

Black Box teater
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Dear reader

In the last year, we have been prevented from doing many things in our familiar way. We have adapted to new rules in short notice; stopped when we have been told to stop, and went on again when we have been allowed to. Despite the fact that we have to keep our distance from each other and meet less frequently, we can still challenge current structures and foster norm critical thinking.

Norms, narratives and structures can become so locked that they are considered as truths. But landing in something that is “true” is an exercise for the less-curious. Accepting these “truths” without questioning them also prevents us from gaining greater understanding that allows us to see people, situations and structures in a new light.

In this book, we have invited eight contributors to give us insight, in their own ways, into their artistic practice, personal stories and current public debates. Each of the contributors help to enlighten us and pique our curiosity so that we hopefully can think in new directions. We have wanted to examine concepts that on one side are demonized, and on another side are deeply necessary in a process of self-identification, namely *identity politics*.

We have invited artists to share from their research processes, an artist and an anthropologist to talk about identity politics, a researcher to share her knowledge on artistic practices and working methods and a dramaturg to write about what happens when art is read (too) literally. Another artist has explored different forms of expression through a visual text.

We wish you a great trip through this rich composition of thoughts and ideas and languages, from hybrid text to conversations, essays, illustrations, photos and collectively written contributions.

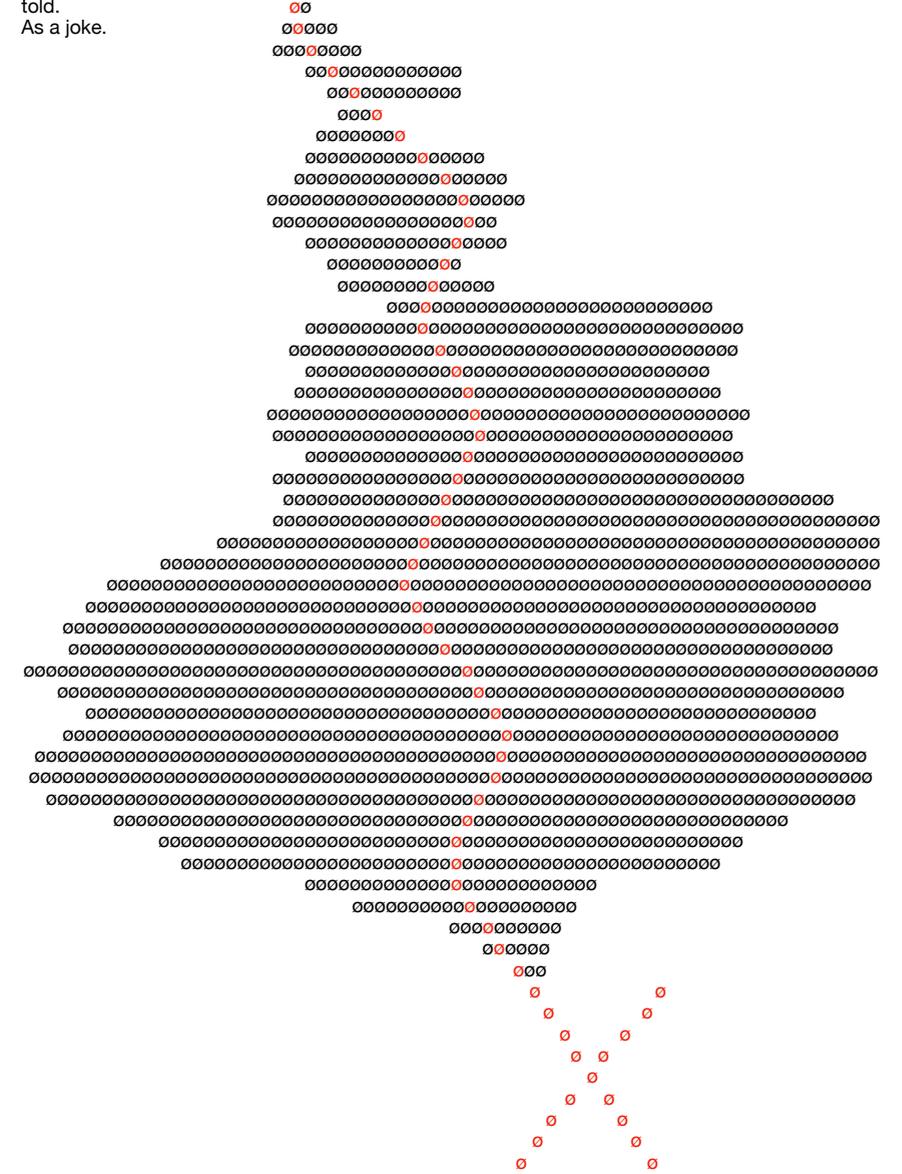
Stuck in the sound of the word is a hybrid text by Maritea Dæhlin, revolving around the words said and unsaid, hidden and exposed, and about the availability of meaning. This visual text is written in both English, Norwegian and Spanish.

Maritea Dæhlin is an artist who alternates between living and working in Norway and Mexico. She is interested in human behaviours, emotions, rituals and encounters. Her work spans between devised theater, video performance, performance art and text. Her art comes off as playful, non-linear, and sometimes absurd. Maritea's studies include a BA in Devised Theatre with Digital Arts at Dartington College of Arts in England and a two year acting course at Nordic Black Express in Oslo. Her work has been shown at venues such as Black Box teater in Oslo, Kunstbanken – Hedmark Kunstsenter in Hamar, Center for Performance Research in New York, Centro Cultural España in Mexico City, RAS – Regional Arena for Samtidsdans in Sandnes, No Nation Gallery in Chicago, Central School of Speech and Drama in London, Defibrillator Gallery in Chicago, and San Agustin Arts Centre in Oaxaca. Maritea is currently an associated artist of Black Box teater, and she is presenting *I guess you have a lot of questions. A bedtime story* at Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2021.

Stuck in the sound of the word

Maritea Dæhlin

Let's say there was a fictional ██████ that hadn't thought of being categorised into a ██████ with the only criteria being that ██████ didn't lack so much melanin. Let's say it made ██████ wish ██████ could be the colour of the ██████ to disappear in it. Not to be the colour of ██████, as ██████ had been told.
As a joke.



Jeg vil ikke skrive om dette

let me talk about something else,

I am very interested in for example: death, repetition, fear of death, something positive, death,

repetition on an abstract level can be positive, repetition as a way to obsessively try to stay in the present, with repetition death is impossible, as we always come back to the present, again and again, ephemeral art is the ultimate acceptance of death, an act of letting go, I like repetition, I want repetition, the most painful thing about death is the impossibility of repetition, I just want to see her one more time, but if it happened it wouldn't be enough, because then I would just want to see her one more time, but if it happened it wouldn't be enough as then I would just want to see her one more time, after seeing the performance last night, she asked me if my mother was blond, I was so happy and surprised, I said yes, she saw me, I miss her so much, what would she tell me, I just want to see her one more time, but death knows it's no point, because if I saw her one more time it wouldn't be enough, I would then just want to see her one more time, and death knows it's no point, as it wouldn't be enough, as death knows I would then just want to see her one more time, so death is trying to protect me, being strict, making a no be a no, that's how you should be, say no and mean it, but I often change my mind, I say no, but then it's a yes, I don't think I need to win every battle, I don't think everything has to be a battle, so I often change my mind, and let the kids have the yes that was a no, but death is firm,

death is really stable,

I admire that,

death is trying to protect me,

not giving me a no that then becomes a yes, fooling me into believing I can ask again and receive a no that is a yes, as if death said no once and then that no was a yes, I would always have hope, but

death is firm, death is strict, death is not interested in repetition,

death is really sure of herself, when she says no, it's no, forever, no, for eternity and that is so slimy and heavy inside my chest, always the chest, for him its the throat, for her it was the eggstokker

I need to break out from this.

I will now give space to other peoples thoughts:

I'm scared ocean right o a in be o on an in be o on an in be o ocean spice Ive been walking on a world
online can't stop thinking of you monk like you left me lonely with my ocean likes you really know that you
make me cry I'm scared I never ocean like on an nbo on an nbo o o o ocean like on an in bi o on an in be o
ocean by taradara taradara those ocean eyes you really know what would make me cry when you give me
those I'm scared on an nbo on an nbo on an nbo ocean on an nbo o o o on an nbo ocean right.

I'm not trying to go to bed with you

fall in love with you

a few songs

mystery

women

from my head I could make you know I love you all if killar mode killar bro like the way you ring my bell

will you even notice

love

landing

oooo sha sha oooo sha sha oooo sha sha oooo sha sha

og nå kommer jeg på at jeg har skrevet noe selv:

Melanin

Some don't have a lot of it

It's not like melatonin

That you can take in a pill

A pill with melatonin to get what you lack

To adjust

To adjust to an hormonal unbalance

To adjust to an unbalance

To adjust to time difference

To adjust to a difference

To adjust to a lack of ability to see that what you lack is the ability to really see

How good wouldn't it be

To have a pill with melanin

Jazz Dance and Speculative Fiction: Research for Fictions of the Flesh is a peek into the research process of the performance *Fictions of the Flesh*. This performance by Ingri Fiksdal, Mariama Fatou Kalley Slåttøy and Fredrik Floen will premiere during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2021 in collaboration with Dansens Hus. The text is written by Fiksdal and Slåttøy, and discusses jazz dance and the history of this dance form. How is jazz dance treated in contemporary dance? And how can we see jazz dance, contemporaneity and temporality in a decolonising perspective? The illustrations are made by Fredrik Floen, and are also a part of the research process. This glanze into the research process is written several months before the premiere, and gives insight in the work in progress.

Ingri Midgard Fiksdal is a choreographer based in Oslo, Norway. In 2019, she finished a PhD in artistic research at Oslo National Academy of the Arts titled *Affective Choreographies*. This research took shape as six performances and three books. Ingri's work on affect has in recent years taken her into discourses on perspective and privilege. She is currently working on a number of projects addressing the intersection between the post-anthropocentric and the decolonial from a feminist perspective in the context of CoFutures at the University of Oslo where she is an Affiliated Artistic Researcher. Ingri's work has in recent years been performed at Kunstenfestival in Brussels, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Santarcangelo festival, Beijing Contemporary Dance Festival, Sommerszene in Salzburg, Reykjavik Art Museum, brut-Wien, Teatro di Roma, Harbourfront Centre Toronto, Contemporary Art Center Cincinnati, BUDA Kortrijk, Tanzhaus NRW in Dusseldorf and Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz, alongside extensive touring in Norway.

Mariama Fatou Kalley Slåttøy is a freelance dance artist based in Oslo, Norway. She graduated from Oslo National Academy of the Arts/Faculty of Dance in 2014. Mariama works with movement within a wide range of expressions from dance performances of different natures to physical and interdisciplinary theatre and various film projects. She has worked with choreographers, directors and dance artists such as Jo Strømgren, Ingri Fiksdal and Fredrik Floen, Eline Arbo, Ole Martin Meland, Niels Windfeldt, Un-Magritt Nordseth and Jon Tombre. In the recent years Mariama has done a series of productions at Hålogaland Teater in Tromsø, and performed at venues such as The Norwegian National Opera House, Arctic Arts Festival, Det Norske Teatret, Showbox Festival/Black Box teater, Dansens Hus, and toured with Hålogaland Teater and Oslo Danse Ensemble/Riksteatret.

Fredrik Floen is a visual artist, costume and stage designer based in Oslo, Norway. He presents his work in a range of different theatrical meetings. Fredrik graduated from Oslo National Academy of the Arts in spring 2017 with an MA in Fashion and Costume Design. He has a former education in Fashion and production design and in theater studies, and a past as assistant in the company Vinge/Müller in Volksbühne, Berlin. As an independent artist, his work is centered on costume practice with a theatrical aesthetic in different collaborations and contexts. Fredrik has in the recent years worked with Burgtheater, Runa Borch Skolseg, Nationaltheater Mannheim, Hotel Pro Forma, Lisa Liem, Otta Kulturhus, Palais de Tokyo, School of The Arts Institute Chicago, Munchmuseet, Black Box teater, Ibsenfestivalen, Teaterfestivalen i Fjaler, The Norwegian Opera, Scene: Bluss, Fruholmen Fyr, The Norwegian Opra (Trond Reinholdsen), Turteatern, Marie Nikazm Bakken & Ingri Fiksdal. His work has been exhibited at the Sullivan Galleries in Chicago and in Palais de Tokyo in the context of the Do Disturb Festival, and he is currently Associated Artist at the Munch Museum in Oslo.

Jazz Dance and Speculative Fiction: Research for *Fictions of the Flesh*

Text by Ingri Fiksdal and
Mariama Fatou Kalley Slåttøy

Illustrations by Fredrik Floen

Fictions of the Flesh is a performance for public space created by choreographer Ingri Fiksdal, costume designer Fredrik Floen and performer and choreographer Mariama Fatou Kalley Slåttøy. The performance will premiere at the Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival in March 2021. *Fictions of the Flesh* delves into Mariama's bodymind archive as a trained jazz dancer, questions of contemporaneity in dance and choreography, as well as speculations on extended corporealities inspired by global future fictions.

This text is co-written by Ingri and Mariama and is meant as a brief outline of the starting point of our research as of December 2020. Mariama has been responsible for the chapters "The Archive" and "Jazz Dance as Contemporary Artform" and Ingri the chapters "Claims to Contemporaneity in Dance", "Relational Temporalities" and "Speculative Fiction". The illustrations are created by Fredrik Floen and inspired by the same thematic starting point.

The term bodymind is commonly attributed to American feminist disabilities studies scholar Margaret Price. It refers to the enmeshment of body and mind to such a degree that the physical and mental processes are difficult or even impossible to discern.¹ The use of the term is an attempt to resist the Cartesian mind-body dualism which has dominated much of Western philosophy, and which seems particularly counterproductive when discussing research in dance and choreography.

The Archive

The personal and artistic archive of Mariama will be the basis for developing *Fictions of the Flesh*. Starting from Mariama's background and dance education, we will together explore the genre of jazz dance. Jazz dance functions as an umbrella term for various dance styles and techniques, philosophies, discourses and subgenres. With its history, entanglement and eclectic form, jazz dance is in our experience a genre that is largely "changeable" in meeting with different perspectives, contexts and people, both historically and in the present. As the term jazz dance can hold multiple meanings and styles of expression depending on the different personal beliefs, references and definitions, it can be challenging to find a common ground to discuss both the nature of today's jazz dance, what contemporary jazz dance is in society today, and what it can be in future society.

The roots of jazz dance are African and particularly West African. A large number of African dance traditions and techniques were practised by the slaves forced to work in the plantations in the Americas during slavery. These dances gradually developed into African-American dances through a mixing of dances from different African tribes and countries, which were shaped further by restrictions imposed upon the slaves in regard to what dances they were allowed to practise. Some dances also incorporated movement from various parts of Europe observed on the plantation.² In the early 1900s, this diverse heritage generated the "jazz age" in the United States, where jazz dance, including both social and performed dances, developed alongside jazz music.

Today, some jazz dance practitioners emphasize the core principles derived from an African aesthetic with personal style, improvisation, connection to the music and dynamic play. Others highlight how the rhythms of jazz music (also largely deriving from West African music traditions) are inseparable from as well as the driving force behind jazz dance, with characteristics and movement performed through elements like syncopation, polyrhythms and polycentrism closely linked to the music. Further, the development of jazz dance continues in multiple directions, merging with elements from for example classical ballet and modern dance, as well as forming different independent dance genres. For example, in dance schools and dance education, it seems like the vocabulary from classical ballet is largely included and frequently used to teach, describe and characterize the style of expression. At the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, jazz dance is described like this: "Jazz dance is characterized by its specific physical style and close relationship to rhythmic music. It requires students to acquire a high level of dance technique."³ Depending on whom you ask, jazz dance today can include everything from vernacular jazz dance, tap and theatrical jazz dance, to hip hop, house and breakdance.⁴

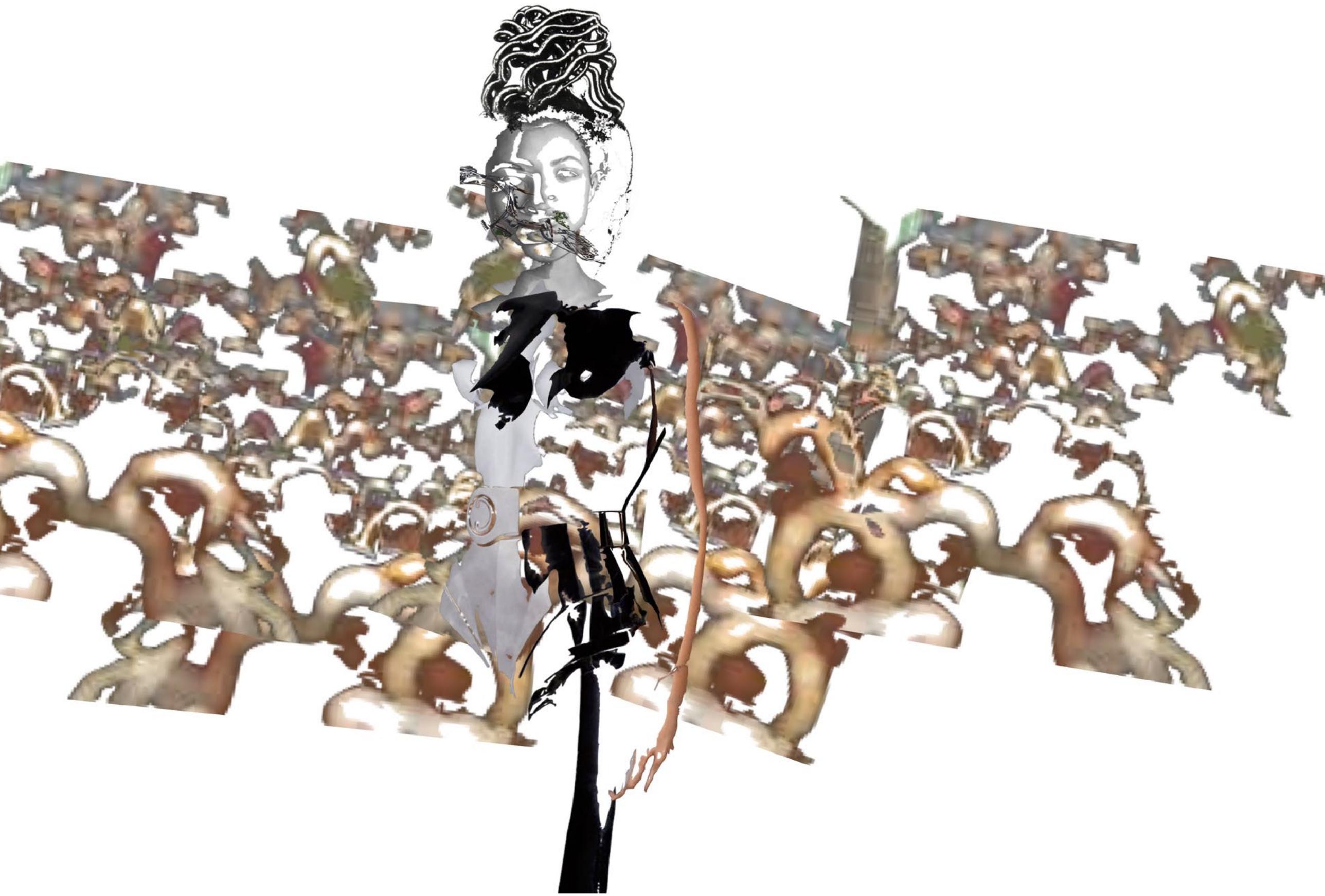
However, when one acknowledges the African roots, traditions and origins of jazz dance, and has an understanding of the history of development of the genre, there are some problematic issues of blending, appropriation and ownership that are inevitable. For instance, during the dance-crazy ragtime era in the United States, the content of jazz dance got "cleaned up" to become more dignified, less sensual and more acceptable for the whites.⁵ This cleaned-up version of jazz dance was in turn affecting and often adopted by the black dancers. When looking at how jazz dance is represented on TV and in competitions in recent times, the genre often manifests as sharp, rapid and rhythmic movement, and is frequently performed with sensual and/or sexual flavour.

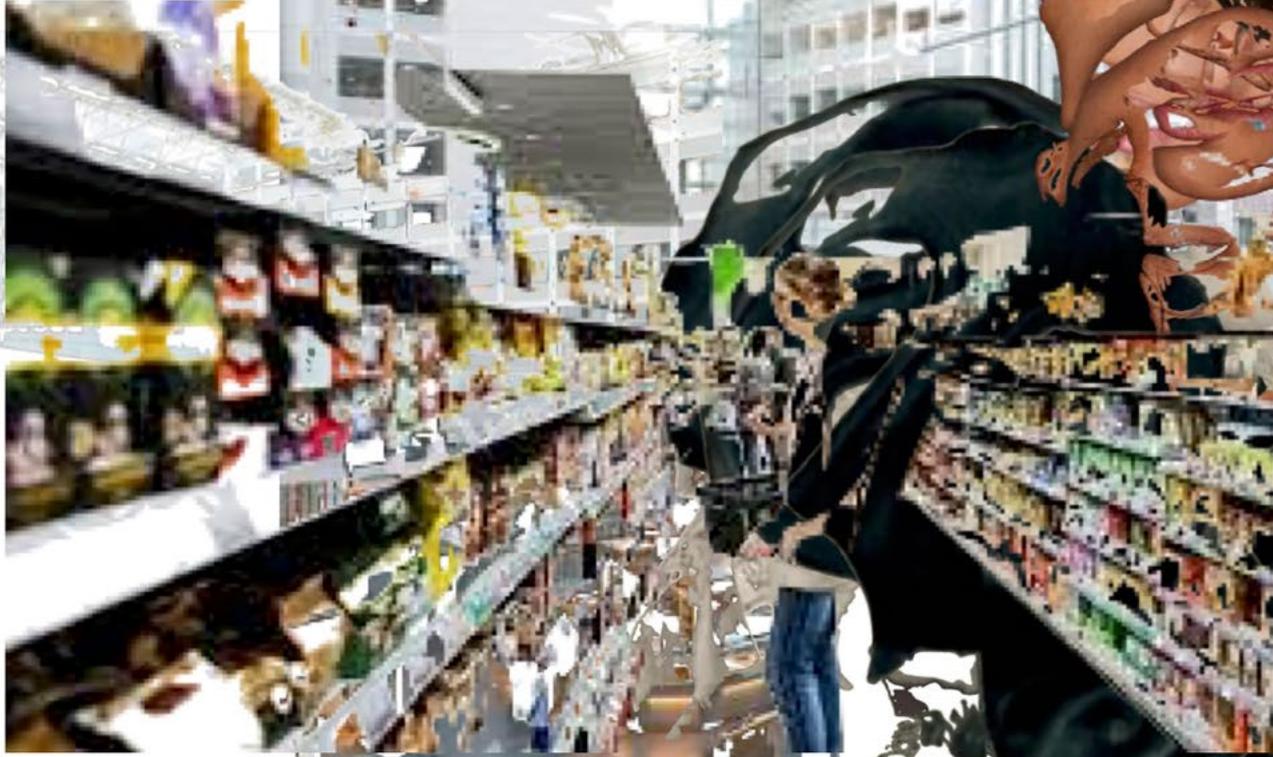
Patricia Cohen, an American jazz dance researcher and pedagogue who focuses on the fact that the roots of jazz music and dance lie deep in the traditions of West African cultures writes; "I have begun to ask my students, 'Where's the jazz?' rather than the elusive 'What is jazz?'"⁶ This could be an interesting question to bring into the future.

Jazz Dance as Contemporary Artform

In the book *Jazz Dance. A History of the Roots and Branches* American choreographer and dance scholar Carlos Jones writes about the ways racism has prevented jazz dance from taking its rightful place in the artistic arena. He writes that "to discuss jazz dance and not acknowledge the issue of race greatly diminishes the truths that exist in the art form".⁷ Jones links the history and aesthetics of jazz dance to the racial biases in the cultural history of the United States with racial prejudice, racism and classism. He claims that race and class have dictated the status of jazz dance.

In Norwegian dance context, jazz dance has often been given a backseat position compared to other dance genres and traditions. It is questioned whether jazz dance qualifies as so-called "contemporary art" or if it rather fits into categories of entertainment or commercial dance. Additionally, the fact that there are relatively few academic sources to be found on the subject in comparison to other styles, may also contribute to this experienced backseat position.⁸ But does it have to be an either-or question in regard to contemporary art and entertainment? And who decides what fits into the category of the contemporary?











Claims to Contemporaneity in Dance

Contemporary dance could in the broadest sense include all dance styles of today. However, in Norwegian as well as Western context, the term “contemporary dance” usually refers to dance styles deriving from a specific North-American and European dance history.⁹ A tendency is to think of this Western contemporary dance as a universal category that also defines the parameters for what is understood as “quality” in dance as a contemporary art form. In recent times, this idea has been challenged by the ongoing debate about decolonization of art, academia as well as society at large. A central thinker in this change of paradigm is the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe who says that decolonization needs to be a planetary project which requires a radical openness to the world.¹⁰ This openness includes a larger acceptance for each other’s manifold ways of living, doing, thinking, knowing, dancing and being, rather than just trying to form new hegemonies. As Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes: “(...) to enlarge contemporaneity means to amplify the field of reciprocity between the principle of equality and the principle of the recognition of difference.”¹¹

With *Fictions of the Flesh*, the three of us would like to look at what this approach to Mariama’s bodymind archive of jazz dance can produce. Referring back to Carlos Jones, a question implicit to this approach might be whether the origin of jazz dance has something to do with how it often has come to be neglected as “high art” in “contemporary” dance circuits.

Relational Temporalities

In the lecture *Decolonizing Time*¹², Mexican sociologist Rolando Vazques talks about how Modernity is inseparable from Coloniality. From the 15th century and onwards, Europe starts to think of itself and act as the centre of the world. On the one hand, this takes shape as a severe exploitation of humans and natural resources in the Global South, and on the other as an attempt to establish European epistemology and ideas on temporality as something universal. Chronological temporality serves the capitalist idea of progress and development into something increasingly better and newer. Within this approach to time, contemporaneity is an exclusive place within Western modernity, whereas the rest of the world still lives in “the past”. Vazques therefore proposes a decolonization of temporality itself. He says that we need to be aware of how modernity is a limited historical project, rather than something universal. This awareness implies to give space for what he calls relational temporalities and learn to separate these from a capitalist idea of progress.

In *Fictions of the Flesh*, we are curious about what a decolonization of temporality might mean for our understandings of dance and choreography, both generally and specifically for jazz dance as a contemporary art form. In our research, this attempt implies a study of Mariama’s jazz dance archive combined with research into fictions of the future. We are inspired by global speculative fictions (SF) from literature, art and film to help us think about extended corporealities as well as different ways of living, doing, thinking, knowing, dancing and being in the world.

Speculative Fiction

SF can refer to the genres *speculative fiction*, *speculative feminism*, *science fiction*, *science fact* and *science fantasy* to mention some. The common denominator of SF is a world imagined differently than today. Marie Jakober writes that “the great gift of speculative fiction (is that) it makes us think, and specifically, it makes us think differently. It makes us examine things we have never examined. Even better, it makes us re-imagine things we thought we knew”.¹³ Accordingly, it is central to think about who writes the future and from where, as well as what this writing contains. For us, “writing” also includes the making of dance and choreography as worldbuilding forms of future fiction.

In Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor’s trilogy *BINTI*¹⁴, the main character’s extended corporeality becomes a manifestation of radical openness. Here, the protagonist Binti, through a number of interspecies amalgamations, finds herself part Himba, Meduse (an octopus-like alien creature), Enyi Zinariya (desert-people with telepathic abilities) and New Fish (a living, breathing spaceship that transports beings between galaxies). This manifold composure visibly changes Binti’s appearance through blue tentacles sprouting from her head, but as importantly, through an immense extension of her sensory apparatus which grants her more-than human experiences and abilities that aid her as a Master Harmonizer (a peace-keeper of the universe).

Set in 2025, the renowned novel *Parable of the Sower* by American writer Octavia Butler, describes a society partly collapsed due to climate change and inequality. The main character Lauren Olamina suffers from hyperempathy. As Lauren explains: “I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel”.¹⁵ Although Lauren experiences this in an extreme, (dis)abling form, it relates deeply to the notion of kinaesthetic empathy often employed to talk about how dance and choreography *work* affectively on the bodymind of the spectator. This implies that people have an inherent ability to be affected by the movement of others through themselves being thinking, feeling beings.

In *Fictions of the Flesh*, we will work with how SF-characters such as the examples above can meet Mariama's jazz dance archive and inspire a fictional, more-than-human bodymind manifested as dance and choreography. At best, we hope that this research can lead to a performance that may stir up habitual categories and create encounters with audiences who can be transformative and create new contemporaneities, even if subtle. As American professor of feminist studies Alison Kafer writes, "The futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently".¹⁶

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Body as fjord: A Sámi decolonial aesthetics is a commissioned text by Nayla Naoufal about the work of Norwegian Sámi choreographer Katarina Skår Lisa, who presented the piece *Gift of Stone* at Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020. This year, in 2021, at the same festival, Katarina Skår Lisa is choreographing the performance *Arctic Summer* by textile artist and clothing designer Ramona Salo. Naoufal, who was in dialogue with Skår Lisa during the two-year creative process of *Gift of Stone*, is giving an introduction to the lifeways and struggles of the Sámi people as a way of understanding Skår Lisa's artistic practice.

Nayla Naoufal is a writer, journalist, cultural worker, translator, and researcher in arts and environmental humanities. Born in Beirut, she lives and works on unceded Indigenous lands, of which the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation are the custodians, in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyaang/Montréal. Her interests lie in the creation of situated practices of care, decolonial practices and alternative modes of co-inhabiting the world. Naoufal collaborates especially with Indigenous artists in Canada, Norway, and the world, and artists and collectives working with environmental concepts-practices. She has written texts for publications and newspapers such as *esse revue d'art contemporain*, *Mouvement*, *Le Devoir*, *Revue de théâtre Jeu* and *Gazette des femmes*.

Body as fjord: A Sámi decolonial aesthetics

Nayla Naoufal

Norwegian Sámi choreographer Katarina Skår Lisa's work is informed by her interest in Indigenous resurgence. Her recent pieces are more specifically imbued with the ocean-based worldview and practices of the community to which her paternal grand-parents belonged: The Sea Sámi who live today mostly along the coast and fjords in Troms and Finnmark in Norway. Presented during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival (OITF) in 2020, *Gift of Stone* relates Skår Lisa's encounter with the coastal landscape of the Varranger-Várjjat fjord. The choreographer's particularity lies in her approach based on listening to landscapes and allowing them to shape and co-author the work.

Gift of Stone initiated Skår Lisa's ongoing collaboration with Sea Sámi clothing and textile artist Ramona Salo Myrseth: Seeking their ancestors' stories, their projects are processual and collaborative, involving shared processes with other artists. At OITF 2021, the two artists will present *Arctic Summer*, a proposition unfolding at crossroads of fashion shows and ambulatory installations. While *Gift of Stone* highlights the choreographer's viewpoint, *Arctic Summer* takes the perspective of clothing designer Ramona Salo Myrseth, which investigates the poetic and performative dimension of textiles and garments composing her collection, and summoning Sámi landscapes.¹

Remaining in flux, Skår Lisa and Salo Myrseth's projects tap into a decolonial aesthetics of presence, and contribute to disrupting narratives of capitalist modernity by reclaiming landscapes in times of environmental colonialism and degradation.²

The Sámi people

The Sea Sámi are part of the Sámi, an Indigenous people who live in an area called Sápmi (“the land of the Sámi”) stretching across central Norway and Sweden, Northern Finland and the Kola peninsula in Russia.³ The earliest traces of their presence on the coastline of the Arctic Ocean were dated back to 6000 BC.⁴ The Sámi people are recognized and consider themselves as one people. Originally, the Sámi were mostly hunters and gatherers. In the 1500s they also adopted reindeer herding.

There are between 60 000 and 100 000 Sámi, depending on the counting method.⁵ The largest Sámi population lives in Norway, and half of it in Finnmark. There are 11 Sámi languages, which are part of the Finno-Ugrian language family. The most spoken of them is North Sámi.⁶ People speaking different Sámi languages generally do not understand each other.

The Sámi have lived side by side with the majority populations of Sápmi for centuries.⁷ This cohabitation has resulted in an exchange of cultures and practices. However, Norwegianization, which is an extensive and harsh policy of forced assimilation of Indigenous communities led by Norwegian authorities from the eighteenth century until the 1960s, and strict assimilation policies in other countries resulted in the loss of land, languages, rights and identity among the Sámi and the Kvens⁸ in the North Calotte region. Partially drawing on social Darwinist ideas, Norwegianisation lasted nearly a century and was characterized by two main trends: settlement and economic policy to establish Norwegian agriculture mostly in the eastern parts of Sápmi on one hand, and language and education policies and measures that aimed at eliminating the Sámi languages on the other hand.⁹ Children were forbidden from speaking Sámi in schools and student boarding houses. In order to be able to acquire land, Sámi people had no other choice than changing their names to Norwegian ones and mastering the Norwegian language.¹⁰ Sámi scholar Veli-Pekka Lehtola explains: “Through *active* colonialism, Sámi were clearly to be assimilated into Norwegian society and they were to obliterate the Sámi language”.¹¹

Moreover, Norway suffered a massive catastrophe when Nazi forces destroyed all villages in Finnmark and Nord-Troms during the Second World War. The local populations had to be evacuated for a certain time and lost everything they had. This was devastating and traumatic for Northern communities, among others Sámi communities¹², as all tangible traces of their culture were erased.¹³

The reconstruction needs of the nations-states following World War II led to increased environmental exploitation and extractivism in Fennoscandia and endangered Sápmi’s environmental integrity, on which Indigenous communities depended for their survival. One of the major causes of environmental damage was the building of dams on rivers, which began in certain regions

as early as the 1930s. In Norway, about 60 rivers were dammed up to provide electricity in the 1970s. As a result, protests against the dam projects began in the 1960s.

At the end of the 1970s, the Norwegian government decided to dam up the Áltá-Guovdageaidnu river in Northern Norway in order to build a hydroelectric power plant. Throughout history, this river has been very significant for the livelihoods and cultures of many Sámi communities, as it is one of the greatest salmon rivers in the world and its valley is a grazing site for reindeer.¹⁴ Due to the disastrous consequences that the flooding of large areas of the region would have on Indigenous people and their role of environmental custodians¹⁵ emerged a vast Sámi-led social movement – involving Norwegian civil society and breeding international solidarities – against the dam construction and for Indigenous rights that lasted approximately from 1968 to 1982. The Norwegian State’s position towards the protests and the hunger strikes in Oslo in 1979 and 1981 was uncompromising and violent.¹⁶ The work on the dam resumed after the protests’ camps were cleared in 1981; the new hydroelectric plant opened in 1987. However, those events empowered Indigenous cultural and political resurgence and opened the eyes of the Norwegian population and the media on how the rights of the Sámi people had been abused.¹⁷ They had important political consequences, leading Norway to transform its policies towards the Sámi, and resulted among other things in the formation of the Sámi Parliament in Norway in 1989.¹⁸ The Sámi were recognized as an Indigenous people under the amended Norwegian constitution in 1988 and obtained in 1990 the Sámi Language Act, legislation giving major language and cultural rights to Norway’s Sámi people.

Sámi artists played an essential role within the Áltá action. This role was showcased by OCA’s (Office for Contemporary Art Norway) exhibition in 2018 in Oslo, *Let the River Flow The Sovereign Will and the Making of a New Worldliness*. As explains the exhibition publication, the Áltá action and its call “to let the river live” was part of the emergence of a new environmental consciousness and of Indigenous struggle and resurgence stories.¹⁹

The Sea Sámi

Today, the Sea Sámi live mostly along the coast and fjords in Troms and Finnmark in Norway. Their relationship with the world is marked by their proximity to the ocean.

The Sea Sámi make up nearly half of the Sámi people and speak one of the dialects of North Sámi.²⁰ Reindeer husbandry has been a very small part of their practices; their traditional livelihood means are mostly coastal fishing and small-scale agriculture.

However, those livelihoods are currently under threat.²¹ Indeed, due to the consequences of Norwegianization and to extractivist projects of mining, forestry, wind and hydroelectric power development, only a small part of the overall Sámi population can sustain themselves today by hunting and gathering, fishing and animal husbandry.²²

Sámi scholars Harald Gaski and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie explain that the Sea Sámi were subjected to colonization and assimilation in early times, resulting in a decline in languages, cultures and traditional practices. Later on, the Sea Sámi were particularly affected by Norwegianization, especially since the coasts of Northern Norway were increasingly populated by new settlers due to favourable conditions for fishing, hunting and farming. Moreover, the Sea Sámi were especially affected when the villages in Finnmark and Nord-Troms were destroyed by Nazi forces during the Second World War.²³

The Sea Sámi are part of the movement to regain rights and preserve cultural heritage among Indigenous people in Norway. The Áltá action contributed largely to empower them and awaken their sense of identity and nationhood.²⁴ Artists connected to this group have played an important role in Sea Sámi resurgence, for example through the annual Riddu Riddu festival held since 1991 in Kåfjord-Gáivuotna municipality.²⁵⁻²⁶

Gift of Stone: an evolving exploration of heritage and landscapes

Initiated in 2019 by Katarina Skår Lisa, *Gift of Stone* is a choreographic and auditive performance that weaves together contemporary dance, textile work, electroacoustic music, joik, video, photography, and poetry. It embodies the choreographer's encounter with the landscape of the Varanger-Várjjat fjord and the local community: The Sea Sámi who inhabit the municipality of Nesseby-Unjárgga.

The piece intertwines dance and other artistic forms with joik, the vocal music of the Sámi. Joik is mostly sung a cappella and characterized by a circular structure and a pentatonic melody. A joik is "a short, partly improvisational pattern of chant or song, usually combining repeating phrases and onomatopoeic vocalizations. Phrases may evoke the sound of skis across snow, the call of a bird, the rhythm of the reindeer herd circling in the corral".²⁷

Artist, forager and earth protector Elin Már Øyen Vister writes that "juoigat ("to joik") is a means of remembering, of describing, of telling of landscapes, of people and of animals".²⁸ A joik pays tribute to a person, landscape, or an animal whose experiential presence it summons. In Norwegian and Sámi languages, joik is both a name and a verb; people say that they are joiking something or someone, and not about something or someone. A joik does not represent its object: it is part of it.²⁹

Gift of Stone grew out of Skår Lisa's collaboration with other Indigenous artists, among others Sámi and Kven photographer and videographer Torgrim Halvari, Sámi composer and joiker Johan Sara Jr., Sámi composer and joiker Georg Buljo and Sámi joiker Johan Andreas Andersen, who is known for including animal sounds in his joiks. In particular, the creative process leading to *Gift of Stone* initiated Skår Lisa's ongoing collaboration with Sea Sámi textile artist Ramona Salo Myrseth.

Gift of Stone was created in, from and with the landscape of Varanger-Várjjat. It was first presented in Finnmark in Varanger Sámi Museum, a Sámi dwelling in the shape of a flattened cone called goahti (in Northern Sámi) or gamme (in Norwegian). Since its creation, *Gift of Stone* has experienced several iterations, among others at Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHIO) in April 2019 and during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival in March 2020 at Riksscenen. Every new iteration is informed by the place in which it is inscribed and the relationships it encompasses. For instance, different iterations have involved different composers and joikers, who are themselves influenced by their plural heritages and the landscapes in which they are working; in turn, the choreographic language of Skår Lisa and the way she and other performers relate to the surrounding space and objects change. Taking place in a space in constant transformation through interlaced geography, music, movement and scenography, *Gift of Stone* keeps evolving.

Sápmi-anchored creative processes

Prior to her exploration of how Sámi cosmologies could reverberate on movement and dance within Finnmark landscapes, Katarina Skår Lisa studied Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies for a long time. Inspired by writers from Sápmi and the Americas (such as Audhild Schanche, Harald Gaski, Britta Pollan, Margaret Kovach, Robin Kimmerer...), the choreographer elaborated a way of relating to the world that constitutes a method fostering conversation and interconnection among artists, communities, and places. Emphasizing personal stories, lived experiences, experiential learning as well as the process of inhabiting a place, this working method draws on Skår Lisa's readings and on the philosophies and practices specific to her Sea Sámi heritage. The artist strives to implement a fluid creative process, inclusive of diverse ways of knowing, and anchored in principles of humility, reciprocity and accountability to the landscape and the human and non-human beings who inhabit it.

In particular, Skår Lisa's creative approach is imbued with the horizontal view of the world and perception of landscapes in Sámi cosmologies, in which there is no ontological hierarchy among the land's constituent elements. According to Sámi scholar Audhild Schanche³⁰ such a perception

contributes to creating relationships based on reciprocity, interdependence, and balance between Sámi people and their territories.

Informed by this non-hierarchical perception, Skår Lisa's understanding of the landscape goes beyond visual aspects. It includes notions of land, territory, place, and relationships.³¹ For the choreographer, the landscape is sentient, animate and a carrier of knowledge (rich in knowledge, kunnskapsrik in Norwegian Bokmål).³² It not only provides context and process, but also form and content; along with its community of beings, the landscape becomes the author of the performative pieces, tracing their contours and textures and shaping their bodily states.³³

Skår Lisa sees herself as part of the landscape, along with plants, animals, minerals, rocks, humans, ancestors, as well as their sounds, movements, stories, legends and joiks. In her view, the landscape is a network of interconnected beings and ancestors that learn, create, and become together. Skår Lisa and her collaborators are of the landscape, their bodies are an extension of the land, and in order not only to create something, but also to function and thrive, they have to care for the landscape and communicate with it. Their ability to collaborate and engage in a creative process is derived from inhabiting and listening to the land. This relationship with the world resembles what Mohawk (Bear Clan, Six Nations) and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts describes as Place-Thought, "a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment"³⁴ through which knowledge, agency and creativity emerge from the land.

The creative processes that unfold through the collaboration of Ramona Salo Myrseth and Katarina Skår Lisa are derived "from a literal expression of particular places".³⁵ For instance, textile artist Ramona Salo Myrseth draws the patterns of the fabrics and costumes from local landscapes, designs them by hand and knits them with a digital knitting machine.³⁶ The textiles and the way they are used in the interplay between human movement and the surroundings reflect the Sámi horizontal perception of the world.

Guided by an understanding of lands and landscapes as sources of knowledge, the epistemological approach that Skår Lisa and Salo Myrseth adopt is relational and horizontal, challenging the prioritization of certain forms of knowledge. For example, *Gift of Stone* integrates references and sources of inspiration such as legends and stories that were told to the choreographers by members of the Nesseby / Unjárgga community as well as regional practices, the tide movement, images from Sámi films, references from the choreographer's collaborators and professors, their reflections on Indigeneity, and more.

An aesthetics of turbulence

Gift of Stone and other recent pieces by Skår Lisa, Salo Myrseth and their collaborators are anchored in places and landscapes. Yet they are also evolving and adaptive. To borrow the words of Indigenous scholar and artist Jarrett Martineau and scholar and writer Eric Ritskes, they are "both rooted and fugitive".³⁷

Indeed, these works emerge from shared artistic processes and keep changing, remaining in flux. They are characterized by an aesthetics of turbulence, as would Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant say.³⁸ In addition to this mobility that allows them to escape containment (in a singular and fixed identity, form, genre or a place), they break away not only from Western art's confinement to the individual and professional sphere³⁹ but also from a humanistic perspective in which the world is a warehouse of inert resources and landscapes are mere backgrounds.

Gift of Stone and other projects by Salo Myrseth and Skår Lisa are rooted in Indigenous forms, experiences, aesthetics, images and stories. They center Sámi landscapes, knowledge, communities, cultures and lifeways as the forces that activate routes for artistic creation. These works reaffirm Indigenous presence on the land, "as the radical alterity of an already before, an always elsewhere from colonialism".⁴⁰ They reclaim and re-story landscapes that have been appropriated by capitalism and dispossession as Indigenous landscapes.⁴¹ By refusing colonial suppression of Indigeneity and Indigenous people, such works reassert and emphasize Sámi resistance and resurgence, and reinscribe Sáminess on the land and in artistic experiences: They are characterized by what Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes describe as a decolonial aesthetics.

These works create spaces of departure and transformation by sharing acts of moving, listening, hearing, singing, seeing, creating and being together within Sápmi: by inviting the audience to experience the landscape as a co-creator, they negate colonial and capitalist limits to knowing, sensing and art-making – "that are cognitively ordered through property and ownership"⁴² in order to estimate land and knowledge for the purpose of commodifying them – and transform sensible experience.⁴³

For instance, in *Gift of Stone*, the artists' voices, corporealities, joiks, movements, words, textiles, objects reassert diverse Indigenous presences on the land: through an aesthetic praxis of presencing⁴⁴ they embody decolonial interventions in the colonized landscape of the Varanger-Várjjat fjord and show that Indigeneity is not monolithic, but plural. Moreover, *Gift of Stone* is marked by the horizontal worldview characteristic of Sámi cosmologies: The landscape, stories, objects, textiles, images also create and dance the work. The dancer is not constantly at the foreground, but merges into the space and fades away in front of the fabrics, stones, fishing nets, joik... – which

co-compose the work. The choreographic language emerges from the artists' encounter with the landscape; it is not inspired by a world already there, but shaped by all the human and non-human inhabitants of the land. This resonates with Sámi scholar Harald Gaski's writings on Sámi aesthetics, which involves getting acquainted with and being considerate of nature in a broad sense and "returning the knowledge to your local community".⁴⁵

Indeed, "reciprocity is an important part of Sámi philosophies and cosmologies"⁴⁶, explains Katarina Skår Lisa. Both she and Salo Myrseth perceive their common work as a way to give thanks to Sápmi landscapes, territories and communities and to collect and share knowledge. The artists strive to participate in reciprocal systems of respect and care that involve their collaborators, communities of all living beings, kinship relationships and local places.

Relationality integral to diverse Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, according to which what matters is the relationship with this particular landscape and community, this fjord, these fish, these rocks. Those elements are not resources to extract for economic growth, but gifts from the earth, and "gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate", as writes Potawatomi writer and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer.⁴⁷ In this perspective, creation is centered on land-based relationality and accountability to relationships. Creation becomes reciprocity. It becomes *dancing back*, both in the sense of giving back and offering thanks, and in that of researching back.⁴⁸

Katarina Skår Lisa and Ramona Salo Myrseth have not stopped exploring together since the first iteration of *Gift of Stone*, and, in November 2020, they initiated a new investigative process called "Researching new Sea Sámi artistic and poetic perspectives in the footsteps of Áillohaš" in Stiftelsen Lásságammi. Stiftelsen Lásságammi is a research and art residency place built in the house of seminal Sámi musician, visual artist, joik composer, philosopher and writer Nils-Aslak Valkeapää⁴⁹ (1943–2001) – whose artist name was Áillohaš, a North Sámi name – in Skibotn in Northern Norway. This research collaboration that centers touch is taking place in the landscape in which Salo Myrseth grew up. In her native community, Kåfjord-Gáivuotna, a new iteration of *Gift of Stone* will be presented at Davvi álbmogiid guovddáš OS (the Center of Northern peoples) on the occasion of the upcoming Sámi National Day, February 6, 2021.

By completing the circle, by nurturing reciprocal relationships with different landscapes, the local communities, plants, animals, rocks, snow, the seasons and the weather, Skår Lisa and Salo Myrseth are reaffirming and amplifying Sámi presence in Sápmi. The opposite of dispossession is not possession or re-occupation, it is reconnection, writes Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar

and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: Through an aesthetic praxis of presencing and horizontality, Katarina Skår Lisa and Ramona Salo Myrseth are taking back knowledge, bodies, landscapes by deeply reconnecting with them and weaving inclusive solidarity networks.

1. Drawing on the same materials, *Gift of Stone* and *Arctic Summer* are different sides of the same collaboration; they were supposed to be presented together, but the latter was delayed due to the pandemic which interrupted OITF 2020.
2. "Green colonialism" is used by Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo in Norway to refer to the imposition of development and "green energy" projects in the name of protecting the environment and or the climate by nations-states that threaten Sámi practices, livelihoods and cultures. They are a manifestation of environmental racism, which coerces local communities in order to exploit their territories without their free, prior and informed consent. Often initiated by national or international companies with the support of public authorities, environmental racism is based on the denial of the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples, including the right to lands, water and governance, and a healthy environment.
3. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka. 2004. *The Sámi People Traditions in Transitions*. University of Alaska Press.
4. Vister, Elin Már Øyen. 2018. *Lávolumin njuoččaiguin – hupmamin gedggiiguin, ruovttoluotta Goase Dušše – skerrui / Singing along to Whooper swans – talking with rocks, Goase Dušše revisited*.
5. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka.
6. Ibid.
7. Snarby, Irene. 2013. *Sámi Art between the Local and the Global*. Ottawa, Canada: National Gallery of Canada. UiT.
8. The Kvens (*Kvener* in Norwegian) are an Indigenous people living mainly in Northern Norway. They are recognized as a national minority since the Norwegian Parliament ratified in 1999 the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. However, the Kvens do not have the status of Indigenous people, unlike the Sámi. The Kvens living in Norway descend from fishers and farmers who emigrated from Finland and Sweden in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today there are 10,000 to 15,000 Kvens according to official documents. Some of them still live in Finland and Sweden. 2,000 to 8,000 of them speak Kven, a language close to Finnish, which was granted the status of minority language in Norway in 2005, within the framework of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Kven culture today includes Kven, Finnish, Norwegian and Sámi elements as a result of Norwegianization and inter-community marriages. Source: Kvener, Arne Forsgren and Anne Minken, Store Norske Leksikon, November 15, 2020. snl.no/kvener.
9. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka.
10. Snarby, Irene.

11. Ibid., p 45, italics in original.
12. *Sjøsamer*, Harald Gaski and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Store Norske Leksikon, November 15, 2020. snl.no
13. Snarby, Irene.
14. Ibid.
15. *Let the River Flow The Sovereign Will and the Making of a New Worldliness*, Office for Contemporary Art Norway. Also available in Norwegian and Northern Sámi. oca.no/publications/project-booklets/let-the-river-flow-the-sovereign-will-and-the-making-of-a-new-worldliness-english
16. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Office for Contemporary Art Norway
20. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka.
21. *Sjøsamer*, Harald Gaski and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Store Norske Leksikon, November 15, 2020. snl.no
22. Vister, Elin Már Øyen.
23. Harald Gaski and Mikkel Berg-Nordlie.
24. Lehtola, Veli-Pekka.
25. Ibid.
26. Place names in this text are written in Norwegian and in Northern Sámi.
27. Reinert, Hugo. 2016. *About a Stone: Some Notes on Geologic Conviviality*. Environmental Humanities, 8, no 1, p 110.
28. Vister, Elin Már Øyen, p 38.
29. Reinert, Hugo.
30. Schanche, Audhild. *Diedut Horizontal and Vertical Perception of Saami Landscapes*. In Michael Jones and Audhild Schanche (eds.) *Landscape, Law and Customary Rights: Report from a Symposium in Guovdageaidnu-Kautokeino, 26–28 March 2003*. Guovdageaidnu-Kautokeino: Sámi Instituhtta. 2004, p 1–10.
31. Interview with Skår Lisa recorded in Oslo on June 18, 2019.
32. Ibid.
33. Naoufal, Nayla. 2019. *Le paysage comme pédagogie: Danser Sápmi – Landscape as Pedagogy: Dancing Sápmi*. Esse Arts + Opinions, no 98, pp 60–67.
34. Vanessa Watts. 2013. “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)”, Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, no 2, p 21.
35. Ibid., p 23.
36. Based on an interview with Ramona Salo Myrseth recorded in Kilpisjärvi on October 9, 2019.
37. Martineau, Jarrett. Ritskes, Eric. 2014. “Fugitive Indigeneity: Reclaiming the Terrain of Decolonial Struggle through Indigenous Art”. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, no 3, 1, p V.
38. Glissant, Édouard. 1990. *Poétique de la Relation Poétique III*. Gallimard.
39. Martineau and Ritskes.
40. Ibid., p V.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p VI.
43. Ibid.
44. Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, Indigenous Americas.
45. Gaski, Harald. 2017. “Indigenous Aesthetics: Add Context to Context”, in *Sámi Art and Aesthetics Contemporary Perspectives*, S. Aamold, U. A. Jørgensen and E. Haugdal, p 189.
46. Interview with Skår Lisa recorded in Oslo on June 18, 2019.
47. Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed, p 25.
48. According to Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, researching back is essential for decolonizing ways of knowing and ways of doing. See *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Zed Books Ltd, 2013.
49. To learn more about Nils-Aslak Valkeapää and Lásságammi: lassagammi.no/nils-aslak-valkeapaa-the-humble-sami-world-art-ist.5765811-315484.html

Aligned and Maligned: A History I Didn't Live but Has Parallels to One That I Did is a commissioned conversation between Michelle A. Tisdel and Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor, centering around self-identification and identity politics. The term "identity politics" is used and misused and carries different connotations depending on who uses it and in which context it is being used. Why is this term divisive? Which perspectives should be voiced? We invited Michelle Tisdel to share her reflections on this, who then suggested answering these questions through an ongoing conversation with Jessica Lauren Elisabeth Taylor.

Michelle A. Tisdel is a native of Houston, Texas. She holds a doctorate in Social Anthropology from Harvard University (2006). Her research interests include heritage production and discourses of belonging in Norway and Cuba. She has conducted long-term research on Cuban museums and Afro-Cuban heritage production. Tisdel works as a research librarian at the National Library of Norway and specializes in migration and heritage. In 2020, she founded Lift Every Voice-LEV, a documentation project about antiracism and civil rights in Norway.

Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor is an artist, filmmaker, writer and community organizer. Her roots are in the Southern United States, born in Mississippi and bred in Florida on former Timucan land. Taylor's work manifests through performance, text, dialogue, dance and community building for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. Her work revolves around themes of ritual, visibility and identity mythology. She is chiefly concerned with ways to dismantle oppressive institutions and the creation of racial equity in art and theater. Taylor is newly based in Oslo.

Aligned and Maligned: A History I Didn't Live but Has Parallels to One That I Did

Michelle A. Tisdel and Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor

A MEMORY

SETTING: TEXAS. INTERIOR LIVING ROOM

Sounds from the television playing from the 4x4 relay race and the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.

Little Michelle: Why are there four teams from the United States?

Grandpa: What do you mean four teams?

Little Michelle: Look at all those Black people! We can't have four teams!

Grandpa: Those are not all US Teams. That's 'this country', That's 'this country'.....

Little Michelle: (*in awe*) Are we everywhere?

Grandpa: Yes, baby, we're in all those places.

Little Michelle: So you mean there's a *me* in all of those places?

Michelle: (*to audience*) In that moment, I became aware of the African diaspora. I wondered: How do the "other" Michelles experience life and being in *their* parallel realities?



Michelle. 2020. Photo: Ka-Man Mak



Jessica. Berlin 2016. Photo: Alexander Coggin

INTRODUCTION

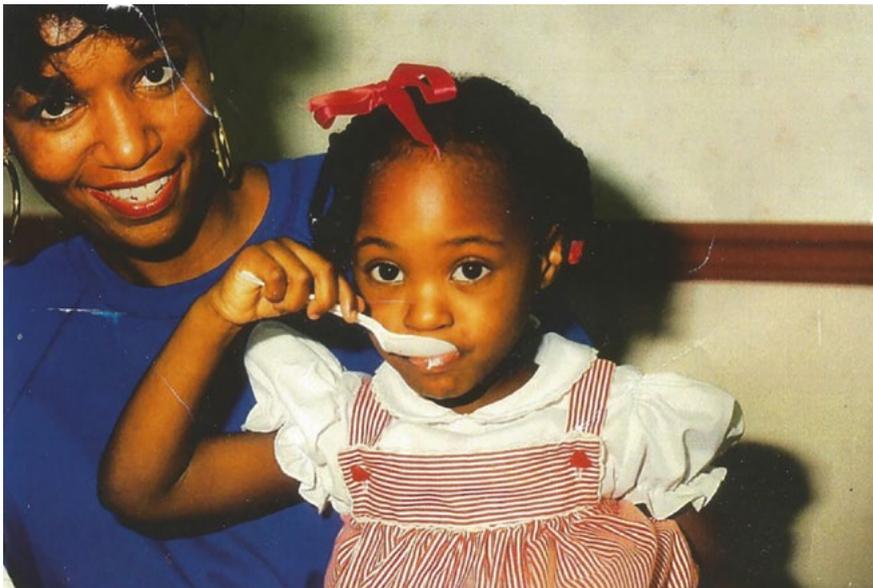
Michelle — Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor is patient, funny, wise, and curious. She stays open but leaves nothing to chance. I met Jessica, also called JLET, through the program Her og Der (Here and There) mentor program that the art organization Transcultural Arts Production (TrAP) sponsors. The mentor program pairs artists who are new to Norway with established artists. Jessica is an artist, filmmaker, and community organizer. Like me, she has roots in the Southern United States. Before moving back to Norway with her young family, she worked in Berlin, where she produced the Black in Berlin salon. Immediately, I found her diasporic perspective compelling and relevant as a meta-analytical practice for engaging art, communities, and spaces of meaning-making. Jessica effectively created “contact-zone” situations between art institutions and diasporic audiences in Berlin. Similarly, Jessica’s film project *Muttererde* addresses heritage and gender in a diasporic context. When we meet, our conversations often return to the intersection of art, cultural policy, and everyday life politics. Indirectly, many of our conversations have probed situations and aspects of daily life that require tools for correcting, disrupting, and exposing harmful practices, challenges to one’s integrity, episodes of injustice, and abuse of power. I am very fortunate that our paths have crossed.

Jessica — Michelle Antoinette Tisdell embodies the definition of a Renaissance woman. As a social anthropologist and researcher at the Nasjonalbiblioteket, Michelle has cultivated a career spanning 25+ years that investigates not only how people live within different societies, but what makes their lives meaningful and the subsequent impact on history. Michelle’s work as a political, social, and cultural critic and writer is particularly inspiring to me. Her unwavering desire to interrogate histories and make space for forgotten histories connects her practice with mine. As Black American mothers, we also share and connect with a long line of cultural workers who have chosen lives outside of their home country in order to gain personal freedom. Over the past few months, our relationship has grown from mentor to collaborator to friend.



Jessica and daughter Maemo. Berlin, 2017.

Photo: Matt Lambert



Jessica with mom Cheryl. Daytona Beach, 1986.



Michelle and son Miles Herman Flikke. 2000.



Nicole Rafiki. *Balansekunst*. 2020.

This text is an extension of our ongoing conversation about diasporic heritage, identity, and the politics of experience in everyday life. Our discussion begins with a question about the colonial legacy of “race” and blackness, then explores understandings of “identity politics”, diaspora and belonging. Other important topics are signaling and unlearning – issues that have shaped, misshaped, provoked, and galvanized us. These are relevant topics for communities in both the US and Norway, where understandings of diaspora, much like individual and group identity, are varied and fluid. Moreover, we explore how personal history and individual experience inform notions of heritage and diaspora.

Our respective journeys in the African diaspora began in different parts of the southern United States and different decades. Nevertheless, they have led us to Oslo and the following conversation – a meta-narrative about blackness, belonging, and identity – at what feels like a critical moment for social and individual responsibility. The following text represents our most lucid moments.

ANCHORING

Colonial History and its Effects on Modern-Day Identity Politics

“When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actual person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth.”

“In the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality. In other words, he is Negro who is immoral. If I order my life like that of a moral man, I simply am not a Negro.”¹

– Frantz Fanon

“Europeans decided that Africans were too brute and aggressive to control their countries, were therefore uncivilized and needed to be colonized and Asians were too effeminate and weak to control their countries, were therefore uncivilized and needed to be colonized. But who defines civilized? Who defines the right way to act?”

– Kama La Mackarel

Jessica — Is there a purpose or a power with connecting to a collective identity as an antiracism strategy or for example all-Black spaces, or are individual identities more impactful?

Michelle — Identity politics can be at play internally – well it can be at play in different ways – so I say internally, and already, I’m constructing a group. There are so many different so-called “groups”. The notion of group in itself is just a metaphor.

A so-called “group” is constructed through people identifying with shared origins, narratives, and experiences. The notion of how a social formation emerges and becomes relevant needs to be reconsidered. The group itself is created through identification. Individuals choose, in given situations, to relate to each other and ascribe to narratives that resonate with their past experience or vision of the future. If we think of groups as fluid, then the tension of feeling that you have to commit to one idea or one position – that you’re locked in or can’t have nuances based on experiences as a woman or someone who doesn’t conform to traditional notions of sexuality or gender identity – dissipates.

Sometimes people forget that identity and groups are not fixed. Individuals identify with multiple narratives and social formations simultaneously. I can adopt and appropriate a **history that maybe I didn’t live but that has parallels to one that I did live**. Knowingly or unknowingly, we construct it through association and through affinity – with another collective of people with which one shares something with or wants to share something.

Jessica — But is it important to put that affinity aside for the greater good? I know a lot of people struggle to identify with this all-encompassing identity “Black”, so by individual identities, I mean specifying African American, Afro-Norwegian, etc. I have always felt at home in a Black, a global Black, identity. Growing up in Florida, moving to Boston doesn’t seem like a very strange difference to some people, but if you’re American you know that being Southern Black and Northern Black, or East-Coast, West-Coast or Midwest – that it is all very very different. I learned that when I moved from Florida to Boston to go to school and then moving to Berlin and meeting a completely new (African) diaspora and now moving to Scandinavia. But I still have always felt very rooted in a global Blackness, although some people feel uncomfortable with that idea because that ‘Blackness’ has been ascribed to us.

Centuries ago when our ancestors were violently removed, wiped out and delegated by Europeans into different countries. They put borders in place without any consideration for the tribal states that already existed. The tribes were all very very distinctive and varied, and had different languages, customs, traditions and even different heritages, gods, and goddesses. And now to distill that into “Blackness”, for some people, feels diluted, and therefore irrelevant. But I purport that there is a power in the global Blackness because the entire African diaspora, at some point, has been colonized. It is powerful to commit to a group identity.

Michelle — As African-Americans, we don’t have that uninterrupted anchoring. Instead, we use a patchwork or collage approach. We have to invent, imagine, reconstruct, and reassemble notions of heritage and belonging. As I moved farther and farther from my point of origin, my experience of Blackness expanded. It’s recalibrating, learning the new landscape, symbolism, meanings. You just add that to your experience bank. Sometimes, Blackness can seem different in environments, localities, societies where the Black population is different from my origins. That’s what happened when I moved from my grandmother’s segregated neighborhood in Houston to campus life at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and eventually to Norway.

In Norway, when most people see a Black person they have a different point of reference than in the US. This was my experience in the 1990s. Before you open your mouth, you’re just exhibit A. However, you are “matter out of place” as anthropologist Mary Douglas would say.² You are an “Other”. And the question is which kind of “Other”? And when you speak, you’re American, and, suddenly, that’s okay. And then being Black American is “cool”. That was really uncomfortable for me. What if I wasn’t from the States, would I suddenly not be okay? That made me interested in the experience of my peers in Norway.

UNLEARNING

How does that effort live in the body, on a cellular level?

Jessica — As a student of Sara Ahmed, I have to acknowledge the continual learning and unlearning. I love what she writes about unlearning habits and patterns that have been passed on from generations of forced assimilation into white culture. I have been working on unlearning in a corporeal sense. When I used to go into shops in Berlin or grocery stores I would make sure to take off my hoodie, take my hands out of my pockets, be ‘respectable.’ But now, because I practice unlearning, I do the opposite: resist these stereotypes forced onto me. Also **it’s vital that I start to relearn the rituals and practices that are a part of my herstory and I think this speaks a lot to deconstruction of identity.**

Michelle — These learned ideas and behaviors have negative consequences and are fraught with contradictions. The subtle ways that differences are communicated are historical. These discourses can start early; often it starts in the family or that a kid is “different” than her peers. I was often accused of being too white. I didn’t perceive it as being malicious in the family. I was uncomfortable, but I learned not to take offense. It was unsettling to be labelled as different from my family. So when we talk about unlearning, it goes very deep. The role of difference in the way that we talk about identity is often learned in our families and is part of our communities.

The phenomenon of “passing”, pretending to be white while hiding African-American heritage, was an important survival strategy for many Black and even Latino communities in the US. We know colorism exists. We have colorism on the one hand and on the other hand a discourse of being too white. There’s a tension in it, just like there’s tension in being able to “pass”. **There’s a tension in the choice to be aligned or unaligned with a group or identity.** Others might attempt to malign the chosen identity and your decision to align with it. How and in which context does ascribing to a certain association signal that you are more or less loyal? There are so many associations, stereotypes, and stigmas that fuel contradictions about belonging. These are reflections of the societies, practices, and environments that we perpetuate.

Jessica — And I don’t want to distance myself from that. Now, my main focus of unlearning is language and speech, written and spoken. Growing up, I too was called ‘Oreo’ and told I was ‘acting white’. There was a constant code-switching between AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and so called “standard English.” Moving to Boston and going to proper theater school I was told my language was incorrect.

And I had my natural language beaten out of me. Later, moving further into academia, my vernacular was ‘unacademic.’ So now my unlearning task is speaking my natural dialect, both at home and in lecture spaces. I often think about Beyoncé and when she stopped doing interviews because people kept telling her she was ignorant simply due to her thick Texan accent. How dehumanizing that can be.



Michelle and her mother, Brenetta, ca. 1974.

SIGNALING

Claim as many labels, identities, descriptions, and experiences that are relevant to you.

Michelle — We don't need to assimilate in order to integrate. And even now, I'm starting to think that integration is not the goal either. My goal is to participate – but on my own terms. Because you grow up knowing there's no blending in or fitting in. So code-switching becomes a necessity. My efforts in Norway have all been about securing the best future possible for my son. What do my actions signal to him? I can't encourage him to seize opportunities if I'm not bold. He doesn't need me to assimilate. He needs me to stand my ground.

Jessica — But even participating sometimes feels like a step too far. If I participate in a machine that is anti-Black at its core, trans-phobic at its core, ableist at its core, which is essentially all major arts and cultural institutions, then what am I participating in? A lot of my heroes are people who actively participate: Stacey Abrams, people who move the needle forward an inch. And also people who didn't participate: Angela Davis, Zora Neale Hurston, and Audre Lorde.

“For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.”³

Michelle — Okay, Angela Davis ended up participating. She became a professor at University of California, Davis. She's a critic. To be a critic and dissenter is to participate. Dissenting is participating. Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), folklorist and author, died impoverished, alone and unknown. Bless her. She didn't deserve that. I would have loved for her to be celebrated and to have experienced how we revere her, how loved and treasured she is. A lot of artists don't get to experience that. She experienced the tensions within her community.

There has to be differing opinions and robust debates. There's no other way for us to exist. **If we're going to deconstruct something, we have to deconstruct the notion that group identity means group consensus.** That is one of the misconceptions about identity politics. There is no consensus within groups. Show me a group with 100% consensus, and I will show you the suppression of thought and freedom of expression. Ironically, critics of identity politics often misuse and exploit the lack consensus within a so-called group. The same



Zora Neale Hurston

detractors malign solidarity and the use of group identities as a strategy to gain political power.

In her article in Oxford Bibliographies, my dear friend Prof. Vasiliki P. Neofotistos (University of Buffalo) defines “identity politics” as:

“[...] the deployment of the category of identity as a tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and orientate social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice and with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and belonging and gaining power and recognition. Additionally, identity politics refers to tensions and struggles over the right to map and define the contours and fixed “essence” of specific groups. The phrase has become increasingly common in political anthropology since the second half of the 20th century with the emergence of a wide diversity of social movements, including the women's movement, the African American civil rights movement, and the gay and lesbian movement, as well as nationalist and postcolonial movements.”⁴

It's important to compare the academic definition to the different uses of the concept in everyday life. How can we observe identity politics in practice? We have to keep the actual circumstances and context of different practices in mind. It is important to scrutinize the motives of those who criticize so-called "identity politics". Often they are misusing the term and actually criticizing legitimate claims and the mobilization of solidarity and definitional power by the underrepresented. Identity politics is strategy and tool for influencing power relations and historical representation. History and being represented or excluded from history is a function and mechanism of power, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot tells us.

Jessica — Yes, it's important that we return to the original use of the term and also name who coined it because it is so widely mis-used. The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian social organization active in Boston from 1974 to 1980. Founding member, Barbara Smith, writes:

"By identity politics we meant that Black women have a right to formulate our own political agendas based upon the material conditions we face as a result of race, class, gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, the term has been maligned and distorted ever since."

Their manifesto of the Combahee River Collective is one of my personal guidebooks.:

"We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough."

Michelle — Yes, Identity politics is a strategy for self-empowerment based on collective narratives of experience and shared affinity. Empowerment is the most misunderstood colonial notion. You cannot empower other people. I am the only person who can empower myself. You can, however, check your own practices so that you are not a hindrance to me.

Today people criticize identity politics in the US and Norway to diminish the claims of racialization and disparity. Criticizing identity politics has become a strategy to delegitimize groups that have been disparaged and disadvantaged. So I choose the phrase the "politics of experience" as an alternative to identity politics.

Individual experiences are facts and information that we use to validate, corroborate or legitimate other people's claims. Collective narratives and action are compelling. People are saying "Me too" and "Yes, this is real – that happened to my mother, in my community, in my football club". If enough of these facts are measured, it becomes part of the public record and historical information. History is two phenomena: events and social processes unfolding, and narratives constructed and told about the unfolding of events and social processes. Identity politics mobilizes both kinds of history.

Maybe identity politics is part of our heritage? Our ancestors' contribution to the world economy is indisputable. The wealth that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and slave economies generated made possible many aspects of life that we enjoy in Europe and the US today. This fact irritates a lot of people. This is important for understanding what kind of effort is actually required to dismantle systemic racism and oppression – to create some semblance of equity and equality.

1. Fanon, F. 1968. *Black skin, white masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
2. Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
3. Lorde, A. 1979. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". In *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. 2017. Silver Press.
4. Neofotistos, V. 2013. "Identity Politics" — oxfordbibliographies.com (accessed December 4, 2020)
5. Trouillot, M.R. 1997. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

During the last couple of years, it has become obvious how the poetry and uniqueness of art disappear when the media reads it too literally. A tendency is to ridicule or attack art by taking the elements out of their context and reducing them to their simpler expression, to a mere description. Furthermore, these simplified narratives can be power tools in the public debate about art.

We invited Eivind Haugland, who works as a dramaturg at Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe, to reflect upon these issues from his position of being Norwegian and living and working in Germany. In a time when artistic freedom is under pressure, we would like to investigate the value of art as a space of fiction. How do we differentiate fiction and reality, poetic spaces and space for interpretation? Haugland starts the text in the covid-19 lockdown in Germany and Norway, and writes about how stories about the arts are dealt with in the media and in the cultural institutions themselves. *About not leaving reality in peace* is a commissioned text.

Eivind Haugland has a master in drama and theater from NTNU and dramaturgy from Theaterakademie Hamburg. He has earlier been active in Propellen Teater, and he is a previous dance consultant and later board member at DansiT – Dansekunst i Trondheim og Midt-Norge. At the time of writing, he lives in Germany working as a dramaturg at Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe, earlier at Theater Konstanz. He is also translating and writing for among other Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift, and he is board member in ASSITEJ Norge, where he sits in the committee for magazine and criticism. Haugland is a member of Kritikerlaget and the german Dramaturgische Gesellschaft.

About not leaving reality in peace

Eivind Haugland

On November 2, German society was again partially shut down as a result of the new wave of corona infection. While trade was more or less allowed to continue as normal, restaurants, hotels and everything else that falls under the general term of “leisure” had to close. According to German authorities, “leisure” includes theatres, opera and concert halls, fairs, cinemas, leisure parks (amusement parks, zoos, etc.), spa centres, swimming pools and saunas, casinos and – last but not least – brothels. It is further emphasized: “All entertainment events are prohibited.”¹ German authorities thus clearly do not consider the field of art and culture as bearing anything more than a basic function of amusement (aside from the poorly concealed authoritarianism, the wording also implies: “When there is a lockdown, it shall be boring!”). We are talking about a cultural nation that has had an enormous influence on the international art and culture scene for several centuries, which has nurtured some of the world’s most influential thinkers and artists, and whose orchestral and theatrical landscape in 2018 was proposed as a nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List: “The nomination shows that theatres and orchestras are important arenas for free expression, public debate and critical reflection,” stated Michelle Müntefering, Minister of State (Parliamentary State Secretary) at the Federal Foreign Office.² What has happened since then? When did art and cultural institutions change from being important arenas for reflection on the society we live in, to being regarded as leisure activities on an equal footing with gambling and prostitution?

During the corona crisis, it has become even clearer how linguistic characteristics can have consequences for an entire field. It was therefore a small victory, when on November 19th it was accepted that art and cultural institutions can no longer be defined as “leisure activities” in infection control issues but must be treated separately as an independent field.³ However, art and culture are still defined as “voluntary activities” in the German municipal budgets and will therefore be the first field to experience cuts when the corona bill has to be paid. Bamberg and Munich have already announced cuts in subsidies to their theatres of respectively 2.5 and 6.5 percent in the 2021 budget, and there is reason to believe that more will soon follow.⁴

Although it is frustrating to be shut down when solid hygiene practices have been developed, no one denies that strict measures with sometimes major consequences are required to quell the pandemic. Nevertheless, it is the demand to be taken seriously as system-relevant agents that has been the primary issue in the fight for the German art and culture field. Already during the first lockdown in April, Ulrich Khuon, theatre director at the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin and president of the Deutscher Bühnenverein (German NTO), stated that “[art] can give society foothold and therefore help to create hope again. (...) We can contribute to society in such a way that it does not become isolated and disintegrate.”⁵ At the same time, Thomas Ostermeier, theatre director at the Schaubühne in Berlin, expresses his frustration in an article in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* on November 12: “It irritates me how many theatre people experience the interruption as a personal offense. (...) Our complaint does not stand in relation to the need that prevails [at the intensive care units].” According to Ostermeier, many people fear long theatre closures because they are afraid the audience will forget them, which for him is completely incomprehensible: “I do not understand how one can have so little faith in the importance of one’s own work”.⁶

Identity crisis

It can appear as though the corona crisis has provoked an identity crisis in German theatre. Through the imposed shutdown of the large and at times over-productive German theatre machine, one has, for the first time, had time to properly reflect on one’s own role in society and how to manage it. At the Staatstheater Karlsruhe, where I am employed, the identity crisis developed yet another nuance. While the facade of the theatre is characterized by the first article in the German constitution, “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar” (Human value is unassailable), the standstill that took place during the first lock down helped trigger a leadership crisis, during which the theatre director’s at times choleric and brutal treatment of the staff, leaked to the media and eventually contributed to his dismissal in late November.

However, the theatre director’s abuse of power would not have been possible in the first place without the almost feudal structures and poor working conditions and rights of artistic employees that characterize the German theatre landscape. So, the theatres’ self-image suffered yet another setback – it’s not sufficient to be a moral institution that thematizes the imbalances within society if you cannot first get rid of the skeleton in your own closet yourself.

In many ways, it is easy to see the German theatre field’s pronounced identity crisis as the culmination of decades of marginalization of a general knowledge of art in the population. At the same time, as the example from my own theatre shows, there have been, until recently, few real attempts by the theatres to renew themselves in step with the development of society. Of course, this applies not only to one’s own work structures but also (and perhaps first and foremost) to artistic production. Few German theatres are located in Berlin and both the German, grey-haired core public, and the German conceding politicians are more conservative than one might think. The identity crisis therefore is also partly a self-inflicted crisis, in that one is unable to make one’s self relevant to large segments of the population. Amelie Deuffhard, theatre director at Kampnagel in Hamburg, accurately describes it in the weekly newspaper *Der Freitag*: “When the doors open again, we cannot simply continue as before. Instead, we must look critically at whether we can manage to take care of our own role as social arenas in a reality that is constantly changing and become more accessible even to those who have not so far spent their free time in the theatre. We must not be afraid of losing the audience, but rather seek out new audiences and continue working on topics that the pandemic has made even more visible (...).”⁷ From my life abroad, however, I observe a Norwegian performing arts field that is already moving in this direction. It is more political, more complex and more experimental than ever, thanks to increased funding and an artistic development that has spread from the independent field and the programming theatres to the major theatre institutions. Now there is more interaction in the entire field, and reality is no longer left in peace neither thematically nor aesthetically. From my point of view, there is little to suggest a similar identity crisis in Norwegian theatre.

A general knowledge of art in retreat?

Nevertheless, through the media and in various social channels, one can get the impression that even parts of the Norwegian performing arts field occasionally struggle to legitimize their own justification. When Black Box teater contacted me about writing this text, they referred to this: *Art definitely carries a speculative power. How is it when these layers of complexity enter the realm of media/social media? When they are barely reduced to their most*

simple expression: a descriptive one, without any double or multiple meaning? And they conclude: *In this time when art is under pressure in many countries, we would like to investigate the value of art as a space for fiction. How do we differentiate fiction and reality, poetic spaces, space for interpretations?* At a time when tabloid headlines and social media dominate our everyday lives to such a large extent, these are all relevant questions. Despite the fact that art may hold a unique position in terms of how meaning is produced and communicated, at the same time these are not questions that are limited to this field alone. Especially in social media, most things are simplified; politics, science and almost everything else with a minimum of causal connection. On the other hand, neither the art field nor any other fields are slow to resort to simplified messages when it benefits themselves. Theatres' marketing departments have long been experts in picking out those sub-sentences from performance critics that have the greatest sales potential, although they even do not necessarily reflect the breadth of the critic's reasoning. As we anyhow have minimal influence on how art is used and abused in public, I think it is more interesting to look at the reasons why the general knowledge of art is possibly on the waning front also in Norway. It is easy to indicate connections that are outside the control of the performing arts: The daily newspapers continue to downplay cultural material and professional art criticism, and leave the responsibility for "low-threshold" art discourse to blogs and social media, while NRK cuts specialized arts and cultural programs. The investment in Den Kulturelle Skolesekken (The Cultural Schoolbag) is a national program designed to ensure that all schools in Norway experience professional art and culture of all kinds.) has not led to the aesthetic subjects becoming more important in school – perhaps rather the opposite. The Humanities are under pressure at universities and some have been closed down completely – theatre studies in Oslo were phased out in 2012. In step with the economization of society, the cultural field is also increasingly expected to adopt a business mindset, where increasing demand for house-income and, as a result, higher ticket revenues contribute to the exclusion of several social groups. Quick summary: After the NRK monopoly was abolished in the 80s, the internet arrived in the 90s and social media, blogs and comment fields broke through during the 2000s; after public space greatly expanded, possibility of choice widened and diversity of opinion was strengthened, it is experienced, paradoxically enough, as if both the concrete art experience and the common conversation around it has become less accessible to the public, and thus made it a simple populist exercise to present the art field and certain works of art as "elitist", "incomprehensible" and irrelevant to the everyday life of "most people". At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the narrative of an art field that moves away from "most people" is first and foremost a populist narrative that is difficult to accept without further ado. I would rather dare say that art has never been more accessible to "most people" as in the last twenty years, thanks to the investment in Den Kulturelle Skolesekken (however, this does not mean that the understanding

of various artistic expressions therewith increases without further ado), the flourishing of culture houses and other art venues throughout the country, an economic strengthening of the art field from the state and private sector, and more. It is rather society that is much less homogeneous now than before (and thank goodness for that!). And the group dialogue is just a nostalgic memory from the days when everyone discussed Tuesday's television theatre during Wednesday's lunch (did it really happen, or is it just what people say when they remember the "good old days"?).

Turning point for the public art discourse?

The art field has a responsibility not to trip itself up. In 2012, I criticized a former member of the Hedda Prize jury after he appeared in a major Norwegian newspaper and happily boasted that one of the city's theatres avoided what he called "alternative, narrow and strange Norwegian and foreign contemporary theatre" (without a closer definition of what this was). Much has happened since then, but the mechanism in the aforementioned wording appears time and time again, also among artists and administrative staff at performing arts institutions, and this makes us easy prey. Because: While we attempt to make ourselves gorgeous and relevant to the public we fear we have lost along the way, we in part take on the populist rhetoric and thus lead the debate mainly on the populists' premises, something that does not contribute to anything other than confirm the prejudices which already exist. Therefore, I also do not readily accept the premise that it is the simplified, anti-art rhetoric suggested by populist politicians and individuals that dominates today's public art conversation, and thus runs away with art's own narrative. Yes, there have been a number of examples of art works taken out of context and artists ridiculed and abused in populist, anti-art agendas. And yes, it is true (and disappointing) that large and normally enlightened media agents have often almost taken over these narratives directly, and thus helped to support and spread these agendas in the public arena. We experienced an initial low point when an almost united press (with some honorable exceptions) uncritically devoured the right-wing narrative about *Ways of Seeing* without having seen the show. This was not only frustrating on art's behalf, but it also had potential for serious consequences given the death threats the participating artists received as a result. With all the attention the show received and still receives, it is no wonder that its reception currently dominates our impression of the public art discourse. At the same time, we often forget (consciously or unconsciously) whether or not we allow this impression to take permanent hold. This is not a recoup report of the daily press and cultural journalism, but in my experience, the quality of performing arts criticism in several of the major media has increased considerably over the last few years. Arts Council Norway's new support scheme *Tidsskrift og kritikk* (Journal and Criticism), where I myself sit on the commit-

tee, will hopefully also contribute to strengthening both the general and the subject-specific art discourse. After Laila Anita Bertheussen was charged with the attacks against herself, Tor-Mikkel Wara and the couple Tybring-Gjedde, and after the trial has revealed exactly what the artists behind the performance wanted to direct focus on, it may actually turn out that the debate around *Ways of Seeing* represents a turning point in the public art discourse, at least concerning the performing arts field. No matter what the outcome of the trial. Because where the media and certain politicians, including the Prime Minister, initially made hasty conclusions and fixed responsibility on the artists, the debate has become more complex as the case played out. *Ways of Seeing* not only revealed the network of right-wing politicians intent on gagging artistic freedom and their supporters, but ultimately also laid bare the public art discourse.

Anti-art rhetoric – not necessarily just a bad thing

In Belgium, the Flemish theatre NTGent (led by Swiss director Milo Rau) has recently published the book *Why theatre?* where they asked over a hundred key artists from around the world to answer this very question. The Belgian director Luk Perceval, who recently won the Hedda Prize for *Trilogien* at Det Norske Teatret in Oslo, is one of those who answered:

“Asking the question ‘why theatre?’, is not as innocent as it seems. It is an echo of the canon of neoliberal thinking – one of many. That way of thinking only accepts what ‘pays off’. (...) In that context, as a theatre maker having to explain the why, the sense of theatre, is essentially to bow one’s head before that utilitarian thinking. It feels as if you end up in the defendant’s chair and are forced to prove your innocence.”⁸

As I see it, one has two choices. One can either choose to bow to the idea of an anti-art opinion and thus place oneself in a defensive position (where one is doomed to lose), or one can spend one’s energy on the overwhelming majority who see the value of a vibrant art life. That art has obviously become so omnipresent and provokes some so much that they call for a fight against artists, I choose to take as a good sign. This means that art does what it is supposed to, that it picks away at established truths, challenges reality and refuses to give in. *How is it when these layers of complexity enter the realm of media / social media? When the contents are made flat?* It is not art’s responsibility to improve media or educate those who write about it. Art should instead always respond with what it is good at – making more art. Pia Maria Roll, Sara Baban, Hanan Benammar and Birgitte Sigmundstad do exactly the right thing when, through WoS TV, they use artistic means to comment on the ongoing trial and the position of art in society. It is also liberating to

see how Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller engage an entire village in *Fotballspelet* in Teaterfestivalen in Fjaler, where on hindsight, the most critical voice belonged to a participant in the field and concerns working conditions. At the same time, it appeared as though the current Nettavisen journalist and former Listhaug-adviser Espen Teigen, had difficulty finding something to complain about in the show and therefore, seemingly reluctantly (and without irony) settled for praising Vinge for having made a “patriotic performance” (!)⁹

Fiction and reality

In 2000, the now deceased German legendary director and *enfant terrible*, Christoph Schlingensiefel, organized the art action *Ausländer raus!* (Foreigners Out!) during Wiener Festwochen. The right-wing populist party FPÖ had for the first time become part of an Austrian government, a party that was hotly debated, but also applauded for their anti-immigrant stance. In front of the entrance to the Vienna Opera, one of the most prominent places in the city, Schlingensiefel placed a container decorated with *Ausländer raus!*, the FPÖ’s party flag and the logo of the tabloid newspaper Kronen Zeitung, which is as good as the FPÖ’s party newspaper. Inspired by *Big Brother*, who just had its heyday, he locked twelve asylum seekers in the container and filmed them 24 hours a day. On the internet, the audience could follow the broadcasts, comment on the action and not least vote out one participant every day, who was in fact sent out of the country. The winner received a cash prize and the opportunity to marry for a residence permit (if someone volunteered their services during the campaign. If not, then their plane ticket out of the country was sponsored). Prominent personalities such as Elfriede Jelinek, Gregor Gysi and Peter Sloterdijk visited the container or commented on the action, it was all followed by thousands of people on the street and online (the website had 70,000 visits already the first day) and triggered a storm of reactions and hateful attitudes. The cynicism of asylum policy became extra clear: “It is hardly possible to demonstrate more clearly the link between the staged cynicism of the television medium and the objective cynicism of a society that ignores moral values and judges asylum policy based on its ability to create a majority”, the journalist Jens Jessen concluded in *Die Zeit*.¹⁰ The confrontational power of art is a core theme also for the French author Édouard Louis: “Theatre can be so powerful in forcing people to see, what they usually avoid, what they have built exit strategies for or against, to not watch, or not listen. (...) Often people try to avoid being confronted with reality. Confrontation is what interests me about theatre.”¹¹

How do we differentiate fiction and reality, poetic spaces, space for interpretations? Christoph Schlingensiefel is just one of many artists who show how art is perhaps at its most effective when it invades reality and, significantly,

does not differentiate between fiction and reality, but rather consciously plays on an unclear distinction. In many ways, such an art strategy also makes itself less vulnerable to populist and anti-art rhetoric, because a larger audience gains ownership of the art experience and its many interpretive levels, something which inevitably leads to the anti-art rhetoric revealing itself and thus being disarmed. The same goes for *Ways of Seeing*, and although both this performance and *Ausländer raus!* had the media and politicians as its target, the same principle is basically valid for all works of art that function in this field of tension. For instance, just take a look at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum and the museum performance *Sámi Dáidda-musea* or the exhibition *Like Betzy*. By respectively constructing a fictional Sami art museum and “replacing” a public statue of Roald Amundsen with the forgotten female nature painter Betzy Akersloot-Berg, the museum allowed fiction to intervene in reality and thus made the art relevant to a larger – and partly new – audience.¹²

The solidary art

In today’s fragmented reality we need art more than ever as a unifying social and discursive arena. However, this presupposes an art field that unifies and does not itself succumb to populist and hostile rhetoric when one disagrees (misunderstand me correctly, professional disagreement and debate are both good and desired, but then it is the thing about practicing what you preach...). In Germany, at least the theatres’ identity crisis and a social climate that is once again strongly influenced by right-wing radical currents (after, among other things, the far-right party AfD – Alternative für Deutschland – fully entered German politics in 2013), has ensured a flourishing of solidarity movements and a greater political awareness in the (performing) arts. One example is the association ensemble-netzwerk¹³ (ensemble network), where actors, directors, set designers, playwrights and other artistic professions within theatres, together fight to improve working conditions by actively pointing out the discrepancies in the theatres’ moral self-image. Other examples are organizations such as Die Vielen¹⁴ (the many), which brings together independent artists and institutions in the field of performing arts and visual arts in a common struggle for an open, inclusive and pluralistic society. One of their stated goals is to be a support body for everyone in the field of art and culture who is exposed to right-wing populist and right-wing extremist attacks. It is particularly interesting that both ensemble-netzwerk and Die Vielen primarily use artistic strategies in their work. These two organizations are examples of solidarity movements which, on art’s own terms and with art’s own methods, have already had a great influence and may prove to be decisive for German theatre being something to be reckoned with also in the future.

I am fundamentally optimistic about art, both in Norway, Germany and the rest of the world. Whether we are talking about a German theatre that is struggling to find its place or Norwegian art taking a beating on social media and used as a pawn in political games: By relentlessly continuing to explore reality, find the grey zones, seek confrontation and promote radical diversity, art will emerge strong.

Translated into English by Gillian Carson.

1. “Das sind die Corona-Regeln im November” – tagesschau.de
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