

Challenging Swedishness: Intersections of Neoliberalism, Race, and Queerness
in the Works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the work of author Jonas Hassen Khemiri and filmmaker Ruben Östlund, examining the ways both artists consistently negotiate racial identification and “Swedishness” in neoliberal economic contexts that are often at odds with other Swedish, exceptionalist discourses of social justice. Khemiri and Östlund represent contrasting perspectives and tonalities, yet both artists identify the successful competition for capital as a potentially critical component in achieving access to “Swedishness.” Khemiri and Östlund recognize that race and economics are intertwined in neoliberal arguments, even in Sweden, something their works help to elucidate. The implications of such similar observations from very different artists might go overlooked if discussed in isolation.

I argue that it is crucial to analyze the negotiation of identity in these works not merely in abstract economic terms, but through their use of a very specific neoliberal economic discourse. In Khemiri’s and Östlund’s work, characters-of-color and white characters alike employ and internalize this neoliberal discourse as they compete in a highly racialized Swedish society filled with increasing economic precarity. I will also discuss the ways Khemiri and Östlund continually undermine these characters’ attempts to succeed in this economic competition, and what this may say about the need for the ultimate deconstruction of normative categories of identity.

Another aim of this dissertation is to explore the ways Khemiri and Östlund use queerness as a conceptual strategy to mediate the understanding of race and economics. Nearly every one of Östlund’s films and most of Khemiri’s novels and plays feature queerness in the form of homosexual characters, homoeroticism, and/or homosociality. The ubiquity of queerness in their work helps us understand the connection between masculinity and the maintenance of economic privilege. Queering this connection can generate narratives that undermine normative categories and present new ways of thinking about neoliberal ideology.

However, both Khemiri and Östlund frequently undermine the potential positives of what Jack Halberstam calls “queer failure” and portray what appears as actual failure (Halberstam 2011). Khemiri and Östlund leave queer characters or characters who experience queerness in ambiguous positions, in which their queerness either fails to rescue them from toxic hetero-masculinity and/or becomes a symbolic manifestation of the dissolution of stable sense of selfhood amid competing discourses of “Swedishness.” This dissertation will examine the implications of actual queer failure in relation to neoliberalism in these works. The tension between competitive success or failure becomes even more pointed for a spectator or reader when the competitors are children, potential symbols of Sweden’s future. In both artists’ work, the figure of the child continually represents this tension between competing, social-justice and neoliberal discourses.

Chapter One examines Khemiri’s first two novels, *Ett öga rött* (2003) and *Montecore – en unik tiger* (2006), as well as his play *Invasion!* (2006), exploring the way characters interpret and perform neoliberal economic values and how success and/or failure either jeopardizes or enhances a stable sense of identity. Chapter Two shifts attention to Östlund’s earlier films, focusing on his first widely-released and controversial films *De ofrivilliga* (2008), *Play* (2011) and *Turist* (2014), considering how characters embody or challenge notions of the neoliberal subject of capacity. In Östlund’s films, this struggle with “Swedishness” is often portrayed as a Nietzschean tension between individual will and social pressure. Chapter Three will compare and contrast Östlund’s and Khemiri’s most recent works *≈[ungefär lika med]* (2014), *Allt jag inte minns* (2015), and *The Square* (2017). In this final chapter, I argue that Khemiri’s and Östlund’s most recent work demonstrates a departure from their previous plays, novels, and films in two critical ways. First, all three works situate capitalism as the overarching cause of internalized tensions between the individual and society. Second, characters in these later works who embody neoliberal values symbolize the ultimate fractured identity. Östlund and Khemiri appear to have followed a similar arc toward representing actual physical and mental embodiment of the effects of economic systems. The dissertation’s conclusion suggests additional perspectives on the above works and offers ideas for potential future scholarship.

For Michael

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Introduction

"White is a metaphor for power. And that is simply a way
of describing Chase Manhattan Bank."
-James Baldwin

Racial supremacy and whiteness as a site of power have intersected, coopted, and manipulated economic ideology and unequal distributive practices since the earliest founding of what is now the United States. Despite Sweden's rather different history, there also exists an association between whiteness and economic power. Though Sweden would like to present itself as a "post" or "non-racial" culture, a "multi-cultural" welfare state based on equality, one sees the same kind of association between race and prosperity there. Swedish scholar Helena Karlsson observes that "the present neo-liberal world order" including Sweden's "neo-liberal government" embraces an economic ideology that relies on the fact that "racial difference serves capital accumulation" (Karlsson 2014, 45–46).

Sweden is, in fact, "one of the most statistically segregated and segmented societies along racial lines, at least in the Western world, and particularly in respect of the residential and labour markets" (Hübinette and Lundström 2014, 424). Sweden ranks highest among all OECD countries in terms of the disparity in unemployment between native- and foreign-born adults (Regeringskansliet, 2011). The statistics point to a direct relationship between ongoing income inequality and race:

In the spring of 2012 for example, the unemployment rate among native-born majority Swedes above the age of 25 was just 3.4 percent, in spite of the global economic crisis, while the unemployment rates among immigrants and among young adults, in practice mainly the so-called 'second generation', is 4–6 times higher (Tidningarnas telegrambyrå, 2012). In total, more than two out of three of all unemployed in Sweden belong to these two categories, and the majority of them are Swedes of colour (Eriksson, 2011). This disparity does not always have to do with difference in educational level, and the same goes for residential preferences—it is increasingly a matter of being white or non-white. (Hübinette and Lundström 2014, 424)

This disparity between race and prosperity in Sweden is different from the United States in important ways, particularly when taking into account that, for hundreds of years, inherited wealth in America depended to a large degree on slave labor and the labor of people of color who were not paid for their work or didn't have access to paid work. In Sweden, the engine of prosperity truly began after the Second World War. Sweden's social welfare system has its origins in the late nineteenth century, but only really took shape in the 20th century. At that time, there were few people of color in Sweden. It was not until the post-war years when people from southern Europe came to Sweden as workers that a

dependence on “non-ethnic” Swedes begins to form. These were often paid workers whose working conditions were in many respects commensurate with those of Swedish workers. The immigration wave that brought a significant group of non-white people to Sweden did not begin until the late 1970s.

While today’s Swedish wealth and prosperity may not have originally depended on racial disparity, continued access to that wealth is tied to cultural signifiers of racial difference. In Sweden, hegemonic whiteness “constitutes the central core and the master signifier of Swedishness, and thus of being Swedish ... a non-white person is therefore not and cannot fully become a Swede” (Hübinette and Lundström 2014, 424). Those holding the capital (in this case, white people) are also the people who have the power to decide who is and who is not a Swede. As Jenny Andersson explains in “Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish model as Utopia 1930–2007,” there exists a tension between such an emerging definition of “Swedishness” influenced by access to capital and other legacy norms of Swedishness such as the social welfare model, egalitarian exceptionalism, and the notion of *folkhemmet*. These discourses co-exist and are often linked—social justice discourses on the one hand, neoliberal economics on the other. Andersson observes, “In the 1990s, no one believed in the validity of the Swedish model, not even the Swedes themselves” (Andersson 2009, 236). Yet with the return of financial stability to Sweden in the 2000s, the so-called Nordic “bumble bee” was back, and so was a return in the belief in the Swedish model (Andersson 2009, 237). During the 2006 election campaign in Sweden, when social democracy was defeated by a resurging right-leaning government, the parties appeared to argue over ownership of the notion of the people’s home or *folkhemmet*, “a historically anchored definition of Sweden and Swedishness that can be traced back to the 18th century” (Andersson 2009, 231). Here, successful enactment of neoliberal policy coincides with both racist national rhetoric and an exceptionalism mythology of the social welfare model meant to conceal the ways the white hegemony of the *folkhemmet* is preserved by unequal neoliberal economic policy. “Understanding racism in a neoliberal age requires making sense of this double move,” as Lentin and Titley describe it (Lentin and Titley, loc. 166 of 6556). This is a “cultural heritage project” that has all along been a neoliberal “reconstruction project” meant to protect the upward distribution of capital in the face of challenges by racialized bodies (Pred 2000, 68). As Alan Pred succinctly and irreverently puts it, “Cultural racism, neoliberalism, and political rhetoric. A threesome between the same metaphorical sheets” (Pred 2000, 70).

This dissertation will focus on the work of author Jonas Hassen Khemiri and filmmaker Ruben Östlund and examine the ways their work consistently negotiates racial identification and “Swedishness” in neoliberal economic contexts that are often at odds with other Swedish, exceptionalist discourses of social justice. Khemiri, a 38-year-old Tunisian-Swedish author of five books and six plays, and Östlund, a 43-year-old white Swedish director of five feature films, represent contrasting perspectives and tonalities, yet their work, from the earliest breakthroughs to the most recent prize-winning examples, intersects economics and identity and, in particular, features the successful competition for capital as a critical component in achieving access to “Swedishness.” Both artists recognize that race and economics are intertwined in neoliberal arguments, even in Sweden, and this is something their works help to elucidate. By bringing together two of Sweden’s most prominent, celebrated, and, at times, controversial contemporary artists, the pervasive socio-cultural impact of neoliberal policies comes into even greater focus. Both artists have

very different perspectives, yet their characters universally struggle with the tension between competing discourses of “Swedishness.” Characters wrestle with capitalism versus social welfare models, individualism versus collectivity, traditional notions of *folkhemmet* versus a rejection of normative identity categories. As Nestingen (2008) and others have argued, popular culture can express social phenomena, and analyzing Khemiri and Östlund in this way allows us to view notions of “Swedishness” in crisis from multiple angles. Such similar observations from very different artists might not be possible if they were discussed in isolation or a single vantage point, and the larger social implications for Sweden were potentially overlooked. Undeniably people of color in Sweden and others marked as non-normative face far greater socio-economic precarity in the midst of such cultural tensions, particularly when they become the target of white anxiety driven by such tensions. Östlund has at times rightly been accused of focusing more on those white anxieties; however, his most recent film, *The Square* (2017), attempts to represent multiple viewpoints.

I argue that it is crucial to analyze the negotiation of identity in these works not merely in abstract economic terms but through their use of very specific neoliberal economic discourse. As Vikash Singh argues, “a critical understanding of racialization necessarily requires a critical engagement with neo-liberalism as an economic, political, and moral discourse” (Singh 2017, 13). Neoliberal discourse champions values of competitiveness, individuality, self-reliance, able-bodiedness, and entrepreneurship that are vital in generating subjectivities willing to compete for capital in racialized neoliberal economic systems. Characters in Östlund’s films and Khemiri’s writing demonstrate a self-consciousness of this neoliberal discourse, what Wendy Brown calls “responsibilization” policies and “practices that make individual agency and self-reliance (regardless of means, social position, or contingencies) the site of survival and virtue” (Brown 2015, 131). In Khemiri’s and Östlund’s work, characters-of-color and white characters alike employ and internalize this neoliberal discourse as they compete in a highly racialized Swedish society filled with increasing economic precarity. I will also discuss the ways both artists continually undermine these characters’ attempts to succeed in this economic competition and what this may say about the need for the ultimate deconstruction of normative categories of identity. Characters in both artists’ work wrestle with a tension between individual will and social norms. In particular, many of Östlund’s films seem to ask: what are the implications of viewing social equality in terms of a sacrifice of individual will, particularly a will accustomed to unquestioned agency? This dissertation will investigate the Nietzschean dimensions of this tension in Östlund’s work, especially as it eventually transforms into something of a rallying call for attention to social equity over individual will in his most recent film, *The Square*.

Another aim of this dissertation is to explore the ways both Khemiri and Östlund use queerness as a conceptual strategy to mediate the understanding of race and economics. Nearly every one of Östlund’s films and most of Khemiri’s novels and plays feature queerness in the form of homosexual characters, homoeroticism, and/or homosociality, leading to the question: Why do Östlund, a white filmmaker, and Khemiri, a writer of color, both identify queerness as a vital aspect of identity negotiation and “Swedishness” in a racialized, neoliberal system? The ubiquity of queerness in their work helps us understand the connection between masculinity and the maintenance of economic privilege, but from very different artistic viewpoints. Despite these differing tones and perspectives, both

Khemiri and Östlund are interested in deconstructing limiting notions of identity and normative roles, particularly that of masculinity. Neoliberal rhetoric and values can provoke deep anxieties about competitiveness and other virtues tied to traditional notions of heteronormativity and masculinity, anxieties about what Östlund himself has called Swedish male “honor culture” (Buckley 2014). Queering this connection helps bring that variable of masculinity into sharper focus when discussing forms of Swedish neoliberalism, particularly as queerness can generate narratives in which expectations are resisted. Since racial differentiation and heteronormativity are linked to neoliberal ideology and practice, undermining racial and gendered categories weakens capitalism’s grip. As Elizabeth Freeman argues in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, queerness can also disrupt temporal expectations attached to heteronormativity, such as marriage and reproduction (Freeman 2010). Disturbing these temporal models can present new ways of thinking about neoliberal ideology.

Queerness, with its open-endedness and resistance to essentializing and categorization, affords the epistemological potential to think outside Swedish norms and capitalist paradigms. If “Swedishness” is constructed in a combination of competing discourses—neoliberalism, social justice, nationalism, racism, heteronormativity—queerness offers a way of thinking that is both individuated *and* utopian. In his important work of queer theory, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz define queerness as “a structured and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz 2009, loc. 1 of 189). He describes not an abstract utopia “akin to banal optimism,” which might seem like “elite homosexual evasion of politics” (Muñoz 2009, loc. 2 of 189), but a “future bound in our desires and designs” in ways that look to past examples and concrete possibilities for breaking out of the “rigid conceptualization of the straight present” (Muñoz 2009, loc. 182 of 189). In this respect, queerness represents a positive “failure,” to use Jack Halberstam’s term (2011), refusing characters’ desires for stable and/or normative categories of “Swedishness” and opening the potential for generation of more authentic senses of subjectivity.

However, both Khemiri and Östlund frequently undermine the potential positives of “queer failure” as an opportunity to escape limiting norms. Instead, they portray characters trapped by norms and unable to succeed economically, unable to overcome racialized barriers, and unable to achieve artistic success. Characters marked as queer find themselves denied dreams, wealth, and fulfilling personal relationships, and in Östlund’s *De ofrivilliga* (2008), subject to bodily harm and/or assault. *De ofrivilliga* conveys queerness as both emblematic of out-of-control masculine domination and total loss of will and submission. Östlund’s film *Play* (2011) also employs queerness as a mediating lens for understanding toxic, masculine pressures, but queerness often takes the form of homophobia. In the case of Khemiri’s *Allt jag inte minns* (2015), a queer character becomes monetarily in debt, violently assaults a woman, and ends up incarcerated. Khemiri and Östlund leave queer characters or heterosexual-identified characters experiencing queerness in ambiguous positions in which their queerness either fails to rescue them from toxic hetero-masculinity and/or becomes a symbolic manifestation of the dissolution of a stable sense of selfhood amid competing discourses of “Swedishness.”

One way of analyzing this commonality in Khemiri’s and Östlund’s work is to see representations of actual failure by queer characters as symptomatic of the frustrating degree to which capitalism and toxic hetero-masculinity have become almost hopelessly

entrenched in Swedish society and how that obstructs either an individual or a utopian vision of society. This dynamic is most poignantly symbolized by the eponymous work of art “The Square” in Östlund’s 2017 film, a utopian vision of individual equality undermined by racial and economic inequality and hypocrisy. Östlund and Khemiri employ neoliberalism to foreclose both queer individualism and queer utopianism as a symptom of the deeply engrained and damaging social and psychological effects of capitalism and norms of hetero-masculinity. It could be argued that both artists illustrate that the epistemological notion of “queer failure” does not sufficiently transcend the intersectional nature of racial, economic, and gender inequality. When one’s economic precarity and/or racial discrimination appears predestined by neoliberal and white supremacist structures, queerness cannot transgress in a way that overcomes combinations of these barriers. What appears as actual queer failure in these works could be interpreted as pessimistic commentary on economic and racial inequality, which must be dismantled before queerness is truly free to imagine itself outside limiting norms.

This raises an important line of questioning: Is the depiction of actual queer failure, with all its historically negative stereotypes, necessary to make arguments about capitalism and heterosexuality? In Östlund’s films, queerness nearly entirely involves characters who identify as heterosexual. Many of the characters in Östlund’s films experience queerness for good or worse as ways of mediating their own heterosexual and/or masculine identities. Khemiri’s queer characters are frequently placed in triangular relationships with heterosexual pairs, which use homoerotic male desire as a foil for the flaws in heteronormative situations. It is entirely possible that these two heterosexual, male artists are not even truly aware of the implications of creating queer characters whose queerness can be interpreted as symptomatic of social failure around them.

Both artists leave queer characters in states of ambiguity as to whether their queerness symbolizes resistance or dissolution. Does this only reinforce negative perceptions of queerness, despite the overall positive impulse to deconstruct heterosexual gender norms? Of course, not all queer characters must be presented in a positive light or have bright futures. But characters marked as queer and/or the presence of homosexuality is so ubiquitous throughout both Khemiri’s and Östlund’s work that the constant negative portrayal of queerness makes queerness often appear essentialized as negative capability, not positive reimagining. What does it mean to employ negatively-portrayed queerness as an aesthetic or epistemological project as an artist when queerness is an embodied and lived (and often precarious) experience for many? This dissertation will explore these questions.

The tension between competitive success or failure becomes even more pointed for a spectator or reader when the competitors are children, symbols of Sweden’s future. Khemiri and Östlund use neoliberal discourse, queerness, and the image of the child in divergent ways, but the repeated presence of these elements in both artists’ work points to their importance as avenues of inquiry. In both artists’ work, the figure of the child continually represents the tension between competing exceptionalist, social-justice discourses and neoliberal rhetoric, sometimes symbolizing anxieties about future generations and other times symbolizing a hope for future freedom from toxic normative categories.

This dissertation takes a non-conventional approach of blending social sciences with the humanities, using artistic works as representations of socio-cultural phenomena.

Yet this critical intersection between economics, race, and identity formation in Sweden frequently finds representation in Sweden in aesthetic works. As Andrew Nestingen argues in *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film and Social Change*, since the 1980s, the Nordic states have become “increasingly fettered by the imperatives of neoliberalism” (Nestingen 2008, 7). These structural and social changes are often represented in popular texts, which “continually mediate socially significant conflicts through narration, music, and image ... If we want to understand contemporary Scandinavia and its struggles over transformation, we need to study and discuss popular fictions” (Nestingen, 2011, 9). Anna Westerstål Stenport and Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm also explore connections between neoliberalism and Swedish crime fiction in their article, “Corporations, crime, and gender construction in Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*” (Stenport and Alm 2009). While this dissertation will turn its attention to other genres, it is built upon the belief that analyzing works of popular culture “maintains that it is a site where answers to the crisis of legitimacy in the Nordic countries are produced, circulated, and contested” (Nestingen 2011, 10).

Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund

Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s breakthrough novel *Ett öga rött* [One eye red] (2003) was one of the most talked-about debuts in Swedish literature with its inventive and initially controversial playfulness with the Swedish language. It sold over 200,000 copies in 2004 alone and was made into a film in 2007. This first novel was followed by *Montecore—en unik tiger* (2006) [*Montecore—The Silence of the Tiger* (2011)], which received glowing reviews and won the P.O. Enquist Literary Prize, Swedish Radio’s Award for Best Novel, and was nominated for the August Prize, Sweden’s most prestigious literary award. Khemiri’s next short novel *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012) [*I Call My Brothers* (2015)] was well received and was followed in 2015 by his greatest critical success to date, the August Prize-winning novel *Allt jag inte minns* (2015) [*Everything I Don’t Remember* (2016)]. His novels have been translated into over twenty languages, and he is equally lauded as a playwright with plays such as the Village Voice Obie Award-winning *Invasion!* (2006), performed in New York City in 2011, and *≈[Ungefär lika med]* [≈Almost equal to] (2014), performed in Sweden at the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm as well as in other sites around the world. Khemiri is also a contributor to American publications such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.

Ruben Östlund has received his greatest critical acclaim with his most recent film *The Square* (2017), which received the Palm d’Or at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. His previous film *Turist* (2014) [released in the United States as *Force Majeure*] also garnered critical acclaim, winning the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard sidebar of the 2014 Cannes Film Festival as well as subsequent BAFTA and Globe nominations for Best Foreign Language Film. It was his film *Play* (2011) however that established Östlund as both a major Swedish filmmaker and provocateur. The film generated intense debate in which many critics and audiences decried its problematic racial differentiation and what could indeed be interpreted as racist messaging (for further discussion of the Swedish reception of the film, see Stigsdotter 2013). Östlund’s first two films, *Gitarrmongot* [*The Guitar*

Mongoloid] (2004) and *De ofrivilliga* [*Involuntary*] (2008) also contain controversial and shocking social commentary on Swedish society.

At times, these two artists have been openly opposed to one another, most notably when, in response to Östlund's film *Play*, Khemiri published the now legendary "47 anledningar till att jag grät när jag såg Ruben Östlunds film *Play*" (47 Reasons I Cried When I Saw Ruben Östlund's *Play*) (2011) in Sweden's most widely-read morning newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. Number six in the list of reasons: "för att jag tyckte att den var rasistisk" [because I thought it was racist] (Khemiri 2011). In an interview conducted for this dissertation, Khemiri described his perspective on Östlund's film:

And I was involved in this debate about that movie. I think that one of the things that struck me was at first, his way of reasoning as if he was telling the truth about these matters—like he responded that the people who were critics should turn the camera around against themselves. I'm not critical of the movie itself. I think it's a very interesting work of art. I think I was critical of the way that it was read as authentic. That this is what reality looks like. When it's a very stylized and highly subjective vision ... I think he's a very talented movie director. I just think that the way that that work of art is being read as real, limited it. And that made it dangerous. (Khemiri Interview, 1:06:34–1:09:30)

One of Östlund's cinematic trademarks is indeed a desire to force spectators into uncomfortable positions by playing on their assumptions. In doing so, Östlund often leaves the viewer with ambiguous and/or ambivalent feelings regarding what is happening on screen. As Khemiri points out, when such ambiguities collide with issues of race, the perception of "reality" or "authenticity" can become suspect, particularly when such perceptions provoke anxieties about "Swedishness."

Östlund has been particularly vocal and frank about his desire to confront his audience with what he perceives as their hypocrisy and lack of self-awareness about the way Swedes practice a double moral when it comes to social values and actual problem-solving that might address racial and economic inequality. He also means to chip away at the "Swedish" self-image, white privilege, and misogyny. Several of Östlund's most recent films wrestle with what he calls "a kind of collective guilt" about supposedly holding lofty values about caring for fellow humans, but, in moments of decision both large and small, falling back on selfishness or indecision or blindness (Nolan 2017). This exposure of purported "Swedishness" appears in films such as *Play* (2011), in which adults fail to intervene in a racialized competition between teenagers for material goods, or *Turist* (2014), in which a Swedish family on vacation is torn apart after the father's act of cowardice in the face of natural disaster, or most recently *The Square* (2017), in which an art museum director advocates for an artwork symbolizing equality for all but fails to live up to that expectation himself. Östlund, whose father was an economist, features economic disparity and the morally ambiguous and sometimes shockingly embarrassing racist or sexist reactions of characters who encounter such disparities. In films like *The Square*, Östlund confronts spectators with the reality of what they would rather not face. In an interview for *The Square*, Östlund discusses increasing social inequality in Sweden, saying, "I think that Marx actually did quite a good analysis on how the economic system is affecting us, and I think [the film is] very much about that" (Utichi 2017). Östlund told

Variety magazine that his next project after *The Square* will “use satire to create a warm portrait of people trying to deal with a cynical industry and show the extent to which economics are connected with looks in our society” (Keslassy 2017). The characters in Östlund’s and Khemiri’s work exist in a precarious and racialized economic system in which subjects compete for access to capital and the access to Swedishness that capital provides. Khemiri acknowledges this when he observes, “When I look back at what I’ve written so far, there is this economic aspect to most things” (Khemiri 2017, 1:45), a feature his work shares with the films of Ruben Östlund. From *Ett öga rött* (2003) to *Allt jag inte minns* (2015), Khemiri’s protagonists experience economic precarity, entrepreneurship, materialism, and a desire to succeed economically. Economic success forms the basis for their hope for a better future and their formation of a “Swedish” identity.

Methodologies

Khemiri’s and Östlund’s exploration of economics, race, and sexuality is groundbreaking and provocative in the realm of Swedish literature and film, but they also necessitate a new analytic model that creates its own approach to combining humanist and social science discourses. Theory and research by scholars who have worked with economics, neoliberalism, and sociology—including Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Ishay Landa, Thomas Piketty, Per Molander, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Alan Pred—provide crucial lenses for my discussion. In addition, I will consider critical race, gender, and sexuality theorists, as well scholarship dealing with ecocriticism, dis-ability studies, and affect, including Jack Halberstam, Alison Kafer, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, and Sara Ahmed.

Even if one acknowledges the constructedness of racial categories and rejects any notion of their biological basis, the continued dominance of institutions based on racial categories makes racism a very real and embodied experience for many people. Recent critical race studies have acknowledged that theories of social identities of race “make it possible to study the significance of race without further contributing to the specious assumptions about its naturalism” (Alcoff 2015, 63). So why not use “ethnicity” instead of “race”? I would argue, as Linda Martín Alcoff does in *The Future of Whiteness*, that ethnicity can be used by white people “to downplay their racial identification” and provide the opportunity to “view other features of their lineage as more important than their whiteness ... In fact, ethnic lineages provide proof of one’s whiteness” (Alcoff 2015, 143–44).

I use the term “queerness” to refer to a spectrum of non-normative sexualities and desires which challenge hetero-supremacist ideologies. I am interested in multiple categories of masculinity and gender, and they are often constructed in complex ways, not just through what might be labeled “homosexual.” Discourses of able-bodiedness, for example, often intersect with constructions of masculinity and gender. Thus, a term like “queerness” provides more analytic room for exploring that type of intersectionality.

As a person who identifies as queer, I fall within that spectrum, though I have referred to myself as gay and homosexual. I am also a white person who identifies as male-gendered, lenses which influence my perspective no matter how I deconstruct them. My topics are primarily Swedish, and, though I have spent considerable time in Sweden and

speak the language, my perspective is that of an American. On the one hand, I have the advantage of perceiving certain trends that might be more difficult to see from within the complexities of Swedish culture. On the other hand, my perception of Swedish culture is that of an outside analyst.

This introduction will continue with a review of the research literature, followed by a discussion of the neoliberal economics and discourse that serve as the dissertation's primary theoretical lens. Since neoliberal economic ideology can take many forms, is often misunderstood, and its analysis in a Nordic context is a recent phenomenon, the dissertation will summarize neoliberal ideologies and discourse unique to neoliberal economics in Sweden in a way that lays the groundwork for subsequent textual analysis.

Chapter One will examine Khemiri's first two novels, *Ett öga rött* (2003) and *Montecore—en unik tiger* (2006), as well as his play *Invasion!* (2006). The first section will explore the way characters interpret and perform neoliberal economic values and how success and/or failure either jeopardizes or enhances a stable sense of identity. The second section investigates the role of art and performativity in trying to forge an identity in a neoliberal context. The third section will examine the link between the motif of the child and anxieties about the creation of successful neoliberal subjects and how this provides or prevents access to "Swedishness." The final section explores queerness and the connection between anxieties of successful economic competition, futurity, and queerness.

Chapter Two shifts focus to Östlund's earlier films such as *Gitarrmogot* (2004) and *De ofrivilliga* (2008), but primarily focuses on his first widely-released and controversial films, *Play* (2011) and *Turist* (2014). This chapter will consider how characters embody or challenge notions of the neoliberal subject of capacity. When white privilege and masculinity are at stake in neoliberal economic contexts, Östlund's films often intensify a highly problematic anxiety in both characters and spectators about the stability of "Swedishness." In Östlund's films, this struggle with "Swedishness" is often portrayed as a Nietzschean tension between the individual will and social pressure. This Nietzschean element finds its most striking expression in *Turist* with its ecological symbols and references to the trope of the German *Bergfilm*. All three films under discussion in this chapter bring together Swedish identity and neoliberal economics with queerness. The presence of queerness in these films, as in Khemiri's work, raises questions about the role of masculinity in the maintenance of economic privilege. This chapter will also investigate another similarity between Östlund's and Khemiri's early works, the motif of the child.

Chapter Three will compare and contrast Östlund's and Khemiri's most recent works *≈[ungefär lika med]* (2014), *Allt jag inte minns* (2015), and *The Square* (2017). In this final chapter, I argue that Khemiri's and Östlund's most recent work demonstrates a departure from their previous plays, novels, and films in two critical ways. First, all three works situate capitalism as the overarching cause of what Östlund calls a loss of "belief in a common project" (Porton 2017). Whereas Östlund's earlier works often wrestled with the individual will faced with pressures to conform and typically leaves characters in states of uncomfortable moral ambiguity, *The Square* indicts "individualism" as one of the causes of this breakdown of moral responsibility. This move away from the rugged Nietzscheanism of his earlier works towards the more collective "common project" marks a remarkable shift in his work. The second major point of departure regarding Östlund's and Khemiri's latest work concerns the depiction of an economic actor who embodies neoliberal values as the ultimate fractured identity. Östlund and Khemiri appear to have followed a similar arc

towards representing *actual* physical and mental embodiment of the effects of economic systems: characters suffer physical and mental dissolution as a result of attempting to embody neoliberal values. In Khemiri's work, this dissolution often takes the form of memory loss or multiple on-stage versions of the same character, whereas in *The Square*, humanity itself regresses symbolically through the presence of actual primates and humans imitating them. Östlund's newest work also highlights the recurring motif of the child. This chapter argues that instead of merely representing anxiety about future generations and the legacy of an ambiguous "Swedishness" as in previous films, *The Square* uses the traditional image of the child more as a symbol of a need to find new ways of imagining "Swedishness."

A conclusion follows these chapters and offers ideas for potential future scholarship in addition to framing this dissertation's primary goals and observations.

Literature Review

Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund make frequent appearances in articles and interviews not just inside Sweden but in the international press. YouTube hosts Östlund's many interviews given at international film festivals, and of course there are countless film and book reviews of both artists' work. Given their high profiles in and outside Sweden and careers stretching into a second decade, it is fairly surprising that so little critical scholarship, whether in English or in a Scandinavian language, has been written about their work. What has been written almost entirely overlooks economics as it impacts racial identity, not to mention homosexuality, and little research has been done on the neoliberal discourse ever-present in their work except for my own previously published article from 2016, "Are our malls safe? Race and neoliberal discourse in Ruben Östlund's *Play*," which appeared in the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* (6: 1, 25–37). Portions of that article have been incorporated into this dissertation.

Ruben Östlund

At the time of writing, there exist only five scholarly articles on the work of Ruben Östlund, one of which was written by this dissertation's author, though other scholars are presently researching and writing about his films. The four remaining articles focus solely on the film *Play* and all appear in the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, three of them in the same issue. Stigsdotter (2013) details the Swedish reception of *Play*, and Stenport and Traylor (2014) present insightful analysis on digitality in the film. Karlsson (2014) and Stubberud and Ringrose (2014) each use slightly different focuses to analyze aspects of the film important to this dissertation's discussion, namely contextualizing *Play* in contemporary Swedish discourses of exceptionalism, race, and "multiculturalism." They analyze taboos, institutional racisms, and privileges which interfere with intersectional deconstruction of white hegemonic practices in Sweden. Stubberud and Ringrose (2014) examine and problematize the ways the film reproduces or fails to challenge racism.

Karlsson describes Sweden's present-day government as "neo-liberal" (Karlsson 2014, 45) and references scholars Lentin and Titley, claiming that "in the contemporary moment, neo-liberalism is declaring society racially neutral, and thereby denying white privilege" (Lentin and Titley 2011, loc. 90 of 6556) (Karlsson 2014, 51). Though the denial of white privilege through discourses of "multiculturalism" and "color-blindness" are aspects of neoliberal discourse, the articles do not elaborate on the uniquely neoliberal economic aspects of the discourse or its involvement in subjective identity formation. Several short but insightful non-peer-reviewed commentaries by Fredrik Bove (2014), Erik Anderson (2014) and Lillia Puskas (2017) on Östlund's films have appeared in *Cinema Scandinavia*.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri

There is comparatively more scholarly research on the work of Jonas Hassen Khemiri. One of the more prolific Khemiri scholars is Magnus Nilsson, whose insightful 2010 article "Swedish 'Immigrant Literature' and the Construction of Ethnicity" mentions a radical change in Sweden's "national symbolic economy" but does not explore Swedish self-image in a way connected to economics, neoliberalism or sexuality. Neither of his two subsequent articles on Khemiri and other "immigrant writers" focuses on these topics either. Corina Lacatus's masterful dissertation *Negotiating the other: Language, ethnicity and identity in contemporary Sweden* (2007) includes extensive analysis on the Latin Kings in comparison to Khemiri but does not explicitly address economics, neoliberalism, or homosexuality, and neither does Peter Leonard's astute dissertation *Imagining Themselves: National Belongings in Post-Ethnic Nordic Literature* (2011), which performs instead an insightful analysis of language and opacity in Khemiri's work. Elisabeth Helena Karlsson's 2008 dissertation *Toward a Multiculturalism for the 21st Century: German and Scandinavian Literary Perspectives, 1995–2005* likewise does not focus on economics or neoliberalism, instead analyzing perspectives on multiculturalism. Her 2011 article on *Play* further explores the use of "multiculturalism" in ways critical to this dissertation's arguments. Ralitsa E. Lazarova's recent dissertation *'True stories': The Politics of Emotions in Works of Performative Realism in Recent Swedish Fiction* (2014) employs affect theory as well as post-colonial theory in an analysis of Khemiri's *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012) that is relevant to this dissertation.

Swedish Neoliberalism and Race

Neoliberalism is an ideology not usually associated with Sweden, yet economists and theorists such as David Harvey and Thomas Piketty have argued that the economic evidence points to an increasingly neoliberalized Swedish society. Harvey's analysis makes the case for some of Sweden's adoption of neoliberal practice as socio-politically organic, in the sense that partial moves to neoliberalization in the 1990s in Sweden "cannot easily be attributed to the imperial reach of US power" (Harvey 2005, 9). This is a crucial detail because the challenges to white economic supremacy in the 1990s posed by periods of

intense immigration to Sweden by people from Africa and the Middle East also coincides with the escalation of hitherto uncommon neoliberal discourse in Sweden, a link that further highlights the connection between race and neoliberalism.

During the 1990s in Sweden, class forces that had been balanced through strong unions became vulnerable due to economic downturn and were increasingly under attack by neoliberal discourse of individual liberties and freedoms (Harvey 2005, 113). When Sweden joined the European Union, “business and the Conservatives let the economic ideas and institutions of the EU achieve by international convergence what they had failed to do through domestic reform” and deficit reduction, inflation control, and balanced budgets as opposed to equitable distribution of capital became the focus of public policy (Harvey 2005, 115). Despite the public’s continued commitment to a notion of equitable distribution, the Swedish economic system is no longer the socialist, social-welfare model it once was, but one that is increasingly neoliberal and privatized. Sweden has been slowly neoliberalized over the past four decades, a process accelerated during a brief period of conservative rule in the early 1990s. By the time the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994, “the neoliberal program of ‘deficit reduction, inflation control and balanced budgets rather than full employment and an equitable distribution of income became cornerstones of macroeconomic policy” (Harvey 2005, 115). There now exists public health and dental care through the National Healthcare Services, affiliated with local authorities and municipalities and National Public Dental Services, as well as private health and dental insurance companies (Socialstyrelsen 2018). Sweden’s insurance industry trade organization Svensk Försäkring reports, “The number of private health care insurance policies continues to increase. In 2016 about 649,000 people had private health care insurance. Most of these people have their insurance paid by their employer” (Svensk Försäkring 2016). This means that at least “one in ten Swedes now has private health insurance” (*The Local* 2014). Not only do Swedes increasingly have private health insurance, but hospitals themselves have become increasingly privatized. Where once St. Göran hospital on Kungsholmen in the heart of Stockholm had been run by the National Health Service, now the name of its corporate manager Capio adorns the hospital (Ramesh 2012). Not only are hospitals increasingly being run by private companies but public hospitals such as Stockholm’s renowned Karolinska University Hospital have also lost “more than 500 beds,” which “are being moved into the community to be run by private companies” (Ramesh 2012). In 1993, “Sweden became the first major European country to repeal its postal monopoly. Sweden Post (now PostNord) was put into a corporate structure, but it is still owned by the government” (Edwards 2016). Since then, privatization of the Swedish postal system, rather than stimulating job creation, has created “1,740 full-time equivalent jobs” by new competitors “compared to 12,000 jobs eliminated at Swedish Post between 1998 and 2008” (Hermann 2014). In *Capital*, Thomas Piketty concludes, “Indeed, the Swedish wealth data confirm what we already know from income statements: Sweden was not the structurally egalitarian country we sometimes imagine” (Piketty 2014, 344).

What would cause an “egalitarian” country like Sweden to so rapidly begin adopting neoliberal economic policies? The answer lies in the intersection between economic hegemony and race. Over the past two decades, Swedish policy regarding multiculturalism and citizenship “has been transformed as it has become increasingly embedded in a wider neoliberal trajectory” (Schierup and Ålund 2011, 47). Alan Pred began his work on *Even in*

Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination during the 1990s, when the confluence of economic downturn, increased immigration, and resurgence of nationalistic and neoliberal discourses all converged to begin building the “circumscribed” neoliberalism taking shape in Sweden today. Pred links the increased racism in Sweden of the 1990s with “growth of low-wage sectors,” “restructuring of national capitalisms,” and a “rightward shift of Social Democratic ideology” (Pred 2000, 8–9).

As is the case with American neoliberalism, there is a mutual dependence between white hegemony of capital and racial inequality in Sweden, a “capitalist hypermodernity” that breeds “experiences that are apt to be culturally and politically reworked into expressions of racism” (Pred 2000, 10). As disposable income fell for 80 percent of Sweden’s population between 1989 and 1994, “a chorus of fundamentalist neoliberal politicians, economists, and business executives sweetly sang the gospel of abstract economic rationality” and “the all-solving virtues of ‘the market’” (Pred 2000, 14). Sweden’s very sense of white nationhood was undermined by European Union marketization in the 1990s in which “‘market forces’ are allowed to exercise (a metaphorical) sovereignty” thus helping to trigger “a renewed awareness of national and local (or regional) identity” compounded by the fiscal and political crises (Pred 2000, 30). This identity crisis might more aptly be typified as a challenge to white supremacy brought on by economic precarity in the face of racialized competition from immigrants to Sweden. Whenever Swedish white economic hegemony is challenged by fiscal downturn, such as in the 1970s when there were widespread labor shortages, immigration rates plummet (Pred 2000, 42).

Perhaps the greatest example of this connection between race and economics is evinced by Sweden’s disastrous experiment with neoliberal school-choice initiatives in the 1990s, which coincided with a period high immigration rates. Based on Milton Friedman’s American philosophy of allowing the free-market to improve education, the argument in Sweden was that “schools would have clear financial incentives to provide a better education and could be more responsive to customer (i.e., parental) needs and wants when freed from the burden imposed by a centralized bureaucracy” (Fisman 2014). In reality, these voucher programs provide opportunities for wealthy parents to remove their students from school systems they view as “failing” due to their diverse populations. In test results that sent shockwaves through the international media, the result of this racialized school-choice initiative was a steep drop in Sweden’s previously enviable scores in the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, which tests students in 65 countries in math, science, and languages (Fisman 2014).

Swedish Neoliberal Discourse and Racism

Neoliberal discourse operates not merely on the level of economic policy but through a moralizing and disciplining discourse of social values. In the 2011 Nordic Moral Climates survey, Sweden scored the highest value on the Privatization index (Bondeson 2003, 126). Across the Nordic countries, 51 percent favored a blend of publicly and privately-run hospitals, and 53 percent favored a blend of publicly and privately-run

schools. These majorities speak to the success of recent neoliberal efforts to privatize these institutions as notions of “freedom” and economic competition take hold. In the survey, respondents were also asked, “Do you think that it is primarily the individual’s responsibility or society’s responsibility to see that everyone has a good standard of living?” (Bondeson 2003, 127). Of the respondents, a surprising 45 percent favored individual responsibility. Such discourse portrays people not as racialized subjects but as purely economic actors. Neoliberal rhetoric constructs the illusion of economic domains in which people are responsible for their own precarity and converts political questions about democracy and inequality into economic ones (Brown 2015, 17). Economic domains immune from institutionalized racism do not actually exist, but neoliberalism depends on this fallacy because it permits the re-inscription of racial hierarchy through competition between racial categories, while transferring any blame for inequality to the so-called “free market” where “All conduct is economic conduct” (Brown 2015, 10). Neoliberal discourse champions rationality and responsibility and “demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal” (Butler 2015, 14). This rhetoric affects subjectivity and how people see themselves as citizens. From organizational psychologists to management consultants to governmental health agencies, a range of so-called “experts” barrage citizens with claims about the benefits of autonomy and enterprise (Rose 1998).

Neoliberal discourse advocates the construction of what Foucault calls *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault 2008, 252). Foucault identifies “rational conduct” and the concept of the self-interested economic actor as crucial in establishing notions of fitness and capacity (Foucault 2008, 269). Reducing society to mere economic competition accentuates the precarity of failing to live up to these practices and maintains racial inequality. New migrants in Europe are often the targets of such rhetoric, labeled as drains on the economy and as unable to pull their own weight—racially coded language that seeks shelter in economic domains to avoid what might be considered overtly racist speech (Brown 2015, 135). These arguments can be made to limit access to entitlements that are perceived as a threat to the continued upward flow of capital to white Europeans.

This same racially coded neoliberal discourse occurs in Sweden, where politicians also attempt to portray racial issues as solely economic. When asked about the immigrant situation in the Swedish city of Malmö, the party secretary of the right-wing Sverigedemokraterna [The Sweden Democrats], Björn Söder, responded:

Jag tror att många av dem kommer att bli identitetslösa så småningom. De kommer att fråga: vilket land tillhör jag? Det blir ett identitetslöst samhälle. Och uppenbarligen är det problem i Malmö eftersom ekonomin är så usel. Resten av landet måste hålla Malmö under armarna i skatteutjämningsystemet. (Orrenius 2014)

I think that many of them [white Swedes] are eventually going to be identity-less. There will be the question: what country do I belong to? It will be an identity-less society. And obviously there is a problem in Malmö because the economy is so lousy. The rest of the country must keep Malmö fiscally sound.

Söder attempts to disguise his concerns for white “identity” and privilege as worries about the “fiscal soundness” of Malmö. It is a fairly see-through cover-up, but one that provides white Swedes with an opportunity to claim color-blindness while simultaneously voting for political parties that promise to maintain the structures of white privilege.

This “blindness” allows Swedish subjectivity to be constructed in a way that obscures its connection to neoliberal economics. In Sweden, anxiety about immigration is obscured by a taboo against discussing such anxieties that exists to prevent discourse on racial segregation (Stubberud and Ringrose 2014, 72). Neoliberal economic discourse provides a convenient alternative to directly violating this taboo by voicing what might be considered outright racist speech. The mask of neoliberal discourse is an alternative utilized, for example, by Sweden’s far-right political party the Sweden Democrats in their now infamous and highly offensive 2010 political advertisement. The commercial’s opening shot emphasizes the state of the economy, featuring a rapid countdown of the national budget, while a voiceover ominously warns, “Politics is about priorities. Now the choice is yours” (Sverigedemokraterna 2010; Stjernholm 2014, 41). This opening, seemingly playing on the viewer’s fears regarding purely economic issues, then turns to an attempt to race-bait potential voters, positing the economic threat as in fact a racial threat. In order to clarify which priorities are posed against one another in Swedish culture, the advertisement moves to images of bureaucrats, one sitting behind a desk marked “Administrator of Retirement Funds” and another behind “Administrator of Immigration.” The face-off between those needing support for retirement (“true Swedes”) and those receiving support as immigrants (“others,” freeloaders) places the two groups in separate economic spheres, maintaining the illusion that somehow Sweden’s welfare system exists in a post-racial imaginary and its integrity is under threat by outside forces, when in reality it relies on racially segregated labor for its survival.

The commercial follows these initial scenes with shameful images that pit a single, elderly white woman using a walker against a group of women in Burkas and Niqabs who are pushing baby carriages, all rushing to be first to the stacks of money on the bureaucrats’ desks. Stjernholm observes, “The fact that the women in the video not only are superior in number to the senior citizen, but also quite literally push a new generation of kids in front of them, draws on the aforementioned rhetorical trope that has become typical of SD in which immigration is highlighted as a threat to the welfare society” (Stjernholm 2014, 42). Though Swedish welfare society is already well on its way towards transformation into a neoliberal system, the ad plays on a nationalistic trope of the welfare society as representative of “Swedishness” (Stjernholm 2014, 38), linking a perceived sense of “Swedishness” with economic systems. More importantly, the ad implies that defending “Swedishness” is tantamount to defending white, economic hegemony over that economic system. The use of racial differentiation becomes a method of categorizing what is uniquely “Swedish” as correlative to its economic system. In an earlier Sweden Democrats ad from 2006, intertitles inform viewers first that “Sweden is worth defending”; second, “Let Sweden remain Sweden”; and lastly, “The Sweden Democrats—Security and Tradition” (Stjernholm 2014, 38). Stjernholm argues that such messages “capitalize on nostalgia for a Sweden that now is changing due to the transformations of the welfare state” (Stjernholm 2014, 38). Importantly, this economic nostalgia, when linked to racial differentiation, generates and re-inscribes a notion of “Swedishness” linked to economics.

No indicator is more reflective of this social anxiety about race than the recent and shocking electoral victory of the Sweden Democrats, a far-right nationalist party, on September 13, 2014 in which the party earned a surprising 17.7% of the vote in the parliamentary elections, a meteoric rise since 2002, when the party barely was able to seat a single member of parliament (Orrenius 2014). Running on a platform of anti-immigration policy and drawing new voters from across the political spectrum, the party's anti-immigrant messaging appears to have struck a chord with a large percentage of Swedes (Orrenius 2014). As Kvisto and Wahlbeck have identified, opposition to multiculturalism in Europe "not only emanates from the extremist fringes of the far right but has become part of the political agenda of many mainstream conservative political parties ... and can be seen to some extent among the progressive left" (Kvisto and Wahlbeck 2013, 3 of 345). In the Nordic Moral Climates survey (2003), Ulla V. Bondeson found that "Denmark with 45 percent, Sweden 41 percent, and Norway 37 percent have fairly similar high levels of people believing that immigration is too high" (Bondeson 2003, 111). Given the recent electoral successes of the Sweden Democrats, these numbers can only have risen in the past twelve years.

Sweden is often portrayed as "one of the most prominent representatives of an officially declared multicultural policy ... indeed celebrated, alongside Canada and Australia, as the model for multicultural immigrant integration" (Borevi 2013, 140 of 345). As recently as 2010, in seven out of eight indicators in the Multicultural Policy Index (MPI) analysis study, carried out by Banting and Kymlicka, Sweden is one of the countries that has "'strongly' shifted towards a multicultural approach" (Borevi 2013, 141 of 345). But how can this be given the Nordic Moral Climates results and recent electoral success of far-right extremists? Borevi senses there is a discrepancy between the synchronic results of the 2010 MPI index and a more comprehensive diachronic approach which examines integrative strategies beginning in the 1960s and early 1970s. Borevi explains, "In the context of the changing character of immigration from the end of the 1970s onwards, with refugees and family members arriving from distant countries, the multicultural direction of the policy was soon re-evaluated. The political debate in the 1980s was characterized by a critical attitude towards the multicultural approach ... Important to notice is that this debate in Sweden began in the 1980s" (Borevi 2013, 155 of 345). From this evidence, we can surmise that despite the egalitarian public imaginary and its supporting discourse, there exists a submerged anxiety about immigration obscured by a taboo on such discourse. Stubberud and Rose point out, "in contemporary Scandinavia—as is the case in most of Europe—talking about issues of race has been rendered taboo (Goldberg 2006)" (Stubberud and Rose 72).

This Swedish exceptionalism and its national and international image promote a model of Sweden as "the most anti-racist of white western countries" (Karlsson 2014, 44). It is a "phantasmatic self-image of a nation which sees itself as always having been white, and continuously, and perhaps even desperately, struggles to find ways to accommodate non-whites within its state territory as well as within its national imaginary" (Hübinette and Lundström 2014, 425). Yet a Swedish white majority that believes in a post-racial "colorblind universalism" and "multiculturalism" and in which discussions of race are "taboo" (Karlsson 2014, 45) and higher education textbooks routinely replace the word "race" with "ethnicity," such "ideological self-definitions" (Hübinette and Lundström 2014, 426) only serve to reproduce white supremacy while appearing to condemn it. This kind of

exceptional self-image is ripe for the justifying language of neoliberal rhetoric which maintains that privilege and exceptionalism.

Chapter Conclusion

The link between economic policy and race is often overlooked in discussions of Sweden. Even a book titled *The Anatomy of Inequality: Its Social and Economic Origins—And Solutions* (2016) by eminent Swedish economist Per Molander never once uses the word “race” with regard to income inequality in Sweden. Despite such an oversight, there are works of popular culture that engage with this intersection of race and economics. This dissertation will explore the way the works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund demonstrate this link between race and economics, discourses that generate tension between traditional Swedish social justice exceptionalism and norms of collectivity. This dissertation will also investigate other major similarities in their work, particularly their use of queerness and non-normative masculinity as a conceptual strategy to mediate the understanding of race and economics. In virtually all their works, homosociality, homosexuality, and homophobia play major roles in negotiating categories of identity, as well as the deconstruction of norms of masculinity within cultural and economic systems. However, the potential freedoms of queerness are often undermined in both artists’ work when queerness and/or queer characters experience breakdown of subjectivity and a sense of authentic selfhood in the struggle to find stable identity.

Chapter One

Jonas Hassen Khemiri: *Ett öga rött, Montecore, and Invasion!*

“For me economics has always been linked to power or the potentiality of freedom...I went to the UN; even the most powerful people at the UN felt powerless. So maybe you have to find other ways to feel free. And in New York is where I ultimately started to write *One eye red*¹”

-Jonas Hassen Khemiri (Khemiri Interview, 11:54-14-05).

Introduction

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's impulse to write his first novel *Ett öga rött* [One eye red] (2003) was triggered in many ways by disillusionment with what he perceived as a connection between economic hegemony and racial privilege. Money doesn't always guarantee the disenfranchised access, power, or "freedom." Despite these limitations, nearly all of Khemiri's protagonists internalize, enact, and wrestle with neoliberal economic values of competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and materialism. These characters are determined to succeed economically, not just as a challenge to privilege, but as a method of establishing a form of stable identity in Swedish culture. However, Khemiri frequently undermines these characters' ability to gain access to or redefine "Swedishness," often leaving them in states of ambiguity and disillusionment.

This chapter will focus on Khemiri's first two novels *Ett öga rött* [One eye red] (2003) and *Montecore: En unik tiger* [*Montecore—The Silence of the Tiger*] (2006), as well as his play *Invasion!* (which premiered on March 10, 2006 at the Stockholms Stadsteater, Stockholm), analyzing these texts through four lenses. The first section will explore the way characters interpret and perform neoliberal economic values through materialism and rationalism and how success and/or failure either jeopardizes or enhances a stable sense of identity; the second section investigates the role of art and performativity in trying to forge an identity in a neoliberal context. In these early novels and plays, children play pivotal roles, heightening the sense of the future at stake, and the third section will examine the link between this motif of the child and anxieties of futurity, particularly as it relates to the creation of successful neoliberal subjects and what kind of access to "Swedishness" they achieve. Another prominent recurring motif in Khemiri's work is queerness, whether in the form of homophobia, anxiety about masculinity, homosocial and homoerotic relationships between men, or characters identified as homosexual or queer. The final section explores queerness in the context of Khemiri's characters' experiences of identity. What is the connection between anxieties of successful economic competition,

¹ *Ett öga rött* [One eye red] (2003) by Jonas Hassen Khemiri.

futurity, and queerness? In what ways might a lack of normative futurity and queer failure, to use Jack Halberstam's term, represent an epistemological envisioning of subjectivity outside of hegemonic "Swedishness"? How might queerness interrupt a neoliberal cycle of identity creation through economic competition? Conversely, how might failures by characters marked as queer represent the entrenchment of economic and racial inequality in Swedish society?

Part One—The Winner Takes It All

The Neoliberal Subject of Capacity and Materialism

In 1999, Jonas Hassen Khemiri began his studies at the Stockholm School of Economics, and, in describing his initial reaction, he says, "It was a school with quite a hidden agenda. It was quite important I felt when I went there for the school to show us students that capitalism was the best possible system. There was not much room for questioning the basic idea of capitalism" (Khemiri Interview, 5:55-11:00). Such unquestioned faith in the power of unfettered, free markets to provide the ideal form of self-governance and freedom originates with Adam Smith's 18th-century philosophies on liberal economics and continues to provide the foundation for contemporary incarnations of that ideology in various forms of global neoliberal economic systems. Though contemporary neoliberal economic policies have and will continue to make various expedient compromises to safeguard upward distribution of capital, its rhetoric of responsabilization and values of competitiveness, independence, and entrepreneurship have remained consistent. This rhetoric supports neoliberal economic structures and masks the inequalities that sustain monopolies on capital by promoting meritocratic mythologies in which each person, with the right determination and decisions, can achieve anything. Such mythologies obscure the vast institutional and racial hierarchies that interfere with access to capital.

In a country like Sweden, with its exceptional self-image of successful social-welfare democracy and egalitarian "multiculturalism," this neoliberal mythology and rhetoric would seem out of place. Yet as Karlsson (2014), Pred (2000), and others have demonstrated, much of that exceptionalist self-image conceals extraordinary white privilege and the links between race and income inequality in Sweden. Peeling away the surface camouflage of social-welfare exceptionalism reveals a population increasingly living under neoliberal restructuring (Stenport and Alm 2009, Nestingen 2008, Harvey 2005, Piketty 2014). Andrew Nestingen observes that decades of neoliberalism have indeed moved Scandinavian culture towards materialist consumerism: "Further, neoliberal policy has been accepted and promulgated by the mainstream political parties ... While many features of the welfare state continue to enjoy broad support, the consumer has displaced the citizen as the privileged figuration of political action" (Nesting 2008, 8). I would argue that people living in Sweden also internalize an accompanying neoliberal value system of competitiveness and entrepreneurship and its accompanying

psychologizing discourse, as Borevi (2013), Bondeson (2003) and Schierup and Ålund (2011) have discussed.

The prevalence of this neoliberal discourse in Khemiri's work signals a perception that, despite Sweden's reputation, people living there have self-awareness of the neoliberal meritocratic discourse that links economic success to overcoming institutional racist structures. Khemiri says that this awareness of the importance of capital and neoliberal values was made clear to him from an early age, particularly as it relates to the experience of racial discrimination:

I think that one of the explanations for that kind of focus on economics or curiosity that I have about money comes from the fact that I studied economics but maybe more so that I grew up in a family where I think financial success was seen as something that could unlock society. You know, so, we live in a society where people are not treated equally, where's there's discrimination. If you have a certain name you won't be called to get a certain job interview. But the one thing that can unlock limitless possibilities was in my family, money. The idea that once we have money we will be maybe not happy but free. Maybe that was the same thing, but that was the mantra. (Khemiri Interview, 3:55–5:00)

This mantra that might give one the key to “unlock society” illustrates the connection not just between neoliberal discourse and wealth, but *racial* privilege and wealth. As Karlsson explains, “Swedishness” is considered the exclusive purvey of white privilege (Karlsson 2014). Neoliberal rhetoric wants to claim that the world consists of purely economic actors in which the ability to claim “Swedishness” is decided not in courts or “hearts and minds,” as the popular phrase goes, but in the marketplace. There will be winners, and there will be losers. But of course, the game is already rigged in favor of whiteness, which neoliberal discourse tries to disguise.

To be a winner and embody the mantra that Khemiri heard as a child, one needs to become what Angela McRobbie calls a neoliberal “subject of capacity” (McRobbie 2007, 718). A subject of capacity is a purely economic actor who has not only internalized values of competitiveness, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and rationality but also successfully embodies and enacts those qualities through accumulation of capital. Other endeavors become peripheral, as we see in the opening line of Khemiri's first novel *Ett öga rött* (2003) when we first meet Halim, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. His first words to the reader are, “I dag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären” [Today was the last day of summer break and so I helped Papa in the shop] (Khemiri 2003, 9).² The first line's declarative syntax establishes Halim as a subject of capacity in-the-making and contains several important signifiers vital to positioning Halim within an economic context by situating the reader in a family “affär” [store]. He goes on to detail the many items for sale in the shop (2003, 9). The first thing Halim and his father do is fill the *skyltfönster* or window display (9), an action symbolic on multiple levels, the first being an awareness of the gaze of others. On the formal textual level, this image of the shop window implicates the reader as spectator and serves as a metaphor for the act of reading. The

² All translations of *Ett öga rött* are my own.

physical book is yet another deeper level of the window metaphor as the reader opens the cover to look inside. The reader “sees” a sign in the window: “Vi har ALLT! (Pappa valde texten)” (2003, 9) [We have EVERYTHING! (Papa chose the text)]. On the one hand, the sign perfectly encapsulates the aspirational nature of neoliberal economic values with a double meaning that commodities are not just for sale but in someone’s possession, the ultimate accumulation. However, Khemiri undermines this bravado with an irony that links consumption with identity: in the novel’s opening line, Halim fails to employ correct Swedish grammatical word-order in the first clause. The incorrect syntax cues the reader to recognize that this store belongs to an immigrant family and thus can lead to nationalistic and privileged assumptions about Halim. Not only does Khemiri problematize norms of “Swedishness” in the opening line, but by placing Halim and his father in the window, exhibited as “immigrants,” the language of the text jeopardizes any agency the system purports to grant them as competitors. On display in the window while arranging the products, Halim and his father become racialized commodities themselves. Kyla Wazana Tompkins has identified a “metonymic of an active relationship with commodity consumption, politics, and citizenship” and that “to consume and to be consumed gain public political meanings” (Tompkins 2012, loc. 3413 of 7265). Only a few lines into the novel, Khemiri has begun exposing the racial hypocrisy that perpetuates the meritocratic myth; Halim and his father may think they are succeeding by selling goods for consumption, but perhaps they are the ones being consumed?

The prologue in *Montecore* (2006) also situates its reader within neoliberal discourse and a materialist universe, asking the reader to “visionera hur världens bästa pappa och bokens superhjärte vandrar vitt kostymerad på sitt luxuösa lofts takterrass i New York” (Khemiri 2011, 9) [envisionate how the world’s best dad, and superhero of this book, wanders white-costumed on his luxurious loft’s rooftop terrace in New York (Khemiri 2011, Prologue)].³ In this novel, the father’s financial success expands globally to a conqueror’s view over all of Manhattan, a “superhero” feat made more impressive by his rags-to-riches journey from Tunisia to Sweden. Just as with Halim’s father’s storefront window, there exists an irony of consumption in *Montecore’s* prologue, as the speaker acknowledges that the very act of reading this text is a decision about consumption and whether to purchase the book or not: “Hej, Kära läsare, där du står bläddrande i bokbutiken! Låt mig explikera varför tid och finanser ska offras på just denna bok!” (2011, 9) [Hello, dear reader, standing there skimming in the book boutique! Let me explicate why time and finances should be sacrificed for this particular book! (2011, Prologue)]. The reader may buy the book and, in so doing, accumulate the speaker, the father, and his jacuzzi, an act of consumption made even more problematic by the racial and cultural implications of a potential white Swedish reader consuming characters marked as non-Swedish. This consumption of the father’s identity is exacerbated to an absurd degree by the fact that Kadir, the novel’s narrator, invents a name for the father: “för att profitera hans framtida omlokalisering till Sverige proponerar jag det symboliska namnet ‘Abbas.’ Sen kan vi skriva: ‘Min fars namn bar alltså likheten med den svenska popgrupp som skulle råga sjuttioalets dangsgolv med hits som ‘Dancing Queen’ och ‘Bang-a-Boomerang’” (2011,

³ All Swedish language quotations from *Montecore*, originally published in 2006, are from the Månpocket mass paperback edition published in 2011. All English translations from *Montecore* are from the English language translation by Rachel Willson-Broyles, also published in 2011.

30) [In order to prophesy his future relocation to Sweden, I propose the symbolic name “Abbas.” Then we can write: “Thus my father’s name bore similarity to the Swedish pop group that would heap the dance floors of the seventies with hits like “Dancing Queen” and “Bang-a-Boomerang” (2011, 18)]. The speaker’s odd, bombastic style peppered with Anglicisms or foreign loan words (“profitera,” “omlokalisering,” “explikera,” “finanser”) employs a conspicuously neoliberal vocabulary from the world of business and marketing. The tale of the father has barely begun, but already he has been subsumed by pop culture, consumed by Swedish readership, and his origins erased, replaced with a “fictional” Swedish identity.

Later in the novel, Abbas will make an even more explicit connection between the erasure of his Tunisian identity, “Swedishness,” and economic values. In an echo of the storefront sign “Vi har ALLT!” at the beginning of *Ett öga rött*, Abbas quotes the ABBA song “The Winner Takes It All” in justifying his decision to embrace entrepreneurship and money-making as the way to succeed in Swedish culture, provide for his Swedish wife Pernilla, and impress her parents: “Ekonomi är vital för att erhålla svenskarnas respekt och lämna invandrarens fack. Vinnaren tar allt, som ABBA sjunger. Vinnaren tar verkligen allt, och vinnaren ska bli jag” (2011, 96) [An economy is vital in order to receive the respect of the Swedes and leave the pigeonhole of the immigrant. The winner takes it all, like ABBA sings. The winner really does take it all, and the winner will be me (2011, 78)]. Abbas completely internalizes the neoliberal meritocratic myth that economic success will overcome white, Swedish privilege. Of course, ABBA isn’t an identity at all—it’s an abbreviation of names. It symbolizes a nameless, financialized export. Becoming rich doesn’t grant access to “Swedishness” any more than buying an ABBA album does.

As in *Ett öga rött*, this irony undermines the meritocratic, neoliberal discourse at the heart of Abbas’ purported success, a neoliberal hypocrisy that was obvious to Khemiri at a young age:

And I think that comes back oftentimes in my writing, this idea that money can create a situation where you as an individual can move up in the system. But it’s not really clear how that upward motion can change structures. And that was not the case when I grew up either. No one in my family thought that these structures could ever be changed. Do you know what I mean? The only way that we can change anything is to change our situation. (Khemiri Interview, 5:00–5:45)

In *Ett öga rött*, Halim, too, appears suspicious of neoliberal discourse and work ethic, as he is careful to point out that “Papa valde texten” (Khemiri 2003, 9) [Papa chose the wording] of the sign. In his inaugural journal entry after the first day of school, Halim describes his embarrassment listening to white classmates describe their luxurious summer vacations: “Anna berättade hon hade varit på Kuba och sen renoverat stugan i Sandhamnen. Sen alla började snacka sommarlov så jag gick mot syorummet och läste på anslagstavla med reklam för gymnasier” (2003, 14) [Anna said that she had been to Cuba and then renovated the summer house in Sandhamn. Then everyone began chatting about summer vacation, so I went into the sewing room and read advertisements for colleges on the bulletin board]. Though Halim attempts to mitigate the frustration of his classmates’ privilege with aspirational curiosity about higher education, the bulletin board also represents the very

embodiment of maintenance of privilege: access advertised but held high enough so as to be just out of reach.

Despite such experiences, Halim internalizes neoliberal discourse and clings to materialism and attempts to embody his own interpretation of the successful neoliberal subject of capacity, acquiring material goods he believes to be proof of status in Swedish society. Every step of the way, Khemiri undercuts Halim's actions with ironies and ambiguities that complicate any firm sense of accomplishment and/or stability of "Swedish" identity for Halim. Halim's Södermalm neighborhood also serves as a constant reminder of the complicated nature of identity, as he lives in a trendier, middle class neighborhood in Stockholm, as opposed to suburbs with higher immigrant populations. Not only does Halim's father not practice Islam, but he doubts religion in general, and he insists that Halim master Swedish over Arabic, details which further set Halim apart from the experiences of other children of immigrant families. Halim's home is bombarded with images from Swedish television, and the books Halim is advised to read on immigration contain only tales of inter-Scandinavian immigration between Norway and Sweden (2003, 148–49). Halim's story is missing even in a book of Swedish immigration narratives. He lives in Sweden, yet his connection to place is left in a state of ambiguity.

The prologue in *Montecore* similarly problematizes a notion of stable identity achievable through material accumulation as the narrator attempts to describe an economic journey of success from Tunisia to Sweden to New York, yet the materialistic details paint the picture of a lonely and isolated figure amid skyscrapers whose tale is ostensibly being told by someone else. A "superhero" he may be (2011, 9), but superheroes are masked, their true identities either unknown or the mirror opposite of vulnerability and weakness. This confusion of identities is fed by the type of materialism at the heart of the novel, which differs slightly from *Ett öga rött* in which Halim's focus is very much on brands and physical goods. In *Montecore*, materialism finds its expression in constant references to popular culture and celebrities, particularly Western and American ones: Jennifer Lopez, Paris Hilton, Jerry Springer, Hulk Hogan, Jerry Seinfeld, James Brown, Otis Redding, Etta James, blues, Richard Nixon, Dean Martin, Muhammad Ali, Judy Garland, Audrey Hepburn, Dr. Phil, Madonna, Paula Abdul, and Guns N' Roses (Khemiri 2011, 29, 32, 47, 22, 248). This galaxy of pop stars, reality TV figures, sports heroes, and politicians not only represents American consumer culture but becomes a universe of stars, many of whose identities are also performances and fabrications. In fact, Kadir begins to seem incapable of narrating memory without relying on these celebrity references as substitutes for his own ability to remember the past or make observations: "hans ansikte refererade minst till en ung Antonio Banderas" (2011, 43) [his face referred at least to a young Antonio Banderas (2011, 31)] or "en växande storlek som refererade till tidiga John Travolta eller sena Marvin Gaye" (2011, 43) [an increasing size that referred to early John Travolta or late Marvin Gaye (2011, 30)]. These pop culture references not only serve as materialist, popular discourse but are intimately connected to psychologizing and neoliberal subject formation and values. Kadir uses quotes from the movie *Top Gun* to make his very neoliberal point about entrepreneurship and competitive values, partially quoting the film in English, "This school is about combat. There are no points for second place. Och pappor håller med: Kom ihåg det min son, i livet finns det no points for the second. Man måste alltid vara absolut bäst" (2011, 238) [This school is about combat. There are no

points for second place. And Dads agree: “Remember that, my son, in life there are no points for the second. You always have to be the absolute best” (2011, 202)].

Materialism and Identity

So, what does “being the absolute best” neoliberal, competitive subject achieve? For many of Khemiri’s characters, economic capital (at least in a “meritocracy”) is supposed to grant one access to “Swedishness.” But, as Karlsson points out, that “Swedishness” is exclusively defined as the purview of white privilege and maintained by economic hegemony (Karlsson 2014). Consumerist power is both formed from and informs a sense of national identity (Pitcher 2014, loc. 688 of 5376). Ben Pitcher observes that:

We often define and redefine our own racial identities, our relationship to others and so on, in social and cultural practices that take place within consumer culture ... What race is or means in any particular instance can be untangled in the ensemble of relations mediated by consumer culture (2014, loc. 189 of 5376).

Even if these material objects do not explicitly convey racialized meanings, “Race is made and unmade in countless other ways as we go about the practice of being a human being: the books we read, the food we eat, the TV we watch, the toys we play with, the clothes we wear: all these things (and many others) can and frequently do have racial meanings” (Pitcher 2014, loc. 163 of 5376). The first physical object Halim acquires in the novel is his journal given to him by Dalanda, an older woman and Libyan-Swede, who encourages Halim to embrace his Muslim heritage. It’s an object that serves as both material object and location where Halim mediates reflections on his own and other peoples’ identities. Dalanda encourages the use of the journal, a site of explicit discourse on racial and national identity. Dalanda lectures Halim on “massa arabiska författare, shunnar som Ghassan Kanafani, Fathi Ghanim och Naguib Mahfouz som fått Sveriges finaste Nobelpris” (Khemiri 2003, 11) [tons of Arabic authors, *shunner* [guys] like Ghassan Kanafani, Fathi Ghanim and Naguib Mahfouz, who won Sweden’s finest Nobel Prize]. Dalanda intends for the journal to represent metonymically a national identity *apart* from Sweden, and Dalanda makes it her personal mission to remind Halim to resist the abundant temptations to mimic Swedish society, everything from their decadent, “Zionist” apple juice to the books Halim’s father reads (2003, 134). David Huddart observes, “Feeling like your home is elsewhere can lead you to imagine a homeland that is a pure, untainted place to start again” (Huddart 2006, 70). For Dalanda, the satellite dish which Halim gives his father to watch programs broadcast from abroad in Arabic should represent a separation of identity from “Swedishness,” but it also becomes a moment of material achievement for Halim who interprets the satellite dish as a symbol of purchase power that grants him status in Swedish culture. In this way, Khemiri problematizes easy solutions to defining identity, particularly material ones.

Halim associates the consumption of material goods with the construction of identity and racial categories. In his journal, Halim invents a hierarchy of essentializing

categories for Swedes, whom he refers to using the derogatory metonymic of *svenne*, and for people of color, whom he refers to using the racist *blatte* or *svartskalle*. The less-than-flattering term *svenne* that Halim employs, the American equivalent of “Joe Six-pack” or “Average Joe,” serves as a metonym for all Swedes. It is the intersection of capital, race, and masculinity that Halim identifies as essential “Swedishness” – the *svenne* – so the term becomes synonymous with material goods. Halim delineates three types of *svennar*:

Först det är lyxsvennarna som spelar maffia fast på svennevis. Dom har märken som är dyra fast ändå dom har små loggor och syns mindre än dyra blattemärken. (Svartskallar spelar rika mera ärliga.) Lyxsvennarna har Östrakläder med äkta Lacoste och aldrig estniska Dieseljeans (Khemiri 2003, 36).

First there are the rich *svennes* who pretend to be mafia but in a *svenne* way. They wear expensive brands though they have small logos and seem to cost less than expensive Black-brands. (Blacks play at being rich more honestly.) Rich-*svennes* have East Bloc clothing with real Lacoste and never Estonian Diesel Jeans.

Most noticeable about Halim’s stereotyping is that his essentializing observations are determined by clothing. According to Halim, one’s status in Sweden is not just defined by skin color but by the material that covers it. In Halim’s perspective, social privilege appears partially constructed by the cost of goods themselves, and he spends a good deal of the novel attempting to acquire objects he feels grant him increased social status. Khemiri himself commented on this fact:

I could look at my first novel through the lens of economics and I could see certain things ... So, what is One eye red⁴ from me being, what was I, twenty-five when it was published and now I’m almost forty, so what is that book to me? Well, if we look at it through some kind of economic glasses, I think it seems there are things that popped into my head, these scenes and situations where Halim tries to prove his economic prosperity or successfulness to the reader. The first thing I thought about was this weird thing that a friend texted me about the novel after she had read it. She said that her favorite part was the part where he says that ... there’s something about him having *handskar*—gloves—but still his hands are not freezing because they have Thinsulate, this kind of special insulation. He feels the need to say to the reader that I’m someone who has these kinds of extravagant things, and it keeps coming back throughout the text that this is important for him to say to the reader that he understands that they are at a luxury restaurant to celebrate the work of Nouridine [a family friend, also an immigrant], but in reality, we as readers understand that maybe that restaurant isn’t as luxurious as he wants it to be. (Khemiri Interview, 1:53–3:45)

Khemiri recognizes the allure of that mantra he grew up with, that mantra that Halim internalizes telling him that the right clothes and right amount of money will serve as an

⁴ *Ett öga rött* [One eye red] (2003) by Jonas Hassen Khemiri.

equalizing force, yet no amount of expensive clothing can compete fairly as long as the system is rigged in favor of white supremacy. Furthermore, that Khemiri humbles Halim in the reader's eyes is also a way of problematizing not just institutionalized privilege, but the idea that a *fairer* neoliberal system will somehow be better. It is the system as well, and the normative notions of identity it creates. Capitalism and its neoliberal discourse does not generate a stable "identity" or sense of self and neither will a so-called Swedish "welfare" state. So long as Halim seeks a single, essentialized category in which to locate his subjectivity, he will always be in a loop of identity construction and deconstruction.

Neoliberal Psychology and the Rational Mind

This connection between a neoliberal discourse of competition for goods and identity construction is crucial, for it exposes the deep, psychological component to generating neoliberal subjects and maintaining upward distribution. An entire aspect to becoming a neoliberal subject of capacity occurs not only in the marketplace but also in the mind. By drawing attention to the instabilities of self-perception, identity, and memory, all three works — *Ett öga rätt*, *Montecore*, and *Invasion!* — situate texts within the psychological, which provides the ideal space for the interrogation of neoliberalism's primary talking point: the concept of the rational mind.

Broadly speaking, the liberal economic theory of rationalism ascribes to the belief that aspirational economic success depends on the ability to make rational (and informed) choices. A cornerstone of classic economic liberalism of the Enlightenment espoused by Adam Smith and John Locke, faith in rationalism is more alive than ever today. Swedish economist Per Molander observes:

Vi lever i en tillvaro som in i vardagslivets minsta skrymslen är påverkad av upplysningens rationalitetsideal genom den vetenskapliga och industriella revolutionen. Mat, husrum och andra nödvändigheter är industriellt framställda. (Molander 2017, 68)

We live in an environment in our everyday lives in which the smallest nook is influenced by the rationality ideal of the Enlightenment through the scientific and industrial revolution. Food, home, and other essentials are industrially produced.

It is often through psychologizing values systems and a discourse that promotes rationalism that neoliberalism enacts

specific techniques of governance ... Neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation ... its mode of reason boring in capillary fashion into the trunks and branches of workplaces, schools, public agencies, social and political discourse, and above all, the subject. (Brown 2015, 35–36)

One of the places such neoliberal rationalism and subject-making has “settled” is Sweden, as Jonas Hassen Khemiri experienced during his studies at the Stockholm School of Economics. During that time, he studied economics and literature in “parallel” but “hated” the economics course of study:

I hated the rationality of it ... I felt trapped at that school and I remember my first course in microeconomics ... The first session we had in microeconomics was basically a guy, a professor showing us graphs of how taxes reduce efficiency in a market. We have the equilibrium here, we introduce taxes, then you see this amount of “pleasure” disappears. Of course, this was just a very basic symbol for him to show us the tools of economics, but if these tools are being shown to people who are quite young and who are not used to or asked to think critically about what they’re being taught, that can be quite dangerous. That was the first thing I did at school, where you were supposed to write a paper on that graph, and I wrote a very long paper questioning this ... how this simplicity can actually end up being quite dangerous if you feed into students’ simplified ideas about it how society feels, because it’s important to remember that this is a school where a lot of students who go there come from privileged backgrounds and already have an idea of taxes not being good for society. (Khemiri Interview, 6:30–10:05)

As Khemiri realized early on in his studies, *rationalism* is designed to sound neutral and unmitigated by already existing hegemonic institutions. Yet the omnipresence of neoliberal rationality as a market model “configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown 2015, 31). A marketized system of rationalist belief depends on a meritocratic myth and false equivalency; not every person is born in the same circumstances or receives the same education or unlimited options to make choices that lead to wealth.

In *Ett öga rött*, one of the first things Halim does is retreat into his own mind in order to declare himself a “tankesultan” [thought sultan] (Khemiri 2003, 38) situated in a hierarchy above two other categories of people of color. The first consists of “den vanliga blatten: knasaren, snikaren, snattaren, ligisten” (2003, 37) [the usual Black: the follower, the carpenter, the shoplifter, the thug] and the second category is reserved for “duktighetskillen” [the smart guy], such as “iranier som smörar lärare och vill bli tandläkare och ingenjörer” (2003, 38) [Iranians who suck up to the teacher and want to be dentists and engineers]. In the same journal entry, Halim institutes the third, superior category:

Men i dag jag har filosoferat fram det finns också en tredje blattesort som står helt fri och är den som svennarna hatar mest: revolutionsblatten, tankesultanen. Den som ser igenom alla lögnen och som aldrig låter sig luras (2003, 38).

But today I have philosophized that there is also a third type of Black who stands completely free and is the kind the *svennes* hate the most: the

revolutionary Black, the thought-sultan. He who sees through lies and is never fooled.

Halim uses the words “filosoferat” and goes on to anoint himself a “tankesultan” who rules over an imagined nation of his own creation, shifting his materialist hierarchy into an epistemological space governed more by the psychological than the physical.

Montecore also begins in a way intended to journey backwards into increasingly complex chronological and mental states. The prologue introduces Abbas in a present moment, and the prologue is then followed by epistolary sections written in a present tense by Kadir to Abbas’ son, who happens to be named Jonas Khemiri, alternating with Kadir’s narration of the past and letters to and from Jonas Khemiri. These narratological shifts backwards and forwards in time not only destabilize “reality,” but filter information through several people’s minds and experiences, offering conflicting versions of events. In *Ett öga rött*, Halim has a neighbor named Jonas Hassen Khemiri, but it is unclear whether or not this neighbor is the same person as the author whose name appears on the cover. In *Montecore*, it is equally unclear whether the novel’s character Jonas Khemiri is the same person as the author. As it turns out, Abbas and Kadir are the same person (Khemiri Interview, 32:05–32:08)—two people whose lives are depicted as so startlingly divergent. Whose version is the real one? Are either of them real?

The play *Invasion!* (2006) takes *Montecore*’s psychological complexity a step further as no fewer than four separate characters are identified by the name Abulkasem (Khemiri 2009, 79, 83, 85, 92, 93).⁵ As the four narratives interweave in increasingly complex ways, Khemiri deliberately undermines the spectator’s ability to apprehend any kind of “real” version of Abulkasem, forcing the spectators to become aware of the way the figure of Abulkasem becomes a construction and projection of their own minds and, in particular, filtered through privileged perspectives and preconceived notions.

Psychologized perspectives are precisely the way people are encouraged to internalize neoliberal value systems that promote independence, self-reliance, and competitive spirit. Halim’s “tankesultan” encompasses all of those values. He also combines his materialist/capitalist supremacy with a romanticized Arabic racial identity, “standing completely free” from those other racialized categories. It may be a rationalized action by a teenage boy facing constant discrimination, but in the scheme of neoliberal competition it isn’t a very rational solution. Rather than escaping essentializing and dichotomous modes of representation, Halim only amplifies a pattern of mimetic behavior that reinforces stereotypes. Though Dalanda encourages Halim to rediscover this history of his heritage, Halim consistently misuses or misinterprets the past. Critical to establishing a sense of tradition in Halim’s imagined nation is a grand narrative of national ancestors such as “Arabic” heroes, writers, and rulers. Halim’s self-consciousness of tradition and ancestors is reflected in his own meta-analysis of his journal when he makes the case for stylistic realism in the mode of Mahfouz:

⁵ All Swedish language quotations from *Invasion!* are from the Mån-pocket mass market paperback edition (2009). All translations are my own.

Därför jag rev sidan och istället provade skriva rakt på pucken om vad som hänt i dag. Det måste ju vara äktast möjliga och såklart Naguib Mahfouz skulle aldrig skriva historier om annan än sig och sin liv (Khemiri 2003, 13).

So I tore out the page and instead tried to write straight to the point about what happened today. It must be as true as possible, and clearly Naguib Mahfouz would never write stories about anything other than himself and his life.

It is important to note, however, the ways in which Khemiri resists allowing Halim's use of tradition to theorize a new, realistic mode of hybrid identity. Halim's mimicry of Mafouz only reifies the "unstable urge" to mimic rather than to create (Huddart 2006, 76). Khemiri then steps in and exposes the inauthenticity of this mimicry with irony. For example, later in his journal Halim admits, "Men samtidigt visst, jag erkänner jag skriver inte om ALLT" (Khemiri 2003, 80) [But at the same time certainly, I confess that I don't write about EVERYTHING]. So much for unwavering realism in the style of Mahfouz. Though Halim seeks to escape representation, he ironically mimics Mafouz rather than locating authenticity or realism.

The breathtaking views of the New York skyline and Abbas' rooftop jacuzzi described in the prolog to *Montecore* place the reader in a very different position from Halim: instead of the escapist fantasies of a teenage boy, the reader meets Abbas at the pinnacle of achievement. This sets the groundwork for the neoliberal rationalist arguments that follow. From early on in the novel, life and "karriär" are conflated (2011, 9). To become a successful neoliberal subject of capacity, every step requires rational investment in future gain, and Kadir uses this neoliberal discourse to describe Abbas' decision as a young man to have "investerade en kamera och initierade dokumentation av dåtidens Tabarka" (Khemiri 2011, 58) [invested in a camera and initiated documentation of the Tabarka of the past (Khemiri 2011, 43)]. The "documentary" nature elevates the "investment" through rationality and a sense of reality, despite the irony that a photograph, like other modes of seeing, is mediated by the photographer's own gaze. Nevertheless, Abbas's rational dedication to the steps and sacrifices necessary to become a famous photographer—his initial work in Tabarka, then as an assistant in Sweden to a Finnish-Swedish photographer named Raino, and finally with his own pet portraiture shop—all exemplify the rational subject of capacity.

In *Montecore*, rationalist neoliberal behavior aimed at accumulation of wealth is intimately connected not just to economic agency but to access to Swedish identity and "Swedishness." When Abbas recounts his impassioned attempt to encourage his future wife Pernilla, a white Swede, to ignore the racism that labels him a "politisk fundamentalist" (2011, 86) [political fundamentalist (2011, 69)] and her a "duperad dotter" (2011, 86) [a duped daughter (2011, 69)], his rallying speech is undeniably neoliberal:

Efter min succé ska din släkt gråtande lapa svetten ur våra luxuöst investerade skor. Min mentalitet ska bli mer svensk än deras tänkbara ideal. Min fotografiska succé ska bli mer illuminerad än deras jävla julgranar. Vår ekonomis tillgångar ska växa sig högre än deras jävla Kaknästorn. Låt oss starta nedräkningen tills den dag då Khemiri bildar en familjisk svensk

storsläkt med inflytande som Bonniers och finanser som Rockefeller. (2011, 86)

After my success, your family will, crying, lap the sweat out of our sumptuously invested shoes. My mentality will be more Swedish than their imaginable ideal. My photographic success will be more illuminated than their goddamn Christmas trees. The assets of our economy will grow higher than their goddamn Kaknäs Tower. Let us start the countdown to the day when Khemiri creates a family-style Swedish superclan with the influence of Bonniers⁶ and the finances of Rockefeller. (2011, 69)

In Abbas' vision, material redistribution upends racial privilege to the point that former oppressors have no choice but to show deference. The shoes are not "expensive" but an "investment," one that achieves a level of begrudging respect in Swedish society. Good investments require a rational mind, and Abbas's "mentality" is not only sharp, but even "more Swedish" than other Swedes. Abbas clearly connects economic achievement with access and dominance over that Swedish ideal. In many ways, Abbas views that ideal of Swedishness as almost exclusively financialized; upward distribution of wealth in Sweden is worth more than their Christmas trees, seemingly a defining aspect of white, Swedish Christianity. Yet he has no interest in appropriating the symbolic trappings of Swedish identity; he knows he must be "taller" than their tallest tower. He needs "assets" that will grant him outsized power such as that of the Rockefellers and the Swedish publishing family Bonnier, who as Jews were themselves considered outsiders prior to building a respected publishing empire and even then continued to experience discrimination. In a double irony, the Bonnier family is placed in the same context as the symbol of the Christmas tree.

Accumulating such assets can only be achieved by excelling at embodying neoliberal values. When Abbas writes to Kadir, ecstatic over the birth of his son Jonas, he declares,

Hans nationalitet ska bli dubbelt svensk och tunisisk. Hans mentalitet ska bli diagonalt motsatt till den man som dog samma dag som han föddes. Är det inte symboliskt att Houari Boumédiène dog just den 27 december 1978? Exakt samma dag som min son föddes! Denna dag kommer i sanning bevaras i historiens kalender: En radikals död och en framtida kosmopolits födsel! (2011, 99)

His nationality will be doubly Swedish and Tunisian. His mentality will be diagonally opposite of the man who died the same day he was born. Is it not symbolic that Houari Boumediène⁷ died on December 27, 1978? Exactly the same day that my son was born! This day will truly be preserved in the calendar of history: a radical's death and a future cosmopolitan's birth! (2011, 80)

⁶ The spelling in the Swedish original implies the possessive case, but the translation uses the plural.

⁷ The spelling in the (2011) translation differs from the Swedish original.

Whereas earlier in the text Abbas' economic goals were positioned in opposition to the racist stereotype of the Muslim radical, here Abbas himself derides Tunisian "radicalism" and distances his son as far as possible from any taint that might jeopardize his being perceived as at least half-Swedish. In fact, his "mentality" will be the exact opposite of Tunisian radicalism; it will be Swedish "cosmopolitanism," a superlative example of upward mobility and financial success. Self-identification as "Swedish," then, becomes possible so long as one has the mentality necessary to successfully accumulate capital and challenge economic privilege. When Abbas' photographic collections aren't well received, he redoubles his efforts to seem more Swedish, changing his name to "Christer" and dedicating himself to learning Swedish (2011, 100). Ironically, it is only when Abbas/Christer decides to be a *Husdjursfotograf* [pet photographer] (Khemiri 2011, 230)] that his business takes off, creating a tension between dreams of photorealism and art and the privileged, conspicuous pampering of pets.

Part Two: Performativity and Art

This juxtaposition of art and aesthetics with money and performance problematizes any stable notion of neoliberal subjectivity and identity achievable through capital. Throughout *Ett öga rött*, *Montecore*, and *Invasion!* Khemiri consistently generates tension between representations of performativity and his characters' attempts to define themselves in relation to normativities, as if to suggest that characters truly desire an epistemological way to escape categories, not fit inside old ones or create new ones.

In the cases of Halim (*Ett öga rött*) and Abbas (*Montecore*), offsetting this equation of money with identity are photography and theater, which symbolize a realm outside the purview of economic privilege and "Swedishness." In *Montecore*, art (photography) is portrayed as Abbas's key to escaping Tunisia, rather than his initial career in law with which he grows unsatisfied. Initially, Abbas sees art as outside the realm of money. For example, Kadir tries to convince Abbas's son, Jonas, to note in his memoir that the two men were opposites: "Min fars väg var Konstens, Kadirs väg var Ekonomins" (Khemiri 2011, 49) [My father's way was Art's; Kadir's way was Economy's (Khemiri 2011,35)].

This image of dueling pistols with regard to art versus business necessarily calls to mind Chekhov's famous quotation about realism in theater: "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act" (Rayfield 1997, loc. 4104 of 16246). But what is truly real in a theater? This question of performativity and the irony of art and the theater as refuges from all-pervasive neoliberal capitalism also run through *Ett öga rött* and *Invasion!*. On the one hand, performativity has a deconstructing potential; through costume and make-up and lights one can assume and morph identities, playing with their alleged fixity. Such potential would no doubt be attractive to a person deliberately excluded from hegemonic normative ideals of "Swedishness." Yet performativity is itself also a construct; if one is always performing, is there ever a stable, singular self-identification? Khemiri rejects this dichotomy, asking readers to problematize the very notion of identity itself.

In *Ett öga rött*, performativity appears through the recurring motif of the theater—both the physical space of performance and the performances themselves—as the place where Halim often attempts to use materialism to challenge Swedish identity. The ticket booth at Dramaten [Stockholm’s Royal Theater] also transforms into a performative space as Halim impersonates “Johan F” to gain entrance to the theater (Khemiri 2003, 179). Halim’s clothes are what garner “sideways” looks, and he proudly displays them as an announcement of his participation and competition in commodity culture, challenging white Swedish nationalism in its symbolic cultural core, Dramaten. Performativity also assumes a very neoliberal and materialist aspect in *Ett öga rött*. In Halim’s hierarchy of white Swedes, there are rich *svennes*, hippie *svennes*, and lastly ballet dancers and their male counterparts who are “riktiga bögar” (2003, 37) [real queers, gays, sissies]. In a sign of Halim’s self-awareness that these identities are performed and constructed through material goods, Halim explains a second category of *svenne*, the *lodisgänget* [rebels/outcasts] who wear torn leather jackets and jeans (2003, 36), and he suspects “lodisgänget spelar falska för alltid dom har massa fikaflous och ingen av deras föräldrar sitter i spärr eller jobbar städare” (2003, 37) [the rebels are faking it because they always have money and I’ve never seen their parents working in the subway or as janitors]. His observation hints that Halim is acutely aware of the performative nature of this materialism and the ways in which hierarchies of racial and economic privilege are can be constructed to resist challenges to their dominance.

Halim exemplifies the fluid and performative nature of the commodities system, and Khemiri uses the neoliberal ubiquity of McDonald’s as one of capitalism’s global signifiers to blur the lines between performativity, identity, and capitalism. In a McDonald’s on Hornsgatan in Stockholm, Halim fakes a telephone call with an imaginary girlfriend so people around him can hear: “Nej, jag kommer hem till dig sen, bitch. Först jag vill softa runt med polarna, vi ska på restaurang och Stures. Men jag kanske ringer dig sen. Kanske sa jag, hora” (Khemiri 2003, 176) [No, I’ll be home later, bitch. First, I want to relax with my buddies, we’re going to a restaurant and Stureplan. But maybe I will call you later. I said maybe, whore]. Halim’s fake phone call converts this space into one of performance. Halim’s performance offers a pose meant to both disrupt Swedish notions of proper behavior and assert and challenge economic hegemony through the appearance of material goods (the cell phone). On the one hand, McDonald’s could symbolize the perfect place to question the legitimacy of nationalist normativities. On the other hand, McDonald’s is deliberately designed to be *identity-less*, as each location is a carbon copy featuring the same brand, the same appearance, and the same food. McDonald’s is mimicry itself — this could even be said about the food—a kind of colonial, neoliberal export intended to erase and encourage patrons to mimic its global values. Anna Stenport Westerstål observes, “In Sweden, consensual corporatism was seen as a ‘middle way’ between capitalism and communism” that was integral to the Swedish Model (2009, 125). In the McDonald’s, Khemiri forces the reader to confront this critical intersection of economics and identity: Is the marketized identity of a purely economic actor an actual identity or merely mimicry of a role assigned by those controlling economic privilege?

In *Ett öga rött*, the character Nourdine, Halim’s father’s close friend, also exemplifies this performative and mimetic failure. Nourdine is an actor originally from Lebanon who claims to have toured the world in a production of *Waiting for Godot* (Khemiri 2003, 50). He is fond of reminiscing, “Visste du att Ingmar Bergman såg oss i Paris? Va? Har jag sagt

det? (2003, 50) [You know that Ingmar Bergman saw us in Paris, right? Have I said that?]. Ironically, this occurs in Paris, not Sweden. Swedish theater enforces a theatrical hegemony where “ingen regissör vågar ens låta han komma på auditioner” (2003, 90) [no director dares let him come in for an audition]. Nourdine’s ethnic background is at odds with notions of Swedishness, despite the fact that “Nourdine pratar finaste engelskan som en gammal adel” (2003, 50) [Nourdine speaks English like an old nobleman]. Instead, Nourdine is relegated to roles such as a Kebab stand attendant, humiliated into uttering the lines, “Stark sås? Salt på fritsen?” (2003, 30) [Spicy sauce? Salt on your fries?]. Nourdine tries to play by the rules ascribed him in Swedish “culture,” but Khemiri reveals these to be a double standard meant to distance Nourdine from Swedish identity.

Khemiri uses the formal elements of drama itself in his play *Invasion!* to explore and question intersections of performativity and identity with racial privilege and economics. Abulkasem was a romanticized “Arab” character in a play by one of Sweden’s canonical authors of the early 19th century, Carl Jonas Love Almqvist. Khemiri adopts the name and character for *Invasion!*, but then the name appears attached to three other characters as well. One of them is Arvind, who assumes the name Abulkasem, another is Arvind’s uncle Abulkasem, and still another is a suspected “terrorist”: Abulkasem never assumes any single fixed identity but is always contingent upon the actor playing him or the particular narrative in any given scene. The character of “Abulkasem” isn’t even among the “Fyra skådespelare” [four players] listed in the play’s written version (Khemiri 2009, 75); Yousef’s uncle is listed as “Lance,” which is his stage name. Further complicating matters in this *dramatis personae* is the fact that the players themselves are technically unnamed and identified as “A man,” “B man,” “C kvinna [woman],” and “D man.” Beside these monikers are listed the various roles alternatively performed by each actor: “A man, 40-50 år = Skådespelare I, Lance, Agenten, Guiden, Journalisten, Äppelplockaren” (2009, 75) [A man, 40-50 years-old = Actor I, Lance, Agent, News Program Host, Journalist, Apple Picker]. “A man” will inhabit a dizzying and alternating number of identities that range from a teenage boy to an adult to a homosexual actor to a journalist and news program host to an undocumented migrant farm worker. Once again, Khemiri disrupts the spectator’s projected, privileged assumptions about characters as they switch in and out of roles, forcing the spectator to confront the constructed nature of such categories.

Scene four of the play, “FORSKARPANELEN OM ABULKASEMS FLYKT” (2009, 107) [THE EXPERT PANEL ON ABULKASEM’S EVASION OF THE AUTHORITIES], assembles on television a panel of three “forskare” [researchers] who explain their inability to locate Abulkasem’s whereabouts. Their “research” shifts from the realm of facts and the material to nothing more than supposition, their expertise merely a performance of security and state-sanctioned surveillance, itself a failure at “spectating.” What the researchers *do* know is only what they don’t know: Abulkasem’s whereabouts have ranged from Jordan to Senegal (2009, 108), all locations meant to conjure associations with Middle Eastern and African terrorism, blurring them into an “othered,” indistinct, and almost borderless geography intended to racially differentiate Abulkasem from the “viewing audience” located within the ever-watchful Swedish borders, physically brought to life by the borders of the theater itself. Even here, Khemiri injects a playful reference to neoliberal global consumerism as Researcher 1 states that in Dakar, Abulkasem smuggled himself onto “ett fartyg som transporterar freonfrysar och Happy Meal-figurer till Sydamerika” (2009, 108) [a ship that transports freezers and Happy Meal figures to South America]. Juxtaposing

McDonald's with Abulkasem's terrorism playfully exposes anxiety about the perceived threat, both racial and economic, he poses to upward distribution of capital and the maintenance of that hegemony.

Deeply ironic, the figure of Abulkasem may be as mass-produced a fantasy as the plastic, mass-produced Happy Meal figures he allegedly stows away with. Even the senses can't accurately detect his presence: one moment he can be a man hiding behind a weeks-old newspaper, another moment a perfumed woman with a camera or masquerading as a child (2009, 109). He disguises his voice blending "urdu med zembliska med persiska med småländska" (2003, 109) [Urdu with Zambian with Farsi with Småland Dialect]. Recalling Abbas' vow in *Montecore* to use proficiency in Swedish to gain access to economic wealth and acceptance in Sweden, such an imperceptibility between a unique Swedish Småland dialect and Farsi not only frustrates Abbas's dream of access through language but blurs any ability to use language to essentialize a distinct "Swedishness." Even Abulkasem's "lukt" [scent] varies (2009, 109), smelling of sweat one day and Obsession cologne the next; his lack of wealth and the barest necessities can change on a dime to expensive toiletries, further obscuring clear lines between what it means to be "wealthy" or accumulate material goods. The researchers are "hunting" a person outside the bounds of any single category (2009, 109).

Though the news program constructs a phantom identity for its imagined audience, there exists a very real spectatorship in the theater itself, and Khemiri doesn't take any chances that the audience might hide behind layers of suspended belief. *Invasion!* begins before it begins with a scene simply titled "I FOAJÉN" (2009, 76) [In the lobby] intended to actually take place in the lobby of the theater before the play starts. While the spectators are milling about the lobby before the show, the actors playing Yousef and Arvind are to come inside the lobby "inkladda kepsar och mjukisbyxor. De har varsitt McDonald's-sugrör och några pappersservetter, blåser tuggade papperstussar på varandra" (2009, 76) [dressed in baseball caps and baggy pants. They each have McDonald's straws and paper napkins and blow the chewed-up paper sleeves of the straws at one another]. Khemiri uses the scene to potentially trigger spectators into making immediate, racist assumptions about the boys who appear to have come in off the street behaving badly and wearing clothes that may trigger racialized associations. Once again, Khemiri calls upon McDonald's with its consumerist and global commodification to symbolize a kind of non-Swedishness and neoliberal values. The presumably majority white Swedish audience, with their disposable income for theater-going, is disrupted by racially-differentiated youth who are determined to interrupt any privileged ability to establish how one (i.e., a Swede) properly behaves at the theater. This, of course, becomes metaphorical for the larger conflict between white economic and racial privilege and those held outside of that hegemony.

Khemiri instructs the actors to appear as if they "Puttar in varandra i andra åskådare" [shove each other and other spectators] and to "Går runt i foajén, är högljuda, raggat på någon tjej" (2009, 76) [walk around the lobby and in loud voices hit on some girl]. Whereas the news program talking heads in scene 4 lose the ability of their five senses when trying to detect Abulkasem, Khemiri drives the actual *Invasion!* spectators to a level of initial anxiety that elevates all their senses—they're pushed and shoved and shouted at, view misbehavior and racialized dress and skin color, and are perhaps even forced to touch McDonald's trash or smell the unmistakable odor of French fry grease on

clothes. The false, governmental hysteria around Abulkasem will be juxtaposed with very real embodied and privileged reactions.

Scene one “ALMQVIST’S INTRO” further escalates this tension by not only pitting majority white Swedish spectators against racialized teenagers but also triangulating this struggle with actors on stage who are performing a scene from Carl Jonas Love Almqvist’s play *Signora Luna* (1835). *Signora Luna* is set in a Sicily that has been torn apart by warring Dons fighting for control of the island. At the heart of the drama is the figure of Signora Luna, a woman viewed as a saint. The island’s ruler has been violently overthrown, and the people left in chaos. Beneath the present-day warring, a past narrative is submerged: Signora Luna’s relationship with a pirate named Abulkasem. By using Almqvist’s play and its anachronistic verse, diction, and imagery, Khemiri immediately generates a self-consciousness about the role of spectatorship and calls attention to the spectator’s pact to view the performance as something like reality. The imagery used in the Almqvist excerpt—castles, ships, flags—is a vocabulary of war and builds on the iconography of terror as incorporated into the set design in a 2012 performance by the San Francisco-based theater company Crowded Fire Theater. The text works quickly to other Abulkasem, and his “Arabness” is reinforced by the fact that “Han var / Från Afrikas nordwest, af Mogrebiners stam” (Khemiri 2009, 78) [He was / From Africa’s north-west, of Mogrebiners tribe]. Abulkasem is mythologized into the image of a “Sköflaren” [plunderer/pillager] and “Mordbrännarfacklan” [arsonist/destroyer by fire] (Khemiri 2009, 78). This portrayal of Abulkasem as a terrorist initiates a crucial moment in the play, as his identity will later become unclear when multiple characters assume the identity of “Abulkasem.”

Soon the teenagers who had been hanging out in the lobby “invade” the play *Invasion!* with both literal disruption and the symbolic disruption of being non-white people interrupting a performance by white actors. Yousef and Arvind, now sitting in the audience with the other spectators, have so disrupted the performance with their bad behavior that one of the actors breaks character and threatens, “Om ni inte kan uppföra er som folk så är det ingen idé för oss att” (2009, 79) [If you can’t behave like people, then it’s no use for us to]. However, the actor has gone too far, othering the non-ethnically Swedish teens beyond the universal notion of “people,” which causes one of the boys to yell indignantly, “Som folk? Du är folk, du är folk!!!” (2009, 79) [Like people? You are people, you are people!!!]. Even though the spectators soon realize that the “teenagers” in the audience are actors and part of a scripted performance, the moment of disruptive terror has done its damage to the spectators’ sense of security.

It comes as little surprise that Khemiri titles his play *Invasion!*, as its immigrant characters’ refusal to “behave like people” arrives as a threat to notions of Swedish national identity. Khemiri utilizes what is actually a fairly storied Scandinavian tradition of acts of theatrical resistance and, in particular, disruption. Disrupting the ethnic Swede’s privileged subject position through competing subjectivities that fail to mimic idealized or traditional notions of “Swedishness” acknowledges what Jenny Hughes describes in her book *Performance in a Time of Terror: Critical Mimesis and the Age of Uncertainty* as “the urgent demand for interruption of the atrophic, petrified projections of the self and other” (Hughes 2011, 18). Through actual disruption, visual semiotics, plays within plays, extra-theatrical spaces, othering speech utterances, and conflicting narratives, disruption destabilizes the optics of the privileged subject position. Khemiri does not allow theatrical performance to “heal this wound” of insecurity. Nor does he allow the play to become a

meditation on the way the non-ethnically Swedish people are othered and stereotyped as terrorists. To do so might allow the spectators to simply essentialize them into another position or fetishize the “ambiguity” of immigrant identity and recuperate a seemingly objective category of “in-betweenness.” Instead, Khemiri uses disruption to accomplish something bolder—to expose the subjectivity of all positions and to free people from attachment to any notions of what it means to be Swedish.

In both *Invasion!* and *Ett öga rött*, disruption of the frame also occurs in extra-theatrical spaces such as ticket booths, entrances to theaters, and lobbies, as well as restaurants like McDonald’s. The appearance of Yousef and Arvind, racialized figures dressed in clothes intended to distinguish them from the primarily white patrons, in the foyer before *Invasion!* begins offers a prime example. The semiotics of Yousef’s and Arvind’s appearance plays a key role in the disruption, particularly in the way they code messages about race and socio-economic status. They are what Marvin Carlson calls “exemplary images” of the characters’ otherness that reinforce the actual spectators’ privileged subjective positions (Carlson 2004, 37). Khemiri has these two characters mingle in the lobby among the other spectators in what appears to be a theatrically “frameless” situation. The fact that this mingling takes place in a foyer and not in the interior of the theater space places both the actors and audience in closer proximity to the “reality” outside.

Once the audience becomes self-conscious of its own spectatorship, Khemiri can capitalize on this tension by unleashing a destabilizing disruption of the performance itself. Inside Dramaten, the hero of *Ett öga rött*, like the “invaders” in the foyer of *Invasion!*, attempts to disrupt the spectators by visually and physically embodying the notion of a “threat.” Halim observes, “Några kollade lite snett och undrade vad jag gjorde där med Gottochblandat-påse men då jag kunde känna under tröjan på räfflade pistolhandtaget och lugnet kom tillbaka” (Khemiri 2003, 180) [Some people glanced at me sideways and wondered what I was doing with that candy bag but then I could feel the gun under my shirt and calmed down]. He engages the unpredictability of terror by having “smugglade pistolen innanför bältet” (2003, 175) [hidden the pistol inside his belt], so its presence is suspected but not fully revealed.

In *Invasion!*, Yousef and Arvind also take seats amongst the audience but begin disrupting the Almqvist performance by blowing spitballs at the actors on the stage. The boys then make a “pruttljud” (Khemiri 2009, 78) [fart noise], which sends them into fits of laughter. The audience is expected to become irritated, an irritation Khemiri hopes will provoke preconceived notions about the boys’ ethnicity and class. It is only when the boys make another disruptive “fart noise” that the fourth wall separating spectator and performer comes crashing down. One of the actors on stage turns to Arvind and demands, “Om alla bara kunde visa lite respekt för oss som ...” (2009, 79) [If everyone could only show a little respect for those of us who ...]. This provokes Yusef to retort, “Ey det är du som ska visa respekt, jao” (2009, 79) [Hey, it’s you who will show some respect, yo]. Through his disruption, a competing subjectivity arises, causing the privileged spectator to become aware that he or she actually *has* a subject position.

In their most outrageous act of defiance, the boys seize control of the stage. Arvind picks up a megaphone and mimics a formal announcer, who says, “Vi ber att få informera om att Rickard, lärare för sex b är värsta horan och bär kukens storlek som en ekorre och ...” (2009, 80) [We regret to inform you that Richard, teacher for 6B is the biggest whore

and has a dick the size of a squirrel's and ...]. Arvind humiliates and emasculates the privileged identity, pushing aside the white Swede to make room for his own subjectivity. Arvind's mimicry of elevated, formal Swedish is its own kind of disruption. As Hughes observes, "Such moments disrupt 'proper' ways of speaking and doing, remake the 'fabric of sensory experience' and generate new kinds of critical subjectivity" (Hughes 2011, 20). The actors on stage have become competing subjectivities in their own right, as they accuse the audience of racism: "Och till den biatchen ute i hallen som sa något typ [härmar hennes tonfall] 'hela Rinkeby är visst här' när du såg oss, tro inte vi inte horde!" (Khemiri 2009, 80) [And to the biotch out in the hall who said something like (imitating her voice) "practically all of Rinkeby is here" when you saw us, don't think we didn't hear you!]. The confrontation over the racialized reference to Rinkeby also contributes the perception that the boys are not merely actors but "real" people with the power to perceive how others perceive them. Arvind directly addresses the spectators: "Ett två ett två är det några riktiga shonnar i huset? Finns det några äkta blattar i huset eller är det bara massa teatrosfittor? Uh uh uh ... Vem äger ruljansen nu horor? Vem är Shakespeare? Vem är Shakespeare nu horor?" (One two one two are there any real homeboys in the house? Are there any true Blacks in the house or is there only a ton of theater pussies? Uh uh uh ... Who owns the market now, whores? Who is Shakespeare? Who is Shakespeare now, whores?) (2009, 80).

In *Invasion!*, Arvind asks not merely "who is Shakespeare?" but "who is Skakespeare now" (2009, 80). Not only has a new subject position taken control of the performance, but the spectator is forced to view that theatrical reality through a new subjective field: Arvind's eyes. Since Khemiri has shown his cards and the spectators realize that the play's initial chaotic disruption was part of a scripted theatrical frame, Khemiri continues to disrupt the play through the use of characters who themselves appear to have unfixed subjective fields. This is represented by the play's focus on a figure named "Abulkasem." This subject position becomes the performance's all-encompassing obsession, yet not a single character succeeds at embodying this subjectivity.

Ultimately, the disruption of the privileged subject position in these works goes beyond just exposing the illusion of hegemonic identity. In fact, it is as much a warning for those who seek to expose and disrupt it. Both methodologies can fall into a mimetic pattern of confusing and competing subjectivities that rely upon dichotomous stereotypes to try and essentialize what it means to be Swedish. In her dissertation "Negotiating the Other: Language, Ethnicity and Identity in Contemporary Sweden," Corina Lacatus writes, "The greater ideological objective of *An Eye Red*⁸ is to prove the futility and paradoxical nature of a worldview based on the dichotomy us/them" (2008, 132). There is no fixed subject position—identifiable or ambiguous—from which one can gain the security of "Swedishness."

Part Three: Futurity and the Figure of the Child

In Khemiri's early works, the disruption of privileged economic and racial positions is often represented by children or teenagers, potent symbols of futurity. Lee Edelman

⁸ Lacatus translates *Ett öga rött* as *An Eye Red*.

describes the figure of the Child as an “emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (Edelman 2004, loc. 70 of 2829), and in the case of neoliberal economic structures in Sweden that futurity only maintains its value as long as those in power maintain the upward distribution of wealth. Edelman further links the figure of the Child to governmentalized subject formation:

We are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights “real” citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself. (Edelman 2004, loc. 200 of 2829)

Much of this language—“the ideal citizen,” “universalized subject”—harmonizes precisely with neoliberal subject formation and notions of subjects of competitive capacity and purely economic actors. The figural child symbolically bears the weight of all that is at stake in creating such “real” citizens, for the capital they accumulate will help give them the privileges that allow them to decide who counts as a “real” Swede and who does not.

In a financialized society, teaching and instilling neoliberal values to the youth takes primary importance. Children in *Montecore* both play by the neoliberal rules and challenge them. Abbas and Kadir (who are technically the same person) both decide at an early age to dedicate themselves to overcoming their humble childhoods as parentless refugees by becoming a lawyer turned professional photographer, in Abbas’s case, and a diligent hotel worker, in the case of Kadir. Throughout their lives, they value hard work, entrepreneurial spirit, competitiveness, and the fruits of rational decisions that lead to wealth. In particular, Abbas is willing to accept the meritocratic idea that his work ethic, money, and respect for Swedish culture and language will finally grant him a stable sense of family and national identity. Ironically his son, named Jonas Khemiri, rebels against these values in his youth, having been raised in a deeply racist Sweden. Jonas listens to hip-hop music and resists his father’s desire that he make friends with white, Swedish boys who will serve as role models. Jonas will grow up to be the recipient of Kadir’s letters and, in another ironic twist, the one writing his father’s biography, now entrusted with the power of creating the man’s identity on paper: “the Child who becomes, in Wordsworth’s phrase, but more punitively, ‘father of the Man’” (Edelman 2004, loc. 200 of 2829). All along Abbas thought he could construct his own identity, but it is his son who will ultimately create a version most people will know.

Invasion! amps up anxiety of futurity before spectators have even taken their seats, using both verbal and physical intimidation to destabilize their privileged positions. The fact that the disruptors are teenagers draws power from the symbol of the Child and futurity: for some spectators, they witness the future challenge to white, economic supremacy before their eyes. The soon-to-be “future” of “Swedishness” shoves them out of the way, disrupting their beliefs about proper “Swedish” behavior, dress, and attitudes. The teenagers show little regard for this system and enjoy how easy it is to irritate the spectators. In *Ett öga rött*, Halim, too, recognizes the ability to provoke and disrupt white

Swedes' privileged positions, most notably when he buys a satellite dish from a store and places the hidden security tag in a Swedish man's jacket pocket (Khemiri 2003, 69). This reversal of racial and economic privilege not only upends racial profiling (as Halim is suspiciously watched by store clerks) but also the symbol of the Child. The white, Swedish man is duped into surrendering his privileged position, a lack of competitive fitness passed on to his two children watching his "rödaste ansikten" (2003, 69) [reddest face] as he is forced to endure the indignity of going back and forth through the store security detector, symbolizing a future challenge on the rise: Halim becomes what he himself calls a "revolutionsblatten" (2003, 68) [revolutionary Black]. This challenge acquires additional significance when we consider that the satellite dish represents Halim's desire for his father to watch more Arabic language television received from other countries. Halim's actions are not only driven by economics but by identity as well.

Many of Halim's acts of petty crime and intimidation are indeed born of a competition for access and identity, but they also directly challenge privileged positions because Halim refuses to wait to be granted access. Halim mimics what he believes to be rebellious illegal activity through his somewhat cowardly attempts at graffiti. Here, too, Khemiri injects a powerful irony. His graffiti "tag" is the half-moon and star, symbols frequently associated with Islam and the national flags of various nations. Halim adopts these symbols as the standard of his own new nation and power, yet his acts of vandalism occur in the less-than-impressive setting of the school bathroom. Even the symbols of Halim's graffiti are appropriations of already well-established symbols. As opposed to elaborate and deliberately individualized gang tags, Halim's graffiti in no way individualizes him. Halim's identity is left in a state of ambiguity ironically undercut by the acts of petty crime and rebellion he uses to try and differentiate himself.

Though he wears what he considers his best gangster-wear to the Royal Theater in Stockholm and sneaks in under false pretenses, his petty acts of subversion are dwarfed by the luxuriousness of the décor:

I kassan jag sa jag hade fått sms från Johan F och då bruden kollade lista och gav mig en biljett. Lättaste matchen! Inne i själva teatern det såg ut lite som på bio fast kanske hundra gånger mera lyx. I taket och på andra ställen det var gulddetaljer och nära scenen det fanns liten guldbalkong för viggäster. (Khemiri 2003, 179)

At the ticket booth I said I had gotten a text from Johan F and the chick checked the list and gave me a ticket. The easiest game! Inside the theater itself it looked a little like the movie theater though maybe a hundred times more luxurious. On the ceiling and other places were gold details and near the stage was a little gold balcony for VIPs.

Though Halim is self-conscious of the "gun" he pretends to have hidden in his pants, he unwittingly reveals that despite his successful attempt to get into the theater, he is still not an equal, as there exists a VIP section. He is a sultan forced to sit with the masses, a sultan so poor he marvels at the gaudy splendor of a gilded ceiling. In all of these examples the unseen and imagined are privileged over the real. They are partially present but not authentic. Inside Dramaten, Halim attempts to disrupt the spectators by visually and

physically embodying the notion of a “threat,” noisily consuming his candy and pretending to feel for a gun under his pullover. He engages the unpredictability of terror by having “smugglade pistolen innanför bältet” (2003, 175) [hidden the pistol inside his belt], intending for people to sense its presence, though it is unclear to the reader if the pistol is actually real.

In many respects, Halim’s actions are not just disobedient or disruptive but what Sara Ahmed describes as “willful.” It could be argued that forms of willfulness might fall in line with neoliberal values of independence and self-reliance, even competitiveness; making up one’s mind and remaining undeterred might be just the survivalist qualities necessary to compete in ruthless markets. As Ahmed has observed in her book *Willful Subjects*, willfulness can also be a way of claiming sovereignty (Ahmed 2014, loc. 2799 of 7786) and, in Halim’s case, a way of challenging white supremacy’s hold on defining “Swedishness.” As Ahmed argues, “Once you are charged with willfulness, you are not with” but outside of normative conventions (2014, loc. 3118 of 7786). Moreover, being accused of willfulness implies something specific about subjectivity, “one that has intentions and knows her intentions” (2014, loc. 3576 of 7786). Yet for all Abbas’ willfulness to prove himself as Swedish, the goal remains out of reach. Similarly, in *Invasion!* the state’s willfulness as “straightening-device,” as Ahmed puts it (2014, loc. 294 of 7786), fails to identify Abulkasem, as does Arvind’s attempt to disrupt that system by claiming the name. Halim’s willfulness in *Dramaten* leads to the ultimate ironic embarrassment: at a party thrown by school friends, Halim starts a fight over a girl named Marit and is kicked out of the party (Khemiri 2003, 158–59). Halim goes to the party, pleased to be included, and he attempts to play the role of “just one of the gang.” Instead, Halim’s impulsiveness and inappropriate rage sets him apart from his stunned classmates.

Part Four: Queerness and Failure

In her book *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed poses the intriguing question, “What would it mean to offer a queer history of will?” (Ahmed 2004, loc. 287 of 7786), a question directly relatable to the three works by Khemiri under discussion. Queerness and/or queer characters, homosexuality, homoeroticism, and homophobia all feature prominently in *Ett öga rött*, *Montecore*, and *Invasion!* I would argue that in all three texts, some of the most willful characters turn out to either be queer, experience homoerotic relationships, or express homophobia. Neoliberal values of independence, self-reliance, rationalism, and competitive spirit intersect with queerness as either an aid or a hindrance in the creation of successful neoliberal subjectivities. For characters attempting to negotiate what identity means in a culture using wealth and whiteness to define “Swedishness,” what role does queerness play and why does Khemiri feature it so prominently in nearly each of his works to date?

Queerness as perceived and experienced by Halim in *Ett öga rött* is often problematized by his expressions of extreme homophobia. In the study, “Between Gulags and Pride Parades: Sexuality, Nation, and Haunted Speech Acts,” Adi Kuntsman observes that nations are often imagined and constituted through normative femininities and

masculinities, positioning heterosexuality at their core (2008, 264). Nations are presumed to be heterosexual, but, as Kuntsman argues, “the nation’s heterosexuality, too, is performed rather than given; it can be threatened, challenged, and disrupted” (2008, 264). Halim relies upon this fact as he intends to disrupt the perceived heterosexuality of the Swedish man and performs his own hypermasculinity. By connecting the word *bög* [queer, gay, sissy] with the word *svenne*, Halim creates a hyperbolic metonymic for the Swedish male that emasculates the Swedish nation and makes Halim’s imagined nation appear hypermasculine by relief. Halim utters the word *bög*, or some neologism using the word such as *bögig*, twenty times throughout the novel. In several instances, the word is used purely to highlight Halim’s masculinity. For example, he is fond of lashing out at a *bögfrisyr* (Khemiri 2003, 26) [gay hairstylist] and takes great offense at the *bögbok* (2003, 148) [gay book] his teacher tells him to read in order to research immigrant narratives. Halim makes the connection between *bög* and *svenne* explicit in the novel, using the term *bögsvennen* (2003, 203) [gay svenne]. In one instance Halim invents the hybrid *svenneguss* (2003, 33) [svenne-girl] in an interesting mix of the word *svenne*, which is masculine, with the word *guss*, which is a word from Halim’s own mixture of Swedish and words borrowed from immigrant languages. On several occasions Halim combines the word *töntig* (2003, 29, 80, 165) [geeky] with *svenne* as emasculating utterances.

Though Halim hyperbolically makes himself into a hypermasculine persona by using sexist slurs such as “fitta” (2003, 39, 57) [cunt] and “hora” (2003, 183) [whore], I believe the key element here is the level of self-conscious mimicry. For example, prior to sneaking into to the theater, Halim grabs a bite at McDonald’s. Self-conscious of all the “svennare” around him, he decides to play the role of the hypermasculine man, pretending to get a phone call and chastising his “girlfriend” (2003, 176). Khemiri uses the irony of the faked conversation to highlight that Halim’s misogyny is merely a bizarre performance. The greatest irony is that this entire incident occurs prior to his attending the theater, of which he later waxes poetic about the gilded ceiling in a stereotypically less-than-masculine observation. Halim’s intense longing for a Swedish girl named Marit at his school also undermines the authenticity of his misogyny and exposes it as mimicry. Halim admits in his journal, “Jag har legat i sängen hela kvällen och nästan bara tänkt på MaritmaritMARIT” (2003, 121) [I have laid in bed the whole night and almost only thought about MaritmaritMARIT]. The sultan has become a love-sick, moon-eyed boy, romantically repeating a girl’s name.

In *Montecore*, both Abbas and Kadir express homophobia, though their relationship is made more nuanced by an overt homoeroticism at the heart of Kadir’s adoration of Abbas (an idolization triply complicated by the fact that they are the same person, converting homoerotic desire to Socratic, hypermasculine narcissism and self-love). Early in the novel, Kadir instructs Abbas’s son Jonas to describe their relationship this way:

Här ses dom alltså. Min far och Kadir. Hjälten och hans eskort. Kadir som kommer att följer min fars öde för all framtid, lite som Robin följer Batman, eller negern i Dödligt vapen följer Mel Gibson. Dom är två nyfunna bästisar som aldrig ska svika varandras löften. (Khemiri 2011, 19)

So here they are. My father and Kadir. The hero and his escort, Kadir, who will follow my father’s fate forever, kind of like how Robin follows Batman or

the Negro in *Lethal Weapon* follows Mel Gibson. They are two newly found best friends who will never break each other's promises. (Khemiri 2011, 9)

Kadir alludes to the homoerotic and older-younger man relationship between Batman and Robin, which itself performs the homosexual and homosocial inter-generationality at the heart of Plato's *Symposium*. They are bound to one another "forever," their fates and promises intertwined (symbolic overdrive in light of the fact that the two characters are in fact one person). Kadir also evokes highly racialized language to describe his devotion, which is clearly relegated to secondary and that of a sidekick or "escort" who is there more to aid and support as Danny Glover's character does in *Lethal Weapon*. Of course, Kadir's choice to mark himself as the person of color and Abbas as the white character has serious implications given the fact that Abbas spends most of his life trying to leave his Tunisian childhood behind and become, as he says, more Swedish in mentality than the Swedes. Since Abbas also spends his life performing the role of the ideal neoliberal subject when offered the chance, Kadir associates that "superhero" power with whiteness. To take the metaphor even further, Batman can be viewed as an enforcer of discipline for the state, "straightening" (as Ahmed calls it) the willfulness of criminals and bending that will back in line (Ahmed 2014, loc. 294 of 7786).

Much of the homoeroticism shared by Kadir and Abbas alludes directly or indirectly to ancient Greek paradigms of homosexual desire. When Abbas returns to Jendouba to work with Kadir in the cookie factory, an overjoyed Kadir sees the returned long-haired Abbas and wonders if he's been "smittats med homosex" (Khemiri 2011, 43) [infected by homosexuality (Khemiri 2011, 30)] a homophobic slight that comes across potentially as jealousy that someone might have beaten him to the punch, so to speak. Kadir observes that "hans ögonlock ridår över bruna" (2011, 43) [his eyelids curtains over brown velvet wells] (Khemiri 2011, 31) and "hans kroppslighet en växande grekisk guds" (2011, 43) [his corporality that of a growing Greek god (Khemiri 2011, 31)]. In another instance, a Greek photographer "Orientalizes" Abbas with a turban during a photo shoot aimed at Greek tourism to Tunisia. Abbas is gazing back at the photographer (in a way that will make him want to be a photographer) while Kadir is gazing at Abbas, all three men gazing at one another (Khemiri 2011, 43-46). This triangular gazing is also filtered through lenses: literal, cultural, and sexual. It is also a performance, an "Orientalized" pose, a homoerotic pose, an artistic pose, and a power pose. The triangulation is so overpowering in its homoeroticism that Abbas cannot maintain the queer pose for long before he physically assaults the photographer, a gay-bashing that comes as a relief to Kadir, for a rival has been eliminated and the beating allows them to "restaurera vår vänligskapliga duo" (Khemiri 2011, 46-47) [to restore our amicable duo (Khemiri 2011, 34)].

The "duo" has a period of debauchery, enjoying their freedom and sleeping with women tourists. They even receive oral sex at the same time, "medan duon skålar kokosnötsdrinkar" (2011, 57) [while the duo toasts coconut drinks (Khemiri 2011, 42)]. The descriptions of women are also misogynistic and sexist; women are seen as objects, such as the "överviktig belgisk turistiska" (2011, 62) [overweight Belgian touristette (2011, 47)] Kadir and Abbas share in a hotel room. So long as women remain disposable and nameless objects of sexual pleasure, they don't threaten the homosocial "duo," a bond instantly challenged when Abbas meets and falls in love with a Swedish tourist named Pernilla Bergman (2011, 72). Her last name evokes both performance (Ingrid Bergman,

Ingmar Bergman) and gaze (Ingmar Bergman's lens, spectatorship). She both poses and documents, a double-sided persona that undermines Abbas' belief that he has found the ideal Swedish person upon which he can pin all his hopes. Of course, Kadir is repulsed, derisively remembering Pernilla as "Hon ... Svenskan som kidnappat din fars ögon" (2011, 66) [Her...The Swede who kidnapped your father's eyes (2011, 51)]. Once again, there is erotic triangulation in the text, in this case between two men and a woman, explicitly and self-consciously very much about "eyes" and the act of gazing. But does Kadir truly see Abbas for who he is? (This is a self-searching question given they're the same person.) Does Abbas truly perceive Pernilla's "identity" as he thinks he does? Does any gaze *really* see what it thinks it sees? Furthermore, is any one person truly what he imagines himself to be?

The queer character of Abulkasem/Lance in *Invasion!* interrogates the nature of stable identity even further, this time with a character more explicitly coded as queer. In Scene One, right after the disruption of the performance of Almqvist's *Signora Luna*, stage directions indicate, "Vi får följa YOUSEF's minnen av sin dansande morbror Abulkasem, mer känd som LANCE" (Khemiri 2009, 83) [We now follow YOUSEF'S memories of his Uncle Abulkasem, better known as LANCE]. This queer coding of a "dancing" man is followed by the appearance of Man A/LANCE singing aloud in English the now legendary camp lyrics of early 90s pop duo Right Said Fred's song "Too Sexy": "I'm too sexy for your land too sexy for your land / New York and also France" (2009, 83). Not only does the song mark Lance as queer in some way, but, interestingly, he misremembers the lyrics. Though the original song's speaker is "Too sexy for Milan, New York, and Japan," he never specifically says "land." This abstraction actually makes Lance identity-less, as "land" is bound to nationalistic borders. In a sense, he belongs nowhere specific, especially not to Lebanon, as Yousef explains, where "misstänksamma grannar viskade om hans oinstresse för giftermål" (2009, 83) [suspicious neighbors whispered about his lack of interest in getting married]. He works as an exterminator, wearing a gasmask all day, a symbol of his disguised sexuality.

Abulkasem in his incarnation as Lance is a homosexual who spends his days earning money by poisoning insects, in effect symbolically enacting what Lee Edelman refers to as the queer "death drive" (Edelman 2014, loc. 179 of 2829). In relation to the other younger, heterosexual characters, Lance exemplifies the lack of heteronormative reproductive futurity. Having never converted his earnings into a way to achieve his dream of becoming a dancer and as a homosexual, he fails as a neoliberal, heterosexual subject. Further exploration of his character also symbolically disappears as it was cut from the play and included as "EXTRAMATERIAL: YOUSEF'S BORTKLIPPTA MONOLOG eller LANCE UNCUT eller INVASION THE LOST TAPES eller ANLEDNINGEN TILL ATT PJÄSEN INTE BLEV FÖR LÅNG" (2009, 135) [EXTRA MATERIAL: YOUSEF'S CUT MONOLOG or LANCE UNCUT or INVASION THE LOST TAPES or THE REASON THAT THE PLAY WASN'T TOO LONG]. Not only is Lance's character deemed worth cutting from the official version of the play, but this addendum can't figure out what it wants to be, as if to reinforce the ambiguity about who Lance is.

Khemiri's queer character named Khemiri in *Ett öga rött* is equally difficult to pin down, especially as the author and the character share the same name. This character is alluded to through a note left on his absent neighbor's door. Halim dismisses this person named "Khemiri" as his neighbor's "nya bögkompis" (Khemiri 2003, 184) [new gay friend].

By invoking the actual author's name, the reader becomes self-conscious of the fact that there exists a person outside of the text who authored this text, not Halim. Later in the novel, Halim suddenly demonstrates respect for this new neighbor of his named Khemiri, whom he has never met:

Jag tänkte Khemirikillen borde inte ge upp för Sverige behöver fler arabförfattare och kanske min hjälp kan lära honom skriva äktare än dom andra. Om han inte litar jag kan visa honom skrivboken så han impas av alla filosofier och börjar be på baraste knän han får sprida dom i nästa bok. Alla bokföretag kommer direkt vilja ge största flauskontrakt och såklart vi splittar kakan för utan mig han är ingen. (Khemiri 2003, 249)

I thought this Khemiri guy shouldn't give up because Sweden needs more Arab writers and maybe my help can teach him to write truer than the others. If he doesn't trust me I can show him the journal so he's impressed with all the philosophies and begins to ask on his bare knees if he can spread them around in his next book. All the book publishers will right away want to give the biggest contracts and obviously we'll split the pie for without me he is nothing.

Compared to Halim's hypermasculine heterosexuality and embrace of neoliberal materialism, the queer neighbor Khemiri represents the opposite lack of reproductive futurity, as exemplified by the fact that Halim uses their interaction as an imagined scheme to get money.

Chapter Conclusion

If queer characters in these texts symbolize a lack of futurity, in contrast to children and teenagers, what purpose does all this queerness serve in the interest of interrogating Halim's, Abbas', and Arvind's neoliberal drive for success? I would argue, as does Khemiri, that identity itself remains an unstable category and that failing at achieving it, particularly through capitalist means, opens more possibilities for thinking outside normativities. If indeed neoliberalism encourages subject formation "constructed as human capital" this leaves both the subject and state "at persistent risk of failure" (Brown 2015, 37). Since precarity is then an ever-present danger, perhaps Khemiri uses queerness to exploit that potential for failure precisely because it undermines the need to maintain heteronormative and racially supremacist structures in an attempt to think outside heteronormative "static models of success and failure" (Halberstam 2011, 109). Though models of neoliberal success are invariably heterosexual and, like many benchmarks, "measured by male standards" (2011, 134), queer failure may provide room for heterosexuals to imagine themselves outside the confines of the available normative choices.

Yet Kadir's and Lance's homoerotic and queer transgression never contributes to the transcendence of limiting norms or economic and racial inequality. They are portrayed as never achieving lasting intimate relationships, wealth, or artistic success. It could be

argued that Khemiri uses these examples of actual queer failure to demonstrate the way in which neoliberal and racist structures foreclose success against certain people in insurmountable ways. Participation in that neoliberal economic system rarely challenges or lastingly disrupts the white hegemony. In particular, it never truly dislodges either “Swedishness” or the ability to define who is Swedish from the tight grip of white Swedes. These characters never find that stable identity they were searching for. If anything, these texts depict identity as performed, fluid, changeable, and virtually impossible to be truly “authentic” given the constructed nature of identity and all the norms that attempt to discipline it. The anxiety of futurity, symbolized by child and teenage characters on the one hand and queerness on the other, serves to push back against normative notions of fixed identity, encouraging an examination of other ways of seeing oneself in the world.

Chapter Two

Ruben Östlund: *De ofrivilliga*, *Play*, and *Turist*

I think that we, as a species, are very upset when we see an imbalance. When we see inequality; when we see poverty. We really get provoked by that. So, I still think that we are definitely caring about each other, but it's also not how we're building cities. The main idea with cities today is, "go to this place; consume." ... I think that Marx actually did quite a good analysis on how the economic system is affecting us, and I think it's very much about that.

-Ruben Östlund (Utichi 2017)

Introduction

In Swedish director Ruben Östlund's films, "inequality" and "poverty" often serve as triggers that "provoke" characters and spectators and force them to face their uncomfortable reactions. His feature films, from the vignette-style *Gitarrmongot* [The guitar mongoloid] (2004) and *De ofrivilliga* [Involuntary] (2008) to increasingly cohesive narrative films like *Play* (2011), *Turist* [*Force Majeure*] (2014) and most recently, *The Square* (2017), all contain a dilemma or narrative structured around one or more situations that place characters in unpleasant and morally complicated positions. When recently asked by an interviewer what comprises a "typical Ruben Östlund film," Östlund responded:

I would say it presents a very strong, clearly defined situation that contains a dilemma, few or more opportunities, but none of them are easy to make. It's an individual put into a conflict with himself in a situation that is close to stand-up comedies. If you combine that with a sociological perspective, then I would say it's a typical Ruben Östlund film. (Puskas 2017)

Undeniably, some of his characters' troubling situations have comedic elements, but that humor quickly deteriorates into a nervous and uncomfortable reaction on the part of the characters and even the film's spectators. Östlund's formal style and subject matter elicits what Frederik Bove calls a "kind of awkward bystander reflection" (2014). When pushed out of their comfort zones, characters' reactions in these scenarios challenge their self-perception. Frederik Anderson describes this experience as "the cinema of the selfie we didn't share. And yet because it's cinema—it's the *video* of us taking the selfie we didn't share" (2014). Östlund implicates both characters and spectators and forces them to try to reconcile idealized self-images with unpredictable actions and reactions.

Östlund's predominantly white, Swedish characters are often forced out of their comfort zones when confronted by the intersection of economics and culture. In addition to

his earlier films, Östlund's most recent film *The Square* (2017) explores income inequality in Sweden and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. Some of his films' most awkward and troubling situations are triggered by busking, theft, homelessness, and fraud, and they are often situated in a materialist and consumerist context. When analyzed through the lens of neoliberal economic discourse that commands people, as Östlund puts it in this chapter's epigraph, to "go to this place; consume," his characters become caricatures, mocked for their weakness, cowardice, emotional vulnerability, irrationality, and queerness.

This chapter will consider three of Östlund's feature films and how characters embody or challenge notions of the neoliberal subject of capacity. Such challenges generate a sense of anxiety about characters' ability to compete economically and excel at neoliberal virtues such as independence, self-reliance, and rational decision-making. When white privilege and masculinity are at stake in neoliberal economic contexts, Östlund's films intensify anxiety in both characters and spectators about the stability of "Swedishness." As in the works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri, notions of stable Swedish identity and the ability to define "Swedishness" intersect with the maintenance of white economic supremacy, as well as other traditional Swedish discourses of social justice. Östlund's films contain characters who often represent this tension between more individualistic, neoliberal values and an emphasis on collectivity and social welfare. This tension frequently takes on Nietzschean dimensions in Östlund's work, and this chapter will explore the role of the natural world and the trope of the German *Bergfilm* as they convey notions of masculinity and the individual will.

Östlund's films approach this intersection from the position of white, heterosexual, male privilege, a vantage-point that in certain films leads to what could be described as racist portrayals of white panic in the face of cultural and economic challenges to hegemonic power. Despite these portrayals of anxiety, Östlund, like Khemiri, consistently undermines any notion of a stable Swedish identity as a resolution. Both artists routinely leave their characters in various states of ambiguity and liminality as to what it means to be Swedish or men. Unlike many of Khemiri's characters, however, most of Östlund's characters retain privileges of whiteness and/or maleness to fall back on when their moment of crisis has passed. How much self-consciousness they've achieved or how much lasting change they are willing to make also remains ambiguous. This ambiguity is often the result of an unresolved tension between individual will and societal norms.

This chapter will examine other striking thematic similarities between Östlund's films and Khemiri's writing. As in Khemiri's *Ett öga rött*, *Montecore*, and *Invasion!*, the three films under discussion in this chapter—*De Ofrivilliga*, *Play*, and *Turist*—all intersect Swedish identity and neoliberal economics with queerness, interrogating notions of Swedish masculinity in explicitly homosexual, homoerotic, or homophobic scenarios. The presence of queerness in these films, as in Khemiri's work, raises questions about the role of masculinity in the maintenance of economic privilege, as characters frequently try to resist traditional expectations of masculinity. However, such queerings rarely result in new ways of conceptualizing gender or sexuality or destabilizing neoliberal discourse; instead, characters find themselves in liminal states in which heterosexuality and masculinity have been challenged but with ambiguous outcomes at best. At worst, queerness is portrayed as a negative manifestation of lack of competitive fitness and masculinity and wholly in the service of making sense of heteronormativity. This chapter will also investigate another

striking similarity between Östlund's and Khemiri's early works: the motif of the child and symbolism of anxiety about futurity. In Östlund's films, children and teenagers are often involved in criminal behavior, which both complicates and enforces neoliberal values.

Part One: Ruben Östlund and “Swedish” Self-Image

The Individual vs. Collective Swedish Guilt

Like Jonas Hassen Khemiri's work, Östlund's films explore perceptions of what it means to be Swedish. Before embarking on a detailed analysis of Östlund's films, I want to first establish the ways Östlund himself perceives a uniquely Swedish sense of subjectivity, citizenship, and collectivism. This Swedish mindset is different in critical ways from what could be described as a more geographical, religious, and racial tribalism that for hundreds of years has defined American socio-political realities. As discussed in the introduction, Sweden is increasingly showing signs of tribalism, but until the past three decades or so Sweden was viewed by many as largely racially and culturally homogenous, with a solid standard of living for the vast majority of the population beginning at the end of the Second World War. The second-person plural pronoun Östlund uses in this chapter's epigraph is emblematic of a form of collectivist group-think that informs both his own and many other Swedish people's morality and behavior. In another recent interview, Östlund returns to examples of urban planning to make his point about shared Swedish cultural and moral values. Describing the art installation that gives his film *The Square* its name, Östlund says,

I look at that symbolic place more like a pedestrian crossing, which is a beautiful invention if you think about it: We have created an agreement with a couple of lines in the street that is not connected to politics or religion. [It's about] taking care of and putting trust in each other. (Laffly 2017)

As in this chapter's epigraph, Östlund repeats the mantra of “taking care” of one another as something ingrained in the collective Swedish psyche. Östlund also situates this social contract in public space. He imagines such spaces located outside partisan politics and religious creed.

Östlund's example of the pedestrian crosswalk isn't merely about protecting bodies but also about disciplining public behavior: people literally staying inside the lines. Östlund has given several interviews in which he problematizes such collective behavior. Recently, Östlund drew attention to this tension between individual and collective impulses in an interview about *The Square*:

But Swedes put their trust between the individual and the state, and it really points something out: we are super individualistic, but at the same time we have a great belief in this common project that is the state. It was an “aha” experience when I saw this triangle. (Utichi 2017)

Östlund implies an almost artificial suppression of one's true subjectivity in favor of governmental intervention. In another interview, Östlund confesses, "We have a very civilized side where we know exactly what's right" (Laffly 2017). Östlund implies that an entire other side of human subjectivity exists outside the bounds of morality. When this tension between individual and collective morality intersects neoliberal economic values, as well as categories of masculinity and race, it reveals deep cracks in normative assumptions about "Swedishness."

The Individual in Public and Private Spaces

This tension between public vs. private and the individual vs. collective will is a consistent theme in Östlund's work and is symbolized by several recurring motifs. In the above quoted statements, Östlund frequently employs the motif of the public space. His latest film takes its name from an art installation in the shape of a square placed in an outdoor public space. As a cinematic device, it also forces characters and bystanders into the same environment, locations that are open-ended and connected to other spaces but also demarcated, surveilled, and policed. After all, the square is the property of both an artist and the museum, though its aim, ironically, is to promote a sense of universality. Another of *The Square's* narratives originates in a public square: the film's protagonist, a museum director named Christian, falls victim to a pickpocketing scheme and loses his wallet. Believing a woman to be in danger, he tries to help her, only to find himself robbed. This results in a sense of victimization and threatened masculinity that will lead him down a path of self-destruction. Other scenes take place in stairwells and corridors, public yet confined spaces, a combination that often provokes irrational fight-or-flight reactions and useless escalations.

Related motifs of public parks and green spaces also symbolize these public/private and individual/collective themes. Green spaces or public squares are featured in every film except *Turist*, in which such spaces are exchanged for the snow-capped French Alps. The grandiosity of the Alps manages to generate intense claustrophobia when characters find themselves constrained by the limits and isolation of a mountaintop ski resort. The triggering event of the film's opening avalanche literally brings the mountains down to human level and surrounds the characters in snow. The intimacy of the hotel's private spaces means that much of the film's emotional drama spills over into hallways, restaurants, lobbies, and ski slopes in full view of other characters, generating dramatic tension. Placing the competitions in *Play* in natural environments raises another set of issues about the white and Asian losers, implying that their lack of economic and physical prowess is rooted in a troubling queerness. Östlund's film *Play* uses highly racialized competitions between African, Asian, and white boys to highlight successful embodiments of neoliberal values and to portray perceived weaknesses in independence, logic, masculinity, and able-bodiedness that expose potential vulnerabilities to the maintenance of white economic privilege.

Public parks in *Play* often represent transitional space between urban and rural settings. In an effort to ostensibly retrieve their cell phone, the white boys follow the

African boys further out into the suburbs, a scene filmed from overhead and tightly focused on the white boys surrounded by the African boys (Östlund 2011, 38:40). The green expanse of the football field is reduced to a backdrop for the collision of racial tension in a tableau arranged like prisoners being escorted to judgement. In another crucial scene, a green playing field is viewable only from the vantage point of a concrete underpass where the film's African and white characters engage in a push-up competition (2011, 50:40). Later in the film, a final athletic competition will decide the return of stolen goods. After riding public transportation further out of the city (2011, 58:45), the boys enter what looks like a nature preserve (2011, 1:05:11). The boys enter this wilderness, and, on the way to the clearing where the boys will compete in a footrace, one of the white boys, named Sebastian, panics and climbs a tree to escape (2011, 1:09:24). When the boy is taunted to come back down, the tree becomes not a symbol of growth but a leafless dead-end.

Public spaces often exacerbate a claustrophobia that feeds characters' anxieties. Östlund's stylistic trademark of the wide-angle, static camera shot in which characters move in and out of frame intensifies the claustrophobia, particularly on the part of the spectator whose gaze is limited by the unmoving camera. Östlund typically avoids close-ups and perspective shots in favor of what seems like an impartial surveillance camera gazing passively upon whatever enters its field of view. By having characters enter and exit the frame while the camera remains static, spectators become self-conscious of the limits of personal perspective. Östlund often contrasts this static camera with another stylistic trademark: scenes that take place on moving public transportation. Buses, trams, and trains serve as confined public spaces that never exist in a single place. They often have unclear destinations, and spectators almost always enter a scene right before, during, or immediately following confrontations between unruly passengers or noisy teenagers. Bystanders look uncomfortable or pretend not to notice. Anderson observes:

This is precisely why Östlund's continual use of public transit as an uncomfortable conduit works so well—almost everyone can relate to feeling vulnerable on a bus when it's between stops and another passenger becomes belligerent. This relatability makes the unfolding escalation of events all the more painful for the characters and audience alike, as the characters have no escape, and we the audience have no opportunity to look elsewhere. (2014)

Östlund's films are populated by such moments, as in *De ofrivilliga* when the drunk, teenage girls disturb passengers (Östlund 2008, 26:50) or in *Play* when the gang of African boys attacks one of their own members on a bus (Östlund 2011, 1:02:40). The bystanders in Östlund's films frequently lack the will to intervene (Anderson 2014). In these situations, the public and private clash, and both bystanders and the film's spectators must face the conflict between how they ought to react vs. how they probably would have reacted. The later realization doesn't usually match up to either social norms or even one's own self-image. But it is only in that crucible that normativities can be interrogated and deconstructed.

A third version of the public-private space motif is the open-air, urban, pedestrian shopping street or the shopping mall. Vignettes in Östlund's first feature film *Gitarrmongot* frequently occur in public spaces, one of the most notable being an outdoor shopping street where a young boy with Down syndrome plays his guitar. The film *Play* opens in an indoor

shopping mall, and a scene in *The Square* also takes place in a mall. In addition to these spaces of capitalism and consumption, the material goods themselves echo the public/private tension. Entire narratives and vignettes in Östlund's films are initiated by the theft of bicycles, phones, wallets, or even musical instruments. Mobile phones materially represent this tension between the public and private. A cell phone enables private conversations and text messages but is linked to one of only a few satellites that connect billions of phones, creating one single network. People become anonymous "users" of such a network. Encryption is possible, but in the end no identity is hack-proof. Does one own these text messages? Who is surveilling them? The two teenage girls in *De ofrivilliga* who film images of themselves online are made to seem unaware of the implications of making themselves sexually vulnerable online (Östlund 2008, 10:45). The film poses the questions: What is public and what is private? Is there a natural or unnatural separation of these spheres?

Nature, Masculinity and "Swedishness" in *Play*

Though the initial twenty minutes of *Play* take place primarily inside a mall, the film also employs ecological images to assist neoliberal discourse in generating anxiety about white competitive fitness and masculinity. As Sebastian, Alex, and John follow the African boys through inner-city outdoor spaces, more suburban locations, and finally into what appears to be a more remote wilderness area, the spectator views racial and economic competition against increasingly pastoral backdrops, invoking another powerful Swedish national imaginary: nature. Typically, the fear of migrant population growth generates nationalistic anxiety about urban contamination and a perception of the purity of the wilderness and outdoors that "serve[s] as a new space for elite enactments of white male superiority" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, loc. 3 of 5638). In Sweden, similar discourses of nationhood and the natural world were constructed in the late 19th century when "Swedish culture began an earnest process of documenting 'authentic' elements defining Swedishness ... and then redistributed or displayed them as emblems pointing to an authentic communal and national identity. Foremost among these supposed authentic traces of Swedish identity was nature itself" (Oscarson 2006, 9). The outdoor sequences in *Play* thus tap into a Swedish national imaginary that associates nature with "Swedishness." By placing racial differentiation and notions of economic fitness within this natural context, the film explicitly connects racial and economic competition with questions of national identity and identification. In *Play*, natural settings become the ideal location for ironically marking white and Asian Swedes as unfit within their own nation and unable to maintain economic dominance and control. One of the film's many haunting scenes initiates the transition from urban to natural space, as the over-head camera follows Alex, Sebastian, and John as they are led by the African boys across a gravel path onto a football field (Östlund 2011, 38:40). For nearly two minutes, this uninterrupted shot captures only the boys and an expanse of green grass, an outdoor space that ironically becomes a potent symbol of potential white captivity, not "Swedishness."

The concept of the wilderness also becomes "an important site for the cultivation of hetero-masculinity" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, loc. 218 of 5638). Concepts

of nature and the “natural” are “rooted in particular productions of sexuality” (2010, loc. 84 of 5638). Another scene in which the white boys fail the push-up competition takes place in a wooded suburban space (Östlund 2011, 49:00). Images of leafless trees and a worker with a leaf-blower who crosses the scene but ignores the boys convey anxiety and a sense of abandonment. Later, to escape the African boys, Sebastian climbs a tree (2011, 1:19:10), and the static camera fixes on the tree’s majestic dominance of the surrounding natural wilderness. Yet Sebastian’s panicked act leads only to a new entrapment as the African boys below taunt him. The tree, also devoid of leaves, becomes associated with hopelessness and confinement, an ironic reversal of the usual positive trope. Sebastian’s inability to negotiate the natural world to his own advantage underscores his “unnatural” lack of physical fitness and calls into question his “Swedishness.” Sebastian and his friends’ inability to compete successfully is later confirmed when the African boys win the footrace, which takes place in the wilderness (2011, 1:18:02).

The film also reverses the expected trope of the African migrant boys as nomadic, instead presenting white and Asian characters as adrift. Localism is traditionally connected to the ecological as a means of othering migrants’ bodies “because they cannot fit any place-centered conception of ecological legitimacy” (Ray 2013, 154). The film begins with this expected binary of the local/nomadic, with the migrant boys’ othered bodies in stark contrast to the shopping mall’s sterile whiteness and the white bodies that seem “naturally” rooted within that market space. But as soon as Sebastian, Alex, and John fall prey to the African boys’ mobile phone scam, the film begins reversing this trope of the nomadic migrant. After being scared away from the mall, they are seen riding a city bus, a kind of nomadism not of their choosing but of displacement (Östlund 2011, 21:05). The more they lose their place-specific cultural identity, the more “unnaturally” disconnected they become from iconic notions of “Swedishness.” It is the African boys who have a domestic destination and who know the way there; the white and Asian boys are associated only with commercial or public spaces, further linking their identities to the marketplace, and are lost when removed from familiar territory. Instead, it is often the African boys whom the film positions in greater proximity to nature. Following their celebratory meal after winning the footrace (2011, 1:30:00), there is a static shot of treetops blowing in the wind, held for close to twenty-five seconds (2011, 1:33:42), immediately followed by domestic interior shots of the home of one of the African boys (2011, 1:34:05). The camera cuts to an exterior shot of that apartment building, surrounded by nothing but trees and rolling hills (2011, 1:36:00). These juxtapositions of exterior and interior convey a domesticity for one of the African boys that is potentially more rooted in nature than that of the white or Asian boys despite Swedish nationalist rhetoric regarding nature.

Characters in *Play* undergo a series of physical challenges at which they repeatedly fail. These physical competitions are proposed by the African boys as possible ways for them to “win back” their material possessions. They include a challenge to complete 100 push-ups non-stop (2011, 49:30) and the final, winner-take-all race that wagers the possession of all the boys—African, white and Asian (2011, 1:16:30). These physical competitions for material goods occur outdoors against natural backdrops. Alison Kafer argues that disability is viewed “primarily as a personal problem afflicting individual people” (Kafer 2013, 4). Individuating disabled bodies fits nicely into neoliberal notions of the economic subject of capacity, particularly as it relates to self-reliance and independence. Robert McRuer draws an explicit connection between these types of

disability narratives and neoliberalism, arguing that “the story or narrative of American neoliberalism absolutely depends upon disability” (McRuer 2010, 169). Having already proven incompetent in the economic marketplace, the white and Asian boys are now portrayed as physically inept. This implied disable-bodiedness further differentiates them from the African boys while coding that difference in neoliberal rhetoric of fitness. Their repeated failures are marked as “unnatural” and “un-Swedish” in ironic incongruity with the natural surroundings.

Part Two: Neoliberalism and the Nietzschean Specter

Östlund uses this tension between the public and private to mirror his character’s struggle with individual impulses versus collective morality. This struggle is often situated in highly gendered terms. Recently he stated, “I’m interested in what it means to be a man these days. We are all born into a kind of collective guilt” (Nolan 2017). His first impulse—to examine constructions of Swedish masculinity—is juxtaposed with what sounds more like resentment about having to examine masculinity in the first place. Describing a scene from his film *Turist* in which a hotel janitor witnesses a white couple’s argument, Östlund says:

In those scenes, where the hotel janitor is looking at the couple, he represents someone who is from another social and economic situation than the family. This is also a question about a certain kind of lifestyle. They have this luxury five-star hotel that they’re going to. They have those electric toothbrushes in their mouths. They have all the resources and they have all the time. The kind of problems that you get in a couple’s relationship is very connected to a certain type of lifestyle. I think it’s a bit provocative that we are allowed to put so much energy into those couple relationship problems. The culture is telling us over and over again that this is what we should focus on in our lives. So, the janitor is watching this couple and wondering what they are doing. They’re well-to-do Swedes and he’s having that perspective of their problems. (Roberts 2014)

What begins as self-awareness of socio-economic inequality and an almost righteous indignation over conspicuous privilege quickly pivots into a complaint about lack of individual male freedom. In the context of the scene in which a husband has an embarrassing emotional breakdown in front of his wife, the “us” Östlund defends can be interpreted as “men” told how to feel and behave by “the culture.”

In a *New York Times* article about *Turist* provocatively titled “Real Men Flee Avalanches: Ruben Östlund’s *Force Majeure*, a Look at Fear and Masculinity,” Östlund argues, “We are living in an honor culture. We say we don’t have expectations of a man’s role, but it’s obvious what was expected of him” (Buckley 2014). Based on the character Tomas’s reactions to crises in *Turist*, those expectations do not include showing fear and certainly not crying in public. When Tomas has an emotional breakdown in front of his wife, the scene is mortifying in one sense because Tomas violates the expectations of a

male “honor culture.” Östlund singles out this transgression as particularly offensive, saying, “One of the most painful things for us humans is to lose face in front of each other ... We almost would rather die” (Buckley 2014). Tomas’s emotional breakdown foregrounds the corrosive effects of failing to live up to normative expectations, as he is unable to express his authentic feelings, yet Östlund also cleverly presents his breakdown as a *performance*. When his wife Ebba comes out into the hotel hallway to find Tomas on the floor, hands covering his face as if he were crying, she says, irritated, “You’re just pretending. You’re not crying for real” (Östlund 2014, 1:33:56). Tomas uncovers his face, reluctantly admitting, “No, maybe I’m not” (2014, 1:34:09). It is only after this revelation and further confrontation that Tomas finally begins to wail uncontrollably, appearing almost forced into it by his wife whom the camera angle depicts as physically lording over him. Visually, it is reminiscent of scenes from *Play* in which women appear responsible for a masculine sense of victimization, further adding to a potential interpretation of these films as inciting an anxiety of “feminization” of Swedish culture in a manner toxic to masculine individuality. In Östlund’s films, female characters tend to fall into two categories: women who do not adequately and/or supportively respond to white, male sense of victimization, such as the wife of a man sexually assaulted in *De ofrivilliga* and the café workers and bystanders in *Play*, or women depicted as interfering with male self-actualization, such as Tomas’s wife Ebba in *Turist* and Anne the journalist in *The Square*. Both of Tomas’s reactions—fake and real crying—are conveyed in a way meant to appear embarrassing to spectators, forcing them to weigh their own perspectives as to what constitutes an “appropriate” male response and how they might respond in such a situation.

By juxtaposing individual will with perceived guilt and shame, Östlund evokes what could be called “the Nietzschean struggle against democratic and socialist nihilism” (Landa 2007, 45). Nietzscheanism is relevant here in terms of the ideas of the individual thinker, bourgeois morality, and a sense of resisting constricting moral imperatives and equalizing impulses. Though there is no explicit connection between Nietzsche and Östlund’s work, according to Ishay Landa, “the decisive question will rather have to be whether it is possible to speak of marked parallels between the Nietzschean discourse and a given text and/or character” (Landa 2007, 16). In *The Overman in the Marketplace: Nietzschean Heroism in Popular Culture*, Landa goes on to define a “Nietzschean hero” as the following:

that character which displays strong enough similarities with a Nietzschean outlook even where Nietzsche is not mentioned ... and when unmistakable references to Nietzschean terms and mottos such as “the will to power,” “*ressentiment*,” “live dangerously!” and so on, are not to be found. (Landa 2007, 16)

Östlund’s personal commentary and his films convey an anxiety about the role of white, male individuality and a sense of nihilism at the thought of its necessary deconstruction. In a connection that echoes the Nietzschean focus on individual will, Östlund titled his second film *De ofrivilliga*, which translates literally as “the unwilling.” (Its English-language release title is *Involuntary*, which uncovers the original title’s play on the negation of volunteerism: “frivilliga” means “volunteers,” and adding an “o” negates the word, making it “unvolunteers.”) The film’s vignettes are structured around battles of wills: scenes in which men sexually victimize one another, a female teacher who witnesses physical abuse and

confronts teachers unwilling to speak out, and teenage girls who are depicted as encouraging their own sexual exploitation on the internet.

Many of Östlund's films seem to ask: What are the implications of viewing social equality in terms of a sacrifice of individual will, particularly a will accustomed to unquestioned agency? Or as Landa describes Nietzsche's perspective, "individualism as unfettered from burdensome demands of equality and solidarity" (Landa 2007, 217). The very underpinning of the Swedish social democratic state is "jämlighet" [equality], so to question seriously whether equality is commensurate with free will is to deconstruct that social democratic paradigm. Östlund claims to want to deconstruct harmful normative categories of toxic masculine "honor culture" in ways that make citizens "take more responsibility for each other" (Buckley 2014). But the individuality these male characters crave also opens the door to neoliberal rhetoric and the values it promotes.

Östlund and the German *Bergfilm*

This section will analyze one of the most conspicuous ways in which Östlund explores the individual will and masculinity: through the lens of the German *Bergfilm* [mountain film] of the 1920s and 30s, which was self-consciously modeled on Nietzschean themes of the masculine will to power. Östlund's film *Turist* shares many ecological parallels with *Play*, particularly in the way it serves as a metaphor for masculine fitness and competitiveness. However, *Turist* employs a significantly different mountain landscape outside of Sweden, one which alludes to a now notorious historical film genre, the classic German *Bergfilm*. That genre shares many of the same gendered themes as *Play*, but *Turist* evokes the *Bergfilm*'s unique and highly problematic gendered themes to explore perceptions about masculinity and individual will in ways that also potentially provoke anxiety about male, Swedish competitive fitness and futurity.

The mountain film genre by its nature tempts the spectator with a deceptive blankness, a *tabula rasa* upon which both on-screen actors and theater spectators are asked to project their own subjectivities as if that space were *always already* blank—a de-politicized space that has historically been portrayed as empty until conquered by humanity. As Caroline Schaumann discusses in her article "The Return of the *Bergfilm*," this resurgence both "hark[s] back to and continue[s] the language of the 1920s *Bergfilm*," which is the cinematic era that defined the mountain film genre (2014, 417). This is of course problematic for many reasons, the foremost being the now thoroughly documented link between the German *Bergfilm* of the 1920s and German National Socialism.

German director Arnold Fanck is the undisputed pioneer of the classic *Bergfilm* genre, but it is actor/writer/director protégé Leni Riefenstahl who not only starred in Fanck's films but also wrote and directed her own *Bergfilm*, before going on to direct the now infamous Nazi propaganda films *Triumph des Willens* [*Triumph of the Will*] (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). One of the primary tropes common in *Bergfilm* is male athleticism and hypermasculinity inspired by the alpine landscape. *Bergfilm*, for the first time, featured skilled climbing and skiing amidst rocky peaks, billowing clouds, thundering avalanches, and shifting ice, putting on display the athleticism and grace of the climbers as well as the dynamism and unpredictability of their rocky and snowy environment (Schaumann 2014,

418). In this way, mountains become backdrops and metaphors for a world framed by the dichotomies of struggle and redemption (2014, 418).

Turist in many ways appropriates mountain film tropes of tested masculinity and endangered male youth in conflict with meddling and assertive female sexuality. As Nancy P. Nenno explains, “The topography of the Alps becomes a screen for the enactment and recuperation of identity” (1996). Just as in *Bergfilm*, in Östlund’s film *Turist*, the alpine *tabula rasa* offers a space upon which to project and, importantly, *recuperate* these anxieties of masculinity. In both *Bergfilm* and Östlund’s *Turist*, the battle between men and women is used to symbolize anxieties related to the perception that masculinity is under attack. Five particular tropes of classic German *Bergfilm* are also present in *Turist*, which like those early mountain films seeks to recuperate an individualistic, unchallenged, and anti-bourgeois concept of contemporary masculinity that is fit to compete socially and economically for control. Understanding those mountain film tropes will help us better understand claims Östlund makes about his film’s project and what the film appears to portray about gender.

A second critical trope of classic *Bergfilm* is the Nietzschean male individualist, a trope already firmly established in Östlund’s work, particularly in the recurring tension between individual and collective will discussed earlier. To amplify this Nietzschean male individualism that resists even the forces of modern morality, mountain films consistently feature a third cinematic trope: the “archetypal conflict between man and woman” (Nenno 1996). Along with other classic examples of the *Bergfilm* such as *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* [*Storm over Mont Blanc*] (1930) and *Das blaue Licht* [*The Blue Light*] (1932), this is perhaps best exemplified in Arnold Fanck’s *Der heilige Berg* [*The Holy Mountain*] (1926), starring Leni Riefenstahl as the dancer Diotima. *The Holy Mountain*’s opening shot (Fanck 1926, 01:43) is that of an imposing Alpine landscape (a trademark feature) followed by heaving images of sea and rocks (Fanck 1926, 03:27), a latitude that sharply contrasts with the initial alpine shot. Diotima performs an erotic enactment of unbridled female sensuality (Fanck 1926, 04:42). In a key shot that prefigures the film’s archetypal gender battle, the director superimposes the original image of the mountain over a reverse shot of Diotima’s view of the sea, highlighting that her own perspective will be fundamentally different from men (Fanck 1926, 07:40). As Erik Rentschler has remarked, female figures in *Bergfilm* “represent and embody a spirit potentially inimical to male images” (1990, 153). It is no accident that Fanck chooses to name the female lead character Diotima, an allusion to one of the great gendered ironies of classical Greek philosophy, Plato’s *Symposium*. After hearing Aristophanes’s legendary mythological explanation for same-sex and heterosexual love (the three versions of original humans—all male, all female, and male-female—split in half by the gods and forever seeking to rejoin their original half), Socrates relates an entirely different explanation he claims to have learned from a woman named Diotima (Plato 1951, 79). Diotima, and by extension Socrates, describes the purpose of same-sex desire as ultimately one of individual self-actualization and idealism that leaves behind the physical and uses an ideal male example to achieve transcendence. Given the film’s Nietzschean overtones, this allusion to hypermasculine perfection only seems to reinforce the notion that to become a superman, one must reject anything that stands in the way of individual transcendence, especially femininity.

We are introduced to the two male leads, the older “Friend” and “Vigo” (Fanck 1926, 09:02). As the film differentiates according to gender, the film employs a fourth classic

trope, which presents men and women as have conflicting perspectives on morality and ideals. When Diotima asks what the Friend searches for in the mountains (Fanck 1926, 30:26), he says “one’s self” (Fanck 1926, 36:36) while she wonders if the ideal of “beauty” is found there (Fanck 1926, 31:08). Masculine self-actualization and transcendence of limits is depicted as necessarily occurring in a space apart from the female, who clings to conventional categories and finds it difficult to visualize the same goal. Given Socrates’s lesson on male transcendence, the film also hints that even this homoerotic bond between the two men must break in order for one of them to become a true superman. Soon Diotima, in *femme fatale* fashion, will come between these two men and their mountain climbing dreams. This introduces a fifth and crucial *Bergfilm* trope: the interfering emotional effect of women on men. Close-up shots on the men emphasize their affective, emotional response to her feminine wiles (Fanck 1926, 14:29). Throughout the film, “we find an obsessive and recurring attempt to counter the stirring effect of a female image and body ... In this way, Diotima commands and distracts her male audiences, compelling them to react strongly” (Rentschler 1990, 155). As we shall see in a moment, Östlund’s film will also make use of this trope, portraying a man’s emotional breakdown, not as the result of his cowardice but as a result of his unrelenting wife. Though Diotima is engaged to the Friend, when he learns that Vigo is also in love with her, he demands that they recklessly climb the mountain’s north face in a suicide pact (Fanck 1926, 1:01:51). Instead of realizing their Nietzschean individual potential, the men become victims of “self-surrender” at the hands of a woman.

As if in homage to the classic *Bergfilm* genre, *Turist* opens with shots of the snowy French Alps where a Swedish family has gone on a ski vacation. Östlund could easily have chosen one of many Swedish alpine landscapes for his film, but using the French Alps amplifies a “foreignness” that permits the film room to explore Swedishness and some of the film’s more troubling anxieties at a remove from Sweden itself, while also heightening the Swedishness of this emotional drama. Thus, every anxiety is both necessarily about Sweden and also plausibly deniable. The *tabula rasa* of the mountain, as in classic *Bergfilm*, is a blank canvas upon which to project these anxieties, but Östlund injects an irony that undermines this project. Tomas is not only incapable of projecting himself onto the mountain, but it comes tumbling down on top of him in the form of what appears to be an avalanche in the film’s opening minutes. Following his stated intention “to make the most pathetic male character on film” (Buckley 2014), Östlund transforms Tomas not into a Nietzschean superman but into a coward.

Part Three: “Are Our Malls Safe?” Race and Neoliberalism in *Play*

Östlund’s Individual and Neoliberalism

Nietzsche’s belief in the “talented, unique individual and the mediocre many” (Landa 2007, 53) reverberates with neoliberal ideology of self-reliance, competitive spirit, and entrepreneurial independence. His antipathy towards bourgeois mediocrity also echoes in

many of statements by Ruben Östlund discussed above. As Karlsson (2014) and others have argued, neoliberal economic rhetoric provides a discourse that deliberately disguises the need to frankly address systematic inequality. The meritocratic moral discourse of the neoliberal subject of capacity masks institutionalized privilege. In Östlund's films, neoliberal discourse is a sword that can cut both ways, at times appearing to expose hypocrisies and social and economic inequality, while simultaneously seeming to represent anxiety about the Swedish economic subject of capacity and the meaning of being a Swedish, white male. As in the works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri, this anxiety about the meaning of and access to "Swedishness" is frequently conveyed in Östlund's films through the lens of neoliberal economic discourse. In these films, narratives are often triggered by situations in which social privilege is confronted by economic inequality, and so it seems logical to explore Swedish normativities in the context of the neoliberal discourse that maintains those norms.

Like Khemiri, Östlund has had an interest in psychology and sociology, which is "a direct result of his upbringing. Both of his parents were teachers. His father taught economics, and thus Östlund instinctively saw human behavior through its lens" (Laffly 2017). Östlund's interest in intersections of economic privilege and race is evident in his first feature film, *Gitarrmongot* [*Guitar Mongoloid*], which focuses on "the preoccupations of people eking along on the fringes of Swedish society. The titular character at the center of it all is a part-time child busker named Erik, who smokes, cusses, and sings off-key bastardizations of songs that he plays on his guitar" (Anderson 2014). Erik has Down syndrome, a fact Östlund highlights with the film's offensive title: *Gitarrmongot*. The term "mongoloid" was once widely used to refer to the syndrome, which was first identified in the late 19th century by physician John Langdon Down. In this context, "mongoloid" is used to medicalize a form of offensive racial differentiation. The title of Östlund's film invokes this racial differentiation, linking a perceived dis-ablebodiedness and socio-economic precarity with racial Otherness. Östlund's *Play* and *The Square* are the films which most explicitly take capitalism and economic inequality as their subject.

Play opens in an urban mall in Gothenburg, Sweden. The initial scenes are followed by additional images of marketplaces—indoor and outdoor, architectural and ecological—in which competition for goods occurs between one group of boys marked as white and an opposing group categorized as Other in terms of race, language and geographic roots. The Swedish mall becomes a racially differentiated site for accumulation of capital in which adolescent white and Asian boys are preyed upon for their mobile phones and other possessions by migrant boys of African descent. The film generated intense debate in which many critics and audiences decried its concerning racial differentiation and what could indeed be interpreted as racist messaging (for further discussion of the Swedish reception of the film, see Stigsdotter 2013).

This combination of neoliberal economic discourse and racial anxiety speaks not only to Sweden's contemporary moment but also to that of Europe, the United States, and indeed an entire global context. Media representations of trans-national migrations of people through Europe in the summer and autumn of 2015 and into 2016 have often distorted this intensely racial issue in the rhetoric of neoliberal economics. A recent *New York Times* headline, "European Union Predicts Economic Gains from Influx of Migrants" (Kanter 2015), exemplifies the power of neoliberal economic discourse to mask a highly racially charged debate with one that appears to universalize benefits for those who can

put aside their racist ideologies. Such a positive spin on racialized discourse can also take the form of highly negative arguments which depict immigration as a drain on the economy and social welfare resources. In either case, it remains an extraordinarily racially coded rhetoric that targets white Europeans with the temptation of a labor force from which to extract even more capital. After the tragic terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, over twenty-five Republican governors in the United States declared that they would block their states from receiving any refugees from Syria (Healy and Bosman 2015). The very next day, neoliberal economic rhetoric went to work in the media to provide cover for these racist fears. CNBC, the economic and market news cable television arm of NBC, aired a live interview segment with Jan Kniffen, CEO of J. Rogers Kniffen Worldwide, entitled “Will Security Concerns Impact Malls?” (CNBC 2015). As Kniffen is interviewed, the headline “Terror in Paris: Are our Malls Safe?” flashes across the screen, coding the previous day’s perceived racial threat as an economic one. The mall becomes the locus of white hegemony and power, and the security of its capital depends on not only protecting that marketplace but also ensuring that nothing threatens capital’s continual upward flow. In *Play* the neoliberal mall becomes an ironic site of “play.” This irony attempts to mitigate any charge of racism against the economic system that re-inscribes racially competitive categories. After all, these are just kids messing with guitars, shopping for shoes, and “playing” around in a mall. But the film’s other irony is that the mall is actually part of a very real neoliberal economic system that relies upon racial segregation to keep capital in the hands of one group.

Scholars have identified the involvement of neoliberal economics in racial differentiation in contemporary Sweden (Karlsson 2014; Schierup and Ålund 2011). However, it is crucial to analyze the ways these neoliberal adjustment processes not only take shape through economic policies but also through a specific ethical discourse, one in which economic actors are subject to what Wendy Brown calls “responsibilization” policies and practices (2015, 131). Restructuring society to mere economic competition accentuates the precarity of failing to live up to these practices and maintains racial inequality. New migrants in Europe are often the targets of such rhetoric, labelled as drains on the economy and as unable to pull their own weight, racially coded language that seeks shelter in economic domains to avoid what might be considered overtly racist speech (2015, 135). These arguments can be made to limit access to entitlements that are perceived as a threat to the continued upward flow of capital to white Europeans.

While the African boys in *Play* are racially differentiated to code this stereotypical trope of non-productive dependency, the film also turns this lens on the white boys, emphasizing their inability to master neoliberal values, types of knowledge, and skill sets. These weaknesses, potentially leading to the loss of privilege and economic power at the hands of othered migrants, communicate an anxiety of futurity of white hegemony and masculinity. The film attempts to mask such racist anxiety by coding a perceived racial threat as an economic one. The African boys remain nameless throughout the film, reducing them to anonymous economic actors, while the primary white and Asian characters are eventually identified (for further discussion on the role of names in *Play*, see Stubberud and Ringrose (2014). The white boys’ Asian friend John is an example of this economic coding. As the primary Asian character, John is racially differentiated from both the African boys and the white boys; yet, in this racial hierarchy, he is accepted into the group of white boys. The film asks the spectator to accept this categorization as based on

perceived economic status. The spectator first meets John waiting for his friends in an office space full of white Swedish business people in suits, a scene that visually differentiates him as Other but also signals that some racial categories are not perceived as threats to the maintenance of the economic status quo. Subsequently, with his white friends, he foos around with a guitar in a music store and shops for shoes, thus suggesting a similarity in socio-economic status among the boys and the equalizing potential of the marketplace. By attempting to convert John from racialized subject into purely economic actor or human capital who contributes to white accumulation of goods, the film aligns him with his white friends and conveys that he is not a threat to their hegemony, whereas by the time he appears in the film the African boys have already been both racially differentiated and established as a challenge to white privilege.

Self-Interest and Individual Responsibility

Issues of economic competitiveness and futurity haunt *Play's* opening scenes. The spectator's gaze is first directed at the heart of a shopping mall with its spiraling escalators surrounded by shops. It is an anonymous, sterile environment filled with the unintelligible din of busy shoppers. The camera is unmoving, meant to evoke the static gaze of a security camera. There is a circular staircase through the mall's center, a location with several layers of symbolism, starting with the impression that this is the heart of the mall around which everything circulates. The multitude of shops, all in view simultaneously, dominates the scene. Two white teenage boys move from one of the mall's upper levels to the main lower court. One of them comments, "This is a nice place"; the other responds, "It never used to be this nice," observations that speak to a perception that equates "nice" surroundings with the availability of high-quality material goods (Östlund 2011, 01:07). That notion is reinforced by a subsequent remark: "I get so psyched for Halloween when I see that stuff... It's like my favorite Swedish holiday" (2011, 01:51). In an increasingly neoliberalized Sweden, traditional holidays are ironically replaced by American, highly commercialized ones focused on purchasing non-essential merchandise. The Halloween costumes can be interpreted as representing imported commercialism that masks true Swedishness, an irony doubled by the fact that Halloween celebration is itself an act of disguising.

However, this ironic commentary on Swedishness and neoliberalism quickly shifts to place the white boys in positions of perceived economic precarity, the drama of which implies not merely an economic threat to Swedishness, but a racial one. One boy, startled, says, "I think I've lost my money" (2011, 02:06). Desperation sets in as they bicker and mentally try to retrace their steps. A total of 500 crowns are missing (2011, 02:10), but more important than the cash itself is the effect on their marketplace power. Without money, they are suddenly out of place in the mall's busy center. Irritated, the boy throws his bag to the floor; the laying down of his possessions carries symbolic weight, foreshadowing the surrender of commercial power to an impending threat (2011, 02:32). It is at this point that the camera finally begins to move, panning slowly to the left (2011, 02:39). The movement of the lens, already prefigured as a sort of security camera, signals that a perceived danger has been identified even before the spectator knows what it is. As

the camera slowly adjusts, a group of five African migrant boys, most in their teens, comes into view. While the white boys argue over the lost money, the African boys are watching them, their silent stares implying that they have been casing the white boys for some time. Thus, the African teenagers appear not merely as random self-interested consumers in potential competition with the white boys but as dangerous predators. As the camera pans right again to include the white boys in the frame, they are still arguing, oblivious to the danger. This is the first signal to the spectator that the white boys lack an alertness necessary to perceive threats to their capital.

One of the African boys then says to his group, "Who's with me?" (2011, 03:01), signaling that they were not merely watching the two white boys, but already planning some scheme. Before they confront the white boys, the migrant boys huddle together on the edge of the frame in a strategy session to plan their scam. They argue briefly over who will be the "bad guy" and who will be the "good guy," ultimately using a version of "rock paper scissors" to determine the roles in their "brother trick," which involves trying to convince the white boys that they have unfairly acquired a mobile phone originally stolen from their brother (2011, 03:14). The "robbery" ruse is a mind game of strategy and performance intended to pressure the white boys to surrender the phone voluntarily. The subsequent success of this trick presents white boys in the film as "trusting, innocent and even naïve, in stark contrast to the African boys, who appear dangerous, violent and manipulative" (Stubberud and Ringrose 2014, 67). In this way the film racially differentiates the boys into categories, while also using neoliberal normativities to discipline the white boys for their lack of competitive fitness. The implication is that, though newer and perhaps even traditionally "un-Swedish" neoliberal economic values have begun restructuring Swedish society, mastery of these new values and skill sets may determine which racial category prevails economically and thus defines a potential new notion of "Swedishness."

Naïveté and lack of self-awareness on the part of the white boys signals a dependence on existing social structures such as family and authority figures to provide for their safety and welfare. This lack of individual responsibility undermines a successful economic actor in the neoliberal marketplace. *Play* contains several examples of white Swedish males unable to follow the dictates of neoliberalism by acting in their own self-interest or assuming individual responsibility. When a new set of boys, Alex and Sebastian, who are white, and their Asian friend John, encounter the group of African boys in a shoe store (Östlund 2011, 15:40), they do not buy shoes and increase their capital, which would be in their self-interest. Instead they become increasingly uncomfortable with the stares and taunts from the African boys, speech acts primarily heard off-screen, and flee. This display of paranoia and weakness as well as lack of economic rationality encourages the African boys to follow through on their scam. Significantly, in accordance with a neoliberal model of behavior, the "brother trick" should not have succeeded: it is not in the interest of the white boys to care that someone else has lost a mobile phone, since the careful maintenance of one's property is a personal responsibility. The boys seem to be at the mercy of two conflicting sets of norms: the capitalistic norm of wanting to accrue and protect one's own property, with little attention to whether someone else has been foolish enough to lose theirs, and the social democratic norm of caring about what happens to other people and taking responsibility for an action that might have hurt someone else.

Sebastian is lectured on the tram for his perceived misdemeanor of riding without a ticket once he has left the African boys (2011, 1:27:30), but his white privilege ultimately protects him: his parent(s) will presumably pay the fine, and he will not be the target of racial profiling by police or other authorities. Conversely, acquiring a mobile phone and other goods through whatever means will not help the African boys escape a racist environment. The film's remaining scenes only highlight this fact. One of the African boys, shown in isolated profile among white passengers, rides a tram without his friends (2011, 1:37:07), following which he is publicly assaulted by two adult white men (2011, 1:40:16). The film concludes with a definitive reassertion of racial hierarchy as the camera cuts from the public space of the confrontation to the interior of a school, where a white teenage girl is performing a dance in which both movement and music are coded as racially Other (2011, 1:46:34). This act of racial appropriation, though awkwardly executed, is a signal to the spectator that traditional categories of power remain in place. After this performance the film presents its final irony as John takes the stage with his clarinet (either newly purchased or retrieved) to "play" a sort of victory song, albeit very poorly (2011, 1:48:52). The symbol of masculinity and the accumulation of material goods so contested by the boys have been restored to the original owner, yet this move also reinscribes racial differentiation and hierarchical social and economic structures. Though most of *Play* establishes the failure of the white and Asian boys to live up to the rhetoric of a neoliberal competitive code, the film concludes with scenes that work to restore their privilege. The portrayal of the African boys as worthy of emulation in certain ways never acknowledges the highly racialized way the film, as Richard Dyer has observed, "implacably [reduces] the non-white subject to a function of the white subject" (1997, 13). The film may represent the African boys as superior, but really this is an imagining of how superior the white boys could become.

Illegitimate Knowledges and Willfulness

Just how superior they could become depends on the lengths to which they are willing to go. Östlund uses the African boys as symbols of the child criminal to test these limits. Nietzscheanism provides a useful lens in this regard as well. Ishay Landa argues, "Within Nietzsche's undertaking to complete the 'transvaluation of values,' the criminal was rewritten as a clandestine representative of the will to power and a useful agent of revolt. The special task entrusted to him was to serve as a role model of genuine individualism" (2007, 219). According to Landa, Nietzsche assimilated "the vision of the criminal egoist who spiritedly resists social claims and shakes off every collective bonding, the criminal as the individual's proxy" (2007, 218). This criminal resistance to "collective bonding" sounds very similar to some of Östlund's own personal reservations about collectivist thought and the limiting facets of bourgeois Swedish mentality. Nietzsche also questioned bourgeois mediocrity, and his belief in "the superior criminal" was based in an ironic notion of meritocracy: if anyone can rise in society, why not a criminal of merit? (2007, 221).

The tacit knowledges the African boys use in their deceptions appear illegitimate, uncivil, and willful as they attempt to redirect the flow of upward redistribution and

threaten white hegemony. In this way, the film again racially differentiates them from the white boys. Yet it is precisely their mastery of neoliberal skills that allows the African boys to succeed. In this way, the film both others the African boys and suggests that the white boys ought to learn from them if they are to compete. Most of the film's narrative is based upon this methodology as established by the African boys' fraudulent "brother trick." As stated earlier, this "brosantrick" reinforces stereotypes of the criminal immigrant up to no good. Yet it serves another purpose in the film: to showcase the African boys' entrepreneurial and competitive spirit as well as their sense of freedom to employ any and all kinds of knowledges to accumulate capital in what Foucault has called "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (1980, 81). In *Play*, the subjugated knowledge, the "brosantrick," is very much othered as something Arabic-speaking, African immigrants might do, not appropriately behaved white Swedes. The fact that the African boys' dialog must be translated into Swedish is the first clue that the spectator has encountered a subjugated knowledge, both linguistic and cultural. Julia Elyachar considers one particular form of culturally specific tacit knowledge in Egypt called *fahlawah*, a word that is "difficult to translate but can mean street smarts or trickery" (2012, 85). In Egyptian society, the appropriateness of such techniques in the market or workplace remains ambiguous, yet *fahlawah* connotes a decidedly unambiguous relationship to the economically dispossessed, "usually discussed in the context of 'popular Egyptian culture' of the poor urban masses of Cairo" (2012, 86). *Fahlawah* is a form of illegitimate and subjugated knowledge that "can be used to advantage in the marketplace or in politics by a weaker group against a stronger or as a way to access information that is not available to all" (2012, 86). In *Play*, the African boys are portrayed as masters of *fahlawah*, both enviable specialists and lawless criminals. While *fahlawah* may not conform to traditional neoliberal subject formation, there exist overlapping notions of independence, creativity, and market savvy that seems lacking in the white boys' approach.

The use of illegitimate knowledges is portrayed as uncivil when the African boys employ it. This lack of civility goes hand-in-hand with a kind of willfulness, another characteristic that others the African boys. As Sara Ahmed argues in her book *Willful Subjects*, "Once you are charged with willfulness, you are not with" (2014, loc. 3118 of 7786) in a space outside disciplining social norms. Moreover, being accused of willfulness implies something specific about subjectivity, "one that has intentions and knows her intentions" (2014, loc. 3582 of 7786). Willfulness others the racially marked subject while serving as a model for white fitness.

Part Four: Östlund and the Gendered Battle of Wills

In *Play*, Östlund intersects a failure to embody neoliberal values of individual responsibility, self-reliance, and rationalism with examples of non-normative masculinity. This both deconstructs traditional notions of Swedish masculinity, while also amplifying the anxiety about the competitive abilities of white, male Swedes in the face of increasing racialized competition. The film's neoliberal discourse asks the spectator to view this racialized rhetoric within economic domains, all the while representing white and Asian

weakness—both male and female—with potentially dire consequences, as demonstrated in the coffee shop scene in which the white boys seek to escape from the African boys. After the white adults refuse to help the white boys, ironically asking Sebastian, “Have you tried calling an adult?” (Östlund 2011, 27:32), the static camera lingers for a moment on the exposed cash register whose digital display ironically reads: “Welcome! Swedish Register, Inc.” (2011, 28:39). Once again, the film uses neoliberal economic value systems to differentiate white behavior. All the white people in the shop, including the boys, have left the symbolic source of their economic power unattended. By not taking Sebastian’s claim of bullying seriously, “they miss the chance to rescue the children from the fate that awaits them because they do not understand how this new society works” (Stubberud and Ringrose 2014, 68). I would argue that there exists a connection between this “new society” and the construction of neoliberal subjectivity in this case, one that censures females for not being proper caretakers and re-inscribes hegemonic patriarchal and gendered notions of reproduction and care work. Neoliberal rhetoric enforces a gendered division of labor, as is the case in the film when female workers are portrayed as shirking fundamental care work duties (nurturing the boys’ needs) that would in turn develop competitive *male* marketplace actors.

Obviously human beings are not pure capital, as neoliberal ideology would like people to accept, and the African, Asian, and white boys in the film do not exist in a truly “free” market but in a categorized racial hierarchy. No matter what weaknesses the white boys demonstrate, or the humiliations and defeats heaped on them, they never actually surrender their positions of privilege, and racialized bodies are only permitted to “play” at reversing hegemonic power structures. Though one of the African boys wins the footrace and symbolically wears John’s coat as a trophy (2011, 1:21:00), he never actually transcends a system of racial hierarchy. This is neoliberalism’s truest irony, that material goods are placed in economic domains allegedly free from such hierarchies. In actuality, accumulation of these possessions never escapes a firmly established system based on power and privilege, demonstrated poignantly when the African boys are violently assaulted on a tram while white passengers fail to intervene (2011, 43:40). It is only after the attackers have left the tram that a white male adult dares to comfort and reassure himself that Sebastian, huddled in a corner, is unharmed (2011, 48:05).

It is within an outdoor public space in *Play* that a remarkable battle of wills—gendered and racialized—takes place, one that even involves the film’s spectators. By using dramatic irony (the spectators know a truth that bystander characters do not), Östlund forces the spectator to wrestle with the ambiguities of social morality and expectations, just as the characters must. When the father of one of the white boys discovers one of the African boys involved in the theft of his son’s phone, a tragic and shocking scene ensues, in which the father physically assaults the African boy. A female bystander and her friend witness the altercation and attempt to intervene:

And unlike most of Östlund’s bystanders thus far, the woman involves herself, almost acting as an avatar for a progressive audience who might cry foul over the film’s subject matter. While the father defends his actions and tries to dismiss her by arguing she wasn’t privy to the context of the precipitating situation, she challenges him that “immigrants already have it twice as hard” in Sweden, implying that any

delinquent behavior on the part of the boy may have been understandable due to his (likely) victimization at the hands of society. (Anderson 2014)

The film's spectators know that the African boy was involved in the theft, undermining the appropriateness of the woman's intervention, injecting the scene with hypermasculine and anti-immigration overtones. Her correct observation about racial inequality in Sweden is overshadowed by what appears to be misguided trust and even a recuperation of privilege that appears to ask the spectator: Why enfranchise people who are "criminals" and a threat to "Swedish" values? The film potentially provokes an antipathy towards female characters from some spectators already on edge from witnessing the unresponsive women in the café who failed to help the white boys. Thus, the film establishes a pattern of white women appearing never to take the side of the white boys. The film leaves the spectator with ambiguities about exactly what Östlund is deconstructing and what he is recuperating. If a spectator holds the immigrant boys accountable for their actions, is that merely participating in a racist structure, or, on the other hand, does it deny the African boys' agency to view them only as victims and not as perpetrators? And then there is the question of violence, which is never appropriate as a response. Östlund's most recent film *The Square* further complicates these ambiguities when the protagonist Christian is pickpocketed by white criminals, and it is a coworker of color who advocates Christian's aggressive response and sense of victimization. Östlund offers his spectators little firm ground, providing certain triggers that allow spectators to begin a prejudicial response but hopefully generating a reflective self-consciousness about it as it is happening.

***Turist* and a Gendered Battle of Wills on the Mountain**

As in his film *Play*, Östlund's *Turist* also deconstructs traditional gendered categories. Östlund's film immediately moves to differentiate categories of men and women. In an opening scene, the film foreshadows the coming gender conflict as the family poses for a photo, and the French photographer must ask the father twice to either come closer to his wife or put his arm around her (Östlund 2014, 1:30). The family portrait prelude is followed by one of Östlund's trademark still shots of the mountains juxtaposed against the lights of the ski village. Successive scenes emphasize alleged heteronormative domestic tranquility with images of the parents and children not only skiing but also brushing their teeth as a unit and sleeping as a family unit, even dressed in matching pajamas. In these shots, the two children, a boy and a girl, are literally mirrored images of their parents. Soon the film unleashes a pivotal narrative moment: in what appears to be an avalanche, the father, Tomas, grabs his cell phone and flees, leaving behind his wife and children. When the snow clears, and it becomes apparent that it was a controlled avalanche, Tomas returns to the table, but everything has changed. Later, Tomas and his wife Ebba stand symbolically outside their hotel room in the hallway apart from their children and have the first of many confrontations about the avalanche incident, harkening to the classic *Bergfilm* trope of the archetypal battle between male and female. When Tomas and Ebba return to the hotel room, the children are now positioned at the edge of

the bed and on the floor, traumatized by their abandonment and their perception of their parents' conflict.

Soon Ebba will not be able to feign indifference any longer, as is the case at a dinner that night with some friends. As Tomas retells the story of the avalanche, he gives his own version of events in which he downplays the danger, a form of denial that Ebba can't withstand. In her own trauma, she reveals Tomas's cowardice to their friends, a revelation the film depicts as an awkward act of betrayal (2014, 26:27). In this scene, men and women are depicted as entirely different subjectivities with opposing forms of consciousness. For example, Tomas responds to Ebba's allegations by declaring "That's not how I remember it," (2014, 27:11) and Ebba then asks, "Okay, then how do you remember it?" (2014, 27:13) Tomas replies, "Not like that anyway," (2014, 27:13) attempting to shut down the interrogation by claiming a position fundamentally unknowable to his wife. In a reverse shot of the friends, the camera emphasizes utterly different and highly gendered reactions to this disturbing news: the female friend gazes disapprovingly at Tomas, representing a disciplining, moral gaze, while the male friend laughs (2014, 26:43). After dinner, Ebba confronts Tomas once more, saying, "It's so weird that you won't admit what happened" (2014, 30:53). In response Tomas again reinforces gendered epistemologies by asserting, "What's so weird about having different versions? ... I can't 'admit' to your perception, that's not how I see it" (2014, 30:57).

Östlund himself states in an interview with *Film Comment*, "We have to be aware of the roles that we play as men and women, and that we are adapting to those roles—very often, not being aware of it. Those expectations make us unhappy and very confused" (Lucca 2014). Interestingly, marital unhappiness is also positioned in the film as heteronormative monogamy. In Ebba's conversation with her friend, Ebba appears uncomfortable with non-monogamy and becomes the symbol of all that is unrealistic about heteronormative monogamy (2014, 41:45). Even when her female friend presents opportunities to think outside categories, Ebba tries to shame her friend into placing happiness in conforming to normative expectations, not disrupting them. This only serves to reinforce the perception that Tomas's behavior stems from a type of "suffocation" at the hands of feminine discipline, not because of gendered categories themselves. Such dialog reasserts traditional gendered and differentiated categories of male and female, as they appear to have irreconcilably different perspectives. In a later scene, after their friends Mats and his partner Fanny arrive and learn of the avalanche incident, Fanny wonders to Mats, "I wonder how I would react if you did that to me?" a statement that is more of a warning than an opportunity to think outside preconceived gendered notions (2014, 1:04:55). Early the next morning, in an intimate moment in bed, Fanny once again disciplines Mats by reminding him, "I know that you would do anything to protect your family, I really do" (2014, 1:09:16), but by now, the formerly gregarious and confident Norwegian friend Mats, a big, bearded, red-headed specimen of masculinity, is now anxious with a concerned look on his face, disciplined into a bourgeois, heteronormative way of viewing the world. Of course, Östlund's film also conveys such a scene with a healthy dose of ambivalence; a spectator may be encouraged to sympathize with Fanny's point of view while simultaneously provoked into feeling sorry for Mats's potential resentment at "playing a role."

This gendered conflict is most potently reinforced in the film's final confrontation between Tomas and Ebba. Tomas, fully humiliated, is positioned on the floor of the hotel

hallway while the camera cuts to shots from below Ebba as she towers over him and confronts him. What Ebba desires from Tomas, aside from an apology, is portrayed as a desire for something fundamentally different than he appears capable of giving, even though the spectator is likely to believe that Ebba does deserve such an apology. Though the spectator may have this sympathetic reaction, Ebba is simultaneously depicted as provoking a strong reaction that demands self-submission. Tomas is forced into a full emotional breakdown that again positions him as an emasculated weakling, as the housekeeper looks down on the couple. The feminine has successfully weakened the masculine to the point that a symbolic economic class reversal has taken place between Tomas and the housekeeper. As his role crumbles, Tomas collapses on the floor of their room in front of his children. As in other scenes, this image can be interpreted multiple ways. On the one hand, Östlund seems to be advocating for the deconstruction of the unhealthy masculine roles that have led Tomas to deny his true self, and his children comforting him represent the hope of the future generations to come. On the other hand, the scene can be viewed as a representation of male submission, weakness, and breakdown in front of the next generation, who ought to be learning from Tomas's example. Östlund encourages the spectator to oscillate between these reactions or to question a firmly held, snap judgement about the characters.

In one of the film's final scenes, it becomes even more difficult for the spectator to figure out how to react to the various nuanced and highly gendered reactions the film presents. On the last day of skiing, Ebba finds herself in need of rescue by Tomas, and Tomas is shown carrying her down the mountain in a snowstorm (2014, 1:48:20). Since the couple became separated in the white-out, it's impossible to tell if Ebba was truly lost or perhaps saw an opportunity to give Tomas a chance to recuperate his standing with his family. If the former, the film uses a very traditional, masculine stereotype to return Tomas to normative expectations, a strategy that does not subvert the "hero culture" Östlund says that he hopes to problematize. If Ebba deliberately stages her own rescue, Östlund can undermine Tomas's heroic moment as nothing more than a performance that reasserts a toxic, masculine norm, a strategy made even more suspect by the fact that it is a woman who acts to reinstate that norm. In the film's final scene, it is Ebba who panics on the bus ride down from the mountain and requires Tomas's masculine calm (2014, 1:52:04). The bus is forced to stop so Ebba and the other passengers can disembark and walk the rest of the way. If the film's project is to critically deconstruct gendered categories or even ironically problematize them, which is an important project, this ending injects ambivalence into that project as it predictably returns to traditional hierarchies. At the same time, a spectator could ask whether the same "honor culture" pressures apply to women; why must Ebba appear strong and resilient all the time? Perhaps Östlund also wants to do away with normative categories of femininity?

Östlund's earlier film *De ofrivilliga* also portrays highly gendered battles of will and morality. As mentioned earlier, one of the film's narratives (told through connected vignettes) is that of a female school teacher who witnesses a male teacher inappropriately physically disciplining a student (Östlund 2008, 41:47). Her decision to not only confront the male teacher but also force other teachers, male and female, to acknowledge the situation and take a stand, results in her ostracization from the other teachers for upsetting the balance (2008, 54:20). From one potential perspective, these reactions portray her concern as overreaction. At the same time, the teacher's reaction in *De ofrivilliga* is

undeniably appropriate, and it is her coworkers' aversion to confrontation that seems irresponsible. Though Östlund's films portray gendered battles of wills, they are nuanced to the point that spectators may have extremely varied responses that differ from those experienced by characters on screen.

Part Five: Queerness in *De Ofrivilliga*, *Play*, and *Turist*

Queer Failures

"Failure," Jack Halberstam writes, "is something queers do, and have always done exceptionally well" (2011, 120). Based on Östlund's own commentary, it seems as if he identifies a real potential in allowing traditional gendered categories to fail. Östlund's film *Turist* explore forms of male queerness, as do *De ofrivilliga* and *Play*. Throughout the film *Turist*, Östlund even briefly entertains deviations from normative masculinity and experiments with what Halberstam calls a "queer art of failure" (2011). In the *Bergfilm The Holy Mountain*, this occurs in the homoerotic male body worship and the male friendship so strong it can only be broken through death (Fanck 1926, 1:40:13). In *Turist*, the character of Tomas seeks, but never quite finds, male companionship and bonding in the form of commiseration with his male, Norwegian friend Mats who, along with his Swedish partner Fanny, joins Tomas and Ebba on "Day Three" of the vacation. Later, when Ebba reveals the ongoing conflict to Mats and Fanny, Tomas becomes silent and despondent, and Mats speaks for him, claiming that sometimes in such situations one is not "aware of what you do" (Östlund 2014, 55:13). As in Tomas's earlier statements, Mats attempts to categorize different levels of consciousness and subjective perspective. He claims, "You try to survive," a statement that essentializes Tomas's cowardice to something "natural" and "instinctive," replacing his selfishness with a self-preservation that is "unconscious" and innate. In fact, it very much echoes the neoliberal economic discourse I mentioned earlier, a discourse that emphasizes self-reliance, self-responsibility, and rationality. This then stands in stark relief to Ebba, whose response no longer appears instinctual but emotionally unstable and vindictive, posing a real threat to his masculinity. Mats later echoes Östlund's own comments, declaring that the real enemy is "the image we have of heroes" (2014, 58:15), this time deflecting the blame onto bourgeois morality for going against "man's" true nature, but, just as in mountain films, woman symbolizes that morality.

Mats and Tomas bond at the top of a mountain, and it is only in the presence of Mats that Tomas seems able to reveal his frustrations. One of the film's only mountaintop vantage points occurs late in the film when the protagonist Tomas and his Norwegian friend ski alone without their partners and families. In wide shots of nothing but snow and jagged peaks, the Norwegian friend is enjoying himself, but Tomas, troubled by his family drama and cowardice in the face of the avalanche, suggests that they stop skiing and "just talk instead" (2014, 1:19:13). At the mountaintop, in what is meant to symbolize the pinnacle of masculine sense of accomplishment, Tomas continues to emasculate himself, actions at odds with the purity symbolized by the snow. The blinding sheet of snow also

represents a chilling bleakness, reflecting the cool lack of emotion in Mats's response to Tomas's admission of weakness; Mats seems to feel only a masculine self-satisfaction in athletic accomplishment and puts up a wall of neutrality towards Tomas, asking only if he's feeling alright (2014, 1:19:38). He then suggests Tomas try screaming instead (2014, 1:19:54), in the hopes that a primal scream would both exorcise his fear and reestablish his primitive masculine territoriality over outside threats, a suggestion not only laughable but ironic given that such noise could cause an avalanche that could bury them, the same kind of avalanche that is already suffocating Tomas's sense of will.

After a day skiing, they relax at the chalet, drinking together and flirting with women. Their homosociality opens a space for envisioning themselves outside the confines of monogamy (2014, 1:21:30). As is the case in the rest of the film, this isn't even really about deconstructing male-female relationships, but a recuperation of unchallenged masculine individualism outside morality, as represented by yet another shot of a woman made headless by the static camera (2014, 1:22:52). In the ultimate assertion of this masculine individuality, Tomas, who is now drunk, spots a nightclub at the resort. In one of the film's most ironic moments, which seems to contain an allusion to the panic Tomas experienced at the avalanche, a large group of men appears to rush towards the oblivious Tomas, who immediately takes off running. In another double irony, Tomas wanders into a dance club in the middle of a scrum of howling, half-naked, drunk men, all screaming in unrestrained animalistic hollering, all touching, punching, hugging, and in some images even mounting one another in what appears to be a bacchanalian homoerotic orgy and celebration of unrestrained homoerotic hypermasculinity. And at the center is Tomas, who is then absent from most images or invisible in the strobe lighting, but the spectator presumes he is caught in the testosterone storm somewhere (2014, 1:28:38). In the midst of this hypermasculine and homosocial bonding, it becomes difficult to tease out exactly how queerness, to varying degrees, either deconstructs or recuperates masculine norms, or leaves the question unanswered and ambiguous.

Masculinity and queerness are also the subjects of a narrative string of vignettes in *De ofrivilliga* about a group of men having a "boys' trip" in the countryside. This motif of groups of men and boys both bonding and misbehaving together reoccurs in many of Östlund's films, as Anderson describes: "depictions of the macho bonding and horse-play of men; their micro-aggressions, intimidations, jockeying, one-upmanship, homophobia-cum-homoeroticism, and escalating pack behavior" (2014). Many of the scenes involving this group of male friends involve copious amounts of alcohol, semi-nakedness and skin-to-skin contact in the form of games (Östlund 2008, 30:04). A scene involving a drunken male striptease (2008, 1:13:14) leads to a naked man in a handstand with the Swedish flag inserted into his ass by another drunk friend (2008, 1:13:40). In one of the film's most alarming scenes (there are many), several of the male friends are in a field (2008, 44:14). When Olle heads off to relieve himself, he is chased down by Leffe who "jokes" that Olle "is gonna get sucked" (Anderson 2014). Though Olle tries to get Leffe to back down, Leffe tackles him and, with the assistance of other guys who hold Olle down, Leffe performs oral sex on him. Anderson describes the scene:

His shot is a static landscape tableau, taken from high afar, and remains motionless throughout the entire ordeal, without cutting or using other angles. At this point, it means that we cannot see exactly what is happening, and yet at the same time, we

are also becoming very well aware: what we are watching constitutes rape. The forced oral-sex doesn't last long before Olle breaks free and gets up running. The others, still assuming it was all in good fun, merely interpret Olle's exit as a sign he took "the joke" too seriously and is now upset. However, we as the audience are indignant—what we've just been witness to was a crime, and yet its build up was eerily normalized. (Anderson 2014)

What is clearly sexual assault is later dismissed by Olle as mere roughhousing that somehow gets out of hand when he admits to his partner what has happened (2008, 59:03). She is visibly disturbed and outraged, but Olle chalks it up to just something men sometimes do. Yet the scene raises issues of individual will and emasculation. In fact, the scene conveys queerness as both emblematic of out-of-control masculine domination and total loss of will and submission. Male homosocial bonding and homoerotic games are naturalized in the country, where they are liberated from a female presence, yet Östlund also uses queerness as a kind of failure to implicate the dangerous potential of masculinity left unchecked by what is depicted as the equalizing and moralizing forces of femininity. Not only is it highly questionable to essentialize morality as gendered, but it is equally concerning to use "queer failure" not as a site of potential but as a symbol of undesired moral chaos with a homophobic narrative valence. In *De ofrivilliga*, Olle transforms his sexual assault into a form of male homosocial and homoerotic bonding immune from his girlfriend's indignation. His queer failure, in this instance, becomes an act of masculine will and defiance, but one borne of violence. Though Östlund aims to deconstruct toxic, masculine roles, he consistently undermines the recuperative potential of "queer failure."

The film *Play* also employs queerness as a mediating lens for understanding toxic, masculine pressures, but, as in the previously discussed films, queerness often takes the form of homophobia. The film queers the character John by making him an object of mockery when the African boys take away his clarinet. On the bus, they insist he take it out of the case and put it together (2011, 59:33). The symbolic image of John fumbling with the phallic symbol, then handing over that phallus to the African boys to be abused, works to construct both a disable-bodiedness (he is physically powerless to play his own instrument) and queerness (passively surrendering his phallus to other males). The clarinet, not the mobile phones, becomes the most highly prized item in the stash of winnings during the race (2011, 1:17:50). The film also queers Sebastian in a more obvious way when the African boys celebrate their physical victories by going to a pizza shop (2011, 1:30:00). They then triumphantly taunt Sebastian by calling his mother from his stolen mobile phone, telling her that he cannot talk now because he's with his "boyfriend" and busy in a "threesome." The pizzas arrive, a whole pizza for each boy. As they gorge, the camera captures their noisy, gluttonous chewing in a way that caps their material victory with a symbolic "consumption" of the vanquished. This strand of homophobia functions as part of the film's neoliberal discourse on fitness and competitive capacity, disciplining Sebastian, Alex, and John for their lack of normative masculinity. As Kafer eloquently puts it, "kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity" (Kafer 2013, 32).

Chapter Conclusion

Östlund's films project an anxiety about clinging to suffocating traditional expectations, particularly with regard to what characters perceive as a tension between individualistic impulses and traditional collective and social justice discourses. Neoliberal ideology only exacerbates this tension, particularly related to masculinity. Many of Östlund's films portray characters struggling to embody neoliberal values, an anxiety made worse by traditional masculine norms. In Östlund's films, characters' relationships with gendered categories are highly complex and often multi-faceted, frequently leaving the viewer with a sense of ambiguity about how the viewer should feel and react to actions on screen. Gendered conflict can provoke the spectator to sympathize with female characters, who are depicted as reacting morally appropriately yet placed at odds with male characters who, rightly or wrongly, feel victimized or suffocated. Östlund portrays gendered battles of wills as more nuanced and complicated than either the characters' or the spectators' potential snap judgments as to who is right in the situation. More often than not, Östlund appears to aim precisely for this sense of destabilization of gendered categories.

Men in Östlund's films are often portrayed as seeking to escape from expected masculine roles and make sense of competing Swedish traditional and neoliberal discourses. Östlund uses queerness in these films as a way to mediate an understanding of this connection between masculinity and competing Swedish discourses, yet instead of portraying the more positive potential of "queer failure," these queerings often are portrayed as actual failures which do not afford characters with any more stable a sense of their heterosexuality or masculinity.

Chapter Three

Dissolution of the Neoliberal Subject in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *≈[ungefär lika med]* and *Allt jag inte minns* and Ruben Östlund's *The Square*

“Money, money, money, that’s all anyone thinks about.”
-*Allt jag inte minns* (Khemiri 2016, loc. 233 of 261)

Introduction

In his most recent play *≈[ungefär lika med]* [Almost Equal To] (2014) and his August Prize-winning novel *Allt jag inte minns* [Everything I Don't Remember] (2015), Jonas Hassen Khemiri frames capitalism and income inequality as one of his explicit subjects. The same is true of Ruben Östlund's recent Oscar-nominated film with the English title *The Square* (2017), winner of the Palm d'Or at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. These award-winning works not only represent two Swedish artists at the peak of their careers and critical success but also a continued portrayal of characters “colliding with the economy surrounding them” (Khemiri website). This “collision” often results in characters who internalize neoliberal economic discourse and manifest values that either assist in the maintenance of white, hegemonic “Swedishness” or potentially achieve access to it. This “collision” is exacerbated by a tension between newer neoliberal pressures and more traditional discourses of Swedish social-welfare model exceptionalism and notions of the *folkhemmet*. These are varied discourses whose popular impact often rises and falls depending on Sweden's overall economic engine (Andersson 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, these multiple, entwined discourses generate enormous tension between a capitalist drive versus social justice discourse, individualism versus collectivity. Undeniably, people of color in Sweden and others marked as non-normative face far greater socio-economic precarity in the midst of such cultural tensions, particularly when they become the target of white anxiety that is driven by such tensions.

Both artists recognize that race and economics are intertwined in neoliberal arguments, even in Sweden, something their works help to elucidate. By bringing together two of Sweden's most celebrated, and, at times, controversial contemporary artists, the pervasive socio-cultural impact of neoliberal policies comes into even greater focus. As Nestingen (2008) and others have argued, popular culture can reflect social phenomena and change, and analyzing Khemiri and Östlund in this way allows us to view notions of “Swedishness” in crisis from multiple angles, all of which eventually point to a perceived, dangerous impact of capitalism and toxic masculinity on a stable sense of authentic selfhood. Such similar observations from very different artists might not be possible if

discussed in isolation or a single vantage point, and the larger social implications for Sweden potentially overlooked.

In this final chapter I argue that Khemiri's and Östlund's most recent work demonstrates a departure from their previous plays, novels, and films in two critical ways. First, ≈[ungefär lika med], *Allt jag inte minns*, and *The Square* situate capitalism not merely as one of several points in an intersection of economics, race, and masculinity, but as *the* overarching cause of what Östlund calls a loss of "belief in a common project" (Porton 2017). In *The Square*, Östlund appears no longer content merely to place characters in situations that trigger bad behavior and hypocritical responses, only to leave their actions in moral ambiguity. Instead, *The Square* foregrounds neoliberalism as a major cause of the inequality that encourages such hypocrisy:

The Square expands its lens beyond the family unit; drawing upon the smug intellectualism, vapid self-seriousness and occasionally pompous decadence of the contemporary art world and its donor class, to effectively probe the moral hypocrisies, vanity and bourgeois sensibilities of urbane liberalism. In doing so, Östlund transforms his film into—among other things—a caustic commentary on a global capitalist society that continues to reward self-interest over social harmony. (Kampakis 2017)

The Square pushes beyond *Turist*, *Play*, and *De ofrivilliga* in that it not only contextualizes anxieties within a capitalist system but satirizes and deconstructs that economic system as a root cause of social conflict.

What Östlund previously characterized as "male guilt" over social pressures to conform to Swedish norms of masculinity, he now shifts to a broader category labeled "liberal guilt":

Do we really think we can solve the environmental crisis by recycling? And can we solve the homeless crisis by giving beggars a couple of coins every day? We've lost any belief in a common project. The idea of solving problems with the help of the state has been shelved and every problem is now considered on an individual level. (Porton 2016)

The Square indicts "individualism" as one of the causes of this breakdown of moral responsibility to fellow human beings. In an interview with *Cineaste*, Östlund explains, "[In] Sweden liberalism is definitely not associated with socialism. It's associated with neoliberal economics. This kind of liberalism is making us very individualistic and creating new challenges for us" (Porton 2017). In earlier films, Östlund focused on the conflict between conformity and individuality, and in *The Square* the pendulum has swung back in the direction of the "common project" and the "state," a radical turn-around considering the rugged Nietzscheanism of his earlier works.

The second major point of departure regarding Östlund's and Khemiri's latest work concerns the depiction of an economic actor who embodies neoliberal values as the ultimate fractured identity. Östlund and Khemiri appear to have followed a similar arc towards representing *actual* physical and mental embodiment of the effects of economic systems: "Everyone seems invaded by numbers. How are we, our eyes, our words, our

bodies affected by the economic system that surrounds us?” (Khemiri website). Unlike Halim in *Ett öga rött* or Abbas in *Montecore*, both of whom are either left in ambiguous states or, in Abbas’ case, achieve financial success and artistic validation, in *≈[ungefär lika med]* and *Allt jag inte minns*, characters very clearly suffer physical and mental dissolution as a result of attempting to embody neoliberal values. The entire narrative arc of *The Square* follows the protagonist Christian’s spiral into self-destruction as he chases retribution to assuage his sense of victimization. In one of the film’s final scenes, Christian furiously digs through garbage to rescue his remaining shreds of self-respect, a visual testament to how far he has fallen mentally and physically. *The Square* portrays this internal conflict as an embodied collapse of subjectivity, a collapse that occurs, as Östlund describes, “at the core of being human” (Porton 2017).

As in their earlier works, memory continues to be symptomatic of a fractured self. In earlier works such as Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött* and *Montecore* and Östlund’s *Turist*, memory plays a major role in establishing a sense of identity as characters (particularly through tropes of journal, letter, and memoir writing) relate, revise, edit, and invent memories that narrate their sense of self. Temporally, these identities shift through past, present, and future, shaped by the intersection of race, masculinity, and capitalism. In Khemiri’s *≈[ungefär lika med]* and *Allt jag inte minns*, memory itself collapses as characters become fully monetized neoliberal economic actors worshipping “mammon,” the god of money (Khemiri 2014, 6). In these works by Khemiri and in Östlund’s *The Square*, fully realized neoliberal subjects of capacity are ironically *incapable* of maintaining or remembering an intact sense of self. Characters in *≈[ungefär lika med]* argue with doubled-selves, and the protagonist of *Allt jag inte minns* can’t remember details of his life, while the novel’s other narrators become equally unreliable. In Östlund’s *The Square*, not just memory but humanness itself begins to dissolve in the face of the financialization of humanity. In the film’s most iconic and disturbing scene, the film explores the fracturing of subjectivity as humanity regresses and devolves into pre-human ape-form in a chilling and disturbing display of cowardice in the face of violence. As in other Östlund films, the scene calls into question individual moral response to provoking situations. Yet instead of problematizing what Östlund considers unrealistic expectations on individuality, *The Square* takes a long, awkward look at the result of a society devolved into people who see the world only through the privileged lenses. Östlund also uses the character Christian’s Danishness to generate a tension between his in-control presence in the beginning of the film with what increasingly reveals itself to be a shocking lack of oversight and somewhat relaxed attitude at odds with his boss and the job’s expectations. This tension helps establish the perception of a fractured identity later in the film.

This discussion is not intended to smooth over previously discussed representations of white, male, heterosexual anxiety in Östlund’s films or representations of masculinity and queerness in either artists’ work. In his commentary about *The Square*, it is clear that Östlund still doesn’t hold his characters personally accountable for inexplicable, cowardly, or hypocritical behavior. Östlund reverts to a defense of human “instincts” in situations where he claims society puts people “under a lot of pressure when it comes to matters of guilt and bad faith” (Porton 2017). That sounds like a threat: don’t confront people with unpleasant reminders of their privilege, and in return they won’t misbehave. It also acknowledges the constructedness of norms of “Swedish” identity, as “Swedishness” can only be properly performed when unchallenged by demands for equality. Östlund both

mocks and exculpates *The Square*'s protagonist, Christian, claiming, "I'm basing this answer on myself, but I think his behavior and responses are similar to what all of us are dealing with" (Porton 2017). The problem, of course, is that not all people are included in his white, male, heterosexual "us," and not all of those people are "dealing" with reactionary anxiety to challenges to their privilege. Many are victimized by the political and social repercussions of that white, male anxiety. Östlund essentializes the naturalness of Christian's "instincts" while placing all the blame on the artifice of the social contract, a statement at odds with his other comments. Such contrasting views illustrate that the director himself exemplifies the internal struggle portrayed through his characters as they wrestle with challenges to their privilege. It is encouraging, at least, that *The Square* demonstrates signs of acknowledging structural systems of inequality rather than focusing exclusively on human "instinct" and individuality in conflict with conformity.

This chapter will also explore the continued relationship between queerness and notions of the fractured subjectivity in these recent works, interrogating notions of Swedish masculinity in explicitly homosexual, homoerotic, or homophobic situations. The presence of queerness in both artists' work raises questions about the role of masculinity in the maintenance of economic privilege. In *The Square*, Östlund focus more on deconstructing toxic hetero-masculinity, while it is Khemiri's most recent novel *Allt jag inte minns* that features a character marked as queer. This character's dissolution and "queer failure" becomes not positive potential but literal failure by the end of the novel. On the one hand, queer failure in this instance can be interpreted as symptomatic of the frustrating degree to which capitalism and toxic hetero-masculinity have become deeply entrenched in Swedish society and how that obstructs either an individual or a utopian vision of society, most poignantly symbolized by *The Square* in Östlund's film, a utopian vision of individual equality undermined by racial and economic inequality and hypocrisy. On the other hand, this also raises an important question: Is queer failure, with all its historically negative stereotypes, necessary to make this point about capitalism and heterosexuality? What does it mean for heterosexual artists to portray actual queer failure when it is also an embodied, precarious, and positive experience for many queer people?

Östlund's newest work also highlights the recurring motif of the child. This chapter will argue that instead of merely representing anxiety about future generations and the legacy of an ambiguous "Swedishness" as in previous films, *The Square* seems to place this motif at the heart of the tension of conflicting social justice and neoliberal economic discourses, using the traditional image of the child more as a symbol of a need to find new ways of imagining "Swedishness." Only then can a pattern of destructive Swedish norms be broken.

Part One: Neoliberal Discourse and the Altar of Money

Selling Souls to the God of Money

Two minutes into Ruben Östlund's *The Square*, a museum curator named Christian,

played by Danish actor Claes Bang, sits for an interview with a journalist named Anne, played by Elizabeth Moss. Her first question travels directly to the heart of the film's focus on capitalism as she asks Christian, what would be his biggest challenge in running a museum? Christian responds:

I hate to say it, but it's probably money. Raising sufficient funds. We're a museum of modern and contemporary art, so we need to present art that is absolutely the art of today, the future. Art that is absolutely cutting edge, and that's expensive. And the competition is fierce because you've got buyers and collectors from all over the world with so much money you can't believe it. They spend more in an afternoon than we spend in a year. Whereas if we buy that piece of art, we'll be able to present it here, to a large audience. To all of Stockholm and Sweden and perhaps even visitors. So, I think it's actually an obligation for us to get into that competition (Östlund 2017, 03:23).

Christian's biggest challenge isn't choosing art, designing exhibitions, public outreach or any aesthetic or social missions, but a purely financial challenge. He equates "the art of today" and the "future" with money to purchase it. Art transformed into capital. Art as capital flowing upwards into the hands of so-called one-percenters, people with incredible disposable income. Christian attempts to exclude himself from that level of wealth but institutionally speaks the neoliberal discourse of competitive capacity to vie for art against other wealthy collectors. The art world becomes an economic "competition," and Christian's identity as art director fully financialized as the ultimate neoliberal subject of capacity whose primary goal is to maintain the upward flow of capital to the institution he represents.

Östlund uses this initial scene to inject his own pointed commentary on this intersection of money and identity. Östlund told *Cineaste*, "There's this corporate theory bullshit. When you scratch the surface, there's not much underneath. So that was an aspect of the art world that I definitely wanted to criticize" (Porton 2017). Östlund accomplishes this critique in several ways. First, there's a subtle irony in Christian's Danishness, immediately at odds with his role as arbiter of Swedish culture that he claims is his priority. Though he may truly believe in that mission, his identity is marked as non-normative Swedish as soon as he speaks, placing a wedge between his embrace of neoliberal values and how close that can bring him to curating "Swedish" culture. Isn't he, after all, one of the "visitors" for whom Swedish culture may or may not be available? Before Christian is to address an audience for a reception honoring the new exhibition, Christian practices his speech in the bathroom mirror. Ironically, he practices credibility and his rehearsed decision to put away his prepared notes and "speak from the heart," a pose of authenticity accentuated by the removal of his glasses, which signifies a more reliable gaze between spectator and himself (Östlund 2017, 21:02).

Such scenes raise questions about the constructedness and privileges of normative Swedish culture: like many other things in this digital, global age, Swedish culture is curated and on display. At several points in the film Östlund encourages self-consciousness of "Swedishness" as curated construction. When Christian and his coworker Michael, a Danish man of color, are strategizing the plan to retrieve Christian's stolen items, Christian balks at the aggressiveness of Michael's threatening letter. "Don't be so Swedish!" Michael

says, “Ditch the political correctness crap” (2017, 27:30). Michael indicates that “Swedishness” is a performed category associated with certain forms of exceptionalist discourse, in this case non-violence. The PR team hired by the museum to market the exhibition pitches a video in which a beggar in the form of a little girl will wander through The Square, and they describe her as having “Svenskt eller blond hår” [Swedish or blond hair] (2017, 1:11:54). The film’s English subtitles use “fair hair,” omitting an important conflation of what is perceived as normative racial features as “Swedishness.” To be sure the stereotype hits the target, the team alludes to a child like the blond boy featured on traditional Swedish Kallas Kaviar tubes (2017, 1:11:58). The subtitles interestingly translate this as “the Swedish stereotype,” an assumption that global, English-speaking audiences will automatically associate “Swedish” with an image of a blond boy, a troubling intersection of Swedish identity, race, masculinity, and anxiety about the future of “Swedishness.”

Östlund aims his second piece of commentary in the scene directly at the spectators who receive an ominous message during the interview: “YOU HAVE NOTHING” is displayed on the museum wall (2017, 01:41). It’s a message literally in neon lights. These words hang over Christian’s head but are truly only visible to the gazing spectator and perhaps Anne, the journalist. Against the backdrop of the white walls and floors and practically empty gallery, the words float like a divine warning, undercutting Christian’s smug embrace of signs of materialist success. His hip red glasses, expensive, fitted suit, and glamorous lifestyle procuring priceless art objects appear to have upset a being from beyond, who sees all. On his way in and out of the 7-Eleven, Christian encounters a beggar sitting on the sidewalk who asks for money (2017, 0:52:55). He greets her in a friendly manner and hands her some money, then heads for an extravagant celebration, leaving the impoverished woman, marked as non-normative Swedish by traditional, ethnic clothing, to fend for herself under the neon 7-Eleven sign, which might as well be blaring “YOU HAVE NOTHING.” Soon, Christian will himself embody this message, robbed of his possessions in a pickpocket scam. In a link to his previous films such as *Play* and *Turist*, Östlund uses a mobile phone as a material object to provoke anxieties and represent connection to a sense of wealth and identity in Swedish society.

There is no mistaking the fact that the museum is a temple devoted to money and built by money. In fact, it appears to be housed in a building that strongly resembles the actual Stockholm Kungliga Slottet or Royal Palace. Christian goes straight from the 7-Eleven convenience store, a now ubiquitous chain across Scandinavia and an unmistakable sign of global neoliberal corporatism, and directly to the museum/presumably former palace, blurring the two spheres of governmental and economic into one neoliberal juggernaut. A neon sign that reads “X-Royal Museum” now stands atop the palace’s façade (2017, 53:20) On the one hand, this nod towards a potential future realization of republican utopianism and deposed monarchy could be interpreted as an upending of traditional hegemonic hierarchies of power and wealth. Yet given Christian’s statements about the museum’s primary financial concerns, it appears that this “X-Royal” institution has merely replaced a hereditary hegemony with a financial one.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s play *≈[ungefär lika med]* goes so far as to summon a replacement for God, who is presumed dead, as Nietzsche so famously declared. In the play’s opening scene, a character named Mani extols the virtue of some of history’s great entrepreneurs and inventors, citing Dutch chocolatier Casparus van Houten (1770–1858)

as particularly worthy of praise. Mani also invokes the specter of *Mammon*, a Biblical representation of wealth or riches, a type of entity or devil devoted to money. Mani, whose name seems to echo the Swedish *mamona* [mammon], reminds the audience, “Det finns till och med dom som påstår att Van Houten, på toppen av sin karriär, skulle ha gripits av fruktan för Mamona. Rikedomens och Marknadens gudinna” (Khemiri 2014, 6) [There are also those who contend that Van Houten, at the top of his career, was the obedient servant of Mamona. The goddess of Wealth and the Market.].⁹ The allusion here to “Gudsfruktan” [fear of God] implies not terror in the sense of aversion but deferential obeisance to the Lord of the Judeo-Christian belief system. Submission to the god of money is offered at the altar of the “Marketplace,” capitalized in the text as a signal of its elevated status. Mani also refers to Mannon as a “goddess,” an unexpected gendering that both upends traditional expectations and implicates the future dissolution of neoliberal subjects with worship of the female. Though the New Testament Gospel of Matthew clearly warns, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:19–21, 24, KJV), Mani claims that the name “Mamona” can be interpreted as “det som man kan lita på” (Khemiri 2014, 6) [that which one can depend upon/lean on]. This argument equating wealth and capital, not a creator god, to the source of all security, completes a kind of apotheosis of neoliberal ideology in which free-market capitalism isn’t merely a means to an end but that which gives meaning to life itself. Mani claims that Casparus van Houten’s greatest achievement may have been the distillation of the very meaning of life into “Van Houtens Teorem” [Van Houten’s Theorum], an economic equation that could “kvantifiera upplevelser” (2014, 7) [quantify experiences]. Based on what a person calculates as an “investering” [investment] in a particular experience, one can determine that experience’s “Minimum Acceptable Rate of Return” (2014, 7).

This initial scene in *≈[ungefär lika med]* combines the apotheosis of economic ideology with a sermon on neoliberal values, an important stage in preparing characters and spectators for the ensuing fall-out from selling their souls to Mammon. Khemiri’s website describes the play as explicitly centered on economic struggle: “Martina dreams about growing her way out of the contemporary economic system, Mani want to crush it. Andrei is looking for a job, Freja is seeking revenge. They all invest money in postage and pine nuts, fake bubbles and perfumes, strollers and utopias” (Khemiri website). This emphasis on money is evident in the play’s opening lines: Mani directly addresses the audience, attempting to persuade spectators that “Ekonomiska historia är inte tråkigt” (Khemiri 2014, 4) [The history of economics isn’t boring]. Mani insists that the history of economics

är inte själlöst. Det är inte en massa torra teorier och livlösa grafer. Tvärtom. Den ekonomiska historien är fylld av virrhjärnor och fritänkare, genier och galningar. Teoretiker som var så kvävda av sin samtid att dom kände sig tvungna att använda sin kunskap för att skapa trovärdiga alternativa världar. Världar som fortfarande glimrar och fyller oss efterlevande med hopp och mod. Till exempel: Casparus van Houten. (Khemiri 2014, 4)

⁹ All translations of *≈[ungefär lika med]* are my own. All translations of *Allt jag inte minns* are by Rachel Willson-Broyles (2016).

isn't soulless. It's not just a bunch of dry theories and lifeless graphs. Just the opposite. The history of economics is filled with dimwits and free-thinkers, geniuses and crazies. Theorists who were so stifled by their times that they had to use their knowledge to create credible alternative worlds. Worlds still glowing and filling us with hope and courage. For example: Casparus van Houten.

The goddess Mannon breathes a "soul" not into humans but into the Market. It is "theories" and ideologies that are not "lifeless" but touched by the finger of the goddess of wealth. The neoliberal subject of capacity is created in the image of money, the supreme financialization of humanity into capital itself. This speech echoes some of the conflicts Ruben Östlund has voiced in interviews, claiming that tensions between individuality and conformity lead "dimwits" and "crazies" to perhaps act out their worse instincts in the name of "hope and courage." Anti-market pressures stand in the way of "genius." But in a continued intermingling of spiritual and economic discourse, Mani prophesizes that unfettered economic ideology is not of this world but focused on creating "credible alternative worlds," economic paradises or heavens of eternal worship of nothing but money.

A worthy subject of the god or goddess of money needs to develop expert neoliberal values and put them into action. Early in *≈[ungefär lika med]* (Act One, Scene Two), we meet a character named Andrej, an immigrant to Sweden with likely eastern European origin. At the end of the scene, he addresses the audience, saying:

(till publiken) Jag ska inte köpa en lägenhet med hiss rakt upp i hallen och ett ljudsystem som känner av att jag kommer hem och sätter på sig självt och köket ska inte ha en tv och sovrummet ska inte ha en äkta walk in closet, en sån där med lampa som tänds bara man öppnar dörren med blankputsade skor på långa rader och mjuka slipsar på specialkrokar och kavajer med prislapparna kvar och märkesskjortor sorterade på färg på trägalgar. Jag ska fortsätta klippa mig själv och aldrig beställa en maträtt utan att kolla priset först. Ett enkelt jobb bara. Det var min plan. Men inget gick som planerat. (Khemiri 2014, 16)

(to the audience) I won't buy an apartment with its own private elevator and a sound system that recognizes when I've returned home and turns on automatically, and there won't be a TV in the kitchen and no walk-in closet in the bedroom, one where the light goes on by opening the door, polished shoes in long rows and soft ties on special hooks and blazers with the price tags still on them and designer shirts sorted by color on wooden hangers. I'll continue cutting my own hair and never order a dish without checking the price first. Just a simple job. That was my plan. But nothing went as planned.

Andrej's plan relies upon a negative capability: he outlines all the things he won't do precisely because they are not financially sound. He demonstrates an exceptional neoliberal rationalism, resisting the temptation to spend money on luxury items and dismissing symbols of wealth as unsuitable replacements for actual wealth. Andrej

internalizes modern neoliberal discourse, outlining what Nikolas Rose calls “making a project” of oneself:

Contemporary individuals are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a ‘style’ of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves. (Rose 1998, 157)

To achieve the dream of the apartment with its own elevator and sound system and walk-in closet, Andrej commits himself to the incremental but financially secure steps of “a simple job.” It sounds as if Andrej attempts to resist neoliberal discourse, not allowing luxurious material items to define him.

Despite his good intentions, “nothing goes according to plan,” and neoliberal capitalism becomes a force that overwhelms him. This is particularly poignant given the fact that Andrej’s impulses are to exemplify more traditional notions of Swedish collective responsibility and an emphasis on *lagom* or living in moderation. One reason for this may be the perceived link between economic success and “Swedishness.” Andrej goes to great lengths to exemplify the neoliberal stereotype of the ideal immigrant subject of capacity, perhaps in the hope that financial success will provide social access. In Act One, Scene Two, Andrej encounters a homeless man named Peter who serves as a symbolic foil to Andrej’s dreams of financial success. Andrej makes a promise to himself “att aldrig bli som honom” (Khemiri 2014, 13) [to never become like him] and spells out for the audience exactly how he intends to avoid financial ruin:

Jag skulle gå klart min kvällskurs, lära mig systemet, fixa jobb med fet lön, extra julbonus, vacker sekreterare och flashig företagsbil. Fast såklart skulle jag fortsätta hjälpa mamma med hyran så hon aldrig mer skulle behöva sitta uppe om nätterna med sin miniräknare och oroa sig för nästa elräkning. (2014, 14)

I would certainly go to my evening course, learn the system, find a job with a big salary, extra Christmas bonus, beautiful secretary and flashy company car. Obviously, I’d continue to help Mamma with the rent so that she never again needs to stay up all night with her little mini calculator worried about the next electricity bill.

Once again, Andrej employs methodical logic to his decisions, all of which are focused on establishing an upward flow of capital. This particular speech, however, intersects neoliberal discourse with a self-consciousness of outsider and “othered” status in Swedish society. Andrej commits to attending his “evening course,” later revealed to be a course in “grundläggande ekonomi och marknadsföring” (2014, 26) [introductory economics and marketing], which will enable him to “learn the system.” Properly employing neoliberal values provides access to the Swedish “system,” which is equated with capital: jobs, big salaries, and an extra Christmas bonus. Pulling his own weight and avoiding the racist stereotype of the economic drain allegedly caused by immigrants, Andrej even wants to be

sure he can pay his mother's rent and allow her to never worry about paying the electric bill. Andrej perceives respect in Swedish society as achievable through capital gain and self-sufficiency. Andrej's mother Silvana warns him to "akta dig för Mammon" (2014, 14) [watch out for Mammon], the false god of neoliberalism, but Andrej dismisses her worries, as if acknowledging that surrendering one's identity to Mammon is necessary in Sweden if an immigrant has any hope of overcoming systemic inequality. In becoming a subject of capacity, his "moral blir en balansräkning" (2014, 15) [morality becomes a balance sheet].

In *Allt jag inte minns*, this "moral balance sheet" falls into the red, as Khemiri introduces a cast of characters who, like Andrej, are marked as non-normative Swedish. In the case of *Allt jag inte minns*, characters such as Vandad and Samuel are of mixed race and migrant backgrounds. Samuel's parents are a white, Swedish mother and a father from North Africa (2015, 170-171). He is portrayed as a "second generation" Swede, as is Vandad, an important detail that marks them not only as non-normative but also as having been exposed to both traditional discourses such as Swedish social-welfare exceptionalism and more recent neoliberal economic discourse. Such characters embody the tension between social justice discourses and neoliberal, meritocratic values of self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and competitive spirit. While it is unclear whether Andrej in *≈[ungefär lika med]* is "first" or "second generation," he serves as a stereotypical role model of the neoliberal subject of capacity, and Samuel and Vandad grow up under similar disciplining economic discourse. In the novel's opening scenes, Samuel and Vandad appear to have manifested this neoliberal ideal, party-hopping around Stockholm's upper-middle class southern suburbs like Liljeholmen and Midsommarkransen, the latter of which is mentioned as the location of another party and is symbolic, as it is considered the city's first, planned suburban community. Now it is only minutes from downtown Stockholm, but socio-culturally it is worlds away from northern suburbs such as Rinkeby, notorious in Swedish cultural imagination as a crime-infested immigrant neighborhood, or one of the "miljonprogram i innerstan" (2015, 58) ["inner-city housing projects" (2016, loc. 39 of 261)], where Samuel and Panther grew up. Mingling in white, middle-class suburbs would potentially signal that access to traditional norms of "Swedishness" is increasing as men like Samuel and Vandad set their sights on improving their economic conditions. The Swedish middle class would appear to be determined more by financial success than race.

Geographical and spatial differentiation of "Swedishness" becomes a recurring motif in the novel, exemplified by Vandad's job with a moving company. Vandad may party in Midsommarkransen, but any identity he derives from it is temporary, as symbolized by his job, which is both permanent and itinerant. He spends his working hours moving rich peoples' possessions within Stockholm. In one instance, he helps move an old woman from the Östermalm neighborhood to Södermalm, two of Stockholm's wealthiest and chicest areas; the former has aristocratic turn-of-the-century origins, and the latter has working-class origins but is now gentrified and trendy (2015, 38). Vandad has no frame of reference for wealthy domestic spaces. He is only able to liken the woman's Östermalm apartment to "ett museum" [a museum] and observes, "Dom dammiga speglarna var antika och den slitna byrån skulle behandlas som en guldacka" (2015, 38) ["The dusty mirrors were antiques and the shabby dresser had to be handled as if it was pure gold" (2016, loc. 24 of 261)]. The dusty, antique possessions represent temporal hegemony and wealth accumulation, and Vandad's own mirrored reflection is potentially obscured by the fact

that the old woman required everything to be double-layered in blankets and bubble-wrap (2015, 38).

Hegemony contracts rather than expands, accumulates rather than distributes, a trend that is spatially symbolized by the fact that Vandad moves possessions in increasingly smaller geographical spheres. One man moves only fifty feet away, though he guiltily tries to persuade Vandad, "Ja, inte är det skattemässiga skäl i alla fall" (2015, 37) ["Well it's not for tax reasons, anyway" (2016, loc. 23 of 261)]. Khemiri associates the man's accumulated capital with tax evasion, taxes that would potentially trickle down into social welfare programs that might help people like Vandad and his family. Instead, the man doubles down on protecting his wealth and privilege by rigging the system, which in turn secures his ability to limit Vandad's access to "Swedishness." In this way, Khemiri makes a larger criticism of institutionalized economic and racial privilege. Such institutions aren't always governmental but also professional and educational, as characterized by a job at the university moving "bokkartonger och sponsgodis och projektorer och en stor plastsoffa i en tjugokubikare. Det hade varit någon sorts mäsas" (2015, 42) ["loading boxes of books and swag candy and projectors and a big yellow plastic sofa into the fifteen-footer. There had been some sort of fair there" (2016, loc. 28 of 261)]. Whether the fair is for prospective students or is some sort of job/internship opportunity fair, Vandad, who lacks higher education, is forced to carry the swag that will be distributed further up the social chain. Even more poignantly, Vandad runs into Samuel on campus, a meeting that sparks the beginning of an intense and erotic friendship. Khemiri also uses this coincidence to further illustrate the ways in which an institutionalized system such as higher education remains rigged in favor of white hegemony. In an email to the novel's presumed author, Samuel's mom describes:

[H]ur ensam han var som tonåring, hur stora hans planer var på att förändra världen när han började studera statsvetenskap. Du måste inse hur jobbigt det var för honom att ta examen och gå runt arbetslös i elva månader, för att slutligen hamna på Migrationsverket. Det var så långt ifrån hans dröm. (2015, 43)

[H]ow lonely he was as a teenager, how much he wanted to change the world when he started studying political science. You have to understand how difficult it was for him to get his degree and then be unemployed for eleven months, only to end up working at the Migration Board. It was so far removed from his dream. (2016, loc. 27 of 261)

Vandad's university degree not only fails to provide employment but injects a pointed irony in that his "political science" degree never truly affords access to the real "science" behind the political system that is rigged against him. Instead, in a double irony, Vandad is forced to work at the Migration Board, a visible reminder to other migrants of the system's limitations.

Samuel's mother's reminiscence also affords an interesting window into the way Samuel may have internalized neoliberal discourse and values. She laments that his stable but humiliating job at the Migration Board was "far from his dream," yet in his meeting with Vandad on the university campus, Samuel complains that he just gave a lecture and met with students in his office and discussed

hur man använder sina teoretiska lärdomar i arbetslivet och man gör det, man säger att man sitter på sitt kontor och intalar dom att det är värt att kasta bort fyra år på en värdelös utbildning och sen får man en applåd och ett tack av läraren och sen går man ut därifrån och känner sig som en stor fejk. (2015, 45)

how you use your theoretical background in your job, and you do it, you say that you sit in your office and convince them that it's worth throwing away four years on a worthless education and then they applaud and the teacher thanks you and then you leave and feel like a giant fucking fraud. (2016, loc. 30 of 261)

Samuel's disenchantment with "theory" and higher education as somehow misrepresentative and "fraudulent," mirrors Khemiri's own life experiences in the Stockholm School of Economics and his frustrations working at the United Nations. At one point, Samuel's former girlfriend Panther says, "Samuel omringades av en massa personer som ville plugga internationella relationer och komma in på UD och jobba för FN och rädda världen och det hade ju varit Samuels grej på gymnasiet" (2015, 56) ["Samuel was surrounded by a bunch of people who wanted to study international relations and get jobs at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and work for the UN and save the world and that had definitely been Samuel's thing at school" (2016, loc. 38 of 261)]. Pitted against entrenched systems of economic inequality and racial privilege, institutionalized knowledge production and "political science" can easily appear "worthless" if it doesn't generate capital that allows one to actually challenge power.

So, what then was Samuel's "dream"? Though both Samuel and Vandad aspire to break into middle-class and even upper-echelon wealth, they are initially tied to a moneylender named Hamza. Ironically, it is Hamza who brings Samuel and Vandad to the party in Liljeholmen, problematizing their ability to fully embody the identity of middle-class "Swedishness," as their very presence symbolizes an underworld, immigrant challenge to white, Swedish supremacy. Vandad has also worked for Hamza as hired muscle or "back-up":

Hamza träffade en kille som var skyldig honom pengar och killen och Hamza var inte helt överens om storleken på lånet. Vi var tvungna att ta in honom på toaletten och påminna honom om summan. Inga allvarliga grejer, jag tror inte ens han anmälde ... Hamza fnittrade i baksätet, han var nöjd med utdelningen, han räknade upp sedlar till mig och sa som vanligt att vi borde slå oss ihop, starta något eget, inte bara slita åt andra. (2015, 25)

Hamza was meeting a guy who owed him money, and the guy and Hamza were not in complete agreement about how big the loan was. We had to take him to the bathroom and remind him of the amount. Nothing serious, I don't think he even reported it ... Hamza was giggling in the backseat, he was happy with the night's profits, he counted out bills for me and as usual he said that we ought to join forces, strike out on our own, not just slave for other people. (2016, loc. 14 of 261)

As in *Ett öga rött* and Östlund's *Play*, criminal street smarts often exemplify certain neoliberal competitive values, yet Vandad shies away from embracing these strategies. He wants to use the system meritocratically against itself. But that system fails to support Vandad in his struggles to improve his conditions, and, behind on his rent, he is forced to turn to Hamza for a loan, a decision that will have disastrous consequences.

Neoliberal Experts and Talking Heads

To properly “learn the system” and complete a “moral balance sheet” in the black requires tutelage from experts who reinforce financial responsabilization through neoliberal discourse. These experts can be governmental entities, such as the bureaucrats who represent institutions like the Swedish Arbetsförmedlingen [Employment Office] featured in *≈[ungefär lika med]*. Governmental bureaucrats serve as excellent neoliberal messengers since “ideals of the self are bound up with a profoundly ambiguous set of relations between human subjects and political power” (Rose 1998, 152). This Foucauldian critical approach stresses a biopolitical relationship between governmental and financial institutions and the manner in which discourse and policies shapes the way people view themselves as citizens. In Act One, Scene Five of *≈[ungefär lika med]*, Andrej goes to his local “Arbetsförmedlingen” [Employment Office] to inquire about job opportunities. After politely asking how one goes about registering oneself, Andrej is treated rudely by the “Arbetskassetanten” [Employment Office Clerk] identified derogatively as a “tant,” or frumpy old woman. She sarcastically explains:

ARBETSKASSETANTEN

Du börjar med att ta fyra steg bakåt. Kan du göra det?

ANDREJ

Mm.

ARBETSKASSETANTEN

Så vrider du huvudet 60-65 grader åt vänster.

ANDREJ

Mm?

ARBETSKASSETANTEN

Vad står det där? På skylten?

ANDREJ

Att om man vill registrera sig som arbetsökande ska man ta en nummerlapp.
(Khemiri 2014, 23–24)

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK (“OLD WOMAN”)

You start by taking four steps backwards. Can you do that?

ANDREJ

Mm.

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK

Then turn your head 60-65 degrees to the left.

ANDREJ

Mm?

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK

What does it say there? On the sign?

ANDREJ

That if you want to register as unemployed, you have to take a number.

The clerk humiliates Andrej through the symbolic act of making him physically step backwards away from her position of authority and economic power at the service desk. She instructs him to move and turn like a child and patronizes his ability to read the instructions, a task that he demonstrates he can do capably. In a culminating humiliation, the clerk reduces Andrej to a mere number, underscoring Khemiri’s argument that neoliberal values and economic success do not necessarily grant one stable Swedish identity, respect, or access to Swedishness, particularly if one is socially or racially differentiated in Swedish society.

After forcing Andrej to wait for his number to be called, he meets with “Arbetskasse gubben” [Employment Office Clerk], this time a “gubbe” or old guy, whose barely veiled racism further exposes the social inequality at the heart of Sweden’s economic system. The negative capability in Andrej’s early speech is now used to discipline him, as the clerk asks patronizingly, “Du råkar inte ha ett CV med dig?” [You don’t happen to have a CV with you?] and “säg inte att du dessutom har med dig ditt gymnasiebetyg?” [don’t tell me that you also have your high school grades with you?] (2014, 25–26). After entering Andrej’s information into the system, the print-out, unsurprisingly, lacks any job matches:

ARBETSKASSE GUBBEN

Intressant, intressant, intressant, intressant.

ANDREJ

Fast det lät mer som om han sa...

ARBETSKASSE GUBBEN

Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot.

ANDREJ
Ursäkta?

ARBETSKASSEGUBBEN

Jo men jag menar. Jag tror att många av dom här arbetsgivarna ställer lite annorlunda krav på erfarenhet och utbildning än det som du har. Men om jag säger sanering vad säger du då?

ANDREJ
Sanering?

ARBETSKASSEGUBBEN

Mm sanering. Du ser ut att vara i bra fysisk form. Har du någon erfarenhet av arbete med högtrycksaggregat?
(2014, 26–27)

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK (“OLD GUY”)
Interesting, interesting, interesting, interesting.

ANDREJ
Though it sounded more like he said...

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK
Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot.

ANDREJ
Excuse me?

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK
Well, what I mean is ... I think that many of these employers have slightly different experience and training requirements than you have. But if I were to tell you the truth, what would you say?

ANDREJ
Truth?

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE CLERK
Mm, the truth. You look like you’re in good shape. Do you have any experience working with high pressure water jets?

Instead of the reassuring meritocratic promise of neoliberal discourse, Andrej now hears the word “idiot” instead of “interesting,” acknowledging a self-consciousness of his outsider status and lack of respect, neither of which can be remedied by obtaining a job from this man. Neoliberal “truth” is not economic survival of the fittest but institutionalized inequality rigged to keep Andrej in manual labor. Andrej’s final question to the “Arbetskassegubben” reveals what Andrej perceives as the real reason for his lack of

access: discrimination and racial/ethnic profiling. Contesting the lack of job search results, Andrej says, “Och du tror inte att mitt efternamn står i vägen?” (2014, 27) [And you don’t believe that my last name is what is standing in the way?]. The clerk vehemently denies this accusation, claiming, “Det borde inte stå i vägen. Och OM det står i vägen så är det fel att det står i vägen. Verkligen fel” (2014, 27) [It ought not to be in the way. And IF it’s in the way, that’s wrong. Really wrong]. But Khemiri has already undermined all his moral credibility, to the point that even this declaration of non-discrimination rings hollow, a façade only reinforced by his insistence that Andrej take the information about a company looking for a janitor (2014, 28). The entire episode ends with Andrej reduced to a “moral balance sheet” with a total equal to cleaning toilets, a financial equivalency Andrej suspects is based not on his qualifications but his non-normative last name.

The biopolitical creation of neoliberal subjects also requires various non-governmental but professionalized experts such as psychologists, sociologists, public health advocates, educators, and journalists. In *≈[ungefär lika med]*, this professional expert class is represented by the character of “Jobbcoachen” (2014, 47) [the job coach]. In Act One, Scene 10, a character named Martina visits a job coach, although it should be pointed out that Martina is technically not alone. The character of Martina is shadowed by the character Martina 2, an interior voice constantly in dialogue with her and present as a distinct voice. Like Andrej, the character Martina has what could be considered a non-normative Swedish name, potentially signaling “non-Swedish” status. This doubled self, which I will comment on in greater detail later in this chapter, seeks the help of a job coach, demonstrating what Rose identifies as, “a single a priori: the ‘autonomization’ and ‘responsibilization’ of the self, the instilling of a reflexive hermeneutics which will afford self-knowledge and self-mastery, and the operation of all of this under the authority of experts” (1998, 157). Instead of setting goals or discussing life experiences, the job coach focuses on the hermeneutics that will make Martina a success. The job coach describes this process as “DISC-analys” [DISC analysis] in which “DISC står för Dominance, Inducement, Submission och Compliance, där Dominance handlar om makt och kontroll” (Khemiri 2014, 50) [DISC stands for Dominance, Inducement, Submission and Compliance, where Dominance is about power and control]. The job coach clarifies that “Submission handlar snarare om tålmod och envishet” (2014, 52) [Submission is more about patience and persistence], an irony that exposes neoliberalism’s false meritocratic discourse. How can one be simultaneously “persistent” and “submissive”? By using professionalized expert-speak, “persistence” becomes unquestioned submission, all designed to convey a message that unchallenged upward flow of capital *is* meritocracy. Though the job coach insists the session was about Martina’s “personliga mål” (2014, 52) [personal goal], the expert did nothing except reiterate neoliberal responsabilization discourse meant to instill a submissive and compliant attitude in Martina’s sense of self, effectively neutralizing her capacity to compete economically and threaten capital’s upward flow.

Seemingly meaningless, expert jargon becomes the basis of satire in Östlund’s film *The Square*, symbolizing not only an attempt to mask corporate or capitalist intentions, but also a symbol of the breakdown of heteronormative communication. During Christian’s interview with Anne, her second and final question asks for clarification about an event listed on the museum’s website. The description is so unintelligible, she is forced to read it, unable to even form a coherent question:

May 30, 31. "Exhibition/Non-exhibition: An evening conversation that explores the dynamics of the 'exhibitible' and the construction of publicness in the spirit of Robert Smithson's 'Site/Non-Site.' From non-site to site, from non-exhibition to exhibition, what is the topos of exhibition/non-exhibition in the crowded moments of mega-exhibition." (Östlund 2017, 04:31)

While Anne reads the abstract, the camera focuses on Christian's humorous, confused facial expressions as he shifts from the confident and composed persona that reacted to the first question to the uncomfortable persona of "art director" who can't understand the jargon of his own profession. Christian, clearly baffled, is unable to respond, indicting what will become an evident lack of oversight in his duties. It is also a glimpse at Christian's potentially more authentic and relaxed persona, characteristics that his Danishness may symbolically offset against his Swedish coworkers, several of whom appear to have considerably greater focus on their work. This may also foreshadow his later identity crisis. Christian asks to read the abstract, but he seems unable to decipher it. Anne feigns ignorance for his benefit, submissively saying, "I'm clearly not as scholarly as you are," but behind that smile is mocking disdain for his lack of ownership over what she clearly perceives as nonsense discourse. Christian tries to fake his way through an explanation by summarizing what happened at those events, but his memory fails, potentially implying he may not even have been present. Christian finally settles upon a question to help explain the esoteric discourse: "If you place an object in a museum, does that make it a piece of art? For instance, if we took your bag and placed it here, would that make it art?" (2017, 0:05:30). Christian's distillation of one of the art world's thorniest theoretical questions in a simple example confuses Anne, who appears unconvinced that he has truly answered the question, though she says "It does, I think. Yeah" (2017, 05:50). No discourse seems to satisfy either person. Ironically, Anne's bag as material object (presumably with wallet inside) fails to convince her of its potential artistic merit, and the same seems true for Christian. Just because it is material or capital doesn't make it worth reverence. When Anne abruptly ends the interview, saying, "Well, that is all we have" (2017, 05:57), Christian looks puzzled, unable to tell if unpreparedness or lack of rapport or boredom or all three contribute to such a short interview. Hollow, expert jargon doesn't fill the void and "all they have" is apparently "NOTHING" blaring behind them in neon on the gallery wall.

Östlund's choice to use a man with Tourette Syndrome to satirize artistic jargon is both pointed and highly problematic, not least because the scene generates humor at the expense of what for certain people is an embodied and lived experience in an unaccommodating world. Equally disagreeable, the man's outbursts fit into a pattern of motifs of evolutionary regression as symbolized by either actual apes or performance art that mimics apes. The audience member with Tourette Syndrome, the chimpanzee Anne inexplicably keeps as a pet, and the ape-artist who will interrupt a banquet at one of the film's crisis moments, all make grunts and noises symbolizing basic, animal instinct. The perception that Tourette Syndrome is form of uncensored speech and therefore non-performative and untainted by social conformity only adds to this symbolism of the original uninhibited will. Yet it is precisely that perception of the uncensored disruption that Östlund capitalizes upon to critique artistic and "corporate theory bullshit" in the art world (Porton 2017). Just as in Anne's interview with Christian at the beginning of the film, the camera once again takes the viewpoint of a member of an audience, forcing *The*

Square's actual spectators to place themselves in the on-screen audience's position. Spectators must passively listen to an artist (played by actor Dominic West) and his pretentious droning on about his latest art installation at the museum. As the artist discusses "the psyche inside one's own head" (Östlund 2017, 46:15) from an aesthetic point of view, the man with Tourette Syndrome yells, "Cock, goddammit!" (2017, 46:17), shocking the audience members, interviewer, and artist. Someone can be heard saying, "This is outrageous" (2017, 48:00), while other audience members look around irritated, and others appear perplexed about how to feel about the disturbance, waiting to take their cues from others. In typical Östlund style, the scene forces the film's on-screen bystanders and real-life spectators into awkward confrontation with their emotional reaction to unforeseen disturbances to order. There is no easy answer to this dilemma: "On the one hand, the audience and the moderator don't want to confront a man with a disability since that would be rude. But the man's disability means that he's unavoidably rude himself" (Porton 2017). Östlund seems to enjoy problematizing "utopianism" and watching well-intentioned but privileged people squirm. Of course, that is usually from the perspective of white, heterosexual people marked as able-bodied; the film makes no effort to view the scene from the point of view of the man with Tourette Syndrome. His character serves a satirical purpose, which is to humiliate people spouting institutional jargon, particularly when it disingenuously masks its corporate or aesthetic self-interest.

Intersecting Neoliberalism and Race

In Khemiri's *≈[ungefär lika med]*, Andrej's interaction with the employment office clerks epitomizes institutional financial systems that exploit social and racial differentiation to limit access to the upward flow of capital. There is a direct link between race and the perception of "Swedishness" as illustrated in the opening pages of *Allt jag inte minns*. Vandad is at a party and relates what has become an all too familiar pattern of racist interrogation by Swedes about his "Swedishness." Upon meeting new people at the party, Vandad says:

Jag gjorde mig redo på följdfrågorna. 'Vad sa du? Vamdad? Vanbab? Van Damme? Jaha Vandad. Var kommer det namn ifrån? Vad betyder det? Var kommer dina föräldrar ifrån? Kom dom hit som politiska flyktingar? Är du född här? Är du hel eller halv? Känner du dig svensk? Hur svensk känner du dig? Äter du fläsk? Förresten känner du dig svensk?' (Khemiri 2015, 19)

I braced myself for the inevitable questions. "What did you say? Vamdad? Vanbab? Van Damme? Oh, Vandad. What kind of name is that? What does it mean? Where are your parents from? Did they come here as political refugees? Were you born here? Are you whole or half? Do you feel Swedish? How Swedish do you feel? Do you eat pork? By the way, do you feel Swedish?" (Khemiri 2016, loc. 8 of 261)

The presumably white Swedes (though it is possible there are other non-white Swedes present) ask invasive questions, which, on the one hand, do not strike them as racist because their privilege blinds them to the offensive imposition of such discriminatory and othering questions. On the other hand, the questions are so deliberately intended to differentiate Vandad from those around him that it's hard to accept they don't express a conscious desire to establish normative boundaries about what counts as "Swedish," even when so-called well-meaning white people try to demonstrate their lack of racism by ostensibly taking an interest in a person's heritage or background. In other words, white "Swedishness" is preserved through an allegedly "multicultural" discourse, as Lentin and Titley (2011) and Karlsson (2014) have discussed. The questions posed to Vandad establish a normative "Swedishness" that is geographical and spatial ("Where are your parents from?," "Were you born here?"), religious ("Do you eat pork?"), cultural ("Oh, Vandad. What kind of a name is that?"), and racial ("Are you whole or half?"). All of these questions barely conceal the racial differentiation the answers provide: "non-Swedish," Middle Eastern or African, Muslim, and mixed-race. While many white Swedes might view themselves as citizens of an exceptionalist, Swedish society known for embracing "multiculturalism" and in which overt racism doesn't exist, its institutionalized forms encourage embodiment of racial differentiation. This is illustrated by the fact that the white Swedes who accost Vandad with questions want to know *how it feels* to be in his body. This is not for the sake of empathy but as a reminder to both Vandad and white Swedes that discourse may attempt to conceal the existence of racism, but normative Swedishness is something embodied.

Khemiri typifies and satirizes this Swedish multicultural discourse through the character of the "Neighbor," who is, in fact, the very first character introduced in the novel. Beginning in the future present after most of the novel's drama has unfolded, the Neighbor expresses regret about the tragic fire at the safe house run by Laide and Samuel. Drawing attention to racial and cultural differences, he's convinced of his "non-racist" bonafides:

Jag har ingen fördomar mot människör från andra länder. Jag har aldrig förstått poängen med att olika kulturer ska isolera sig från varandra. Jag älskar att resa. Ända sen jag gick i pension har jag tillbringat vinterhalvåret utomlands. Indisk mat är jättegod. Det finns en kille som jobbar i fiskdisken på Konsum som är från Eritrea och han är jättetrevlig. Jag hade inga problem alls med att det började flytta in nytt folk i Samuels mormors hus. Det rörde mig inte i ryggen att vissa av kvinnorna hade slöjor. Däremot tyckte jag inte om att dom grillade på altanen och slängde sina soppåsar i min soptunna. Men det hade ju inte med deras bakgrund att göra. (Khemiri 2015, 21-22)

I don't have any prejudices against people from other countries. I have never understood the point of different cultures isolating themselves from each other. I love to travel. Ever since I retired I've spent the winter abroad. Indian food is very good. There's a guy who works at the fish counter at Konsum who's from Eritrea and he is very nice. I had no problem at all when new people started moving into Samuel's grandmother's house. It didn't bother me that some of the women had veils. On the other hand, I didn't like it that they used the grill out on the roof terrace

and threw their garbage bags in my garbage can. But that had nothing to do with their background. (Khemiri 2016, loc. 9 of 261)

In this complex delusion of white privilege, the Neighbor consistently uses contradictory statements to differentiate himself as Swedish from “people from other countries,” all the while claiming not to have any “prejudices.” Foreigners “isolate,” but when Swedes “travel” away from their culture, it results in enjoyment. In fact, it has nothing to do with authentic desire to expose oneself to other cultures but is motivated by the hardships of Swedish winter and eating Indian food. When the weather is better, the privileges of Swedishness allow one to be served food by foreigners in one’s own country. The equation of non-white people with food also serves as a reminder of white, post-colonial privilege as a form of racial consumption as detailed by Pitcher (2014) and Tompkins (2012). The Neighbor’s perception of the Eritrean man as “nice” is based partially upon the fact that the man symbolically offers something for the white man to consume. His perception of the safe house women as offensive is also based partially on the fact that their cooking, which is done above him on the roof, remains symbolically out of his reach.

The Neighbor’s suspect claim about veiled women aside, his primary irritation originates with what he views as un-Swedish etiquette, customs not rooted in religion but normative behaviors. Swedes enjoy the benefits of privilege in the form of a cushy pension that affords extensive travel abroad, whereas as immigrants are marked by a need to work low-paying jobs for a precarious financial future. In the absence of widespread religiosity, contemporary Sweden could be said to place a greater cultural emphasis on social rituals that are seen as symbols of Swedish exceptionalism, such as being leaders in environmental progressivism. This facet of Swedish society is made evident by a Byzantine recycling sorting system frequently involving no fewer than five different trash bins. The waste disposal system is a social ritual in Sweden, a facet of Swedish life Ruben Östlund uses to powerful symbolic effect in the conclusion of *The Square*, when Christian’s emotional breakdown occurs in the rain amongst his building’s trash. In the case of the Neighbor from *Allt jag inte minns*, the trash of people marked as non-Swedish is improperly comingled with white-Swedish refuse. The Neighbor’s “liberal guilt,” to use Östlund’s phrase, reveals itself to be a type of concealing discourse meant to hide white privilege.

In another vignette that intersects money and race, Samuel’s grandmother is placed in a nursing home. One of her caretakers is an immigrant named Guppe who suffers the indignity of the grandmother’s racism:

Guppe säger att det första mormorn gjorde när hon var nyinflyttad var att anklaga alla mörka mön som jobbade på boendet för stöld ... Guppe berättar att en gång när mormorn hade varit på extra dåligt humör försökte Samuel’s mamma ge honom dricks. Hon höll fram en hundring och sa att hon var ledsen för alla saker som jag fick höra ... När jag kom hem och berättade för min fru om vad som hänt kallade hon mig idiot för att jag inte hade tackat ja till sedeln. Vi hade precis köpt radhus och tvillingarna var ett och ett halvt och blöjor och nappar och wet wipes var inte gratis. När jag skulle somna låg jag vaken och tänkte ganska länge på om jag borde tagit emot sedeln. Men jag hade gjort samma sak idag. Sa jag fru? Jag menade exfru. (Khemiri 2015, 31-32)

Guppe says that the first thing Samuel's grandma did when she moved in was accuse all the dark-skinned men who worked at the home of theft ... Guppe says that once when Samuel's grandma was in an extra bad mood, Samuel's mother tried to give him a tip. She held out a hundred-krona bill and said she was sorry for all the things I had to listen to ... When I came home and told my wife about what had happened she called me an idiot for refusing the money. We had just bought a terrace house and the twins were eighteen months old and diapers and pacifiers and wet wipes didn't come free. When I went to bed I lay there for a long time, wondering whether I should have accepted the money. But I would do the same thing today. Did I say wife? I meant ex-wife. (Khemiri 2016, loc. 19 of 261)

The racist grandmother represents overt racist discourse that shamelessly accuses non-white Swedes of being threats to white wealth. But this is supposedly not representative of the modern "multicultural" Sweden, and Samuel's mother's "liberal guilt" prompts her to offer money to Guppe. As Östlund earlier argued, how do gestures such as this truly address systemic social problems? Or do they merely assuage white guilt in a way that staves off a true relinquishment of privilege? Insulted, Guppe interprets the offer for what it is: not an authentic acknowledgment of his victimization but a kind of hush money to keep him from complaining and thereby upsetting the system. A complaint might affect Samuel's grandmother's privilege to enforce her supremacy, so money steps in to calm the challenge and re-establish order. Guppe epitomizes true, honest work ethic, yet for all his faith in meritocratic behavior, he still finds himself at the bottom of the economic scale.

At the heart of *The Square's* narrative is an urbane, stylish, attractive, wealthy museum curator named Christian who spends much of the film attempting to promote an artwork called *The Square*, which is meant to represent utopian ideals of collective equality. The square draws attention to artificial social boundaries that limit collective equality. The drama at the beginning of the film challenges Christian's dedication to this utopian dream as he is robbed by a pickpocket who preys on his sense of empathy and steals not only his phone and wallet but even, he believes, his cufflinks (Östlund 2017, 0:09:10). Overcome by a need for justice (which blurs into vengeance), Christian elicits the help of a co-worker to use his stolen phone's GPS locator to try and find the culprit and shame the person into returning the phone. The film also follows Christian's one-night stand with his interviewer Anne, who is portrayed as attracted to his position and charm but confronts Christian in subsequent scenes over his compartmentalization of their sexual interaction and lack of intimacy. Throughout the course of the film, all of Christian's lofty aesthetic ideals are revealed as a well-intentioned but uncommitted pose as he reveals himself to be a vain, vengeful, petty, misogynistic, materialist:

Östlund transforms his film into—among other things—a caustic commentary on a global capitalist society that continues to reward self-interest over social harmony. In skewering the commercialization of art, *The Square* effectively draws attention to the well-meaning, though ultimately myopic, worldview of a privileged slice of the population, whose experiences within Stockholm's social apparatus often bristle

against the harsh realities of life for many. With shots of immigrants, panhandlers and homeless folk peppered throughout *The Square's* 150-minute runtime, the film renders the world of the "haves" as an almost ego-driven bubble where money, sex, power and opportunity are inextricably linked. (Kampakis 2017)

Those "harsh realities" of Stockholm life are on display through much of *The Square*, forcing both characters and spectators to confront unpleasant reminders of their privilege, particularly racial and economic privilege. Östlund's *The Square* is replete with images of people, in many cases marked as non-normative Swedish, at the bottom of that economic scale (Östlund 2017, 41:26). In a particularly charged exchange, Christian goes to the 7-Eleven, walking through another city square in which an overhead shot captures Christian's shadow as "Do you want to save a human life?" is once again heard from offscreen (2017, 42:38). Christian decides that he does, and, once inside the 7-Eleven, he offers to buy food for a woman seated at a table begging for money. Not only is she marked as racially non-normative Swedish, but she is portrayed as extremely aggressive and rude, not even remotely thankful for Christian's kindness. As Christian orders her a sandwich, she shouts, "No onions" (2017, 43:26) in a moment both humorous and full of dubious white anxiety about her "gratefulness" and her desire to "take advantage" of Christian by daring to ask that the sandwich be made to her liking. In a subsequent interaction outside the 7-Eleven, Christian hands money to the beggar woman but not on the way into the store. He must first retrieve his stolen money (Östlund 2017, 0:52:52). Only once the attempt at redistribution has been thwarted and the upward flow returned to normal then is Christian free to donate the money back down the scale on his own hegemonic terms. Christian's "liberal guilt" assuaged, he can now go to the celebration and put the less fortunate out of his mind.

Throughout the film, Christian's privileged expectations reveal themselves in other interactions with people of color. Christian's stolen iPhone GPS tracker leads him and his co-worker Michael to a housing project and they both write a demand letter confronting the potential pickpocket. When Michael, who is a Danish person of color, refuses to distribute the letter throughout the housing project, Christian asks him, "As your boss, I'm curious to know if I can count on you?" (2017, 34:35). In another troubling confluence of economics and race, Christian is shopping at the mall with his children. In a scene reminiscent of the opening of Östlund's film *Play*, Christian rides an escalator in the atrium of multi-level shopping mall (2017, 1:37:36). Unable to find his children and desperate to leave, he encounters a man, also marked as racially non-normative Swedish, bowing in supplication on the ground, hands clasped in prayer-fashion and begging for money. Shockingly self-absorbed, Christian asks the man to "give him a hand" and watch his belongings as he goes in search of his kids (2017, 1:38:05). Stunned, the man agrees, and Östlund sets up Christian and the film's spectators to confront their preconceived prejudices and assumptions that the man will abscond with the bags. He does not.

Another way in which *The Square* breaks new ground for Östlund is through the character of Michael, a person of color. His professional status sets him apart from the few characters of color in other Östlund films, though it could be argued that his ill-conceived plan for Christian to retrieve his stolen goods comes dangerously close to harassment, if not criminal behavior, a fact which unfortunately brings his character development closer to Östlund's more typical presentation of people of color as criminals, as in *Play*. It is

Michael who first suggests that they use the phone's GPS tracker to locate the building and that they "write a threatening letter that we distribute in the building" (2017, 26:52) with the intended effect of flushing out the thief. Once at the building, all the stereotypical tropes of "bad neighborhoods" and lawless people of color are present in the film, complete with hip-hop music. Christian distributes his fliers, setting in motion a chain of events that leads to a young boy, also marked as non-Swedish, confronting Christian's coworker Michael in a 7-Eleven (2017, 1:17:03). The boy, whose parents have mistakenly punished him for stealing Christian's belongings, wants Michael to exonerate him. He threatens Michael, saying, "Don't make me angry! Don't act stupid!" attempting to force him to take back the flier's accusation. The argument pits two people of color from different economic backgrounds against one another in an awkward battle that paints Michael as a liar and the little boy as aggressive and violent, but also justifiably righteous. In some ways, Östlund harnesses that anger in the form of the child as a warning cry to his Swedish audience, a demand to be treated fairly. It's a demand that escalates later in the film when the young boy confronts Christian and his children in the foyer of Christian's upscale building (2017, 1:56:43). Christian, wearing a tuxedo and carrying multiple shopping bags, towers over the little boy who nevertheless has the nerve to try to speak truth to power. The boy's angry tirade and dogged determination scares Christian's children. The boy's stated strategy is to bang on all the neighbors' doors "to make chaos with [Christian]" (2017, 1:59:38), and his act of resistance unnerves Christian to the point that he violently accosts the child trying to get him to calm down and shoves him down the stairs. Realizing what he's done, Christian doesn't ask if he's ok, but asserts his racial and economic power, warning, "Why didn't you listen to me?" (2017, 2:00:10).

The Ghosts of Liberalism's Past

In the first scene of *≈[ungefär lika med]*, Khemiri ties the legacy of white, Swedish exceptionalism and race to economics. The character Mani canonizes Casparus van Houten as an example of neoliberal success. Mani explains that van Houten "patenterat den hydriska press som kommer att revolutionera tillverkningen av kakaopulver" (Khemiri 2014, 4) [patented the hydraulic press that would revolutionize the manufacturing of cacao powder]. Mani cites van Houten's achievements as the epitome of neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, independence, rationalism, and self-reliance. Yet the shadow of white, European colonial exploitation hovers over this eulogy. Historical and present-day cocoa production necessarily intersects neoliberal economic practices with racial supremacy and exploitation, as the source of cocoa was non-European nations. Spatially, this colonial legacy solicits a global neoliberal aspiration, in a sense, creating an "alternate world" or globe constructed to keep capital flowing upwards. Given the fact that economic inequality in Sweden is highly racially differentiated, such an "alternate" neoliberal world seems constructed to maintain white economic hegemony apart from other worlds.

Van Houten enters this scene as a character in dialogue with Mani, a presence representing a voice from the past. Mani's admiration for van Houten typifies capitalism's tendency to erase and revise the past, particularly its racial supremacist past. Khemiri gives van Houten's ghost a voice to serve as a reminder that though we may imagine "alternate

worlds,” it is a revisionist act in a very real world with a real past. The play’s spectators may not be aware of the play’s epigraph, a voice from Sweden’s past:

Gack nu, lilla papper, omkring i världen, och förstör penningetyranniet, så att guld, silver och ädle stenar en gång måtte upphöra att vara världens afgudar och tyranner! August Nordenskiöld (1789) (Khemiri 2014)

Go now, little paper, around the world, and destroy the tyranny of money, so that gold, silver and precious stones would cease to be the world’s idols and tyrants!

August Nordenkiöld (1754-1792) was a Finnish-Swedish alchemist and abolitionist who died in what is now Sierra Leone attempting to establish a colony for freed slaves. The play’s epigraph functions as a petition, praying that Nordenskiöld’s words might “destroy the tyranny” and the worship of “idols” of money. His plaintive verse recalls Old Testament psalms, calling for people to repent or bring destruction upon themselves. In the case of the modern neoliberal world, this destruction arrives in the form of economic inequality and the racism upon which it depends. In many ways, Nordenskiöld is the very example of the intersection of money and race. He spent a good deal of his career trying to create gold, supported in this venture by the Swedish absolutist monarch Gustav III, the symbol of Swedish political, social, and cultural power (2014, 100). Yet he also was keenly aware of the role of racial supremacy in not only accumulating capital but maintaining the white hegemony over that upward flow of capital.

Khemiri’s play makes a temporal leap from the age of Enlightenment to the present day, confronting the characters and spectators with discriminatory interactions at the heart of daily life in Sweden’s economy. While none of the characters in *≈[ungefär lika med]* are identified or self-identify as non-white, the play makes it clear that their names alone are enough to distinguish them from normative Swedes. Their immigrant or migrant status marks them as a potential economic challenge to white hegemony, which leads to institutionalized and bureaucratic discrimination against them.

In an interesting reversal, Khemiri juxtaposes Andrej’s internalization of neoliberal values against an ostensibly white, homeless Swede named Peter. Early in the play, Peter is introduced as “homeless” (2014, 9). There has been a car accident that injured his sister and should draw the spectator’s empathy, but, juxtaposed against the previous scene’s admonishments about investing and rates of return, homelessness is viewed instead through a neoliberal lens—as one’s own failing and problem. Peter asks for money to go see her, but Andrej shows disdain and tells the audience, “Lita inte på honom” (2014, 9) [don’t trust him]. Peter keeps introducing himself as “Hej jag heter Peter” (2014, 11) [Hi my name is Peter], interrupting Andrej’s monologue as if trying to assert a humanity and an identity apart from his economic worth and contribution. Andrej just talks past him, in an attempt at erasure, calling him a “en fejkande tiggare som vet precis hur han ska göra för att lura till sig så mycket cash som möjligt” (2014, 11) [a faking beggar who knows exactly how to cheat as much cash out of people as possible]. It’s an ironic reversal of social and economic inequality, as Peter, a white Swede, finds no help in the neoliberal, meritocratic discourse, and Andrej, an immigrant, shows little empathy for those whose circumstances are beyond their control and warrant assistance and equal treatment. Khemiri also uses this interaction to highlight the ways in which neoliberal discourse on taxes and public

spending often serves as a proxy discourse for discussing immigration and racial differentiation; in this discourse, an underlying assumption often seems to be that it is immigrants or non-normative Swedes who “profit” from social services, whereas the majority of these actually go to non-immigrants and white Swedes. Most importantly, however, the differentiated role reversal illustrates one of Khemiri’s recurring themes: becoming the ideal neoliberal subject of capacity is not a stable identity, regardless of race. It is a constructed category unable to maintain a stable sense of sense other than that of pure monetized actor. As Andrej experiences with the *Arbetsförmedlingen* illustrate, his “identity” at the top of the economic flow can easily reverse to the bottom. There is no essentialized neoliberal subject, just discourse that promotes that falsehood in order to justify racist institutions.

Part Two: Embodying the Fractured Neoliberal Self

One of the defining features of Khemiri’s and Östlund’s later work is the portrayal of characters who physically and mentally embody a dissolution of subjectivity once they have fully embraced neoliberal ideology. In earlier works, these two artists often left characters in ambiguous states of success or failure or in liminal states to which they return after moments of crisis. In more recent work, Khemiri and Östlund appear to make more didactic and focused commentary on the dangers to selfhood and to what Östlund refers to as “the social contract” when neoliberal ideology, racism, and masculinity all intersect and when people “invest” in an identity that only brings them dissolution.

Fracturing the Fourth-Wall—Indicting the Spectator

The decisive aesthetic fracture in subjective perception is to break the literary or cinematic so-called fourth wall. Narrative unreliability is another example of this broken author contract with the reader, though one could argue whether the terms of such a contract ever truly exists. Nevertheless, interrupting this contract and exposing its performativity—actors performing, spectators gazing—blurs the lines and intensifies confusion. Who is the actual performer—actor or spectator? Is the spectator witnessing something of herself projected on screen? Are the actors potentially speaking the spectator’s thoughts? Is assumed “real” life actually just a performance?

Such boundaries have always been fluid in Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s work. As discussed in Chapter One, Khemiri uses mixed genre and narration in his first novel *Ett öga rött* to complicate assumptions about Halim. Halim speaks with multiple voices and identities, depending on whether he is narrating events or journaling. In Halim’s journal he embodies personas such as *tankesultan* [thought sultan], further distancing any means by which to essentialize his character. Interactions with men and women provoke a wide range of unpredictable responses, and sometimes his actions are those of a young boy and other times the actions of a young boy mimicking adults. Khemiri frustrates the reader’s

ability to rely upon traditional notions of the author-reader contract by inserting a character named Khemiri into the text. His next novel *Montecore* intensifies the textual unpredictability, using a mixture of epistolary and narrative forms to create deeper and deeper woven levels of confusion about who is speaking and to whom. Temporally, letters and narratives shift back and forth in time, undermining reliance upon traditional linear narrative, making it difficult to pin down character's progressions, as if telling a life-story or memoir was actually an impossible feat; no one's "life" can be authentically represented by the available means, particularly so long as it requires distilling that life into comfortable and predictable categories and narrative arcs. Khemiri's most recent novel *Allt jag inte minns* employs similar strategies, but in an even more fractured pattern of short, alternating passages in which multiple narrators (try) to remember the tragic loss of their friend Samuel in a car accident. The alternating passages attempt to piece together a portrait of Samuel through the memories of his best friend Vandad, his childhood love Panther, who lives in Berlin, and Samuel's girlfriend Laide. Samuel meets Vandad at a party, travels to Berlin with him to visit Panther, and eventually meets Laide and falls in love. Later, he begins to spend less time with Vandad as he works to convert his grandmother's home into a safe house for women with Laide's help. Eventually Vandad's jealousy and Laide's goals tragically intersect with Samuel caught between the two of them.

Khemiri's play *Invasion!* best represents the disruption of the fourth wall, establishing a literary mode revisited in recent work like *≈[ungefär lika med]*. Even before the actual play's opening scene (which is itself a play performed within a play), actors mingle with spectators in the lobby, generating tension and provoking responses. In the play's opening scene, these presumed spectators interrupt the onstage "performance" only to reveal themselves as actual characters in the play. By mingling with audience members and moving between the stage and spectators, the actors effectively shatter traditional expectations about the theatrical fourth wall. Performing the play in the round, as in the 2012 performance by Crowded Fire Theater, alters traditional spectatorship, removing a single clear line of demarcation between spectator and performer. Spectators are deprived of clear sight-lines and perspective, potentially unable to see the entrance or exits of characters and even uncomfortably situated in the midst of action taking place close to their seats. In this way the gazing spectator is herself gazed upon by other spectators, a triangulation of actor and spectator that calls into question even the reliability of perception of self: In this moment, one could ask, am I "real" or a "character" or both?

Khemiri frequently signals performative disruption in his plays through the titles themselves. The title *Invasion!* is metonymic of the various symbolic and thematic forms of invasion (racial, political, sexual, economic, journalistic) within the play, as well as the literal "invasion" of the performative space by what initially seems like rowdy teenagers bent on disturbing the show. The Almqvist play performed in the opening scene is itself about piracy and invasion, and this intertextuality is also an invasive aesthetic mode. The English-language title is a linguistic invasion and accentuates tensions in the play revolving around intersections of "Swedish" identity and race and immigration. Lastly, the title *Invasion!* is the ultimate "invasion" of normative theatrical morality: akin to yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater, the play's exclamation point likewise sets spectators on fight-or-flight mode and injects an air of pandemonium and chaos by triangulating the opening scene's rowdy teenagers with a play by one of Sweden's most beloved literary figures, J. C. L.

Almqvist. Ironically and fittingly, the 2012 performance of *Invasion!* in San Francisco was by a company called Crowded Fire Theater.

The title *≈[ungefär lika med]* similarly undermines assumptions with a built-in irony. Through a mathematical symbol and text, the irony of approximate equality undercuts the meritocratic neoliberal discourse at the heart of the discussion. The title looks similar to a mathematical equation, further establishing the connections with the economic theorem that will become the focus of the play's opening scene. In this way, individual perception blurs with neoliberal worldview, and it becomes difficult to divorce the two. Is everything perceived through the lens of capital? Is reality merely an equation? If so, the play's title builds in a poison pill: an approximate result is not an absolute result. The balance remains tipped towards one end of the scale. The first stage direction in *≈[ungefär lika med]* also undermines audience expectations before the first line of dialogue has been delivered: "MANI sitter på scenkanten" [Mani sits on the edge of the stage] (Khemiri 2014, 4). In the seated position, rather than a more performative standing pose, Mani mimics the seated spectators, blurring the lines between gazer and gazed upon. Legs dangling over the edge of the stage, the spatial limitations of performance are breached, further obscuring notions of performative space. It also forces a level of self-consciousness on the part of the spectator who now must consider the very act of watching as the performance; perhaps the spectators are the active voyeurs and Mani a person upon whose life we are intruding? Mani delivers his first speech, suddenly acknowledging the spectator: "Jag är ensam ... Eller ... Jag trodde jag var ensam ... Men sen tittar jag ut i publiken och upptäcker att det ... Det sitter en massa människor där ute ... En massa massa människor ... Dom tittar på mig och jag tittar på dom och ..." (Khemiri 2014, 4) [I'm alone ... Or I thought I was alone ... But then I look out into the audience and discover that ... That there's a lot of people sitting out there ... A lot of people ... They're looking at me, and I'm looking at them and...]. The ellipses function almost as anaphora, segmenting Mani's ability to rationally understand his situation but also functioning as omissions. The final ellipsis short-circuits any concrete statement, rescued by the ensuing speech extolling the virtues of "Ekonomisk historia" (Khemiri 2014, 4) [history of economics]. Mani attempts to make sense of his world through economics, a strategy immediately problematized by the presence of a ghost: as soon as Mani invokes Casparus van Houten, he appears onstage as a character in dialogue with Mani. Khemiri cleverly juxtaposes Mani's relentless economic conviction with what appears to be a dissociative identity disorder, though part of the disruptive power of such a scene is that it remains unclear if van Houten is a splitting of the self or is actually present. Perhaps the spectators perceive it to be something the author only meant for the audience to perceive? At worst, it might be a project of their own minds.

The dialogue between Mani and van Houten continues to infringe upon the spectator's sense of subjectivity, becoming part of an economic equation. Explaining van Houten's "Theorum," Mani says:

MANI

Låt oss ta ett praktiskt exempel. Året är [Årtal]. [Kvällens publikantal] personer bestämmer sig för att investera [Pjäsens biljettpris] kronor i hopp om att få en oförglömlig upplevelse.

CASPARUS VAN HOUTEN

Det ger alltså [Kvällens publikantal] personer gånger [Pjäsens biljettpris] kronor likamed Produkten av Publikantalet*Biljettpriset = UX] kronor.

MANI

Van Houtens teorem lär oss således—i all sin enkelhet—att det kollektiva målet med denna investering är att tillskansa sig underhållning värd minst [UX] kronor. (Khemiri 2014, 7)

MANI

Let us take a practical example. The year is [Year]. [The evening's audience count] people decide to invest [The play's ticket price] dollars in the hope of having an unforgettable experience.

CASPARUS VAN HOUTEN

That gives [The evening's audience count] people times [The play's ticket price] dollars equivalent to the Product of the Audience Count Ticket Price [Ticket price = UX] dollars.

MANI

Van Houten's theory, therefore, teaches—in all its simplicity—that the collective goal of this investment is to attract entertainment worth at least [UX] dollars.

Mani transforms the aesthetic experience of watching a performance into an “investment” in which individual “experience” can be quantified into a “minimal rate of return” (2014, 7). Without an increase in capital, experience becomes essentially “worthless.” Fortunately, a glimmer of hope remains in the fact that the equation is a “theorem,” not fact. But until “the collective goal” ceases to be ironically focused solely on individual gain, valuation will continue to rest on financial worth. Ensuring that public morality becomes private investment remains neoliberalism’s primary governmental and social ideology. This opening scene harkens back to the interview in *The Square*, where the primary problem experienced by the museum is fundraising: How much is art worth?

Ruben Östlund’s films also unsettle spectator position and fixed notions of the cinematic fourth wall. Stylistically, Östlund is known for his static camera shots, often at wide angles reminiscent of security cameras. Occasionally they pan slowly left or right but mimic a surveillance camera’s limited field of vision. On the one hand, this static shot is like a theatrical stage and the physical movie screen the fourth wall. Characters enter stage right or left, and the spectator only sees straight on without the benefit of close-ups or perspective shots to narrate emotional responses to the action. In *Play*, characters routinely exit the shot while the camera remains static, and entire conversations can be heard in the wings, so to speak, but the speakers are hidden from view. This heightened perception of the performance’s artificiality emphasizes familiar aspects of the cinematic fourth wall. Yet these distancing effects make the spectator’s shock even more palpable when, in a subsequent scene, she is suddenly thrust into the action on a moving tram. As discussed in Chapter Two, Östlund forces the spectator into an “awkward bystander reflection” (Anderson 2014) along with other bystanders in the scene who happen upon

violence or harassment just as it occurs. The spectator, in the confined space of the tram car or escalator, is in close proximity to the action, and the fight-or-flight response generates extreme empathy with the bystanders unwillingly caught up in the drama, often just a few seats or steps away. In Östlund's films, bystanders are not passive witnesses but are forced to reflect upon how they thought they might react in such a situation and how this contradicts their actual responses in the moment, generating an uncomfortable moral crisis that disrupts the cinematic fourth wall. In *Play*, dramatic irony assists in drawing spectators into this awkward bystander reflection, particularly near the end of the film when one of the black boys is assaulted by the father of the white boy who lost his phone. When a woman intervenes, the spectators know the truth and must wrestle with how they would or would not act in the situation. In *Turist*, Östlund uses claustrophobic interior spaces such as hotel rooms and hallways to amplify the bystander awkwardness, and in one scene, uses four points of connected gazing as the spectator gazes at a hotel housekeeper who watches Tomas, the film's male protagonist, have an emotional breakdown in the hallway in front of his wife Ebba. Placing the housekeeper on a level above Tomas and Ebba, the film invites the spectator to empathize with the housekeeper's awkward bystander position, looking down upon Tomas and Ebba with disdain.

Östlund's most recent film *The Square* employs the awkward bystander position, but he generally abandons his stylistic trademark of the static shot in favor of a more conventional blend of different camera shots and angles, which ultimately elevates the emotional and moral tension. With less ambiguity about character's reactions and emotional states, the spectator comes in closer proximity to both empathy and aversion towards characters' responses to situations. *The Square* also marks a major break with the cinematic fourth wall. Near the end of the film, in a now iconic scene, people attend the museum's black-tie gala in a self-congratulatory celebration of the art-world's pretentious and moneyed role as social commentators, an irony underscored by the glittering jewels and luxurious surroundings. The gala invites a performance artist named Oleg (played by motion-capture performer Terry Notary) impersonating an ape (Porton 2017), a performance meant to portray an ape as a symbol of the precarity of human instinct, ostensibly to proclaim the ability of humanity to evolve beyond base instincts of tribalism and exclusion. Rather than reinforcing the evolution of human instinct, the actor, in the ultimate method acting, takes his performance to shocking levels, crossing the line into a full-on assault on a woman and what could have led to an actual rape in full view of the attendees were he not stopped by outraged banquet guests. This devolution of human instinct is made all the more revolting by the attendees' utter paralysis. In a nearly five-minute long sequence, the guests remain frozen, first as awkward bystanders, then as frightened potential victims afraid to draw the ape-actor's attention. They fail to intervene when the ape-actor grabs a woman, throws her to the ground, and begins violently assaulting her:

Adding to the scene's immersive tension is the complete absence of a score, which strips the moment of any cinematic flourishes, and therefore places the audience right inside that banquet hall. This renders every viewer a complicit spectator and leering voyeur whose temporal, visual and sonic experiences simulate that of the gala patrons. Staged and filmed in such a way as to implicate audiences, the sequence compels us as viewers to question how we would react in such a

disturbing situation—so much so that its suspension of disbelief carries the gravitas of an experimental short film, as Östlund stealthily breaches the social contract between film and filmgoer. (Kampakis 2017)

After an almost unbearable lack of intervention, a man finally tries to come to her rescue, and a few others follow his lead, but not before both the cinematic fourth wall and “the social contract between film and filmgoer” has been violated. Östlund has forced the spectators to confront their own potential lack of action. Though the spectators share the same psychic space with the guests at the banquet, they do not in fact share the same physical space, so there is no impulse to rise from their seats in the theater. Affected by the film, several spectators did get up and leave the theater in disgust during this scene at the showing of the film attended in preparation for this analysis on October 7, 2017.

In numerous interviews, Östlund has stated that it was his express desire to mimic the film’s spectators with this scene and generate extreme self-consciousness about their role and morals. When asked by *Notebook* about any specific human behavior he was attempting to deconstruct in the scene, he replied:

ÖSTLUND: The bystander effect, for sure. The scene begins with a voiceover announcement; “Soon you will be confronted by a wild animal ... ” As we all know, the hunting instinct can be triggered by weakness, which is also true for humans. Don’t you remember how in school, a mob would close in once a weakness was detected in a fellow classmate? This ability to point someone out from the herd is very animalistic behavior. If you show fear, the animal will sense it, but if you remain perfectly still and try to hide in the herd, then it’s possible that someone else might be the prey. And that is the reason why we become paralyzed when scary things happen, because we are hoping “don’t take me, take someone else. In pointing out this behavior, I wanted the setup of that scene to be very simple, where these gala patrons who are seated in their gowns and tuxedos have to deal with this monkey imitator. And I love the idea of the film being screened in competition at Cannes, where you have another tuxedo dressed audience watching as these characters’ experiences mirror theirs. [laughs] Then the monkey imitator comes in, chases away the alpha male, and approaches a female with the intent to reproduce. [laughs] In the end, you finally see all these refined people become uncivilized animals. (Kampakis 2017)

Refinement, social status, and wealth do nothing to prevent their devolution into “uncivilized animals,” an accusation also fraught with white supremacist essentialism. After all, it was the white people gathered in that room who set the norms for “civilized” behavior, the implication being that even sitting atop the pinnacle of neoliberal success with the ability to define normative behavior doesn’t in any way guarantee the stability of the self.

What's My Name? Memory, Doubled-Selves & the Neoliberal Subject

In Khemiri's and Östlund's work, memory and its disruption serve as a repeated motif and tell-tale sign of this dissolution of the self. Most notably, Khemiri titles his recent novel *Allt jag inte minns* [*Everything I Don't Remember*] a bold and ironic way to draw readers into a narrative predicated not merely on unreliability, as in *Ett öga rött* or *Montecore*, but on the collapse and absence of memory altogether. The epigraph in *Allt jag inte minns* speaks directly to this type of memory loss, quoting pop superstar Rihanna's 2010 hit song "What's My Name?": "Oh na na what's my name?" (Khemiri 2015). The epigram's pop-culture reference to Rihanna maintains another Khemiri trademark of using pop-culture references in connection with memory and the formation of Swedish identity, perhaps best exemplified by his novel *Montecore*. In *Montecore*, Kadir and Abbas consistently use pop-culture references when describing themselves, often unable to do so without the use of a celebrity metaphor. And, of course, the memories that allegedly form two distinct lives turn out to be lived by a single person, further undermining the stability of memory. The epigraph also points to one of the most common ways people associate memory with identity: names. As discussed earlier, Vandad is forced into extreme self-consciousness regarding his name, particularly when it leads to racial differentiation and the disciplining of his "non-Swedishness." Lack of memory of one's own name, then, might also free one's identity from such constraints, as Vandad discovers:

Jag visste inte vilket namn jag skulle välja för när jag var ute på rundor med Hamza sa jag aldrig mitt riktiga namn. En gång kallade jag min "Örjan." En annan gång presenterade jag mig som "Travolta." När vi gled in på en privatfest i Jakobsberg på jakt efter två tvillingsystrar som hade lånat pengar för att rädda sin frisörsalong kallade jag mig för "Holabandola." Jag kunde säga vad som helst för när man ser ut på ett visst sätt är det ingen som vågar påstå att ens namn inte är ens namn. (Khemiri 2015, 19)

I didn't know which name I should use because when I was out doing rounds with Hamza I never gave my real name. One time I called myself "Örjan." Another time I introduced myself as "Travolta." Once when we slipped into a private party in Jakobsberg, on the hunt for twin sisters who had borrowed money to keep their hair salon afloat, I called myself "Hoobastank." I could say anything I wanted, because when you look a certain way no one would dare to tell you that your name is not your name. (Khemiri 2016, loc. 8 of 261)

Once again, Khemiri uses pop-culture references as stand-ins for individual identities, and it is also reminiscent of the name "Abulkasem" in *Invasion!* and the way in which names are a game. Names like "Rihanna" and "Hoobastank" become metonyms for constructed identities not necessarily based upon artist's actual names but on public personas. They also serve as shields for artists, who attempt to maintain a private sense of self behind the public mask.

Not only does the textual form of the novel use fast-revolving vignettes to confuse the identities of speakers, often only revealing characters and their names through the

voices of other characters, but the epigraph ironically indicts the novel's author himself. One of Khemiri's trademarks is to question the nature of authorship and insert his name as characters in his novels. In the case of *Allt jag inte minns*, the question of the author's name delivers even more dramatic impact when one takes into account that Khemiri based the novel on his own personal experiences. Khemiri draws attention to an authorship both inside the narrative and outside the text when the novel's "author," or compiler of disparate accounts, explains Samuel's mother's reaction to being interviewed for the project:

Men jag upprepar min önskan om att inte låta mig intervujas. Ta det inte personligt. Det handlar inte om att jag är "orolig för vilka minnen som ska väckas till liv." Och det handlar inte om dina egenskaper som författare. Även om det du skriver ligger långt ifrån den litteratur som jag uppskattar så är det inte det som gör att jag (igen) väljer att tacka nej. Det spelar ingen roll att jag inte ska filmas. Det räcker med vetenskapen om att någon ska spela in min röst för att jag ska bli påverkad och börja staka mig. Jag har alltid kunnat prata betydligt bättre när igen lyssnar. Eller när någon lyssnar som känner mig. Därför tackar jag nej. Igen. (Khemiri 2015, 36)

But I will tell you once again that I do not wish to be interviewed. Don't take it personally. It's not because I'm "anxious about the memories that might be dredged up." And it has nothing to do with your qualities as an author. Even if the things you write are very different from the sort of literature I enjoy, that's not the reason I (once again) choose to decline. It makes no difference that I wouldn't be filmed. Just knowing that someone is going to record my voice is enough to bother me and make me stumble over my words. I have always been able to speak much better when no one is listening. Or when someone who knows me is listening. So I'm saying no. Again. (Khemiri 2016, loc. 23 of 261)

After drawing the reader's attention to the novel's authorship by someone who may or may not be the "author" in the novel, Samuel's mother makes an interesting claim about how memory functions for her. Memories can be compartmentalized and only reappear when "dredged up" by someone else. Acts of documentation such as interviews or recordings give permanence to a version of the self, which makes it more difficult to invent an alternate identity for oneself. Authorship, too, finds itself in a tense relationship between extremes of fictional worlds and the journalist. Samuel's mother seems to suspect the author more because he has abandoned the literature she "appreciates" for documentary realism. And she can't stand how the "real" version of her voice sounds played back to her. An idealized alternate identity or subjective sense of self can only exist in perfect isolation when "no one is listening." Khemiri doesn't quite allow his characters total amnesia; absence of memory still appears fairly selective depending on the character. Instead, memory loss in *Allt jag inte minns* and *≈[ungefär lika med]*, as well as many of Östlund's films, signifies an almost willful amnesia driven by shame or insecurity or feelings of inadequacy, particularly in an unequal and racialized society. People forget or wish to forget inconvenient parts of themselves that interfere with the creation of a desired identity.

Other characters such as Samuel and Vandad claim not to have much control over their memories. At the party in Liljeholmen where Samuel and Vandad meet Panther, she

asks how Samuel knows so much about history, and he replies, “Jag vet inte, sa Samuel, och log. Jag tror det kommer från något datorspel. Jag har ett jävligt skumt minne. Vissa grejer bara fastnar” (2015, 21) [“I don’t know,’ Samuel said, and smiled. ‘I think it comes from some computer game. My memory is fucking weird. Some things just stick” (2016, loc. 10 of 261)]. Samuel feigns ignorance about the source of his memories, claiming them to be potentially video game implants in an attempt to distance them from lived, embodied experience. It is also possible that he prefers an identity that exists in an alternate gaming world where rules and codes can be created and hacked and bent, as opposed to the real world. The memories that “stick” may be the ones that never happened at all yet give Samuel a more fulfilling sense of identity than what the real world allows.

Vandad’s observations of Samuel’s memory loss lend credence to Samuel’s claims of memory loss. Vandad explains that Samuel tried associating music, clothes, and cologne in order to trigger memories, but “Istället för att minnas sina upplevelser mindes han musiken och byxorna och parfymen. Men själva livet som passerade, vardagen, den mindes han ännu mindre av” (2015, 59) [“Instead of remembering his experiences, he remembered the music and the pants and the cologne. But his actual daily life as it went by, he was remembering even less of that” (2016, loc. 41 of 261)]. Sense of smell is often described as the sense most intimately connected to memory, so it comes as little surprise that Samuel would turn to colognes in an attempt to remember experience. It is a technique also employed by the character Martina in *≈[ungefär lika med]* whose breakdown in identity manifests in the form of a doubled self named Martina 2 who appears onstage. In Act Two, Scene 9, Martina resists visiting the job coach, but Martina 2 persists, suggesting “Vet du vad vi borde göra innan dess? Köpa en ny parfym” (Khemiri 2014, 46) [You know what we ought to do before this? Buy a new perfume]. Undeterred by Martina’s assertion that “they” have neither the funds nor the need for a new perfume, Martina 2 insists until finally Martina pushes back, saying, “Vi behöver ingen ny parfym. Hör du det? Vi har allt som vi behöver. Vi har ett helt okej jobb.” (2014, 47) [We don’t need a new perfume. Do you hear me? We have everything that we need. We have a totally okay job.]. This internal, economic conflict is visually represented as a psychological dissociation of self. The two selves seize upon perfume not as a symbol of identity freed from neoliberal pressures but as a materialist signifier of embrace of neoliberal values that the job coach will reinforce. Part of Martina wants to smell like someone free from competition for capital, and part of her wants to show up to her interview smelling the part of a neoliberal winner.

In Samuel’s case, memory loss may make it impossible to remember details of his identity, but it also aids others around him in creating alternate versions of themselves. For example, Vandad is initially attracted to Samuel as a friend precisely because Samuel’s memory loss makes him an excellent listener (Khemiri 2015, 50). Samuel doesn’t “care” what Vandad says, which gives him an extraordinary freedom to not only speak uncensored but also remain free of judgment. Vandad can retell stories, which may or may not be true, and after a few months, receive a similar reaction, reinforcing Vandad’s self-image as amusing and likable. If the details of the world prove too traumatic to remember, Vandad convinces Samuel that lack of memory can be the opposite extreme kind of identity:

Jag förklarade för honom att mitt minne också var svindåligt.
-Jag kommer knappt ihåg vad jag gjorde förra veckan, sa jag.

Samuel tittade på mig, sprack upp i ett tacksamt leende.

-Är det sant?

Det var kanske inte helt sant men jag sa det för att han skulle må bättre, jag tyckte synd om honom, han jobbade så hårt för att försöka förstå och kontrollera något som för många kom helt naturligt. (2015, 60)

I told him that I had a shitty memory too.

"I hardly remember what I did last week," I said.

Samuel looked at me, his face lighting up with a grateful smile.

"Really?"

Maybe it wasn't completely true, but I said it to make him feel better, I felt sorry for him, he worked so hard to try to understand and control something that came perfectly naturally to so many people. (2016, loc. 42 of 261)

By collectivizing the experience of loss of memory, Vandad attempts to turn it into a type of identity—that of people whose identities are utterly unaffected by social norms and experience. For oppressed people, this could be a potentially attractive option. Yet Khemiri does not allow utter lack of identity to become a viable option either since it is an absence that exists only in opposition to something else. Clinging to identity as a category in all its extremes—whether fully embraced or fully rejected—is still a form of clinging to category. All of these forms of Swedish identity are formed in relation to normative and non-normative categories and therefore constructed on some level.

One of the novel's most powerful signifiers of the failure of Swedish identity as a category occurs when memory intersects neoliberal economic discourse. Samuel attempts to invest his life experiences and subsequent memories in what he refers to as his "Erfarenhetsbank" (2015, 57) [Experience Bank (2016, loc. 40 of 261)], but, as discussed earlier, in a racially differentiated system of income inequality, Samuel's experience doesn't accumulate capital or interest in the bank. Nevertheless, he uses financial discourse as a metaphor for subjective experience. He believes his "banked" experience will lead to security in Swedish society, but the bank is rigged against him. It is designed to maintain his precarity and mark him as an outsider. Panther seems able to recognize this, saying, "Ju mer han pratade om att fylla på Erfarenhetsbanken, desto tommare kändes han. Jag minns att jag tyckte synd om honom" (Khemiri 2015, 57) ["The more he talked about depositing things in his Experience Bank, the emptier he seemed. I remember feeling sorry for him. He seemed lonely" (Khemiri 2016, loc. 38 of 261)]. Her ability to remember appears intact, yet she has been living outside Sweden in Berlin, a symbolic distance that allows her to view Sweden from a perspective freed from Swedish norms. Those norms and the neoliberal economic discourse that supports them has penetrated all the way into the parts of the brain that control memory and how people "bank" experience. At the end of *Allt jag inte minns*, Vandad even tries to negotiate payment with the author for telling his stories, attempting to place a monetary value on his memories (2015, 175).

Part Three: Queerness and Non-Normative Masculinity

Another key difference between *≈[ungefär lika med]*, *Allt jag inte minns*, and *The Square* and earlier works is the role of queerness and non-normative masculinity. In Khemiri's and Östlund's earlier works, queerness and non-normative masculinity often intersects with neoliberal economic discourse to either discipline characters into complying with neoliberal values or to portray anxiety about lack of embodiment of individual will and neoliberal competitive spirit. In these more recent texts and films, queerness and non-normative masculinity have also become symptoms of neoliberal subjectivity in dissolution. It can be argued that in Khemiri's work, queerness-as-loss-of-normative-identity opens the possibility for epistemological frameworks outside available heterosupremacist notions of "Swedishness." Despite this potential, queerness is consistently associated with characters who fail in one way or another. One perspective on this queer failure would be to view it as commentary on the transgressive potential of queerness vs. entrenched economic and racial inequality foreclosed by neoliberal structures. Nevertheless, the necessity of using queerness to mediate this understanding of Swedish neoliberalism, particularly by maintaining negative stereotypes of queer characters, poses important questions of the text.

Queerness as Neoliberal Failure

In *Allt jag inte minns*, queer "failure," to use Jack Halberstam's phrase, is no longer symptomatic of potential epistemological freedom, or in the case of Abbas/Kadir self-love, but a neoliberal failure to sustain competitive viability. Vandad's first words in the novel as reported by the "author" coningle crime and punishment with homophobia in a way that both disciplines and emasculates Vandad:

Jag hade också en tydlig bild av hur det skulle vara här. Jo med du vet, mera som på film. Tjocka stålgaller, äckliga toaletter i ena hörnet, våningssängar och ångande duschar där man måste akta sig för att tappa tvålen. Jag tänkte att jag skulle behöva gå runt med ett rakblad i munnen tjugofyra sju för att vara redo. Men du ser ju själv. Det liknar mera ett vandrarhem. Folk här är softa. Toaletterna är rena. Det finns till och med en verkstad där man kan göra trägrejer. Jag hade tur som hamnade här. (Khemiri 2015, 11-12)

I had definitely pictured what it would be like in here, too. You know, more like in the movies. Thick iron bars, a disgusting toilet in the corner, bunk beds, and steamy showers where you have to be careful not to drop the soap. I thought I would have to walk around with a razor blade in my mouth twenty-four/seven to be prepared. But you can see for yourself. This is more like a hostel. The people here are chill. The toilets are clean. There's even a workshop where you can make stuff out of wood. I was lucky to end up here. (Khemiri 2016, loc. 3 of 261)

In the spatial context of prison, queerness represents confinement, not movement, ironic given Vandad's former job with a moving company. Vandad imbues non-normative masculinity with all the traditional homophobic Hollywood tropes of shower rape scenes, a standby of cinema from Clint Eastwood's *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) to HBO's series *Oz* (1997–2003). In those films, as well as in Vandad's mind, non-normative masculinity and homosexuality are depicted as a form of violence, which gives Vandad the fantasy of carrying a shiv in his mouth to protect himself. This imagining of untainted normative masculinity commingles with a homosexual fantasy of a kind of violent oral sex, as Vandad strangely pictures himself wielding the knife in his mouth as opposed to hiding the penetrating weapon somewhere on his body. In this way, the phallic symbol, normally concealed from other men, is displayed in full view and almost invitingly in his own mouth where it represents the potential for actual physical dissolution or carving up of the body. This fantasy contrasts with the fear of being anally penetrated, a heteronormative panic associated with the improper input rather than output of bodily "filth." It is a paranoia rendered through the warning about "dropping the soap," a symbolic act of distancing oneself from masculine purity. Vandad's worry about "disgusting toilets" and "steamy" group showers amplifies the perception of the homoerotic as contaminating.

Vandad's anxiety is alleviated by the "chill" men and an expectation of cleanliness. Men "make stuff out of wood," enforcing a normative image of masculinity, while at the same time reinforcing the homoerotic lens through which Vandad appears to view the world. Wood and men woodworking suggests more phallic imagery, generating a queer tension in this supposed return to normativity. Also undermining this normative masculine sexual identity is the fact that Vandad bases much of his perception on "the movies," an extratextual clue that memories and experiences that contribute to a sense of identity are constructed within constructed contexts, themselves not real but uncanny versions of the real. This perception of the constructedness of identity and heteronormativity contrasts with the Neighbor's attempt to naturalize sexuality, as he claims, "Vissa saker sitter så djupt att dom är omöjliga att stoppa. Man har gjort dom ett helt liv och då bara sitter dom där. Det är som med sexualiteten" (2015, 19) ["Some things are so deeply engrained that it's impossible to stop yourself. You've done them all your life and they're just automatic. It's like with sexuality" (2016, loc. 7 of 261)]. At the party in Liljeholmen, Samuel does his best to fulfill what he recognizes as normative masculine behaviors in a rambling, embarrassing, and chillingly violent digression about his name and the Mongols:

Sen la han tio minuter på att snacka om mongoler. Han sa att noll komma fem procent av jordens manliga befolkning delar DNA med Djingis khan bara för att han hade sex med slash våldtog så många tjejer. Han sa att Djingis khans rike var världshistoriens största och att mongolerna dödade typ fyrtio miljoner människor. Han berättade att mongolerna straffade snåla byherrar genom att hålla ned nysmält, glödgat guld i deras kroppsöppningar tills kroppen friterades. Jag fattade inte varför den här spinkiga personen pratade med mig om mongoler och jag fattade inte heller varför jag lyssnade. (2015, 20–21)

Then he devoted ten minutes to talking about Mongols. He said that point-five percent of the men in the world share DNA with Genghis Khan solely because he had

sex with-slash-raped so many girls. He said that Genghis Khan's empire was the largest in world history and that the Mongols killed like forty million people. He said that the Mongols punished cheapskate village chieftains by pouring freshly melted, red-hot gold into their bodily orifices until they were fried. I had no clue why this scrawny little dude was talking to me about Mongols, and I had no clue why I was listening. (2016, loc. 10 of 261)

Samuel struggles to connect his name's meaning to Mongol legends and derive a sense of identity from these histories, a hypermasculine identity that not only fits heteronormativity but exceeds social norms and enforces its own rules through rape and violence. It's a strategy that serves as a motif in several of Khemiri's works. For example, there is Halim as the *tankesultan* in *Ett öga rött* and Halim's attempts to connect himself to legendary Middle Eastern and African leaders and artists, and in *Invasion!* the various embodiments of Abulkasem, particularly as it is used by the teenage boys as a symbol of resistance. In *Allt jag inte minns*, Vandad's tales of alleged Mongol terror are also intertwined with money. "Cheapskate" people who don't pay the capital upwards to the Mongol overlords are executed, a reminder of the unequal power dynamic both social and economic.

Furthermore, Samuel almost relishes the mode of economic discipline, itself a homoerotic echo of Vandad's prison visions. Mongol overlords fill "orifices" and pour gold down throats, symbolic acts of fellatio in which gold replaces semen as the ultimate procreative and masculine force. Despite these fascinating economic and sexual intersections, the fact remains that Samuel expresses queerness as a form of punishment for financial failure or irrational decisions (Why wouldn't people fear their notorious Mongol overlords?). Only two brief vignettes later, the Neighbor admits that he suspects Vandad as the culprit behind the safe house fire, telling the Author, "Andra påstår att det var Samuels storsvuxna kompis fel, han sitter i fängelse, han som gjorde vad som helst för pengar" (2015, 13) ["Others say that it was Samuel's big friend's fault, that guy who's in jail, the one who would do anything for money" (2016, loc. 3 of 261)]. The Neighbor makes the explicit connection between Vandad's behavior and his inability to earn money, a lack of rationality which, combined with hypermasculinity, clouds his judgment, leads to a woman's assault, and brings about the collapse of his life. It is a dissolution compounded by his incarceration and potential emasculation. Perhaps queerness in this punitive context could be interpreted as the ultimate form of hypermasculine economic domination. Khemiri undercuts this supposition with a humorous but enlightening irony: Panther describes Samuel as a "scrawny little dude," an appearance at odds with the economic and sexual discourse Samuel uses to build up his self-image in front of women. Then again, the Neighbor describes Vandad as a "big" man, so is Vandad's own body the construction of others' perception of him?

These initial vignettes in *Allt jag inte minns* continue to reinforce an ever-present homophobia against the backdrop of the party in Liljeholmen. At the party, Samuel asks Hamza:

- Redo? frågade jag.
- Knullar bögar i skogen? sa han.
- Varför knullas bögar i skogen? frågade Samuel.

-Åh det är ett fucking ordspråk, sa Hamza. Läs en bok så slipper du skina med din okunskap. (2015, 22)

“Ready?”

“Do fags fuck in the woods?”

“Why do fags fuck in the woods?” Samuel asked.

“Aw, it’s a fucking figure of speech,” Hamza said. “Read a book and maybe you won’t have to broadcast your ignorance.” (2015, 10–11)

The exchange’s humor paints Samuel as naïve, an aspect of his character that highlights the constructedness of the hypermasculinity he idealizes only moments earlier. In another irony, Hamza, essentially the stereotype of a gangster, lectures Samuel on his lack of knowledge and “ignorance,” as if being unable to rationally understand homophobia were an essential skill equal to traditional forms of “book” knowledge. In a double irony, it mocks the very books that Samuel studied and teaches at the university in his field of political science. Hamza embodies the neoliberal street smarts that equate moneylending expertise with being able to wield homophobic discourse.

Later in the novel, homophobic humor is once again tied to neoliberal discourse. While working at his moving job, one of Vandad’s co-workers jokes:

-Vem är bögen?

-Du är bögen, sa jag.

-Ni är bögarna, sa Bogdan.

-Den som inte återgår till jobbet och ser till att vi är klara innan fem är bögen, sa Marre. Jag måste hämta på dagis. (2015, 47)

“Who’s the fag?”

“You’re the fag,” I said.

“Both of you are fags,” said Bogdan.

“Whoever doesn’t get back to work and make sure we’re done by five is a fag,” said Marre. “I have to pick the kids up from day care.” (2016, loc. 30 of 261)

Once again, homophobic discourse is conveyed through humor in a way that does not intend to emasculate Vandad and his coworkers for being queer; there are too many hypermasculine normative assumptions between the men to have entertained such an idea. No, the homophobia is intended to emasculate the men for not working hard enough and succeeding at the job task at hand, which will also disrupt the boss’s heteronormative routine of picking up his children from school on time. Queer temporality (being lazy at work; no concern for deadlines; no future in the sense of children to care for) clashes with the pressures of heteronormative time. “Fags” are people who don’t punch the clock at five and pick up their kids, money in their pocket.

Failure of Non-Normative Sexual Duos

Just after Vandad's coworker and boss jokingly call him a "bög" (Khemiri 2015, 47) [fag], Khemiri reveals that Vandad may, in fact, be queer himself. When Vandad meets Samuel at the university, he describes the chance meeting in the erotic discourse of love at first sight, saying, "Samuel tittade på mig. Jag tittade på honom. Han ställde ingen följdfråga. Jag sa inget mer ... På universitetets grusiga gångstig bytte vi nummer, vi sa att vi skulle horas, båda fattade att det här var något speciellt" (2015, 45) ["We exchanged numbers on the university's gravelly paths; we said we would be in touch, both of us knew that this was something special" (2016, loc. 30 of 261)]. Wordlessly gazing into each other's eyes in the romantic outdoor, collegiate setting intensifies the homoeroticism of the encounter which Vandad, at least, thinks is reciprocated. He later reminds the Author of the "specialness" of their friendship, explaining that he waited several days to get in touch with Samuel, almost as if nervous to seem overanxious to set up their first date: "Jag tänkte att vi inte hade någon brådska. Jag visste att han var en speciell person" (2015, 49) [I waited a few days before I contacted Samuel. I thought there was no rush. I knew he was a special person (2016, loc. 33 of 261)]. Their meeting blossoms quickly into an intense friendship, in which they are soon living and even traveling together almost as partners. When Samuel goes to visit his former girlfriend Panther who lives in Berlin, Vandad goes along for the ride, something of a third wheel, but his presence also triangulates the eroticism into a homo- and heteroerotic threesome. Vandad asserts a queerness that disrupts the nostalgic meeting between Samuel and Panther. Far from the constraints of Swedish society, in the hipper, more diverse Berlin, Vandad feels his relationship with Samuel deepen, particularly when they leave Panther for the final time: "På vägen hem, när vi sagt hejdå till Pantern och det var bara Samuel och jag i taxin sa jag saker som jag aldrig sagt till någon" (2015, 71) ["On the way home, after we said goodbye to Panther and it was just me and Samuel in the taxi, I said things I'd never said to anyone" (2016, loc. 49 of 261)]. Though perhaps not fully self-conscious of the homoerotic nature of his desire, Vandad nevertheless embraces the freedom non-normative masculine intimacy affords and, importantly, feels it allows him to reveal hidden details of his identity. For a brief moment, queerness reaches the potential of generating space for authentic subjectivity. In a tone similar to Kadir's memories in *Montecore*, Vandad recalls their time together as "en lycklig tid. Kanske den lyckligaste jag lev" (2015, 84) ["a happy time. Maybe the happiest in my life" (2016, loc. 60 of 261)].

This space, however, quickly collapses in a pattern reminiscent of earlier works such as *Montecore*. What was once the ideal, sexually platonic male duo is disrupted by a woman, Laide, who reintroduces a fatal sexual triangulation. Vandad feels provoked into misogyny, asserting statements like "Broz before hoez" (2015, 144). Ironically, even as Vandad competes for Samuel's affections, Laide also seems to perceive their queer relationship, admitting that his queerness may have been the reason "vi hade så lätt för att prata med varandra. Kanske för att jag misstänkte att han var gay. Han återkom flera gånger till att han bodde ihop med en kille som hette Vandad och att dom hade en väldigt fin relation och jag minns att när han berättade det kände jag som ett hugg av svartsjuka" (2015, 128) ["it was so easy for us to talk to each other. Maybe because I suspected he was gay. He kept coming back to the fact that he lived with a guy named Vandad and that they had a great relationship and I remember when he said that I felt a pang of jealousy" (2016,

loc. 95 of 261]). This doesn't stop the two from becoming closer and pulling away from Vandad, who spirals into depression. As if in one of the stages of grief, Vandad recalls, "Vi bode fortfarande ihop och våra tandborstar stod fortfarande bredvid varandra och sommarsneakers låg kvar i garderoben och hans anteckningsblock stod staplade i hans vita bokhylla. Men själv var han försvunnen" (2015, 165) ["We still lived together and our toothbrushes were still next to each other in the mug in the bathroom and Samuel's spring coats and summer sneakers were still in the closet and his notebooks were stacked on his white bookcase. But he himself had vanished" (2016, loc. 125 of 261)]. Critically, the authentic identity that their non-normative relationship had once provided now evaporates, and the real Samuel, the symbolically naked Samuel free from material trappings, "vanishes." Neither material goods nor heteronormativity give his identity form.

Perhaps, then, queerness is the essential ingredient for breaking free? If so, Vandad's ensuing financial ruin is portrayed more as a result of his irrational homoerotic longing than it is as a symptom of a multitude of factors including economic inequality and racism. In an interesting connection to Vandad's prison anxieties, Samuel returns to the apartment "för att hämta underkläder eller lämna smutstvätt" (2015, 167) ["to pick up some underwear or drop off dirty laundry" (2016, loc. 128 of 261)], now associating their former intimacy with filthy clothes and loneliness. Both instances in which Vandad remarks that "Samuel vanished" are immediately followed by him not doing well at work, an almost neoliberal value retribution for his homoerotic non-normativity (2015, 130, 148, 149, 151). Vandad's debt to Hamza (2015, 158–59, 161) further compounds negative anti-neoliberal "debt" discourse (2015, 160, 161, 162, 185, 200), which Hamza intersects with homophobia and misogyny when he calls Vandad a "fitta" (2015, 211) ["pussy" (2016, loc. 162 of 261)]. Vandad's queerness is equated with anti-neoliberal values of weakness, non-competitiveness, and lack of self-reliance. Even though Samuel and Laide eventually break-up, the damage to his relationship with Vandad is done, and Samuel resists and disciplines Vandad's homoerotic desire with the cutting jibe, "Och vad har du för erfarenheter av tjejer egentligen? ... Frågan hängde lös i luften" (Khemiri 2015, 266) ["And what experience do you even have with girls? ... The question hung blankly in the air" (Khemiri 2016, loc. 205 of 261)]. By exposing Vandad's queerness "in the air," Khemiri causes it to function not as open space but a bounded category, another type of imprisonment. By the end of the novel, when increasingly rapid-fire and fractured revolving vignettes paint a picture of Vandad having stolen money from Samuel, this financial dishonesty dovetails with Vandad's potential queerness. Samuel's grandmother says "jag förstod att han var något annat än bara en vän" (2015, 330) ["I knew it was something more than friendship" (2016, loc. 225 of 261)] and "Jag tror att han älskade honom" (2015, 351) ["I think he loved him" (2016, loc. 256 of 261)], accusations which provoke Vandad to say, "Sluta. Jag vill inte höra mer" (2015, 331) ["Stop I don't want to hear any more of this" (2016, loc. 256 of 261)]. It becomes difficult to get an accurate image of any identity as characters hopelessly contradict one another.

Abandoning the Post-Gender Love Story for the Pre-Human

Near the end of *Allt jag inte minns*, Panther tells the Author that when she moved back to Sweden from Berlin, she abandoned her novel with the working title “Den könslösa kärlekshistorien” [The Genderless Love Story] which she says she spent “fyra år åt att inte skriva klart. Jag kommer hem till Stockholm med färre sidor än jag hade när jag flyttade ned” (2015, 313) [“four years not finishing. I return home to Stockholm with fewer pages than I had when I moved down” (2016, loc. 243 of 261)]. Even life outside of Sweden did not free her artistically enough to complete a non-normative vision of gender. Still trapped by categories of gender, she abandons an epistemological way out. *Allt jag inte minns* also loses any clear way out of the heteronormative crisis at its conclusion. Queerness has not succeeded in offering a way to escape the crisis.

The Square, like *Turist*, initiates its heteronormative crises through confrontation with a woman, though *Play* and *De ofrivilliga*, with their female characters who fail to intervene or inappropriately intervene, could also be included in this analysis. In *The Square*, a female trigger arrives in the form of a frantic woman pleading for help, who catches Christian off guard in a ruse to steal his cell phone. She screams desperately, “He’s going to kill me!” (Östlund 2017, 09:44), a double irony given the chant only moments earlier of the street canvasser asking if people wanted “to save a life.” As it turns out, Christian’s instincts to take the woman seriously are manipulated by the team of thieves, triggering the reactive thought that people in need can’t be trusted and people with privilege are their potential victims and justifying a neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance and resistance to redistribution of wealth.

This air of victimization also triggers a need to assert individual will and autonomy, two neoliberal values. When placed into the context of Christian’s wounded masculinity (having been duped by a woman), this toxic combination of neoliberal values of individual will and hypermasculinity sets the stage for the breakdown of his heterosexual relationship with the journalist Anne. The collapse of their potential heterosexual union and Christian’s regression into a state of self-serving individualism is foreshadowed by the absurd and unexplained presence of a chimpanzee in Anne’s apartment when Christian and Anne first have sex (2017, 1:00:14). The chimpanzee ordinarily might serve as a reminder of human evolution, but the image of a chimpanzee hard at work, quietly drawing at the coffee table while Anne and Christian have sexual intercourse, blurs the line between human and animal and again foreshadows Christian’s eventual abandonment of rational behavior in favor of more instinctual defensive reactivity towards challenges to his privileged sense of order. The chimpanzee leads the spectator to wonder, Which of Christian’s experiences are “real” and which may be projections of hypermasculinity? Was the chimpanzee really there? At the same time, by subverting realist norms and luring the spectator into surreal, dream-like territory, Östlund also places the spectator in the uncomfortable position of potentially robbing characters of their agency. In a mark of how far *The Square* has come from earlier works, Östlund may be acknowledging that deciphering “what is real?” is itself a privileged construction.

Heterosexual sex symbolizes this lack of rational decision-making. At the party where Christian and Anne meet again after their less-than-satisfactory interview and begin to flirt with one another, Christian stands in front of the mirror in the men’s room and

promises himself aloud, “I am not going to sleep with her tonight” (2017, 58:44). It’s a hollow promise given the fact that he spends time preening in the mirror, buttoning and unbuttoning his shirt to gauge the right level of seductiveness, and baring his hairy chest, a signifier of hypermasculinity that also blurs the distinction between the two hairy beasts in Anne’s apartment: Which one is the ignorant ape and which one the evolved being? Östlund utilizes Anne’s character to further humiliate Christian and his supposed “memory loss” later in the film when Anne confronts Christian about his lack of communication after their night together. Östlund prefaces their lack of ability to communicate with Anne catching Christian by surprise. Christian reacts in skittish fight-or-flight mode which causes Anne to scream in shock, both replaying the vocal, animalistic sexual encounter, but this time in the hushed and amplifying quiet of the museum. The spectacle continues to blur the line between human and animal, situating this heterosexual conflict not in Panther’s idealized post-gendered world, but in an almost pre-human landscape. By situating that pre-human landscape within the museum walls, Östlund further deconstructs the art world and exceptionalist utopian discourse.

Anne asks Christian directly, “Do you remember what happened between us the other night?” (2017, 1:21:14), a somewhat odd question. Instead of asking why he has been avoiding her, she skirts the deliberateness of such a reaction and conflates his self-centeredness with memory loss. In this way, memory becomes symptomatic of the breakdown of his identity. Frustrated that she has forced him to recount specific details of the encounter, he says, “Are you guessing at something specific here? ... Why don’t you just come out and say it?” To which she responds, “Because I want you to say it, I want you to remember it” (2017, 1:21:54). Christian resists Anne’s determination to recount their sexual intimacy in a scene that Östlund tells *Cineaste* “creates so much subtext that’s interesting in the social contract between a man and a woman” (Porton 2017). Their heteronormative contract breaks down in the exchange. Anne calls Christian’s bluff by asking him to say her name (2017, 1:24:35), which of course he has momentarily forgotten. If, as Khemiri implied through Rihanna’s lyrics, remembering one’s name is akin to remembering one’s identity, Anne stripped of individual identity beyond that of a sexual partner, and Christian fails to maintain the heteronormative “contract” required to be a successful neoliberal subject. Non-normative couples can also embody neoliberal values, so long as they mimic bourgeois monogamy that produces future competitors and capitalists. In a last-ditch attempt to save face, Christian challenges Anne’s attack on him and implies she used him as much as he used her, thereby completing at least some form of an equitable social contract. He asks why she can’t admit “that power is a turn-on for you?” (2017, 1:26:06). In the background of the shot, an art installation comprised of a towering pile of precariously balanced chairs wobbles and looks as if it’s about to topple over, a symbolic aesthetic representation of Christian’s teetering manhood and career. Earlier in the film, Anne asks Christian incredulously, “You really think highly of yourself, don’t you?” (2017, 1:05:19), a rhetorical question, but one that exposes the precarity of Christian’s self-image and identity.

Christian’s ultimate gendered humiliation comes when he is forced to explain a PR disaster to his female boss, Elna, shown imperiously awaiting him in her office and looking at her phone, watching a news report that complains that the museum “produced this video with taxpayer money” (2017, 1:40:56). The report also accuses the museum of insensitivity towards “one of Sweden’s most vulnerable groups, the beggars. People who sit day and

night outside shops” (2017, 1:41:09). In this mixture of racialized politics, in walks Christian, evidently having just come from one of those shops, as he is carrying expensive-looking shopping bags. His two children in tow, he is the image of neoliberal materialism, wealth, and heteronormativity that will inherit and maintain that wealth. But he fails to impress his boss. Less disturbed by the actual controversy and more concerned about finance, she asks incredulously, “Baby Björn. Do you think they’ll want to donate money to this museum?” (2017, 1:42:05). The larger corporate entity of futurism, Baby Björn, makes Christian’s own heterosexual contribution seem utterly insignificant. Symbolically emasculated by this dressing-down from his female boss, Christian bears the potential responsibility for bringing down the entire museum’s financial stability and alienating the future of the money represented by Sweden’s most iconic and global childcare brand, Baby Björn.

Part Four: Exploding Children

Though Christian’s argument with Anne in *The Square* exemplifies toxic masculinity and two people’s miscommunicated heterosexual expectations, the most cringe-worthy moment in their heterosexual interaction occurs when Anne confronts Christian about his postcoital refusal to surrender the semen-filled condom to her. She even goes so far as to bring the trash can bedside, open it, and demand that he relinquish the condom, which he grips to his chest like a child, ironically keeping any potentially future children within his control (2017, 1:04:54). One can infer, as Anne does, that Christian is concerned she might use his sperm to get pregnant, victimize him, or limit his autonomy in some way. Their literal tug of war over the semen is a visual metaphor for the breakdown of heteronormativity and the symbolic of potential white, Swedish anxiety about the future. Much of Christian’s desire for justice, or “Tesla” justice as his co-worker Michael ironically refers to his privileged pettiness, symbolically revolves around issues of future generations and masculine inheritance: Christian seems most upset that his heirloom cufflinks were stolen. As it happens, they were not stolen; he had them the entire time.

While not primary characters, children play a larger symbolic role in Östlund’s *The Square*. The presence of children becomes markedly noticeable in the film’s first true office or corporate scene, intersecting issues of business with the child motif. As the curatorial team discusses publicity and marketing for The Square exhibition, the sound of a baby crying can be heard in the boardroom (2017, 13:36). A male staff member walks in carrying a baby just at the moment the hired publicity team wants to discuss “important issues” (2017, 13:48). Right away, the movie obscures preconceived norms about what those issues are: economic, professional, or familial? As the coworker walks around the room attempting to calm a fussy baby, the scene becomes more farcical and Christian and the others try to maintain their composure. However, the harder the staff tries to focus, the more the baby steals the scene with funny faces and noisy demands, a symbolic cry from the future to pay attention to what really matters. Contributing to a perception of anxiety about future generations is the fact that the man holding and caring for the child appears a bit older than the typical Swedish father. But assuming he is the father, the image of the

older man only adds to a sense of temporal non-heteronormativity. The film highlights this when the older coworker is the one who sees the value in the young PR team who can “Do something fresh” because “they were born into this fast-moving arena” (2017, 19:29).

The spectator soon realizes that Christian also has children whom he is at times single-parenting but not parenting with mindful presence or a lot of patience. In many respects, his generally absentee parenting style mirrors that of the absentee parents in Östlund’s earlier film *Play* and the dysfunctional parents in *Turist*. In the case of *The Square*, this focus on absentee parenting serves as the final manifestation of Christian’s professional/economic and heteronormative dissolution. After his confrontation with Anne at the museum, he returns home only to realize he has forgotten to pick up his daughters from school (2017, 1:28:53). He claims, “It wasn’t my turn to do it,” another failure in both memory and the gendered “contract” he has entered into. After his daughters have an argument that turns physical, an exasperated Christian loses his patience and verbally lashes out at his younger daughter, both a symbolic delayed and patriarchal assertion of his threatened male order, but also a symbol of the breakdown of his parenting.

Östlund cheekily follows this domestic drama with a scene of Christian promoting another ironically humorous art installation that aims at interactive audience participation. Once again, the cameral position invites spectators to participate as on-screen audience members who have the opportunity to choose whether to push a button marked “I Trust People” or “I Mistrust People” (2017, 1:32:10). Since Christian has spent the entire film in escalating, victimized paranoia attempting to seek justice from a thief, he has zero credibility at this point in the movie. Though the digital counter in the art exhibit shows more people have pushed the “I Trust People” button, Östlund goads the real-life spectators, through dramatic irony, into pushing the opposite button, or into at least admitting that some people (like Christian) simply can’t be trusted.

But who *can* be trusted to protect whiteness, masculinity, capital, heterosexuality and the future recipients and protectors of that legacy if not someone like Christian with all his privilege and access? Perhaps the film’s namesake, the art installation *The Square* is the answer people need, with its metal plaque that reads: “The Square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within its boundaries we all share equal rights and obligations” (2017, 08:12). As a worker polishes and prepares to install the plaque, the spectator notices that there is a geometric image as well as words, but, contrary to expectations, it isn’t a self-referential image of a square, but, because of the perspective, it appears like a non-equal-sided parallelogram. After a few seconds of black title cards, there is an image of a homeless man passed out on the sidewalk (2017, 08:35). The camera holds steady at sidewalk-height, framing the sleeping homeless person in the center while the anonymous headless bodies of bystanders and passers-by continue past without acknowledging the human being at their feet. Off-camera someone can be heard asking, “Do you want to save a human life?” (2017, 08:40). Perhaps it is a non-profit worker on a signature drive; when the camera cuts to a wider shot of a pedestrian square outside the Odenplan metro station in Stockholm, a greater irony is revealed. Not only do passers-by ignore the woman soliciting signatures and/or donations, but her cause “save human life” appears to ignore the homeless man only steps away from her. The camera pans away to museum curator Christian, so absorbed in his mobile phone that he is not even aware of the woman or her solicitation. In the scene’s greatest irony, after Christian’s phone is stolen, he himself resorts to asking bystanders, “Could you please help me?” (2017, 12:04). The symbol of his communication

with others now gone, several layers of irony undermine any notion of Swedish exceptionalism or utopianism. Without material goods, people can no longer communicate with one another or even demonstrate awareness of others. This stands in stark contrast to Anne's chimpanzee, studiously drawing and seemingly on its way to learning communication, perhaps about to form an alternate evolutionary tree. Östlund paints a picture of anything but a utopian, Swedish paradise. Swedish society attempts to mask these realities through exceptionalist "multi-cultural" discourse such as *The Square*, which in turn grants society permission to protect privilege by pretending to be post-race and post-inequality. "Swedishness" survives the challenge to its supremacist hierarchies.

Or does it? As opposed to films such as *Play* and *Turist*, which generate anxiety about the competitive capacity of white, Swedish men and youth, Östlund finally shifts perspective and sets his sights in *The Square* on a larger, far less privileged anxiety: the potential for future disaster unless inequality is addressed. No other scene in the film better represents this new perspective than the disastrous public relations video made by the museum's hired marketing team. Despite some of the staff's objections to the film, Christian's absent-minded approval leads to a YouTube viral sensation when the video is published online. In the video, a bomb timer counts down from 11 seconds (2017, 1:39:15), and a blond, baby girl lies in the street, dirty and crying. It's a bizarre nationalistic nightmare in which not actual homeless children or people marked as non-normative Swedish are at risk but the symbolic ideal representation of "Swedishness" and potential bearer of subsequent generations. Swedish fertility itself is under siege. The video then displays a title card asking, "How much inhumanity does it take ... before we access your humanity?" (2017, 1:39:32) The video cuts to the same little girl now happily wandering in slow motion through *The Square* holding a mewling kitten in her arms, an additional symbol of innocence. In one of the more horrific sequences in recent cinematic history, the timer accelerates down to zero, and the little girl explodes before the viewer's eyes in a horrifying cloud of flame and debris (2017, 1:40:04). Östlund forces the spectator to confront what he perceives as the concealed, Swedish anxiety: a paranoia that it is not beggars on the street who are under threat but the future of Swedish, white privilege. The ticking bomb imagery implies as much, alluding to past and potential acts of domestic terrorism and injecting a racist overtone to the anxiety. Such allusions were on Östlund's mind while making the film. He tells *Cineaste*, "There was originally one provocation that I didn't dare to include. When the kid is blown up in the promotional video, I originally had someone shout "Allahu Akhbar." I wondered if I should inject more oxygen into this conflict. In the end, I felt that I didn't want to do that" (Porton 2017). Nevertheless, the associations are hard to miss.

The little blond girl in the PR video bears similarities to Christian's own blond little girls, adding symbolic weight to his own parental shortcomings. Östlund gives Christian several opportunities at the end of the film to appear to recuperate those shortcomings. Seated next to his younger daughter, he attends his elder daughter's cheerleading performance (2017, 2:19:15), which provides an interesting all-female display of teamwork and pyramid building, more effectively modelling cooperation than did *The Square*. Östlund undermines this teamwork with an American form of athletics, just as he invoked Halloween in his earlier film *Play*, references which highlight a sense of neoliberal capitalism and culture as imported and somehow "non-Swedish." He also takes his children into the housing project where the little boy who was wronged lives. It seems as if Christian

wants them to witness his apology as well as life outside their privileged bubble (2017, 2:23:53). Östlund's camera circles above as Christian and his children are forced to climb a set of seemingly endless stairs to reach the top floor where the boy presumably lives, a symbolic reversal of privilege. But of course, it is only symbolic. No real change in social privilege has taken place. In a last punishment, Christian is robbed of his feel-good, "liberal guilt" repentance when he discovers that the boy's family no longer lives there.

Children play a more minimal role in Khemiri's more recent work, which has a greater emphasis on young adults. Then again, their absence becomes a kind of omnipresence as the intimacy of heterosexual pairs falters in *Allt jag inte minns* and *≈[ungefär lika med]*, particularly in the case of Samuel and Laide in *Allt jag inte minns*, whose differing views on resisting normative Swedish society leads to their breakup. Different viewpoints on money also becomes a source of tension between Mani and Freja in *≈[ungefär lika med]*. These tensions force a wedge between these pairs, whose lack of children represents a certain future precarity. The safe house run by Laide in *Allt jag inte minns* is filled with children, one of whom nearly dies in the fire that destroys the house, another symbol of futurity in danger. In all of these situations, the precarity is experienced by people marked as non-normative Swedish in some way, intersecting the child motif and an anxiety about subsequent generations with racial differentiation and economic inequality in Sweden.

Chapter Conclusion

A side-by-side analysis of Khemiri and Östlund brings the pervasive socio-cultural impact of neoliberal policies into even greater focus. Works of popular culture can reflect social phenomena as Nestingen (2008) and others have argued and analyzing Khemiri and Östlund in this way allows us to view notions of "Swedishness" from multiple perspectives, all of which implicate masculinity and racism in the maintenance of economic privilege. Despite their differing viewpoints, Khemiri and Östlund both identify the dangerous impact of capitalism and toxic masculinity on a stable sense of authentic selfhood. Discussing each artist individually might miss an opportunity to demonstrate the larger social implications for Sweden, as these two very different artists raise similar questions.

In both artists' work, queerness poses questions about the role of masculinity in the maintenance of economic privilege. Though queerness and "queer failure" can be presented in a way that implies positive and even utopian futures (Muñoz 2010), Khemiri's novel undermines such potential with a queer character's dissolution. On the one hand, queer failure can be viewed as symptomatic of the degree to which capitalism and toxic hetero-masculinity have become deeply entrenched in Swedish society and how that obstructs either an individual or a utopian vision of society. On the other hand, one could ask, Is queer failure, with all its historically negative stereotypes, necessary to make this point about capitalism and heterosexuality? How does queerness' near constant *actual* failure in Khemiri's and Östlund's work serve the larger epistemological project of envisioning people freed from limiting norms? Perhaps it is a commentary on the overarching maintenance of economic and racial inequality that must be dismantled before subjectivity

is truly free—queer-identified or otherwise? Is the lack of resolution from experiencing queerness portrayed as a fault of queerness or masculine norms or something else?

Conclusion

In an interview with *Notebook*, Ruben Östlund summarizes his goals for *The Square*:

If I try to think of what my goals were for this film, I'm brought back to how [the artwork] the square raises universal questions about society, and the kind of society we want. It's a very broad topic, and I wanted to approach that theme first on a society level—"What do we do with this common project?"—but I also wanted to approach it on an individual level. I wanted to challenge Claes Bang's Christian with different moral dilemmas that he must face, while at the same time having him believe in this social art project, because I was trying to challenge myself. In which situations do I fail to live up to these humanistic values? (Kampakis 2017)

Östlund represents that "individual" struggle through the museum director Christian who fails spectacularly at living up to "humanistic values." Through the symbol of the art installation *The Square*, these humanist values are promoted as the epitome of "Swedishness." Yet by the end of the film, Christian sits in his apartment, clothes wet and dirty from digging through trash bags, and records a video of apology for the boy who was wrongly punished as a result of his need for vengeance (Östlund 2017, 2:07:25). He describes himself as "careless and prejudiced" (2017, 2:08:22) and "afraid of the people I picture living in a building like yours. Those negative expectations say something about me. They say something about our society" (2017, 2:08:48). At this point, Christian's initially sincere and personal apology begins to turn into something else. Instead of representing *The Square*'s values of egalitarianism and equality, "Swedishness" as performed by Christian (who, while a Dane, nevertheless aligns with the Swedes), evolves into a defensive protection of racial privilege, materialism, and toxic masculinity. But it also reveals that, at some level, Christian himself perceives the connection between neoliberal capitalism and socio-political structures that protect his privilege and guard access to who can be considered Swedish. Christian tells the boy:

So suddenly, it comes down to politics and the distribution of assets. Because these problems can't be solved by individuals alone. Society needs to lend a hand, too ... There are bigger, structural problems involved that society needs to deal with. I actually know one of the 291 people who own more than 50% of the world's wealth. A guy like that could fix all this in an instant. (2017, 2:09:16)

Though Christian acknowledges that economic inequality undeniably maintains racial and economic privilege, he reveals how deeply embedded he is in that neoliberal discourse: his imagined solution is to turn to the one man who most embodies successful neoliberal values. In his view, it takes the ultimate financialized actor to "fix" society, which then removes his own personal responsibility to change.

It is within this broken society that Östlund's and Khemiri's characters wrestle with their identities and what it means to be Swedish. Christian's apology video perfectly

encapsulates the tension between societal and structural problems worked through at the individual level. Individuals must form their identities within (or against) those structures and figure out how to resist in order to forge their own unique subjectivity. By bringing us into fictional worlds, Khemiri and Östlund help us understand that. Art (in the form of films, plays, poems, novels) can help us grasp the situation of the individual within the structure.

One of the goals of this dissertation was to bring together two of Sweden's most prominent artists, as different from one another as they might seem on the surface and as opposed to one another as they might be in the press, who wrestle with some of the same major issues that confront Swedish society and individuals within that society today. One issue at the heart of their work and this dissertation is the question of what it means to be Swedish and how "Swedishness" and identity is challenged and negotiated in an increasingly racially diverse Swedish society. Khemiri and Östlund have very different perspectives yet analyzing their work side-by-side reveals a common self-awareness by both artists of the need to challenge Swedish categories of race and masculinity. Khemiri and Östlund are both artistically and publicly involved in Swedish social debate, and examining their work explores what they view as a critical need to think outside traditional norms if individuals are ever to find an integral sense of self, if that is even possible given the current form of social and political structures.

This dissertation also sought to explore an overlooked but major similarity between these artists' work in that they consistently situate this deconstruction of "Swedishness" within an overtly neoliberal economic discourse. Evaluating the role of neoliberal discourse in Swedish identity formation, particularly as it intersects race and queerness, was a primary goal of this analysis. For many American and Swedish scholars, neoliberalism and its expression in aesthetic works of art is a new critical lens. This dissertation draws from both social science and humanist scholarship to forge a unique analytical approach. In addition to discussing representations of economic discourse in Khemiri's and Östlund's work, this dissertation aimed to explore an additional blind-spot in the scholarship regarding the way identity formation and "Swedishness" in these two artists' work intersects with representations of queerness and anxieties about future generations often symbolically embodied by the figure of the child. Neoliberal discourse plays a role in heightening anxieties about normative and non-normative Swedish identity categories in both Khemiri's and Östlund's work. These anxieties are only heightened by the fact that neoliberalism is only one of several competing and coexisting Swedish discourses; Östlund's and Khemiri's characters often experience an anxiety-provoking tension between neoliberal ideology and more traditional Swedish social justice and *folkhemmet* discourses, in addition to traditions and cultures that originate outside of Sweden and/or find expression within Sweden. This intersection of discourses generates extreme tension between individual and collective impulses and lies at the heart of the struggle to make sense of the self and "Swedishness."

Östlund places his characters, typically white males, in situations that challenge their self-image and often result in hypocritical and irrational responses when their racial privilege or masculinity feels challenged. In the context of a neoliberal economic system with a discourse of rationality, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and competitive spirit, Östlund's characters fail to live up to those values. Many of his earlier films, like *De*

ofrivilliga, *Play*, and *Turist*, have the potential to provoke problematic anxiety in a spectator about the fitness of the white, male Swede in an increasingly racialized Swedish society.

If the arc in Östlund's work has led to a deconstruction of white, male "Swedishness" as a normative category fraught with hypocrisy and dependent upon capitalism for its power, the works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri provide the perspective of a Swedish person of color. His works feature characters of color or with foreign origins struggling to understand their identities and the meaning of "Swedishness" in a capitalist system that is rigged against their success. Khemiri and Östlund have been dominant presences in Swedish literary and artistic discourse for more than a decade, and this dissertation has focused on their work as a means to identify major patterns in aesthetic representations the negotiation of Swedish identity within neoliberal contexts. Given that Khemiri has reacted publicly to Östlund's work and the many interesting similarities in their thematic preoccupations, they make an enlightening pair.

In his first two novels, *Ett öga rött* and *Montecore*, characters like Halim cling to identity categories, either embracing neoliberal values to try to gain access to normative "Swedishness," or forging their own categories. Halim is a prime example of this attachment to categories, and he is uncomfortable with liminal space between them. On this point, Khemiri observes,

Maybe there's something typically Swedish about his inability to be okay with kind of dynamic borders. Because he's really focused on putting things in boxes, trying to understand them through making these stable and clear-cut. So, we're at the mercy of this—maybe that's why the novel works. Because we come so close to his idea of who he would like to be. (Khemiri Interview, 1:19:16–1:19:23)

But "putting things in boxes" is anathema to Khemiri's own authorial intentions, particularly as it relates to Halim being representative of any "collective" identity:

I struggled to free myself from boxes, or categories. So, whenever someone says, "Well, actually this novel is about this—he is a symbol of this." Well, actually, what if we read him from this perspective? Is that even possible? Maybe it is ... I think there's also one important aspect of him; that he is actually Swedish. He is being read as other, and he's also reading himself as other. (Khemiri Interview, 1:12:14–1:14:32).

Both Östlund and Khemiri, particularly in their most recent works, warn against a reflexive need for identity "boxes." Characters frequently experience memory loss and other signs of fractured senses of self as a result of trying to conform to expectations or fit an image of "Swedishness" or by attempting to create their own unique identity in opposition to normative categories. Under the pressures of neoliberal competitive values, such identities prove to be unstable. Both Östlund and Khemiri see the positive potential in the deconstruction of categories, particularly those of race and masculinity, and convey a curiosity about "Swedishness" viewed from outside the "boxes."

As Christian demonstrates in his apology video, rejecting norms and their disciplining discourses can prove easier said than done. Östlund often makes contradictory statements about the source of "stress" and frustration in not living up to expectations.

Categories, however constructed, can be precarious, embodied experiences for people. This tension between identity category and embodied experience in Khemiri's work has sometimes drawn criticism:

When readers or critics have asked Khemiri about the social milieus in his books, he has often denounced any realist interpretation. An outspoken critic of the way immigrants and their children are categorized as "others," Khemiri prefers to discuss his aesthetic "play" with identities. I have wondered whether Khemiri's sensitivity in this regard, his reluctance to categorize or to discuss categorization, falsely obscures that reality of marginalization, which he clearly thematizes in his books. (Karlsson 2008, 145)

Corina Lacatus has also identified a "dual" response by Khemiri to his work, on the one hand encouraging his readers "to think critically of his creative use of Swedish as a means to question the tacitly accepted and apparently inextricable division of Swedish society in us/the Swedes and them/the immigrants" while on the other hand warning them not to "internalize their status as the social other and accept their marginality" (Lacatus 2007, 161). Khemiri himself identifies two strategies:

That's one strategy to kind of remove yourself from inequality. And the other strategy is of course the lying. To claim that you are better than—you are richer. But I think ... the much more challenging question is how to kind of break the actual system (Khemiri Interview, 25:50–26:22). ... Maybe another way of getting at the system is really inventing your own categories. Maybe that's another way of kind of finding freedom. (Khemiri Interview, 30:10–30:27)

This push and pull between embracing and rejecting fixed identities initiated an "authenticity debate" (Lacatus 2007, 161) that has at times pitted Khemiri against other artists of color such as hip-hop group The Latin Kings and one of its members Dogge Doggelito:

The general discussion of belonging to a locality and ethnicity granting one authentic *blatte* [black] status has also transferred into the realm of literature, where Khemiri's literary production has been accused of being inauthentic, abusing the language of true immigrants who were not lucky enough to be born in central Stockholm, like our author. Statements as strong as Dogge Doggelito's when speaking of language use: "This is our language; we have discovered it, and nobody in central Stockholm can use it to turn it into a business concept!" seem to want to secure for TLK their image as the true voice of the suburbs by anchoring their music and public personas in the marginal space they represent. Khemiri, however, has always made a point of doing away with ethnicity and locality as criteria of esthetic evaluation of artistic production. In his prose and theater plays, slang from southern Stockholm becomes a stylistic, fictional tool modified and exploited for its poetic expressivity in order to create a postmodern narrative about ethnicity. (Lacatus 2007, 161–62)

Khemiri's artistic exploration of identity outside of categories has occasionally struck other artists of color as removed from lived realities. Dogge Daggelito even implies, ironically, that such stylistic expressions are themselves products of a capitalist system bent on generating a single, financialized identity for all. It goes without saying that envisioning futures freed from present-day normative constraints, even when that takes the stylized form of artistic expression, is a critical aspect of self-actualization and resistance to inequality. It is important to also recognize that intellectual exploration is not the same as lived experience or the visceral defense of certain identity categories. I would argue that both perspectives are necessary for resisting institutionalized inequalities and creating the freedom to imagine personhood as having full agency to develop the self without limiting constraints. I think Khemiri's and Östlund's work contains elements of both perspectives, which is what makes their work so important to understanding challenges to "Swedishness" and how that is playing out and could play out in the future.

This dissertation does not argue that Khemiri and Östlund have failed to offer a clear path forward; instead, it has shown how complex and intersectional the path is. There are no easy answers, and what could work for one person or people does not necessarily resonate with others. People have mixed emotions, ambivalent and hypocritical reactions, even racist, homophobic, and sexist defenses to challenges to their privilege or sense of self. Östlund films often convey ambiguous messages about how the spectator should feel regarding a character's flaws, which in the case of *Play* take the form of problematic portrayals of racialized characters that can indeed be considered as stoking racist anxiety. *The Square*, however, makes far more ambitious and unambiguous claims about the relationship between capitalism and racial and economic inequality, as well as toxic masculinity. If anything, the frustration experienced by readers and spectators at these artists' often ambiguous messaging or characters' failures to live up to their best intentions or societal expectations, reflects the reality of how difficult it is to escape the neoliberal and traditional logics that compromise much of contemporary Swedish discourse and society. This is not to say that a single artist or two, however lauded and brilliant, can or should be the only voices at the table, a statement with which I believe Khemiri and Östlund would no doubt agree. Nor has this dissertation argued that either Khemiri or Östlund are representative voices of all Swedes or ways of envisioning "Swedishness." I think they both would also resist that label. They have, however, received enormous attention for work that taps into the heart of the Swedish cultural moment from different perspectives and thus make for an interesting comparison and beginning of a discussion about the intersection of race, queerness, and neoliberalism in Sweden.

Khemiri and Östlund frequently focus on documenting the undoing of male characters who are unable to escape the logic of neoliberalism and other traditional discourses and norms. Their works contain interesting and complex female characters, but they are often not the protagonists of the narratives, with the possible exceptions of the school teacher in Östlund's *De ofrivilliga* or Ebba in *Turist*, as well as Laide or Panther in Khemiri's *Allt jag inte minns*. For the most part, these women are not portrayed as the character at the drama's heart. This dissertation has also discussed the positive potential of "queer failure" in these artists' work, a promising avenue of artistic inquiry, but one that continually lapses into what is portrayed as a consistent, actual failure by characters marked as queer or heterosexuals who experience queerness. On the one hand, this

highlights the deeply engrained nature of toxic heteronormativity in Swedish society. Perhaps these instances of queers failing reveals the entrenched nature of economic and racial inequality. On the other hand, it also emphasizes the need for non-white, non-cis male queer and trans voices to also present queer possibilities. Queerness isn't just about reforming masculinity alone, and queering masculinity, race, and neoliberalism from multiple angles might allow room for spaces that assist in the deconstruction of these categories.

There are many other Nordic voices, particularly voices people of color, that could be brought into future discussions: Swedish-Ugandan poet, novelist, and playwright Johannes Anyuru, who has been an important voice in Swedish literature since Khemiri's first novel, Swedish poet Athena Farrokhzad, Danish poet Yahya Hassan, or Norwegian filmmaker Solveig Melkeraaen. Further investigation should certainly include Evin Ahmad's debut novel *En dag ska jag bygga ett slott av pengar* [One day I will build a castle of money] (2017), not least because she was also the star of the 2007 film version of *Ett öga rött*, playing the role of Yasmine. Queer Swedish novelists and poets such as Kristofer Folkhammar, Jonas Brun, and Jenny Tunedal, as well as critically acclaimed writers of color such as Mara Lee and Patrik Lundberg should also come under investigation. It is vital to bring the work of women—heterosexual, queer, trans—into the discussion. For example, looking closely at what Nancy Fraser describes as the gendered role of care-work in evaluating neoliberalism and the neglected “relation between production and reproduction” (Fraser 2016, 31–32) would provide a different relationship to the neoliberal logic of contemporary Sweden, particularly as it comes into contact with more traditional, exceptionalist Swedish social welfare discourses. No single angle of approach is the best or most coherent; as Khemiri and Östlund have elucidated, dismantling institutional privileges of all kinds is a project that requires multiple ways of viewing the self in the world.

Two of Sweden's most prominent artists, Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund, have devoted more than a decade to striving to make sense of categories of identity and Swedishness in an increasingly neoliberal context. This dissertation aimed to bring this aspect of their work to the forefront of their commentary on “Swedishness” and resistance.

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