LITTLE PINK

White fragility and black social death

YLVA HABEL

Human Life is dependent on black death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence. There is no World without blacks, yet there are no blacks who are in the World. The Black is indeed a sentient being, but the constriction of Humanist thought is a constitutive disavowal of blackness as social death; a disavowal that theorizes the Black as a degraded human entity. (Wilderson, 2016)

Drawing on the intellectual work of afro-pessimist scholars such as Frank B. Wilderson III, I want to elucidate the ways in which blackness and black life have become contested, unfathomable ‘objects’ in Swedish mainstream media debates. I locate my discussion at the interface between those debates, afro-pessimist legacies and my position as a black film and media scholar before, during, and after the release of the animated children’s film *Liten Skär och Alla Små Brokiga* [*Little Pink and The Motley Crew*] (Stina Wirsén, Sweden, 2012). My aim is to examine the ways in which the film’s pickaninny figure, Little Heart, and the hurtfulness of this stereotype were discussed and contested in the debate around the film. I argue that the debate ended up producing a sense of white fragility as a priority instead of dealing with anti-black racism, its consequences for black people, and its ongoing maintenance through representation.

Before I delve into the turbulent reception of the film, let me first begin by saying something about the partly auto-ethnographical point of departure for this text. I draw on my own participation in the debate around the signification of blackness in *Little Pink*, but these experiential accounts are not to be understood as purely personal or individual experiences of black positionality. Like Saidiya Hartman (2008: 5) claims, ‘the autobiographical

example ... is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them.' In several respects, this is an auto-ethnographical text that intermingles reflections on various stages of the debates with a contextualised understanding of what black people, and specifically black women, run up against in our encounters with neoliberal white supremacy (Hage, 1998; hooks, 1989: 112). For ethical reasons, I will refrain from revealing the identities of the black women and other black online commentators involved in the struggles with me. You know who you are.

Moreover, I should state that I write from an exceptionalist national context. Despite its historical and ongoing corrosion, the national image of the Swedish welfare state still provides a solid basis for exceptionalist discourses on equality, in which race and racism are absent (Habel, 2012a). Enabling a continued hold on the public imaginary – and, by extension, orchestrating and setting the limits of the thinkable and speakable in contemporary power-evasive media debates on race – these discourses serve to reformulate, salvage, and update purportedly collective imaginings of racial inclusion, innocence (Wekker, 2016), and democratic values as watchwords for dialogue.

Swedish cultural investments in political innocence have been grounded in collectively held images of being historically exempted from colonial involvement and racialising structures. As several scholars, including myself, have claimed, Sweden has come to imagine itself as a race-less, tolerant country, which is supposedly less affected by postcolonial relations than other nations (Habel, 2012a; Keskinen et al., 2009; Neergaard and Mulinari, 2017). Our history of welfare politics and our contributions to egalitarianism, diplomacy, and foreign aid are well known. Throughout contemporary history, Sweden has marked – and marketed itself – as a moral superpower – a haven of democracy and neutrality. As Katarina Schough (2008) claims, Swedish collective identity involves imagining our country as a de-territorialised, ethereal space. To be black in Sweden is therefore complicated in many ways, and has been explored by a growing group of scholars and free intellectuals (Abdullahi, 2015; Cátia Suzana, 2015; Habel, 2008; 2012a; 2015; Habel and Kanyama, 2014; Habel and Sawyer, 2014; Keyune-Backström and Sawyer, 2015; Keyune-Backström et al., 2015; McEachrane, 2014; McEachrane and Faye, 2001; Miller, 2017; Ndow-Norrby, 2015; Polite, 2007; Sabuni, 2015; Sawyer, 2000).

Since 2011, the Swedish public sphere has roared with debates around cultural images of blackness. The release of the Swedish film *Play* (Ruben Östlund, 2011) gave a spark to powerful critiques regarding racist, specifically black stereotypes, on a broader scale than before. *Play* depicts two pre-teen white middle-class boys who become the hostage of a group of black boys

and teenagers from the 'suburbs', who steal their phones in a shopping mall. The white boys are taken from the mall and forced to spend a long humiliating day in capture, without knowing what is going to happen next. The imagery of the film encourages intimate identification with the white boys' situation, the camera lingering on their fearful faces as they are subjected to threats and gratuitous and capricious cruelties from the black boys.

Black people and people of colour, who until then had often been held back by unacknowledged, unofficial, and hidden forms of censorship, spoke up on social media and blogs to critique *Play*. Earlier, examples of public media engagement in anti-racism and racist stereotypes were more far apart – and not accorded more than marginal, fleeting attention by the mainstream media coverage. The main reason for this protest – inspired in part by Jonas Hassen Khemiri's forty-seven-point elegy over the film (2011) – was that white daily press columnists from left to right on the political spectrum had openly ridiculed the anti-racist critique of *Play*, while at the same time denying black people the possibility to respond (Linderborg, 2011; Wiman, 2011). At this point in time, I was the first black person in Sweden with a doctorate in cinema studies, yet I was barred from publishing a response to the film.

Then a YouTube sequence of Afro-Swedish artist Makode Linde's performance work 'Painful Cake'¹ went viral in spring 2012. He had created a naked Saartje Bartmann-like figure in cake material, with himself as the head, made up in glaring blackface. Minister of Culture Lena Adelöfson Liljeroth cut the first piece of the cake and chose to start at the vaginal area, then fed a piece of it to Linde. From there, a new wave of debates started – which, at first sight, appeared to be game-changing. Suddenly, we found ourselves invited, even called upon, to comment on the problematic of blackface and the reproduction of racist stereotypes. This time we kept raising our voices, and during most of 2012 one debate followed another. For the first time, a relatively big group of black intellectuals, activists, educators, and academics, including myself, could make themselves heard on the cultural arena.

What became interesting as well as painful to observe during this period was that debates created 'chains' entailing uncontrolled seepage or overlap between context, medium specificity, and genre. Dominant voices in press and media debates banded about easy generalisations of culture and representation in ways that incessantly derailed attempts to keep a focus on the specificity of films, artworks, or comic books. It can be argued that the big controversy over *Little Pink* in the autumn of 2012 was given a three-month build-up, constituted by the succession of escalating but repetitive debates: the artist Makode Linde's performance work 'Painful Cake' in April and his next performance work 'The Last Supper in June', both in which he performed in blackface, and the controversial premiere of *Little Pink* which

took place in late September. Just a few days after the premiere of *Little Pink*, yet another debate ignited around the colonial and racist imagery of the *Tin Tin* albums after they were taken away from the children's section at the Cultural House in central Stockholm.

Yet, powerful voices within the mostly white mainstream media contributed significantly to compartmentalising each of these debates. Hence, the dramaturgy and discursive logic of each debate became excruciatingly repetitive, suggesting that earlier arguments from black critics were neither heard nor absorbed by the press, cultural institutions, or public service media covering the debates. Kitimbwa Sabuni (2012) referred to this as 'white rage'. Significantly, white cultural critics and debaters in Swedish daily newspapers, such as Jonas Thente and Björn Wiman of *Dagens Nyheter*, the daily with the largest circulation in Sweden, would start all over again for each controversial cultural product, thus making every particular debate almost thematically and discursively identical. A key tendency among these critics was to deny that anti-black racist stereotypes retain similar colonial meanings in Sweden as elsewhere, or that they could be harmful overall. Through each step of the way, the exceptionalist discourse in these debates followed the dramaturgy of several predecessors in Europe. One of the clearest examples is the perennial denial that *Zwarte Piet* in the Netherlands embodies an offensive black stereotype (Essed and Hoving, 2014; Habel, 2012a; 2012c; 2012d; Keskinen et al., 2009; Martina, 2012; Wekker, 2016). I will return to the Netherlands context and the *Zwarte Piet* debate since, as I will argue, it is instructive for the Swedish debates in several ways.

TICKLED PINK: PLEASURABLE WHITE FANTASIES AND ROWDY RECEPTION

What about the film *Little Pink and the Motley Crew* itself? How could a children's film create such a national stir? How did its reception unfold within the series of debates outlined above? In August 2012, shortly after the film's premiere in late September was announced, critique was raised against the figure of Little Heart, a crudely drawn and easily recognisable pickaninny stereotype. A group of academics, myself included, tried to approach the film's distributor Folkets Bio ('People's Cinema', a network of leftist film theatres in Sweden) on its public Facebook page and gently request a discussion about this racist stereotype. They responded on the page, claiming that we should not judge a film before having seen it, and then more-or-less withdrew from further conversation. Folkets Bio went as far as deleting several posts by us and them on their page. Fairly quickly, we were characterised in the larger debate as having acted threateningly and

aggressively vis-à-vis Folkets Bio and the film's director Stina Wirsen, with whom we had not been in direct contact at all. As a small token of good will, they took down the film posters – featuring Little Pink, Little Heart, and the rest of the Motley Crew – for the upcoming film.

During the rest of the year, little by little, I got sucked into an increasingly disturbing dynamic created around *Little Pink*. Shortly after Folkets Bio's withdrawal from accountability and dialogue, the journalist Arash Mohktari (2012) contacted me, wanting to link an interview with me to a conversation with the actor Stellan Skarsgård, *Little Pink's* narrator voice. Standing beside Mohktari while he called Skarsgård, I could hear the latter screaming at the top of his voice, claiming that the whole discussion about racist imagery in the film was a ridiculous non-issue, and that he refused to say anything more about it. Speaking with me was out of the question.

By then, I knew that the opening of the film at Folkets Bio in the city of Lund in southern Sweden had been cancelled (Löfvendal, 2012). Having been asked to write a short piece on *Little Pink* for the online debate site for public service TV show *SVT Debatt* (Habel, 12 September 2012), I braced myself and went to the preview screening in Stockholm. The film itself turned out to deliver a series of more-or-less shocking un-surprises. The animated figures Little Pink, Little Worm, Bosse, Little Heart, and Ruta/Square are all created in Stina Wirsen's signature watercolour aesthetics, and have wordless voices, like whistles and differently pitched horn instruments. Little Heart's voice has the crude, hoarse sound of a broken trombone. She has been given the features of a classic pickaninny figure: a pitch-black face, a round white mouth, and braids adorned with red hearts (instead of the conventional red bows) standing up from her head.

Throughout the loosely constructed narrative, drawn against a white background, the group of toddler figures are exposed to various heretofore unknown things and creatures that appear before their eyes through fluent watercolour technique; by way of the cues given by the pedagogical narrator voice, the figures learn to interact with the novelties and each other. They dance and sing, tease each other, play, and eat. Little Heart's behaviour is erratic and implicitly brutal: at one point, she cannibalistically forces Bosse down into a big pot and tries to cook him. She is also the only one among the figures who does the cleaning, and who readily exposes her 'nipples' when undressing to do gymnastics. She is the only female character that is clearly sexualised, also engaging in long passionate kisses with Little Worm.

On the opening day of *Little Pink* in Stockholm, a small black demonstration took place outside the film theatre Zita; protesters were photographed carrying signs saying 'I'm not a pickaninny, I'm a person' and 'We are not your Motley Crew'. Staffan Carlsson, who posted the collection of images on Flickr, photographed the demonstration, and I posted them on my

Facebook account, which was public at the time.² The statement 'We are not your Motley Crew' was shortly after given a homepage created by the free-lance intellectual and programmer Oivvio Polite: NotYourMotleyCrew.com (2012), where black people and other people of colour protesting against the pickaninny figure could upload a picture of themselves, holding up their critical message to the camera.³

By this time, *Little Pink* had become such a sensitive topic that the online review of the film issued by SVT was quickly taken down (noted by Lundström, 2012). In it, Isabel Espinoza (2012) had stated that she refused to review such a racist film.⁴ During the fall, mine and other debaters' written critiques of *Little Pink* were instantly met by a disproportionately crude backlash, such as that by the cultural columnist Jonas Thente (2012), who wrote that 'academic hags' and 'quasi-academics' like me should stop writing debate articles to fish for research funding. He furthermore mentioned his genitals, as if that had something to do with the matter. In his view I, even though I was not named in his text, 'invented' racism in order to criticise it. At this early stage, several white debaters critiqued Thente for the baseness of his attack and questioned whether it could be fruitful to carry on a discussion at 'penis-level' (Krutmeijer, 2012). Others critiqued Thente's name-calling, while also pointing to the general dominance of white voices in the debate (Grellsson, 2012). The author and illustrator of children's books Eva Susso (2012) in turn argued that we must not be 'one-eyed and pale', but recognise that a well-known black stereotype cannot be re-signified at will. Karoline Eriksson (2012) wrote: 'Someone should have woken up and pulled the emergency brake [on this film, especially] since Makode Linde's *Cake* caused such severe reactions earlier this year.'

However, these voices of early support were quickly drowned out by liberal white supremacist voices and a few tokenised allies of colour. The black debater Sherlot Jonsson (2012), a former employee at the Discrimination Ombudsman, argued that *Little Pink* exemplified 'diversity' and equalised representation. Most of the all-white cultural columnists at *Dagens Nyheter* who had been former colleges of Stina Wirsén retaliated against us, while withholding opportunities for black critics and other critics of colour to respond in their debate columns. Björn Wiman, editor of *Dagens Nyheter's* cultural section, was an important gatekeeper who invited participation solely from his white colleagues, such as Erik Helmersson, Sverker Lenas, and Ulf Stark, a celebrated writer of children's books (Stark, 2012). Ovvio Polite (2012c) pointed out this nepotism in the evening paper *Expressen* and received no response. Earlier in October he started an online timeline on the NotYourMotleyCrew page, collecting as many debate entries on the film that he could find.⁵

The white anxiety over being denied the pleasure of freely delving into this type of colonial imagery incessantly resurfaced during the year's many

debates, specifically those revolving around *Little Pink*. All attempts to address the fact that black stereotypes were part of an anti-black genocidal history lingering in the present (Habel, 2012c; 2012d; Rubin-Dranger, 2012a) were fiercely rejected, partly through accounts of how these were enjoyable images for children (Lenas, 2012; Wiman, 2012). Points about how black people's children were put in harm's way by racist stereotypes (Polite, 2012a) or that blackness could be portrayed in non-offensive ways (Rubin-Dranger, 2012a) went unheard by adversaries. Stina Wirsén (2012), who had made herself scarce before the premiere for the film, dismissed critics as generally ignorant, without naming or addressing anyone in particular. Björn Wiman of *Dagens Nyheter* (2012) went as far as bluntly outing his desire to 'eat' the black Other (hooks, 1992) by writing that taking away all the colourful representations of black and other people of colour, that he and so many others enjoyed, would signify 'draining all the sugar out of the juice'.

As much as the discussions around *Little Pink* exemplified expressions of bell hooks's seminal arguments in the essay 'Eating the Other' (1992), I would like to turn to aspects of Afrodiasporic theorisation formulated both before and after bell hooks's critique, such as anticolonial critique and afro-pessimism. The free intellectual and activist Egbert Alexandro Martina combined these strands in his text 'The delicious pleasure of racism' (2012), in which he explores the argumentary logic of Zwarte Piet defenders in a Dutch context. He writes that 'one of the main arguments used in defence of Zwarte Piet is that Sinterklaas is a "fun" and joyous occasion for children and by getting rid of the figure we are denying children a source of pleasure'. He goes on to argue that this way of reasoning *demands* not to be put into question, and 'repackages (the trauma of) slavery as racially innocent fun' (Martina, 2012). Similarly, in the Swedish context of the *Little Pink* debate, black critics' arguments went unheeded. Regarded as the under-vegetation of humanity, we could not be heard. Step by step, it dawned on me that there can be no such thing as establishing a relationship of reciprocity and accountability vis-à-vis black people. We were natural clowns.

In late October, Oivvio Polite and Joanna Rubin-Dranger revealed that important parts of the fierce resistance against our critique had been motivated by Wirsén's large-scale business interests launched in twelve countries via an Internet-based licence company (Rubin-Dranger, 2012b). 'Brokiga är business' ['Brokiga is business'], Polite stated, adding that the product line was extra popular in Japan (2012b). Others, whose identities I am not at liberty to reveal, drew attention on social media to the fact that preceding her visit to Japan that autumn, Wirsén had received considerable support from the Swedish Institute, and had prepared a multifaceted launching campaign of her new product line Brokiga [Motley], consisting of fabrics, clothes, toys, dolls, and baby outfits (Habel, 2012b).

Figure 5.1 Motley/Brokiga merchandise in the window of the children's bookshop Bokslukaren/Book Eater in Stockholm.

By November, I and several other black critics, whose identities I cannot reveal, had talks about the many ways in which we were beginning to feel bruised and exhausted. For some of us, friendships and family bonds were strained or shattered. Other black people, I was told, had lost or left their jobs on account of the debate, since it had entered into organisations and cultural institutions by way of position taking. As I write this, the Motley products are still broadly available in online shops. Some of them can be seen in the children's bookshop Bokslukaren's window in Stockholm (see figure 5.1), and a selection of Wirsén's original paintings of Brokiga are in the window of the art gallery Konst och Folk, just a stone's throw away (see figure 5.2).

THE NEED FOR AFRO-PESSIMIST THEORISATION IN SWEDEN

Before going back to the discussion about the conditions of possibility for black critics during and after the debate around *Little Pink*, I need to address the specific predicament of the black populations in the Swedish and Scandinavian contexts, intimately tied to the broader European discourses

Figure 5.2 Motley/Brokiga merchandise in the window of the art gallery Konst och Folk/Art and People in Stockholm.

regarding the relationship between everyday racist oppression and our limited power to fight anti-black stereotypes. In several ways, European nations share a deep collective investment in normative colour-blindness, departing from a welfare-and-democracy-saturated, self-congratulating, liberal-minded White supremacy that refuses to acknowledge its own existence. What gives these national self-images their staying power is that they rely on an automatic, principally inclusive collectivity based on an unexamined presumption that equality stands in a metonymic relation to racial/non-racial/white sameness (Daun, 1996).

It can be argued that our shared, global history, involving the active participation in the transatlantic slave trade and anti-black genocide, has been

and to a large extent continues to be forcefully denied in Sweden. Studies on it certainly exist but remain unheeded in everyday culture.⁶ This denial goes on, even though *Little Pink's* depiction of Little Heart as a crude pickaninny stereotype harks back directly to the already-established relationship between the dehumanising black stereotypes created during plantation slavery and what Orlando Patterson (1982) calls black social death.

Therefore, speaking with Christina Sharpe (2016), it is of utmost importance to redact our whitewashed history-writing in order to address the ways in which the black diaspora is affected by what Sharpe calls the 'after-life of slavery' in both a US and a global context. She takes her cue from Saidiya Hartman, who writes:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, *but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.* I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (Hartman, 2008: 6, italics mine; see also Kilomba, 2010)

Anti-black racism, understood as an economic endeavour and not as a moral failing (Ferreira da Silva, 2015) also has global signification, even if exceptionalist discourses have stubbornly denied that it has a bearing on the Swedish context. One of the many important contributions of afro-pessimist theorisation is that it straightforwardly addresses how the African diaspora is positioned as the constituting outside of the category of the human and humanist thinking (Weheliye, 2014; Wilderson, 2016). Frank B. Wilderson III (2016) writes:

Afro-pessimism offers an analytic lens that labor as a corrective to Humanist assumptive logic. It provides a theoretical apparatus which allows black people to *not* have to be burdened by the ruse of analogy – because analogy *mystifies*, rather than clarifies, black suffering. Analogy mystifies black peoples' relationship to other people of colour. Afro-pessimism labors to throw this mystification into relief – without fear of the faults and fissures that are revealed in the process.

So, what does it entail to advance afro-pessimist thought in the context of Swedish cultural debate?

The racist and particularly anti-black verbal violence which erupted around *Little Pink* can be placed within the larger colour-blind framework of neo-racism (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991) or 'racism without racists' (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Of course, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) has shown, this discourse is not limited to Europe or the US – black Canadian scholars

point to collectively held images of Canada as a peaceful, colour-blind, post-racial nation (Chariandy, 2015; Hudson and Kamugisha, 2014). What black populations in all these contexts share is a relatively weak position and that they are constantly called upon to 'prove' that racism is damaging and dangerous. The existence of anti-black racism (if it is allowed to be named as such, that is) is regarded as an opinion among other opinions. This tendency to make black embodied existence under anti-black regimes an 'opinion' could be seen as one of the most tangible aspects of contemporary black social death. I will attempt to clarify how this tendency functions by interlinking national exceptionalist discourse with the repetitive logics of debates (Habel, 2012a).

In recent years, exceptionalist discourses in Europe have grown fangs, or in other words have turned increasingly aggressive – while claiming purity, virtue, peacefulness, and innocence. In her book *White Innocence* (2016: 18), Gloria Wekker argues that Dutch cultural and political discourse on white non-racialised innocence is exceedingly strong. Exemplifying the aggressive 'ignorance' with which innocence is defended, she writes: 'The behaviour and the speech acts of his [Zwarte Piet's] defenders do not speak of innocence but rather of "an ignorance, militant, aggressive – not ... confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land ... presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge"'.

I want to make a specific point of returning to the crude cultural situation within which discussions around *Little Pink* and its contextual framework in 2012 had to take place. Some of the most disturbing white supremacist positioning strategies that remained widely unacknowledged in the debates entailed giving leeway to increasingly predictable arguments, put forward by white debaters in defence of embracing and accepting black racist stereotypes as harmless. The argumentative logic expressed around *Little Pink* can be summarised in typified statements such as: 'But this is censorship! You are impending free speech! You are making yourselves enemies of democracy through this line of argument,' or 'You are being ridiculously oversensitive! This is just harmless fun for kids!' Only marginal variations were allowed in these discussions, if at all.

A whole range of contradictory impulses were produced by the debate on *Little Pink*. Significantly, white debaters resorted to a bandying about with agency, as if they had been reduced to helpless victimhood. In his text on white rage, Sabuni (2012) called out Erik Helmersen for falsely accusing the National Afro-Swedish Organization for being violent and loud-mouthed, when in fact they had only responded to questions posed to them by public service media. Polite, pointing out the apparent gatekeeping and nepotism involved in the position of *Dagens Nyheter's* cultural section, added: '[Wiman] writes that the debate climate has made "an artist withdraw

part of her authorship in despair". A courageous artist has been silenced by the PC-mob. Criticism against racist stereotypes in children's culture is to be compared with the fatwa against Rushdie' (2012c).

Little Pink's maker Wirsén described herself as having been forced, through pitiless attacks from us critics, to stop drawing the pickaninny figure Little Heart (when in fact, she did not). In her retrospective interview, she likened us to all-powerful tyrants (Jofs, 2013), even if she, for almost a year, had made no attempts listening to us or interacting with us. In August 2012, I and a group of academics offered to arrange a meeting with her and Folkets Bio. She did not respond (Habel, 2012d). In October, the African film festival in Stockholm CinemAfrica, where I had just been made a board member, tried again, but Folkets Bio and Wirsén remained unresponsive. At every turn, white rage and tears were followed by lies, demonisation of black people, and a refusal to engage in further dialogue.

Since Sweden has lagged behind many other countries in getting to grips with its colonial past, significantly by repeatedly silencing any serious public discussion about our colonial history (Habel, 2012a), 'we' had a lot of catching up to do. Yet, in accordance with so many other Western contexts, black people in Sweden as much as elsewhere are expected to provide the emotional and educational labour of informing white people about the meaning and consequences of anti-black racism, in ways that are palatable to white people. As much as this is an impossible task, we are not let off the hook. On the one hand, we are required to speak from what can be called the non-place of black social death (Patterson, 1982; Sharpe, 2016); on the other, we are not allowed to describe the ways in which dehumanisation endangers us.

A return to a comparison with the Dutch context is instructive. In his article 'Finding a way out of the polder' (2015), Egbert Alejandro Martina points to a specifically dangerous aspect of white fragility revolving around Eurocentric, idealised images of democracy – especially when they are elucidated in relation to anti-black racism. He points to the many ways in which his own intellectual and activist work has come to be regarded as 'too political', 'too radical'. 'What does it meant to be "too political"?' he asks, pointing to unmarked expectations that anti-racist struggles should be kept within, not exceeding the limits of the politically 'reasonable', i.e. a given consensus around an imagined, race-less common good. He writes: 'My demand is, by its very nature, in a relation of excess vis-à-vis the political, and, therefore, unreasonable both in terms of meaningfulness and practicality. To fundamentally question the legitimacy of established ways is seen as not only an assault on "freedom" and "democracy", but also a subversive act against the nation itself' (2015: 3).

Thus, acting and writing in resistance to anti-black racism is framed as an impossible standpoint, at odds with legality and eligibility for personhood (Martina, 2015: 3; Weheliye, 2014: 77). Martina's politically acute observation can fruitfully be juxtaposed with the *Little Pink* debates to elucidate the various ways in which the arenas of anti-racist struggle in general and those of anti-racist cultural media criticism in particular become conflated. First, the massive, annihilating burden of compromise put on black anti-racists becomes instrumental in paralysing their radius of action through compulsory adherence to the alleged due process, as described above. Second, the punishments dealt out to black people for articulating protest also took on similar forms: de-legitimisation, silencing, bereavement, and expulsion.

Having had my share of both being subjected and bearing witness to the accelerating normalisation of anti-black racism, I no longer see a valid reason to presume that there is a clear distinction between battles over cultural images or battles for black survival – they are inextricably intertwined. From a strict film and media studies position, I would not have made such a claim before 2011. But since then, black people have been bruised-by-way-of-media debate in ways clearly pointing to the close connection between culturally and socially dehumanising practices, involving black people, particularly women, being treated as working mules and/or objects for the benefit of non-black people's enjoyment. As Katherine McKittrick states, black people are returned to the 'nowhere of black life' that came with the colonial invention of our shared 'non-personhood' (McKittrick, 2017: 99) in a new world in which we do not exist (Wilderson, 2016).

In the article 'The machinery of dehumanization' (2014), Egbert Alejandro Martina critiques the logic according to which state sanctioned anti-racist agencies address the problem of racism in the Netherlands through what he calls 'itemization' of racism into racist 'events', 'actions', and incidents. He writes: 'The purpose of neoliberal (state-sanctioned) "anti-racist" politics is, thus, not to bring about the end of an anti-black world, but to redirect anticolonial struggles into safe business models, such as anti-discrimination agency, which, in a larger sense, manage, redirect, and defuse black rage. These agencies give us a false sense of hope' (Martina, 2014). Martina elucidates how the stubborn refusal of reciprocity and accountability gets black people bruised, manhandled, and killed, socially and literally. Social or factual death is imminent in his writing:

As black and non-black people of colour we need to think about how we understand antiracism. By which I mean, we need to reckon with the 'biopolitics of antiracism', the ways through which some black lives are marginally fostered and supported, while other black lives are made vulnerable, difficult or impeded to the point of death. The devastating irony is, as Saidiya Hartman notes in 'Fugitive Dreams', that black people in Western societies are

less vulnerable because we are 'safely situated within the enclosure of empire and foreign capital, which is the very same force making the lives of Africans vulnerable and disposable'. The semblance of humanity (of black folks in the West) is brought about and maintained through accumulated structural adjustments; the ongoing paternalistic colonial project of fashioning Black people into human beings deserving of rights. (Martina, 2014)

Philomena Essed's coinage of the term 'entitlement racism' reminds us yet again of how forcefully whiteness is linked to rights (Essed and Hoving, 2014). Entitlement racism, she argues, entails the growth of shamelessly articulate attacks on black people and other marginalised groups. Saying what one wants about already vulnerable, suppressed groups has increasingly come to be seen by European white majorities as a part of their freedom of speech. An understanding of entitled humanity as whiteness – the stable, possessive individual (Cherniavsky, 2006) – is contrasted to the lingering, unspoken constitution of black bodies as property. Hortense Spillers calls this relation 'being for the captor' (2003: 206). In her article 'Toward a black feminist poetics', Denise Ferreira da Silva writes: 'From without the World as we know it, where the Category of blackness exists in/as thought – always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact beyond evidence' (2015: 81).

What became very clear to me was that as an Afropean within the academy I had, up to this point, been positioned as a human-aspiring object that Martina describes above, paternalistically cued into a being 'deserving of rights'. The case of *Little Pink* and its almost year-long framework firmly reinstated me as an object – and, ironically, it was enabled by the negotiated agency and voice I had been invited to express in the debate. In my encounter with white adversaries, I was constantly reminded that I was not a dialogue partner, but 'an object in the midst of other objects' (Fanon, in Ferreira da Silva, 2015: 87).

FEELING GOOD ABOUT WHITE FEMININITY

Frequently, the emotional labour of black people – particularly black women – is expected and, yes, demanded; but it can be just as quickly cast aside when it offends the white entitled sensibilities we criticise. During the *Little Pink* debate and those following it, I both witnessed and became subjected to the stubbornness with which white debaters would uphold their bad faith and pursue me on my Facebook account for the sake of argument – something which sooner or later transformed into open harassment and stalking. Of course, these online incidents were not unique: in recent years, black women on Twitter have similarly pointed to the many ways in

which white people search them out with the explicit purpose to harass them through thinly veiled 'disagreement', and then stalk them for days or weeks to inflict even more harm (see the anonymous blogger and artist Trudy in the blog *Gradient Lair*, or on Twitter, @TheTrudz; also see Macias, 2015: 99). As Trudy argues, the very presence of black women's influential voices online is seen as a provocation by many whites. They are 'hurt' by black expertise, intellectual interaction, and creativity (Trudy, 2014a; 2014b).

In her essay 'White fragility', Robin DiAngelo elucidates how white affective registers play out when white people are confronted with the realities of racism. Being made to feel uncomfortable over racism is equalled to being endangered and/or bruised by the critique articulated by black people and people of colour. The word 'fragility' implies, as DiAngelo argues, that whites may indeed feel disempowered and weak in these contexts (2011: 56). However, even if I have not yet seen published research on the term, on more than one occasion I have witnessed black scholars and free intellectuals (whose names I cannot reveal) in online discussions beginning to question whether we can talk of these reactions of refusal, denial, and anger as 'fragility'. This is because the performative behaviour of 'fragility' – crying, being silent, withdrawing, or even leaving – leads white people to feeling victimised and then retaliating with violence and/or abusive behaviour: stalking, shouting at, punishing black people. Accordingly, in these situations they wage the full power of white supremacy.

As implied, the debates surrounding the particular example of *Little Pink* appeared to feed off and become mobilised by each other. Most importantly, and as I will try to exemplify here, white fragility in these interactions wielded imagined vulnerability as a tool, or, if you will, a form of affective currency. As Judith Butler writes: 'Vulnerability takes on another meaning at the moment it is recognized, and recognition wields the power to reconstitute vulnerability' (2004/2006: 43).

In the context of *Little Pink*, white people hearing about the vulnerability of racialised others, and black people in particular, entailed that white people themselves felt vulnerable to blame, as well as shame through being faced with the unavoidable significance of global anti-black history. Even if this was certainly not the first or only time that I analysed white Swedish bafflement over critiques of anti-black stereotypes (Habel, 2008), I now drew comments of shock and surprise, simply by drawing attention to the passivity and lack of reflection (Habel in Mohktari, 2012) involved in what I called white separatist processes of decision-making (Habel, 2012d). A recurrent impression from the already mentioned debaters defending the film was that children's films, and especially those for toddlers, should go unexamined as feel-good experiences placed outside the social and political. How could I ruin their pleasure?

In her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed elucidates how white people mobilise happiness in expansive ways to tone down or silence anti-racist protest and political controversy. She means that the normative, unmarked subject's post-political demand for happiness departs from the premise that if something 'is good', 'it feels good' (2010: 6). Hence, in a social context where happiness, connected to prosperity, becomes a 'self-evident good', the marginalisation of the oppressed is heard/interpreted as something that *in itself creates unhappiness and misery* (Ahmed, 2010: 13). Describing the particular image of the black feminist killjoy, she writes: 'you can be affectively alien because you affect others in the wrong way: your proximity gets in the way of other people's enjoyment of the right things, functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb the atmosphere' (Ahmed, 2010: 67).

The post-political need for happiness in this debate found several outlets, specifically foregrounding white women who took a specific interest in *Little Pink* and *Tintin in the Congo* during September 2012. They would claim that if 'old' racist stereotypes were only contextualised and explained properly they would be harmless, and furthermore educating, for children. During the same period, many white women who I encountered in Facebook discussions argued that 'we' – meaning themselves, the parents of white children – should neither censor the narratives offered to children nor change history. Neither should 'we' be over-protective, but instead explain problematic images to them – because that was the honest way to go. Children, too, must meet reality. A Facebook friend of mine mockingly suggested that we should all do that – over a glass of wine, some porn and a cigarette. This satirical take on what can be regarded as harmful to the unmarked category of 'children', and what shouldn't be, became instructive. Black children's safety and wellbeing was repeatedly placed beyond the scope of discussion (Polite, 2012a).

Something that quickly became obvious in these encounters with white, mostly female, debaters was their need to feel good about themselves and their chosen position on the matter. When notions of social vulnerability got into public and semi-public circulation, they were transformed into a form of currency – something to possess – connected to already established relationships between a given or even expanded set of virtues in gendered, sexual, and racialised terms. Hereby, I witnessed white cis-hetero women with nuclear families stepping into the foreground. In various ways, Sarita Srivastava (2006), Beverley Skeggs (2006), and Raka Shome (2011) have elucidated how Victorian white womanhood as being caring, respectable, prudent, virtuous, and selfless lingers in contemporary white gender norms and cultural discourses. In particular, Shome's concept of white femininity as signifying global motherhood becomes useful for describing the

ways in which the white women debating on Facebook carried themselves in our encounters – promoting themselves as carers and bearers of finer sensibilities and as capable of emotional depths they imagined lacking in black women.

Accordingly, they regarded their stance as inherently good and therefore politically immune. Critiquing them online and calling them out when they engaged in racist and violent behaviour against black women was risky business. In my encounters with their limited repertoire, I was frequently tone-policed and de-legitimised, and observed that what I regarded as a fairly standardised ‘white tears’ situation was a new experience for them. Their punishment for me, for not accepting the alleged non-ambiguity and purity of good white intentions in *Little Heart* at face value, was to seek me out via email to force me to continue the ‘discussion.’ I abstained.

One of the most clear-cut examples of white supremacist response, cloaked as injury, came from Stina Wirsén, who had remained silent for most of the autumn of 2012, but who was invited to give the last word in an interview for the magazine *VI/WE* in an article called ‘The heart that broke’ in mid-2013. In it, she argues that she was hunted down by online commentary, a frenzied ‘drive,’ stating: ‘One person used their own and other people’s children, who were made to stand outside the Cinema Zita with placards on the opening night [in fact, it was in the early afternoon], reading “I’m not a Pickaninny, I’m a person”. Afterwards, these images rolled on a homepage’ (Jofs, 2013). She then goes on to argue that critics had been cynically lying in wait for an image on which they could pounce. These were lies. Images did not roll, nor did anyone force their children to protest.

During late autumn 2012, feeling exhaustion nearing, I and other black women would take longer and longer breaks from social media in order to avoid constantly having to encounter violence from white women. In order to avoid being poisoned by the onset of never-ending ‘misogynoir’ – a term later coined by Moya Bailey⁷ – we would call each other, both for the purpose of mutual support, to give each other advice on which kinds of interviews one should avoid as black person, and which white ‘anti-racist allies’ to stay away from. Most of us were punished by various forms of silencing: deliberate misconstruction of our arguments, stalking, and/or demonisation.

Standing your ground as a black critic – specifically a black woman – largely became understood as being divisive, toxic, and even threatening social cohesion. White adversaries could expand the concept of ‘debate’ at will at any given moment, resorting to the stalking I mentioned. The comments were typical of social media discussions where black women in and by themselves are often constructed as toxic and excessively ‘angry’ (see ‘This tweet called my back,’⁸ 2014). On social media, the effects of white

imagined fragility became multiplied in powerful ways, allowing for black people in general, and black women in particular, to be hunted and 'dragged' on social media through the use of screen-dumped statuses, posts, and mentions. Punishments were frequent, involving demonisation, lies, total disqualification, and character assassination.

The debate exemplified, all in all, in stunning accuracy a similar dynamic which Audre Lorde addresses in her essay 'The uses of anger' (1997) about how black women's anger is deemed toxic and destructive by white people who do not want to face it:

For it is not the anger of black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles, agents of war and death, pushes opera singers off rooftops, children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work. (Lorde, 1997: 285)

THE AFTERMATH: THINKING AFRO-PESSIMIST FUTURES

What took place in the aftermath of the *Little Pink* debates was an ambivalent and very painfully turbulent process, entailing white dominant voices shutting down the most straightforward and scathing forms of black critique, while at the same time enabling watered-down versions of 'critique' voiced by white commentators. According to this discursive logic, anti-racism – institutional as well as non-institutional – quickly became an object of value, but only in the hands of mainly white cultural commentators. After the storm around *Little Pink* had blown over, an exponentially growing number of white columnists and media personalities felt called upon to organise anti-racist events, and participate in 'debating racism and anti-racism', often muting the voices black people in the process. Recurrently, our presence was not required, or for that matter desired. Rather, it was feared as a potential disturbance to conversations on race. For example, around the same time as the *Little Pink* debates raged in September 2012, a panel on anti-black racist stereotypes was held at the yearly literature fair in Gothenburg – without a single black participant.

Increasingly, after this period of debate, I have observed that keeping the particularity of anti-black racism at bay at all cost has become the prerequisite for making the terms of these debates allegedly acceptable 'to all'. As Egbert Alejandro Martina argues, 'dialogue, compromise and consensus-seeking strategies' employed for the alleged sake of democracy and inclusive

dialogue must thus 'regulate the range of critiques' (Martina, 2015). And during the years following the *Little Pink* debates, I have noted that to an increasing degree, a whitewashed, neoliberal version of intersectionality (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016) has become instrumental in barring black people from ever reaching the point when 'we all' can speak about the particularity of anti-black racism and the specificities of the social and real-life threats to which we are exposed. The tug-of-war is tangible, and we are losing ... Additionally, since black people are firmly placed outside the category of the human we cannot possibly act and be understood as subjects. Neither do we get support from other racially oppressed groups; they must necessarily distance themselves from connections to and solidarities with black people in order to advance their own liberation (Ray et al., 2017).

As young black intellectuals and activists became visible in the public debate post-2012 and in the long *Little Pink* debate, the normalisation of anti-black racism has simultaneously continued to escalate, locally as well as globally; and the direct connection between anti-black stereotypical imagery and anti-black violence has been increasingly visible. Expressions of white fragility and white preferences for how 'we all' should work against anti-black racism 'constructively' have grown proportionately, and continue to hold on in the public imaginary. So, which types of agency are expected of black people in debates (the only dialogue genre to which we are mostly offered to participate)? White normative 'anti-racist' discourse prescribes a passive optimism and 'hope for change' as one of the important 'tools' with which to deal with racism. In effect, white people are being hopeful at our expense.

I see a menacing development that pushes black people to the margins, making us obsolete. Given this state of affairs, I think it is important to return this open time-window to the early stages of the roaring *Little Pink* debates, when our voices were (at least in some way) heard. A young generation of voices came forward during and after this debating peak, and new constellations of cultural and political resistance were formed, such as 'The Room,' 'Black Coffee,' 'The AfroSwedish Academy,' and a Swedish 'Dear White People' page on Facebook. Yet, Afro-Swedish cultural workers, intellectuals, activists, and researchers are in dire need of academic and cultural strategies for redacting and re-historicising our cultural-political context in order to visualise the inseparable connectedness between past and present anti-blackness, such as was exemplified in the case of the figure of Little Heart.

And what are the lessons to be learned from afro-pessimist thinking, juxtaposed with a discussion about the non-place from which black debaters are required to speak? As Christina Sharpe argues, the non-place of black people must be acknowledged as a starting point, and we need to remain grounded in the insight that the world and its way of imagining the human is anti-black per se. Therefore, history must be redacted through reinscribing

what has been erased (Sharpe, 2016: 9, 107). And as Denise Ferreira da Silva shows, black feminists need to produce ‘other ways of knowing and doing ... without the charge of irrationality, mysticism or idle fantasy’ (2015: 90). I would argue that these powerful pieces of advice can lead us to refuse the interpellation to debate our humanity, which has already been denied. Given the dire conditions of possibility for black people in Sweden to engage in cultural dialogue, I have come to argue that we should say ‘no,’ and instead turn to each other to advance our struggle through ‘doing and knowing differently’ (Ferreira da Silva, 2015).

NOTES

- 1 Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9Eg9iqhmY (accessed 5 March 2018).
- 2 Staffan Carlsson’s group of images are available on Flickr: We are Not Your Motley Crew, www.flickr.com/groups/2130269@N22/ (accessed 5 March 2018).
- 3 Oivvio Polite, NotYourMotleyCrew.com, partly accessible through Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20121016195603/http://notyourmotleycrew.com> (accessed 4 March 2018).
- 4 Since then, the review has been put back online, but as a version in which the critique has been toned down slightly. See www.svt.se/kultur/musik/skulle-aldrig-falla-mig-in-att-betygsatta-den-har-filmen-1 (accessed 6 March 2018).
- 5 Oivvio Polite, NotYourMotleyCrew – the Debate: <http://notyourmotleycrew.com/thedebate> (accessed 3 March 2018).
- 6 For several overviews and summaries of existing research see Habel 2012a; 2012b; 2015.
- 7 The term ‘misogynoir’ was coined later, and is explained by the anonymous intellectual blogger Trudy on *Gradient Lair* (2014a). The larger part of Trudy’s blog has been closed down as a result of widespread plagiarising, which she talks about here: www.gradientlair.com.
- 8 The name paraphrases the seminal and women of colour feminist book edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1982).

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