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To cite this article: Ryan Thomas Skinner (2018): Walking, talking, remembering: an Afro-Swedish critique of being-in-the-world, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, DOI: [10.1080/17528631.2018.1467747](https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2018.1467747)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2018.1467747>



Published online: 24 Apr 2018.



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Walking, talking, remembering: an Afro-Swedish critique of being-in-the-world

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the existential grounds and experiential limits of an embodied and intersubjective being-in-the-world, in walking dialogue with the remembrances of Afro-Swedish subjects. To walk, wander, and roam in Sweden, particularly through the abundant green spaces that intrude upon and surround nearly every town and city, is a socially constitutive practice of everyday life. It is a sign of personal vitality, healthfulness, and a kind of being-with others predicated on a regular, vigorous, and widespread being-toward nature. Yet, for many Swedes of African descent (as for non-white Swedes more generally), such an imagined community of salubrious walkers is largely just that, a socially constructed fiction that perforce excludes them; an abstraction of urban planning that encumbers their movements, creating anomalous spaces of stasis and immobility; a caesura in the biopolitical field that indexes their black lives as matter out of place, beyond both culture *and* nature.

KEYWORDS

Afro-Swedish; Afrophobia; remembering; walking; existential anthropology

Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on what it means to move through and dwell in the urban and natural spaces of contemporary Sweden *while black*. In particular, I am interested in the particular cartographies, discourses, and histories that manifest in the socio-cultural field of Swedish society when we follow the paths, listen to the words, and linger on the memories of African-descended peoples in Sweden today. I approach these issues by first introducing a theoretical approach to the biopolitics of walking in Swedish society, following Michel Foucault's observations of the way modern states manage and maintain social and political life for some at the deathly expense of others (2003, 255–256). As manifest in pedestrian acts of leisure and recreation, walking in Sweden represents, I argue, a powerful and privileged signifier of socio-spatial belonging and exclusion, demarcating the biopolitical field along racialized lines. This conceptual excursion is followed by three ethnographic cases studies, framed as distinct walking tours of urban and suburban locations in the municipality of Stockholm, in which reflections on and critiques of anti-black racism are immanent to my interlocutors' memories of these spaces and their movement through them. I conclude with a brief reflection on what it would mean for social thought

and theory, in its phenomenological guises, to properly account for an African and black presence in places like Sweden, where normative notions of being-in-the-world tend to obscure histories and practices of anti-blackness that underlie and sustain them. Of paramount importance to my interlocutors' efforts to redress this marginal and stigmatized condition, I suggest, are vocal and embodied acts of re-membling Afro-Sweden.

Pedestrian existentialism in modern Sweden

In Sweden, walking is not a culturally neutral act; it is not merely a functional, or pragmatic means of getting from 'here' to 'there'; it is, rather, a socially constitutive praxis. To walk in Sweden, particularly through the abundant green spaces that intrude upon and surround nearly every town and city, is a locally salient mode of being-in-the-world. It is a sign of personal vitality, healthfulness, and a kind of *being-with* others predicated on a regular, self-conscious, and often-solitary *being-toward* nature.¹ In these all-encompassing natural spaces, one does not just walk; one hikes, roams, and wanders through well-tread forests, fields, and groves, from which the memory of getting lost has been mostly banished, though not entirely.

The adverb '*vilse*' (lost) has its roots in the Old Norse '*villr*', a cognate with '*vild*', meaning 'wild'.² As a verb phrase, one 'gets lost' by 'walking into the wild' (*att gå vilse*), beyond the known world of what Hannah Arendt calls the 'human artifice' – the '*lived space*', as Henri Lefebvre terms it, of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's '*cultural world*'. (My reference, here, to these existential and phenomenological theorists and their respective lexicons of terrestrial humanism is intentional, as will become clear in the case studies and arguments that follow.) By contrast, to hike or wander (*vandra*) suggests a purposeful pedestrian journey through the natural world. Such walking is, thus, an active and incorporative production of space – what anthropologists Tim Ingold and Jo Lee identify as a 'fundamental' mode of place-making and everyday sociality in human life (2006). With every successive footfall that tramples down the earth and shapes the contours of a path, a new cartography is produced that claims this 'space' as a 'practiced place' (De Certeau 1984, 117); that binds each individual walker to the next, producing an essentially *ambulant* sense of being-in-the-world in Sweden today.

To walk the *city* in Sweden calls upon a different lexicon, of a more modern (and French) vintage, emphasizing the spaces and practices of the urban stroll (*promenera*) and the pleasure of the aimless gallivant (*flanera*). In the city, nature has been (mostly) tamed, and the world (largely) made, allowing the urban walk to be less productive and more performative, a striding presentation of the self in everyday life (Goffman 1959). Though, here too, the act of walking as place-making returns – semantically, and as what Michel de Certeau would call a '*spatial practice*' (1984) – in the '*guided tour*' (*stadsvandring*), through which the city may be *rediscovered* and *reproduced* by purposefully walking along the paths of past life-worlds, of social spaces long since gone, but not forgotten; '*re-memorable*', as Edward Casey pithily puts it (2000), through regular returns to those places where footfalls and stories coincide. (I will take you on such a city walk, before concluding this essay.)

To 'get lost' (*gå vilse*) is to be radically estranged from these worlds – urban or otherwise – made of storied paths. Though such estrangement does make for good stories, as told by those who keep to the trail. Walking into the wild is the subject of many old (and new)

faery tales that speak of a hidden, mischievous, and frequently dangerous life on the shadowy margins of humanity, of trolls that play tricks and monsters that steal away children into the opacity of the unknown (Frykman and Löfgren 1987, 47–50; see also Häll 2013).³ It is also the subject of a more contemporary Scandinavian existentialism, famously rendered in prose through the brooding genres of the detective novel and crime thriller, in which the solitary and deathly angst (*ångest*) of life on the edge of a massive wilderness – both figurative and literal – takes narrative shape (Forshaw 2012). This sense of ‘getting lost’ as *alienation* suggests two existentially precarious terms of walking in (and out of) Swedish space, with profound implications for the present moment of widespread human displacement across the globe: ‘*utvandring*’, emigration, and ‘*invandring*’, immigration.

The idea of ‘emigration’ in Sweden – to leave home or ‘wander out’ (*vandra ut*) into the world – maintains strong associations with the trans-Atlantic journey of roughly 1.5 million Swedes to the United States, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing through the 1920s. The Swedish author, Vilhelm Moberg, immortalized this history in his 1949 novel, *Utvandrarna* (*The Emigrants*, 1949), creating iconic characterizations of the mostly poor and provincial farmers who, in the face of failed crops and oppressive authorities, left home in search of a livelihood and, beyond necessity, greater civic and religious freedoms. The American half of Moberg’s book plays out in Minnesota, my home state. Such is the connotative strength of this historical association with emigration that when I travel to Sweden and introduce myself as a Minnesotan, in Swedish (and, I might add, with my pale complexion and blonde hair), I am often welcomed home.⁴

The idea of ‘wandering in’ (*invandring*), or ‘immigration’, also maintains strong social and historical connotations in contemporary Swedish society, but with strikingly different implications, and consequences – the empirical focus of the remainder of this essay. To speak of ‘immigrants’ (*invandrare*) in Sweden today does *not* suggest a purposeful and productive movement through the world; rather, it returns us to the condition of being ‘lost’, of walking into the wild, of a radical rupture with the human world. To be an immigrant in Sweden is both a legal status and identity and a profound social stigma (Eastmond 2011) – a pejorative term for those who do not belong, and, as will be become clear in what follows, are not white (Pred 2000; Hübinette et al. 2012). The history invoked by this term is that of the past 60 years and counting, when growing numbers of southern and eastern Europeans, North and sub-Saharan Africans, Middle Easterners, Asians, and Latin Americans began migrating to Sweden with greater and greater frequency, looking for work, refuge, asylum, love, and security; some by choice, others by necessity, still others through marriage or adoption (Borevi 2012). Their presence is the basis of what some now call ‘the new Sweden’ (*det nya Sverige*), connoting (positively and negatively) the perceived novelty of an increasingly heterogeneous – diverse (*mångfaldigt*) and multi-cultural (*mångkulturellt*) – Swedish society (see, for example, Gärding 2010).

I turn now to three stories of walking, talking, and remembering in this ‘new’ Sweden, which, as we shall observe, remains intimately bound up with (conditioned by and frequently judged against) the ‘old’ Sweden. My ethnographic focus will be on the ambulant and vocal lives, works, labors, and experiences of ‘Afro-Swedes’ (*afrosvenskar*), a relatively new term of identification that broadly refers to any inhabitant of Sweden with some form of African background (McEachrane 2012). This may include recent migrants from the African continent, both North and sub-Saharan; children with African parentage; people

who trace their heritage within the broader African diaspora, including the Caribbean, North and South America, and elsewhere in Europe; and individuals who are adopted from Africa or its diaspora. While Afro-Swedes represent a relatively small minority in Sweden today, perhaps 3 percent of the total population,⁵ they face disproportionate discrimination in the housing and labor markets, and they are the frequent objects of everyday racist humor, stereotype, and violence (Hübinette, Beshir, and Kawesa 2014). As such, Afro-Swedish experiences and perspectives have become increasingly central to contemporary debates about the value (or burden) of social diversity and multiculturalism, as well as a growing critical interest in the history, ideology, and practice of race and racism in Swedish society (see, for example, Sawyer 2002; Sawyer and Habel 2014; Habel 2015; Norrby 2015; Diakitè 2016; Miller 2017; Stephens 2009, among other works).

The term 'Afro-Swedish' (*afrosvensk*) seems to have entered the public sphere with the founding of the National Federation of Afro-Swedes (*Afrosvenskarnas Riksförbund*) in 1990 but has gained currency as a term of identification only in the past decade, spurred on by a vocal and often activist cohort of so-called *andragenerationare*, a term referring to the children (literally, 'second generationers') of foreign-born migrants to Sweden. Among them, a growing community of young Swedes of African descent has taken a public and frequently creative stance in asserting the terms of their status and identity and confronting the structural and everyday hindrances to their agency and well-being as a racialized minority (Skinner 2016; Svanberg 2016; Tensta 2016), as the following case studies testify. Read together, the claim these stories make is as pragmatic as it is urgent: to walk along paths tread by Afro-Swedish feet, through stories told by Afro-Swedish voices, is to critically re-member the racialized social space of contemporary Sweden (and the Nordic region more broadly; see McEachrane 2014). Following the lead of our Afro-Swedish guides, we recall the struggles and achievements of those who 'wandered in' and refused to 'get lost', laying claim to a land that is also, always already theirs.

'You are not Swedish': growing up black in Blackeberg

[S]everal manners of being or of living can find their place in the ruins or the broken instruments which I discover, or in the landscape through which I roam ... (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002, 405)

I arrive in Blackeberg in the late-morning on September 22. It is the time of year when one notices the days growing shorter – and colder – as the once-lofty summer sun begins its seasonal retreat back toward the horizon, casting long shadows that, with a shiver, send you back inside to fetch a jacket before venturing out again. I arrive on the subway, alighting onto a platform designed in the early 1950s by industrious urban planners to service Stockholm's growing suburban workforce, conveying them – through the regular and predictable rhythms of railway arrivals and departures – from their newly built residences on the city's forested fringe to the urban offices, factories, stores, and warehouses of a booming post-war economy. This was the infrastructure, and these were the subjects of a burgeoning welfare modernity. Today, six decades later, I arrive after the morning rush, to a mostly empty station. There is an elderly couple scanning the screens displaying arrival times, checking their watches; a pair of teenagers, glued to their smartphones, likely playing hooky from school; a subway attendant, reading the free daily newspaper in her cramped booth; and me, ascending the stairs to exit onto the square above – at this

moment, nothing here would suggest the vital and productive mobility this location was originally designed to manage and direct.

I have come to Blackeberg to meet Stevie Nii-Adu Mensah, an Afro-Swedish musician, producer, and music educator who lives and works in Accra, Ghana (Figure 1). Stevie is back in Sweden for several months to develop and promote his new solo project, *Retrorik*, an album-length musical meditation on his Swedish upbringing in the 1980s and 1990s. Blackeberg is Stevie's hometown, where he spent most of his childhood and young adult life. (Though he would insist that it is Ghana, his parents' country of origin that is really 'home'.) We are scheduled to meet outside the subway station, which lies on the northern edge of an expansive plaza, another mid-century social construct. The local historical society describes this open-air space in sparse and practical terms: in addition to an assortment of retail shops, of which *Johans Skridsko* is the most notable (serving devoted ice skaters 'for more than thirty years'), the society notes that 'there is also a post office, bank, pharmacy, and the local library' (Bromma 2017). These are the façades, presented with purpose though without much fanfare, of what Merleau-Ponty would call the 'cultural world' of late-modern Swedish society; still bound, in many ways, by the functional idealism of the recent past.

Stevie arrives on foot, and we greet each other with a handshake. I have asked him to show me around his old neighborhood, to visit the places that animate his current, retrospective compositional work. 'Let's go to my old school', he says, leading me a short distance down a curving road behind the subway station toward a group of modest, three-story brownstone buildings.⁶ 'Blackebergskolan is one of my first



Figure 1. Stevie Nii-Adu Mensah at Blackebergskolan. Photograph by the author.

memories', he begins. 'This is where I started dancing, started writing music, singing, rapping.' All around us, young children are playing, enjoying the ample recess time that is typical of Swedish elementary schools. But Stevie holds his gaze to the school building, as if looking through it. 'I mean, the breaking was always there', he says, nodding as the memory thickens, gathering detail. '[In the mid-80s] there was a TV show called *Bagen*, with a [dance] segment called "Freak Out," which got me interested in [hip hop culture] from a young age'. He recalls the names of the show's stars – 'Eva Williams, Karl Dayal, Ayondele Shekoni, Quincy Jones III' – all Afro-Swedish artists who looked like him and were on TV, sampling beats, breaking, locking, and popping. 'They were like heroes. Like superman and batman', he says.

'In the cultural object' Merleau-Ponty writes, 'I feel the close presence of others beneath the veil of anonymity' (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002, 405–406). Stevie's memory is such an absently present object of cultural constitution, born of a walking encounter with a brick edifice, pregnant with history – *his story* – and fashioned, 'beneath the veil of anonymity', in sound, movement, and names. Memories, Edward Casey argues, 'are in the world ... in the things that belong to the world such as lived bodies, places, and other people'. Memories, Casey continues, 'take us continually outside ourselves; and they do so in the very midst of the enactment of their own distinctive in-gathering action' (2000, 309–310). Memories are, in Arendtian terms, 'something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together' (Arendt [1958] 1998, 182). For a whole generation of 'new Swedes' born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first wave of a burgeoning Swedish multiculturalism, this is precisely what the television show, *Bagen*, and the 'Freak Out' street dance segment in particular, represents: an expressive artifact of an increasingly diverse and popular intersubjectivity, transforming cultural life, then as now (to paraphrase Stuart Hall [1996, 470]), by the voicing, dancing, and mixing of the margins.⁷

The sub-cultural significance of Stevie's popular memory becomes apparent, by way of contrast, as we continue our dialogic walk; for if there are parts of Blackeberg that recall the superheroes of one's youth, there are others that harbor memories of monsters. '*Du är inte svensk.*' 'You are not Swedish.' This is another recollected 'object' that materializes in Stevie's voice as we walk the grounds of Blackebergskolan.

People were always pointing out that I wasn't [Swedish] due to my darker skin ... Even though I've lived the same life that most of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed kids have. Sang the same songs in school ... Played the same games ... Still, there's something that set me apart.

That 'something' – *race* – signals the 'peculiar sensation' that W.E.B. Dubois famously dubbed 'double consciousness' ([1903] 2008); a very different 'something' from the materially mediated intersubjectivity identified by Merleau-Ponty and Arendt, among others. It is the nagging feeling that, as a black person in Sweden, you do not belong; that you are 'lost' (*vilse*). '*Du är inte svensk*', rings the schoolyard refrain, a reminder that Stevie's black skin marks him – then as now – not as a person of *inter-est*, but of *alter-est*; who *is* always already *Other*; who is an 'immigrant', one who wanders in but can never settle down; and who must, at some point, leave. 'But the thing is', Stevie countered, as if arguing yet again with this disturbing and recurrent thought, 'at home I have a strong cultural, *Ghanaian* background'. Speaking Ga in a home full of his father's highlife and his mother's traditional dance kept young Stevie grounded, even as the world around him 'look[ed] on with amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois [1903] 2008).

'So where are we heading now?' I ask. 'Blackebergskogen', Stevie replies. Through a pedestrian tunnel under a roadway (the township is planned to keep foot and motor traffic separate) we emerge onto a gravel path in the middle of lush ravine, surrounded by tall trees, filtering light through a still abundant canopy to reveal the first signs of fall color. 'What a beautiful place this is', I think to myself, but this is not what Stevie is thinking. 'Um, I don't have the fondest memories from here', he says, in a muted voice. 'Because this is where a lot of *the stuff* went down.' While I see a thriving forest in a carefully planned suburban community, Stevie sees more demons from his past. I give voice to my visceral response to the landscape: the feeling of an intimate, proximate, and physical connection to nature and a sense of respect for the society that has kept its green spaces so close.⁸ 'Those are definitely some of the memories', he acknowledges. 'We used to go sledding [here]. On both of these sides, there were really steep trails. And that was just, so fun ... But then, there is obviously the other side, the dark side'. Stevie hesitates as he speaks, as if trying to avoid words that will open old wounds, but to no avail. 'I mean you were *conscious*. Because you knew that there was something *lurking*.'

For many Swedes, this was a time of lurking threats, as notably rendered in John Avide Lindqvist's 2004 novel, *Let The Right One In*. Set in Blackeberg in the early 1980s, the book stages the gruesome and tragic hauntings of a vampire (another one who 'wanders in' and does not belong) at a time when Soviet nuclear submarines were being spotted in the Stockholm archipelago and the once robust welfare state was showing signs of significant strain in the midst of a persistent economic crisis (Berggren 2014, 612–618). It was a time of widespread anxiety, engendering heightened awareness. 'You were *conscious*', Stevie said. But, for people like him, the multicultural vanguard of a 'new Sweden', that consciousness was always double. In the dark tunnels and along the shadowy paths of suburban forests, Stevie did not fear Russian spies or an economic downturn. Stevie was conscious of *skinnskallar* (skinheads), the exponents of a resurgent racism in the 1990s (cf. Teitelbaum 2017), who roamed the forested environs of his neighborhood; who played their nationalist rock music on boom boxes by the waterfront; who forced his best friend Lelle's family to move, if they wanted to live; who, in 1992, assaulted and killed Stevie's older brother, Frasse, only 14 years old. It is this history of violence that preoccupies Stevie's creative mind in Sweden these days. It is the subject of his latest track, 'Du Blöder' (You're Bleeding), dedicated to his brother but addressed to this *Brave New Sweden*, where vampires still lurk, bloodthirsty as ever.

'Between me and the other world': the afterlife of abstract space

So long as everyday life remains in thrall to abstract space, with its very concrete constraints ... so long must the project of 'changing life' remain no more than a political rallying-cry to be taken up or abandoned according to the mood of the moment. (Lefebvre 1991, 59)

Three weeks prior, I am standing on the artificial turf of an outdoor soccer field in the township of Husby, northwest of Stockholm. In front of me, there is a chain-link fence from which a series of white banners are hung (Figure 2). Most of the banners bear names, written in black spray paint. ABDIRAHIM. REMAN. HENOK. 'This is the first guy that passed away, Romario', my friend Simon tells me.⁹ 'He was a big icon here – probably one of the biggest icons in Husby! His personality was great. His football skills were even greater. He was murdered in 2008.'¹⁰ The locals here call this field '*trean*' (number three), a reference



Figure 2. A deathly memorial at *Trean*. Photograph by the author.

to a popular community center (*fritidsgård*), where Husby youth would come to hang out, do homework, or play sports. The center is now closed – ‘fallen into disrepair’, Simon says – but young people still come to the field, the real players at 6pm. ‘The field is known for the motto, “*trean klockan sex*” (number three and six o’clock)’, Simon explains. ‘Some of the soccer players [who have gone pro] even have #36 on their jerseys!’¹¹ But pride is mixed with pain in this place. ‘*Vila i frid mina bröder*’ (Rest in peace my brothers), reads the first banner. As a Husby landmark, the soccer field is both a celebration of life – of local tradition, community, youth, and sport – and a deathly memorial; a makeshift monument beside a boarded up rec center, dedicated to small cohort of local heroes, who inspired others with their talent but never realized their potential. It is a somber, but appropriate place to begin a suburban walk in Stockholm.

My guide on this day is Simon Matiwos, another local icon in Husby, and a living reminder that not everyone here dies young. Simon is a spoken-wordsmith, an urban griot of suburban Sweden – a talent that, like soccer, he also associates with his hometown. ‘Everything here is about your tongue. It’s a big muscle here in Husby’, Simon says, turning a question about *his* verbal artistry back to the collective pride he feels for *this* place. ‘We are the best at making fun of each other. We are the best rappers, [and] the best writers’. Earlier this year, Simon won a national championship in spoken word poetry (*estradoesi*), performing with the art collective *Förenade Förorter* (United Suburbs). I first saw him perform with this group of twenty-something slam poets at a community fair in Alby, a suburb in the south of Stockholm that resembles Husby in many ways, social, economic, and cultural. Simon makes these connections between place and personhood on the socio-spatial margins of

Swedish society though a vital and vocal poetics, here in a text called 'The System's Waiting Room' (*Systemets vänterum*, my translation):

We got stuck in the system's waiting room
 Twenty friends on the other side of Swedish space
 Outside
 We call it "*Centrum*" (the City Center)
 Shady, not right
 [Here] outsider-ness is centralized
 At the same time that politics marginalizes
 Are we becoming unified?
 I see the upper class doing it
 But when will the working class be united?
 Half are throwing stones
 The rest have turned to stone
 I point out the problems
 But you are too preoccupied with my brown hand
 'Does he have blood on his hand?'
 'Has he stolen with his hand?'
 'Can you even shake his hand?'¹²

In Simon's verse, one hears, once again, echoes of Dubois: 'Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question ... How does it feel to be a problem?' In Husby, as in suburbs surrounding just about any Swedish city, gestures of good faith toward this 'other world' are all too often misrecognized as threats, preoccupied, as such other worldly spectators are, with the assumed criminality of 'brown hands'. This endemic suspicion is a symptom of what Henri Lefebvre would call the *abstraction* of social spaces like Husby, of communities systemically transformed into 'waiting rooms'; of a racialized and divided underclass confined to 'the other side of Swedish space', who, lacking a meaningful interlocutor in 'the other world', confront the 'concrete constraints' of their everyday lives by casting stones upon an ossified – and marbly white – society (see Molina 1997). 'No more than a political rallying-cry', Lefebvre writes, but no less a 'project of "changing life"', among those condemned to wait.

'Because this is where we live', sings the hip-hop artist Jacco in his track 'Vår Betong' (Our Concrete), 'in the middle of Sweden's ... Million Program'.¹³ Undertaken during the post-war boom years of the 1960s, the *miljonprogrammet* was an ambitious state-sponsored initiative to provide modern and affordable housing to a growing urban population. The Million Program built on earlier efforts to expand urban housing, such as the 1950s public works that produced Stevie's hometown, Blackeberg, but on a different scale, getting its name

from the stated goal of building one million residential units in ten years. By this numeric measure, the programme was a success, but, by the mid-1970s, a depressed economy and declining population left many of these units, most located far from the city center, vacant (Lundevall 2006, 153). The efficiently built, pre-fabricated concrete structures had also become a sign of socioeconomic stigma – functional, but unattractive and, in some cases, of poor quality (Hägg 2007, 214–217) – and, with an increase in immigration from outside of Europe during this time, the principal site of an increasingly segregated society, along ethnic and racial lines. In the Fanonian words of Afro-Swedish activist Kitimbwa Sabuni:

[T]he million program, the pride of the Swedish welfare state in the 1960s, was turned into a catchment area (*uppsamlingsplats*) for us, the wretched of the earth, and transformed into what we today call ‘the suburb,’ with all the negative connotations that term implies (2016).

As such, a *walking tour* of a Million Program suburb like Husby would seem to be a contradiction in terms; a vital activity, to paraphrase Arendt via Mary Douglas, out of place. Here, in the waiting rooms and catchment areas on the other side of Swedish space, one does not walk to make a place; one is gathered and lingers outside of it. As Lefebvre argues, abstract space ‘leaves only the narrowest leeway to ... works, images and memories whose content ... is so far displaced that it barely achieves symbolic force’ (1991, 50). But spatial abstraction is not absolute, and that is what Simon wants to show me, as we walk along the concrete paths and façades of his hometown. ‘I’m going to show you this one’, he says, as we approach a long stretch of scaffolding beside a walkway behind the town center. ‘We started with this wall a month ago. We’re almost done. Do you recognize this guy?’ (Figure 3). On the panel of an unfinished mural, a silhouette of Simon stands, reciting one of his poems into the mouthpiece of a megaphone. The text reads, ‘As flowers fall, so naturally texts arose, and awakened a public.’¹⁴ It is a visual representation of Simon’s poetic and vocal response to the premature passing of his friends and neighbors; an inter-sensual intervention that testifies to the ‘symbolic force’ of local ‘works, images, and memories’; a creative and critical call-out to those who oppose, even as they live with the abstract, dehumanizing logics of the suburb.

Stretching along the length of a city block, one must walk to view this mural, moving along the panels that announce the many the joys and struggles of everyday life in Husby. And, as one walks and looks, one listens, hearing voices in the visual. In panel after panel, symbolic and mute images suggest real and live utterances. There is Simon with his megaphone, reading a commemorative poem; a group of veiled women, voicing a petition to end Islamophobic violence; graffiti that reads, in letters that leap off the wall, ‘WE CAN ALSO DREAM BIG’ (*Dröm Stort / Vi Kan Också*), behind a woman inscribing the pavement with an emblem of her feminism; and signs of local signs, interpellating a Husby public with familiar expressions of neighborhood solidarity: ‘Husby is open to everybody’, playing on the advertisement slogan of a local grocer, and ‘3:an Kl.6’, the cue for footballers to meet at the old rec center, number three at six o’clock. There are also signs of a more mundane vocal sociability, of people talking and hanging out. And there are shout-outs to some of Husby’s stars: Farhiya Abdi, a basketball player who made it to the WNBA, and Robin Quaison, who helped lead Sweden’s U21 soccer team to a European championship in 2015 – both Afro-Swedes. But amidst these audio-visual signals of Husby social life, there is one striking image of noise, rendering the violence and destruction of riots that broke out here in May 2013, and the police response that added fuel to the fire.



Figure 3. Simon Matiwas at the Husby mural. Photograph by the author.

'The riot was the last straw', Simon explains. 'There was so much that had already happened.' On our walking tour of Husby, Simon makes a point of taking me to all of the places where youth centers had stood, once open to the public but now closed, many torn down entirely; he shows me residential areas once run by the city but now under private management, with skyrocketing rents; he points out groups of young people, friends and neighbors hanging out in the town center, who once frequented the youth center but are now left to wait, most of them unemployed, some selling drugs. So much has already happened. 'I can't blame them!' Simon says. 'They've been ripped off.' On the other side of Swedish society, outside the waiting room, some have interpreted the noise of the riots differently. On 31 May 2016, the leaders of the four right-wing opposition parties arrive in Husby for their own walking tour, but they are not here to listen to local residents; they have come with a message of law and order. 'We cannot accept people throwing stones at police just because they're unemployed', one of them announces (TT Nyhetsbyrå 2016). An entourage of armed city police accompanies the politicians on their suburban stroll. A more evocative image of the political, economic, and cultural distance between communities like Husby and the rest of Sweden is scarcely imaginable.

Remembering the trans-atlantic slave trade in Gamla Stan

[R]emembrance and the gift of recollection, from which all desire for imperishability springs, need tangible things to remind them, lest they perish themselves. (Arendt 1998, 170)
 'Imagine that the year is 1822.' Faaid tells us.

The climate is tropical. And the place is one of Sweden's biggest cities. A black boy, that we unfortunately cannot name, walks down a cobblestone road, leading a horse. Nearby, the boy notices a refined group of Swedes, sitting on a porch. A member of this group asks the boy, "Whose horse is this?" But before he can respond, a man leaps from the porch, grabs the boy, and slams his head to the ground. Another older man joins in to assist [the punishment] with his cane. The place was the city of Gustavia, capital of the Swedish colony Saint Barthélemy. The man with the cane was Sweden's governor on the [Caribbean] island, Johan Norderling (as cited in Rosén 2016).

With these words, Faaid Ali-Nuur begins our walking tour of Gamla Stan, the picturesque and touristic Old Town in central Stockholm, from the halls of the Swedish Economic History Museum (Figure 4). Today, we walk in the footsteps of the Swedish trans-Atlantic slave trade. 'This is a part of history that has been hidden for many in our country', Faaid explains, during a panel discussion on Afro-Swedish histories and the legacy of the slave trade at Uppsala University earlier in the year.¹⁵ The city tour offers a clear picture of "Afro-phobia," [the term used to refer to] racism against black people [in Sweden], tracing its development and history', he adds.

In Sweden today, public signs of Afrophobia are increasingly visible and hotly debated, even as *histories* of anti-blackness remain murky, or even 'hidden', as Faaid says, in a society that broadly views itself as tolerant and humane, even anti-racist and color-blind.¹⁶ Over the past five years, Afro-Swedish activists, advocates, and allies have drawn critical attention to the visual culture of Swedish children's literature, film, and art that features pickaninny, gollywog, and blackface minstrel characters (see, for example, Rubin Dranger 2012). There has also been significant argument over the



Figure 4. Faaid Ali-Nuur, in the footsteps of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Photograph by the Author.

continued use of the Swedish term '*neger*' in the name of a traditional confection and the prose of canonical literature (Hübinette 2011). This vulgar, colloquial, and, for some, innocent word for 'black' was a term Swedes used to refer to African slaves (Weiss 2014). Sometimes, the history of such racism is itself performed, though not as a form of critical engagement, but as a farce or provocative joke. Such was the case when student organizations at Lund University organized a mock slave auction in April 2011, with some participants wearing blackface. The same year, in the neighboring city of Malmö, a poster campaign by artist Dan Park portrayed a prominent Afro-Swedish community organizer as runaway slave, a defamation justified in the name of free speech (see Hübinette 2014). The recent visibility of Afrophobic public culture coincides with a documented rise in anti-black hate crime in Sweden. A 2015 report from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention shows that (1) black people are the most frequent targets of hate crimes in Sweden and (2) there has been a 31% increase of such crimes since 2010 (Djärv, Westerberg, and Frenzel 2015, 39).

The city tour proceeds from the perspective of those most affected and victimized by the trans-Atlantic slave trade', Faaid explains, 'from black people's perspective', whose lives are still bound to the burdensome legacy of this history. 'Otherwise', he continues, 'it is more common to hear about kings, buyers and sellers, and other rich and powerful persons when telling these stories'. This is the narrative and existential challenge of the city tour. For the European world through which we walk, both old and new, has scarcely left a trace of – or allowed a space for – an 'African presence'. Instead, we encounter what Arendt would call the reified and public *works* of Old Town Stockholm's 'human artifice'; its buildings, squares, and monuments, along with the official memory of Sweden's history they inscribe (commemorating 'kings, buyers and sellers, and other rich and powerful persons'). What we do not see, on the worldly surface of these produced things (Arendt 1998, 96), is the historically ephemeral and, in Arendtian terms, 'private' (physically subjugated and socially alienated) *labor* of those who contributed to the manufacture of this artifice – the materiality of the human condition – including labor sustained by Sweden's participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Our first stop is the docks along Skeppsbron in Gamla Stan. There, on the cobblestone walkway that abuts the brackish waters of the Baltic, Faaid tells us the story of Louis de Geer. This enterprising Belgian industrialist introduced the triangle trade to his adopted country, Sweden, in the late seventeenth century, transporting West African captives to Caribbean colonies and returning with sugar cane and other commodities for sale in European markets. To encourage this lucrative business, de Geer had four 'product specimens' brought to Sweden: an African boy and three girls, presented as *exotica* and a tantalizing promise of wealth to the Swedish court (see Lindqvist 2015, 93–96). We proceed south to observe the towering Katerina Hiss on shore of the neighboring island of Södermalm. There, between the islands, where the fresh water of Lake Mälaren drains into the sea, once stood an iron weighing station (*järnvågen*). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sweden was among the world's largest producers of high-quality iron ore, much of it sent to the steel mills in Sheffield to make parts for ships, tools, weapons, and shackles – literally binding the trade in iron with colonial conquest and the enslavement human beings (Evans and Rydén 2007). Along the southern perimeter of Old Town, we approach a building with a small plaque, featuring the bust of Swedish naturalist Carl Von Linné, whose eighteenth-century scientific categorizations of the plant and animal worlds are

still used today. The memorial is to the Uppsala native's Stockholm medical practice, but it is also a reminder on this day of Linné's pioneering work in racial biology. Linné was among the first to divide up mankind into color-coded races: white Europeans, red Americans, yellow Asians, and, just above a fifth category of 'wild humans', black Africans, whom Linné described as 'phlegmatic', 'relaxed', and 'ruled by caprice' (as cited in Gould 1994).

If, as Arendt claims, 'to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common' and if 'the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men [*sic*] at the same time', (Arendt 1998, 52) then to walk in the footsteps of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Sweden is to stake a claim on this material commons for those long excluded from the historical title to these worldly things. It is to insist, in other words, on a deeply rooted African presence in the history of modern Sweden, and, through the world-making footfalls of a guided tour, to relate that history – *their story* – to an Afro-Swedish contemporary. It is to remember the Africans brought to Stockholm as product specimens, shackled by Swedish iron, and enslaved – physically and mentally – by a dehumanizing racial ideology; and it is *re-member* an Afro-Swedish community that lives everyday with the legacy of these historical practices, thoughts, and behaviors. It is to the phenomenological and existential significance of such critical *re-memberance* that I now turn, in conclusion.

Conclusion: re-membering Afro-Sweden

[W]henver commemorating occurs, a community arises. (Casey 2000, 235)

In a cautionary comment about the perils of privileging the world of the mind over 'the physical and social world' when encountering others, Merleau-Ponty writes:

the other's gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, *only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze*, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect's. ([1962] 2002, 420, my emphasis)

He calls this condition 'unbearable', and thus aberrant, insofar as it negates a materially mediated, mutually embodied, dialogic, and otherwise omnipresent humanity. Yet, this inhuman stance is a condition that scholars of the African diaspora have long recognized, not as a phenomenological exception but as an existential rule, wherever the logics of colonialism and enslavement persist. 'Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man', Aimé Césaire writes in his still relevant *Discourse* (Césaire [1950] 2000, 41). '[T]he colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets in to the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like and animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal' (emphasis in the original). Some might hear, in Césaire's words, echoes of Arendt's 'laboring animal' (*animal laborans*), deprived of human sociality, or the anonymous subject of Lefebvre's abstract space, 'with its very concrete constraints'. Surely, there are many insights to be gleaned from such seminal theorists of the human condition, as I myself have asserted by referring to their scholarship throughout this essay. (Indeed, their work is the stuff of my own intellectual heritage, which I continue to fruitfully employ.) Be that as it may, it is no less remarkable to observe the way a conventional and canonical social phenomenology (still) struggles to account for the experiences and perspectives of those subjected to

the very real, and by no means exceptional effects of a colonial, and thoroughly racialized worldview (but see Ahmed 2006, 2007). How, then, to paraphrase Sartre ([1956] 2001), does one recognize and respond to this (colonized) ‘nothingness’ woven into the worldly fabric of (postcolonial) ‘being?’ And, more specific to the concerns of a global Black Studies, how do we effectively critique and contest the pervasive anti-blackness that continues to objectify, alienate, and assault peoples of the African diaspora, in Sweden as elsewhere?

I would assert that there are important lessons to be learned from the foregoing stories of walking, talking, and remembering in Sweden, lessons critical to a more inclusive and incisive existential and phenomenological anthropology; lessons which might help us to better understand our wandering species in a time when so many now find themselves lost to the world. Let us remember the creative, spatially productive, and often outspoken work of people like Stevie, Simon, and Faaid, who repurpose cultural objects by publicly voicing their popular memory; who resist the abstraction of space by writing, rapping, and visualizing the stories of their communities; and who acknowledge the nearly forgotten presence of their ancestors, by regularly and vociferously retracing their footsteps. Their vocal and embodied work does not only call upon those who identify as ‘Afro-Swedish’, nor is it merely addressed to a subaltern demographic of ‘immigrants’; though these communities *are* necessarily central to their concerns and efforts. Rather, their art, advocacy, and activism speak to all those who are willing to listen, acknowledge, and advocate. By inviting us to walk with them and *re*-member Afro-Sweden, these tour guides for troubled times encourage us to embrace the possibility of transcendence toward a common world, where ‘wandering in’ does not signify ‘getting lost’ but a vital and essential human project; where ideas of ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ are not ontologically opposed but mutually constitutive; and where it is possible to be both black and Swedish, without fear of violence, confinement, or loss of memory.

Notes

1. A national report published in 2008, studying the nature, scope, and significance of ‘outdoor recreation’ (*friluftsliv*) in Sweden, shows that nearly 90% of the 1792 respondents associate hikes in the forest and mountains (*vandring i skog och fjällvandring*) with the idea of the ‘being outdoors’. Moreover, the report describes such recreational contact with nature as ‘a central part of our [Swedish] cultural tradition and national identity. It is for many people a very important element of their quality of life and health’ (Fredman et al. 2008, 7). Swedish ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren describe this notion of a typically Swedish appeal to what they call the ‘recreational landscape’ as rooted in the emergence of a middle-class, bourgeois conception of and engagement with nature in the nineteenth century (1987).
2. See entry for ‘vill’ (a dated term in Swedish, meaning ‘lost’) in Elof Hellquist’s *Svensk etymologisk ordbok* for an etymology that links this term to ‘vild’ (wild), from the Old Norse ‘villr’ (1922, 1123–1124).
3. Stories of children getting lost in the strange, scary, and creaturely world of the forest appear frequently in contemporary Swedish children’s literature. See, for example, Westerlund (2012) and Lindenbaum (2001).
4. Ola Larsmo, in a recently published history of ‘Swede Hollow’ (2016), a slum on the outskirts of St. Paul, Minnesota, where more than a thousand migrant Swedes lived at the turn of the twentieth century, offers a fascinating counterpoint to the frequently romanticized narrative of Swedish migration to the United States, and Minnesota in particular. Larsmo’s book is also

timely in relation to current debates about the recent influx of non-European immigrants in Sweden, showing how Swedes have also felt the pressures of migration, sought asylum and refuge in a faraway land, and faced discrimination and abuse as ‘foreigners’.

5. In a recent state-sponsored study of anti-black racism in Sweden conducted by Tobias Hübinte, Samson Beshir, and Victoria Kawesa, the authors estimate the number of Afro-Swedes to be approximately 180,000 (2014, 16), noting, however, that this is likely a conservative figure. Indeed, more recent data from Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska centralbyrån*, a state-sponsored institute that tracks national demography) indicates that, in 2016, there were as many as 200,000 Swedish residents born in Africa, a figure that does not include children born in Sweden to an African parent or parents or Swedish residents and citizens with roots or heritage in the broader African diaspora.
6. Stevie Nii-Adu Mensah, interview with the author, 22 September 2015, Stockholm (Blackeberg), Sweden.
7. As Swedish DJ, public intellectual, and culture critic Nathan Hamelberg notes (in a recent Facebook post, 1 December 2016): ‘The program was a potpourri of contemporary pop culture, all in one place ... everything from Twister Sister to Culture Club, or Limahl [of “Never Ending Story” fame], and, deeper still, Cabaret Voltaire’. Turning to the dance segment, ‘Freak Out’, Hamelberg notes that

much of what epitomized the [cultural] style of Plattan and Kungsan [two bustling public squares in downtown Stockholm] was covered in a few minutes: the leg warmer, robot dance, boom box, head band, sound from drum machines and synths, pastel colors matched with black.

8. It is worth noting the commentary on the Bromma municipality website regarding the relationship between Blackeberg township’s urban infrastructure and its forested environs: ‘Development in Blackeberg is skillfully and thoughtfully adapted to the natural environment. Rock faces and large forested regions have been maintained – One has build WITH nature and not AGAINST it’ (Bromma hembygdsförening, my translation).
9. Simon Matiwos, interview with the author, 1 September 2015, Stockholm (Husby), Sweden.
10. Ahmed Ibrahim Ali (aka Romário) was Swedish soccer player of Somali descent.

Ali had played with the men’s national soccer team in Djibouti, studied on a scholarship at West Hills College (USA), and been hired as gym teacher. He had even been active in the opening of a youth center in Husby.

He was murdered, following an altercation at a nightclub near Fridhemsplan on 18 October 2008 (Wikipedia).

11. A short online article (Mitt i 2012) describes the efforts of Swedish soccer player and Husby native Henok Goitom to have artificial turf installed at the ‘number three’ soccer field in Husby. The article begins by noting Goitom’s jersey number with the AIK soccer club: #36.
12. Text of ‘Systemets Väntrum’ in Swedish: *Vi fastnade i systemets väntetrum / Tjugo vänner utanför svenska rum / Utomhus / Vi kallar det ‘centrum’ / Skumt / [Här] utanförskap centraliseras / Samtidigt som politiken marginaliserar / Håller vi på att bli enade? / Jag ser adeln göra det / Men när ska arbetarklassen bli förenade? / Hälften kastar stenar / Resten är förstenade / Jag pekar på problemen / Men ni är allt för upptagna att titta på min bruna hand / Har han blod på sin hand? / Har han snattat med sin hand? / Får man ens skaka hand med han?*
13. “‘Jacco’ – Vår Betong (Official Video) + Lyrics.” 2012. YouTube video, 4:02, January 24. Posted by ‘ClynCes kanal’. Accessed 19 April 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mrk5skPpwAc>.
14. In Swedish: ‘*Som blommor falla / så naturliga texter växte / och väckte en publik*’.
15. The panel discussion, in which I also participated as a guest speaker, can be viewed in its entirety at: urkola.se.
16. A 2015 United Nations ‘Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its mission to Sweden’ states:

There continues to be a general Swedish self-perception of being a tolerant and humane society, which makes it difficult to accept that there could be structural and institutional racism faced by people of African descent. The policy to ignore 'race' creates a gap in the understanding of the problem and preserves the status quo of racial inequalities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to say 'tusan tack' (a thousand thanks) to Stevie Nii-Adu Mensah, Simon Matiwos, and Faaid Ali-Nuur for sharing their walking insights with me during my year of fieldwork in Sweden (August 2015–July 2016). For listening to an early oral presentation of this essay and providing useful feedback and encouragement, I thank Johanna Sellman and Sofia Andreasson. For helping me assemble sources and format this article, I thank my spring 2017 research assistant at the Ohio State University, Austin McCabe Juhnke. I first presented this work as an invited lecture at the Columbia University Center for Ethnomusicology on 24 January 2017. My thanks to Ana Maria Ochoa and Aaron A. Fox for inviting me back 'home', and to all of the students and faculty who asked great questions and offered astute comments that day, especially Monica Miller, who also took the time to read and respond to a later written version of this essay. I thank Ben Teitelbaum and the editors of *African and Black Diaspora* for their careful readings and astute feedback as the final version of this article came together. Finally, I am very grateful to Professor Sten Hagberg and the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University for hosting me during the 2015–2016 academic year.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author is grateful to the ACLS Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship, a research fellowship from the American-Scandinavian Foundation, and the Malmberg Scholarship from the American Swedish Institute for generously funding this research.

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