoticized Nordic white femininity.

The next favorite number in Lind’s concerts was “Greetings to America” by Julius Benedict, which was the result of a contest that Barnum had launched for the lyrics, and which was won by the popular poet Bayard Taylor. Lind sang:

*“I Greet with a full heart, the Land of the West,
Whose Banner of Stars o’er a world is unrolled;
Whose empire o’ershadows Atlantic’s wide breast,
And opens to the sunset its gateway of gold!”*⁴²

Later, during the tour, another popular song was the middleclass favorite *Home! Sweet home*.

Lind emphasized with these songs the conflicting feelings of being an immigrant: the clashing emotions of being torn between loyalties and longings to one’s native country (Sweden), and, at the same time, embracing the new country, the United States, with all the possibilities it had to offer. Emotions that certainly were recognizable for many of the spectators.

Likewise, Christina Nilsson had Scandinavian folksongs in her repertoire, which she indeed had kept and developed from her childhood. From her

39 Horak 2014, 273.

40 Parker Willis 1851, 114.

41 Ling 1978, 11–17.

42 Parker Willis 1851, 115.

concert in Philadelphia, the Swedish press reported that she “sang a little Swedish folk song, which inevitably brought tears to the eyes of the Swedes present” [my translation].⁴³ When Nilsson performed the Swedish folksongs it triggered emotions in the Swedish-Americans of nostalgia, loss, and longing. The folksongs had become codes for the nation they had left and their loved ones they had left behind. Her repertoire in the U.S. also consisted of popular Swedish songs that are not regarded as folksongs, like, for example, “Fjorton år tror jag visst att jag var”, which became Nilsson’s signature tune.

The way that both Lind and Nilsson mixed operatic numbers, Swedish folksongs, and popular songs was a successful way of appealing to a wider audience that was not used to opera. This repertoire showed off the divas as high cultured artists, but it also manifested their Swedishness, and, through popular songs, aligned them with less elitist entertainment that appealed to spectators of all classes.

Performing Swedishness and Royalty in Public Life

Wayne Koestenbaum has identified a number of processes and signs that defines the diva. He calls them diva codes. This can, for example, be that the diva infects cities with fever and the police have to be called upon to control the enthusiasm of the crowd of fans she gathers. According to Koestenbaum, one of these diva codes is the association and kinship between divas and queens. He writes that “the diva masquerades as regal. Queens and divas understand each other. The diva believes – and this may not be grandiose delusion but truth – that she and the queen are secret sharers, conversing in winks and nods.”⁴⁴

Barnum orchestrated Lind’s arrival in New York, like the arrival of a sovereign. It took place on a Sunday and 30 000 people greeted her and sang outside her hotel all night. Lind’s persona and acts of philanthropy, in combination with depictions of her in a queenly position, blended with Barnum’s orchestration of her celebrity and resulted in a metaphorical dance between the diva and her fans. The history books call it “Jenny Lind-mania” or, as in a Swedish newspaper, “Jenny Lind-madness” [my translation].⁴⁵

During her American tour, the British satirical magazine *Punch* took the opportunity of making fun of Lind’s popularity overseas by publishing a cartoon by John Leech of the diva being crowned as *Jenny the first – Queen of the Americans*. On the left-hand side, Lind is sitting in a rocking chair throne. Behind her stands a skinny man in a sombrero smoking a cigarette while crowning Jenny with a leaf crown. In front of her is a cheering crowd. People lift their hats on sticks up in the air, hands are held up waving, a standard is visible with the words “Long live our queen Jenny!”, people kneel; some are laying down kissing the ground in front of her throne.

The crowd consists of people with crude faces and ragged clothes, one man

43 s.n. *Malmö Allehanda* 30.11.1870. Original “(...) sjöng en liten svensk folkvisa, som owillkorligen frampressade tårar i närvarande svenskars ögon”.

44 Koestenbaum 2001, 107–108.

45 Koestenbaum 2001, 111; s.n. *Carlshamns Allehanda* 14.11.1850.

is for example wearing a paper hat. The only elegantly dressed people in the cartoon are Jenny herself and her cupbearers. Amongst the crowd it is possible to distinguish different nationalities. Some men are wearing sombreros, which signals that they are of Hispanic decent and one man has long, black hair, which makes him recognizable as a Native American.

Jenny, though, is indisputably white; her fairness stands out, especially since her white dress leaves her shoulders bare and makes her skin glow white compared to the rest of the crowd. Her class and whiteness are enhanced by her calm, dignified posture and sartorial elegance. Compared with the surrounding people of darker skin, harsh features, rugged clothes, and in combination with their emotional outburst, Lind stands out as a symbol of hegemonic white femininity that the British readers knew was Swedish. I suspect that her whiteness was in fact a prerogative for her queenly position, but that is a topic of another article.

The cartoon played on the British readers prejudice of the vulgar and racially mixed (and therefore inferior) Americans. The diverse crowd of rough people of different decent, acting out their enthusiasm in an ill-mannered way, was far from the middleclass decorum of Victorian Britain. Once again, Lind is depicted as the people's queen, but now her subjects were not just unfortunate poor people, but loud and vulgar American riffraff.

Christina Nilsson also used the combination of charity and performance as a figurative queen as part of her image. She publicly announced in 1873, during the famine in the U.S., that she would raise money for destitute Swedish immigrants. She declared, in a queenly manner: "Wherever I am, I will always feel happy to assist those who suffer far from my fatherland" [my translation].⁴⁶ This quote signifies that she felt herself responsible for her compatriots, or rather, her subjects, just like a queen.

During Nilsson's tour, the population of Swedish immigrants in the U.S. had grown considerably, especially after the great famine in Sweden in the late 1860s. The first time Nilsson arrived in New York in 1870, a group of Swedish immigrants in the city decided to make a procession to greet her.⁴⁷ Never before had so many Swedes been gathered at the same time. Norwegians and Danes also joined in, and around 10 000 people turned up as an audience. The train started when it was dark at 11 o'clock. They were holding about 600 colored lanterns, the Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and American flags, as well as standards with the pictures of both Jenny Lind and Christina Nilsson in white and gold (note the colours!). They marched from Third Avenue and Fourteenth Street up to Fourth Avenue to the villa where the diva was staying. They stopped under her window and serenaded her with Swedish folksongs and the national anthem. This made Nilsson cry.

Afterwards, she thanked them with a speech in Swedish and went to a balcony that was decorated with the Swedish flag. She had agreed to let the train pass by her so all of her countrymen could get a good look at her. When she entered

46 s.n. *Nya Wermlandstidningen* 24.12.1873. In Swedish: "Hwarhelst jag må befinna mig, skall jag alltid känna mig lycklig att bistå dem, som lida fjerran från mitt fädernäsland."

47 s.n. *Lunds Veckoblad* 15.10.1870.

the balcony, she kissed the Swedish flag, sat down on a chair and was lit up by two gigantic candelabra. Her white skin and blond hair must have been glowing in the light when the train of Scandinavian subjects passed beneath her. Here, Nilsson performed as the queen of the Scandinavian-Americans in exile.⁴⁸ Nilsson's gesture of kissing the Swedish flag and crying during the national anthem worked as an identity marker for the Swedish diaspora. She was one of them. Similar manifestations occurred when Nilsson arrived in Boston and in Chicago.

Recounts of the celebrations of Nilsson by Swedish-Americans show that singing Scandinavian folksongs had become a way of bonding for the Scandinavian community. The events can also be read as a manifestation of presence from the growing community of Scandinavian-Americans, and their performance of Swedishness as identity markers.

In 1850, Lind was depicted as the American people's queen in a satirical drawing which associated the Americans as ridiculously exaggerated in their diva worship. Twenty years later, the queenly greetings and manifestations for Nilsson in the U.S. had normalized both diva worship and diva conduct as performed rituals that were expected by both the fans and assumably also by the diva. Lind had hated the attention she attracted in North America. Nilsson, on the other hand, seemed to have played the part as a figurative queen of the Scandinavian-Americans to perfection.

Final discussion

According to historian Dag Blanck, the Scandinavian diaspora was invited into Anglo-Saxonism when the immigration of Catholic Europeans grew during the latter part of the century.⁴⁹ Scandinavians fitted the template as white, hard-working, and Protestant. During these years, Anglo-Saxonism was distinguished by the notion "Manifest Destiny".⁵⁰ This movement advocated the fate of the European settlers to colonize the whole North American continent.

In an often-reproduced painting by John Gast from 1872, the quasi-mythical figure *Colombia* or *Progress* had the dominant position. (See Figure 2.) The often-reproduced painting *American Progress*, that was originally printed in a travel guide, describes the colonization of the west and is an allegory of Manifest Destiny. *Progress* comes from the east with the light, holding a schoolbook in one hand and a telegraph wire in the other. Her mission is enlightenment, civilization, and education, ushering an era of modernization to the ignorant and dark Wild West, much like Lind's mission with her schools in Sweden. The *American Progress* is a racial manifest of white colonialism.

Progress is blond with a fair complexion and has the inner glow of the white woman. She wears a white toga and is crowned with a tiara with a white star. It is unknown who was the model for *Progress*, but I cannot resist the temptation to point out the resemblance to Christina Nilsson, especially in the photographs of her as Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* from 1865. (See Figure 3.) Nilsson's flowing white dress resembles a toga, her hairstyle is like

48 s.n. *Lunds Veckoblad* 15.10.1870.

49 Blanck 2014, 37–54.

50 Jakobson 1998, 205–206.

that of Progress, and Nilsson wears a comparable tiara.

According to an earlier quote, Lind, as a Nordic diva, had a lesson to teach the American audience. I would suggest that *Progress* was through her association with Nordic white femininity used by Anglo-Saxonism as a manifestation of



FIGURE 2. John Gast, *American Progress*. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American_Progress_\(John_Gast_painting\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American_Progress_(John_Gast_painting).jpg)



FIGURE 3. Christina Nilsson as *Queen of the Night*. <https://stockholmskallan.stockholm.se/skblobs/f4/f42bd28b-1b9d-490d-9613-bf23ffdc7e96.JPG>

that lesson. But I must underline that neither Lind nor Nilsson were outspoken advocates of Manifest Destiny, at least to my present knowledge.

Divas of different cultures have often both voluntarily and involuntarily embodied a signal system that can be used as a weapon in politicized discourses. Analyzing performances of divas can therefore reveal intricate systems of ideologies and inherited symbolic ideas that circulate in society, both historically and in contemporary time. Investigating the origins of these standards could shed light upon the intersectional crossroads concerning gender, nationalism, globalization, colonialism, class, and race that still circulate in society today.

I would argue that Lind's and Nilsson's self-fashioning and performances set out a template for aspiring divas of the twentieth century to follow. This prototype consisted of a white femininity linked to Sweden, and/or the Nordic countries that included fairness of skin, eyes and hair color, Protestantism, innocence of character, generosity, a conduct of simple natural grace, a quaint quality, and expressed love of their native soil. These were qualities that Swedish movie stars like Greta Garbo (1905–1990) and Ingrid Bergman (1915–1982) would perform variations of and iconize with the help of Hollywood.

As both Lind and Nilsson were successful divas, they embodied the American dream both on stage and off. Accordingly, they were associated with (and to some extent socialized with) – royalty. But due to their likeable personas and performances of idealized Nordic white femininity, their specific brand of royalty had clear bounds to the (Scandinavian) “people”. I therefore suggest that both Lind and Nilsson contributed to the growing identity and self-awareness of Swedish-Americans.

Nordic white femininity is linked to the construction of ideal femininity that was exoticized in the U.S. Arguably, qualities like respectability, Protestant affiliation, and whiteness, were regarded by Swedes and Swedish-Americans in the nineteenth century as a prerequisite for Swedishness. However, these associations are still prevalent ideas in popular discourses that are used in political right-wing argumentation in today's Sweden. As highlighted in the introduction, Nordic white femininity continues to be a potent, visible representation in modern U.S. culture with a high social status. The legacies of Jenny Lind and Christina Nilsson are not only paragraphs in theater history, but also surround us in the prevailing high position of idealized and exoticized Nordic white femininity visible in contemporary celebrity culture and the entertainment industry of today.

AUTHOR

Hélène Ohlsson is PhD in theatre studies, with an expertise in nineteenth century theatre history with a gender perspective. Her particular interest is in the professional history of the actress, divas, dandies, acting, self-representation, critical femininity studies, and gender study. Hélène Ohlsson is currently teaching gender studies at Stockholm University, where she is also affiliated with theatre-, performance-, and dance studies. She has a background as an actress and a director.

REFERENCES

- Benson, James E., and Lloyd F. Thompson. 2001. *The Swedes of Greater Brockton*. Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing.
- Blanck, Dag. 2014. "A Mixture of People with Different Roots': Swedish Immigrants in the American Ethno-Racial Hierarchies." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33:3, 37–54.
- Davis, Tracy C. 2012. "From Diva to Drama Queen." In Rachel Cowgill & Hilary Poriss (eds.). *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 252–271.
- Dunsmore, Sarah Jenny. 2015. *Jenny Lind: the story of the Swedish nightingale*. [Unknown]: RedDoor.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White: essays on race and culture*. London: Routledge.
- Horak, Laura. 2014. "Queer Crossings: Greta Garbo, National Identity, and Gender Deviance." In Jennifer Bean, Anupama Kapse & Laura Horak (eds.). *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 270–294.
- Jakobson, Matthew Frye. 1998. *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Kellogg-Strakosch, Clara Louise. 1913. *Memoirs of an American prima donna*. New York: Putnam.
- Koestenbaum, Wayne. 2001. *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. New York: Da Capo.
- Kunhardt jr, Philip B., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt. 1995. *P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Laurin, Carl G. 1910. *Skämtbilden och dess historia*. Stockholm: P. A. Nordstedt & söner.
- Ling, Jan. 1978. *Svensk folkmusik*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Prisma.
- Linscott, Robert N. 1959. *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Anchor Books, Random House.
- Lundström, Catrin. 2010. "Transnationell vithet: Svenska migrantkvinnor i USA och Singapore." *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap* 1–2/2010, 25–45.
- Mitchell, Katharine, and Clorinda Donato. 2015. "The Diva in Modern Italian Culture." *Italian Studies* 70:3, 293–297, DOI 10.1179/0075163415Z.000000000102.
- Montemorra Marvin, Roberta. 2012. "Idealizing the Prima Donna." In Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds.). *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 21–41.

Ohlsson, Hélène. 2020. "Diva." *Lambda Nordica* 25:1, 38–42, <https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v25.611>.

Ohlsson, Hélène. 2018. "Rivaling femininities – Jenny Lind and Emélie Höggqvist, The emergence of multiple femininities and female identity." *European Romantic Review* 29:1, 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2018.1416997>.

Parker Willis, Nathaniel. 1851. *The Life of Jenny Lind*. Philadelphia: Robert E. Peterson.

Poriss, Hillary. 2012. "Prima Donnas and the Performance of Altruism." In Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds.). *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 42–60.

Rosenberg, Tiina. 2009. *Bögarnas Zarah diva, ikon, kult*. Stockholm: Normal förlag.

Skeggs, Beverly. 2001. "The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-Recognition." *Women's Studies International Forum* 24.3/4, 295–307.

Straub, Kristina. 1992. *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tjeder, David. 2003. *The power of character: middle-class masculinities, 1800–1900*. Diss. Stockholm: Stockholm University.

Tägil, Ingela. 2020. *Näktergalen: en biografi över Jenny Lind*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Tägil, Ingela. 2013. *Jenny Lind: röstens betydelse för hennes mediala identitet: en studie av hennes konstnärsskap 1838–49*. Diss. Örebro : Örebro universitet.

Warner, Marina. 1994. *From the beast to the blonde: on fairy tales and their tellers*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Newspapers and magazines

s.n. 1850. "Stockholm." *Carlshamns Allehanda* 14.11.1850.

s.n. 1870. "Christina Nilsson i Newyork." *Lunds Veckoblad* 15.10.1870.

s.n. 1870. "Ur en korrespondens från Philadelphia." *Malmö Allehanda* 30.11.1870.

s.n. 1870. "Christinæ kyrka." *Amerika* 30.12.1870.

s.n. 1870. "Christina Nilsson i Boston." *Amerika* 30.12.1870.

s.n. 1873. "Wåra landsmän i Amerika." *Nya Wermlandstidningen* 24.12.1873.