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Afro-Swedish Artistic Practices and Discourses in and out of Sweden: A Conversation with Ethnomusicologist Ryan T. Skinner

Beth Buggenhagen

Sweden has long been known for its tolerance and openness. During the twentieth century, Swedish missionaries paved the way for Africans to migrate to Sweden, Swedish political figures campaigned for decolonization, and by the 1970s, Sweden was attracting people fleeing war-torn areas such as the Horn of Africa (Kubai 2016; Kushkush 2016). Yet recently, Sweden has had to contend with a sharp increase in the numbers of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Once a nation with one of the most progressive stances on migration, it reversed its immigration policy in 2015, in part responding to the unprecedented numbers of families migrating to Europe from Syria, West Africa, and elsewhere. Sweden began to control its borders with Denmark and to admit only the minimum number of refugees required by its EU membership (Russo 2017). This contemporary conjuncture has fueled debates in Sweden over race, racial identity, and national belonging.

These debates are especially pertinent to young people who were born in Sweden and whose parents were born in Africa and who increasingly identify as Afro-Swedes (*afrosvensk*). This generation faces the conundrum of having been born in Sweden, yet often assumed to be not Swedish (Miller 2017; Skinner 2017). Members of this community also include recent migrants from Africa, individuals who trace their heritage to the diaspora, and those who claim affiliations to Africa.

This new generation has taken an increasingly public stance as an ethnic and racial minority. A flashpoint in the debate over racial identity and racial politics in Sweden has been Sweden's involvement in the slave trade. Sweden played a marginal role in the European colonization of Africa. The Swedish Africa Company controlled a small colony, Cabo Corso, in the Gulf of Guinea, from 1650 to 1663, which was not economically important to Sweden. This colony was incorporated into the British Gold Coast, and by 1663 Sweden had lost control of it to the Dutch. Of more debate is the

role that Sweden played as a transfer point in the transatlantic trade in slaves from Africa to the New World until 1847, when it abolished the slave trade. Sweden had a more indirect, but no less significant, contribution to the trade: the export of high-quality iron ore, some of which was forged into shackles.¹

The presence of people of African descent has changed dramatically in Sweden, as have the ways members of this community discuss race, identity, and racial politics. Ryan Skinner, an ethnomusicologist in the School of Music and the Department of African American and African Studies at the Ohio State University, has been tracing the presence of Africa in Sweden. His research focuses on discourses of identity making among artists and arts groups in Sweden, focusing on artists who claim Afro-Swedish identity. Skinner's work focuses on the local and global music cultures of contemporary Africa and its European and American diasporas. Skinner is the author of *Bamako Sounds: The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), an ethnographic study of the popular music and culture of Bamako, Mali. He is an accomplished kora player.²

During a year of fieldwork in Sweden in 2015, Skinner tracked modes of expression, identification, and political engagement among the artists that make up Sweden's emergent Afro-Swedish community. Afro-Swedes are part of a growing African and diasporic presence in contemporary Europe. In the past six decades, African nationals claiming African descent have gone to Sweden through tourism, travel, adoption, and migration, seeking refuge and asylum. Through ethnographic inquiry, textual analysis, and historical study, Skinner studies the sociopolitical processes through which Afro-Swedes claim to belong in Sweden. He is working on a book in which he examines understandings and expressions of Afro-Swedish identity in music, dance, theater, film, and verbal art. He aims to draw "critical attention to the lives and works of artists who perform a sense of community while confronting endemic racism; who celebrate social pluralism against assumptions of cultural difference; and who, in performance, captivate Swedish audiences while resisting perceptions of exoticism and foreignness."³

While researching the public culture of Afro-Swedish artists, Skinner discovered widespread membership in Sweden's associational life. Sweden has a diverse and active associational life based on profession, sports, neighborhoods, and the like. Many Swedes belong to a diverse array of associations through which they channel their political activity. In the past, many Afro-Swedes affiliated with associations based on national origin, but today, many younger Afro-Swedes born in Sweden affiliate with an array of newer associational groups, contending with what it means to be black in Sweden today.

Skinner recently visited the African Studies Program at Indiana University to give his take on Afro-Swedish artistic practices and life in Sweden. The following interview occurred during his visit in March 2017 to participate in the Contemporary Africa Seminar Speaker Series, organized by

IU ethnomusicologist Daniel Reed on African Mobilities and Expressive Culture. In the seminar, Skinner presented his research under the title "A Colder Congo: An Afro-Swedish Chronotope of Race, Politics, and Culture." *Africa Today* followed up with him to ask about African identities in Sweden, debates on race and identity, and the emergence of new terms, like *Afro-Swedish*.

Beth Buggenhagen: Do you think these shifting terms of self-identification reflect different kinds of intergroup relations? Do you see that the relations among Mande speakers from different parts of West Africa have shifted in Sweden over time?

Ryan Skinner: The shift is largely generational. If I go back fifteen years, most of my Mande-speaking friends in Sweden would have identified as Africans, organized through various national associations (*nationella föreningar*), but today, the new generation is less likely to identify as Malian, Gambian, or Guinean, at least not primarily. Born and raised in Sweden, many see themselves first and foremost as Swedish. The younger generation is much more conscious of race and racism than their parents, in the sense that they are more likely to publicly voice their frustrations and grievances. It is from these voices that new modes of identification, like *Afrikan Svensk* (African Swedish) and *afrosvensk* (Afro-Swedish) have emerged. This younger group is making claims on Swedish society in ways that are often foreign to their parents, forging identities that are doubly or multiply conscious and not limited to the national and ethnic communities of their elders. Of course, this can produce some generational friction.

BB: How have women and men from Mali, Guinea, Gambia, Senegal, Somalia, and elsewhere on the African continent come to Sweden? How would you characterize this type of migration?

RS: It varies so much. There are many ways of migrating to Sweden from the African continent. One could begin in the mid-twentieth century, with Sweden's involvement in decolonial politics, spearheaded by the likes of Dag Hammarskjöld (secretary general of the United Nations, 1953–1961), who campaigned for African sovereignty in the late colonial period, and Olof Palme, who as Sweden's prime minister (1969–1976, 1982–1986) supported antiapartheid and nonaligned movements in southern and eastern Africa. Their commitment to a decolonizing and independent Africa created important affinities and alliances, resulting in a lot of movement back and forth. Much of that movement was political, with Swedes joining or advocating for political parties in an increasingly independent Africa and their African partners coming to Sweden to further their anticolonial struggle beyond the continent. This climate of political exchange enabled other kinds of migration as well. For example, South African music and dance groups toured in Sweden in the 1950s, groups like the Golden City Dixies. Some of them stayed, living in exile from the apartheid state. This group of artists

represents the first wave of a modern Afro-Swedish community, going back fifty or sixty years. They helped establish a significant southern African presence in Sweden today.

Then you have cases of regional conflict in the African world, with many people seeking refuge and asylum in the Global North. Sweden established itself early in the postcolonial era as a progressive and generous state in response to forced migration. There have been waves of migrants fleeing domestic strife in places like Ethiopia during the 1980s, or Somalia from the 1990s to the present, but of course it is not just conflict that drives migration. For example, West African communities would fall under a variety of categories. Some of them have sought refuge and asylum, if we are talking about the Casamance conflict in southern Senegal, or political instability in the Gambia or Guinea Bissau, but some of it has to do with tourism. The Gambia, with its many beach resorts, has long been a destination for Nordic tourists. When I visited Gambia in 2001, it was not uncommon to find newspapers in Swedish and Norwegian on the streets of Banjul. This type of travel has enabled more intimate encounters, with relationships between Africans and Swedes that further extend and deepen travel back and forth.

This has led to a large and vital Senegambian community in Sweden, of around six or seven thousand people, according to official statistics, which in a small country like Sweden is significant. And that number only refers to people who identify as first-generation Senegalese and Gambian immigrants; it does not include their children and grandchildren. If you include second- and third-generation communities, the number is closer to twelve thousand.⁴ The Senegambian community in Sweden, including first-generation migrants, their children and grandchildren, is quite large, by any measure.

The current estimate of the number of Afro-Swedes as a whole—that is, in the broad sense of people who have direct ties to Africa but also generational ties, first, second generation, even third at this point—is about 300,000 people. A 2014 report on Afrophobia (antiblack racism) in Sweden estimated the Afro-Swedish population to be upwards of 180,000 individuals.⁵ This suggests a rapidly expanding demographic. In a country of 10 million people, it is safe to say that there is a significant Afro-Swedish presence, though many Afro-Swedes feel marginal, even invisible, in Swedish society. The argument that many of these folks make is that the black experience in Sweden is real and transcends national identity—that it is textured by race and racism, which is of a deep and old provenance and needs to be acknowledged. And so, that is the kind of critical consciousness that this current generation of the self-identified Afro-Swedes or African Swedes is bringing to the social and cultural mix in Sweden today.

BB: How much are people identified with Islam? What you are describing seems to differ from the case of Murid associations in France based on long-standing circular migration rooted in trade. You mention that associations in Sweden are nationalistic, not necessarily religious.

RS: Again, it varies. Like the migrant groups organized as nations, religious communities have associations in Sweden, including Islamic associations, but there are ways in which such groups overlap with each other. For example, two of the most widespread forms of prejudice and discrimination in contemporary Sweden are Afrophobia and Islamophobia. Thus, a Somali-Swede might be doubly discriminated against, because she is black and a practicing Muslim, especially if she wears the hijab. There are multiple layers of intolerance that such a person might encounter. Today, people who are racialized and discriminated against in these ways are saying, "Sweden needs to take this set of problems seriously!" And there are prominent voices in the Afro-Swedish and Muslim communities who are making those connections and contributing to the debate. They are mobilizing an intersectional politics of identity, that is gendered, that is religiously inflected, that is critically conscious of race.

The sectarian alliances within Islam that you are describing, like the Murid order, tend to be embedded within the national associations. A Murid community would be found principally among the Senegalese groups, for example, but that is something I have not fully explored.⁶

BB: The French state has its own way of intervening in religious life, despite the politics of *laïcité*. For example, one can look at the politics of the state's attempt to regulate Islam in France in the face of global Islam. Is there such a sense in Sweden, a kind of Islam of Sweden?

RS: There is a similar affiliative or associational politics, but I would not say that there is a sense in which Islam is recognized as being in any way part of the Swedish social contract at this point. The way in which Muslims can identify meaningfully as such is precisely through the bureaucratic structure of associations in Sweden. Swedish civil society is grounded in associational life. Everyone belongs to a *förening*, which we could translate as a 'voluntary association'. If you are a Muslim, you might choose to be in an Islamic association; if you are of Malian descent, you may join a Malian association; if you are a teacher, you might be part of a professional teacher's association. That is the way in which everyday political life is managed and mobilized, through associations.

Your voice as a citizen is amplified and extended through these groups. All aspects of public life—it could be sport, it could professional life, gender, or religious identity—have a place. The structure of associational life matters, but the specificity of being a Muslim is still a point of great contention in Sweden. That comes to a crescendo with the rise of xenophobic, and more specifically Islamophobic, politics. In Sweden, you have the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna), an ethnic nationalist party that is currently polling at 20 percent of the Swedish vote. They will soon be the second-largest political party in Sweden, and many others sympathize with their antiforeigner (*främlingsfientlig*) politics. In this environment, many now consider being a Muslim to be anathema to Swedishness. The situation is

distinct, I think, from France, which has a long-standing history of trying to propagate a French Muslim identity.

BB: In the context of this shifting political framework, what was your experience like?

RS: Most recently, I spent a year in Sweden, from the beginning of August 2015 to the end of July 2016. I encountered a younger generation of Afro-Swedes, and began learning about their associational life, what they do, how they are organized, and the kinds of work and culture they produce. Connecting with old and new interlocutors took up the lion's share of the project, establishing those relationships and immersing myself in their expressive culture. I say that because what I did not have as much of in Sweden, which I did have Mali, where I lived with a Malian family in a domestic compound, was a sense of familial intimacy.

This new project is much more grounded in public life than it is in private life. Of course, this does not mean that I didn't have a home life in Sweden. I am the father of two Swedish-American children. I had a working life as a researcher and a home life as a father. Certainly, the experience of being a parent in Sweden has informed this project in many ways. At home and in our community, I learned a lot about what it means to live every day in a Swedish context: negotiating the public schools, taking my kids to soccer practice and play dates, getting to know our neighborhood as a family, and so on. All of this gave me insight into a certain kind of domesticity in contemporary Sweden, but my research mostly took me to the sites and spaces of an emergent Afro-Swedish civil society. All of this contributed to a lived sense of distinct public and private spheres in Sweden today.

As I got to know the Afro-Swedish community, I quickly learned that it has a diverse and active associational life. You have Afrosvenskarnas Riksförbund, the National Afro-Swedish Association, which does public advocacy and educational work, primarily in Stockholm. Coffee, a separatist group, meets around coffee and cakes, and talks about issues that are important to the black community throughout Sweden. Afrosvenska Akademin, the Afro-Swedish Academy, a kind of Afro-diasporic mentorship program and discussion forum, is a space where young Afro-Swedes can probe ideas, histories, and debates about the black and African experience, which are not normally discussed in the Swedish public sphere, and learn from them as a community. Cinemafrika is a major Scandinavian film festival, which showcases African filmmakers and films; in recent years, this group has broadened its focus to include films from the African diaspora, including Afro-Swedish filmmakers.

BB: Can you elaborate on how these groups are depicting their own experiences?

RS: There is an array of Afro-Swedish artists currently active in Sweden. Take singer Seinabo Sey, for example. She is popular in the United States and

extremely popular in Sweden. In the spring of 2016, she performed for the Swedish Grammy Awards ceremony, much like our Grammy Awards in the US. On national television, she invited one hundred thirty black women, all dressed from head to toe in black, to join her onstage. They stood, silent and proud, while she performed her track, "Hard Time." Sey's father is Gambian, and her mother is Swedish. The way she identifies herself is complex and interesting. She claims both Gambian and Swedish identities, and she has a critical sense of what it means to be black in Sweden today. To see her surrounded by dozens of black women struck many as unprecedented. It was a direct and powerful refutation of the notion that there is not a black community to speak of in Sweden, that there is no need to speak of this particular identity, that it amounts to an imported and irrelevant identity politics. Alongside these black women, Sey is saying: "We are here, we are women, we are black, and we are proud." That is an example of the kinds of things that populated my research. It was a period of effervescence, with lots of stuff going on all the time. Another example was the staging of Lorraine Hansberry's classic African American play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in Swedish.

BB: Were there Afro-Swedes in the production?

RS: Yes. The cast and crew were predominantly Afro-Swedes, and the staging was a Swedish adaptation, performed in Swedish. In fact, the Swedish translation had been made some years ago but was never staged until 2016. The creative force behind the production was a woman named Josette Bushell-Mingo, a British woman of Afro-Caribbean descent, who has lived many years now in Sweden. In addition to directing plays, Josette is an actor, a singer, and a tireless spokesperson for diverse and vital public arts and culture in Sweden. In the fall of 2016, she staged a solo performance depicting the life and work of Nina Simone. As she interprets Simone and Hansberry's work, she confronts different aspects of the reality, the struggles, and the possibilities of being black in Europe today.

BB: Who were the audiences for these productions?

RS: Well, *A Raisin in the Sun*, or "*En druva i solen*," as it was titled in Swedish, and *A Story about Me and Nina Simone* were both productions of Riksteatern, the Swedish National Theatre. The company is based in Stockholm, but its productions tour throughout the country. The audiences would have been a broad cross-section of Swedish society, or at least the country's theater-attending society. And both pieces were symbolically important to the Afro-Swedish community more specifically—black theatrical productions, performed by black actors, and staged by a black director. This is groundbreaking in Sweden today.

BB: Can you elaborate on the question of artistic work on the continent and off the continent and the conversations that African artists are having about what it means to be producing from a place on the continent in terms of the critical edge, relevance, and meaningfulness of what they are creating? For example, if you are creating in Dakar, everything you're seeing, experiencing

and doing is informed by the fact that you are in Dakar. On the other hand, to have an artistic life, you should go to Europe, because it is where the galleries are; it is where the grants come from, the residencies, and the recording studios. You can talk about how that has shifted in the last, probably, thirty years. Are these issues that the artists you were working with were talking about?

RS: I have a long-standing interest in the relationship between the public and private sectors regarding this question of cultural production. As an Africanist, I am interested in how cultural, political, and economic questions play out on the continent, and the importance of urban centers as sites of cultural production. In cities like Bamako, historical traces of postcolonial cultural policies loom large: formative institutions such as orchestras, ballets, ensembles, and museums continue to inform the professional consciousness in culture sectors. That takes us back to my first book, which examined the role of professional artists in postcolonial Mali and their status and identity in society, in relation to both public institutions and spaces that are not publicly structured, or that are publicly structured otherwise, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). We might say that associational life is one of the defining features of civil society and cultural production in Sweden, and nongovernmentality is increasingly the defining feature of civil society and cultural production in many African societies. In Mali, I know artists who have created NGOs to apply for EU funding, to mobilize projects that are in line with their government's or Europe's politics of the day, whatever that might be: public health, national security, poverty, and so on. Such initiatives have become an important revenue stream, mitigating pressures to migrate abroad. In other words, people are finding ways of bringing the EU and US to Africa, because travel abroad is increasingly difficult.

I have been witnessing a new generation of people defining a place for themselves, in ways that are not defined by ethnic or national groupings—a system that the Swedish state has advocated and promoted through its multicultural policies since the 1970s. As a Malian person in Sweden, for example, you have a right to continue to speak your mother tongue and learn it alongside Swedish in the Swedish schools. If you were going to school, you have a right to what's called home language teaching (*hemspråksundervisning*). If you are a Malian, then, you would probably begin with French. I haven't heard of such a program in Bamana, which might say something about the politics of language in this system, but in any case, there is some recognition that studying your home language is important. One could argue that such a language policy is quite progressive, multicultural in the best possible sense, but from another perspective, such a policy reinforces the idea that you are and always will be an other in Swedish society. That is, because you are essentially Malian, you should be French speaking, and we want to maintain that, so you are culturally prepared when it is time to go "home." That is the negative, critical view. The positive view is that people in Swedish society value this plurality, this cultural and linguistic diversity. We have a new generation of people who are seeing across these boundaries,

for whom Swedish is their mother tongue, but who are still perceived by state and society as cultural outsiders.

They are working and mobilizing domestically, in Sweden and abroad, and this has fostered a diasporic consciousness. For me, this has meant that my fieldwork in Sweden has taken me to places like Senegal and Ethiopia, and it could be elsewhere. It could be the Congo. It could be Uganda. It could be South Africa. It could be any country where Afro-Swedes maintain salient diasporic ties. In Ethiopia, I have worked with an organization called Selam, one of the major players in what we might call the world music scene in Sweden. They bring top-notch artists from Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere to perform on the best stages, with the best lighting and the best sound in Sweden. That has been their profile since the late nineties. Selam is the brainchild of Teshome Wondimu, an Ethiopian-Swedish musician and cultural producer. He has had several prominent roles in major municipal, regional, and national cultural policy institutions in Sweden, and, more specifically, he has worked hard to raise the profile of African music and African musicians in Sweden. About ten years ago, he developed an NGO in Addis Ababa to promote the development of a local culture industry there. Their work has helped me understand how Swedish cultural policy is being reorganized and reimagined by diasporic voices.

In Addis, Selam has several projects. They have a recording studio where they train local sound engineers. The studio provides opportunities for local musicians to record, and even market and distribute their work. They have sponsored a major African music festival, one of the continent's largest public musical events. They have supported a school for blind musicians. It has been a struggle to do this work, particularly in their efforts to negotiate with the government. NGOs have a hard time establishing and sustaining themselves in Ethiopia, for a variety of reasons, but it is worth highlighting Teshome's strong commitment, as Selam's director and as an Ethiopian-Swede, to make things work.

BB: What you are describing has similarities and differences with the way that the French support arts on the African continent through events such as the Biennale of Contemporary Art, Dak'Art, the Biennale of Contemporary African Photography, and Fespaco. There are artists in Senegal who do not want to be locked into French-sponsored cultural events, who see them as a continuing neocolonial system.

RS: The Swedish case is different from France, with its enduring métropole-colony relationship. Selam would say they are as much a Swedish organization as they are an Ethiopian organization, or an African organization. They have another office in Uganda. They work in Rwanda. They have worked in many countries—Nigeria, Senegal, Botswana—and on a range of topics, from the film industry in Nigeria, to intellectual property in Kenya, to the promotion of popular music in Rwanda, heavy metal in Botswana, and electronic dance music in South Africa. Unlike France, these places do not bear a colonial relationship to Sweden. Though this does not negate the fact

that Sweden does have a colonial history to speak of and answer for in many ways, but it is not the same. What has been fascinating to me is to see how members of the Afro-Swedish community, and Swedes of African descent writ large, engage and mobilize existing infrastructures of postcolonial development and foreign policy to cultivate their diasporic work in Sweden, but also in Ethiopia, Congo, South Africa, and throughout the continent.

BB: What are the three most unexpected things you learned while doing this work in Sweden?

RS: I was surprised by how little I really knew, how much I had to learn, how many new voices there were out there to engage with, to better understand the double consciousness of African and Afro-diasporic Swedes and the experience of being black in Sweden today, with all the different kinds and permutations of contemporary black identities and how they play out in society at large. That was the biggest thing that surprised me, or that I had not fully anticipated. I knew in 2012 that there were these new discourses about identity, being, and belonging in Sweden, but I understood that I lacked an affective, grounded understanding of these new ways of speaking, that my significant knowledge of this place and its people was insufficient. That was surprising but salutary. It was the kind of welcome surprise that made it clear to me that there was a real, substantive project here that I could spend multiple years studying and learning from.

I expected that I was going to play more music than I did in the field. I am an ethnomusicologist. I expected to be a participant-observer of the music during my time in Sweden. I expected that this project would have a strong ethnomusicological profile, but when I got to Sweden and got to know this new generation of artists, I quickly realized that music was a part of the mix, but it was not uniquely important. The music existed alongside other art forms: film, visual art, cinema, photography, and dance. I had to widen the scope of project I had envisaged, to incorporate a much broader field of expressive culture. This is now a project rooted in the performing and visual arts, writ large. That's been a challenge, an interdisciplinary challenge. I am often asking myself: "Do I have the right tools to conduct this work as a scholar?"

You asked the question about how I spent my time doing fieldwork. Well, I visited and spent a lot of time in art galleries. I attended many dramatic and musical performances, some of them multiple times. I spent time in movie theaters, and with directors, actors, and producers. I spoke with different kinds of audiences, about different kinds of artistic genres and modes of expression. I knew how to speak with musicians and their fans, and I knew how to think about the music culture that surrounds them, but here I was encountering new perspectives on society and its expressive culture through a more diverse range of creative expression. I have had to retool, both academically and socially, and I have enjoyed this process very much, but you really do need time to make that work.

A third unexpected aspect of this project has to do with my own disciplinary identity. In addition to getting me to think about a broader field of expressive culture, this project has brought me much closer to African studies. This has been a learning curve, one that I anticipated in some ways, but I am now in the midst of it. This has meant becoming more versed in black cultural studies, critical race theory, and intersectional scholarship. These literatures are all important in helping me account for and respond to the work my interlocutors are doing. Many of them are critically aware of this scholarship. They are invested in it, this emerging cohort of public intellectuals, activists, and artists. This is part of their intellectual and social training. It often feels like I am playing catch-up with them, but it has been a good experience, a chance to grow as a person and a scholar. I would say the critical social thought and theory coming out of black studies, an engagement with a broader field of cultural production and expression, and relearning what it means to be Swedish—those are the three surprises I have encountered in this project.

Later in the interview, Ryan Skinner elaborated on his new book on Afro-Swedish artistic discourse and practices.

RS: Here at IU, I gave the second of two initial long presentations of this work. The first is a piece that discusses themes of walking, talking, and remembering in Afro-Sweden. That work builds on the fact that many of my interviews were conducted on foot, touring neighborhoods with interlocutors, recollecting the past with them in dialogue with social spaces both familiar and foreign. One of the case studies follows a guided tour of Old Town, a popular tourist destination in central Stockholm. There, participants were encouraged to remember the transatlantic slave trade and its historical footprints in Sweden. Other cases took me to artists who live and work in the suburbs of Stockholm, where the aging architecture of the welfare state meets contemporary stories of everyday racism and segregation.⁷

My talk at IU was a historical reflection on the discourse about Africa in Sweden, in which stories and signs of the Congo loom large. The paper explores the connections between Sweden and the Congo over time, going back to Sweden's missionary presence in the late nineteenth century and its participation in King Leopold's Congo Free State into the early twentieth century. These histories have appeared in a few books and dissertations, but are not widely circulated or known in Sweden today, but these events are important to thinking about subsequent Afro-Swedish histories, such as the Congo crisis, the UN operation that thrust Swedish soldiers together with other troops, many from the decolonizing world, to fight a real war for decolonization in 1960. I would argue that these colonial and postcolonial histories inform a sense of what it means to be Afro-Swedish, what it means to be black and Swedish today.

I bring these historical moments together with more contemporary evocations of a Congolese presence in Sweden to present what I call an Afro-Swedish chronotope, revealing the connections and intersections that bring African and Sweden together in time and space. What happens when we consider current debates about texts like *Tintin in the Congo* in an Afro-Swedish space-time? What if we use this context to consider what it means for a Swedish actor, Alexander Skarsgård, to play the role of Tarzan? *The Legend of Tarzan* was not a great movie, but it was interesting. Aaron Bady (2016), a scholar of the Tarzan franchise, has said that this is the first Tarzan who is ashamed of being Tarzan. And the Scandinavian media have lambasted the film for being too politically correct, too apologetic for the colonial history that produced characters like Tarzan. Examples like that populate the piece, which attempts to account for Afro-Sweden as a spatial and temporal analytic category.

For the book, I am working on a series of chapters that will deal with various aspects of Afro-Swedish public culture, some of which we have already discussed, like Seinabo Sey's black feminism at the Swedish Grammy Awards, or the Swedish adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I want to interrogate controversial artists like Makode Linde, who employs vulgar imagery to confront Swedish society with the spectacle of racist violence. His work employs blackface and pickaninny figures. He uses the N-word explicitly, eliciting the support of radical civil libertarians. He is an Afro-Swedish artist himself, but many Afro-Swedes are deeply offended by his work; others see his work as a necessary provocation.

I am working on a theoretical piece that examines the idea of a black and African renaissance as a frame for what is happening in Sweden today. There, in fact, is a palpable presence of African Americans, and Harlem more specifically, in mid-twentieth-century Sweden. You have someone like Don Cherry for example, an African American jazz musician who lived in southern Sweden, whose children represent an important genealogy of contemporary Afro-Swedish music, people like singer and producer Neneh Cherry, or pop artists Eagle-Eye Cherry and Titiyo, and you have a person like Jason Diakit, perhaps Sweden's most famous hip-hop artist. He raps under the name Timbuktu. His father is an African American man from Harlem who came to Lund, in the south of Sweden, in the 1960s. Jason is conscious of his dual African American/Afro-Swedish identity. Their stories bring histories of black renaissance to bear on contemporary Sweden, which I have argued is amid its own Afro-Swedish renaissance. Dani Kouyate is a Burkinab filmmaker who lives in Uppsala, Sweden. His most recent work is the feature film *Medan Vi Lever* (While We Live). It tells an Afro-Swedish story, about a Gambian-Swedish mother and her son living between Malm in southern Sweden, and Banjul in the Gambia. It is a story of a movement, back and forth, within a more fluid diaspora. That is a piece of this puzzle too. Dani tells an interesting and meaningful story, and his own sense of identity adds a fascinating layer to the story of Africa in Sweden. He does not consider himself to be Afro-Swedish. He is rooted in the Mande griot

tradition, born in Burkina Faso (his father is the legendary actor and musician Sotigi Kouyaté), trained and educated in France, now living with his Swedish, or Afro-Swedish, family in Sweden. Perhaps he represents a kind of Afro-politanism in contemporary Sweden? But however one defines him and his work, his voice is important.

BB: What are you setting out to accomplish in this book?

RS: There are two sides to that question: the first is personal, the other professional. As an American father of Swedish-American children, I have a vested interest in what is going on in Sweden today, to help my children navigate their own complex Swedishness. I am interested in what Sweden means, and for whom; that is, who is included in—but also excluded from—a Swedish sense of place. It is important to me to communicate to my children that this is their society, to inherit and claim as a complex and, I hope, open society. I have a strong personal investment in this Swedish project.

But more importantly, this project is personal for those I am writing about. Two things are happening simultaneously in Sweden today. First, a younger generation of Swedes of African descent are creating a remarkable set of ideas about what and how it means to be Swedish today. There are tensions and debates among them, but also real creative potential. It is dynamic and exciting. At the same time, there is a resurgence of ethnic nationalist politics in Sweden, as elsewhere in the world today—movements that represent an existential threat to the Afro-diasporic communities I have come to know. Those two things are happening simultaneously. One discourse calls for a multiply conscious sense of Swedishness, and the other champions an ethnically and racially exclusive notion of Swedish identity. This is a contentious time, and the stakes are high for many people. Accounting for this moment is one of the most important things I wish to accomplish with this work.

Professionally speaking, I hope that my research will substantively respond to the largely rhetorical challenge of interdisciplinarity by presenting a robust and integrated study of the performing and visual arts. In this way, I am interested in making a strong argument for public support for the arts in society, by using Swedish case studies to show a principally American audience that there is a meaningful public option for the arts out there. With the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities on the budgetary chopping block, this argument seems more urgent than ever to me. We can learn something from places like Sweden, the ways in which cultural production happens over there; not perfectly, but in ways that I think have something to offer us. We can be humble and say, “How might we apply some of these strategies?” Can we see the potential of growing up in a place that, from elementary school through high school and into adult life, values the arts? Can we appreciate what artists are able to do with their education and through access to municipal, regional, national, and even transnational grants, through the EU? Funding for the arts is the subject of lively debate in Sweden, and I don’t mean to romanticize their approach, but in the US,

I do worry that our students, in places like Indiana University and Ohio State, are not being trained to effectively advocate for such public options. I am not even sure that some of them know that they even exist. Do our students know what the NEA and NEH do?

BB: Right. One of the issues is that they come from small towns, but at the same time those small towns are going to be hurt the most by the lack of arts education.

RS: Yes, and if that happens, we will have to deal with the results when they come to us. My most recent curricular response to this problem is the creation of a new course in the School of Music at OSU, called “Musical Citizenship: Activism, Advocacy, and Engagement in Sound.” This course will take a comparative look at how the public arts sector operates in different societies and across different scales of place, from towns and cities to nations like the US, and transnational spaces like the EU. How do these public sectors work? How do artists work within them? What opportunities and challenges do they reveal? Do we find top-down cultural policies that reinforce nationalistic concepts and ideas? Or is the model more open, more liberal and progressive? In it, we’ll have case studies from Mali, Sweden, America, and so on. In the end, students will be encouraged to arrive at their own informed opinions about how they want their art and culture to develop. At least, I hope so.

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NOTES

1. For further discussion, see Lindqvist 2015 and Scott 2015. About Sweden’s export of iron ore, see Evans and Rydén 2007.
2. A kora is a twenty-one-stringed Mande harp.
3. Interview with the author, March 2017, Bloomington, Indiana.
4. Population figures are derived from data collected and published in 2016 by Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska centralbyrån*, <http://www.scb.se/>), a state-sponsored institute, which tracks national demography.
5. Population figures are derived from data collected and published in 2016 by Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska centralbyrån*, <http://www.scb.se/>), a state-sponsored institute, which tracks national demography.

6. People living in Sweden often join multiple associations, and some associations have subgroupings.
7. An article based on this work, "Walking, Talking, Remembering: An Afro-Swedish Critique of Being-in-the-World," is forthcoming in the journal *African and Black Diaspora*.

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