

‘We just want to make art’ – Women with experiences of racial othering reflect on art, activism and representation

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Abstract

In recent years, Swedish women belonging to a post-migrant generation have made their voices against racism and social inequality prominent within public debate. Engaging in segregated and economically deprived suburbs, these women make use of art in order to counter stereotypical narratives of themselves and their communities. Based on interviews from two research projects, *Accessing Utopia* and *Gendered Islamophobia in Sweden*, this article aims to understand the complexities in using art to protest racist structures and stereotypes. In what ways are the young women making room for their own creative expressions in Swedish society, while countering processes of othering? How does the work of representation affect them? What meaning do the women give to the platforms and networks they have been involved in? This article shows that the women's early experiences of othering and meeting likeminded youths play a central role in order to either enter or create collective platforms where they can creatively engage in expressing their subjectivities and counter society's controlling images. Projects and platforms such as *Revolution Poetry* and *Swedish hijabis* provided collective self-care through support and confidence building among youths from marginalized communities. These platforms can be seen as an artistic homeplace for the interlocutors. The article also shows that the work of representation is sometimes felt as limiting. The activism the women engage in is a deeply personal struggle for self-valuation and seeking ways to live a life on one's own terms.

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*We just want to make art
Instead, we are made to
hold lessons in social sciences*

(Libre, 2020: 49)

Introduction

The above quote is from the Swedish spoken word artist Nachla Libre's poetry collection *Tiden har sett allt* (author's translation: 'Time has seen it all'). Libre, who was born in Sweden with a Libyan-Chilean background, has, through her art, been vocal about issues concerning racism and feminism. In this quote, she reflects on the dilemma of wanting, on one hand, to engage freely in artistic exploration, and, on the other hand, feeling obliged as an artist with experiences of racialization, to counter stereotypical societal narratives, a work she refers to as 'teaching social sciences'. The societal context for Libre's poetry is Sweden, a country that has in recent decades transformed from a strong welfare state to a country characterized by rising social inequality and privatizations within key sectors such as housing, health, and education (Keeley, 2015; Therborn, 2018). The weakening of the Swedish welfare state has been found to erode the foundation that once made gender equality an important part of Swedish national identity (Lane and Jordansson, 2020; Martinsson et al., 2016). This change also relates to the emergence of overlapping racialized patterns of economic segregation in Swedish cities, polarization between rich urban areas with an increasingly wealthy Swedish population, and the economically deprived and stigmatized suburban areas where rental housing is dominated by Swedes with a migrant background (Börjeson, 2018). Research has shown how the increasing social inequality and stigmatization of racialized neighbourhoods and minority groups also create a breeding ground for artistic creativity among young people from these neighbourhoods (Sernhede, 2002; Sernhede et al., 2019).

We see the poet Nachla Libre as an example of a new generation of young women with experiences of racialization in Swedish society that are using art to elevate their voices in the public sphere. Through artistic expression, such as poetry, Libre and many other young women have managed to highlight and protest patriarchy, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and socioeconomic inequality affecting their neighbourhood. In this article, we aim to explore how racialized women artists from stigmatized neighbourhoods reflect on the dilemmas that condition their work when using artistic expressions to make their voices heard and counter inequality and society's stereotypical narratives of themselves and their neighbourhood. Through a thematic analysis of seven interviews with racialized women artists, gathered through parallel research projects by the two authors, this article explores the complexities involved in the use of art as a means of highlighting and protesting inequalities. How are these young women making room for their own creative expressions in Swedish society, while countering processes of othering? How

does the work of representation affect them? What meaning do the women give to the platforms and networks they have been involved in?

Methodological underpinnings

The seven young women quoted in this article are all deeply involved in organizing and raising awareness on societal issues, as well as in counteracting the cultural stigmatization of their own neighbourhoods and communities. The interviews with the young women stem from two research projects in which the authors of this article have been respectively involved.

The first project is called *Accessing Utopia*, which was part of the research project *The suburbs and the renaissance of public education, 2014–2018*, financed by The Swedish Research Council.¹ *Accessing Utopia* is a video installation based on 10 interviews with Swedish activists, most of them from racialized minorities from the suburbs, who have created platforms that address issues connected to racism and social equality in Swedish society.

The second research project is called *Gendered Islamophobia in Sweden – A study on Muslim women's experiences of anti-Muslim racism and their use of art and activism, 2020–2022*, also financed by the Swedish Research Council.² The project focuses on experiences of anti-Muslim racism, as well as how young Muslim women make use of creative expressions to both express their subjectivity and counter issues of racism, patriarchy, and social inequality. The project is based on 22 interviews with Muslim women who are activists and/or artists.

The seven interlocutors featured in this article were identified through the authors' respective ethnographic work in the two research projects mentioned above. All of the interlocutors are artists between the ages of 20 and 35 years. They were either born in or immigrated to Sweden with their families as children. Hence, they all belong to a post-migrant generation. Besides migration experiences in the family, they also share experiences of racialization based on skin colour and/or their ethno-religious background. The women in this study have, for many years, engaged in creative community projects and organizations in the suburbs. Although there is a great diversity among these artists, they converge in their choice of using art to engage in issues concerning racism, as well as patriarchy and social inequality within their local community. The organizations, networks, and platforms that they have engaged in can be seen as a reaction to the political and societal changes taking place within the Swedish context, with a weakening of the Swedish welfare state that has specially affected already-marginalized communities and neighbourhoods (Sernhede et al., 2019). Examples of the organizations and platforms that the interlocutors in this article have been involved in are as follows:

Revolution Poetry: In 2009, a group of friends, inspired by the spoken word³ scene in the United States, started the organization *Revolution Poetry* with the explicit agenda of bringing the culture of the suburbs into mainstream Swedish cultural institutions. For a decade, *Revolution Poetry* arranged workshops and spoken word events,

providing youth from the suburbs with a cultural platform to share their stories through poetry performance.

StreetGäris: In 2013, this organization started as an online platform where young women, especially those from stigmatized urban areas, could discuss issues related to the different kinds of oppression affecting them, such as sexism and racism. The platform is now a formal organization. The Facebook page, with over 9000 members, has been a prominent platform for discussions and women and non-binary persons of different backgrounds supporting and providing each other with information on political, cultural, and economic issues, as well as promoting artistic interventions.

Svenska hijabis (Swedish hijabis): In 2016, anti-racist activist America Vera Zavala initiated and directed a community theatre project on Islamophobia. Community-based art-projects aim to engage a (often marginalized) community in order to, through artistic expressions, highlight their experiences and stories. The play was called *Swedish hijabis*⁴ and it let five young Muslim women share their stories and everyday experiences of growing up in Sweden. The play sought to both counter racist stereotypes and to provide a platform for young women to make their stories heard. The play toured in six cities in Sweden with 1–3 showings in each city. It was later aired on Swedish State Television.

Brown Island: This collective was created by a group of students in 2017 to protest racism and structural discrimination at an art university in Stockholm. These students created Brown Island to highlight and problematize the White, heteronormative values of their university and the art world through exhibitions and curatorial work.

We see the emergence of the aforementioned organizations and platforms as a reaction to many of the societal issues that increasing and racialized social inequality have given rise to in Swedish society. The work of the interlocutors featured in this article has been influenced through their experiences in organizations like these and, as we show below, many of them refer to these platforms while reflecting on their work.

Theoretical underpinnings

For the women presented in this article, the possibility of engaging in artistic work is conditioned by societal *Othering*. Inspired by the postcolonial philosophical tradition (Saïd, 2000 [1978]; Spivak, 1985), we use the notion of Othering here to name processes by which groups are constructed and sometimes construct themselves as society's 'Others', discursively created as 'different' from what is perceived to be society's normative cultural, social – and thus political – community. The Others are thereby constructed as marginal and inferior with the help of dichotomizing and essentializing logics of 'us versus them' (Ashcroft et al., 2007), and as a fundamental 'constitutive outside' for identities that are positioned as normal in society (Hall, 2005). For instance, research on the dominant discourses that are continually articulated within mass media on the 'immigrant suburbs' in Sweden has shown how they contain a set of racializing, gendered stereotypes about the people living there (Backvall, 2019; Brune, 2004). Here, 'the

criminal immigrant guy' and 'the oppressed immigrant woman' such as the stereotypes circulating in debates on honour killings in Sweden, as shown by Alinia (2020), are examples of gendered stereotypical figures that limit and condition the public understanding of the complex social life patterns in the suburbs, with negative effects on the lives of people living there (Brune, 2005). The dominant discourses on Muslims in Sweden have, in similar ways, been shown to contain and normalize stereotypical ideas relating Muslims to backwardness and fundamentalism, constructing Muslim women mainly as oppressed and submissive, and thereby positioning them against the ideas that link Swedish nationalism to gender equality (Gardell, 2010).

In this article, we analyse the ways in which women artists are affected by gendered ethnic stereotypes, with reference to what Patricia Hill Collins has called 'controlling images'. According to Collins (2000), the stereotypical images circulating in society are 'designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural and inevitable parts of everyday life' (p. 69), thereby emphasizing the systematic ways in which stereotypes perpetuate structural discrimination. These are the structures within which the women in this article navigate their lives, and through various artistic expressions negotiate and sometimes counter the 'controlling images' as a way of formulating their own sense of identity. We will show how the need to navigate and negotiate these structures becomes more visible when our interlocutors find themselves in what can be understood as the *outsider within* position (Collins, 1986). Collins used the term outsider within to pinpoint women's positioning in predominantly white spaces, a positioning that highlights the experiences of being allowed into, yet never fully becoming a member of the collective. We will argue that this feeling of never being fully included raises the need to engage in processes of what Collins calls *self-definition* and *self-valuation* (Collins, 1986). She uses these concepts to understand the processes taking place within the Black feminist struggle in the United States. While the process of self-definition involves challenging external stereotypical images of Black womanhood, she referred to self-valuation as the work of replacing these stereotypes with the content of Black women's own ideas of who they are (Collins, 1986). Collins shows how Black women's creative work as writers, musicians, dancers, and artists has played a vital role in shaping their self-definitions and self-valuations. Thus, creative expressions, even in limiting spheres, are an important element in Black women's subjectivity as fully human beings. Following Collins' insightful analysis, we show how creativity becomes a means of striving for freedom that can help racialized women cope and move beyond the constraints placed on their lives in the Swedish context.

An important element in this work of coping can be found in Ahmed's notion of *self-care*. Ahmed argued for the need to view self-care among marginalized groups as self-preservation. While the promotion of self-care within a neoliberal framework has been identified as part of a depoliticizing discourse that puts the burden of structural patterns of inequality on the shoulders of individual life choices, Ahmed noted that self-care must be understood differently, depending on whether it is a strategy used by privileged groups or by groups that are oppressed by them. She emphasized that, for the latter, self-care is a matter of survival and self-preservation, not self-indulgence (Ahmed, 2014). Feminist scholar bell hooks (1990) identified safe spaces – what she called *homeplace* – as important sites where Black women could nurture themselves and their communities, and

strive to be subjects. Thus, these safe spaces have a political dimension attached to them, as they are sites of resistance against oppressive structures within society. We use the notions of self-care and homeplace to understand the ways in which women give meaning to the importance of solidarity and collective support within their communities and the networks they are engaged in.

In a classic dialogue between photographer Pratibha Parmar (1990) and filmmaker June Jordan, on photographic work by Black women in the United Kingdom, the two artists discuss the need to develop narratives that stem from their positionalities but move beyond the limitations imposed by having to relate to identities such as 'black British women'. They argue that the focus on racialized identities emanates from the fact that minorities often find themselves having to deal with people who question their existence, giving rise to a political awareness that derives from the necessity to find out why this particular kind of oppression exists. In their discussion, Parmar and Jordan make the point that once you try to answer this question, you risk giving into a discursive positionality created by others (Parmar, 1990). One of the consequences of this process can also be a generalization of a diverse group of people. Whereas this might be a necessary part of the self-defining process (Collins, 1986), as we show in our analysis, our interlocutors reflect and negotiate how to handle the dilemma between countering processes of othering and simultaneously looking to formulate their subjectivities on their own terms.

Early experiences and countering the process of othering

In the interviews, one of the salient themes that emerges is how women's ways into the artistic world are deeply intertwined with experiences of different kinds of *othering*, affecting their understanding of art and its relationship to society. Our first example is from Sara.

For Sara,⁵ the path towards learning to counter processes of othering began in her early formative childhood and teenage years. She is a spoken word poet, artist, and one of the founders of Revolution Poetry. Her artistic work is deeply intertwined with raising societal issues such as racism, feminism, and social justice issues in the suburbs. Sara's path towards working with social injustice issues through artistic expression stems from her family background:

I come from an extremely political home, but also an extremely artistic home. You could say that I lived with oppressed bohemians because they did not get an outlet for their creativity except at home. They were workers at the company, I mean industry . . . But they came home and they drew and they sang and they played guitar, and they danced. (Interview, Sara, 15 September 2016)

Sara comes from a working-class family background with a strong socialist tradition. She relates both her passion for social justice issues and love of art to her parents. By using the term 'oppressed bohemians', Sara gives political meaning to the fact that her parents, having to work hard to make ends meet, had to confine their artistic selves within their home. Here, the home can be understood as a *homeplace* where the family gets to uphold and cultivate memories of who they once were. Sara's homeplace (hooks,

1990) also became a site from where she developed resistance towards societal structures that kept her parents from being able to express their full subjectivities. Sara's political heritage and early awareness of the effects of socioeconomic factors pressing on her and her parents' lives have played a vital role in forming her choices. Sara initially pursued studies in political science, but the pull towards the arts became stronger when she discovered spoken word poetry and met two other poets:

And then I met these two poets, other poets, who also wanted the same thing, who also had the same vision and dream. And then we started up the scene. But it began as a love for the arts. And where I just felt, wow, there is a symbiosis of depicting the social or being a community storyteller and being an artist. But also doing something that is challenging and innovative, which is like a punch in the face of obsolete institutions and the outdated theatre and stage world in Sweden. (Interview, Sara, 15 September 2016)

Sara's identification with spoken word poetry, along with her meeting two other young poets with similar experiences and interests, led to the establishment of Revolution Poetry. Sara could deeply relate to the intertwining of art and social justice issues, two central elements within spoken word poetry. Revolution Poetry became an important platform, a kind of artistic homeplace for marginalized voices to make themselves heard, but it also became a way of manifesting resistance towards the elitist art scenes in Sweden by highlighting the lack of ethnic diversity in the major art institutions in addition to creating an alternative platform.

Another young woman who started her artistic career as a spoken word poet is Aisha. Aisha was born and raised in a suburb of Stockholm and has always loved writing. She has been a prominent spoken word artist in Sweden and participated in spoken word platforms and events. As a black girl who struggled with speech difficulties her entire childhood, she continuously struggled with low confidence and feelings of being an outsider. Writing became her safe space. However, it was at a political demonstration, when a friend asked Aisha to speak, that she shared her writing publicly for the first time. The appreciation of her writing and her performance led to further invitations and opportunities:

I: Were you an activist? Were you politically active?

Aisha: It is a bit hard because whatever I did, everything became political. I think when you are a Black woman and when you come from the area I am from, you cannot really choose if it is political or not but also, I got to speak for others that don't have a voice. (Interview, Aisha, 21 May 2020)

Aisha's experience is an example of how for marginalized minorities, such as Black women, everyday acts of resisting, such as refusing to be defined by others, can be viewed as activism (Collins, 1986). The line between being an artist and an activist in such conditions is not straightforward. For Aisha, whose poetry was always a personal way of coping and creating a safe space within a difficult environment, and perhaps compensating for her speech difficulties, it now became a tool to highlight social justice issues within her community and Swedish society at large. This is a position Aisha

herself takes up, pointing out how sharing her work publicly gave her the opportunity to represent and 'speak for others that don't have a voice', as she formulates it.

While the examples above show that the choices made relate to family background, political tradition, and friends, the women's own early experiences of racial othering are also important factors that lead them to position themselves and engage in the struggle against cultural stereotypes. Sahar refers to herself as a self-taught multi-artist, as she engages in several different artforms. She was one of the women who participated in the community theatre project *Swedish hijabis*. Sahar says that her own experience of not feeling represented in culture was an important factor that spurred her engagement in community-based art projects:

One thing I went through as a teenager was, I read a lot of fashion magazines, I was interested in fashion. I loved films, series, magazines, but I never saw people that looked like me. And when I did they were portrayed as terrorists, the bad guys, and poor. They had poor language skills. In films, it was always like poor hijabi sitting there with her baby and its war. I remember that I always thought that I will do my own thing. (Interview, Sahar, 26 April 2018)

The stereotypes Sahar mentions can be seen as a kind of *controlling images* (Collins, 2000). Having the function of positioning Muslim women as the *Others* of Swedish society, women like Sahar are affected by these images and relate to them in some way. For Sahar, these images have impacted her and spurred her to counter them, both on a day-to-day basis and in bigger life choices. The strong statement 'I will do my own thing' manifests her decision, as a teenage Muslim girl, to pave her own way. Doing your own thing can be understood as an expression denoting that one chooses to take one's own path, or handle something independently of what other people think. In this case, it involves choosing not to conform to dominant stereotypes. By discovering, through an online advertisement, and deciding to apply to the community project *Swedish hijabis*, Sahar entered a collective artistic setting where other women like her would engage in a collective process of self-defining (Collins, 1986). She tells us how the women would spend several hours sharing their experiences, both life stories and experiences of Islamophobia, together with the director, to collectively develop the play. The countering of Islamophobic stereotypes then took place on stage in front of an audience, where they shared their stories:

The thing with the play, the purpose was to do something that had not been done before by a hijabi. But also, that I want other hijabis to not feel what I felt. They should not feel this loneliness that I felt. To not see themselves. Well, they should be able to see themselves in theater, in movies, in newspapers. I want other hijabis to not see themselves as alone or to be unable to do this. That's what I wanted. [. . .] And when you get a message from other girls who say, 'God, this was the best thing I've seen in my life', as a hijabi you think we have done something right. That we can create this feeling in a human being. It's so powerful. I remember so clearly, it was a girl who wrote, 'I have always dreamed of becoming a director, but I thought that's not a place for me because I wear a veil but after seeing the play I feel that nothing is impossible'. (Interview, Sahar, 26 April 2018)

The power of representation is effectively highlighted in this quote, showing us the ways in which minority artists and their public can engage in processes of mutual confidence

building. Like Aisha, Sahar positions herself as someone who inspires other young women like her by entering art spaces where few young women wearing hijab had been before. Through her work of *self-valuation*, challenging the stereotypes that limit what Muslim women can do, she also influences the possibilities of *self-definition* of women with similar backgrounds, a process that can be seen as central in processes of collective empowering (Collins, 1986).

However, the work of entering and making a mark that challenges stereotypical discourses within majority society is not always easy. Whereas identification with those with similar experiences and backgrounds can provide a confidence boost and impetus to engage in creative work, dis-identification and feelings of being an outsider may lead to abandoning dreams of becoming an artist. Amanda, one of the founders of the arts collective Brown Island, recalls the alienation she felt when she took her first step within the art world:

I applied to art school, and was completely set on becoming an artist. And then I got there and was met by a world I did not recognize. We got to look at things that I did not recognize. I felt like, these galleries, my parents will not go to them. I have never been in these rooms. You know, it just felt like this . . . I could not put it into words then, but it felt so damn far away from my reality. I wanted to make art, I thought even then, for my own, or for people, for everyone. I was also exposed to quite a lot of racism in that school, and I felt I was the only one who was from the suburbs at the school, and I just got this disgust for all this art and became like, ah, I cannot stand this, so I just left. (Interview, Amanda, 22 September 2016)

Amanda's experiences of alienation from the art world she encounters at the art school can be understood as the effect of her entering an institution where she feels like the *Other*, meaning an institution in which her experiences, her perspectives on life and art are not part of the dominating norms, 'It felt damn far from my reality' (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Amanda testifies about how the impossibility of being able to recognize herself in the art norms she met at school had both a racialized place character – 'I was the only one who was from the suburbs at school' – and a racist character, as she also had to endure expressions of racism while there. What Amanda expresses is more precisely an experience of othering that positioned her as an outsider within (Collins, 1986). The experience of not belonging in the art world that she thought was hers alienates her from what has been her passion since she was little. This feeling of alienation can be seen as an effect of the border-guarding processes that maintain the status quo within institutions; in this case, the processes of *othering* that led to art being largely characterized by a normative White, middle-class view of society (León Rosales, 2021).

What we have shown is how our interlocutors' experiences of different forms of inequality shape the ways in which they work with art. Coming from a minority background with experiences of racialization and being raised in suburban neighbourhoods are important factors for how our interlocutors use their creative work to highlight societal inequalities. Finding other people with similar experiences is also important. Their personal trajectories run parallel with their engagement in community projects and platforms to work towards change. The transformation is personal, but it also seems to lead to collective confidence building. In the next section, we show what meanings collective platforms have for interlocutors.

Alliances of fragile communities

The work that the women engage in, as artists striving for social change, has to be seen as part of a social context. Friends, local communities, and meeting people with similar backgrounds and experiences in organizations such as Revolution Poetry and *Swedish hijabis*, all play a central role in their struggle against racial structures within society, in addition to providing them concrete spaces to engage in creative work:

One thing that I have thought about a lot more in retrospect is how much it means, just sharing a post by a sister, just how much that thing does. What it can mean. Every comment we received, every person who came up to us. So, you became genuinely happy. And when you experienced it that way I also understood, it became even clearer how important it is that we support each other. So now, what I took with me was to support others. And not just hijabis, but various minorities in society. It is very important to highlight different kinds of problems that different minorities experience. (Interview, Sahar, 26 April 2018)

For Sahar, her work with *Swedish hijabis*, which was a collective work between cultural workers of different backgrounds, led her to appreciate the importance of understanding experiences of other minority groups and supporting their struggles. What often brings the women together in these projects is the experience of having grown up in the suburbs and belonging to a post-migrant generation, as well as experiences of racial othering.

Collective projects such as *Swedish hijabis* and Revolution Poetry can be viewed as forums where women (and in some cases men) with experiences of marginalization come together and make use of creative expressions like poetry and theatre to engage in both self-defining through countering controlling images and in shaping their self-valuation (Collins, 1986). Initiatives like StreetGäris and *Swedish hijabis* can also be understood as collective platforms for groups with experiences of marginalization and being positioned as the *Others* in society engage in various self-care practices, since they mainly gather young marginalized women (Ahmed, 2014). Earlier research has shown how social media has become an important tool for marginalized groups to make their voices heard and engage in processes of collective recognition and empowering (Brown et al., 2017). This is the case for many of the organizations and platforms our interlocutors are engaged in, with Facebook pages as well as personal social media pages used to share one's work and communicate with others. In the quote above, Sahar highlights how simple and mundane acts of liking, commenting, and sharing each other's posts on social media are meaningful ways to show support. This, along with the feedback that Sahar received from other young women who saw her perform on stage, can be seen as forms of collective self-care where women recognize and articulate their own and each other's struggles and gain confidence and assurance that they are seen and heard. For these women, the support that is gained through likes and comments on social media can be understood as a self-preservation practice, remembering and reminding each other that what they do matters (Ahmed, 2014).

Another person who reflects over the meaning of collective support is Zinat, an artist born and raised in a suburb of Stockholm. As one of the key members of StreetGäris, Zinat reflects on what she has learned from her work with the organization:

I learn every day. And what I've taken away from it most is a kind of humility. Not to get too stuck in your struggle, or get tunnel vision. [. . .] Also, having grown up in an area with so many cultures, with diversity, with different stories, to be humble towards the different perspectives there are in life. And just because I think, 'this is right' does not mean it's right for others, for everyone. (Interview, Zinat, 30 September 2016)

Networks like StreetGäris and projects such as Swedish hijabis can be seen as platforms where fragile groups come together, and through their work discover the need to support various struggles. For example, *Swedish hijabis* was a project that, although revolving around Islamophobia and five Muslim women, also involved people belonging to other minority communities. By engaging in dialogues across communities that have similar struggles, by learning about struggles other than one's own, Zinat highlights how her work with StreetGäris has taught her to understand other marginalized communities, opening up the possibility to support ethnic and religious groups that may have different struggles, but share similar experiences of marginalization within the majority society. This can be understood as an effect of what Keskinen (2022) calls post-ethnic activism. Our interlocutors, who were born or raised, in Sweden engage in activism that sets out to transform stereotypes of 'the immigrant', moving beyond reductions of ethnicity and instead focusing on experiences of being *othered*. Working within areas that are diverse, like suburban neighbourhoods, creates possibilities for understanding difference, yet also shares experiences of growing up racialized.

Representation – A double-edged process

As we can see in the earlier section, taking up the position of representing marginalized groups can provide women with a sense of meaningfulness and recognition, changing the narrative about who they are and inspiring confidence in what they can do. Our interlocutors also bring forth how engaging in collective platforms and projects opens up avenues for understanding other groups and struggles. The women find pride in their struggle to open doors for others. The struggle of self-definition and the countering of 'controlling images' of who they should or should not be takes place through collective creative platforms. This work is often a collective process, in which support from others is vital. Art is an important element for the interlocutors to also engage in fully exploring who they are, on their own terms. However, to be a representative struggling to counter racial othering is not always easy.

As an 18-year-old girl, Nora participated in and won a national spoken word competition in Sweden. She has since performed and shared her poetry on several prestigious cultural platforms in Sweden. Although the networks and organizations the women are involved in can be springboards that provide them with confidence and spaces to share their creative work and stories, the work of representation sometimes becomes demanding and the effects of *controlling images* palpable (Collins, 2000: 69). Here, Nora reflects on the difficulties she sometimes experiences when having to live up to others' ideas of who she is. This feeling especially occurs when entering prestigious cultural arenas or performing in front of a predominantly White audience:

I'm not a teacher and I'm not going to sit there and explain to you that what you said is wrong. If you want to find out something, you have Google. You can't say, 'oh I didn't know'. There is no room for not knowing anymore. If you want to know something you go and find out and then you know. I'm tired of having to defend so many people at once. Defending the black community, the Muslim community, women. So, I'm always at war, and I'm tired of it (tired laugh). (Interview, Nora, 26 April 2020)

The feeling of exhaustion reflects the cost associated with constantly feeling compelled to defend the groups she identifies with. She constantly feels that she has to counter other people's prejudices, which is metaphorically likened here to the emotional cost of constantly 'being at war', a struggle she never chose to be a part of in the first place. What Nora expresses here is a wish for self-preservation. However, this self-preservation at times is not easy to attain, as she constantly feels the need to explain and answer other people's questions about her community:

Because people assume that I represent Muslim women, when in fact I only represent myself. All Muslim women do not think the same, all Muslim women do not want the same things. (Interview, Nora, 26 April 2020)

Nora emphasizes that she can only represent herself, and not all Muslim women. All of the interlocutors in this article are in some way engaged in the work of representation. This can be a chosen position, with the ambition to 'give a voice to the voiceless', as well as a position imposed by mainstream society. This creates a tension within the artists where the will to represent their community is no longer experienced as freely chosen but rather expected, always from mainstream society but sometimes even from fellow activists. Entering into the mainstream societal institutions means having to relate to the process of othering and position oneself in relation to controlling images. Whereas the women in this study use their art and creatively engage in a game of positioning against societal narratives and stereotypes, the work of representation in and of itself, including becoming 'a voice for the voiceless', at times becomes limiting. The interlocutors also run the risk of taking up positions that homogenizes an entire group. Sahar highlighted similar thoughts when she shared her wish to be appreciated for her work:

I should be able to exist. If I just want to talk cake art, I should be allowed to do that. I should not need to be the hijabi who bakes. I should be a cake artist, not a hijabi cake artist. (Interview, Sahar, 26 April 2018)

The similarities in Nora's and Sahar's experiences pinpoint the difficulty that several of the women in this article have highlighted. The moment one takes the step towards mainstream cultural platforms, one must relate to the positions that are available within mainstream society. In this case, Sahar's wish to just be viewed as a cake artist rather than a *hijabi* cake artist – 'I should be able to exist' – can be understood as a wish to be seen as a full human being, while pinpointing the limitations of a coercive focus on how one is perceived within the dominant cultural context in a certain time (Parmar, 1990).

Aida, a filmmaker and activist who has worked in several antiracist community art projects in the suburbs, describes the limitation as follows:

It's like you trying to become friends with someone who is not really interested in being your friend. And you do everything in order to impress them. Instead of working on your own character, with your own interests, develop yourself. You know, what do you like, explore the world. (Interview, Aida, 13 June 2018)

Here, Aida testifies to the asymmetrical relationship that can arise when a person belonging to a racialized minority is allowed into the art world of the majority, as the admission itself is often conditioned by the performance of stereotypical and restrictive positions and expectations. This process, in which Aida feels that she is no longer working on her own terms but instead doing what others expect of her, can be understood, in the words of Collins (2000), as a process in which

[o]ppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (p. 205)

The interlocutors bring forth the importance of collective support as well as taking upon themselves the responsibility to counter hegemonic ethnic and religious stereotypes. As we have seen, online platforms, cultural projects, and organizations play an important role in providing the support and confidence that these women need in order to articulate issues and questions that are important to them. In a way, these cultural platforms, which are mostly formed by communities from the suburbs and online platforms, can be viewed as a homeplace where young women and men can manifest their subjectivities and take care of each other (hooks, 1990). However, once the threshold towards the majority society has been passed, the experience of being positioned as *the outsider within* becomes palpable, making the work of art and representation at times feel more limiting than empowering.

The struggle against racial structures occur both on a symbolic as well as socioeconomic level (Collins, 2000). For our interlocutors, structural limitations arise in the form of funding issues and project-based employment. The precariousness that characterizes the women's working conditions also affects their health in the long run:

You know something, when working with these kinds of questions, you get tired. You get really tired. It wears you out. I know of no one who hasn't been . . . who works with these issues, who hasn't felt depressed in periods. I think we're a bit . . . That you sometimes, somehow, romanticize what you do. That you romanticize the struggle itself, you romanticize the fight for improvement, but we're people behind that, real people, with traumas, with experiences, with baggage . . . What is needed are methods where we don't burn out, where we don't crash. Where there are many of us involved in things, to create a change. (Interview, Sara, 15 September 2016)

By also highlighting the fact that many people need to be involved for change to happen without people burning out, Sara echoes Ahmed's (2014) idea of self-care being a strategy that counters the notion of individuals having to bear the burden of structural issues. What the quote from Sara shows is how the balance between wanting to create change

and always being on the verge of taking too much upon oneself is something these women continuously need to reflect on.

Finding ways to move beyond 'fighting against'

The reflections presented in the previous section highlight the thoughts and wishes that the interlocutors have for their own futures, as well as the future of the struggle against racism in society. While reflecting on what kind of art she would like to engage in, Sara compares herself with 'white male artists' who, according to her, are freer to create on their own terms. Sara believes that this liberty is not accessible to her, as a racialized woman:

Because we are moving in such an alarming society and we are exposed to things all the time as non-white women. I have done much more [activism] than I do today, much more than before, but I also feel that there is so much more that I want to talk about. And I do not want everything to be a counter-reaction to oppression. I do not want everything I do to be a counter-reaction to being discriminated against. (Interview, Sara, 15 September 2016)

The quote highlights her wish to use her art to freely explore and express different aspects of her life, a process of self-valuation that for her is more accessible to the position of White men in society. Sara's reflections align with earlier quotes expressing the longing to be free as artists and, in the end, as human beings. It manifests what appears to be a central dilemma that she shares with many of the other interlocutors: the balance between engaging in self-valuation as an artist and countering – in a reactive manner – oppressive structures and narratives.

Having experienced burnout after years of being an activist engaged in social justice issues in the suburbs, Amanda decided to go back to art school:

I hit the wall, as many others who are activists also do, because you give your life for this. And then I got a wakeup call – shit, what do I . . . What do I really want to do? Because activism became a reaction to something and I started thinking, okay, but what do I want to do myself? What happened to my dreams? And then I felt like, but damn, I want to do art, that's what I wanted to do, but then all of this came, everything else got in the way, and then I thought, damn, I'm applying to art college. And now it has been a while, quite a few years, now the same thing that happened in the art school will not happen. But even if it happens in this school, now I have the tools to deal with it. So, I applied and for me art is a tool, a method and a way to . . . to bring the same questions, but also a room where I can be . . . Where I can try to free myself and try to be who I wanted to be. (Interview, Amanda, 22 September 2016)

In similar vein, Amanda testifies to the exhaustion that activism can lead to, and the existential reflections that it gives rise to. But Amanda also maintains that all her years working as an activist in the suburbs, 'fighting' for her community's rights, has equipped her with tools that will help her deal with institutionalized racism. This points to the important role that support within fragile communities plays in providing women like Amanda with confidence and knowledge to 'get back in', in this case reapplying to art school. The will to continue pushing boundaries and struggling for social justice

continues to be important for our interlocutors. Both Sara and Amanda, once enrolled in art school, became active in Brown Island, an art collective that highlights structural discrimination within art institutions in Sweden. The process of self-definition and self-valuation, along with the scarcity of economic and health-related resources, lead the women to navigate who they want to be and in what ways they can and whether they want to continue the struggle.

For Aida, her experiences from years of working on projects in the suburbs, the constant hunt for funding and project-searching, and time off due to exhaustion led her to reflect on what kind of work she wants to engage in. Just like Sara and Amanda, she also decided to attend art school to focus on her work as an artist. Here, she reflects on the change of approach she is developing as an antiracist artist:

I then felt inspired and called to – I did not feel obligated to – make a film about a refugee. So, it turned out that one of my projects was about a refugee. So, you might think that you have really gone back to working with yourself, but it came from a place where I did not feel I had to explain and defend. But I felt that I wanted to create something that I feel is important. (Interview, Aida, 13 June 2018)

For Aida, this realization, and the articulation of it, has created a shift in how she approaches her work that still deals with issues of social justice, such as the experience of being a refugee – but without feeling the need to defend herself against societal stereotypes.

Conclusion

The interlocutors in this study are deeply engaged in their work against social inequality and fighting racist structures within Swedish society. They use their artistic talents to both raise their voices and counter the inequality that they themselves and their communities experience. The collective platforms that they create and participate in play an important role in their self-defining process. By coming together, using their creativity, and playing with societal stereotypes of themselves as Brown, Black, Muslim women from the suburbs, they seek to debunk society's controlling images (Collins, 2000). The collective platforms are also vital in terms of providing them with support from which they gain confidence. These tools of support, which also include social media, go beyond one's own ethnic or religious community and can be understood as articulations of collective self-care practices (Ahmed, 2014) that these women need to engage in the struggle against narratives that position them as society's others. The community projects and online platforms can thereby be understood as 'homeplaces', or sites from where resistance occurs (hooks, 1990). A part of the artistic processes the interlocutors have engaged in appears to be a perpetual reflection on who they want to be in relation to their societal perception, shaped through othering. This work takes place both within the collective platforms they engage in and through periods of self-reflection.

Hence, the struggles that the interlocutors describe have a dimension of engaging in collective change, as well as being a deeply personal transformational path of claiming the right to be themselves and lead a life on their own terms. The interlocutors position themselves as representatives of their communities and groups as a means of both

engaging in the process of self-defining as well as inspiring and opening doors for others. However, upon entering the arenas of mainstream society, they find themselves positioned as what Collins (1986) referred to as 'outsiders within'. They often find themselves in an uncomfortable and limiting game of positioning, with the risk of becoming stuck in a discursive positionality created by others (Parmar, 1990). Thus, a feeling of limitation echoed in Nachla Libre's words that opened this text – *We just want to make art* – can be read as claiming the space to engage in self-valuation.

Although difficult, we also understand the position of the *outsider within* as a potentially transformative space (Collins, 1986). We argue that it is not a coincidence that a new generation of women with experiences of othering are making use of art to highlight and counter the structures of societal exclusion and to define their own voices. For them, engaging in art is a deeply transformative process through which they are given the means to articulate self-defined subjectivities. By coming together beyond one's own ethnic and religious community, in projects and platforms like StreetGäris, *Swedish hijabis*, Revolution Poetry and Brown Island, our interlocutors also inspire youth from the suburbs to engage in society through creativity. Furthermore, these initiatives create spaces where issues that are important for marginalized communities are placed at the centre of attention, sometimes forcing mainstream society to listen, consider, and engage with them, as the attention that mainstream media has given to the platforms our interlocutors have engaged in testify to. In a way, the testimonies of our interlocutors are part of a change and expansion of narratives by which Sweden is constantly creating itself. These women are demanding and reclaiming their power to explore and express themselves, as they would like to, in their fullness as human beings.

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Notes

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2. Grant number 2019-03337.
3. Spoken word is a poetry genre with strong historical ties to social activism, popular among working-class Black writers and performers, as well as youth within diaspora communities in the West (Krishnamurti, 2014).
4. Hijabi refers to Muslim women who wear the headscarf.
5. The names are pseudonyms.

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