



White Laughter and White Academic Space by Lena Sawyer

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Maybe you have noticed it as well. A giggle, a laughter, a titter titter, a knowing look directed at you, a head shaking in dismay and shoulders shrugging. A little “hee hee hee” and “tsk tsk” teeth sucking sounds – whilst racist representations of non-whites, which have circulated in the Swedish society in different settings, are being spoken, made visible, to a mostly white crowd.

What is so fucking funny?!

Not so long ago, I heard this laughter at a conference on intersectionality, when Johan Förnäs gave his keynote talk about the ways that “Africans” (along with “women”) were both a dangerous and desirable “Other” for Swedish jazz musicians.

The crowd is quiet for most of the time, we sit with pens in hand; some taking notes, others possibly daydreaming, most of us, I imagine, paying attention to what is an interesting presentation of how racial meanings are part of the construction of Swedish identities. On the overhead projection above us, we see images of Monica Zetterlund, who Förnäs tells us was called the “Swedish Negress” – it is here the titters begin. Later, when Förnäs describes how the Swedish newspapers reduced the talented Louis Armstrong to an animal-like nature, the crowd really starts to titter, looking at each other, some making eye contact with me, they shrug their shoulders and shake their heads disapprovingly.

This was an inclusive laughter and like a blinking white light, it drew us, the audience, into a common standpoint in relation to the racist meanings being made visible.

Some of my colleagues, such as Katarina Mattsson, Ulrika Dahl, Adrian Groglopo, and I have discussed this laughter afterwards – I was happy to hear that they too had wondered about it, felt uncomfortable and even angered by it, and at the same time also felt drawn to it like a moth to a flame. We talked about how this laughter seems to come up in the academic circles in which we move (and often see each other) and have named this phenomena *white laughter*. In these moments, whiteness as a structure of power is visible and uncomfortably negotiated, indicating that the racial meanings upon which white supremacy has been constructed and historically legitimized are still today made visible. Academic spaces – most often occupied by white academics – are usually also hegemonic spaces, where whiteness-as-Knowledge is recognized, confirmed and legitimated. The introduction of postcolonial theory into Swedish academia means that racialized critiques and perspectives on power and knowledge, as theorized often by non-whites, are being used more frequently to unpack the different ways in which Swedishness throughout history has rested upon a demarcation alongside sexualized understandings of non-white “Others.”

Laughter is not the only response that an audience can have. I was reminded of this shortly after the Johan Förnäs lecture at a Black European Studies conference held in Germany, where James T. Jones, a black American professor, lectured on race and crime in the US. Here, the forty academics in the audience were predominantly black Germans, Americans, Brits and Swedes. There were three people, who identified as white in the audience. Interestingly, when Jones described how whites associate crime acts with blacks and read citations by whites using racist and sexualized stereotypes, there was no laughter, no tittering or shrugging body movements and looking at one another. There was nothing to laugh about or look to each other for confirmation about. It seemed to me that in this way, this was a black space, not only because it was filled by academics whose understandings of racist stereotypes were not only a common theoretical interest but a part of our collective lived experience. It was also a space where this knowledge was a hegemonic Knowledge, rather than a peripheral one.

These two conferences made me think about the ways that the laughter in Swedish academic spaces has a function. I think these responses are attempts to try to deflect (white) individuals in the audiences’ association with such racist meanings and characterizations. It is a way for whites to resist being linked with and included in these meanings, to get confirmation from others in the audience that “we are not those kind of whites.” As such by laughing and making eye contact with other people in the audience, whiteness is at the same time made

visible, negotiated, and I would also say, being re-established. By quickly working to re-position oneself as “above” such meanings through affirmation from other people in the audience, this white laughter in its effort to distance oneself from racism sidesteps the way that these racial stereotypes and sexualized meanings are actually painful for many people today and are a symbolic violence that erodes and limits people’s life possibilities and self-perceptions.

By laughing in an effort to position oneself against such racist meanings, whites’ strategies of tittering, laughing and sharing knowing looks with each other compromise the integrity of those, whose everyday life is confined by these meanings. And in this sense, the whiteness of these spaces is re-established.