Race Place Shape: A Case Study of Contested Racialized Boundaries of Belonging, Embodiment and Gender in Swedish Alternative Media

Abstract

When the alternative and separatist media site Rummet [The Room] was launched in January 2014 it gave immediate echo in Swedish mainstream media. The founders of the platform declared that it was for and by “racialized feminists and anti-racists”, and only non-whites were welcome to participate. The criticism of elite media centred on the separatist stance and accused the founders of being racist themselves. My discussion in this case study concerns the racialized intersections of body, space and identity. The data consist of texts posted on Rummet’s website during January of 2014, the month when the site was launched, and articles in the Swedish mainstream media published during the first three months of 2014, the period when the media coverage was the most intense. The founders of the website Rummet made use of the media space to reverse the white gaze, reframe themselves and their bodies and re-imagine place-making mediascapes and identities. The polemical debate framed the separatism as a threat to social cohesion and evaded the question of white dominance.

Introduction

The website Rummet [The Room] the Instagram account Svart kvinna [Black Woman], the TV-documentary Raskortet [The Race Card], and a report on afrophobia were four occurrences in the spring of 2014 that jolted the media debate concerning racism directed against black people in Sweden. The purpose of this case study is to examine the content of the alternative media site Rummet together with the news coverage and debate, which immediately followed its launching in January 2014, in Swedish mainstream news media. The study is focused on how issues of belonging interact with racialized, corporeal and gendered aspects.

Rummet presents itself as a separatist platform for “racialized feminists and anti-racists”, where only non-whites are welcome to participate (Rummet 2014). Rummet centres on the lived experience of racism, thus contesting the norm of whiteness and power
relations in the public space. The mainstream media coverage both supported the content of the website and accused it for being racist by excluding whites. Notions of race and “whiteness” are important distinction markers of national identity in the Swedish society. It is argued that Rummet challenged these boundaries of belonging present within mainstream media. Conversely the founders of Rummet diligently have used the mainstream media arena to get their message through and to establish themselves within Swedish elite media.

The data consist of texts posted on Rummet’s website during January of 2014, the month when the site was launched, and articles in the Swedish mainstream media published during the first three months of 2014, the period when the media coverage was the most intense. All in all 30 entries were published on Rummet’s website from the start 18 January 2014 to 31 January. In my analysis I have mainly focused on the 19 posts written by the four women who started the site, namely Camila Astorga Díaz, Judith Kiros, Mireya Echeverría Quezada, and Valerie Kyeyune Backström. They are the most prolific contributors to the site and as founders they represent the ideological foundation of the forum. The launching gave an immediate echo in several elite media such as Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter, the largest Swedish evening and morning newspapers, and Sveriges Radio the Swedish public service radio company. The data collected from mainstream media consists of 17 articles published in newspapers or on the website of Sveriges Radio and eight radio programmes all aired by Sveriges Radio. My analysis is thus based on a total of 55 items.

The method used is a qualitative framing analysis. I identify the main frames and determine how framing devices in a texts/programmes form underlying patterns of meaning (D’Angelo & Kuypers 2010; Entman 1993, 2004; van Gorp 2005). The analysing process aimed at discerning organizing themes and other framing strategies in the content. These were categorized, coded and analysed using the software Nvivo 10.

The paper will start with a brief overview and background of Sweden’s colonial legacy and the racism in Sweden. Then I will present the alternative media platform Rummet and an analysis of the texts published on the website. Subsequently I move on to the examination of the responses that Rummet gave in mainstream media. In the concluding section I draw attention to dimensions of difference and sameness and on Rummet as a political space engaged in the efforts of power of meaning.
Post-colonial ambivalence

Sweden never became a significant colonial power, even though it had such pretentions. Nevertheless Sweden was part of a colonial mindset and has been formed by the history of colonialism. Colonial ideas of superiority and the inferiority of the colonized won foothold and Sweden. Perceptions and stereotypes about Africa continue to influence media representations and the everyday lives of many Afro-Swedes today.

Sweden was directly involved in two colonial projects. The State of Delaware on the US west coast was under Swedish rule for the period 1638 – 1655. The island of Saint-Barthélemy in the Caribbean was a Swedish colony in 1784 – 1878. The Swedish King Gustav III formed the West India Company with the right to engage in the slave trade between Africa and the Caribbean. The island was used as a transit point for the trafficking of slaves until the end of the 1840s. Sweden benefited economically from the added capital brought from the colonies of a number of European states. Also the Swedish export of iron and herring as well as the import of coffee, sugar and tobacco, were closely connected to the slave trade (Afrofobi 2014: 20).

Colonialism has had a continuing and decisive influence on migration policies and the composition of migrants to Europe, Sweden included (Hultén 2006: 50). During the years 1917 – 1918 a strong control of aliens was introduced in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The new regulations were justified by the need to protect the labour market and the Swedish workforce. But the aliens’ control was increasingly warranted by the opinion that the mixture of different “races” should be avoided. More recent news coverage of migrants often draws on a positive self-representation of Sweden as a nation of tolerance, generosity, equality and anti-racism (Hultén 2006). The legacy of colonial ideas of supremacy resurfaces in the media reports of migrants, migration and diaspora of today. The nation constantly takes shape in the settings of mainstream media, and hierarchies and distinctions are still resonant elements in journalism, a late echo, as it were, of a colonial past.

This is clearly visible in the news coverage of some the metropolitan suburban areas with a high percentage of immigrant populations can be analysed from a postcolonial perspective. The reports often make use of colonial tropes, the suburb is compared to a jungle, wild, dangerous, dark and backward, but also authentic, honest, alluring and fascinating. News media’s representations of the suburbs are mostly connected to the strange
and deviant that disrupts law and order. They represent insecure places, associated with social evils, violence and crime (Dahlstedt 2005: 112–114). Thus they contribute to consolidate a dual representation of the suburb as both unsafe and exotic. The depictions establish the suburbs as places different from the rest of the society. In this way the segregated residential suburbs are symbolically charged reflections by means of which the majority society defines itself (Pred 2000: 226; Ristilammi 1998: 67).

In his book Even in Sweden Alan Pred (2000) analyses different forms of racism in Sweden; a country whose self-image has been strongly connected to social justice, tolerance, solidarity and equality. These elements are all central components in the construction of a Swedish national identity. One effect of this self-understanding is a denial of racism. Racism is constructed as something extraordinary and has been projected to certain locations and groups, he contends. This “has frequently enabled people to regard racism as typical of somewhere else, of some place or space other than their own, of some other community, urban centre, or part of metropolitan area other than their own” (Pred 2000: 96). Thus the racial has been coupled with the spatial, the who you are becomes where you are.

Here I find it useful to recall philosopher Valentin Yves Mudimbe’s notion of africanism. In The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (1988) he explores relations between knowledge and power in the creation of ideas about Africa. From a power perspective, he analyses how, for instance, anthropologists, missionaries and ideologists from the West has transformed the knowledge of Africa. What he proposes is that the discourses on African societies, cultures, and peoples are “signs of something else” (1988: ix–x).

Inspired by Mudimbe Toni Morrison introduces the concept of the africanist persona, which refers to “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify” (Morrison 1993: 17). To Morrison the African is a reflected image against which the white American identity can stand out as a contrast and a difference. In her study of africanism in literature she also argues that: ”The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act (Morrison 1993: 46).

My discussion in this paper draws attention to how the content of Rummet reverses this reflected image. It sheds light on the denial and displacement of that which contradicts the selfimage of Swedish national identity.
Rummet – a room of one’s own

*Rummet* can be understood as an alternative media in at least two respects, – alternative in relation to mainstream media and as a means for self-representation. It can thus be regarded as a contested media space with the objective to articulate the needs and experiences and aspirations of racialized persons, and as a space of empowerment of this group (c.f. Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier 2008 :x–xii). The media scholar Gaye Tuchman (1978/1981) applied the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe media representations of women, characterized by condemnation, trivialization or omission. There is an ongoing struggle over representation in mainstream media, particularly by those misrepresented, ignored or unrecognized elsewhere in the mediascape. One of the main features of the site is the critique of the invisibility of racialized persons in mainstream media with the aim to offer an alternative public space to members of the society that consider themselves excluded and shut out. The website is thus an action of resistance to the annihilation. On the day of the launching the four founding women of the site declared:

RUMMET emerged from a survival instinct: we choose separatism. Otherwise we will never get the anti-racist conversation going. Otherwise, our role is to develop other people's thinking, not our own. Otherwise we will never be anything else than a token black friend, an alibi, a quota-based black island in an otherwise white ocean (Manifest 2014, capitals in the original).

On the homepage the website presents itself in the following way, “*Rummet is a platform for dialogue, discussion and analysis for feminists and anti-racists who are racialized*” (*Rummet* 2014). The first published post on the site contains a manifesto of five paragraphs declaring the principal ideas of the platform. The manifesto states that the site “is separatist for racialized persons”. The togetherness that *Rummet* addresses is the We of racialized individuals “in contrast to the We in the outside world” (Manifest 2014).

The platform thus dissociates itself from the white community: “*Rummet* turns its back to the white audience. Because we can’t develop a line of reasoning if it is all the time drowned in white tears.” Therefore the forum "is a safe place for all racialized" (Manifest 2014). The same day as *Rummet* was launched, *Aftonbladet* published an article authored by the founders, titled “Therefore we launch *Rummet*” (Kiros et al. 2014). The opening paragraphs reads:

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We meet the world with our bodies. We move through it with different conditions depending on who we are or what we are considered to be. For some of us this is something that we are constantly reminded of. /…/

We look around and note that we are not included in the public space. There always seems to be the gaze of someone else in the stories or framings of feminism and anti-racism. A gaze that doesn’t have the experience to face the world with a body that lives under different conditions (Kiros et al. 2014).

The manifesto and the article signal the main themes of the upcoming content of Rummet – the body, the space, and gender. In doing so it also brings up dimensions concerning power relationships, identity politics, whiteness, exclusion, and the intersection of these. In this paper I adhere to Nina Lykke’s broad umbrella-like definition that consider intersectionality as tools to analyse the overlapping and conflicting power differentials and normativities of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities Lykke 2011: 50–51). Nira Yuval Davis strongly argues that:

[…] intersectional analysis should not be limited only to those on the multiple margins of society, but rather that the boundaries of intersectional analysis should encompass all members of society and thus intersectionality should be seen as the right theoretical framework for analysing social stratification (Yuval Davis 2011: 159)

Legal scholar Devon Carbado consider it inaccurate to regard intersectionality as a theory whose focus is the intersection of race and gender and suggests a broad reading of the concept. He employs the notions of colorblind and gender-blind intersectionality to illustrate how these are neither race-neutral nor gender-neutral.

Framing intersectionality as only about women of color gives masculinity, whiteness, and maleness an intersectional pass. That, in turn, leaves colorblind intersectionality and gender-blind intersectionality unnamed and uninterrogated, further naturalizing white male heterosexuality as the normative baseline against which the rest of us are intersectionally differentiated (Carbado 2013: 841).

The writings of Rummet offer a more narrow interpretation of intersectionality, returning as it were to the roots of the concept. They adhere to the ideas of postcolonial feminist and anti-racist struggle that are closely linked to the emergence of intersectionality. Thus the published texts mainly focus on the intersections of race and gender. They emphasize difference understood in hierarchical terms of white oppression of racialized persons based on bodily features. As one item in the manifest explains: “RUMMET declares white feminism incapacitated in the analysis of racialized, gendered bodies in a white world (Manifest 2014, capitals in the original).
The body and the white gaze

In their writings *Rummet’s* founders view and identify themselves as living at the margins of the Swedish society. This out-of-placeness is reflected from their subject positions as racialized women. The accounts and narratives in *Rummet* centre on events directly encountered in the everyday lives of the writers. They emphasize the lived experiences of embodiment, which involve the operation of power relations and the oppressive system of whiteness. This is made clear when you consider the five most frequent words used on the website namely; *racialized/race/racism, white/whiteness, antiracism, black/colour of skin, and room/space*. The corporal dimension of the racialization is made central. The physical body entails a social out-of-placeness. The identity is inscribed in their bodies. The site’s four founders write from at physical environment shaped by a terrain of white dominance. In doing so they also defy existing social boundaries. The opening paragraph of *Rummet’s* manifesto states:

Living in a world where the white gaze defines us, forms us and decides our value, is a form of violence. We are neglected, placed within a clause, where we all the time must convince the world and ourselves about our raison d’être. We are the brackets that someone else has put us within (Manifest 2014).

*Rummet’s* understanding of whiteness concur with the three dimensions that Ruth Frankenberg ascribe the concept; namely that of a location which refers to a structural advantage, a standpoint including a system of domination and an set of cultural practices (Frankenberg 1993: 1–5).

Recurrent keywords and metaphors on the website are coupled with vision and it’s opposite blindness; to be gazed at or being ignored. Two bodily features that attract the attention of the white gaze reappear in the posts – the skin and the hair. Both signal what is experienced as deviant and abnormal. Valerie Kyeyune Backström of the women wrote:

I think about my hair, the hair of others. How it evokes so much emotion. /…/ It is as if non-black people think you are walk around with this hair to tempt other people. As if you have your hair to attract attention, just as punk or emo-kids with their respective styles. As if it is an invitation. As if you asked for it (Kyeyune Backström 2014c).

The hair also symbolizes marginalization and exclusion. In her entry Kyeyune Backström refers to an article published in *Dagens Nyheter* in which the author Taiye Selasi, who visited Sweden during a literature festival, was described as “a visual sensation when she
enters the stage with a huge hair, huge smile and a shawl wrapped around neck and shoulders” (Schottenius 2013).

I think of representation. Newspapers are not written for me, they don’t have people like me as the intended reader, it is made so clear in such a detail. The writer points out the hair, its width, because the writer thinks that her readers also think that Selasi’s hair is enormous, /…/ that they too will find comfort in the writer's reassuring observation of the abnormal. The writer doesn’t think about me. I who am happy to see my hair represented, to see a genius, a successful, respected woman with similar hair like myself (Kyeyune Backström 2014c).

A different but a related set of key words have to do with voice, to speak and to be spoken to or being voiceless and not addressed. I think a lot about that. […] That you deserve to be addressed (at least occasionally!). That you deserve to be recognized included; that you deserve to be spoken to as if you have a brain, a heart, and possibly a soul (Kyeyune Backström 2104b).

But the address can also contain words that wound. Julia Cagan writes:

I do not really know how to tell you about the voices that nowadays have made themselves at home in my head, the voices that sometimes still snap “filthy Turk!” at me when I am staying in white spaces. /…/ I’m not sure how I should write about the feelings welling up inside of me when our existence is constantly questioned without getting patronizing pats on the back (Cagan 2014).

The expressions and features concerning the gaze and the voice are used to define women’s spaces, both the physical as well as the symbolic terrain. The gendered and racialized places matter when creating boundaries between and within nation states. This is illustrated in this post by Judith Kiros.

This is how I feel: in the public spaces there is an invisible architecture, a maze that only I can see and navigate through. Partly because I’m a woman, and partly because I’m black. When I was younger my parents warned me against walking alone through the city at night, told me to make sure that there were always people around me, that I had my cell phone charged and ready. And then again they warned me against places where some people hung, told me with sharp voices how to identify and avoid men in bomber jackets and boots.

And I learned. Of course. Internalized the warnings. And without my noticing it my liberty of action in the public space shrank (Kiros 2014)

The content of Rummet evokes the tensions between difference and sameness, autonomy and integration. The writers perceive themselves as different, as one explained:

We are not the same. We should not have to be the same. We have to talk about this. We must talk about the differences. We must talk about how white supremacy fit us
into different steps of the power ladder, depending on our origins or how it is perceived (Kyeyune Backström 2104a).

Obviously the concept of difference can have a variety of meanings. In a negative sense, it is about the exclusion and marginalization of those who are perceived as Other. On the other hand, difference can be construed favourably as a source of diversity and heterogeneity. Difference is then seen as enriching and as a basis for opportunities (cf. Lentin & Tilty 2011). However, the notion of difference does not capture the mechanisms that produce and reproduce inequality between different groups in society. As Michel Wieviorka reminds us, difference also evokes inferiority, subordination, exclusion and domination (2001: 59, 161). In addition, differences contain a potential threat to society, implying the dissolution and division of society. He contends that contemporary debates on cultural difference proceed from the observation that it is an internal problem in our societies, emphasizing the friction between different cultural groups (2001: 89). In doing so, he raises the questions of power relations, and touches upon the politics of representation. For Wieviorka, the challenge of contemporary societies is rather to ensure intercultural communication, and to realize that all cultures are susceptible to alteration or dissolution.

**The response in mainstream media**

The news coverage of Rummet started even before the site was launched. An overwhelming majority of the reports welcomed the initiative and gave a positive account of the founders’ intentions and aims. Out of 25 articles or programmes 20 were favourable, the remaining five however delivered a harsh criticism.

The separatist approach of Rummet, evoked hundreds of strong critical reactions on Facebook, Twitter and other websites. In this paper I will however focus on the criticism published in the five editorial and polemical debate articles of Swedish elite media. The most common argument in these was the absurdity of excluding someone just because she or he happened to be white. In a radio discussion Adam Cwejman, liberal editorial writer and debater, argued that the separatist stance and the division between white and non-white racists create barriers between people that might cement differences and reinforce racist tendencies in society. If Rummet’s line of argument was to dominate the discussion about anti-racism he foresaw that it would play into the hands of the worst racists (P3 Nyheter med Sjödell, 2014).
In a similar vein Hanne Kjöller, high profile leader writer for Dagens Nyheter, contended that the website Rummet is based on the idea of a “we” opposed to a “they”. In her article titled “Don’t touch my victim role”, she wrote:

The degree of pigmentation is what determines the individual's right to an opinion. Even on the website. One of women writes: ‘I am black, but I'm mixed, lightskinned, yellabone, insert insert. I am exposed to afrophobia, but I do not meet with as severe racism as my darkskinned sisters.’ Hey now, wait. With what right can a ‘mixed’ has an opinion about racism against ‘black’ if ‘whites’ are not allowed to have any view on racism against ‘mixed’ or other people whose pigmentation is of different kind than white? (Kjöller 2014).

Kjöller accused the four women for turning their personal experiences into a general truth. According to Kjöller the primarily scope of the website was to launch a business strategy and not to try to understand or seek solutions but “to be rolling in suffered injuries” (Kjöller 2014).

Others defended the separatist stance arguing that a group that experiences racism must have the right to exclude the dominating group. Dagens Nyheter published a approving article by the author Lyra Ekström Lindbäck.

The website will reduce the blindness of many white anti-racists, and help us see the invisibility that we daily contribute to just by living our privileged lives without reflecting. Moreover, I think that the texts will create an incredible boost of self-confidence and fighting spirit among all those who recognize themselves. To shut out the white from writing on a single website is an important symbolic act. It highlights the overwhelming white majority that surrounds us in practically all other public contexts. Not least on the cultural pages such as this (Ekström Lindbäck 2014).

This predominantly positive article gave rise to a critical response in the same newspaper from Valerie Kyeyune Backström, Mireya Echeverría Quezada, Judith Kiros, and Camila Astorga Díaz. In the reply they accused Lyra Ekström Lindbäck for being part of the symbolic annihilation she condemned and made a strong point of the need for media spaces such as rummets.se. They specifically attacked the sentence: “The website will reduce the blindness of many white anti-racists, and help us see the invisibility that we daily contribute to just by living our privileged lives without reflecting.”

Throughout the article the journalist addresses the white reader. /…/ Not even in a sympathetically intended piece about a separatist website, by and for racialized people, are racialized persons included in the address (Kyeyune Backström et al. 2014).

Sociologist Everett Stonequist’s thoughts on marginalization (Stonequist 1937/1965) can be linked to the strategies that the founders of Rummet make use of to cope with their
situation in the public sphere. According to Stonequist the marginal man belongs at the same time to two (or more) social worlds and experiencing uncertainty in both. In these worlds one is often "dominant" over the other (Stonequist 1937/1965: 8). The way that Rummet’s writers deal with this conflict and duality is not submission or acceptance but by contesting marginality.

**Concluding remarks [to be completed]**

The founders of the website Rummet have made use of the media space to reverse the white gaze, reframe themselves and their bodies and re-imagine place-making mediascapes and identities. Rummet is political space articulating the struggle for inclusion and identity recognition of minorities. However according to their line of arguments there is a direct causal relationship between the situatedness of people’s gaze and their cognitive perspectives on life. This contradicts the view of several scholars within intersectional studies (cf. Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013 ;Yuval-Davis 2011). The main frame in the writings of Rummet is *whiteness as a power of control*. The critical debate framed the separatism of Rummet as a *threat to social cohesion*.

The last post on Rummet’s website was published in November 2014. Camila Astorga Díaz is now presenter of the programme P3 Nyheter [P3 News] broadcast by the Swedish public service radio company. Judith Kiros frequently writes for Dagens Nyheter and for the website Edit, launched by the Swedish public service television in April 2015. In addition she and Mireya Echeverria Quezada run the podcast Hämdens timme [The hour of revenge] on the website of Expressen, the most widely circulated newspaper in Sweden. Valerie Kyeyune Backström currently writes for Expressen’s cultural pages. The four founders of Rummet have moved from the media margins to the very centre of Sweden’s elite media. Moreover Mireya Echeverria Quezada was in January 2015 appointed editor in chief of the Swedish feminist magazine Bang. It remains to be seen to what extent this alliance can minimize mainstream media’s power over meaning.
References


References to analysed texts and programmes


