

Dear Refusniks—This paper is a talk I gave recently at the English Institute at Yale, the theme of which was “Figure.” This piece will be published later this year, after I revise/edit it. This is, in a way, what I had to write to get to the work that I am trying to do on the emergence of “blackness” in Sweden/northern Europe, to think about the refusal or the many erasures (of history, race, place) that black subjects are currently facing. Thanks for reading!

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This paper, which is a part of the new work that I am doing on theorizing blackness in contemporary Europe, will pivot around images and ethnographic moments: different types of figura, if I may. Tentatively titled “*Blackness, Swedish Style: Race, Diaspora, and Belonging in Contemporary Sweden*,” this project has its origins in scholarly concerns and personal experience. My work primarily concerns the theorization of African American and Afro-diasporic identity through literature, visual culture, and expressive culture. Personally, I am an African American woman married to a Swedish man and during the last fifteen years, I have spent every summer and two recent sabbaticals living and working in Sweden, observing the challenges of Swedish multiculturalism, diversity, and integration, which are similar to those of the rest of Europe, but have some very specific, Swedish contours. In this project, I am challenging myself to work ethnographically, as well as in the realm of cultural studies, in order to think about the emergence of “blackness” in a place that has no obvious or well-developed colonial or imperial history, that has to think of “diaspora” and the black identities and cultures that emerge from it differently. As such, I am hoping to capture the contours of race, racialization, integration, blackness/anti-blackness, and the emergence of what I’m calling Afro-Nordic soul.

There are many ways of being black and Swedish in Sweden: AfroSwedes are native-born, immigrant, refugee. Black Swedes are a generation of Swedish Ethiopians/Eritreans adopted singly into Swedish families, mixed-race Swedish-Ghanians, Swedish-Ugandans, Swedish- (any African country or place within the diaspora), Somali refugees, now citizens, who have lived above the Arctic circle for two generations, African American musicians, athletes, political activists resident in Sweden since the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements and the War in Vietnam. People of African descent have been coming to Sweden, first as adoptees and then as refugees or other exiles, for just the last 40-50 years; indeed Sweden has had “foreign” immigration (immigrants from outside of Scandinavia) in real numbers only from the late 1950s onwards. In investigating connections and disconnections between Europe, Sweden and its African Diaspora, as well as among AfroSwedes themselves, this project consists of theory, ethnography, memoir, (oral) history, and contemporary cultural criticism. The structure and contents of this project reflect the eclectic nature of the black Swedish “experience” as it is emerging. This is my first attempt at bringing these genres/inquiries/methodologies together—in the spirit of the conference, I’m “figuring” it out. Thanks for your patience and I look forward to the discussion.

Figuring Blackness in a Place without Race

I. 20 February 2014, Meeting with Lena N., Pom & Flora café, Södermalm, Stockholm.

We’ve just moved to Stockholm again; I’m meeting Lena, mother of one of my son’s new classmates. She is a member of TRYCK/PUSH, a newly established group of AfroSwedish

artists and cultural workers, and therefore an excellent contact for me. Adopted from Eritrea, she grew up in Stockholm; she had been living in Denmark for the last 20 years, having gone there for acting school. Lena is nimble and quick in her movements and maybe because she is an actress, is much less reserved than many Swedes would be on a first meeting. Over coffee, hot chocolate, and a fruit juice, we talk at a table near the window for nearly three hours about all things AfroSwedish, including the differences she sees between the racial/political climate between Sweden and Denmark. What bothers her most is Sweden's sense of its own goodness and exceptionalism: Sweden thinks of itself as a place that is morally superior, having avoided the most direct political, social, and cultural consequences the twentieth century Europe's most significant upheavals: the second world war and the "official" end of colonization/imperialism. Thus, racial "problems" happen elsewhere, in places like America and South Africa, as evidenced by Gunnar Myrdal's famous study and Sweden's unprecedented support of the ANC. Despite its reputation as one of the best and happiest places to live, Lena sees Sweden as a kind of time bomb, that will soon be forced finally to acknowledge a lost innocence in terms of its self-perceived "goodness" in the world. She's worried that another Anders Breivik, the Norwegian man who killed 77 people in Oslo, in an act of domestic terrorism/white supremacy, will happen here because Swedish people, mainstream media/public culture is really unable to talk about racial issues, discrimination, and racism, in a meaningful way.

For Lena, Sweden's innocence and "goodness" has actually been penetrated a number of times, but Swedes will not acknowledge this. As examples, she talks about the serial killer known as Lasermannen, who shot and killed (some say hunted with a laser-guided rifle) immigrants in Stockholm and Uppsala in the early 1980s. Going further back in history, she notes that she did

not learn about Sweden's involvement in the slave trade at all until she heard a lecture at one of the first Slavery Remembrance Days in Sweden a few years ago. In the fall of 2014 she directed a play/performance piece about the Swedish arms trade and its relation to immigration in which she alleged that Sweden exports arms to conflict areas and then takes in refugees from those same places, that there is a direct correlation between Swedish arms export and its refugee "crisis." This play was met with extreme criticism because Swedes do not want a complicated vision of themselves and their history; instead, they want to maintain the goodness, the righteousness, both historically and in the contemporary period.

Towards the end of our conversation, Lena turns to thinking about blackness in Europe and remembers a moment from Barack Obama's memoir. She notes that when Obama recounts his travels through Europe as a student, he mentions that when he helped a friend to work out a visa issue in Spain, he felt Europe's rejection of brown and black bodies and remarks, "This place is not for me. It is set up to keep me out." She and perhaps Obama understand Europe as a place that is not for "foreigners" and also not for black "strangers," in particular. It is not open to them and structurally does not accommodate movement of "others" in and through. It is a difficult, foreboding "home place."

II. "Kärt barn har många namn"// "Beloved Children Have Many Names"

Over a century ago, a black man walks south from Stockholm's harbor, up Katerinavägen, on to Renstiernasgatan and then to his home at Skånegatan 11 on Södermalm, the

large island home to Stockholm's working class and Jews in the late 19th century.¹ He is returning home after a long day working as a stevedore on the docks. One of possibly two black men living and working in Stockholm at the time, he leads a relatively anonymous life, quietly negotiating his status as both a long-term resident in Sweden and "främling" or stranger in the nation's capital. In Swedish there is an old saying "Kärt barn har många namn" or "Beloved children have many names"²— this man, variously known as Jean Louis Pierre, Pierre Louis Alexandre, P.L. Alexandersson, Svarte Uno, Svarte Pedro, or, most pejoratively and frequently Neger Pettersson (The Pettersson Negro/Nigger), would seem to be loved indeed. The combination of his last name, Petterson, that which he reportedly used most often, and his denigrative given first name, the racial slur "Neger," indicates that this love was fraught if it existed at all. We do know that he was indeed esteemed by an unexpected group of Stockholmers— the artists of the *Kongliga Akademien för de Fria Konsterna* or Royal Art Academy for whom he served as an artist's model. While there are few traces of Neger Pettersson's actual life, there are at least 28 paintings and drawings of him, two photographs (that show him posing in the school's atelier) and two structural busts, one of which bears the name "Zambo," currently extant. These artworks were created by some of Sweden's best known artists, including Oscar Björck, Johan Krouthén, and Ecker Hedberg and Karin Bergöö- Larsson, the wife of acclaimed artist and designer Carl Larsson.

Said to be a native of French Guyana who made his way to Sweden on a ship transporting sugar via Bahia, Brazil and also possibly New York, Jean Louis landed in Sweden on April 20, 1863, around the age of 20. The captain of the ship he travelled on, the "White Star," was named Petterson. Jean Louis is thought to be either a fugitive slave or recently freed man

escaping French colonization and its aftermath; likewise he may have abandoned the ship when it docked in Stockholm. He disappears from the record for the next 15 years, although it seems possible that during this time, he met and then married or cohabited with a woman from Öland (a large, rural island off the mainland), who worked selling food to dockworkers, with whom he may have had two children. He emerges again in 1878 on the payroll of the Royal Art Academy and in community registers, using the name Pettersson. Jean Louis Pierre's status as an oxymoronic "stranger at home" is also marked under these years: he is relatively invisible and anonymous as there are few verifiable records of his presence in Stockholm. At the same time, he is strikingly recorded in visual culture by means of his modeling at the Royal Art Academy. During his time in Sweden, from 1863 to 1905, we see his presence marked as both foreign and familiar; foreign, as denoted linguistically by his many "nicknames," and familiar, when rendered artistically in oil and charcoal.³

The portraits of Jean Louis Pierre, in their variety and typicality, allow us to think/look both backwards and forwards into Swedish history and the relationship it has developed with its black and brown "strangers", now citizens. Via the ledger at the Royal Academy, we know that Jean Louis sat as a model in the late 1870s and early 1880s (1878-82), and again in the early 20th century (1903), we seem to have a series of portraits that portray a kind of "emplacement," moving from costume-y depictions of the threat of and desire for the Other and otherness to other more naturalistic images of resignation and contemplation, that seem to accompany a kind of "settling," in both senses of the word—homesteading and making do.⁴ In one of the only full-length oil paintings depicting him, **this painting by Oscar Björck**, we see Jean Louis dressed as a typical Renaissance Moor, earring-ed, turbaned, armed with a golden scimitar, enveloped in

rich colors and flowing fabrics. Exhibiting the “Moor’s” nobility and strength (like the marble columns behind him) and, perhaps, his cunning (with that look to the side, out of the frame), this portrait conveys a serious, yet provocative and intriguing menace. In this pictorial “costume drama,” foreignness is emphasized and conveyed through racial and physical difference, difference in setting. In this portrait we see an art historical trope, one of the typical depictions of “the exotic” as black man from a European point of view. What we are looking at here is less a portrait of Pettersson, rather, it is more a depiction of a Swedish artist’s participation in the traditions of 19th century European aesthetics that were fueled by colonialism and imperialism—evidence of Sweden’s imbrication in the symbols, if not the actuality, of European imperialist politics. He is purely model here—excelling in the costume and Orientalist fantasy.

Björck’s second portrait, demonstrates similar qualities— this time in repose, but still armed, this Moor also exhibits strength (the finely-rendered bare chest and arm muscles, the size and power of the hands)) and intelligence (the seemingly knowing, slightly world-weary side glance). In this Björck, color operates not only as an “exotifying” element, but perhaps as more of an aesthetic, painterly contrast— the red and yellow bring warmth and depth to the deep brownness of his skin. This “Moor” looks retired or resigned; having done his actual and metaphorical work, he seems to be impatiently awaiting his next assignment. **Artist Ecke Hedberg** perhaps offers Pierre Louis a new role, as more himself. Placed in a similar pose, here he is rendered to entirely different effect— still bare-chested, but without the weapon, Pierre Louis appears in a more “typical,” even actual, setting for an artist’s model, his face in shadow, his eyes forward, but downcast. This portrait seems to depict a real man, rather than a Moor. In terms of genre, it is an academic study of a black male model, rather than a meditation on foreignness or Otherness

in the service of an artist's career. The visible chair and the "unfinished" nature of the background simultaneously give this portrait a rootedness *and* a dynamism, an oxymoronic state that we might think of as characterizing Jean Louis's later life in Sweden. According to these likenesses, he was always never at home.

In the best known portrait of him, **Karin Bergöö-Larsson** depicts Pierre Louis realistically, warmly conveying his humanity and perhaps capturing other, more local facets of his emplacement in Stockholm and Sweden. Although she seemingly includes an element of the "Moor's" costume (the sash), she transforms it into the uniform of a sailor or a denizen of the docks, which was Jean Louis' occupation, marrying it to the red-striped pants and rolling his shirt sleeves. Even if Jean Louis' presence in the Royal Academy's atelier was initially designed as an academic exercise, an opportunity for Sweden's artistic elite to draw or paint a *främling*, or stranger, a man with dark skin, wooly hair, fuller lips, Bergöö-Larsson turns this "experiment" into a study of his quiet strength, possible only through, one supposes, a palpable sympathy between sitter and artist. In this radiant piece, Bergöö-Larsson beautifully captures the fine features of his face, the unruly order of his hair and beard. The early evening summer sunlight, so specific to Sweden's latitude, seemingly envelops his body, illuminates a meditative tranquility. In 1905, "Negern Pettersson" died of tuberculosis and was buried in the Catholic Cemetery in northern Stockholm, aged approximately 60 years. He lived the majority of his life as a singular black presence in an overwhelmingly white, homogeneous culture that was fast indelibly equating whiteness with Swedishness, transforming its state into a "folkhem" or, People's Home partly described in restrictive, racist terms.

III. The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture

In the late nineteenth and early 20th century, like many other European nations, Sweden was modernizing, consolidating regional cultures and geographic differences into Swedish nationality, creating “Swedishness” as specific and recognizable. As Sweden took the steps to create its liberal, progressive, generous welfare state, it did so based on notions of inclusion, worth, and community, which necessarily relied on notions of exclusion and hierarchy. Swedish social democracy is, on some level, based on and extended to those who meet a standard of “sameness”; benefits are extended to those who historically have been and can be included in the concept of “the folk.” In the early part of the 20th century, as one historian puts it, “Swedish national identity ha[d] come to be tightly linked to the welfare state, understood not simply as a set of institutions but as the realization of *folkhemmet*, the “people’s home.” (Tradgardh, 131). Swedish social democracy is conceptualized as a political/social/cultural entity in which “‘ethnos’ and ‘demos’ merge into a “central metaphor” of “Swedishness” (141), that is based on notions of belonging determined by identity and utility. “The folk” in a Swedish context are both workers (peasants, industrialized labor) and inheritors of a powerful mythology about their relationship to democracy and democratic principles like equality, individualism, rule of law, and progress and modernization. The concept of “folkhem” successfully unified a divided people as it defined the principles around which “Swedishness” was based. This unification created the possibility for Sweden’s rapid economic growth fueled by a strong, state-supported Labor Movement, creating its unique socio-economic model, The Middle Way.

The rhetoric around “the folk” and the potential of this “folk” to embody modernity and carry forth prosperity did, sometimes, and perhaps inevitably, create moments in which expressions of

nationalism uneasily coincided with racialism and xenophobia, but to a much lesser extent than Germany. The “Folkhem” ideology was, in its best moments, positive and powerful, a successful effort to define nation, self, and their interrelations; however, as we know, defining who we are, means also indicating, either obviously or tacitly, who we are not. In 1909 politician Bengt Lindfors wrote that “the working class is the marrow and core of the Swedish people, the blood inherited from the parents through innumerable Swedish generations.”⁵ The 1928 and 1933 Social Democratic party platforms declared that “the Swedish *folkstam* (race) must be protected from race degeneration—Immigration of inferior *folkelement* (racial groups) must be prevented.”(LT, Varieties), fn87). In the time in between these two statements were uttered, Sweden became the first European nation to establish a state Institute of Race Biology in 1921, the first state-sanctioned eugenics program in Europe. Sweden’s Institute, like its later companions in Europe and the US, were part of what people thought could be a positive, utilitarian social engineering movement that was popular in the inter-war period. As such, the IRB worked to ensure that Sweden’s folk were “skötsam folk,” or “healthy,” steady, conscientious, hard working people. However, it was also later involved in “rensning” or purifying the population— creating a bio-racial norm that would become synonymous with Swedishness.

The relationship between the welfare state, race biology, eugenics, and whiteness stems, initially, from organizational need.⁶ How Sweden “looked” was important from an organizational perspective, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the culture and the state worked to establish the socio-culturo-political norms of social democracy, to create and maintain what we might call in modern terms “buy-in” to modern Sweden and Swedishness. Although

“modern society and modern science are conjoined twins” during this time, the “science” of the times was nevertheless dubious—*seeing was believing*, as creating modern day Sweden and Swedes was a political *and* aesthetic exercise (Broberg and Roll-Hansen 7). Art historian Jeff Werner explains the connection between social democracy and racial aesthetics in his *book Blond and Blue-eyed: Whiteness, Swedishness, and Visual Culture*, saying:

When social democracy, in a rhetorical manoeuvre, made the “People’s Home” of the welfare state its own in the late 1920s, it was economic justice and consensus that were the focus. However, in the course of the construction of the Swedish welfare state, aesthetic ideals and scientific-racist ideals gained prominence. The welfare state, especially people’s mental image of the welfare state, was clothed in the white raiment of Modernism. In the visual propaganda for the new age’s architecture and way of life, the new man, who has thrown off the yoke of tradition and scrubbed away the dirt of history, is invariably white. The dream, although not the reality, of the Swedish welfare state was monocultural. Its utopian purpose was a uniform society made up of sensible, democratic, modern people. Today, the welfare state—like a nostalgic dream—has been lightened to an even paler shade of white by both the extreme right and many of the left wing-debaters.” (Werner, 313).

“The dirt of history,” then and now, includes differences of race, ethnicity, religion, and culture, which challenge a system based on a mutual recognition of worthiness and belonging.

According to the pre-eminent historian of Sweden’s Institute of Race Biology, Gunnar Broberg, “the ambition to clear away what was old, dirty, and diseased could range from commitment to

physical hygiene to an aspiration to create, by means of a eugenic program, a sound and healthy people free from defective genes.” (Broberg and Tyden, 136). To fulfill this goal, Sweden's IRB instituted a sterilization program that while officially focused on the elimination of physical disease and mental “feebleness” which effected competence to work and live independently, nevertheless included and depended upon ideologies of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture that determined one's industriousness and intelligence. As in many other European countries, people or groups of people deemed “different” and unproductive, such as the Swedish *tattare* or travellers, a group of Roma resident in Scandinavia for over 500 years, were sterilized, adopted away from their families, and forced to assimilate in the 1930s-50s. This completed a process of exclusion that began in the 17th century when it became illegal to be Roma in Sweden.

In its earliest phases, Swedish eugenics or race thinking was a visual phenomenon that worked to establish how “race” and “nationality” could be read and the relationship of this reading to individuality and a particular Swedish whiteness which was the guarantor of that individual freedom. Swedish eugenics was officially and unofficially illustrated, in order to visualize and support notions of belonging, for there to be little confusion as to the precise “Swedish racial type” or who could constitute the *skötsam folk*. Herman Lundborg, founder of The Swedish Society of Racial Hygiene and the first head of the IRB, was such an apt propagandist for his conviction that Swedes were of a superior, as yet unspoiled Nordic racial type, that he published three tomes of what we might call “coffee table books” illustrating contemporary race thinking (Bjorckman and Widmalm 388). These books were deliberately aimed at popular, middle class and foreign audiences. *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture* appeared first in English in 1918 and was accompanied by an exhibition of “racial types,” that toured the country. “Know

thyself, thy family, thy people,” was the motto of this 1919 exhibition —photography, sculpture, and painting were the media one could use to obtain this knowledge (Bjorckman and Widholm 385). *The Racial Character of the Swedish Nation* followed in 1926 (first in English, then Swedish, then German), and included a portrait gallery illustrating **the “types” of Swedes** currently extant in the country. (Gunnar and Tyden 87-89). Finally, in 1934 *Swedes of Today* was issued, lavishly illustrated by artist Ivar Kamke, a student of Gobineau and an outspoken supporter of the emerging German race ideology, who drew 45 pastel portraits of elite men of the “Nordic race type” (Werner 333). In all of these books, eugenicists were “constructing a visual and textual discourse about the Swedish nation and its biological stratification,” in which “the pure Nordic types appear not only as thriving and strong individuals, **from a salt of the earth type of rural stock** ...but they also convey images of cultural heritage and national or regional tradition, in effect saying that the superior qualities of the Nordic race are reflected in its history and culture.”(B&W 388, 390-91).⁷

This visual, “scientific” presentation of Swedishness took its cue and has its history within the art world; the “glorification of peasants in the national romantic style was common in early twentieth century art,” and was an established way to see and depict “Swedishness.” (B&W 389). The world of visual culture both created and reflected the fact that one truly had to “look” Swedish in order to be “Swedish” and “Swedishness” became overwhelmingly associated with whiteness and whiteness with Swedishness during the late nineteenth century” (Blå, 45). By the turn of the twentieth century, Swedish visual culture, its institutions (museums, art schools) and forms (oil and watercolor painting, even landscapes, advertisements, cartoons), created Swedishness as *a specific whiteness—the whitest of whitenesses, a blond, blue-eyed ideal*— via

well-known artists, indeed, the icons of traditional Swedish art: Carl Larsson, **Anders Zorn**, **Richard Bergh**. Zorn, the best known painter in early twentieth century Sweden, was “the most generous individual supporter of the 1919 Swedish Types exhibition,” and like his fellow artists was deeply committed to depicting a nationalist, even patriotic Sweden in paintings in which “**people are in harmony with nature**,” (89) in which bodies and landscapes are telling a particular story about what Sweden looks like. A vast, rugged, yet quiescent natural landscape of mountains, fir forests, fields of wheat, and rocky ocean coastlines are the birthright of Swedes—**the bodies that** occupy this landscape are hardy, healthy, robust, pale. Because of the way in which they present a powerful relation between “people, form, color, and climate,” **Carl Larsson's paintings** of the Dalarna region have become the representation of “authentic” Sweden; he is the father of **traditional Swedish home decoration**, a celebrated designer and depicter of Swedish interiors. He and his wife, Karin, based much of their visual and design aesthetic around that which would complement “the deep green pine forest and the cold white snow”—**blonde, blue-eyed women and children (2)**, nuclear and extended families, village communities at work and at play **in simple, rustic, yet modernizing** domestic country settings emerged as the perfect aesthetic for this visual and national space (W189). This is, of course, a false view of Sweden at the time: Zorn and other artists and architects of Swedish modernity made aesthetic choices that had political origins and consequences, that crafted Swedish whiteness as *hyper-white*, as they painted ideal landscapes and the ideal Swedes within them. The Swedish “monoculture” was created and illustrated and its contradictions ignored. You will remember Karin Bergöö Larsson, Carl Larsson's wife and artistic partner, as the artist of this portrait of **Negern Petterson**.

So, then what do we make of these portraits of Jean Louis/Petterson? How do we understand their ubiquity and anomaly—are they aesthetic exercises or evidence of even an inchoate politics? In their totality, we confront the multifaceted nature and mythology of Sweden's *folkhem* or the emplacement of its various people, citizens, strangers. When we consider Petterson's multiple and pejorative names against or with the lack of stereotypical elements in his portraits, or even, more simply, the mysterious occasion of his work as a model, we see that he lived during a signal, complex moment in Swedish cultural and political history. Explaining Swedish "racial" exceptionalism today, Werner writes: "The close relationship between Swedishness and whiteness is evident in the [nearly total] invisibility of non-white Swedishness. Swedes who are not white are defined by white, normalizing, society as belonging [altogether] to other ethnicities and cultures. In this respect, Sweden differs from many other countries. Although Britishness, Frenchness, or Americanness is primarily white, for everyone except racists, these countries see [little or] no contradiction between nationality and color." (Werner 49) So what do we make of Petterson's simultaneous visibility and invisibility? How do we understand his blackness, the possibility of his Swedishness? His portraits as traces of a black Swedishness that was and is to come? Or Can never be?

In the visage of this man from the late 1880s, we might also see a glimpse of 1780s, prefigure the 1980s and beyond: When dressed as a Moor, he reminds us that Sweden is actually not an exception within the history of European colonization and enslavement, as is often perceived. Cape Coast Castle in Ghana was built by the Swedish Africa Company and known as Carolusborg; it had a "Door of No Return." The Swedes lost it to the Dutch in 1663. Sweden controlled the Caribbean island of St. Barthélemy (St. Barts) from 1784 to 1887, establishing the

island as a free zone for European trading and contraband. Sweden supported the triangular trade in slaves as major supplier of dried fish or herring that fed slaves and masters alike, was a supplier of “voyage iron” used to fabricate shackles and cages, as well as timber for slave ships necessary for the trans-Atlantic journey. While some towns in St. Barts bear Swedish names, there are no “black” Swedes claiming descent from this history. Nevertheless, the people of African descent who have been born in or arrived in Sweden since the late nineteenth century and from some very different political geographies, have run right into the anti-black racism, prejudice, and stereotypes that enabled and supported the slave trade and its long aftermath.

When dressed in his working clothes, looking grumpily or despondently out into space, we might see past evidence of this future reality— an ordinary man grappling with uniqueness and typicality. He is both exceptional, exotic, and begrudgingly at home in a place that over 100 years later, would ask its black population—mixed-race, native-born black Swedes, adoptees, labor and love immigrants, refugees— to live in a place without race. At this moment, in 2015, “race,” the word and concept, is in the process of being officially removed as a category of identity or legal complaint in Swedish law, while at the same time that hate crimes against Swedes of African descent have increased 25% in just the last few years (while all other violence against minority groups declined) and a far-right anti-immigrant political party with roots in National Socialism, the Sweden Democrats, have won places in the Swedish and European Parliament, are the third largest political party in the land.⁸ Many contemporary Swedes see the erasure of “race” as an anti-racist gesture, which is how the former Minister of Integration, who has sponsored the bill, promoted it. We might also think of it as an odd continuation, in some way, of the ideologies that built the Institute for Race Biology and the attempted realignment of

those ideologies in the aftermath of World War II. Sweden's "racial" history, the formation of its specific whiteness and exclusion of otherness and difference, has been occluded. Indeed, it was only in the 1970s that most Swedes learned of the history of the IRB, just as it was being shut down and the sterilizations outlawed; only in the 1990s was Sweden's history with the slave trade, colonization, and western imperialism acknowledged (and "waves" of immigrants and refugees began to arrive on Sweden's shores). Swedes of African-descent are embroiled in this history, despite their recent arrival and fraught attempts at homesteading in the "deep green forest and cold white snow."

III. 19 July 2015, a tennis court in Båstad, Sweden

We are visiting friends in the southernmost province of Sweden, Skåne. They live near the Swedish "tennis capital," the town of Båstad, which is the site of the Swedish Open Tennis Tournament. It is a resort of sorts for wealthy Stockholmers, society folks and party-people, although to the untrained eye, it resembles a small village with a disproportionate number of red clay tennis courts. Our friend Nils grew up here and spends the summers in an 18th century house that he's lovingly renovated. This afternoon we are borrowing time at a tennis court near the ocean—it is tucked into a grove of trees and on the edge of some farmland. We take to the court even though Nils is not dressed for the game—he's playing anyway, in clogs and with a wooden racket. He resembles Björn Borg, who is often in Båstad—he is frequently mistaken for the tennis great despite his footwear and his forehand.

A few years ago, Nils wrote a book about Sweden that investigated the relation between individual and community, elucidating the paradox that a high level of trust in the Swedish state frees the individual. In Sweden, social democracy's comprehensive array of tax-funded government services — state-funded health-care, daycare, public schooling, university education, job training, parental leave, decent pensions, a system of old-people's homes — enable its citizens to escape dependency, on family, on *any* others. For Nils, this trust and the possibilities of radical individuality *are* what defines Swedishness, which he says exists in a productive tension between a kind of communitarianism and misanthropy. Having come of age in the 1970s, Nils reveled in and still relishes this freedom, which for him, creates and allows for choice. When Nils and I discuss immigration and integration in Sweden, while our children chase tennis balls around us, we have a disagreement. I remind him of something his wife, a sociologist, taught me last year: that when thinking about multiculturalism in Sweden, we should remember that, unlike the US, the country was not founded on the principle of toleration of differences (religious difference primarily in the US). Instead, it cohered around a sameness and operates on consensus, eliminating difference (when it can) rather than exploiting it. Nils argues instead that one must see the barriers to integration as related to issues of trust and individuality, not intolerance: one can become Swedish by following the "system": trusting the government, working/paying taxes, respecting the rights of others to be individuals in a society that champions the rights of women, children, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities. Nothing hampers a person's ability to reach this ideal. "Nothing except race and religion," I say. "Nonsense," Nils retorts, saying that race is and cannot be a hindrance: individuality is, by definition, open to everyone. For Nils, "race" is a bagatelle— Sweden is not the most racist country on earth, he says, as contemporary leftists would like you to believe. Instead, its

integration problems are wholly related to work and perceptions of participation in the national communitarian ethos. I argue back with the story of a well-known journalist, a mixed-race Swedish man, who when I asked him if it was easier to be black and Swedish when he was a child in the 1970s or now, after fifteen years of a perceived “flood” of black immigrants and refugees into Sweden, started to cry. For him, it was terrible, yet still easier, to be the only, very isolated brown person in his school, neighborhood, in his group of friends, and at work than it has become to be a part of a “blackness” that has, as the numbers of people in that category increased in Sweden, become troublesome, suspicious, distrusted, discriminated against—marked as definitively Other. This man had lost his individuality, a constituent part of his Swedishness, as well as what he thought was an ability to define *his own* blackness, if he had ever had it—he mourned the loss for himself and his children.

This conversation with Nils made me think of another Skåning, Skånes most famous native son apart from football/soccer legend Zlatan Ibrahimovich—hip-hop artist Timbuktu. To many young Swedes, Timbuktu is national treasure, an icon of creative intelligence and political savvy. He deliberately raps only in Swedish and Skånska despite the fact that he is also a native speaker of English as his parents, a mixed-race American couple, emigrated to Sweden in the late 1960s in order to escape American racism and the politics of the war in Vietnam. Not known for creating controversy, Timbuktu has been very Swedish about his music and his career, gently and eloquently pushing his agenda—equal rights, human rights, hip-hop as left-leaning organic intellectualism—without confrontation or brazenness. This is, until recently. A number of high profile events forced him speak extremely clearly and provocatively to the Swedish public, events that included the Sweden Democrats' entrance into the Swedish Parliament in 2012 and

the 2013 Swedish Police program REVA, which randomly and with no provocation stopped “non-Swedish looking” people in the subways and train stations, to check the legal status of their residency (a violation of the EU conventions). When he won the 5i12 (Five to Twelve) Prize in 2013 for his work against racism and xenophobia, Timbuktu went to Parliament, where the prize is given out, and gave an emotional acceptance speech. **Holding up his Swedish passport**, he declared, “I took this with me today in order to say that this is my proof in any case that I am not a stranger. So discrimination against me for reasons of my skin color can actually never be xenophobia— it is and will always be racism. You do not have to be “tolerant” of me. I don’t ask to be tolerated, and this honor isn’t something that I need. What I do need, with all the power I can summon, is to be judged for my actions and *my individuality*... I want to be safe in Sweden...I want to be seen as a part of this society. In exchange, I give my life to Sweden...I give you my inventiveness; I give you my creativity and my energy. I will love in Sweden, I will live in Sweden, and I will die in Sweden.” Many considered this moment akin to the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. Yet, instead of a black glove, signaling belonging to a collective blackness, Timbuktu held up his passport, a document of individual and national identity.

IV. “Svart barn har många namn”/Black children have many names”

Although she has recently been criticized for being what AfroSwedish activists would pejoratively a “typical white anti-racist,” someone who will defend the freedom (of racist) speech over the rights of the racialized not to be victimized by offensive words/actions, Swedish artist Marianne Lindberg De Geer has made a series of paintings that for me illustrate

exceedingly well an aspect of the contemporary “AfroSwedish” condition. Entitled “**Jag tanker om mig själv**”/ “**I’m thinking about myself**,” these portraits are Swedish landscapes that De Geer has collected from yard sales, auctions, antique stores and some that she has painted herself— in each landscape she places a singular black figure **or a couple**, in the form of small wooden figurines depicting African professionals. Popular in West Africa during the colonial period, these statues are now tourist fare and for sale in shops peppering the diaspora. When De Geer paints them into the Swedish landscape, places black bodies in Nordic nature, she questions their “fit”— do these Africans belong in this nature, is the nature out of place or the people? Does the juxtaposition of landscape and people render both wooden and inanimate, despite or because of the mythology attached to the land and the turbulent colonial and contemporary history surrounding the other? **Can these statues become citizens?** Can they animate this landscape, can it transform into a home place? What would that look like? In this series De Geer depicts the anxieties about multiculturalism and integration— and their relation to Swedish individualism—that worry majority Swedes at the same time that she visualizes the social isolation and frustration/ lack of opportunity of Swedes of African descent. As such, these paintings re-imagine Carl Larsson and Anders Zorn for the 21st century at the same time that they echo Timbuktu’s plea to be a Swedish individual, regardless of skin color.

In *Becoming Black* and *The Physics of Blackness*, Michelle Wright argues that our current theories of black identity formation, dominated as they are by the rhetoric and discourse of Black Atlantic Studies, are inadequate to task of understanding black diasporic identity as it is currently being formed in and between sometimes “new” diasporic places. She writes: “ While an Afro-German will no doubt find the Middle Passage a significant event, it is not what brought him or

her into Germany; in like kind, an Ibo woman or man of Maghrebi or East African origin is automatically located outside of a Yoruba cultural trope that is nonetheless directly significant to many contemporary Caribbean and /or African American communities” (BB 3). “Roots” and “routes,” or even a “double articulation” between belonging and place, cannot sufficiently account for some diasporic experiences. For Wright, blackness has a phenomenology, a “where” and a “when” that makes it meaningful or legible beyond the fact that we have thought of it as a “what,” (a near biological category hailing all people descended from Africa), or even a negotiation of power and circumstance beyond black and white, the west and the rest (PB 3). Noting that for some “to identify Blackness as an identity is racist,” as is certainly the case for anti-racists and racists alike in Sweden, she urges us to think of definitions of blackness “that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize,” that consider blackness and its attendant identities as fully formed and always in process in any given moment. As such, it becomes impossible to do “blackness” or even “Swedishness” wrong, to exclude “vulnerable identities” (PB 14) from either a specific blackness, such as AfroSwedishness, or a supposed collective black (diasporic) community, such as Afro-Europeans; or, even more radically, from the “normatively” constructed “dominant” category against which we would seem to define blackness at all. For her, the present matters as much to identity formation as does the past (as history and event), the “moment of interpretation” the key to apprehending the possibilities of blackness, Swedishness, being and otherness, here and now, yesterday and tomorrow.

Sweden's black “moment of interpretation” is now; it is always and has always been now. In the last few years there have been an increasing amount of novels, films, plays, paintings, performances, and other artwork about and increasingly *by* AfroSwedes: there are official

governmental organizations that bring this emerging community together have become more active, such as the AfroSvenskarnas Riksförbund (National Organization of AfroSwedes); culturo-political organizations of artists and other cultural workers designed to bring better or any black representation to Swedish public culture have emerged such as TRYCK/PUSH; “Rummet” or “Space, a “separatist” web platform started by four queer-identified “racialized” women ignited the blogosphere last year (now they have become a book, earned writing spots at two of Sweden’s largest daily newspapers); Black Coffee, a Facebook group with 1700 members, most of them young, second generation Swedes of African descent, stormed a lecture by Angela Davis last week in Stockholm, forcing the Royal Art Academy, the art school that Pettersson posed for, to set up overflow rooms, closed-circuit TV, a meeting between Davis and activists; reports of Black Coffee’s existence and frustration made it onto the main newspapers and the state-sponsored TV Culturenews. As my friend Ylva, one of a handful of black academics in Sweden, said, “It’s happening.” In the service of this emergence and in the spirit of Jean Louis Pierre/Pettersson, I’d like to end by modifying the Swedish saying with which we began, “Kärt barn har många namn”/ Beloved children have many names. Changing kärt to svart, let’s now say: “Svart barn har många namn”/Black children have many names,” too.

¹ Biographical information on Pettersson is derived from three sources: Henricksson and Gibson, *Svart I Sverige: Om svart kulturhistoriskt inflytande I Sverige* (2012, pp.48-50); Nationalmuseum, *Framlingen: drom eller hot* (1996, p.114, Janette Rangner); and the blog of amateur historian Mats Werner: <http://matswerner.blogg.se>. I also cite a blog entry on Anbyterforum, a genealogy website, which Werner and historian Ola son participated in, <http://aforum.genealogi.se/discus/messages/44/47186.html?1175724643>.

² Werner uses this phrase, without the irony I import, when describing his efforts to learn more about Pettersson.

³ Tellingly, he is also “heard” in oral culture, the subject of a macabre, gothic children’s rhyme sung over the next century. Jean Louis’ first wife, Kristina Elizabeth Ericsson, committed suicide in 1889—she suffered from an incurable illness. Her association with his blackness and foreignness lead to her pejorative re-naming as well— she was known as “Negarkärningen,” or the “nigger lover/witch.” Jean Louis was the one to find her hanged from a beam in their basement. The rhyme records the report a grief-stricken husband gave to the police in broken Swedish after he discovered the corpse of his wife: “Mig komma hem, frysa kallt, kadaver hänge i vedboden” (Me come home, freezing cold, body hang the wood shed).³

⁴ The paintings I mention here all appear in *Svart i Sverige*; the Bjork portrait also appears in *Framlingen*.

⁵ Bjork 1946, LT 136).

⁶ Around the turn of the 20th century, Sweden was “a country with rational, organized education, light veneer or steel furniture, kindergartens, cleanliness and order— that is how Sweden looked, at least from a distance.” (Gunnar and Roll-Hansen 5).

⁷ Ominous: Eugenic features of its population policies not automatically re-examined after the war, as was the case in Germany... Throughout the twentieth century, Sweden has been characterized by continuity, consensus and cautious change. Consider the following characteristics: a development free from open social conflict; basic agreement about the concept of the welfare state, the growth of the public sector, a stable power structure. All of these factors either contributed directly, or at least did not hinder continuity with regard to the values that were behind Sweden's population policies and attitudes toward eugenics, or the way in which they were put into practice. Broberg 139; social problems are racial problems (125);

⁸ *Afrofobi Report*, Mangkulturellt Centrum, February 2014; “Ras ska bort ur Svensk lagstiftning,” *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 July 2014: <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/ras-ska-bort-ur-svensk-lagstiftning/>.