

# “We Are Still Not Being Heard” Making Black Lives Matter in Contemporary Swedish Performance

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## **ABSTRACT**

For several years, the Black Lives Matter movement has been advocating for issues of racial justice and the representation of POC artists (people of colour) in the arts. However, it is a different kind of challenge to face up to systematic racial discrimination in Swedish society that claims itself to be both colour-blind and antiracist. Contrary to the notion that if race is not mentioned, there cannot be racism, it may be argued that the performing arts in Sweden are not as open-minded and inclusive as often claimed. This article focuses on anti-blackness and argues that although there are anti-racist performers and activist groups who continually address racial injustice, the response from theatre institutions has been slow. It is suggested that the performing arts in Sweden need to expand the representation of artists of colour, get better at detecting strategies of equality reluctance in theatre organisations, and improve a critical understanding of hegemonic whiteness. They also must develop a politics of intersectionality and accountability as an approach to new ways of thinking and acting.

## **KEYWORDS**

Black Lives Matter, decolonisation, equality, intersectionality, performing arts, racism

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## **“We Are Still Not Being Heard” Making Black Lives Matter in Contemporary Swedish Performance**

The protests that grew out of the 2020 police killing of George Floyd and brought millions onto the streets demanding an end to systematic racism breathed global urgency into the Black Lives Matter movement. When the *Art Review* published its 2020 Power 100 list of the most influential people and groups in the artworld, Black Lives Matter was ranked number one: ‘BLM has come to symbolise a global reckoning on racial justice and a paradigm shift in contemporary culture.’<sup>1</sup> This marked the first time that a social movement has been considered so influential in the artworld that it topped the list. What started as a protest against police brutality in the US has dramatically reshaped the global cultural landscape.

For several years, the Black Lives Matter movement has been advocating for issues of racial justice and the representation of POC artists (people of colour) in the arts. The movement’s founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, have been calling attention to structures of power that perpetuate inequality and affect representation, identity, and the reproduction of injustice. However, it is a different kind of challenge to face up to systematic racial discrimination in Swedish society that claims itself to be both colour-blind and antiracist. Contrary to the notion that if race is not mentioned, there cannot be racism, it may be argued that the performing arts in Sweden are not as open-minded and inclusive as often claimed. This article focuses on anti-blackness and argues that although there are anti-racist performers and activist groups who continually address racial injustice, the response from theatre institutions has been slow. I suggest that the performing arts in Sweden need to expand the representation of artists of colour, get better at detecting strategies of equality reluctance in theatre organisations, and improve a critical understanding of hegemonic whiteness. They must also develop a politics of intersectionality and accountability as an approach to new ways of thinking and acting.

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1 <https://artreview.com/artist/black-lives-matter/?year=2020>

### **Black Lives Matter and White Melancholia**

Black Lives Matter activism in Sweden in 2020 was in many ways the anti-racist version of the 2017 #MeToo movement. Anti-blackness was not a new phenomenon, but Afro-Swedes previously had not shared their personal stories and reached out through social media to the extent they did during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the #MeToo movement, however, there was a crucial difference. Sweden had been at the forefront of white, straight, cis-gender equality, and Swedish feminists were well-prepared to engage in the #MeToo movement, but a general knowledge of systematic racism was less developed. The claim that widespread racism exists in Sweden had been considered *the* problem, rather than racism itself. This exceptionalist impulse is based on a national self-understanding of Sweden as the home of neutrality and equality, a de-territorialised space beyond comparison with other countries.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Afro-Swedes continued to bear witness that they are regularly exposed to racism, making it increasingly difficult to argue that racism does not exist.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologist Robin DiAngelo has pointed out that what is called colour-blind is an example of racism’s ability to adapt to cultural changes.<sup>5</sup> If we pretend not to notice race, we believe no racism exists. Sociologist Catrin Lundström and cultural theorist Tobias Hübinette advocate for the use of the word race arguing that if Swedes keep ignoring race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, it makes it easier to claim that racism and racial discrimination are not a real problem in Sweden. They point out that Sweden still clings to an illusory self-image of a relatively homogenous nation, although more than half of the residents in the three major cities – Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö – are of migrant origin.<sup>6</sup>

The presumably antiracist or post-racial position is a particular form of racialisation that is often taken for its absence, when it is in fact an active process for keeping the image of the nation white.<sup>7</sup> Lundström and Hübinette have identified three phases of hegemonic whiteness in Swedish history: first, white purity (1905–68), with a triumphalism and homogeneity that included racism, racial hygiene, assimilation, and colonialism. It was the period of the country as the Swedish *Folkhem* (literally, People’s Home) and included polarised class relations, patriarchal families, rationalism, nationalism, and social democracy. The second phase, white solidarity (1968–2001) was characterised by cosmopolitanism, humanism, and antiracism, and took place at a time of colour-blindness, multiculturalism, integration, and postcolonialism. This was the heyday of the Swedish welfare state, with a wealthy growing middle-class, gender equality, collectivism, left-wing liberalism, and internationalism.

The authors see us now in the third phase, white melancholia (2001 to the present). It is marked by a sense of nostalgia, loss, mourning, borders, white

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2 <https://www.facebook.com/blacklivesmatterswe/>

3 Habel 2014, 182.

4 Orrenius 2020; Johansson 2020, 8–15.

5 DiAngelo 2018, 40.

6 Lundström and Hübinette 2020, 17. They include foreign and domestic citizens with two foreign-born parents, and domestic-born citizens with one foreign and one domestic-born parent.

7 Svensson 2020, 273. See also Alcoff 2006, 179–94.

survival, and white protectionism.<sup>8</sup> The result is cultural racism, islamophobia, segregation, neocolonialism, antiglobalisation, and anti-Westernisation. Race relations are polarised, there are identity politics, the #MeToo movement, the crisis of white masculinity, and homo- and femonationalism. The zeitgeist of white melancholia is one of privatised nostalgic retro-escapism, anti-liberalism, neoconservatism, climate change denial, policing, and legal power.<sup>9</sup>

According to Lundström and Hübinette, white melancholia has emerged due to a perceived loss of both the 'old', white Sweden and the 'good' Sweden with international solidarity as its national brand. The old Sweden, which not very long ago was noticeably white, is soon to disappear, while the 'good Sweden' is also fading away. In both cases, Sweden is understood as 'threatened' by the presence of racialised minorities who have destroyed the nation's homogeneity and, at least indirectly, facilitated the success of a right-wing populist party in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats.<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of the epoch of white melancholia, Black Lives Matter Sweden has shown how black lives have systematically failed to matter in this northern corner of the world. The movement managed to expose contemporary forms of anti-black racism: first, as a systematic form of discrimination; second, as individual and collective ideas and representations of race; and third, as organised racism in the form of explicitly racist parties and organisations. Black Lives Matter has successfully brought the anti-racist struggle into the present and attracted a diversified crowd of global supporters. As the *Art Review* has stated, Black Lives Matter 'provides a method for a decentralised, decolonised and more equitable artworld. More importantly, it is an ongoing working-through of historical imbalances, incorporating discussion, redressal and a recognition that we can change how we all work and structure things. That is the promise, but there is still a lot of work to be done.'<sup>11</sup>

Black Lives Matter Sweden has also made it clear that a generation gap exists between younger northern Europeans who have adopted North American definitions of race, and older generations for whom race is a dangerous word due to Europe's history of explicitly racist and white supremacist (fascist and Nazi) regimes. Literary scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines race as a permanent suspicion of other people's lack of humanity, differently represented depending on time and place.<sup>12</sup> For philosopher Judith Butler, racist norms tend to operate by distinguishing between those who can be recognised as human and those who cannot. The human has its defining counterpart in what is inhuman, and the historically entrenched forms of racism rely on bestial

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8 Sigmund Freud's concept of melancholia has been used by cultural theorists, including Judith Butler, who has written extensively on melancholy and mourning. Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning, calling the former as state that one cannot overcome completely. What is missed and mourned becomes a part of one's identity. Lundström and Hübinette see racial melancholia used in critical race studies to analyse minorities and migrants in terms of a deferred assimilation process.

9 Lundström and Hübinette 2020, 86.

10 Ibid., 87.

11 <https://artreview.com/artist/black-lives-matter/?year=2020>

12 Maldonado-Torres 2007, 240–70.

constructions of blackness.<sup>13</sup> Racism, as prison abolitionist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes is ‘the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.’<sup>14</sup>

### Activating White Fragility

The lack of relevant terminology is only one reason why systematic racism and racial discrimination are difficult to address in Sweden. Seemingly harmless tradition is another. Swedish debates on anti-black representation have taken place over the past decade. They concerned racist stereotypes such as Lilla Hjärtat (Little Heart) in the children’s book and film *Liten Skär och alla små brokiga* (Little Pink and the Other Motleys) who was depicted as a so-called pickaninny, a racist image of a black child. Another discussion was about the use of the N-word in *Pippi Longstocking*, Astrid Lindgren’s popular story about the world’s toughest girl. The N-word was removed from the book in 2014 and the television series in 2015.<sup>15</sup> A heated dispute followed when Kulturhuset (Stockholm’s House of Culture) in 2012 removed its copies of *Tintin in the Congo* (*Tintin au Congo*, 1931) due to the racist and colonialist descriptions of the African, Turkish, and Russian characters in the cartoon book.<sup>16</sup> Although racist caricatures have a long history in Western visual culture, it has been ‘that the representational logic of colonialism has not ceased in Sweden’, media scholar Ylva Habel argues.<sup>17</sup>

In 2012, an internationally acclaimed race-related performance called *Painful Cake*, was staged by the Afro-Swedish artist Makode Linde. He created a cake in the shape of Sara ‘Saartjie’ Baartman, a South-African woman exhibited as a freak show attraction in early nineteenth century Europe. The edible cake was offered as a confection to Sweden’s Minister of Culture and other cultural representatives at Moderna Museet (Museum of Modern Art) in Stockholm. YouTube videos of the event show white people happily smiling and laughing as they dismember the symbolic black female body.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of seeing government officials irate at a piece of racist history, what we witnessed back then was white people’s hurt feelings of being played. It was a perfect example of white fragility, a phenomenon that insulates white people from racial discomfort and unpleasantness.<sup>19</sup> Robin DiAngelo, who has coined the term, declared that she has ‘found that the only way to give feedback without triggering white fragility is not give it at all.’<sup>20</sup> The social cost for a black person who talks back often proves so high, that not many risk speaking out against racial discrimination. Although they see it, black people generally curb their reaction in order not to rock the boat. And because white people do not

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13 Butler 2015, 36.

14 Wilson Gilmore 2007, 28.

15 Ingrid Vang Nyman’s classic drawings in *Pippi Longstocking in the South Pacific* (*Pippi i Söderhavet*) have also been criticized of being colonial.

16 Rosenberg 2016, 207-18.

17 Habel 2014, 178–86.

18 Rosenberg 2016, 207-18.

19 DiAngelo 2018.

20 Waldman 2018.

correct each other's racial missteps, the social and cultural peace is preserved and racism is kept in place.<sup>21</sup>

### Common Strategies of Reluctance

Explicit forms of racism are easier to detect than its more insidious systematic forms that masquerade as antiracism. A good place to start might be to examine common strategies of equality reluctance. In her 2007 report, *I väntan på vadå?* (Waiting for what?), gender and theatre scholar Vanja Hermele identified a number of arguments for *not* seeking change in the performing arts. Although her report was about white, straight, cis-gender equality, the subterfuges she has documented have relevance for ferreting out racism and processes of whitening that hold racism and colonial structures in place. Such arguments are frequently heard in cultural institutions, media debates, and in everyday life, making it crucial that they need to be confronted.

One common strategy of reluctance is the 'We are so open minded' argument that wants to signify that the performing arts are already radical and world-changing, and in no need of specific equality claims. Another approach, 'The performing arts are just art', suggests the performing arts are tolerant by nature and all performers are born humanists, disconnected from any form of discrimination. Another tactic, 'Artistic quality is threatened by equality demands', proposes that equality threatens the beauty of the performing arts and extends to 'Will equality ban Strindberg?' implying that pro-equality measures are impossible because of the classical theatre repertoire. Mock outbursts such as 'The PC mafia is killing the performing arts' also concede that while equality is an important issue, it is lamentably politically correct and, therefore, slaughtering the performing arts.<sup>22</sup>

There are yet further objections. The fatigue strategy, 'It is so exhausting', portends that 'equality noise' drowns out *real* problems. What these real problems are has not been specified. The overly optimistic argument, 'Everything just becomes equal – or kind of equal, anyway', results in smugly taking no action although discrimination is a violation of the Swedish law. The claim that 'Women – unlike men – do not produce very interesting performances' indicates that whereas women and minorities are marked in various ways, white straight cis-gendered men are universal human beings and thereby great performers. Women and minorities are essentialised, generalised, and assigned preconceived characteristics based on notions of how women and minorities *are*, as opposed to straight, white, cis-gendered men who *do* important work.<sup>23</sup>

The neutrality strategy, 'We are gender neutral', can be translated into a post-racial pretense that implies all performers are treated equally in a colour-blind manner, and therefore arguments concerning race should not matter.<sup>24</sup> The final argument, 'Women are so sensitive and emotional', stands for overly affective women and minorities who have the tendency to act out instead of expressing

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21 Ibid.

22 Hermele 2007, 10–81.

23 Ibid.

24 DiAngelo 2018.

grateful subordination. Nonetheless, anger can be a source of energy and lead to action. As the poet and African-American feminist activist, Audre Lorde, writes about black anger: 'Everything can be used, except what is wasteful (you will need to remember this when you are accused of destruction).'<sup>25</sup> Thus, there are many strategies of reluctance that shift the focus from structures to individuals reiterating arguments that make change difficult.

### **When Performance Looks Like Us**

'It is time to break the cycle of the white colonialist structure of Nordic culture,' Swedish-Syrian dancer, actor, and activist Ninos Josef states, pointing to the growing number of citizens in the Nordic countries who are both excluded and invisible in the arts. He urges that for Swedish cultural life to become more inclusive, white people must begin to listen and learn more about decolonisation and racism in the performing arts. 'Instead of doing an inadequate job, you should make room for individuals with first-hand experience,' he says. 'Increased diversity requires that you step down and allow others to step up, and, then, together we can move forward.'<sup>26</sup>

However, demanding space and representation is a racial trigger for white cultural institutions. In the performing arts, representation of people means to present living bodies on stage. It indicates a paradox for black bodies who might be present as characters in plays, but not present as actual bodies on stage, pushed into what psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon called 'the zone of non-being.'<sup>27</sup> As Judith Butler writes, 'the assertion of a life that matters, as we see in the Black Lives Matter movement, can break through the schema. Lives matter in the sense that they assume physical form within the sphere of appearance; lives matter because they are to be valued equally.'<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, the political strategy of removing power and oppression through representation has been critiqued by philosopher Michel Foucault, among others. He believes that identity categories do not precede power but are created by and within them.<sup>29</sup> However, film scholar Richard Dyer writes that how social groups are treated in cultural representation is how they are treated in life. 'How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens.'<sup>30</sup>

Thus, for performers who have felt ignored by the performing arts, representation is a matter of presence, power, visibility, and ultimately

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25 Lorde 1981.

26 Josef 2020, 54. Translation mine.

27 In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Frantz Fanon uses the notion "the zone of non-being" as hell of blackness confronted with its condition in an anti-black world.

28 Butler 2020, 12.

29 Foucault 1994.

30 Dyer 2002, 1.

democratic inclusion. Identity politics might be an unfashionable notion today, but it is still important for performers who have been exposed to negative representation for a long time. While representation might not be everything, it matters. As Robin DiAngelo writes, the term identity politics refers to the focus on the barriers specific groups face in the struggle for equality.<sup>31</sup> One might say that all identities are political, but some are more politicised than others, and therefore disproportionately more disposed to injury and early death than others.<sup>32</sup>

‘Racial representation is slowly changing in Sweden’, according to actress Nanna Blondell who will be introduced to an international audience in the Hollywood film *Black Widow* in 2021. Blondell explains that she could never survive as a black actress if she were only to work in Sweden. ‘It is a matter of credibility. As a black person, I cannot even play myself here,’ Blondell states, pointing out the urgent need for other kinds of stories.<sup>33</sup> Bahar Pars, actress and director, similarly critiques whitewashing in Swedish cinema, performing arts, and television. ‘The few roles that could go to black or brown actresses are played by blonde Swedes who dye their hair and pretend to speak broken Swedish’, she says and emphasises the importance of political organising. Bahar Pars notes the frustration of always having to start with the basics when she plans a theatre, film, or television production. Real change would allow all those involved to share their knowledge and analysis in a safe space, she claims.<sup>34</sup>

In the quest for racial representation, two main organisations work for Afro-Swedish interests in the Swedish performing arts, TRYCK and the National Black Theatre of Sweden (NBTS). TRYCK (Push) is a cultural association consisting of Afro-Swedish cultural workers and scholars in the humanities.<sup>35</sup> It was founded in 2010 by activists in the field of the performing arts, television, and cinema protesting against the stereotypical casting of people of colour as criminals or victims of violence. TRYCK also sponsors forums and readings on black performing arts and literature. In September 2020, it celebrated its tenth anniversary with an online festival, about which its chairperson, Alle Eriksson, wrote that this is an ‘absolutely unique chance to take part in the fantastic breadth that black cultural workers can offer in Sweden. I am proud and happy to celebrate our ten years with a festival that reaches everyone who wishes to participate.’<sup>36</sup>

In 2016, TRYCK took part in a production of Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 Broadway classic *A Raisin in the Sun*. It went on to tour Sweden and Finland with Riksteatern (Sweden’s National Touring Company). This was the first theatre production with an all-black cast in Sweden and it was directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo, one of the original members of the National Black Theatre

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31 DiAngelo 2018, xiii.

32 Gilmore 2007, 28.

33 Hermansson 2020, 71. Translation mine.

34 Hermansson 2020, 63. Translation mine.

35 <https://tryck.org>

36 <https://www.facebook.com/alle.eriksson.9> Translation mine.



of Sweden, founded in 2018 as a platform for Afro-Swedish performers. The National Black Theatre of Sweden sees itself as part of a long history of Afro-Swedish presence in Swedish culture that has been unrecognized and even effaced. ‘We are a part of a journey. An African journey.’ the ensemble writes on the website.<sup>37</sup> The company presents plays from Africa and the African diaspora, and also offers work opportunities, co-productions, and internships for Afro-Swedish performers, theatre producers, directors, and stage designers. ‘We develop, inspire, remember who we were and determine who we are; we prosper and walk in the light of our ancestors.’ the group states.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Door of No Return**

One collaborative project initiated by the National Black Theatre of Sweden was the Afro-Swedish commemorative performance of *The Door of No Return* at the Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten) on 8 October 2020 in Stockholm. It was a symbolic coming together of the black and the white national theatres organised on the occasion of the abolition of slavery in the former Swedish colony of Saint Barthélemy on 9 October 1847. *The Door of No Return* honoured the memory of the Africans who disappeared in the transatlantic slave trade. It was also a tribute to all black people who continue to be discriminated against and killed by racist violence. The door intended was the one Africans went through when they were forced to leave their home countries and sent to a life of enslavement in humiliation, violence, and poverty. Josette Bushell-Mingo, director of the performance, declared that, ‘*The Door of No Return* is today a place that we as black people never return to. Every day we walk on our way to freedom, to our destiny, and to our history. That is why we remember and celebrate’.<sup>39</sup>

The production included three short pieces and a concluding poem, and was mounted with a sparse scenography displaying colonial iconography together with today’s Black Lives Matter posters. The introductory piece, *Black Ocean*, explored the dreams of among those who drowned or perished on the slave ships at sea.<sup>40</sup> The second part, *Morianen* (The Moor), was written and performed by Jean Valois about a young boy from the Caribbean who had been abducted and given as a gift to queen Lovisa Ulrika of Sweden (1720–82). He became a new ‘brother’ to prince Gustav and was called Gustav Badin (1747–1822) in Sweden. Badin’s portrait, painted by Gustaf Lundberg in 1775, can still be seen in the Drottningholm Theatre in Stockholm. Since the ‘theatre king’ Gustav III is the founder of the Royal Dramatic Theatre and the Royal Opera in Stockholm, Jean Valois pieced the origins of Sweden’s national theatres together with colonialism, a connection that is rarely made, and that theatre scholars might explore further.

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37 <https://www.nationalblacktheatre.se>

38 <https://www.nationalblacktheatre.se>

39 <https://via.tt.se/pressmeddelande/the-door-of-no-return-en-kvall-till-minne-av-avskaffandet-av-den-svenska-transatlantiska-slavhandeln?publisherId=1706167&releaseId=3283741>  
Translation mine.

40 *Black Ocean* was performed by Kayo Mpoyi, Lamin Daniel Jadama, Nancy Ofori, Tarika Wahlberg, Senait Imbaye, Marque Gilmore, Raymond Peroti, Binyam Haile, Ruben Karsberg, Ama Kyei.

The third part, *Nubian Voices*, a collage of plays from Africa and the African diaspora, included pieces by Wole Soyinka, Lorraine Hansberry, Winsome Pinnock, and August Wilson, and was performed by a cast of Afro-Swedish actors Astrid Assefa, Richard Sseruwagi, Måns Clausén, Alexander Karim, Maria Salah, Ellen Nyman, and Francesca Quartey. The fourth part, a poem by Maya Angelou entitled *And Still I Rise*, was recited by Rebecca Drammeh and Kayo Shekoni.<sup>41</sup>

*The Door of No Return* made it clear that although Sweden has often disclaimed colonialism, it does in fact have a colonial past. The Nordic nations like to celebrate their progressive accomplishments by quickly forgetting their past failures. Compared to the UK, France, Portugal, and Spain, the history of Nordic colonialism may seem modest, but as cultural geographer Katarina Schough has shown, Swedish exceptionalism is not a new phenomenon. Using the notion of *hyperboré*, Schough traces Swedish exceptionalism back to sixteenth century cartographic historiography and the idea of an ideal place in the world. Swedes were given a special whiteness status, which both during and after the colonial era was attributed to a morally and culturally elevated plateau they thought to be on. According to Schough, Swedish whiteness is strictly associated with the image of political innocence and purity, and has crucially contributed to Sweden's collective tendency to forget its participation in colonialism.<sup>42</sup>

### Intersectional Poetics

The performing arts in Sweden have survived for a long time without any intersectional equality demands being placed on it. In 2004, the Swedish government appointed a committee to address gender-related inequality in the performing arts, marking the beginning of a critical examination of the field. Its 2006 report, *Plats på scen* (Place on Stage), was a thorough investigation that confirmed shortcomings in gender equality in the performing arts.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, another collaborative project, 'Att gestalta kön' (Performing Gender), was initiated by a group of students at the Theater Academy in Stockholm. Its aim was to scrutinise patriarchal poetics and practices dominating theatre education and bring about change.<sup>44</sup>

There is, however, a problem in that it has been customary to examine gender apart from other forms of discrimination. The year 2006 was proclaimed the Year of Cultural Diversity in Sweden. Its two-fold purpose was a) to permanently extend opportunities for all those people living in Sweden to participate in cultural life, and, b) to facilitate an interplay between the variety of prevailing traditions. A further aim was to incentivise those who were responsible for publicly funded cultural activities to find ways to integrate the ethnic and cultural diversity that exists in Sweden today. The report identified obstacles achieving that goal, but reiterated the government's commitment to ensure that state funded cultural

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41 Lundström 2020, 10.

42 Schough 2008, Habel 2014, 183.

43 Englin et al., 2006.

44 Edemo and Engvoll 2009.

institutions attract diverse audiences to participate in their cultural activities.<sup>45</sup>

I think that it would be useful to have an intersectional approach to cultural policy as well as new theoretical and practical approaches to theatre practice and education. Intersectionality would raise the awareness that marginalisation and discrimination in their various forms rarely occur alone. Legal scholar and African-American feminist activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, introduced the notion of intersectionality, arguing that analyses of gender applied to black women’s experiences of oppression when encountering the law fall short when they discount race as the mutually constituted feature of that oppression.<sup>46</sup> The complexities of intersectionality, the fight against colonialism and racism have led to post-colonial, decolonial, and critical race studies whose insights have yet to find their way into theatre.<sup>47</sup>

In feminist theory, intersectionality has gradually – and in the case of white feminisms often after much struggle – expanded to include other categories of oppression alongside gender, such as age, class, disability, nationality, postcoloniality, race, religion, and sexuality. The list often ends with an embarrassing ‘etc.’ as Judith Butler once remarked. ‘This illimitable et cetera, however, offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing.’ Butler writes.<sup>48</sup> Such knowledge is also needed in the theatre. The reification of whiteness also contributes to the misguided impression of having arrived at a post-racial moment.<sup>49</sup> As an antidote to these, sometimes unintended, consequences of intersectional analyses, political theorist Anna Carastathis argues for the application of a rigorous historical critique of colonialism. Decolonial theory exposes its long diachronic process as a destructive force that is ubiquitous, ongoing, and deeply connected to other forms of discrimination.<sup>50</sup>

### **From Cultural Politics of Blame to a Cultural Politics of Accountability**

‘Whom do you fear the most, the one who openly despises your existence, or the one who silently excludes your existence while pretending to care for it?’ This question opens the introduction of the Norwegian Arts Council’s *Actualise Utopia: From Dreams to Reality* (2019), a report on inclusion and racialised structures in the arts in the Nordic countries.<sup>51</sup> One may respond by confronting hegemonic

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45 Rock et al., 2007, 26.

46 Crenshaw 1989 and 1991. See also: Crenshaw, Kimberlé, et al., 1995, 357–83. Sociologist Sirma Bilge identifies three main developments in intersectional literature from the 1980s to today. First, the different axes of oppression (gender, race, class) were treated as co-constituted rejecting the hierarchization of the axes of social inequality. The second phase tended to an overarching axis of inequality, from which other categories of inequality/identity would follow. In its current phase, Bilge observes a tendency to leave relationships between categories of differentiation as an open question. In Bilge 2010, 9–28.

47 Those women who were drawn to the anti-racist movement and black feminism in the early days are central to the emergence of intersectionality. Classic texts such as Gloria Hull et al. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) and Angela Davis’s *Women, Race, and Class* (1983), with their explicit intersectional perspectives, were some of the first challenges to hegemonic white feminisms.

48 Butler 1990, 143.

49 Carastathis 2016, 11.

50 Ibid.

51 Josef 2019, 2.

whiteness and systematic racism in our Nordic societies and cultural institutions. African-American feminist theorist bell hooks points out the importance of moving from a politics of blame to a politics of accountability.<sup>52</sup> That, according to hooks, would lead us from a simple, dualistic way of thinking that classifies people either as victims or perpetrators, to an understanding of the world and politics in which we are *both* victims *and* perpetrators. Acknowledging that we, as human beings, both promote and benefit from inequality, one can see how we are simultaneously exploited by unequal power structures and, at the same time, continue to maintain them. Instead of downplaying conversations about systemic racism with a, 'I have never discriminated against anyone', a politics of accountability would make white people understand that they have profited from racist exploitation in the past, just as they are profiting from it in the present, and, therefore, have a duty to do something about it.<sup>53</sup>

Change is brought about by activists and people in leadership positions. When Mattias Andersson began his new job as artistic director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten) in Stockholm at the beginning of March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had recently closed theatres in Sweden and elsewhere in the world. It gave him time to think about what it means to lead a national theatre today. 'I see Dramaten as an artistic project', he says and asks what a national theatre means in a globalised world and in a segregated Sweden. 'How are we to do something called theatre in the 2020s that could be relevant and attractive to everyone who is currently living in Sweden?'<sup>54</sup> That is the key issue. Since everyone in Sweden contributes to financing a national theatre through their taxes, it should also include everyone. What he and other Nordic theatre directors must consider is that during the post-WWII era, the Nordic region has shifted from a predominantly white, Christian majority population to a multicultural, multi-religious, and multi-racial society. A truly transnational and intersectional approach to the performing arts does not consider discussions of systematic racism and decolonisation of the performing arts as a threat, but recognises its obligation to see all performers in their own right, and understands that the ultimate goal of democracy is inclusion.

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52 hooks 2014.

53 Ibid.

54 Sjödin Öberg 2020, 29. Translation mine.

## AUTHOR

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