

Research Article



The contestations of the gathered voices of Malmö

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Introduction

Malmö, Sweden, is a city smaller than its reputation. Stories about the city as a scary place – based on a master-narrative that combines black economy, street violence, and (allegedly failed) multiculturalism – depicts the part of the city's population that is racialised as non-white as a problem for (the proper) society and adds plight to the social vulnerabilities that this population handles in their everyday life. In a competing narrative, with strong proponents in City Hall and the local liberal newspaper *Sydsvenskan*, Malmö is an excitingly complex urban space, which is close to the European continent and open to the world. In this narrative, the multiculturalism of the city, and those seen to embody it, become a backdrop to urban middle-class life. Each in their own way, these two influential narratives about Malmö marginalise the voices from many of the city's inhabitants.

With less than 350,000 inhabitants, Malmö is counted as the third of Sweden's "big cities". Its dense city-plan however makes it a better example of the super-diverse urbanity typical for post-colonial Europe than the bigger city Gothenburg and the capital Stockholm. One third of Malmö's population is born outside of Sweden, more than half of the population has a parent with a migratory background, and almost 170 different languages are spoken in the city. Meanwhile, Malmö has the poorest population among Swedish cities, and is in fact the only Swedish city with a population that is getting poorer by the year. Sociologists Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein's insight that race is the way class is experienced seems to capture something important about the contemporary Malmö experience.

For a couple of years, we have been first the conveners of and then participants in, but also observers of a diverse group of professionals and civil society actors that have worked together to invent a way to enhance the right to the city in Malmö by engaging in sustained conversations around life stories from the large part of the city's population that is working-class and exposed to structural as well as subjective racism. The result of that voluntary work is the association the Gathered Voices of Malmö (hereafter MSR from its name in Swedish: *Malmö's samlade röster*).

The activists, community leaders, scholars, museum professionals, playwrights, and others that have been part of setting up the MSR have found common ground in the need to supplement their already ongoing work for social justice and political recognition with a cultural facility that would challenge dominant narratives about Malmö and let people living in that city work with their experiences and visions for the future in their own ways and for their own causes.

What follows is our story about the MSR, derived from interviews with some of its founding members, of what we did when we were assigned to do an ongoing evaluation of the expanding life-story process. Our conversations (of which only a few are quoted in this article) have given MSR's members possibilities to reflect on their activities and connect them to their life stories and stories about living in Malmö, with us as active listeners.

From research initiation project to cultural association

“It all started with that meeting at the university, that in a pedagogical and exciting way introduced the work we had before us ... It was like you [Robert] said: “This is how I see things ... Shall we do something about it?” But you never said what we should do or how we should do it.”

This is how Rena Baledi – who is an organiser in the association Swedish Queer Initiative and at the time of the meeting was also working at the Museum of Movement – remembers the start of the process leading up to the formation of the MSR. She is talking about a workshop at Malmö University in 2019 that brought together for the first time a professionally and socially diverse group of people, of whom some would go on to form the MSR. The discussions on that day were initiated and framed by Robert Nilsson Mohammadi’s presentation on how established narratives about the city contribute to sustaining its inequalities.

This workshop marked the start of a research initiation project called Malmö Life Stories, aimed at adapting the methods from the Montreal Life Stories Project which was done between 2007 and 2012 by scholars at Concordia University and their partners in some of Montreal’s diasporic communities. At the workshop, Steven High from the Concordia Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling spoke about how their Montreal-based life story-project had been organised. All the participants then presented the life-story work they had done as museum professionals, stage-producers or community-leaders, for example. Rena Baledi describes the day:

“We started off from a message on what is problematic in our situation that was recognised by all the social movement people at the meeting, since we are working against it in our every-day organising and community-building. We all had our previous experiences of having done life story-work, but in different ways as activists, researchers, playwrights and so on. And we also had the example from Montreal that showed what could be done by a collective life story-project. We were given this vision of how it could work, and then we chose what was useful for us.”

What made the Montreal Life Stories Project so appealing to the group in Malmö was that it showed how differently situated actors can work together for the creation of knowledge that benefits every participant. The Montreal Life Stories Project was a collaboratively designed process, rather than a process invented by an institution, that only later included interviewees. The project demonstrated how insights from oral history research could be used to break free from what sociologist, Sujatha Fernandes, has called the “political economy of storytelling” by putting the traditional division of labour between those who provide facts and those who add analysis out of play. No one could be part of the Montreal Life Stories Project without first having been interviewed, and everyone who was interviewed was then given the opportunity to be trained to become an interviewer for the project. Although the project was run by a research institution, it did not start with a set of research questions. However, many research questions emerged along the course of the collaboration that lasted for years. All groups that participated were interested in life stories, but for different reasons. The Montreal Life Stories Project was therefore designed in such a way that different life story projects were carried out side by side within a shared process. When everyone made something for themselves, everyone could

also learn from each other's work. In this way, community projects, activist projects, artistic projects and research projects could actively develop each other. The Montreal Life Stories Project was based on the principles of learning together and learning from each other.

"From that first day at the university I remember Steven High's lecture", playwright Cecilia Nkolina says in one of our interviews. "At that time, I didn't know there was a thing called oral history and I certainly didn't know about this collaborative way of doing it. It gave me a strong feeling of having come to a context in which I could talk about the ways of working I had learnt on my own when doing interviews for the stage, and about the dilemmas I had encountered when doing it."

The MSR has taken some of the approaches from the Montreal Life Stories Project but has also invented its own ways of working. For example, one conclusion from the first year of working together was that instead of being part of a coalition under a university-project umbrella (which was the way of working in Montreal), the community partners wanted to create an association of their own. Cecilia Nkolina stresses that without self-organising, talks with institutions and their representatives have been hard:

"Even on that first day at the university it was really hard to be in dialogue with the academics. I don't understand what makes it so hard to talk to university people. It's like they are talking another language. You know, like when you say something, and it just drops to the floor or into a void. It was lucky that Steven High made such a different impression, humble and curious yet affirming, otherwise I would have left. And of all those academics who were at the workshop it is only you two [the interviewers] who have done hard and unpaid work like the rest of us."

Forming an association meant that the group could organise itself more transparently, make decisions in a more democratic way, apply for its own funding, and form a more equal partnership with the university. The research initiation project that occasioned the group's first meeting actually became dependent on maintaining good relations with the association which had a network in the city, and best practices when it came to knowing how to do life story-work in the local context. Rena Baledi explains the choice to form an association from her perspective:

"We in the MSR want to be clear with that we are creating something for ourselves, something that we need and that is useful for us as we go on living in the city. We are not giving voice to our neighbours; we are creating an ever-expanding forum in which we can talk and sometimes make statements based on what we learn when we keep on talking. By being an association, institutions must seek our partnership and I think they will do that because we are grounded in the city, we are developing ways to work, and a collection of high-quality oral history interviews that they might want to get access to. We do not want to be let into the institutions, because one experience that we realised that many in the group shared was that such inclusion always has come with conditions. Instead, we want institutions for culture and research to find a role in the work we have initiated and are leading."



Reclaiming community

“At my first meeting, Rena read that presentation text that you all had put together, and I was blown away. This is the most meaningful and important project I have ever been part of,” says Showan Shattak who is a well-known anti-racist organiser and community leader in Malmö.

In our interviews, but also at MSR’s meetings, Showan Shattak often comes back to the moment that he heard the MSR’s statement of purpose at his first meeting with the association. At a later meeting, he explained that this text impressed him so much because it touched upon his experience that non-white, working-class peoples’ attempts to build community in Malmö have often been questioned and attacked. At the same meeting, he

provided an analysis of how the scary-city narrative of Malmö depicts this population as a problem that needs to be dealt with, and thus hides away all they do as agents in the making of a sustainable city. He then went on to interpret the other master-narrative about Malmö – the exciting-city narrative – as asking poor Malmöites to stand back and make space for a new-coming, middle-class population. At the meeting he also made the remark that recent depictions of Malmö as a “transit-city” affirm the notion that Malmö is not a city worth caring for, but a city that you are expected to leave when you have gotten what you want from it. This representation is consistent with his witnessing of how a conjunction of landlords, the municipality and sometimes the police have shut down voluntary social activities, and forced associations to move their meeting places away from the city centre so that big companies could move in.

When telling about her time growing-up in Malmö in one of our interviews, Rena Baledi also reflected on her impression that it is not possible for poor and non-white people to create a future while staying in the city. For Rena, passing through higher education and becoming a professional meant that she could remain in the gentrifying city by switching sides, but at the same time it has made her uncertain about if she still belongs to the city which she sees as her home and heritage:

“It was fun to grow up in Malmö, but I have also learnt many lessons from it. Malmö prepared me for life, but I don’t think that Malmö prepared everyone for life. In order to attain a tolerable life, some of those I grew up have been forced to move. The remaining ones have the lowest paid jobs in the service sector. If I am looking at my childhood friends, many are living in the areas where they grew up. Those who did not study are stuck in the same places. Some of those who stayed are among those who are now criminal, dead or on welfare. It is like you can’t stay and be successful in this city. I feel guilty about it. Guilty because... why am I doing this? Why is not everyone living a good life when I am?”

Gains and losses

After the meeting at Malmö University, intensive group work began. Most of this work was done during the Covid-19 pandemic, which made collaborative work in a socially diverse group especially hard. When the regulations allowed for it, the group met at the Museum of Movements, which at that time was operating a venue in central Malmö that was designed for involving people that usually don’t visit cultural institutions such as museums in the co-creation of knowledge and culture.

During the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020, the participants shared their different ways of doing life-story interviewing and what they wanted to learn in order to do it better, what they wanted to get out of participating, what they thought that they could create together, and how the joint work should be organised in order to be democratic and inclusive. Meanwhile, the composition of the group changed. Rena Baledi looks back on this period:

“What we were doing had no clear goal at the time. It was confusing for some, while others saw it as a possibility and for them things clarified. Some stayed, some joined, and others moved on. We lost those who were a bit older, or that didn’t have Swedish as their first language, and maybe there is a class dimension to who stayed and who left but I am not sure about that. It seems like it was easier for the younger ones to go digital when the pandemic started and we could not meet.”

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Besides offering a venue for the formation of the MSR, the Museum of Movements also hired Robert Nilsson Mohammadi as a project manager, and in that capacity, he organised a course in oral history methodology for the MSR. In the interviews with the MSR's members, this course is remembered as an opportunity to have more focused discussions about the group's aims and approaches, and the regularity of the classes is said to have helped structure the work during the pandemic. Having a syllabus supplied the group with common references and inspiration. The group's choice to name its association Malmö's Gathered Voices was inspired by how oral historian Alessandro Portelli represents the urban experience of Rome as a choral in his book *The Order has been Carried Out*.

"It was really important that we did that course in oral history while we were doing the preparatory work for the founding of the associations," Showan Shattak reflects.

And Rena Baledi remembers the autumn of 2020:

"We became fewer but also tighter. We became close by talking oh so much and by spending time together. Now we are a smaller group of really dedicated people that believe life story-interviewing to be an important part of what we are doing to improve our conditions in the city. We were brought together by what we wanted to do, but also by starting to like each other."

The decision to form the association MSR was made at the Museum of Movements. This meeting happened to be one of the last activities that took place at the museum, since it was dismantled and closed its operations by the turn of the year. The shutdown of the Museum of Movements meant that the MSR lost an important institutional sponsor, but also the access to the museum as an infrastructure that invited the kind of public and private conversations the MSR believes are lacking in Malmö. What comes forth the most when the members of the MSR look back at this in the interviews is feelings of having been evicted from a space that had begun to feel like home.

Showan Shattak sees the closure of the Museum of Movements as part of the ongoing and politically supported gentrification of the city, but he also sees it as yet another loss of the spaces in which the city's working-class population created something for themselves and where their experiences were valorised:

"It's like the true city exists below the city that is seen, or projected. But the true city has been made invisible and not been given any platform or resources. Below the ideological narratives, other experiences and visions swarm. Take Möllevångsfestivalen [an annual community-based block party made in the area where Showan Shattak lives] as an example. It was created from below but then the municipality decided that it should be subjected to the same security demands as Malmöfestivalen. But the difference is that Malmöfestivalen is held by the municipality and can afford to have more than twenty full time employees, while we were working on a voluntary basis. We have been forced to leave our collective meeting places. There is a fancy cheese shop in the place where our community organisation Möllevångsgruppen used to have its centre. The place where the non-profit café Glassfabriken will soon become an architectural office. All the small businesses and associations in the block where the Ubisoft Studio Massive Entertainment established itself had to go away. Also, the Museum of Movements, the politicians didn't see any value in it. Also, all the things that professionals and community members did at the museum have been made invisible."

Organising to care for each other's stories

In a discussion about how to work, interview and present stories ethically, the group phrased its mission to be to care for each other's stories. The framing of what the group is doing as a kind of care work emerged from a discussion about the idea that oral history expresses a shared authority and became the group's articulation of that idea within its own praxis.

The concept of a shared authority was first coined by historian Michael Frisch in a meditation on the question of who should be considered the author of oral history. Frisch uses the concept to facilitate critical readings of how the voices seemingly heard to talk directly to the reader of oral history are produced in historically mediated social relations, which shape the voices. The concept opens for inquiry the labour process behind creating stories, voices, and historical interpretations. After Frisch's publication, oral historians have tended to apply the concept methodologically, in order to create research processes that are more inclusive and democratic.

By talking about their work as a care work, the members of the MSR have shown how the interpretations of a shared authority as a critical concept and as a methodological or ethical approach can and needs to be bridged. In the MSR, to care for each other's stories prescribes an approach that the members want to have when interviewing, but it also means to create a setting in which stories can be more fully developed, explored and compared without being dissolved into a new master narrative. It further means taking good care of what is handed over to the association by interviewees inside and outside of it, so that stories are not once more hid away but made to mean something. This also means making sure that the stories in the association's growing archive are not used in ways that do harm or is unwanted by the tellers.

Caring for stories in the gentrifying city of Malmö means to give them some kind of permanency by way of recording and archiving, while at the same time avoiding once again fixating the identity of the city and its inhabitants by assuming the position of voice-giver. To avoid that, caring for stories has also taken on the meaning of engaging more and more people in critical readings of their own stories, as well as on their conditions to speak publicly.

Learning from the Gathered Voices of Malmö

When listening to the interviews with the founding members of the MSR, it is hard to tell which theme is most strongly pronounced. Descriptions of becoming close, maybe even becoming part of an extended family, setting up a new public sphere or maybe opening a pathway to a city within the city, and mending wounds, competes with talk about having to resist strong tendencies to be governed, supply value to the city and its branding, and fear of being pushed aside. A third theme has to do with questions about how to connect to one another through acts of listening and storytelling that is ethical, promotes equality and that places the city and the development of stories through which it is understood in

the hands of its citizens.

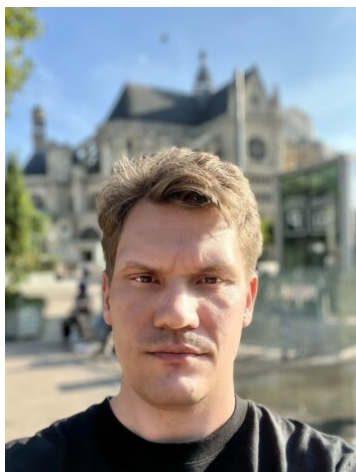
When we look at the interviews and the processes to which they relate from a strictly scholarly perspective, we see that they contain knowledge that could be formalised and generalised through scholarly examination. Being part of the formation of the MSR has helped us to develop research questions and project applications we would not have been able to produce on our own. The knowledge that is forming within the MSR could be valuable for cultural institutions and researchers that want to include people in their work in order to make it relevant. Not least, the interviews let us glimpse ourselves as scholars doing co-creation, and which of our approaches that have been successful:

“As we worked together, we became tighter”, Rena Baledi explained in one of our interviews. “I think that happened when we understood that no one would come and solve things for us, when we understood that we are the owners of this thing. We decide both how the work will be done and the path it will take. I think that it has a lot to do with how you [Robert] started it all, but then kept saying: ‘I don’t know’. Like: ‘I don’t know. You have to decide.’ You have said that so many times. You initiated it, but then you showed that we were the ones making the decisions.”

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Robert Nilsson Mohammadi serves as the theme leader for urban humanities at Malmö University's Institute for Urban Research (IUR), where he coordinates the development of a research environment and hub dedicated to urban humanities.

His current work focuses on how local actors handle the afterlives of far-right racist attacks. By studying public memory art in various cities affected by far-right violence, his research introduces a spatialized, urbanized, and translocal perspective to memory work conducted by those impacted by such violence. He also approaches this topic through the framework of reparative remembering, investigating alternatives to dominant critical approaches and examining how cultural production and spatial practices can be reparative.

Another key research interest concerns participatory practices in the production of culture and knowledge in the public sphere. He approaches this both critically and creatively, analyzing the conditions for just co-production within an unequal society and a political economy that often reinforces the divide between those who contribute experiences and those who refine theories. A central concept in his work is "shared authority." He also studies community art and community archives as examples of participatory knowledge production in urban public spaces.



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Sima Wolgast has been a psychologist since 2007, and a psychotherapist since 2013. She worked as a clinician before engaging in social psychological research. In 2013, she began her doctoral studies in a project about discrimination in the labour market. Her thesis aimed to study different factors influencing recruiters when recruiting from an applicant pool including applicants from ethnic groups other than white Swedish. Ethnicity was predicted to influence recruiters' perception and behaviour in different phases during recruitment. In collaboration with the Stockholm County Administrative Board in 2018, she conducted an extensive quantitative investigation into the segregation and discrimination of Afro-Swedes in the workplace. Wolgast currently works as a Senior Lecturer at Lund University. She is involved in research that focuses on developing countermeasures against segregation and discrimination, and interventions that promote psychological well-being in minorities. As a senior lecturer at the Department of Psychology she teaches courses in psychotherapy, creativity, social psychology, and conversational methods. In recent years she has been working with collaborative oral history in Malmö.