

# RACIAL LONELINESS

LEARNING WHAT SHAPES BELONGING

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# Abstract

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In this thesis, I explore how Nordic theatre education affects POC students' sense of belonging and their artistic development within its walls. It is based on theories of whiteness, tokenism, representation, and racial loneliness, as a key starting point, since this concept helped me understand and put words to many of the experiences and questions that have shaped this thesis.

The materials I chose to work through are mainly articles, previous theses, a questionnaire with current and former POC students, and my own reflections. The methods used are questionnaire analysis, reading of research and artistic material, comparison between institutions, and personal reflections. Through these materials and methods, I examine how educational theatre institutions speak about diversity compared to their efforts to advance it, how their structures and artistic choices affect POC students, and what kinds of change might be needed.

This thesis shows that, even though theatre institutions often describe themselves as diverse and inclusive, their structures, teaching methods, and artistic references can still reproduce a sense of distance from the education itself, thereby creating racial loneliness. It also points to a clear gap between institutional ideals and lived experience, something I recognise in both my own experience and in the responses of other students. The relevance of this thesis lies in showing that meaningful inclusion in theatre education requires more than diversity in numbers; it also requires changes in structures and teaching methods.

So the question is, what would real inclusion actually require?

**Key words:** Tokenism, Representation, Belonging, BIPOC, Education, Diversity, Inclusivity, Eurocentrism, Theatre, Identity, Whiteness

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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|                                                           |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| TERMINOLOGY                                               | 4  |
| INTRODUCTION                                              | 1  |
| CHAPTER I                                                 | 3  |
| Encountering ‘Racial Loneliness’                          | 3  |
| CHAPTER II                                                | 6  |
| The Institution as Atmosphere                             | 6  |
| Racial Loneliness and Artistic Imagination                | 10 |
| CHAPTER III                                               | 12 |
| Resonance - Other Voices in Dialogue                      | 12 |
| Questionnaire Responses                                   | 15 |
| Question 1 - Overall Experience                           | 16 |
| Reflecting on the responses I                             | 18 |
| Question 2 - Artistic Developement Within the Institution | 20 |
| Reflecting on the responses II                            | 21 |
| Question 3 - Belonging                                    | 23 |
| Reflecting on the responses III                           | 25 |
| Question 4 - Background Relevance                         | 28 |
| Reflecting on the responses IV                            | 30 |
| Question 5 - Institutional Support                        | 33 |
| Reflecting on the responses V                             | 35 |
| CHAPTER IV                                                | 37 |
| Conclusion                                                | 37 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                                              | 40 |

# TERMINOLOGY

The list of terms I will use will primarily focus on the educational institutions of theatre and art. I am aware that some terms may have broad meanings and could be interpreted in different ways, which is why it is important for me to clarify how I interpret them. The definition will be based on general knowledge, [thoughtco.com](http://thoughtco.com), [cultureally.com](http://cultureally.com), the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre ([aclrc.com](http://aclrc.com)), and an article written by Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt about Racial Loneliness.

## Racial loneliness

*Racial loneliness* describes the feeling of isolation that comes from being one of few racialised people in spaces built around whiteness, where your experiences are rarely reflected or fully understood.

## White institutions / Institutions

*Institutions* refer to schools whose structures, traditions, and everyday practices are shaped around whiteness as the norm, even when they claim to be inclusive. If written only as “Institutions” this is what it refers to. If referring to other types of institutions, such as theatre institutions, as a workplace, then it will be mentioned as such.

## Whiteness/White

*Whiteness* refers not to white individuals, but to a system of norms and values that shape what is seen as neutral, normal, or professional, and that often goes unnoticed by those who benefit from it.<sup>1</sup>

## BIPOC/POC

In this thesis, I will mainly use the term *people of colour (POC)* to refer to individuals who are racialised as non-white within European contexts. The term is used to point to shared structural conditions, not to suggest a shared identity or experience. In some cases, the term *BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour)* appears in participant responses and is therefore preserved when quoting participants directly.

## Tokenism

*Tokenism* refers to the inclusion of a few people from marginalised groups to appear diverse, without making real changes to institutional structures or power relations. In this context, because I am focusing on students at theatre institutions, POC students are often expected to represent diversity, educate others, or support claims of inclusivity, while the underlying methods of teaching and working remain the same.<sup>2</sup>

## Neutrality

*Neutrality* refers to the idea that certain ways of teaching, creating art, or evaluating work are objective or universal, even though dominant cultural norms shape them.

## Representation

*Representation* in this thesis refers both to numerical presence (who is in the room) and to symbolic presence (whose stories, bodies, and perspectives are considered central). Representation alone is not treated as a guarantee of inclusion; rather, it is examined in relation to institutional structures that shape the experience of representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, “Whiteness,” accessed February 16, 2026, <https://www.aclrc.com/issues/anti-racism/cared/the-basics-level-1/whiteness/>

<sup>2</sup> The CultureAlly Team, “What Is Tokenism?” accessed February 16, 2026, <https://www.cultureally.com/blog/what-is-tokenism>

# INTRODUCTION

When I was trying to figure out my subject for my master's thesis, my head started to spin around my bachelor's thesis, *Beyond Stereotypes*<sup>3</sup>, where I wrote about the stereotypes that are still occurring today for POC actors, and the impact it has on society. I was thinking about how I could somehow grab a branch from that tree, which I had already planted. Obviously, the choices of topics were many, but I realised that one area stood out the most for me; and that was the study around diversity and inclusivity for POC artists in the Nordic theatre institutions, and how the lack of POC artists and overall diversity in the curriculum has affected the people belonging to that minority, and how it translates into their art. It is not a surprise to anyone that many institutions tend to be quite conservative, and by that I mean that many school curricula choose to do "what they have always done", because A) it works for them, and B) they have already built a reputation that they do not want or need to change. At least this is my theory, and because it is only a theory, I am curious to dive deeper into it to see which changes have influenced some institutions towards the "better" and why and how.

I am also interested in whether that change has had an effect on the field of performing arts. I also started to think about the possible aftermath for POC students at the educational theatre institutions, how it might affect their perspective on creating art for themselves and for the institution. What actually happens with the dynamics in a class where there is only one POC student, and what would it look like if the scenario were to change to the opposite? That is, if the majority of the class were to be POC?

If the institutional framework assumes that whiteness is the norm for art, every student outside the norm is hyper-visible and invisible. Visible as the diverse one and invisible regarding the curricular imagination of the institution. This is why I think the discussion needs to go beyond body counting to how institutions choose to work through levels of institutional structures. Nordic theatre schools often present themselves as growing, international, and socially conscious. They speak the language of diversity and claim inclusivity as a fundamental value in making art. Though this is a positive development, the system of artistic education may still reproduce racial isolation, even where the institution wishes to be inclusive. This gap between what the institutions say and what I, as a student, and probably many others, have experienced is one of the many motivations and inspirations for this thesis.

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<sup>3</sup> Edit Williams, *Beyond Stereotypes: BIPOC Actor Navigating the Finnish Stage and Screen*. (Bachelor's thesis, Theatre Academy, Helsinki. University of the Arts Helsinki, 2024)

In this thesis, I will analyse how tradition, conservatism, and institutional self-preservation shape the curricula of educational Theatre institutions. For perspective, I am writing this thesis from the position of a POC student at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki. Although most of my attention is on my own school, I am also looking into other Nordic Theatre academies to compare them and see how they differ and what they offer in neighbouring countries. I will also use a questionnaire on the theme of belonging to see whether the pattern of racial loneliness appears in other students' experiences. Many of these educational institutions take great pride in their historical legacies: they are built upon classical repertoires, Eurocentric dramaturgies, and acting methodologies rooted in ideas of "neutrality" that rarely acknowledge racialized embodiment and since these methods have a long history, they are often treated as unquestionably universal.

But universality does not necessarily mean it is neutral; I believe the dominant culture always shapes its criteria. For POC students, this dynamic can manifest in many different ways. They may be encouraged to "tone down" their cultural background in the name of neutrality, or they may be cast almost exclusively in roles that reflect racialized stereotypes. They may also feel pressured to become representatives of diversity within their cohort, expected to speak on behalf of racial issues or to educate their classmates and coworkers. As a result, the classroom becomes a site of negotiation between the desire to fit into an educational institution's expectations and the desire to assert one's own artistic identity. To investigate the situation at the Nordic theatre schools, this thesis will focus primarily on my own institution, while drawing on research from other Nordic schools for comparison. The following questions will guide the study:

1. How do Nordic theatre schools present and approach diversity and inclusivity within their educational walls? Are these values included in the curriculum, or are they treated as 'outside' conversations?
2. To what extent do conservatism and tradition influence the artistic training offered to students? Does the weight of institutional reputation prevent meaningful systemic change?
3. How do POC students experience their education within the walls shaped by these traditions? What forms of racial loneliness, tokenism, or isolation appear, and how might these affect artistic growth and development?

By investigating these questions, I may not find a definitive answer for you to read; instead, I will use them as a guide to identify what rocks I might encounter along the way and what lies beneath them. I believe that if institutions desire to create art that reflects contemporary society, they must examine the foundations on which they build their teachings. Inclusivity cannot be achieved only through casting practices; it must be embedded in the educational processes that shape artists long before they enter the professional field. Understanding these roots is essential, as they reveal why representational problems persist and why institutional change is often slow, contested, or incomplete.

# CHAPTER I

## Encountering ‘Racial Loneliness’

If you have not (yet) read my bachelor's thesis, *Beyond Stereotypes*<sup>4</sup>, a brief recap is that I wrote about the major impact of systemic stereotypes on POC actors' careers. I wrote about the fact that performing arts and theatre are, most of the time, reflections of the society we live in, and what better way is there to contribute to changing our views on what and how our society should look like than through art? I also wrote about Finnish theatre and TV casting, and what kinds of characters POC actors usually end up tackling. Usually, it is quite predictable: a ‘typical’ caricature of a person of colour in the Western world, or they play that one supporting character who brings some type of colour diversity to the plate. I found this subject interesting because I was quite new to the field, yet I noticed some of these patterns quickly.

Throughout my years at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki, I began to develop a broader perspective on who I am and who I represent in a class where I was the only POC student. I started questioning my choices about what kind of art I do and who I am actually doing it for. I also started to notice that I was not the first person to have these questions and thoughts, which made me more interested in where all this could be rooted. While I was doing my research around this topic, I asked myself “Why do I somehow feel lonely when it comes to conversations about inclusivity in the institution?”

In an article by Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, I learnt the concept of “racial loneliness” within educational institutions and its potential effects on discussions of how to prevent underrepresentation.<sup>5</sup> In the abstract, Schmidt states that “racial loneliness resides as an affective response to experiences of structural racism in the infrastructures of the arts.”<sup>6</sup> I felt as if Schmidt’s concept of racial loneliness spoke deeply to my own experiences in the theatre education. It helped me put words to something I had felt for a long time but could not describe: that the loneliness did not stem only from being numerically underrepresented, but also from navigating an educational environment built on traditions, pedagogies, and artistic references that rarely reflected my reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, “Beyond Stereotypes”

<sup>5</sup> Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, “No Count! BIPOC Artists Counteracting ‘Fair’ Representation and Systemic Racial Loneliness in Higher Education in the Arts,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 14, no. 1 (2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20004214.2022.2046956>

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, “No Count! BIPOC Artists.”



While going through my study diary, which I had been writing in quite frequently in the beginning, I found an interesting entry about my daily thoughts and feelings. This was written in my second year of studying at the school, translated by me into English.

*I don't know. I have this strange feeling of not belonging somehow. But at the same time, I'm sure others might feel the same. But this belonging that I am talking about is not about not having a theatre background. It is more of a feeling that I don't know how or who to talk about certain things with. The course "Fritt Arbete" is coming up, and I have this weird feeling of pressure somehow. And the pressure is not from the school itself, I don't think. It is maybe from myself and from what I am expected to represent. I want to create something freely, and I want to create a character that is not talking about their identity or where they belong or where they are from, just because I'm brown. I don't know, I feel like I'm just talking around this circle, and I can't get into the middle. I can't exactly explain what I am feeling.*

*I sometimes think about the difference it would make for me personally if there were another person of colour in the class with whom I could talk about these things. Or maybe get to create some art together. What would we create, you and I? Us. We. Would it be something where we can play with the origin of our identities if we wanted to? I do think about it a lot. Like, what kind of artistic choices would I make if we were all BIPOC? Or half and half. In Finland, that would be crazy, or? Haha. I love my class, don't get me wrong. I also love my teachers dearly, and I wouldn't want anyone else taking their position anytime soon, but I cannot help but think about what it would be like if the professor of the Finnish or Swedish acting program were a BIPOC? ... The thing is, I also understand that the underrepresentation looks the way it looks, especially the Swedish program, it's almost like a minority inside of a minority, haha. So I guess it's a weird circle of endless shit we just can't affect. Imagine if the school took in those few BIPOC people JUST because they are BIPOC? Oh wow, if that was the truth, that crisis would haunt the student forever, or at least for a while, as it did for me. You know, the thought of getting in because I am a tiny splash of diversity lol. But all in all, it does feel lonely sometimes. And weird. There are times when I just wish to speak to someone about these experiences and thoughts, without feeling like they pity me or become dramatic about how it is such a 'horrible' situation that I am in. Because I don't feel like it is horrible or that I hate something, I just feel like it would've been nice to have someone else to talk to who has the same experiences, in school, at the same time. Someone who simply understands without having to explain it.*



Reading this made me realise that the sentence ‘someone who understands’ has a deeper meaning in the picture than we might think. Take the Theatre Academy of Helsinki as an example: not only the study programs like acting, directing, set design, and lighting design, but also the costume departments and makeup artists. Now, think about how much all of these departments have to do with each other when it comes to a project. They are all connected. If there were at least one POC in all of these, I believe a different understanding would naturally develop among the group's POCs.

This one time, I was having a conversation with a friend who studies lighting design. She mentioned that since they don't have any POC students in their class, the program completely dismisses the fact that light might have a different result on the actor depending on their skin colour, at least when the majority on stage is white. This is something that she thought about and realised herself, and not something the school provided. I'm not even sure if they would provide it even if there were to be a POC student in the class. I had never thought about this myself, but of course, it made sense. I feel as if another layer of how racial loneliness operates beyond oneself was revealed, and that the level instead runs through the educational environment of the institution. It is not only that I was the only black person in my class; it was that the infrastructures surrounding us, curricula, technical training, and design practices, were built on unspoken assumptions of whiteness as the default. If no one in the room has lived experience that questions those assumptions, they remain invisible, no? As a result, the burden of recognition, correction, or even articulation falls on the few who do not fit the “norm”.

# CHAPTER II

## The Institution as Atmosphere

What my friend described about the lighting design proves my point exactly: how all the departments are connected and how deeply racial loneliness is tied to the material conditions of artistic production. Maybe the lack of POC students in her program affected the fact that an important perspective was overlooked, which is simply how different skin tones react to light, but even here, I cannot speak for all and assume that the POC would even question it, since it is an education where students expect to be given all the general tools they need. I would say that even technical choices like stage lighting carry assumptions about which bodies are expected to be on stage, and these choices also influence how characters are viewed and how stories are read by the audience. Yet the education had not considered it because the student body, and consequently the educational imagination, was not diverse enough to support that way of thinking. Keep this thought about light design in mind, as I will deepen the reflection on it later in the thesis through the questionnaires. Anyhow, this brings me back to my diary entry, where I wrote about the desire for “someone who understands.” I now see that the desire is not only a need for personal companionship, but also as a need for a structure where I am not the only one carrying these experiences: an institutional environment where my presence does not require translation, explanation, or self-monitoring when talking about racism by having to shift my energy and care for others who feel bad or guilty. They come and vent their heavy feelings and explain themselves about something irrelevant, and now I have to tell them, “Oh, it’s ok. Everything is fine.” I don’t always have the resources to have that conversation, and I don’t believe I owe them that. Just having someone who understands is not just another person of colour to talk and share experiences with; it is a reminder that understanding itself is relational, produced when multiple perspectives coexist and shape the cultural and artistic space together.

This is where I start to understand that representation is not just about appearance or about looking diverse on the outside. It is about how institutions actually function. When certain angles are missing, it not only affects one area; it slowly affects everything else around it as well. The lack of diversity in one part of the institution could influence decision-making in another. For example, if there are few or no POCs in the acting programs, that absence can also appear in other areas like design, directing, costume work and vice versa, or even in the administrative decisions behind the scenes. Over time, these gaps begin to shape the whole environment.

Whiteness becomes not only the majority of people in the room, but also the quiet thread that shapes how things are done and what is considered the norm. For those of us who fall outside of that ‘box’, the result is not only a feeling of loneliness, but it also means constant adjusting and code-switching in order to move through the system. I will discuss code-switching more later in the thesis, as another student mentioned it in the questionnaire.

This type of adjustment sometimes means explaining things that feel obvious to us. Sometimes it means choosing not to explain because we simply do not have the energy. And sometimes it means trying to make ourselves understandable within a building that was not built with us in mind.

Understanding racial loneliness in this broader way helps me articulate why my experiences during studies sometimes felt both subtle and intense at the same time. It was not always obvious exclusion or clear racism; often, it was the smaller moments where I felt unseen, unreflected, or misread, piling up. Moments when I wondered how my artistic choices might change if the institutional landscape around me looked different, if there were more students, more teachers, more collaborators whose reference points and lived experiences resonated with mine. These questions are not just abstract; they affect how we imagine, create, and take risks as artists.

In the end, seeing racial loneliness as a structural problem turns the conversation away from how we as individuals deal with it, how we cope, adapt, or “push through,” and toward institutional responsibility. It challenges schools and theatres to ask not only who is in the room, but whose perspectives shape the room itself. And it suggests that addressing underrepresentation is not purely about increasing numbers, but about transforming the structures that produce loneliness in the first place.

When I looked at different Nordic theatre schools to see how they handle diversity, I found the same mixed picture over and over. On paper, these schools say they care about inclusion and have action plans or values that promise equality; for example, Uniarts/Theatre Academy in Helsinki has a published Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan (DEI) for 2025–2028, and Malmö Theatre Academy (MTA) openly frames parts of its education as socially engaged and critical practice. Oslo’s Academy (KHiO) also has an equality and diversity action plan in paper, but no concrete examples of how it is incorporated. Stockholms konstnärliga högskola (SKH) states that its plan for equal opportunities includes systematic work in both the study and work environments, as well as for students, applicants for education, employees, and job applicants.<sup>7</sup> They also state that broadened recruitment contributes to higher-quality, more relevant education and, in turn, helps build a stronger democracy and a more active cultural life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stockholms konstnärliga högskola, “Breddad rekrytering,” accessed March 18, 2026, <https://www.uniarts.se/om-sk/h/visioner-och-strategier/breddad-rekrytering/>

<sup>8</sup> Stockholms konstnärliga högskola, “Lika villkor,” accessed March 18, 2026, <https://www.uniarts.se/utbildning/student-pa-sk/under-studierna/lika-villkor/>

These documents show institutions trying to say the right things, and to me, there are many important facts and truths in the statements they make, but it still feels surface-level. In outlining its approach to inclusivity, MTA states:

*Malmö Theatre Academy has long been actively working on diversity, gender equality and equal treatment with the aim of incorporating and systematising the issues in the business. Examples of this have been to review the selection of texts and authors, to ensure equal treatment and safe spaces at admission tests, and to increase the amount of gender literature in the school's library.*

*We also work actively to broaden recruitment and consider it crucial for the future of the performing arts that actors and playwrights with different backgrounds, perspectives and stories are trained. If not, the performing arts risk losing their relevance and democratic value.<sup>9</sup>*

Reading that Malmö Theatre Academy works actively with diversity by choosing certain texts, authors and plays, I realised that this is the kind of approach institutions should take on more. Some might argue that this is a form of forced diversity or even a lowering of artistic standards, but the reality is that it's about expanding the artistic world we train in. The repertoire we meet in school shapes the kind of artists we become. If all the main texts are written by the same type of people, usually white, usually male, usually from a Western tradition, then the school is basically teaching us that this is what "real theatre" looks like. It sends an indirect message about which stories are valuable and which bodies belong on stage. So when a school says it actively chooses a wider range of material, I do not see that as a political gesture. I see it as correcting a gap that has been there for decades. And honestly, it shouldn't be controversial. New generations of actors will meet a world where audiences expect a broader range of stories. So why shouldn't our training reflect that reality?

I also agree with their point about recruitment. If theatre schools don't train actors and writers from diverse backgrounds, the whole art form risks becoming narrow and irrelevant. Theatre can not claim to be a "mirror of society" if the training pipelines already filter out most of that society. Another related thing was found on the Malmö Theatre Academy page, where they introduce a collaborative course called Scenkonstbryggan<sup>10</sup>, with Fridhems Folk High School, allowing participants to approach the theatre field through courses offered at the theatre school. This program encourages people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, as well as anyone interested in theatre, to deepen their curiosity about the art form.

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<sup>9</sup> Malmö Theatre Academy. "Core Values." Teaterhögskolan i Malmö, (Lund University). Last modified July 3, 2023. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://www.thm.lu.se/en/core-values>

<sup>10</sup> Lunds universitet, "Scenkonstbryggan". Teaterhögskolan i Malmö. Last modified December 17, 2024. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://www.thm.lu.se/scenkonstbryggan>

This creates a win-win situation for both the participants and the Theatre Academy, as it promotes diversity among students and the Swedish theatre scene. So for me, the question is not *why* they deliberately choose diverse texts, which is great by the way, but it's why it took this long for schools to even admit that they needed to.

As I was going through the different DEI plans, I noticed that not once did I read about an approach to creating a supportive system for POC students that would allow them to vent, share thoughts, discuss art, or receive guidance and support in their artistry. To clarify, I am writing this from my own perspective and reflection, what I personally know I would have benefitted from, and before you think, 'well, why should they be treated differently if they want to fit in,' you have to understand that it is not for us to be treated differently, but to at least give us the option of a foundation to stand on and be supported from when we are navigating in a space that has not been created for us systematically. This is not self-segregation; this is self-care. Most POC students have created their own supportive circles and communities within those walls (or outside), but know this: being the only person of colour in a room full of white people is a special kind of stressor, and it should not be overlooked by us experiencing it, nor the whiteness of the educational institution. Of course, I cannot speak for all POC students, but I think it should already be taken into consideration, even if there is only one person of colour expressing it.

When you look for concrete, lived experience accounts from students about being the only POC person in a class, being asked to "represent diversity," or technical problems like lighting not being discussed in relation to darker skin, there's far less visible evidence on the official sites.

But from talking to different POC students at school, the feeling of not belonging and not being included in the choices of work presented shows a lack of inclusivity. A video work by the *Feminist Collective With No Name*, from their news channel "*Fuck CNN-News*", includes an interview that examines arts education in white institutions.<sup>11</sup> Eliyah Mesayer, who is a guest, talks about her experience of tokenism and racial loneliness, exactly the kind of thing I felt in my studies. That paper shows how being "included" on the surface can still leave you isolated if the system's basics are built around whiteness. So the big question is this: are schools actually tackling how POC students experience study life - the small practical things and the everyday curriculum - or are they mainly trying to look inclusive? From what's public right now, many Nordic theatre schools have started to say inclusion is important, but there's not much public 'hands-on' documentation showing they have changed their teaching practices for, for example, design or tech (like lighting and how it affects different skin tones), or that they have done deep work to prevent tokenism in classrooms. That gap between what institutions say and how students experience things is exactly where I believe racial loneliness exists.

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<sup>11</sup> Feminist Collective With No Name, "*Fuck CNN-News*", Episode 1, 2028. <https://fccnnnews.love/>

With this in mind, I would like to circle back to the article by Schmidt, and how it made me think about how much of this discussion is still stuck at the level of numbers. We talk about recruitment, representation, who gets in and who doesn't, but we rarely talk about what it actually *feels like* to be the minority inside the building. The article basically points out that many institutions measure "diversity" as if it was a checklist, without asking what happens after the student walks through the door. That part really stayed with me, because so much of what I have experienced hasn't been about big, dramatic events, as I mentioned earlier; it has been about the small, everyday things that slowly build up and shape your sense of belonging.

## Racial Loneliness and Artistic Imagination

I realised that in almost every project (excluding those meant for POC artists), I have been asked to be part of or given a role in, the question "*Am I here because they need diversity?*" has been echoing in my head. It is hard *not* to think that in a country where white is the majority. I once told my friend that one thing that would help me get rid of this insecurity is when I see people from all kinds of ethnicities applying to the same role as me, and since then, it has happened a few times. Once was not so long ago: I went to a theatre audition and saw white actors auditioning for the same role as me, and that feeling felt really nice. It makes me feel like I am more than just my skin colour. The first time I felt it, it didn't matter whether I got the job or not, because the main thing was that I felt I had something to offer beyond diversity. One thing Schmidt highlights is how institutions often see diversity as something "extra,"<sup>12</sup> something you add on top of the real work. But for the people who carry that "extra," it's never just extra. It's literally woven into every room you enter, every group assignment, every casting list and every piece of feedback. The article describes how POC students end up doing quiet emotional labour all the time; adjusting, translating themselves, guessing whether they're being seen for who they are or for what they represent. And that really resonated with me.

It reminded me of those moments where I have been in a rehearsal room and suddenly realised I'm paying attention to things no one else even notices. Things like how my body looks next to everyone else's, or how I might stand out on stage in a way my coworkers never think about. Those are tiny thoughts, but they're exhausting in the long run.

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<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, "No Count! BiPoC Artists."

During my internship at Åbo Svenska Teater between 2025 and 2026, I played Mercutio in the production *Romeo & Julia*.<sup>13</sup> In this production, I had a moment that felt different. This was the first time I felt that I played a role where my skin colour didn't define whether I could inhabit it, and I didn't question why I had been cast.

It was liberating to step into a character originally written without a person of colour in mind and realise that I was seen as a full actor, not just a representative of my ethnicity. I thought about the reasons for this, and part of me believes it was because I had seen Harold Perrineau play Mercutio in the movie adaptation of *Romeo & Juliet*.<sup>14</sup> I think this kind of effect can be seen in more and more productions today, such as the musical film *Wicked*, where Cynthia Erivo plays the Wicked Witch of the West.<sup>15</sup> This has led to more interpretations in which Black performers take on the role, as they are able to recognize themselves in the character. The same applies to Svenska Teatern in Helsinki and their adaptation of the Swedish classic *Ronja Rövardotter*,<sup>16</sup> where the POC actor Antonia Atarah plays Ronja, reimagining a character traditionally portrayed as white and offering young audiences the chance to recognize themselves on stage in a role they likely already know.

Another thing Schmidt talks about is how racial loneliness affects the way POC artists see themselves creatively. When you're surrounded by people who don't share your background, you start to question what kind of art you're allowed to make. Are you expected to make work about identity? Are you expected *not* to make work about identity? Do teachers see your artistic choices as creative decisions, or as "cultural statements"? All of that becomes part of the invisible pressure that shapes your training. Reading this, I thought a lot about my own hesitations during school. Those moments where I second-guessed an idea because I wasn't sure if it would be read through a "race lens." Or moments where I did feel like talking about where I come from, but didn't want to confirm anyone's stereotypes. It's like walking on a tightrope: balancing between expressing yourself and managing how you'll be interpreted.

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<sup>13</sup> *Romeo & Julia*, directed by David Sandqvist, Åbo Svenska Teater, Åbo, Finland, 2025–2026

<sup>14</sup> *Romeo+Juliet*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, USA, 1996

<sup>15</sup> *Wicked & Wicked: Part Two*, directed by Jon. M. Chu, USA, 2024 & 2025

<sup>16</sup> *Ronja Rövardotter*, directed by David Sandqvist, Svenska Teatern, Helsinki, Finland, 2023–2026



# CHAPTER III

## Resonance - Other Voices in Dialogue

There were a few times where the topic of racism in theatre history appeared, and I felt like people expected me to speak about it or say something, or at least have a say, and of course I have a say, but not because I am there to speak on behalf of anyone or to represent someone. And do not understand me wrong, I am all for representation, but when it is somehow forced in an educational matter, it is no longer an institution where I get to learn and discuss anymore, but rather me educating others just for "fun." My point being, it is not my job, not there. Another time I felt lonely was after a movie we watched at school that told the story of a black woman moving into a white suburb, and the lengths she went to feel accepted in the community. I had so many thoughts and feelings I wanted to talk about, and that is exactly why we have that movie club in the first place, to be able to discuss it, but this one time, I felt like there was no one I *wanted* to talk with. The things I wanted to reflect on were the ones I needed to reflect on with someone who truly understood.

What I appreciate about Schmidt's article is that it doesn't necessarily shame institutions for failing, but it does hold them accountable. It says: if you want diversity, you need to build systems that actually support it. It is not enough to recruit one or two POC students and hope they magically change the culture from the inside. I would not call that diversity; I would rather call it survival. And honestly, I agree, because I don't think most institutions are intentionally exclusive; I think they are trying (sure, some more than others), but they are still working within very old structures. Structures where the "default actor" is white, right? Where the "neutral mask" is white, where the lighting is set for white skin, and where the standard is white. And when that's the baseline, it doesn't matter how many equality plans you publish; the atmosphere stays the same.

The article also discusses how POC artists create their own pockets of belonging when institutions don't provide them.<sup>17</sup> I found that quite beautiful. It's like a quiet rebellion: people finding each other, forming small communities, building solidarity in the cracks of a system that overlooks them. It's something I have felt too from time to time, that longing for someone who understands without needing explanations. That feeling of exhaling in a room where your experiences are not unusual, not exotic, not "deep," just normal.

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<sup>17</sup> Schmidt, "No Count! BIPoC Artists."

My first real experience with this was probably when I started writing and planning my third *Fritt Arbete*, a course in which students create their own performances from scratch. I ended up doing a video work called *Ephemeral Reverie*. It was a project I had wanted to create since my first year, I couldn't place my finger on why I felt like I needed to do it so much, but either way, I couldn't do it at the beginning simply because it required an all-Black cast, and at that time, there were no other Black students in the Swedish nor Finnish acting programmes. When my third year came around, things changed: the Finnish side welcomed three new POC students, the Swedish programme had two new POC students, and one of them joined my class from Norway. That shift got my wheels turning, and for the first time, I felt I could share this process with people who truly understood what the piece was about, who it was for, and why it had to be done.

Another moment worth mentioning happened earlier this year, when I was asked to audition for a demo of a possible new TV series. I read the script and was immediately ecstatic. The creator group consisted of four people, of whom three were POCs from different professional backgrounds: a comedian and a media creator, a politician, and an activist. The story follows three POC friends simply living their lives in Finland.

What felt special was that the characters reflected different kinds of POC identities living in Finland: one was a politician and feminist activist, one was just an everyday guy who likes rapping, making music, and falls in love, and the third was a deeply culturally Finnish guy, into ice hockey, old Finnish music and classic poetry. It was a light-hearted, slice-of-life story, not a heavy lesson about racism or ethnicity. Just... normal, you know?

That meant a lot to me, because up until that point, most stories I'd encountered were written by white people or were somehow written to, once again, teach a lesson about what it's like to be Black in Finland. And while those stories are important, I would lie if I said it isn't a breath of fresh air to see, or be part of, projects that aren't entirely defined by how we are seen in society, but instead by who we are as people. Schmidt's article helps me understand that racial loneliness isn't about being physically alone. It's about being structurally unsupported. It's about the way an institution can speak the language of inclusivity while still running on old assumptions that no one has questioned. And it's about how that gap, between what they say and what you feel, can be one of the most isolating parts of the experience.

As I continued writing and doing research for this thesis, I realised I wanted to properly hear what other POC students have to say about these topics of belonging. To do this, I set up a questionnaire and sent it to various POC students at school. I chose to formulate the questions in a way that would not directly point to a specific tone. I wanted it to feel somehow 'neutral' and give them the chance to interpret the question as wide or as specific as they needed. I also told them to write as much or as little as they felt the question warranted. Initially, I planned to send it only to the acting programme, but I also got curious to see how it might look in other departments as well. Not only did I send the questionnaire to people in Finland, but I also sent it to a few students in Sweden who study or have studied at Stockholms Konstnärliga Högskola and Malmö Teaterhögskola. Of the 18 current and former students I sent the questionnaire to, 10 replied. I got replies from four programmes at Uniarts (Acting in Finnish, Acting in Swedish, the Directing department at the Theatre Academy, and the Sculpture area at the Academy of Fine Arts). Unfortunately, I received only one response from Sweden, a person from the SKH in Stockholm.

When I wrote to these people, I specifically told them that I am not looking for a certain type of answer. I wanted their answers to be as honest as possible. I wanted all experiences, both good and bad, and why they were good and bad. I have to say, I was often quite surprised by the answers, but at the same time, not surprised at all. For a long time, I thought that I had been circulating around these thoughts and opinions by myself, and that I considered many thoughts to be "ghost-voices" in my head. Just something stupid that I might imagine, but after reading these answers from different people, I realised that this is bigger than myself and what I thought it would be, and that the issue is, in fact, real for many people.

## Questionnaire Responses

The number of students in these respondents' classes ranged from 2 to 50, and most answers were from actors, whose classes are usually around 10-14 people. Why this was important for me to know was that I wanted to see what it looked like in terms of POC representation in class, and maybe a part of me also wanted some kind of self-reflection for them. When they go through this questionnaire, they might feel something or recognise a pattern; either might affect how they then answer the rest of the questions, as it did for me when I wrote them. In one class of 50 students, there was only one POC. In another class with 2 people, there was again only one POC. The rest of the classes in between had one or two POCs, and in another, there were 2 or 3 POCs.

At first, I thought I would only write the answers woven into a floating text, but then I thought about it and read them many times, and realised that they were already very nuanced and needed to be read exactly how they were written. So that is what you will read, apart from a few translated answers; they are all in their own words. To keep the answers anonymous, I have kept the formulations but edited and removed revealing details, such as degree programs, schools, and gender. The reason why I chose to put out the text like this is because I wanted the reader to experience the same repetition of text as I did reading it. The constant heaviness and spiral of people saying similar things to the person before them.

## Question 1

### **How would you describe your overall experience of studying at the Theatre Academy / Uniarts, or a similar theatre institution?**

*(This question invites you to reflect on your general experience of studying in a theatre institution – positive, negative, mixed, or neutral. You may focus on big impressions or specific moments that stand out. It's okay if nothing feels especially significant.)*

“Fun. Stressful when it comes to awareness of including black history or actors. Lack of use of methods outside the Western world.”

“For me my experience, (mostly my bachelor's) was contradictory. I remember educational moments in poetic expression in movement, voice, speech, and overall stage presence. However, I struggled throughout my entire education to connect with the art field, art making, and my identity as part of making art. During my time, we had a professor whose focus was the “avant-garde” and “tabu” and performance art, but from the white male perspective. That did not resonate with me. Also there was no pedagogical facilitation that would have given space for people with different background. I was the only BIPOC student in the class, and since there was little identity awareness, discussions, or facilitation around these issues, I often felt very responsible for my identity and alone. We were also a class that suffered from the pandemic, so I felt that I learned much more during my time outside of the academy, for example, through my internships.”

“It's been fun! It has also been heavy. Five years of studying is, in my opinion, a bit too long. I'm sure it has its benefits, but it's nice that during the master's years you get to do a bit of work outside of the school, and that has been fun.”

“First of all, I am grateful for the education I received at the Theatre Academy. Studying and working with my classmates and fellow students taught me a lot about live-art making, and the courses yielded many valuable observations in relation to acting, dancing, music and art in general. The most unique thing was the cooperation between different programs of performing arts and the courses were irreplaceable, as well as the fact that we got access to production technical resources, professional staff and their knowledge for the stage productions we did. However, Theatre Academy is a school at the end of the day, so there is always a place for constructive criticism and things that need to be developed. For example, we acting students were not required to critically perceive our own position in local, national and global structures, nor to consider the dynamics of power structures. Different power structures were acknowledged in teaching, but there were no in-depth discussions about them.”

"Experiences have been mixed, depending a lot on the course and teacher. Some teachers have been very open and willing to take feedback, for example, in situations of microaggressions, but not all have taken it very well. There has been big steps forward in the past years with for example bringing a short anti-racist training for the students but I have heard that this training is voluntary for the teachers. I feel like the studies in our program are already so heavy that at some point POC students don't have the energy react on all the issues anymore so many of them just become accepted. The active and every-day anti-racist work that should be done doesn't seem to be distributed very equally and it falls on the shoulders of the POC. The peer-support of other poc students in the class has been irreplaceable and has made many situations easier and manageable."

"The Academy was like a journey into my own inner world. Therapy. A journey into my own artistry — and its constant questioning."

"At times isolating and exhausting. The experience has taught me a lot about boundaries."

"Honestly, it was a mixed bag. A really mixed bag. On one hand, I would say that a lot of the course structures and the practicalities within them are very good for facilitating strong skill sets and development as a director. However, in Martin Luther King's letter to Birmingham. He reflects towards the end that he may be integrating his people into a burning house. I would say that I didn't truly understand what that meant until I was a student at this university, because after I graduated, I realised that I had been inside a burning house. By which I mean the environment at times could be incredibly hostile. I had racist incidents occur quite frequently. One student I was working with made a comparison to an Orangutan and said "You're very GTA coded". I had a lecturer tell me that "I didn't deserve being in the college" (I am the highest performing academic theatre major in the entire history of my university, by the way). [...]"

"I really enjoyed it at the academy. Before I started my MA studies, I had studied physical theatre for 4 years and worked in the field for about 5 years. So when I got into the school, I was almost like a sponge that sucked up everything I could. It felt very luxurious to exist there. I felt immensely privileged and very thankful. In a way, I always felt like I didn't belong, but I was thankful at the same time about the fact that I wasn't just "one in the crowd" [not looking like everyone else]. The feeling of not belonging wasn't necessarily heavy because it was one I had carried with me for most of my life and in most situations. What made me uncomfortable during my time of studying came from outside of the educational institution. It was discovered in a panel discussion about non-whiteness on stage that I was the first black [person] to have graduated from the program."

Which led to me being asked to speak about it left and right. I was not completely ready for it, nor had I properly formed clear thoughts about it. I felt like I was just a student, like everyone else, but other people put me in a box as something else. Today I would probably have handled the discussion differently, but back then I felt quite hard.”

“It has its good and bad parts, so I’d give it like 7.5/10. I’m not so emotionally invested in this institution. Love the people in here but the structure is where the work should be done.”

## Reflecting on the responses I

I noticed that many of these answers pointed towards mixed and contradictory feelings. It occurred to me that I have experienced that same feeling on and off myself. I think that, apart from this being a fairly normal experience at universities (and schools in general), studying at a university where you are expected to showcase your identity on stage brings up many identity-related questions that do not always come with helpful tools. The feeling of carrying these questions and layering them on top of one another places a heavy burden on oneself, especially for someone who works in a creative space. Being creative should feel like an open space, a continuous flow, and, in some ways, limitless, but this kind of burden weighs us down, and the limitlessness becomes its opposite.

I also want to underline that racial loneliness does not always cancel out positive experiences. Students can develop artistic skills and value the training, yet still experience some form of exclusion, and think that this complexity is important because institutions often assume that if students succeed academically, the environment must be functioning well. Another theme I noticed in the answers was the tension between institutional structures and individual people. There was mention of how some teachers were supportive, and others were not, and that the anti-racist training exists but is voluntary. For me, this is what I would consider one of Schmidt’s central arguments: that institutions often treat diversity as an additional layer rather than something embedded in the structure itself.<sup>18</sup> When anti-racist initiatives remain optional or occasional, students may still experience exclusion despite the presence of diversity ‘plans’.

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<sup>18</sup> Schmidt, “No Count! BiPoC Artists.”

One person wrote “Love the people in here but the structure is where the work should be done.” This, for me, points sharply towards the institution's responsibility to pay more attention to how its DEI-plan comes to action. If the anti-racist training is voluntary, is it really part of a functioning plan, or is it more like the looks-good-on-paper action? Personally, I would call this a lack of institutional framework. Some quotes that got me thinking about tokenism and emotional labour;

“I was the only BIPOC student”

“I felt very responsible for my identity”

“first black graduate”

This connects directly to the concept of racial loneliness. How can it emerge through different kinds of expectations and unwanted positioning? Being positioned as a representative rather than a student carries a lot of responsibility, and, as I mentioned earlier, that responsibility slowly asphyxiates the freedom of creativity and the form of art one wants to pursue. I felt that responsibility many times. I remember thinking a lot about what kind of art I should do during the Fritt Arbete courses. And even though no one expected me to do anything specific or asked me to, I always leaned towards art that talked about my identity and the colour of my skin.

As I am writing this thesis, I realised that most of it came from feeling so alone in the position I was in, which kind of became something I needed to get out of my system. What I mean by this is that if I had been surrounded by a stronger sense of belonging, or surrounded by people who shared a similar ethnic position as me, I wonder what my art would have looked like. Would I still have felt the same urge to communicate those messages? Did racial loneliness shape the kind of art I made?



## Question 2

### **How does/did the curriculum, teaching methods, or artistic references shape you as an artist?**

*(You can mention things that felt helpful, restrictive, inspiring, or absent – or say if you didn't feel strongly shaped in any particular way.)*

"I don't feel strongly shaped. However, I'm encouraged to be true to the art and to the work, to act in my truthfulness. To be authentic."

"The artistic references and methods showed me to fit a specific aesthetic (kaanon) that maybe did not resonate with me personally, and I could never see myself in the pieces or educational material. The inspiring parts that I remember were the cabaret courses and poetic movement courses that had a strong feminist approach."

"It made me extremely independent and an Afro-Nihilist."<sup>19</sup>

"Not that much. I know what I want to do. Took the teaching and methods that are relevant for me and put them in my toolbox."

"I know what I don't want."

"The curriculum has given [me] space to grow and shape me into the artist I want to become. Sometimes the teaching that should support personal growth and shaping comes from a very Eurocentric, narrow perspective, which I have found restrictive. So, not always has the needed support been available."

"I knew from the very beginning that we would be taught different techniques, which were deliberately avoided being called "methods." So from the start, I approached it as if I were on an exploration. With each character, I experimented with different techniques, and I realised that, in general, techniques don't really work for me. When I'm creating a character, I want to encounter a human being. So I use the technique(s) only when I'm in trouble."

"I don't know how they affected me, but I don't think I was in any course where there was one overwhelmingly strong feeling that really stayed with me. I think I've gained something from each small course, and they've all helped build my own understanding of acting."

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<sup>19</sup> Afro-nihilism is the belief that the system is so anti-Black that real freedom for Black people may be impossible within it.

"I feel like my master's studies at the academy were a natural expansion of my earlier education within the field. I also had the opportunity to partially build my own curriculum. When I got into the school, I was already quite sure about what I wanted to develop and where my weak points were, and I feel like I got the chance to work on them. The most valuable thing about my years at the school would probably be all the connections you get that will help you further along in the work life."

"As an acting student, I was most influenced by the acting techniques of the Russian Mikhail Chekhov, the Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski's practice of poor theatre, and the acting methods developed by the Japanese Tadashi Suzuki. I had a strong realization when I studied Mikhail Chekhov's acting technique during my first year of studies. I was able to access my emotions organically through exercises based on Chekhov's pedagogical methods. It was rewarding to be able to express feelings as a whole, without pretending or being artificial. I was amazed at how effortlessly and lightly my body moved through genuine feelings without me trying to force them out."

## Reflecting on the responses II

First and foremost, let's talk about the mentioned Afro-Nihilism. I had never heard of this term before this survey, and once I looked it up, I found that Afro-nihilism is basically the idea that the world is deeply unfair to Black people, and normal ideas of hope or progress can't really fix it. It looks honestly at these problems instead of pretending everything can get better.<sup>20</sup> I found the comment in the questionnaire to be a very powerful statement. Since this survey was anonymous, I cannot know from which program this person comes from or came from, but I can again, only speak for myself when I say that no matter how many times I have questioned my position and belonging at the school, I am forever thankful for how it made my awareness towards my identity and position stronger than ever. In both good and bad ways, but without them I would not have been as confident or resilient in talking about these themes as I am today. This, of course, then spills into my artistry and not just what kind of art I choose to do today, but also in the ways I choose to look at art. The person who wrote this also wrote that it made them extremely independent. This can be seen as a good thing for some and a bad thing for others, but in a way I hope that everyone experiences something that teaches them to become more independent in whatever position they are in, and not in the cheesy cliché way, I mean the survival way.

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *Ill Will*, July 23, 2015, <https://illwill.com/black-nihilism-and-the-politics-of-hope>

This world does not seem to change anytime soon, and though we are working towards the better, we have to understand that in order to have the strength and motivation, we need to find ways that protect our sense of self, our dignity, and our ability to create meaning within systems that were not built for us.

In some cases, learning independence can come from a bad place, which raises the question: at what cost? Is independence empowering, or is it a response to abandonment? In a cultural context, Afro-nihilism can be a way of looking at black life that faces its harsh realities and struggles in an honest way without relying on the usual “hopeful” stories that society often tells.<sup>21</sup> As I mentioned earlier, this perspective can emerge from both empowering and painful experiences.

However, in the context of these questionnaire responses, which reflect students’ experiences within their schools and their curricula, I find myself leaning toward reading it as a quite neutral or slightly negative critique of the schools. You see, many of the answers point towards a selective engagement. That is taking only what is useful for oneself while discarding the rest. A majority of the respondents describe their opinions about the curriculum in quite vague or selective terms and often emphasize what they chose to take from the education rather than the specific elements that shaped them. I cannot help but feel that this emotional distance indicates a lack of identification with the institution, and if there is a lack of identification, it will not be long before there is a lack of motivation. This is one example of what might happen if the educational institution talks about taking action on paper but doesn’t do so in the building. This pattern raises the question of whether racial loneliness not only affects social belonging but also transforms how artists relate to education itself. One person talked about being able to shape their own curriculum, which I find very positive. To be able to influence your studies while studying is something other programs could include more of. I would mirror that to the course I talked about earlier, ‘Fritt Arbete’, which takes up a large portion of the curriculum’s timeline and becomes your own work, giving you the chance to explore whatever awakens your creativity and interest. I am still wondering why other programs have not yet taken this into consideration. What a waste of opportunity if you ask me.

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<sup>21</sup> Devon, R. Johnson, “Look,”...Performing Black Nihilistic HipHop Adulthood, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 21, no. 3, 2025.1-4. <http://liminalities.net/21-3/look.pdf>

### Question 3

**Do you/Did you feel a sense of belonging at the institution – for example, with other students, within the program, or in the wider community? Why or why not?**

*(This question explores whether you felt connected or disconnected within the institution. A sense of belonging can include social, artistic, or cultural comfort – or the absence of it. Some people feel strongly one way, others don't notice this at all, and both are valid responses.)*

“Yes, well, with other students it felt quite nice. Of course, not with everyone — but I was able to build my own close circle at school, which helped me cope during my studies.”

“I am the only black person in my class. It gets lonely. Difficult standing up for every time it gets problematic with not taking into account my colour or background, where it's needed. I can't be both the "victim" and at the same time the educator.”

“I felt very disconnected, or maybe more that I code-switched a lot to get by, which, on the other hand, made me feel that I did not belong properly anywhere. My sense of community came through work and community building outside of my education.”

“Yes and no. I mainly cope. I don't put a lot of hope in white institutions to fill up my needs or anything like that. I'm here for a reason, and I just want to do what I need to do so I can do what I want to do for me and for mine.”

“I find the feeling of belonging in the institution through the shared passion towards acting and theatre with other students. Yet I have questioned my right to be in the community when I have heard people speculate if poc's have just been chosen because of their skin colour and the need to grow diversity.”

“Not really or rather rarely. During my studies, the fingers of one hand were enough to count the number of other bipoc students across all performing arts education programs. Fortunately, there were some students in English-language master's programs with whom we shared the same experience of being an outsider.”

“Yes, but it took time. Years. In the first years, I felt very detached.”

"At times I felt like I belonged, and at times I didn't. Sometimes I felt outside the culture, and other times it simply felt like I thought differently. I do things differently, and I work differently. But many of my classmates also felt a sense of not belonging. So I came to see it as something normal. Rather than focusing on cultures and their differences, I was encouraged by them to explore my own artistry. Culture connects us, but it also separates us. Art creates unity."

"No. I don't think the environment facilitates that."

"I did find 'my people', but by that, I do not mean only other BIPOC people.

At the same time, it was at [this school] where I experienced being in a working group for the first time, where I was not the only person of colour. That was a clear turning point in my professional life."

## Reflecting on the responses III

Let's start by talking about the term 'code-switching'. I have known this term for a long time, and when I heard about it and what it meant for the first time, I was in awe of how something could describe that one feeling so well. Code-switching means when a person changes their demeanor, language, clothing, etc., depending on who they are with or where they are going, to fit into that other 'bubble' as I call it. By language, I do not mean languages from different countries, but rather *how* they speak. For Black people, code-switching can be a routine that is as familiar as breathing. Some people don't even notice that they are code-switching, like me, until the day I encountered it for the first time. I was in a group of white people going somewhere, and then this African-American guy joined the group and in the blink of an eye, I switched my demeanor because we had a moment of 'I see you' in the group, as the only people of colour, and he said to me "'Oh, so you're code-switching now huh?'" For a moment I felt ashamed, as if a mask was taken off of me without my permission, and I was all exposed. Later, we talked about it, and he explained the term to me, and he told me many stories of how he does it daily, including as soon as he steps through the door to his workplace. He called it 'Talking in white'. So, to circulate this back to the person who wrote about code-switching to get by at school, this is a form of coping mechanism for many. The same way that guy told me he does it as soon as he gets to work, this one student does it to get through the day at school. Code-switching can be a good thing when you benefit from it, but having to code-switch just to save energy is not something I consider a healthy standard.

Even though many of the answers circulated around not necessarily feeling as if they belonged at the institution, one said that they believed it was a normal thing because other people in their class felt the same. What I like about this comment is that it really underscores the fact that people can find connections and togetherness even in situations that are not traditionally seen as positive. What I mean is that even though this group of people did not feel a sense of belonging, it drew them together and created a common ground of understanding amongst themselves. Another interesting theme is the idea that artistic collaboration can sometimes go above social differences. One person writes that they find belonging through "the shared passion towards acting and theatre with other students." Similarly, another response reflects that although cultural differences exist, artistic practice can create a shared ground: "Culture connects us, but it also separates us. Art creates unity." From what I see, these comments suggest that artistic spaces can serve as sites of connection even when institutional structures may not fully support a sense of inclusion. This is the beautiful thing about (some) humans: the way we find each other and support one another, because we recognize the mutual understanding and the importance of belonging.

About this comment about questioning whether they belonged or not, or deserved to belong because they are POC: “Yet I have questioned my right to be in the community when I have heard people speculate if POCs have just been chosen because of their skin colour and the need to grow diversity.” Really got me thinking about my first years at the school. For a long time I really doubted my position in the school because I was the only POC. I don’t think I need to explain why that was since this entire thesis talks about it. But having that feeling was really tough, and I want to put emphasis on the really. Because no matter how much my friends said positive things to me, I did not, I could not believe them. Even when the teachers gave good feedback, I still doubted if I was actually good at what I was doing, or just good for a person of colour in that class. As I am writing this, I can feel my emotions bubbling up, because it really is emotional to think back to those days, and know how I really struggled with my self-esteem of belonging.

When I was reading Tuuli Heinonen’s master’s thesis Ansvarslöst<sup>22</sup>, about taking the freedom of being irresponsible, I found a section where she talks about this exact same feeling I had;

*“Varje gång jag kommit in på en utbildning inom scenkonsten, (Värsta Nylands Folkhögskola, danslinjen, Yrkeshögskolan Novia, fysisk teater, Teaterhögskolan, Utbildningsprogrammet i skådespelarkonst) har jag haft en liten känsla av att jag möjligen fyller en kvot. Det kan vara hjärnspöken, men det är en äkta känsla som jag bär på. Samma känsla har jag när jag blir erbjuden en roll. Jag kan aldrig vara helt säker på om jag verkligen är den bästa möjliga för rollen eller om min hudfärg har något med anställningen att göra. Detta har jag valt att förhålla mig till på ett ansvarslöst sätt. Jag kan omöjligen påverka andra människors val och skulle jag fråga på vilka meriter jag tagit mig från utbildning till utbildning eller från roll till roll skulle jag antagligen aldrig få svaret att orsaken är att jag fyller en kvot.”<sup>23</sup>*

For those who do not speak Swedish, she is basically describing the feeling of always wondering whether she has been accepted into these different schools within theatre, just to meet a diversity quota. That this is a constant, real feeling she had to carry with her even during casting processes. She talks about not knowing for sure whether she is genuinely good enough or whether the colour of her skin plays a role in getting a role. She then continues by saying that it is a deliberate choice on her part to approach this uncertainty in a carefree way, acknowledging that she cannot control other people’s decisions. Reading this felt like a big inhale and exhale of relief somehow. That's right, I cannot control other people’s decisions in such matters, but I can control how I choose to think about all of this in a way that benefits me.

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<sup>22</sup> Tuuli Heinonen, Ansvarslöst – ansvarsfulla jag tar mig friheten att vara ansvarslös (master’s thesis, Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu, 2018), <https://taju.uniarts.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/e88703ec-10e8-4a1f-8ab7-1a5bf318ca21/content>

<sup>23</sup> Heinonen, “Ansvarslöst”, 27.

Lastly, I want to comment on one of the answers about experiencing being in a working group where there were other POCs for the first time. This brings warmth to my heart. Because I know how immensely important this experience was to me when I first had it. There is this undescrivable feeling of freedom and a strong wave of belonging. There is a different type of strength that emerges from working in a group with an all-black cast or having at least one other POC. I felt this when I got the chance to participate in a performance by Calixto Neto called *Feijoadá*<sup>24</sup> back in 2022. The performance was, in a way, a ritual for exploring memories, resistance, and colonial history. This felt important to me because it drew me to explore my roots from my father's side in Guinea and incorporate them into the piece. Everyone shared a mutual respect, but most of all, an understanding of the diverse roots of the Afro-diaspora. This whole experience inspired me to explore and better understand my roots and become even more appreciative of them. As one quote from the questionnaire expresses 'Rather than focusing on cultures and their differences, I was encouraged by them to explore my own artistry.'

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<sup>24</sup> *Feijoadá*, directed and choreographed by Calixto Neto, Moving in November festival, Helsinki, November 3–6, 2022. <https://www.voa-calixtoneto.com/en/feijoadá>



## Question 4

### **At any point, did your background feel relevant or irrelevant in the classroom, rehearsal process, or casting practices? If so, how?**

*(This question asks whether your ethnic or cultural background ever felt noticeable or meaningful in theatre spaces, or if it felt irrelevant. Some participants may have clear experiences; others may not have thought about this before. Either response is welcome.)*

“The teachers, most of the time during lessons, talked about how ‘we’ here in the western world do like this or like that. Which erases me and my background.”

“I feel that my background was irrelevant and very relevant at the same time in a way. The non-white perspective was not visible in my education. And since it was never brought up how problematic our white and homogenous institutions are, I felt that my ethnicity became the problem and a "touchy/uncomfortable subject" that could only be brought up by me. So the silence made it invisible, even though situations in rehearsals and classrooms made my ethnicity very visible. I usually use an example from my education: our professor showed disturbing material on colonialism (specifically in Africa), and then he expected us to address the problems and argue with him for educational purposes. There, my ethnicity became extremely visible, and I felt a big responsibility for it, and froze completely. This othering made me also hyper aware that bringing this up can cause me to be labeled and forced into a narrow box or expected to only create art about my blackness.”

“All the time. Honestly, I do not like thinking about it because I subscribe to the Toni Morrison belief that racism is ultimately a distraction that is white people's problem to fix, but I just said this way, I think we've vastly overestimated how progressive and tolerant we are. Spaces are particularly important if you have an anti-colonial or anti-imperialist stance. Many of the students know of Marx, Foucault, Kant, etc. But they know nothing of Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson, Angela Davis, Steve Biko, etc., so it's fundamentally an incomplete worldview that permeates into the creative sphere.”

“My background or my ethnicity didn't matter when I was studying and when I was acting in school production, but that changed when I first started getting job offers outside of school. I didn't recognize myself in the roles I was offered. Those roles were stereotypical and one-dimensional.”

“No, my wish throughout my time at the school was not to be known as the student from [...]. I just wanted to be a student, just like anyone else.”

"I've been asking that question for a while now. Relevant. Because there have only been 4 of us in this major at this school. First year it defo bothered me. Made me wonder if I was just the DEI hire. Don't get me started with the classes in the first year. I got questions like, "Where are you from?" and "What language do you speak?" etc. All the damn time. Made me wonder a lot and got confirmation on a lot of things. For example, in rehearsals for my second year (theater), the lights were only made for white skin to look good, and I asked about that and got the answer, "Oh, I never thought of that."

"During a course [...] I experienced some kind of overstepping. The teacher kind of like, assumed things about me because of my skin. For example, that I haven't had that many friends in Finland as a child, and that I for sure have been bullied. The teacher told me to "let the African bird fly" hahaha...I remember thinking that it was really annoying."

"I feel like my ethnic background has always had meaning, and it's never irrelevant. It's visible, for example, in a casting process when all the actors invited to apply for a role are poc. Usually, a production has that one poc role that all of us apply for. It forces us into a situation where we are constantly competing with each other, even though we have very different characteristics, personalities, and strengths. So it almost feels like the only thing that matters is the ethnic background, and all the unique things each of us has are not seen."

"Yes. Eggshell-walking because of blackness."

"At castings, I have often felt bad and lost faith in myself precisely because I don't look like I'm originally from this country. Especially now, with so many historical productions, I've been excluded from quite a few of them. It has affected me — and each time, the impact has been negative."

## Reflecting on the responses IV

Firstly, I want to reflect on some of the responses that describe how ethnicity was rarely discussed directly. This silence can create discomfort and make race a “touchy” subject that students feel responsible for raising. I think that by incorporating more material written and created by black authors could stretch the idea of what theatre is about and what it can look like, but when doing this, there has to be a balance, otherwise it becomes this idea of taking just one single material so that there is some kind of diversity, and once it is done, it has no value to it anymore. This is once again the same type of action: an institution writes on paper that it believes in diversity and works towards it, but it is nowhere to be seen in a permanent way or in a way that students can notice. I had a conversation with my professor where I told them that I realised how important it felt to me when in one course, we worked with the play *Slave Play*, written by Jeremy O. Harris in 2018. This was the one play we had actually worked with that was written by a black playwright, but I felt that my feelings during the course were ambivalent. I was excited about the fact that we were working with material that was written by a POC, but at the same time, this material happened to be about race, sex, power positions, trauma, and interracial relationships. So naturally, it became a heavy material to work with, especially when the majority of the course was white. Even though the guest teacher was POC and we were two POC students, I still felt as if there was some kind of responsibility put on us. The three of us discussed the material as we were put into groups and to be honest, I remember so little of it because I think I took a distance to the material to protect myself, so that I would not have to feel a burden of being ‘stared’ at or ‘expected’ to have a specific opinion.

Whilst having this conversation with my professor, I asked them why they chose this text specifically out of all the material out there. They explained that they had not thought about the weight of the context itself, but rather how the play was written and the unique nuances it had coming from the play spheres of new drama. I absolutely understood this reason, since they chose it from their perspective as someone interested in working with text and how it is built. They also talked about choosing this material because it included specific details about the characters, such as the different shades of brown and their beauty. Hearing this perspective now makes complete sense to me, but there and then, in that course, it felt somewhat disappointing because, from my perspective, the story's context played a big role for me. It was difficult for me to appreciate that the only material by a Black author focused on slavery, race, and power dynamics. If it had been one among several works, it might have felt different—but as the only one, the enjoyment felt somehow limited. I was relieved to hear that my professor said that they genuinely did not think that it would have such an impact on me in that way, even though I already knew this, because one thing I am truly appreciative of from having the professor that we have is that since day one, they have been very clear about the importance of covering as much knowledge as possible about the different minorities we have in Finland and even globally.

So, in that sense, I suppose my education never felt completely Eurocentric. I also told them that I do understand the position that they are in when it comes to following some sort of ‘traditional’ curriculum expected from the so-called higher positions. The conversation ended up being a very heartfelt moment of sharing perspectives and we both realised and learnt something by having this discussion. For this I am thankful, knowing that by sharing this realisation, I might be able to affect the future of someone else’s studies and the material they get to work with.

I would also like to say that there are so many POC playwrights out there who I think should be included in the learning of theatre history. We never talked about these playwrights and their importance to black communities within the art field. For example, Lorraine Hansberry, she was the first Black female author to have their work *A Raisin in the Sun* performed on Broadway in 1959<sup>25</sup>. By having that play been put up, it opened doors for Black playwrights, actors and directors. It demonstrated that plays centered on Black families could succeed with mainstream audiences, and it challenged the industry’s assumptions about whose stories were “marketable.” This is still something I think Finland can take notes on by the way. Wole Soyinka is a poet, author, and playwright from Nigeria. We read one of his plays, *Death and the King’s Horseman*<sup>26</sup>, in an optional course I chose, called *Encountering Worlds*. In this course, we had a guest teacher, a Nigerian playwright, Onyeka Iwuchukwu. We discussed how this material was in a way ahead of its time because Soyinka merged African mythology and Western dramatic structure together, creating a new kind of global theatre. In this play, Soyinka showed that non-Western storytelling traditions could reshape modern drama and not just be represented within it. We discussed how he introduced Yoruba cosmology, ritual, and performance traditions into modern theatre, and this stayed with me. I thought, why did I not know about this play before? Imagine how rich and multiverse we would be as artists if we looked more into the non-Western plays and actually analysed and worked with them. Imagine, these two great examples are just one of many.

Moving on to the comment, *“In rehearsals for my second year (theater), the lights were only made for white skin to look good, and I asked about that and got the answer, ‘Oh, I never thought of that.’”* Let’s unfold this. This is something I mentioned earlier in my thesis, where I had a conversation with a friend (let us all them Tobi for anonymity), about the light design education. After reading the comment in my questionnaire, I asked Tobi to elaborate on the matter to see if they had considered it whilst working on and studying across various projects.

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<sup>25</sup> “Black Playwrights That Made a Mark on Theatre History,” *On The Stage*, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://onthestage.com/blog/black-playwrights-that-made-a-mark-on-theatre-history/>

<sup>26</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Eyre Methuen, 1975

Tobi said that the absence of learning about different lighting on different skin tones was very problematic in many layers. On a base layer, Tobi felt that because they had not been taught to carry this conversation, and with little to no knowledge about it, the threshold for bringing this up in a conversation with the POC in question felt very high. Not only because the knowledge is not fully there, but it would mean that the conversation would lean towards the POC having to figure it out with them, and frankly, it should not be on the shoulders of the POC at all, since it is not their job to do so. The job is to make sure that all actors on stage are equally visible when they are supposed to be visible, and if the skin tone is drastically different, it needs proper work to be balanced. This is something that Tobi was missing from their education, and not to have it as a fast topic but to truly study it so that they have the tools that are needed. As a finishing touch to this subject and with their consent, below is a comment written by Tobi on the matter as we were texting about it. At first, I wanted to write about each thing they said, but I realised that once again, the nuances and the details of what Tobi writes need to be read as a whole. The text is edited by me to keep both Tobi and the people mentioned, anonymous:

Of course, I could be wrong or just not in school on a particular day, but I don't think anyone ever talked about working with skin colour or tone. The only answer I got when I asked about it was, "Well, just put enough light so that everyone is visible. It's not that difficult." We took a whole two-week course on colour theory, but performers' skin colour never came up once.

The first time I genuinely started thinking about skin tones in my own lighting design was about a year ago, when I was working on a piece with two white actors. There was one scene where I was completely stuck trying to achieve a cold, simple lighting, but I couldn't get the colour tone right. With one colour, actor 1 looked like a corpse while actor 2 looked normal; with another, it was the other way around. This happened because of their different undertones, and it might not have been such a problem on a large stage, but in this case, I had a very small space and limited technical resources. Another example is from a recent course where we worked with different performances. In my group, there was one Black actor with very dark skin, while the others were white. In the first week, working with Renaissance theatre, we only used footlights. I simply couldn't achieve enough intensity for the one actor's face to be properly visible, while the others remained visible in dim lighting. Later, I added more fixtures, which solved the problem, but it still made me think.

In one demo, this same actor was clearly separated from the others, so I could give him great lighting. But in another, where everyone was constantly moving together, I added a lot of light so everyone would be visible—and got the comment: "Wow, the lights were really bright." I'd say this becomes a problem particularly on a black stage. If the set were more colourful, there would be fewer issues. It's also a directing question: you can't demand a very dark scene with a very dark-skinned actor on a black stage. People often call the black box neutral, but in my opinion, it's mainly neutral for white performers. If a scene isn't meant to obscure faces, then it's a design mistake if performers are not equally well-lit.

## Question 5

### **Is there anything you feel the institution could have better understood or supported during your studies?**

*(This question invites reflection on whether the institution met your needs during your studies. You may mention areas that felt supportive, lacking, or simply enough. It's okay if you don't feel there was anything missing.)*

"I do not believe in requesting such basic things of an institution, especially one that houses so many intellectuals. I think it's frankly insulting. If the institution wanted to address these issues, it could. They have the intellectual and practical capabilities to do so. There is only a deficit in practical willpower. A deficit that is not my responsibility to solve. I can only state the obvious."

"I wish that there would be more colour in the school in the future. I wish there were teachers who are also, in some way, foreigners, which would help us understand life and the world from other perspectives."

"I would have wanted my education to take more action regarding inclusion and making the pedagogical methods, material, and the education altogether more decolonial, feminist, and queer.

I would have liked mandatory courses regarding these subjects.

I would have wanted a more diverse group of teachers in terms of ethnic background and artistic practice.

I would have wanted recognition regarding the lack or poor representation of BIPOC identities and students in the school, and offered support and tools for me as a BIPOC student.

I would have wanted the possibility to work with other non-white artists.

I would have wanted a stronger focus on community building and braver spaces.

I would have liked a more diverse point of view of the "autonomous actor" "

"I don't hold anyone accountable for my needs. Especially anyone at white institutions. I come, I take, and learn what I need, and then I'll be on my way. Never ask for a handout or assistance. That's how I cope, and never can I be let down by this institution. It doesn't have that kind of "power" over me."

"Representation is important. Just that one course where we had a BIPOC lecturer felt really important for me."

“Not once have they asked about my culture or included broader aspects other than Europe. They can improve in including the world outside Europe when it comes to acting methods, cultures or just experiences.”

“Educating teaching staff on how to act (DEI education, don’t use the n-word in lectures)  
The anti-racist work that is done is not enough, and the continuity of it falls on the shoulders of poc students. That kind of uncompensated extra work is unreasonable to do while focusing on studies, and in order to maintain the well-being of poc students, more support would be needed.”

“I would have led courses where we act in different languages, monologues in different languages, drawn from various national literatures or poetry. More diversity among the teachers. Not a situation where the cleaners are people of colour and the teachers are white. Also, classmates might even better understand what it’s like to act in a foreign language. It could actually bring us closer together. Outside of school, I have actually worked more in other languages than in Finnish. So why isn’t this reflected at the university?”

“Sometimes I felt like some of the lecturers did their work routinely. Students are forced to use the same teaching methods in a performance-oriented atmosphere, without listening to their own personal needs. The problem was that the same dusty teaching methods have been in use for decades. The society around us is constantly changing, but the teaching methods of acting education is not.”

## Reflecting on the responses V

Alright, so let's talk about the strategy of not asking anything. When a person chooses not to ask for help, enlightenment, guidance, or support, they usually tend to stand in the thought of 'I'm capable and strong enough to do this on my own', it's a way of thinking that you are independent and do not need help. But what this does is that it puts extra work on the shoulders of the person in question, and the overall work becomes way more intense than it should have to be. What I am now referring to is the two people mentioning how they either do not expect the institution of giving the support needed, or how the need to request the basic needs feels insulting. This is their coping strategy, not relying on something so that they can avoid being disappointed.

This is a good time to talk about how the plant needs the seed to be planted for it to be able to grow. I think that in order for change to be applied, we need to talk about them and more importantly we need to demand them, and just as I mentioned earlier about the emotional labour, the conversation about this topic will nevertheless require that energy and emotional labour. It is just a matter of what is worth putting that energy into. For me, this entire thesis is, in a way, an emotional labour, but it is at the same time rewarding for me to be able to reflect on myself in the position I am in, as well as knowing (and hoping) that it will be read by someone who needs to hear all this. It can be for their personal sake, or it can be for the sake of change if the person reading is in a position to make change happen. So, even though the work requires emotional labour, staying silent also has its consequences. If not now, when? If not us, then who? Even though there have been multiple theses written by POC students from my school, where they mention these subjects about being a POC in the theatre field, it does make me question if teachers have taken them into consideration when creating the environments their students work in.

I read Geoffrey Eristas' master's thesis, *Valkoista vasten: Luettelo mustuuden illustraatioista*, in which he discusses the history of theatre in the western world in juxtaposition with African art history.<sup>27</sup> In his work, he examined how Black people have been viewed in theatre historically, as well as detailed the different ways African art has influenced Western theatre ideology, and it made me think about the subjects that are completely excluded from the theatre history taught in our school. Here, again, as I mentioned in my reflection from question 4, there are multiple interesting and important aspects that would only broaden our perspective of what theatre is, globally.

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<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Erista, *Valkoista vasten: luettelo mustuuden illustraatioista* (master's thesis, Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu, Uniarts, Helsinki, 2020)



In the thesis, Erista also reflects on his experiences of working in groups where he was the only person of colour, describing how expressing frustration about being perceived differently on stage could sometimes be met with misunderstanding from coworkers. The idea of being perceived as something because of the colour of your skin is where I would like to connect some of the comments in the questionnaire. In my bachelor's thesis<sup>28</sup>, I mentioned representation on stage and the importance of having it to be able to fully mirror the society we live in today, without POC actors having to bear the idea of someone reading them differently because of their skin colour. But in this thesis, I want to underline the importance of representation when someone leads or is the centre of a course. This is not only important for POC students, who may benefit from hearing and learning from people with similar experiences navigating a white-dominated field, but also for the white majority to see diversity in positions of authority. When students regularly see teachers from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, it gradually reshapes their imagination of who can occupy those roles, helping to normalize diversity rather than treating it as exceptional. One person commented on the important impact it had on them when they had a POC teacher leading a course; another mentioned how it would be nice to have teachers from different backgrounds to broaden understanding of worldviews. Another one expressed an interest in working on stage in different languages to learn about various national literatures and poetry. If the school were to put a budget on that, I think it would be an interesting opportunity.

Lastly, one person wrote "The society around us is constantly changing, but the teaching methods of acting education is not." This, for me, is the epitome of theatre reflecting society. If we are supposed to be artists who can reflect the world we live in, the institution is missing out on a very important moment. If the field can change its content, why can't the institution do so too? This is something I already reflected on earlier, after reading the Malmö Theatre Academy's statement on incorporating diverse material into its educational institution. I really do think we have come far enough in our time that education, especially in Finland, should be able to include this change of perspective in its curriculum. It feels outdated that we, as students, still have to learn about it outside the educational framework and repeatedly write about it in different essays, yet no real change ever happens, does it?

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Beyond Stereotypes*

# CHAPTER IV

## Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored how racial loneliness operates not only as a personal feeling but as something built into the theatre education. Schmidt's article '*No Count! BIPoC Artists Counteracting 'Fair' Representation and Systemic Racial Loneliness in Higher Education in the Arts,*' showed that permanent change can only come from the inside of the structure, and in the end of the day, diversity shouldn't be something you feel like you have to carry on behalf of a white institution, or any institution for that matter. It should be something the system is built to support, for you. It is not about the anti-racist weeks in schools or the optional diversity courses, but about what is consistently taught, who is represented in the material, and what kind of system students are asked to learn within. When I was writing this thesis, and I realised that I wanted to include a questionnaire, I thought about the emotional labour. I realised that some of these students, if not all of them, might not have the energy to answer the questions or that they feel some kind of hopelessness, like the Afro-nihilism earlier. One memory from my early years at the school was the anti-racism campaign. Students, especially POC students, were asked to pose for a photo and get a free tote bag to support the initiative. I remember talking to other POC students about it, and many of them laughed about it because they thought it was another surface-level gesture that left the underlying structures untouched. This is the kind of nihilism that exists inside the building, inside the structure made for the students. A white institution offering a helping hand through the exchange of visual representation in the form of a picture with a text basically saying, 'look, we're not racist!'. The institution would be nothing without its students, so why isn't the work done with and for them, rather than around them and at their expense?

As I approach the end of this thesis, I want to circle back to the questions introduced at the beginning: how Nordic theatre schools approach diversity and inclusivity, how tradition and institutional structures shape that approach, and how these ways and institutional environments are experienced by POC students. One of the clear conclusions I got from the research done is that many of the theatre education systems tend to, one after the other, express their support for diversity and inclusivity on paper. This, without a doubt, is already a great first step towards a more modern understanding of the basic attributes all schools should have. Let's start by calling it for what it is, the bare minimum. But comparing DEI plans and statements from different theatre academies shows that some schools are still far more ahead than others. Take Malmö Theatre Academy (MTA) as an example; they clearly state on their page what shape their plan towards more diversity will take, and more importantly, they list concrete initiatives already in motion. But after hearing about POC students' own experiences from the schools, I do still have a critical lens on that fact, since I never got the chance to hear it from an MTA student themselves.

Having a strong, broad curriculum not only benefits students but also the institution. If the institution produces actors, directors, playwrights, and artists in general, with a broad understanding of international art, they are offered not only tools and perspectives from a Eurocentric point of view, but also a more expansive and critical understanding of global artistic practices.

So, to answer my own question about the extent to which conservatism and tradition continue to shape the artistic training offered to students, I do believe that the institutional reputation is closely tied to these long-standing traditions, but then it also becomes necessary to ask whether this makes meaningful change harder or prevents the curriculum from becoming more diverse and inclusive. I am not saying that institutions should drop all classical theatre education, because it is just as important in shaping an artist. Many techniques, even though they are created by (mostly) white men, can still help create a sense of identity and self-understanding through other lenses. It does not always have to center on feelings of racial loneliness; sometimes these changes are simply necessary for institutions to remain relevant in an evolving world. However, what I am saying is that if the importance of having a stable and inclusive environment has not yet been understood, then something essential is being overlooked.

One might ask, what have I learned from this process as a whole? I have come to understand that feelings surrounding belonging have a lasting impact on students, even after they graduate. On the one hand, a student may leave school with a stronger sense of independence in their artistry, supported by a broad and nurturing curriculum, which can carry into the professional field in a meaningful and enriching way. On the other hand, some may leave with more questions than answers. The important thing is that the student can enter the work life with tools they can use in different environments where this development has not yet emerged. I have had many courses that were important to me in many ways. Some courses have been important because I have learnt something about myself and not just about the course's theme. Some courses truly helped me shape my understanding of who I am as an artist. One of them was the course *Fritt arbete*. It wasn't until a few months after my last project in that course that I realised I had multiple layers on me this whole time, and that they needed to be peeled away in each project to reveal my artistic core. Things I needed to get out of my system, things I just needed to do, just to have done it once, and then go full-on towards something that has nothing to do with that 'old version' of myself, rather, this new, awakened, limitless actor.

If there is something I wish had been done differently, it would be the more in-depth history of POCs within the theatre field. I would have wanted and even needed a strong representative in our curriculum, and it can be in the form of a teacher, a subject in theatre history, a play, or a playwright. I keep thinking about the argument that 'it takes time' to make these changes, but in all honesty, it is not about the time anymore; it is about the effort and lengths one goes to in order to make these changes.

For me, this continuation of Schmidt's ideas became more than just academic curiosity. It became personal. It gave me a vocabulary for things I've felt but didn't always know how to name. It helped me see that the loneliness wasn't just in my head; it was in the system too. Understanding this gave me hope about the future, knowing that it is a structure that can be deconstructed and rebuilt if there is enough material and workforce. My hope is that this thesis contributes to that process, even in a small way. I hope it offers material, reflection, and perspective to support the work that still needs to be done.

I hold much gratitude for the Theatre Academy of Helsinki, despite the challenges I encountered with my sense of belonging. Without those experiences, this thesis would not exist, and without this process, I would not have arrived at the sense of clarity, confidence, and empowerment I carry with me now. I also want to acknowledge my professor, Aune Kallinen, who consistently seeks out the cracks in established ways of thinking. Through their teaching, I was able to explore my identity in ways I did not expect, even if they would say that work was entirely my own.

This thesis should not be read only as a critique, but as a reflection, a guide, and a tool for imagining how theatre education can evolve into something more inclusive, supportive, and representative for all who enter it. Perfection may not be reachable, but meaningful change is. And perhaps that is where the work must begin, and continue.

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