Chapter 5
Black Oslo

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In Norway, numerous demonstrations were organized in response to the murder of George Floyd in the USA in May 2020. The "We Can't Breathe – Justice for George Floyd"[1] demonstration, arranged by the African Student Association (ASA) of the University of Oslo and the organization Afrikans Rising in Solidarity and Empowerment (ARISE), mobilized more than 15,000 people on June 5. It was Oslo's second and largest protest in response to the killing. The organizations sought to highlight the ongoing problem of structural racism and inequality in Norway, not just in the USA. In media interviews and statements, they referred to Norwegian examples of police violence and the police's use of excessive force, as well as to discriminatory attitudes and practices that have led to structural inequality and experiences of racism. The most egregious example of police violence in Norway is the case of Nigerian-born Eugene Obiora, who, aged 48, died in Trondheim in 2006 after police restrained him using a chokehold. Reportedly, the same policeman who killed Obiora had also been involved in another controversial case seven years earlier involving 21-year-old Ghanaian-born Sophia Baidoo, who was also restrained in a chokehold, but survived. Public opinion and debate surrounding these incidents pointed to discrimination, minority rights, and police brutality as issues of concern for antiracism organizations and activists.

The same protest transformed the historic Eidsvolls Plass (Eidsvoll's Square) in front of the Norwegian parliament into a new site of meaning in the symbolic landscape of Black Oslo. The concept "symbolic landscape"

1 The original title of the demonstration was "We Can't Breathe – Rettferdighet for George Floyd."

describes a constellation of emotionally important components and highly visible venues that have different emotional significance for social actors in the public field (Ross 2007; 2009). The demonstration and the perceived messages of the organizers and protesters became central to a renewed racism debate that is still ongoing. As the site of a collective mobilization for anti-racism and social justice, the demonstration became a platform for voicing claims about historic inequality and articulating demands for new framings of equality and social justice.

In the following weeks, the public discourse quickly turned to definitions of racism, including everyday racism and structural racism in the Norwegian context. Many individuals with a so-called minority background shared personal narratives of discrimination and highlighted important examples of how individual incidents of discrimination contribute to systemic and structural inequality. In the public discourse that played out in traditional and social media, the stories were met with an array of responses, such as empathy and support, but also criticism and provocation. Debates focused on the claim that racism in Norway is still a hindrance to quality of life and social mobility. How could a country with such strong social democratic and egalitarian principles and anti-discrimination legislation be fertile ground for racism and structural inequality? Some critics commented that the demonstration illustrated, among other things, the importation of political issues, racism discourses, and 'identity politics' from the USA.

There were many different contributions to the racism debates, which ranged from serious and constructive to sensational and superficial. Nevertheless, the demonstrations had mobilized a new social engagement and political interest that highlighted issues of self-representation and historical visibility. Later that year, in October 2020, the organization Black History Month Norway kicked off its second celebration in Oslo. With a host of new prestigious institutional partners, such as the National Library of Norway, the National Gallery of Art, Architecture, and Design, and the Deichman Public Library, producing more than 15 events. Black representation and definitional power were central to the program theme, "From Fragments to History" (*Fra fragmenter til historie*).[2]

2 "Black History Month Norway 2020," May 18, 2021 (https://www.omod.no/post/black-history-month-norway-2020)

In addition, the Fritt Ord Foundation, a private non-profit organization that promotes freedom of expression, public debate, art, and culture, commissioned an analysis and report titled *Covering the Debate on Racism in Norwegian Media, 1 May 2020–31 August 2020*.[3] The report was prepared by Retriever, Scandinavia's largest media monitor and analyst. Described as a "media analysis of racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement," the report underscored a deep sense of "before" and "after" the demonstration.[4] It illustrated the national relevance of George Floyd's death as a catalyst for widespread demonstrations and public debate. The analysis also highlighted the media's active role in the Norwegian racism debate that ensued following antiracism solidarity protests around the country.[5] These debates also explored the issue of historical representation involving monuments and statues commemorating controversial persons such as Swedish scientist Carl von Linné (1707–78) and British statesman Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965), as mentioned in Chapter 3.

Figure 5.1: The "We Can't Breathe – Rettferdighet for George Floyd" demonstration at Eidsvolls Plass in Oslo. Photograph: Lila Zotou, 2020

3 Homepage of The Fritt Ord Foundation (https://frittord.no/en/home)

4 Report Launch Event: "Covering the Debate on Racism in Norwegian Media," November 11 2020 (https://frittord.no/en/calendar/report-launch-event-covering-the-debate-on-racism-in-norwegian-media)

5 Demonstrations were also held in several cities, including Arendal, Aurland, Bergen, Hamar, Harstad, Skien, Sortland, Stavanger, Tromsø, Trondheim, and Volda.

The demonstrations that occurred in Oslo and around the country in June 2020 were not the first antiracism demonstrations held in the city. In October 1976, the Foreign Workers' Association,[6] along with antiracism allies and other immigrant and labor organizations, had staged an anti-discrimination and antiracism demonstration at University Square, a few blocks from Eidsvolls Plass. It was a response to anti-immigration policies, such as the 1975 immigration ban, and to increasing racism and structural inequality that impacted immigrant populations at the time (Røsjø 2007).[7] On May 8, 2007, OMOD Center for Social Justice and the Norwegian Centre Against Racism staged a protest outside the Ministry of Justice and Police, demanding an independent investigation into the death of Obiora.[8] In June 2021, ARISE and ASA commemorated the anniversary of the 2020 demonstration, acknowledging the continued relevance of antiracism and the need for collective action and responsibility.

The significance of Black spaces of representation in Oslo as contact zones – places or frontiers for "meetings" where "people geographically and historically separated encounter each other and establish ongoing relationships" (Pratt 1992: 6) – emerges through the interactions between people who meet and engage there. As a contact zone, the Oslo demonstration on June 5 engaged not only the 15,000 demonstrators but also those who observed and discussed their experiences. The demonstration had historical relevance and gave legitimacy to self-historicizing narrative practices about the value of Black lives and histories (see Espeland and Rogstad 2013: 128; Das 1995).

6 The Foreign Workers' Association (FAF), founded in 1972, focused on issues of human rights and the interests of foreign workers. Important mobilization issues for FAF were residence permits, family reunification, and discrimination in work life and the housing market. The association published the newspaper *Fremmedarbeideren* in 1974. The immigration ban that parliament introduced in 1975 affected many foreign workers (see Røsjø 2007).

7 On May 8, 2007, OMOD Center for Social Justice and the Norwegian Centre Against Racism staged a protest outside the ministry of justice and police, demanding an independent investigation into the death of Obiora.

8 Subsequent demonstrations were held in Oslo on May 19 and August 25, 2007 and January 4, 2008.

European Attraction Unlimited: A Temporary Site of Collective Memory

Examples of the social construction of space include the definitional power mobilized by the "Congolese Village," a temporary art installation constructed by Swedish-born Lars Cuzner and Sudanese-born Mohamed Ali Fadlabi in 2014. According to a text attributed to Will Bradley, artistic director of Kunsthall Oslo:

> The challenge in thinking through Lars Cuzner and Mohamed Ali Fadlabi's proposal to recreate the Congolese Village exhibit from Oslo's 1914 centenary exhibition is to escape the straightforward statement that it seems to offer.[9]

Fadlabi and Cuzner named the project after the London-based company European Attraction Unlimited, run by entertainment entrepreneur Benno Singer, who was the director of the Amusement Department at the 1914 exhibition that marked the centennial anniversary of the 1814 constitution. Adding to the numerous human zoos and colonial exhibitions that were celebrated in Germany (see Chapter 1) and other European countries, Oslo also participated in this colonial cultural tradition, staging *Kongolandsbyen* (Congolese Village) during the fair in 1914. Solidifying the dissolution of its more than 500-year union with the ruling kingdom of Denmark, the 1914 exhibition celebrated not just the centennial of the 1814 Norwegian constitution but also the nation's recent economic and cultural achievements. The exposition focused on industry, agriculture, and shipping, but organizers also aimed to entertain the public. There was an amusement park, which consisted of the Congolese Village, a Ferris wheel, a 700-meter roller coaster, and other attractions.

The staged Congolese Village presented 80 African inhabitants from Senegal in a theatrical setting. As many as 1.4 million spectators are reported to have visited the exhibition, where they encountered African adults and children, dressed in allegedly "traditional" clothes, using supposedly "authentic" tools and objects, and performing what were assumed to be "ordinary" African activities. According to newspaper reports, the village consisted of approximately 20 huts built by the "villagers," who cooked meals, sang, danced, and performed religious rituals (Graff 2004). At that time in Europe,

9 Website of Lars Cuzner: https://larscuzner.com/european-attraction-limited/

these productions were billed as entertainment but also as contributions to public information bordering on education, offering eager and curious Norwegians a unique opportunity to see Africans firsthand (many for the first time) and to observe them as "exotic" beings in their "natural" habitat engaging in everyday activities.

The archival evidence tells us, however, that the individuals in the 1914 "Congolese Village" were recruited from different Senegalese populations. The man whom newspapers referred to as "the village chief" (Ytreberg 2014a; 2014b) was Jean Thiam, a resident of Dakar, a jeweler and property owner who also participated in local politics. Thiam had taken part in the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris. Professor and media scholar Espen Ytreberg suggests that Thiam functioned as an employer or manager for the unidentified Senegalese. These elements further reveal the complex nature of Black representation in Norway – in 1914 as well as in 2014.

The extent to which the Congolese Village exhibition in 1914 provided Norwegians new insights into how Africans lived or merely reinforced racial stereotypes and ideas about a racial hierarchy is highly debatable. The public's reactions ranged from curiosity and excitement to discomfort and disgust. For example, some spectators seemed surprised or fascinated by the similarities between the demeanor of African and European children, while for others the exhibition confirmed the notion of African people and culture as primitive and inferior to civilized Europeans.

The 1914 jubilee exhibition took place in the then capital Kristiania, which later was renamed Oslo. A committee founded in 1908 had applied for funds from parliament and the Kristiania municipality. A total budget of 2,850,000 NOK[10] was approved to fund the exhibition, which covered 40,0000 square meters and included six thematic departments and 19 sections (Hammer 1928: 413–14). The government and Kristiania municipality contributed 500,000 NOK and 300,000 NOK respectively, while organizers hoped to raise an additional 800,000 NOK through a lottery and ticket sales (ibid.).[11]

As part of the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of Norway's constitution in 2014, the government funded the reenactment of the "human zoo," which

10 The equivalent of approximately 202,600,000 NOK or €21,325,500 in 2021.

11 The amounts are equivalent to the following 2021 values: 300,000 NOK (1908) is 21,325,500 NOK or €2,245,000 (2021); 500,000 NOK (1908) is 35,500,000 NOK or €3,750,000 (2021); and 800,000 NOK (1908) is 57,000,000 NOK or €6,000,000 (2021).

sparked debates with antiracism organizations. In recreating this critical event, Fadlabi and Cuzner's project sought to raise important questions about Black and African representation in Norway, the country's relationship to colonial history, and discourses about racism in 1914 and 2014. They also organized the conference "European Attraction Unlimited," which assembled experts and researchers in art and African history to probe the historical context of race, inequality, and representation surrounding the Congolese Village projects. Themes included Afrocentric historical perspectives, material conditions that enabled imperialism, ideologies of racial hierarchy, and the problematic industry surrounding human zoos or exhibitions that showcased indigenous peoples and traditions as "exotic" and "primitive" for white spectators.

The artists conceived the project as a public dialogue and experiment that would address historical patterns of injustice and asymmetrical power relations between Africa and Europe and their populations. This created an opportunity to question the material conditions and power relations that shaped perceptions of racism and representation in 1914 and 2014. Had understandings and practices of racism, "othering," and exotification really changed at all? To say that Fadlabi and Cuzner's project engaged the public is an understatement. Reactions ranged from amusement and curiosity, to concern, irritation, and provocation. Critics questioned whether a reenactment of a racist spectacle could effectively articulate a critique of racism in the past and the present. Others argued that any reenactment or replica of the 1914 Congolese Village could inadvertently reinforce racist attitudes and stereotypes (cf. Khan-Østrem 2014).

Another perspective was that the project might have benefited from the use of more archival evidence and information about the "villagers" in the 1914 exhibition. Ytreberg, for example, noted that the 1914 Congolese Village was part of a broader tradition of public display and information dissemination (Ytreberg 2014b). The 1914 jubilee exhibition program also featured a small farm operated by the Kalby family, Norwegian farmers from Midtskogen near Jessheim (Ytreberg 2014a). In this sense, both the Congolese "villagers" and the Norwegian farmers were human exhibits. The Norwegian family, however, was part of the agriculture and industry presentation, located inside the main exhibition area, and intended to illustrate Norwegian farming methods. In contrast, the Congolese Village was part of the entertainment department, separated from the "serious" exhibitions and located

outside the entrance. Promoting European superiority, it was designed as a contrasting showcase of "exotic" people and culture from Africa.

European Attraction Unlimited and its 2014 Congolese Village project were a critical event, not only because they engaged the public in an important debate about racism and representation in Norway. Some of the most outspoken critics of the project were individuals from the Black community who feared that the mere replication of such a dehumanizing spectacle might retraumatize their members, not to mention delight anti-Black racists. As the editorial written by Nazneen Khan-Østrem suggested, amid the persistent denial of racism in Norway, the complicated debate among Norwegians of African descent – and the, at times, uncomfortable majority–minority interaction – the Congolese Village was a "mental state" (Khan-Østrem 2014). The art project was designed to mobilize taboos, stereotypes, and discomfort that obscure racism and inequality. Inadvertently, perhaps, the project also revealed the complexity of Black Oslo – its scars, vulnerabilities, and competing self-images.

Figure 5.2: Mohamed Ali Fadlabi and Lars Cuzner's "Congolese Village" recreated in Frogner Park in 2014. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kongolandsbyen_2014.JPG. Photograph: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, 2014

In May 2014, after much controversy and debate, the artists reconstructed their model of the Congolese Village at the site of the 1914 village campus in Frogner. Instead of populating the recreated Congolese Village with African bodies, before the opening, the artists had published an open call for volunteers to participate in the village by displaying themselves. When the artists opened the attraction, the public became both collective spectators and spectacle, as individuals were left to ponder each other's curious and "othering gazes." In this way, Cuzner and Fadlabi further engaged the public in antiracist and postcolonial debates by creating a new spectacle that questioned existing understandings of what it means to perpetuate and challenge racism in the past and the present.

Colonial Innocence and Cultural Contestation

Power structures, material conditions, and sociopolitical factors have also influenced broader social processes, such as public debate and knowledge production. The construction and production of historical narratives, monuments, and memorial sites are manifestations of these processes (Trouillot 1995; Low 2000). In public discourses, many community leaders and activists have addressed different kinds of power and historical processes from the perspectives of minorities and People of African, Asian, and Caribbean Descent. Take, for example, human rights activist and cultural critic Khalid Salimi's book *Rasismens Røtter: Da Rasisme Kom Til Norge* (*The Roots of Racism: When Racism Came to Norway*) (1987). He discusses how racism, definitional power, and representation can be understood in relation to broader histories of European colonialism, extremist ideologies such as fascism and Nazism, as well as global inequality. In *Mangfold og Likeverd* (*Diversity and Equality*) (Salimi 1996), Salimi, a former leader of the Norwegian Centre Against Racism (1983–98), engages younger readers in a discussion about race relations in Norway, citing the need for knowledge grounded in respect for human dignity.

Consider, for example, that while scientist Carl von Linné developed his perspectives on the racial categories of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the world was engaged in lucrative triangular economic activities – enslavement that trafficked Africans and traded goods between Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. From the Reformation in 1536 until 1814, Norway was part

of the Danish Empire, which built the Christiansborg fort, now called Osu Castle in the current city of Accra, Ghana, between 1659 and 1661. At first, this stronghold became the seat of the Danish governor, who oversaw the colonized peoples and land on the so-called Gold Coast, but later the fort became an important support point for enslavement. The twin kingdom of Denmark and Norway was active with its route between Christiansborg on the Gold Coast of Africa and the Caribbean colonies, now known as Saint Croix and the US Virgin Islands, but formerly called the Danish West Indies.

As part of Denmark–Norway, many Norwegian residents and regions engaged in and benefited from the enslavement and trafficking of Africans during this period. In the 17th century, the Bergen businessman Jørgen Thormøhlen (1640–1708) invested in the city's shipping economy and became the largest ship owner and industrialist in the country. His good relations with Denmark's King Christian V led to Thormøhlen's appointment as commerce director (minister of trade) in 1682. Thormøhlen managed all trade with the Danish–Norwegian colonies in the Caribbean between approximately 1690 and 1700 (Mardal and Fossen 2020). It is said that because of this economic system, the period 1770–89 was a heyday for Denmark–Norway. However, the abolition of the trade in enslaved Africans in 1792 was not the end of enslavement; it took until 1848 for it to be abolished in their colonies.

There is ample scholarship and archival evidence to nuance and even refute notions of Norwegian colonial innocence, which underpin many denials of racism and the historical conditions of inequality that the Benjamin Hermansen bust and Ruth Reeses Plass address (to be discussed later). Two important examples are Bergen-based journalist Claus Fasting's (1746–91) anti-slavery writings and the works of activists of the Sámi movement, such as Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1931) and Karin Stenberg (1884–1969) from the southern Sámi-speaking region of Sweden. As historian Aina Nøding explained, in the Danish–Norwegian and European context, Fasting was an early and unreserved opponent of enslavement, even though – or perhaps because – he had relatives and friends who profited greatly from sugar plantations in the Caribbean (see Nøding 2018: 201–5). In 1778, Fasting used his magazine *Provinzialblade* (Bergen, 1778–81) to argue against enslavement and to directly oppose the excuses of Danish and religious authorities, both in articles and through translations of stories of enslavement and the trading of Africans.

Furthermore, newspaper announcements from the 18th century confirm the presence of enslaved Africans and Caribbeans living in Norway with their Danish and Norwegian enslavers who had returned from the Danish–Norwegian colonies and the United Kingdom. On September 8, 1777, the year before Fasting published his antiracist writings, a baptismal announcement for a Black woman called "Christine" or "Juliana Maria" appeared in the newspaper *Bergens Adressecontoirs Efterretninger*: "This Negro belongs to Mad. Dischingthun who brought her from the West Indies to this place."[12] About ten years before Fasting's publication, the merchant frigate *Fredensborg* had already sailed from Accra to Saint Croix with a cargo that consisted of 265 Africans. Sugar, tobacco, mahogany, and ivory were in the hold when the ship sank on December 1, 1768 at Gitmertangen at the eastern end of the island of Tromøy in Norway. The wreck was found in August 1974. The examples above demonstrate Norway's role in enslavement and colonization, which can also be framed as a broader issue of social justice and part of the symbolic landscape of Black representation and history.

Many Norwegians do not regard Norway as a former colonist state because it was part of the Danish Empire. Moreover, there are no identified direct descendants of the Danish–Norwegian colonial populations in Norway. On the contrary, there is a strong belief that "Norway is so highly valued in the world because we have no colonial past," as former prime minister and current secretary general of NATO Jens Stoltenberg stated in 2013 (Tveit 2021). As social anthropologist Laurie McIntosh notes: "[T]he national self-image disregards the history of Norwegian maritime involvement in the transatlantic slave trade during Denmark–Norway's participation in colonial expansion" (2015: 312). Yet, many contemporary ideas about fundamental Norwegian self-image, values, and national cultural identity relate to ideas and traditions from the 19th century (Gullestad 2004: 192). "Norwegian national identity used to be defined in contrast to Danes, Swedes, and other Europeans who were white," according to social anthropologist Gullestad (ibid.: 193). "Now being white has become a more pronounced dimension of being Norwegian" (ibid.). In this regard, race, descent, and national self-image represent mutually referential but shifting ideas. Furthermore, there

12 The notice refers to the woman as a "*negerinde*" named Christine, who is baptized as Juliana Maria. "Denne Negerinde tilhører Mad. Dischingthun, som førte henne med sig fra Vest-Indien her til Stedet," *Bergens Adressecontoirs Efterretninger*, September 8, 1777, p. 2.

is more scholarship and archival evidence to muddy and even refute this notion of colonial innocence that underpins many denials of racism and the historical conditions of inequality. These processes are also part of cultural contestations and the social constructions of space in the symbolic landscape (cf. Low 2000; Ross 2007; 2009)

The political representation of Black Oslo is not only about the power to challenge, define, and disagree with the terms of belonging in society and in history. It also involves the ability to articulate and realize demands for Black historical representation. Even before the death of George Floyd, Bergen resident Irene Kinunda Afriyie articulated this need in her editorial "Norway Needs a 'Black History Month,'" published in the newspaper *Bergens Tidende* on February 28, 2020 (Afriyie 2020). "Norwegian history lacks, among other things, recognition of Africans who have been in Norway from the start," she writes. That is, the African diaspora in Norway did not begin with modern immigration. Afriyie points out that enslavement and Norway's role in colonization are also part of Black history in Norway. This framing of Norwegian history and Black Oslo also inspired Yacoub Cissé and Ann Falahat's book *Afrikanere i Norge gjennom 400 år* (*Africans in Norway throughout 400 Years*) (2011).

In addition to the aforementioned memorials, street art depicting PAD is also an important contribution to the public arena and political representation. Substitutes for official monuments are strategically located in neighborhoods associated with significant populations with African backgrounds. In Oslo's Tøyen neighborhood, for example, the municipality commissioned a mural by acclaimed artist Fadlabi. Fadlabi's mural *The Sky's the Limit* (2016), located at Jens Bjelkes 63C, depicts a Somalian man with brown skin, wearing sporty sunglasses, dressed in an astronaut suit, and holding a helmet (figure 5.3). In interviews, the artist has stated that he chose a Black role model for the artwork to inspire the community. The mural is the artist's message to the local youth: "Kids, if you work hard, everything is possible."[13] Fadlabi's work foregrounds the Black protagonist as a force of progress and autonomous action. Thus, the mural performs a monumental role in the public space and as a homage to Black Oslo.

13 Interview by NK with artist Mohamed Ali Fadlabi on June 2, 2016 (https://www.nrk.no/osloogviken/gatekunst-pa-toyen-1.12980157)

Figure 5.3: Fadlabi's The Sky's the Limit (2016). Photograph: Michelle A. Tisdel, 2022

In her acclaimed book *Rasismens Poetikk* (2019), author, slam poet, and educator Guro Jabulisile Sibeko addresses the importance of social categories and labels, describing "Black" and "Brown" bodies in Norway. By discussing the term *melaninrik* (melanin-rich), Sibeko illustrates the power of self-identification and labeling as engaged social action. Among relevant populations there is no consensus about which descriptive term is the best collective label for African diaspora populations. While personal experience may influence self-perception, historical factors, beliefs, and attitudes operating in society also influence the use and effect of accepted and emerging social categories. These social constructions all involve the "phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control" (Low 2000: 128).

Community Organizing: Permanent Contact Zones as Official Sites of Memory

Political representation of Black Oslo in the symbolic landscape is the ability to attain rights and realize new forms of historical visibility through self-articulation and representation. The demand for political representation is predicated on a public dialogue in which a multiplicity of Black experiences and histories are valued and validated. Two permanent contact zones in the symbolic landscape are the bust of the slain teen Benjamin Hermansen (1985–

2001), born to a Ghanaian father and Norwegian mother, and Ruth Reeses Plass, which commemorates the African American singer, author, and activist Ruth Ann Reese (1921–90). The former holds somber relevance for Black Oslo because it pays tribute to 15-year-old Hermansen, who died after neo-Nazis attacked him with a knife on January 26, 2001, in the Åsbråten neighborhood in the Holmlia district. A brutal reminder of the persistence of racism and nationalism in Norway and Europe, Hermansen's death was a tragedy that left deep wounds in the imagined community of Black Oslo and the nation.

Every year since the tragedy, Åsbråten residents and others have been gathering at Hermansen's bust and lighting candles in his memory. The idea for the monument came from his friends in Holmlia and initially was a source of considerable discontent and disagreement among nearby residents. A group of members of the housing association were concerned that the statue would negatively affect the property value of their apartments.[14] Nevertheless, in November 2001, a bust of Hermansen, created by Norwegian sculptor Ivar Sjaastad, was unveiled at the site of his death. The inscription reads "Do not forget [*Glem ikke*], 26.01.2001," reportedly at the request of the teenager's friends.

Figure 5.4: Bust of Benjamin Hermansen (1985–2001) in the Åsbråten neighborhood in Oslo. Photograph: Michelle A. Tisdel, 2021

14 The results from a private communication with a colleague who conducted research on the case.

A miniature copy of the bust is awarded to schools that receive the annual Benjamin Prize for their work on antiracism. The prize is managed by the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, a research, education, and documentation center in Oslo focusing on the Holocaust and other genocides, as well as "extremism, anti-Semitism, hate speech, and the situation of minorities in contemporary societies."[15] Holmlia Sports Club, the organization Vær Stolt (Be Proud), Holmlia School, and the Benjamins Minnefond (Benjamin's Memorial Fund) helped to arrange a ten-year celebration in January 2011.

In January 2001, residents with a so-called minority background made up 9,000 of the 32,000 residents of the Holmlia district that includes Hermansen's neighborhood Åsbråten (Buggeland et al. 2001). The popular teenager, a student at Holmlia High School, was involved in his local community through activities such as football and the local youth club. According to one newspaper article, the "Norwegian-African"[16] youth was aware of his skin color (ibid.). In a news interview with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation just six months before his death, Hermansen had discussed encountering racism and neo-Nazis at recent football tournaments in Denmark and Sweden.

After his murder, friends, local residents, and other mourners from greater Oslo placed photographs, flowers, candles, written messages, and other objects at the site, forming the first spontaneous site of memory commemorating Hermansen. A few days later, approximately 40,000 people participated in the torchlight procession and demonstration held on February 1, 2001 at Youngstorget; this became another significant venue for Black people in central Oslo. One newspaper summarized the significance of the gathering, saying that the country had not seen a rally of that size since the liberation after World War Two (Strand 2001). In 2011, a similar vigil was held at Youngstorget to commemorate Hermansen, who had become an important source of inspiration and a symbol for antiracism in Norway, ten years after his death. His killing was a critical event that created another new reference point and dialogue about racism and belonging.

The three assailants who had targeted Benjamin Hermansen had direct ties to the neo-Nazi group Boot Boys. His death was widely understood as

15 Quoted from the homepage of The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies (https://www.hlsenteret.no/english/)

16 "*Norsk-afrikansk*" is the phrase used in the newspaper article.

a racially motivated hate crime. A survey of the collection of the National Library of Norway illustrates the vast body of literature and news generated about Hermansen. More than 270 digitized books and 50 journal articles reference him. The digital library also contains nearly 4,000 relevant newspaper items. Social history, discrimination against national minorities and "new" minorities with a "migration background," racism, hate crimes, and extremism represent important subjects in the academic and popular works that reference Hermansen. He, along with other victims of racism in Norway, were featured on several protest posters during the demonstration in Oslo.

In January 2021, the Benjamins Minnefond, along with the local community of Åsbråten, the African Student Association (UiO), the Norwegian Centre Against Racism, and many other actors, staged virtual memorials for Hermansen, marking 20 years since his passing. Friends, neighbors, Prime Minister Erna Solberg, and a host of other individuals submitted video tributes about antiracism and Hermansen's significance. This suggests that many people link Hermansen's death to broader public issues of racism, injustice, inequality, and the very real danger of racial violence in Norway. Moreover, the commemorations of Hermansen suggest that his death has influenced knowledge production and new frames for imagining values, such as social justice, antiracism, minority rights, and democracy.

Ruth Reeses Plass, another contact zone of historical relevance, is in the Grünerløkka district in Oslo, located in front of the main gate of the former Schou Brewery. It lies at the intersection of Nybrua, where Trondheim Street starts and Thorvald Meyers Street ends. The name was adopted by the Grünerløkka Bydelsutvalg (District Committee) in February 2012 as part of a plan to increase the number of roads named after women. In a letter dated June 18, 2020, the socialist political party Rødt introduced a motion to the Grünerløkka Bydelsutvalg to investigate the cost and criteria for erecting a bust of Reese in the square.[17] Rødt also suggested that the committee involve Reese's collaborator and friend Cliff Moustache, who wrote the poem "Letter to U"[18] about Ruth Reese.

17 "Ny Sak: Statue av Ruth," letter to the Grünerløkka District Committee, June 18, 2020.

18 Cliff Moustache is the artistic director of Nordic Black Theatre in Oslo. In 1985, Reese and Moustache were founding members of the Oslo-based activist organization Artists for Liberation.

The year 2021 marked a century since Reese's birth in Hayneville, Alabama. However, she grew up in Chicago and was trained as a classical singer. In the early 1950s, she moved to Europe to pursue a singing career, settling in Oslo in 1958, where she lived for more than three decades. In Europe, Reese became known as "The Black Rose." Combining her

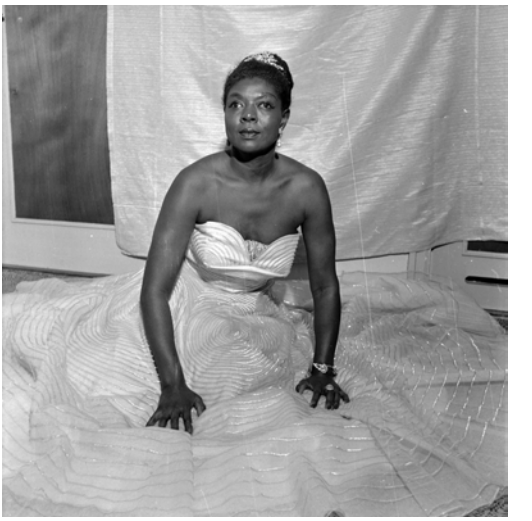

Figure 5.5a: Ruth Ann Reese. Photograph: Klaus Forbregd, 1959, NTNU University Library.
Figure 5.5b: Ruth Reeses Plass, Grünerløkka. Photograph: Michelle A. Tisdel, 2021

knowledge of African American cultural history with social justice activism, she significantly contributed to antiracism and the rights of women of color in Norway.

A vast body of archival material provides an insight into Reese's life and community involvement. Reese is well represented in the collections of the

National Library of Norway and the Oslo City Archives.[19] She published two books, her autobiography *Min Vei* (*My Way*) (1985) and *Lang Svart Vei* (*Long Black Road*) (1972), a collection of short essays on African American history. The books and chronicles illustrate Reese's desire to educate Norwegians about African American history and the individual and societal consequences of racism.

Reese was first interviewed for an article entitled "Vanskelig å være neger – også i Norge" (Difficult To Be a Negro – Also in Norway) in the magazine *Alt for Damene* in 1958 (Lekang 1958). We learn about her background and ambitions, and that she struggled to find housing in Oslo in the late 1950s. In the text "Vår hud er sort" (Our Skin is Black) published in the daily newspaper *Dagbladet* and others in July 1959, she observed:

> Most people in Scandinavia disagree with what is happening in South Africa and the American southern states, but it does not concern them. It's so far away. (Reese 1959: 4)

Reese's call to mobilize for antiracism and social justice received much attention. Her newspaper article ignited a debate about white complicity, denial, and misunderstandings of racial prejudice. Newspapers also printed letters of support, criticism, and comments from readers. The essay and the discussion it created can be regarded as a reference point in an ongoing dialogue on solidarity and European accountability in the struggles for anticolonialism and antiracism. Six months later, Reese followed up the article with the lecture "Rasehat og demokrati" (Racial Hatred and Democracy), which was held in January 1960 at the prestigious University of Oslo Aula.[20]

Reese worked to raise awareness about antiracism in Norway more than 60 years ago, at a critical time just before the mass immigration from Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco, and several other countries began. According to archivist Ellen Røsjø, Reese became "an inspiration for several of the new immigrants who came to the country in the 1960s and 70s" (Røsjø 2017: 31). "She took on the role of public educator in Norway – about Black Americans'

19 In the National Library's digital collection alone, Reese is mentioned in 150 books, 9,000 newspaper items and 113 journals. The Oslo City Archives manages the MiRA-Centre's private archive about Reese.

20 (1960) "Rasehatogdemokrati," In: Morgenbladet, January 22, 1960, 4.

music, culture, history and tradition" (ibid.). On October 25, 1990, during a program at the local culture house Slurpen, the organization SOS Rasisme awarded Reese an honorary lifetime membership for her antiracism work. Reese accepted the award, and then collapsed and died on stage while delivering her thank you speech.

Although many African American performing artists had worked and lived in Norway before, Reese was distinctive because she engaged in the public dialogue about the plight of Black people around the world. She had experienced firsthand the brutality of racism and racial segregation in the USA. Although she chose to live in Europe to pursue an international career as an artist, Reese felt a profound responsibility to participate in the ongoing Civil Rights Movement in the USA. Not only did she speak and write about the social movement for equality there, in 1959 she also advocated for stronger political action against apartheid in South Africa. She was an early collaborator with the Norwegian Students' Society and supported their efforts to create the South Africa Committee in Oslo and sponsor Black South African students to study in Norway. Moreover, her public presence and engagement from 1958 to 1990 was unprecedented for a Black woman in Norway.

Among Black Oslo's younger generation, her significance and that of the landmark Ruth Reeses Plass are still emerging. Reese introduced Black self-representation and historical awareness into the Norwegian public dialogue about racism and inequality. Although she challenged Norwegian stereotypes about race and discourses about social justice, Reese and Norwegians felt a mutual respect. She commented that in Norway she felt "human," because there was no explicit state-sponsored racism targeting People of African Descent (PAD), unlike in the USA. She also spoke openly about examples of racism in Norway, such as the use of Blackface and other practices.[21] "Ignorance has always been the source of fear and injustice," Reese told a journalist in 1959 (Blom 1959). Thus, she combined her appeal as an artist with her dedication to educate and mobilize the public about the inhumanity of racism and colonialism. By combining her activism and artistry, she spread a message of antiracism, social justice, solidarity, and social responsibility to thousands of Norwegian children and adults around the country.

21 Reese's criticism of Blackface in 1958 was written about by Einar Deisen in the national newspaper *Aftenposten*, June 27, 1958, p. 6.

Critical events and narratives involve knowledge production, collective action framing, and critiques of power (Espeland and Rogstad 2013). The ascription of meaning to George Floyd, the Congolese Village, Benjamin Hermansen, and Ruth Reese are all involved in this process and offer different frames for interpreting Black Oslo and its complexity. When a personal challenge or event takes on meaning in a collective action or narrative framing, it becomes a "public issue" that can reveal conflict and implicit power relations from a different perspective. These monuments and memory sites relate to critical events and narratives that hold significance for Black Oslo as a real and imagined community. Moreover, narratives about meaningful events and persons can reveal cultural contestation about asymmetrical power relations, claims for rights and equality, and how these histories are represented in the public field. Knowledge production involves analyzing and making sense of the world through remembering and self-historicizing, as well as through marking and encoding objects, events, social interactions, and spaces with value and sentiment (see Espeland and Rogstad 2013: 128; Das 1995).

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