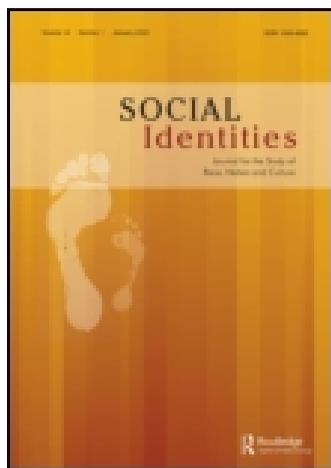


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Race performativity and melancholic whiteness in contemporary Sweden

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This article deals with the subject of race performativity, and has Sweden as its case study and national context. In 2011, an academic scandal erupted at Lund University when a group of white students in blackface, chained and half-naked, performed a slave auction at a dinner party. In the debate that followed, many of the white Swedish voices that were raised defended the scandal as an expression of an apolitical and liberated humour, while on the other hand several non-white Swedes pointed out that such an event can only take place in a country which is deeply segregated and which refuses to see itself as racist. With this event as the point of departure and with other contemporary cases of race performativity as empirical examples such as a blackface performance with the artist Makode Linde, this article tries to understand and analyse the needs and desires behind this phenomenon. Race performativity is here limited to when whites temporarily perform as non-whites by the way of, for example, make-up, clothes, body language and facial expression on stage, on television, in photography, in film and at various cultural and social events. Why do whites want to dress up and perform as non-whites? And what are the needs and desires behind this social and cultural phenomenon?

Keywords: race performativity; whiteness; Sweden; melancholia

Introducing the subject of race performativity

In the spring of 2011, the Swedish media reported that a group of white students at Lund University had dressed up as ‘Africans’ using blackface make-up at a student dinner which had a ‘jungle theme’, and had staged a fake slave auction, chained and half-naked (Eriksson, 2011). The incident which was first reported in critical terms on Facebook by a white American exchange student who reacted strongly to the fact that such racialized party games are seemingly socially acceptable among white students at an elite university in Sweden, reached not only the national media, but also became a news story in many countries. It also led the American politician Reverend Jesse Jackson to write to the Swedish Minister of Education and request that the Swedish school system take active steps to teach about slavery and Sweden’s active participation in it (Centre against Racism, 2011).

Jallow Momodou, a member of the National Association of Afro-Swedes, also reported the event to the police as an example of a crime which in Sweden is called ‘agitation against an ethnic group’. However, the students involved were never charged

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for any crime, and Momodou was subsequently mocked for reporting it in a poster made by the white artist Dan Park, and put up at his workplace, Malmö University, bearing the text 'Our negro slave is astray', and with a manipulated photo of him wearing a slave chain with a lock around his neck. In the ensuing debate, a polarization emerged between those who saw the incident as a harmless, apolitical expression of frivolous student humour, and those who viewed it as yet another example of a naturalized and normalized everyday Swedish racism. The former position was dominated by white Swedes and the latter by non-white Swedes, and this pattern and polarization between whites, who cannot see that something happening in contemporary Sweden can be racist, and non-whites, who try to point out the racializing aspects of such humiliating and demeaning cultural representations, is almost constantly reproduced when racial stereotypes are debated in Sweden (HübINETTE, 2012; Pripp & Öhlander, 2008). At the same time, it is important to remember that not all white Swedes find events like the slave auction funny, and there are also white Swedes who are actively engaged in protesting against events such as the one at Lund University.

However, similar events when whites dress up and perform as non-whites do take place regularly in Swedish daily life, as well as in television shows and movies, on stages, and in private settings such as at masquerades, children's parties and dinners. For example, barely a week after the fake slave auction at Lund University, Södertörn University's annual student play was staged with the Vietnam War as the main theme, and with white amateur actors who, using make-up and wigs, played both African Americans and Asians. This social and cultural phenomenon when whites perform race and dress up as non-whites has also been criticized by a few Swedish scholars, who argue that it is problematic when majority Swedes dress up and play minority characters, since it may lead to the reinforcement and reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices (Feiler & Sauter, 2006; HübINETTE, 2008; HübINETTE & Tigervall, 2011).

To dress up and perform as a non-white, non-Western and/or non-Christian character arguably has a long tradition in Western history and goes back to the Europeans' first encounters with and experiences of other peoples and cultures during the colonial period. This cultural practice is usually linked to the well-known term *going native*, which includes such diverse examples as white women who have converted to Islam and who wear *burqa* and *niqab*, and white men who have converted to Judaism, Buddhism or Hinduism, as well as the colour-based names which figure in theatre and film contexts when white actors, using make-up, play non-whites thereby performing as 'Blackface', 'Brownface', 'Redface' or 'Yellowface' (Gubar, 1997; HübINETTE & Arvanitakis, 2012). It is therefore possible to talk about a continuum that spans from having transformed oneself almost permanently into the Other, to the act of going native for a shorter and limited period of time by staging racial alterity through a combination of facial expressions and gestures, make-up, clothes, hair colour, wigs and other bodily transformation techniques, usually combined with different otherizing linguistic expressions.¹

In this article we have chosen to call this phenomenon *race performativity*, and the practices as race performances or staging and doing race. Based on a number of contemporary Swedish cases of race performances and inspired by critical race and whiteness studies, as well as critical theory and psychoanalysis, this article aims to understand why race performativity is so appealing and attractive in light of the fact that race performances are almost always associated with humour and joy. The article also looks at how race performativity might be understood in comparison with gender

performativity, and in relation to a colonial history that still haunts the postcolonial present. The article tries to understand the needs and desires behind race performativity as a contemporary cultural and social practice in Sweden, and the focus is here limited to whites performing as non-whites. Thus, the analysis excludes so-called 'reverse' race performances from non-white to white, and the practices of going native and its relationship to postcolonial literary studies aimed at a more or less permanent transformation which were previously mentioned, as well as cases of virtual and visual race performances or performances of fantasy creatures in, for example, role playing or performances of *manga* characters.² Issues related to mixed race and passing are also excluded from the article, as well as examples of race performativity where minorities play themselves in an often over exaggerated way, such as in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* or the Jewish character played by a Jewish actor in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*, and a growing number of non-white comedians who play non-white characters and which, according to Simon Weaver (2012) in his treatise on racist humour, can be seen as a way of talking back to racial stereotypes. In this article, we are focusing on contemporary race performativity practices set in contemporary Sweden, where, in everyday life, 'white Swedes' means those who can more or less pass as white, and who mainly derive from the majority Swedish population and from European and Western countries. Those who are perceived as non-white generally derive from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Race performativity in history and contemporary Sweden

Race performativity in Sweden prior to the post-war era was a more or less permanent feature of Swedish culture, both in formal and informal settings, and among different social classes, during a period when few non-whites from the colonies visited, let alone lived permanently, in Sweden. Irrespective of being a masquerade ball at the court, or festivities among the peasants, one can assume that it was neither unusual nor problematic that white Swedes dressed up as Turks, Arabs, American Indians, Africans, Persians, Asian Indians, Chinese or Japanese, or, for that matter, as more familiar minorities who lived within the national borders of Sweden such as Saamis, Jews, and Roma. Examples of such race performances can also be found in both textual and visual source material, and must be seen as a pan-European phenomenon at a time when Europeans had to psychologically process and take in the numerous new encounters with different peoples around the world. For example, in the 1600s, French noblemen in Paris would sometimes dress up as American Indians and, during the heyday of Orientalism in the 1800s, it was fashionable in Europe to alternately dress as up a Turk, Arab, Indian, Chinese or Japanese. In the US, at the same time, whites staged a grotesque form of blackness in so-called minstrel shows, and the story of how Virginia Woolf and her friends in the Bloomsbury Group performed as East Africans in order to trick the British fleet into believing that they were Ethiopian princes as part of the successful practical joke in 1910, known as The Dreadnought Hoax, is well-known (Lott, 1993). In Sweden, it was popular among majority Swedes during the same time period to dress up and pose as Saamis in photo studios, and in films from the inter-war years, majority Swedes also played Saamis, Jews and Roma with the help of clothes, make-up, accent and bodily mimicking (Gustafsson, 2007; Wright, 1998).

During the post-war period, and particularly after the breakthrough of popular culture and its mass mediation through television and on the Internet, a number of classic

examples of race performativity saw the light and became a part of what might be seen as an almost modern canon of race performances which are reprised and referred to again and again. These include Peter Sellers' *Goodness Gracious Me*-singing Indian, Mickey Rooney's Japanese character equipped with buck teeth-prosthesis in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Sacha Baron Cohen's various ethnic and racial characters. Similar Swedish examples from the 1960s and onwards are Ture Sventon's sidekick, the brownfaced Mr. Omar; yellowfaced Povel Ramel in his 'Waite-l! I'd like a sukiyaki' song number; Little Gerhard's 'Last Mohican' character; Jarl Borssén's Chinese character in the *Jönssonligan* ('The Jönsson gang') films; Mi Ridell's Japanese television character Oumi; Henrik Schyffert dressed as a Native American in the Eurovision Song Contest; Peter Wahlbeck's ghetto Swedish speaking character Dragan and the mixed artist Makode Linde's blackface performances which include the infamous blackface cake which was eaten at a public art event by the Swedish Minister of Culture in April 2012.

Some contemporary Swedish race performances have also become immensely popular, such as the humour collective Killinggänget's 'Mina sjungande ko-l-eanska adoptivpä-l-on' ('My singing Ko-l-ean adopted pea-l-s') sketch, which was performed by the prominent Swedish comedians Robert Gustafsson, Johan Rheborg and Henrik Schyffert, and that has become a stand-up comedy number which is restaged not only at public events, but also at private parties and events. Race performativity also occurs even in more cultured circles. For instance, when Händel's classical work *Xerxes*, was staged at the Royal Opera House, it included a character dressed up as an exaggerated fantasy version of a Persian who, to the amusement of the upper-class audience, sang in so-called 'ghetto Swedish', and even the King of Sweden has occasionally dressed up as an Arab at private dinners and parties (Pettersson & Ekelund, 2011). Finally, it is not uncommon that race performativity takes place at children's parties that may have an Asian, Middle Eastern, Mexican or African theme, at Halloween and costume and masquerade parties to which it is possible to purchase wigs and clothing from a party industry that provides practically all types of race-performance equipment, at liberated, 'decadent' and burlesque events in radical, leftist or LGBTQ contexts, and in connection with sports events and similar festivities. In other words, race performativity is a part of contemporary Swedish everyday life and culture.

Parallels with gender performativity

The fact that both race performativity and gender performativity bring forth and provoke smiles and laughter when a representative from a superior group momentarily stages the subordinate is perhaps not a particularly exceptional observation or a controversial assertion. However, the smile and the laughter are hardly harmless. Even if humour is often regarded as nothing more than just humour, that it is nothing but an innocent expression, a smile or a laugh are all but innocent or apolitical, as, for instance, was shown in the above-mentioned slave auction event. Rather, laughter can be seen as an example *par excellence* of how particular ideologies inscribe themselves in our bodies, and this of course concerns both the laughter following gender performances as well as the laughter following race performances. In the same manner as the 'spontaneous' experience of being a free individual might be seen as an example of the embodiment of a liberal ideology, laughter, in all its seeming spontaneity, is an expression of a certain ideologically-formed subject. In our everyday lives, we might consider laughter as a way of creating a certain distance from certain subjects and things, but it is precisely in this very experience of distance and of

feelings of relief that our attachment to a certain ideology and to particular ideological fantasies shows itself. As the philosopher Mladen Dolar puts it in a discussion on humour, it is through the smile and the laugh that ideology 'starts functioning fully as ideology, with the specifically ideological means, which are supposed to assure our free consent and the appearance of spontaneity, eliminating the need for the non-ideological means of outside constraint' (Zupančič, 2008a, p. 4). This appearance of spontaneity is of fundamental significance for the reproduction of every kind of social relationship, and for the maintenance of social order and society.

In relation to the race performances discussed in this article, that is, when the superior white group with an apparent mixture of fear of and fascination for the subordinate group performs as non-white, we also find something which borders on freak shows and circus aesthetics and which, inspired by Judith Butler's (1990, 1997) analyses of gender performances, might be described as an activation of prohibited fantasies and identifications. Butler asserts that gender performativity, for instance, in the shape of drag queens, not only destabilizes the dichotomization of gender and reveals it as a contingent historical construction, but that it also may provoke same-sex desire in an audience that otherwise identify itself as straight – a desire which derives from a mourning over a ban on transgender practices and a compulsory heteronormativity. According to Butler, this grief is a reflection of a heterosexual gender melancholia that goes back to a lost same-sex intimacy and identification between father and son, and mother and daughter. It is a loss of a forbidden homosexual desire that precedes the incest taboo, and a loss of a love object that cannot be recognized but which may never entirely be forgotten, and which therefore makes itself felt and articulated in different ways when there is no mental space to acknowledge the loss. Looking at the matter at hand from this perspective, the prohibited (and repressed) desire might be seen as constitutive of the social order, as well as for the necessary but repressed underside of heteronormativity.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, with its genetic and historical view of adult sexuality, it is important to note that the kind of loss discussed by Butler, a loss generating the heterosexual gender melancholia, is something that must be seen as merely one particular kind of loss among many others. Adult sexuality ultimately derives from an infantile sexuality which is polymorphously perverse. It is a sexuality uninhibited by the reality-principle, not yet restricted by a social organization focusing on genital sexuality and the maintenance of the institution of the family, and it is thereby much more open to the erotic potentialities of human bodily experiences than is the case with adult sexuality (Bersani, 1998/2010; Brown, 1985). The social organisation of infantile sexuality, the process of subordination of the pleasure principle to the reality principle, demands a repression of infantile desires, leading to alienation and the feeling of melancholy. Melancholy could here be seen as a compromise solution to the unbearable loss of real enjoyment – or of the enjoyment in the Real, as Slavoj Žižek would put it (Žižek, 2000). The point made here, and to which we shall return, is that a psychoanalytical view of socialization might help us to understand, not merely the production of the repression of that which deviates from heteronormativity, and gender melancholia, but also racial melancholia. Psychoanalysis shows us 'the procedures by which the mind dephenomenalizes the world, freezes it in a history of phantasmatic representations, or persistently resists the world with its fantasy of lost *jouissance*' (Bersani, 1998/2010, p. 99). These procedures rely on hierarchies of differences, and it is hard to see why it would not be possible to conceptualize relations based on racial distinctions, relations linked to particular processes of socialization in a society characterized by racial hierarchies and

structures, and thereby to talk about racial melancholia in a way similar to how gender melancholia is conceptualized and analyzed.

What seems particularly interesting in relation to the performance of bodily alterity and the laughter which seems almost automatically related to this kind of racialized performance, is also the oscillation between the comical and the uncanny, that is, the ambivalent motion between feelings of pleasure and enjoyment, on the one side, and feelings of discomfort and revulsion or even nausea, on the other side. The question is that if the smile and the laughter provoked by race performances should be seen as merely a defence against anxiety – how often is laughter not an expression of a feeling of discomfort – or if it is something else. As already mentioned, the performance, both on behalf of the one staging the Other and for the one watching the race performance, clearly exists in an ambivalent sway between enjoyment and uncanniness. How is it possible to understand this uncanniness of enjoyment or, put differently, this enjoyment of the uncanny? Remembering Freud's words that 'the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (Freud, 1919/2003), might we then not say that what the staging of the Other brings forth is the suppressed memory of lost desires, memories which are both pleasurable, in that they evoke other possible forms of enjoyment, but also traumatizing since the reminiscences of these other ways to enjoy refer back to that which was considered forbidden, and therefore had to be abandoned by the subject in the process of socialization. Finally, in relation to gender performativity and drag queen performances, what is it that is perceived as lost, what is mourned, and what is desired, and what might this 'something' be behind race performativity that produces the same kind of experiences of enjoyment, desire and excitement as well as melancholia?³

Race performativity and its needs and desires

It is important within the context of the subject of race performativity to emphasize the historical legacy of the general Western prohibition against interracial relationships and interracial intimacies in general, which in its modern form emerged in relation to European imperialism, and also in relation to the abolition of slavery in North America (Kennedy, 2003). Particularly in the US, the fear of interracial relationships led to mass killings of African American men who were supposed to have assaulted white women or who only had looked at or talked to white women, and which continued up to the 1940s. Similarly, in the European colonies in Africa, Asia, and Oceania, intimate interracial relationships between European settlers and the non-Western natives were often criminalized (Stoler, 1997, 2002). In the US, the juridical prohibition against interracial relationships was gradually abolished during the 1960s and 1970s, but the historical legacy regarding the association between interracial relationships and the prohibited, with the prohibited also as being enticing and tantalizing, still exists and haunts contemporary Western culture.

Furthermore, race performances from white to non-white are generally considered as a negative phenomenon within postcolonial and cultural studies (Kerrigan, 2011; Mueller, Dirks & Houts Picca, 2007). Juliette Hua (2008) writes in an article on yellowface performances, that 'the ability for racial masquerade enables an experiencing of the other that reassures and reaffirms the stability and normativity of whiteness', and this analysis is definitely the most common in critical studies on race performativity. In a similar way, Sara Ahmed (1999) argues that the desire to become the Other, be it temporarily or permanently,

is motivated by a colonial epistemological project to monitor and control the Other. As for the term melancholia in relation to race, American critical race studies scholars have coined the concept of 'racial melancholia' (Cheng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000). However, racial melancholia is mainly attributed to minorities as a result of an ever-deferred assimilation process stemming from the inability, as a non-white person, to be fully accepted as American or Western.

In light of a queer theoretical understanding of gender performativity and in comparison to heterosexual gender melancholia, we here want to pose the question of whether it is possible to understand race performativity as something more than just a way to ridicule and humiliate, and to gain insight into and control the Other? Furthermore, is it at all possible to speak of a white racial melancholia or a melancholic whiteness? We might also ask whether it is possible to find parallels between the enjoyment that both gender and race performativity provoke, and if these reactions derive from similar kinds of prohibited identifications and desires as is the case with gender performativity. Gail Ching-Liang Low (1996), in a study of fictional race transformations in Victorian literature, has argued that whites' performances as non-whites does not only disclose a search for knowledge about, and hence power over, the Other, but also a desire to overcome the gap between whites and non-whites that arose as a consequence of empire building and colonial violence. Ching-Liang Low relates this to the psychoanalytical understanding of the fetish: 'it appears that cross-cultural dress is invested with a magical fantasy of wholeness that can make good colonial alienation and lack' (Ching-Liang Low, 1996, p. 232). The fetish here becomes, in a slightly paradoxical way, both a stand-in for a primordial lack, a void which cannot be filled, and a representation of this very lack. In other words, the fetish could be considered as an embodiment of what is called *objet petit a* in Lacanian psychoanalysis, that is, the unattainable object of desire which we seek in the Other (Lacan, 1978; Žižek, 2000).

Inspired by Butler and Ching-Liang Low, we would here like to suggest that the contemporary Swedish examples of race performances from white to non-white are an expression of a white desire to bridge the gap between whites and non-whites, an alienating gap characterized by unpleasant feelings of emptiness, lack and even homelessness. In other words, to perform race is an attempt at returning to a kind of a state that can be likened to the Real, according to Lacan, before the subject enters the symbolic order, in this context a state before the dichotomous racial order between whites and non-whites that Western culture dictates. This analysis would mean that the desire to overcome race temporarily derives from a repressed desire for the Other. In our understanding, to perform race from white to non-white also goes against both the prohibition against a transgression of race boundaries and the condemnation of interracial intimacy. In this sense there is also a subversive potential to be found in this attempt to approach the Other and to transcend the separation between the superior and the subordinate, to make possible that which is regarded as impossible, that is, the utopian unification between whites and non-whites and thereby the complete eradication of racial alterity.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the desire here described is a desire for the Other formed in accordance with a stereotypical white Western understanding of the Other and within a context where enjoyment occurs in relation to a racist social order. If we remember the discussion above about melancholy and alienation as an effect of a primordial process where the pleasure-principle is subordinated to the reality principle (in this case, the subordination of certain desires to societal norms characterized by

hierarchies and differentiations made on the basis of race), we suggest that the reason why this particular attempt to transcend race by means of race performances in order to meet the Other is destined to fail is that these are practices remain within the realms of a racist social order, whether in Sweden or elsewhere. In the words of Žižek, what we really need is instead:

an intervention that changes the very coordinates of the reality principle. The Freudian reality principle does not designate the Real but rather the constraints of what is experienced as possible within the symbolically constructed social space, that is, the demands of social reality. And an act is not only a gesture that does the impossible but an intervention into social reality that changes the very coordinates of what is perceived to be possible. (Žižek, 2000, pp. 671–672)

Race performativity, notwithstanding its subversive potential, therefore in the end becomes nothing but a way for the white subject to avoid the possibility of genuinely meeting the Other in her or his reality. In other words, even if the wish might be to approach the Other, the reification of her- or himself that follows, and the appropriation of this Thing by means of trying to embody the Other, or ‘eating the Other’, as bell hooks (1992) puts it, simultaneously leads to a postponement of the possibility of a genuine encounter, as well as to the subject phantasmatically preserving the desire for the Other. What we have here is a racist ideological practice which, as is the case with ideology in general, has as its aim the maintaining of a certain distance from one’s object of desire. It is an object which in this case consists of the complete fusion with the traumatic Thing that is the Other – the non-white. This paradoxical situation, that is, the avoidance of the object of desire precisely because of our desire for it, is characteristic of the enjoyment as it is described by the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*:

The basic paradox of *jouissance* is that it is both impossible AND unavoidable: it is never fully achieved, always missed, but, simultaneously, we never can get rid of it – every renunciation of enjoyment generates an enjoyment in renunciation, every obstacle to desire generates a desire for obstacle, etc. (Žižek, 2008, p. 21)

If we return to the smiles and the laughter that are so often expressed by whites watching race performances– as for instance was the case with the much discussed cake artwork by Makode Linde displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm in April 2012 – does it not seem appropriate to view those excited smiles and the roaring laughter as not only ways to manage the potential anxiety related to the loss of the object of desire, but also as expressions of this object having come *too* close to the white subject? The fantasies which are the preconditions of enjoyment always run the risk of breaking down if the subject really gets what it (unconsciously) wants, that is, if the subject really meets the Other in her or his real presence. Since those fantasies are constitutive of the subject’s identity formation, to completely conquer the object of desire would lead to the disintegration of this identity. Such a subject whose libidinal investment in the Other as fetish can no longer sustain itself, and becomes what Žižek calls a ‘post-traumatic subject’ who, after the traumatic meeting with the Other (and her or his own desire), must completely reconstitute its identity anew. It should also be mentioned, in relation to race performativity, that the Other as a fetish always, in its non-whiteness and non-Westerness, is also a reminder of the colonial history and of racist violence.

Race performativity and melancholic whiteness

Race performativity is, according to our analysis, a process of reification where the Other is made into an object for consumption, but it is also a process where we may find an attempt to make the Other into a subject. A subversive potential exists here, but it cannot be realized since it is an attempt founded both upon a stereotypical understanding of the Other, and upon a capitalistic logic of consumption which, in the words of Judith Butler, creates a situation characterized by ‘the impossibility of grieving a loss which is not only figured by this commodity system but covered over once again by it. So it becomes an impossible referent, it becomes an impossible object of grief’ (Bell, 1999, p. 171). The Other is in other words reduced to being merely ‘a catalyst via which the subject comes to know his unconscious and assumes responsibility for it (and keeps generating more of it)’ (Zupančič, 2008b, p. 49). Race performativity thus becomes a way of relating to the Other based on a narcissistic and consumerist logic which reduces the Other to a fetish, a mere tool which is used in order to fill a perceived lack in the white subject. The Other is enigmatic and alluring for the white subject by being completely detached from its social and historical context; she or he only exists in relation to the fantasies, needs and desires of the white subject. What we have here is a confrontation with the Other that becomes an encounter which annihilates difference by introjecting the Other in accordance with the white subject’s fantasy that the Other harbours a Truth that only the white subject may find. At most, the Other here becomes a reflection of the white subject’s own Self (Ahmed, 2000).

As Anne Anlin Cheng puts it, this particular act of racialization, ‘as an act of self-constitution through denying and re-assimilating the Other – must be conceived of as a wholly melancholic activity’ (Cheng, 1997, p. 54). It is an activity that is melancholic because it relies on the repression of certain desires in relation to the Other – desires which cannot be realized – and this is primarily due to the prohibitions dictated by a social order characterized by a racist ideology and a whiteness regime. Thus, melancholia is, as was stated earlier, a consequence of the socialisation into the social order, and as such it may be seen as a compromise solution to the unbearable loss of *jouissance*. The race performativity described above can be seen as a way for the white subject to approach the Other, but it is also an attempt that is doomed to fail from the beginning since it is founded only on the white subject’s racialized fantasies of the Other, that is, what the Other is for the white subject, and not what she or he might be in her or his own reality, outside the realms of the pre-given understanding and framework of the racist social order. In this sense, race performativity constantly maintains a melancholic state for the white subject, as well as upholding the idea of an absolute difference between the white subject’s own Self and the Other.

It must here be said that this is a problem pertaining to every ethical reflection postulating an absolute difference between the Self and the Other, and this is regardless of whether we are talking about Otherness in the form of racial alterity or different types of Otherness. This kind of thinking, even if it is founded on a critique of ontologies that reduce difference to sameness, will in the end always be nothing but a search for a Truth, an insight and a self-development *for me*, a Truth formulated on my own *a priori* knowledge, and which stays within the boundaries of this knowledge. What is completely excluded here is the question of how it might be possible to ‘make room in our own rationality for that which we lack a concept of’ (Palm, 2007, p. 285). The creation of a situation that makes a meeting with the Other impossible can, in the context of race

performativity, also be seen as an attempt to maintain a race based distinction. What we see here is an oscillation between proximity and distance in relation to that which is considered alien (i.e. viewed as a stranger), where the stranger certainly may be a part of a particular group, but who at the same time stands outside and in an oppositional relationship to this group by being seen as someone who does not originally belong to this group, and as someone who carries particular qualities stemming from a place outside the group (for instance, the colonies, the Third World, the migrant diasporas, the non-white and non-Christian minorities and so on). Furthermore, the fact that the stranger is situated both near and at a distance is only made possible through the conceptualization of her or him as sharing certain general human characteristics. However, such a sharing of characteristics is a sharing *in abstractum* and implicates a rejection of every kind of individual characteristic pertaining to the stranger; she or he becomes merely a (stereo) type, merely a form without any substance. Of course, it should be added that when the stranger is seen as lacking even this kind of general characteristic, she or he is reduced to nothing but a subhuman or even a non-human, a monster or an animal, and which is precisely what non-whites are seen as in many situations.

One example of a situation where the Other is reduced to a form without substance is, according to our understanding, the artist Makode Linde's art performance that took place at an art gallery in downtown Stockholm in June 2012. Linde is well-known in Sweden for his series of art works called 'Afromantics,' consisting of different kinds of objects ranging from canonical cartoon figures to statues of the Virgin Mary, all of which have been painted black and given the facial features of the famous stereotypical figure of a black person commonly known as a 'golliwog'. By making use of Eurocentric cultural icons and turning them into blackface, Linde's purpose is said to be to shed light upon a racist system and the othering of black people which constantly takes place within a white dominated society. The art performance of Linde which we want to bring up as an example of a race performativity case in contemporary Sweden consisted of a staging of *The Last Supper* with the artist himself playing Jesus, and where all the people participating in the performance were painted in blackface before taking part in the sumptuous consumption of food and wine. However, in practice, everyone who visited the art gallery was invited to be painted in blackface, so the number of participators well exceeded the number taking part in the original *Last Supper*.

Against the background of our analysis of laughter and ideology in relation to race performativity, it is interesting here to observe the reactions to the performance evoked among the viewers and to compare them with the feelings and opinions expressed by the participants. According to the journalist Danjel Nam (2012), who covered the art performance at the gallery, one of the visitors, a black woman who did not participate in the performance, said: 'If he wants to change the views on black people, don't make us into caricatures. Make Black people more attractive. If only he had have done that, then I would have been standing here praising him every single day. But now he has only denigrated us.' The aversion that the woman articulated in that interview also included Linde's cake artwork displayed at the Museum of Modern Art earlier the same year. Her opinion was that the lack of contextualisation in the presentation of the artwork simply made it incomprehensible. This absence of contextualisation is again in line with the general tendency to reduce the Other to a fetishistic object of narcissistic consumption. However, turning to the voices of some of the blackfaced participators, two of them, both white, told the journalist the following when asked why they took part in the performance:

X: 'Well, first of all it's a funny thing to be a part of, and there was such a discussion a few weeks ago, when Makode was baked into that cake. I don't know if anyone actually missed that thing.'

Y: (laughter)

X: 'It's fun that he's doing this and making hay while the sun shines.'

When the journalist commented that they were drinking wine, their response was:

Y: 'Yes, blood!'

X: 'Yes, since we are black. You know what Hottentots are like. They are wild.' (laughter)

The journalist also asked them if they as participants in the performance were not just restaging the kind of minstrel shows that they were supposed to be criticizing. The answer to this was:

Y: 'But I'm not doing this in order to make fun of black people, I'm doing it because I think it's sexy. And how hot, isn't it, with some kind of black plastic skin that enfolds you? I like the feeling.'

Finally, when asked if they thought that some people might feel insulted and get hurt by the performance, they said:

Y: 'That I don't understand.'

X: 'No! In that case, I think that says more about them and their problem.'

Y: 'You have to think a bit about who is making this. We are not Sweden Democrats sitting here cheering – we are on the other side of the fence. If it is something we want, it is that everyone should be able to be human.'

As becomes evident in the interview, the white blackfaced participants were primarily focusing on what they saw as the humorous aspect of the performance. There was also a slightly 'decadent' touch to their answers, as in the reference to the sexiness of blackness, but at the same time, through their laughter and by the reference to the performance as a 'funny thing', they also clearly revealed their belief in the innocence of what they were doing. They also expressed the belief that their own intentions, and those of the artist, were just and antiracist (the Sweden Democrats is the name of Sweden's Far Right party), and made up a sufficient justification for the art performance. The possibility that other people, despite these intentions, might not understand what they were doing, and might feel insulted, were rejected as being unjust. However, it is difficult for us to see the difference between the motivations and explanations expressed by the two participants, and those expressed by people participating in other kinds of race performances, such as the one that took place at Lund University. The focus on frivolous and 'decadent' humour, the supposed innocence of laughter, the belief in apolitical aesthetics, and the disavowal of the fact that the meaning of a work of art or of a performance is never limited to the intentions of the artist or the performer, are essentially the same in both cases. All these aspects are, as we have argued, central to a certain ideologically-formed subject, in this case a subject formed in accordance with a racist ideology.

Since the performance was a deliberate staging of the very racist ideology which the artwork was said to be criticizing, the crucial question for us is whether or not the artwork is able to maintain any subversive element at all when it is so deeply submerged in this

ideology. In its alleged illumination of racist thinking, it runs the risk, for us, of being merely a repetition of this thinking. Furthermore, since the performance was based on the eradication of every individual characteristic of the participants, which the identical blackface paintings ensured, what is left is merely a stereotype, a form without a substance, or differently put, a figure which bears the slight resemblance of a human being but which is no longer human at all and who as a subhuman balances on the verge of the monstrous. The point for us is that this kind of dehumanizing and fetishistic portrayal, this moulding of the Other in the form given by racist ideology, obeys the logic of the white gaze, where the Other exists only as an object of narcissistic desire and enjoyment for the white subject. Instead of paving the way for a meeting with the Other based on what she or he is *apart* from the stereotypical image of her or him, this image, this phantasmatic representation, is maintained, and even enhanced. Instead of making the white subject confront her or his desire for the Other as a fetish and of making her or him question why the Other as a stereotype functions as a phantasmatic stand-in for a lack within her- or himself, the representation in the form of Linde's art becomes a way to once again cover up this lack, leaving the cause of the desire untouched. The melancholy is thus maintained, the racist ideology remains unchanged, and the distance towards the Other which was to be transcended inevitably persists.

Conclusion

We argue that beyond the ambivalence between a sincere interest and an outright contempt present in race performances from white to non-white in contemporary Sweden, there is also an underlying and mostly unconscious will to overcome the alienation that racial differentiation and a racial order creates, and a desire to be with the Other, which may take different forms. The mundane practices of race performativity, such as when white Swedes play and mimic non-white migrants in private settings, reflect this desire to overcome the unpleasant and uncanny feelings of lack and alienation which derive from racial segregation, and which produce so much pain and suffering for the white subject. It must also be mentioned that the contemporary Swedish context wherein all these aforementioned examples of race performativity take place, is marked by an extreme racial segregation pattern in all aspects of life including the residential sector, the labour market and the cultural sphere, and our analysis is therefore perhaps particularly suited for the Swedish case and for Swedish whiteness. Thus, the pleasure, excitement and enjoyment that is almost always evoked and lived out when whites stage and perform as non-whites, be it in the public sphere or in private settings, can in our interpretation be traced back to that which the colonial and racist order prohibits and disavows, that is, a desire to get to know the Other and to be with the Other, perhaps even to become the Other, as a way of finally eliminating the spectre of white melancholia that has haunted the white psyche ever since the beginning of the colonial project 500 years ago.

Notes

1. Such as, for instance, a certain accent or more or less serious attempts to speak a specific language or uttering specific racialized interjections such as 'yalla yalla', 'Allahu akbar', 'bongo bongo', 'bunga bunga', 'unga bunga', 'chip chop', 'hugga chaka', 'chop chop', 'ugga bugga', 'ugh ugh', 'banzai' or 'ching chong'.
2. It is interesting in this context to note that around the turn of the last century the mere sight of native children in countries like China and Korea who behaved and dressed up as whites after

- having being brought up as Westerners, often by missionaries at orphanages, could cause riots and disturbances and even lead to the killing of Europeans as they were perceived as monstrous.
3. It is worth noting that a search via Google (14 June 2011) indicates about 26,000 hits on 'gender performativity', but not more than about 650 on 'race performativity', of which most are related to the issue of mixed race and questions about passing. One exception is the blog, 'race performativity': <http://raceperformativity.blogspot.com>. In Swedish 'rasperformativitet' (race performativity) gets no hits at all, which, however, the word 'genusperformativitet' (gender performativity) does.

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