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Being Latvian: Discourse and Identity Among  
Individuals of Black African Descent

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**Abstract**

Being Latvian: Discourse and Identity Among Individuals of Black African Descent

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This dissertation examines the dynamics of skin color and identity among individuals of black African descent in Latvia. I contend that the politics of blackness is constituted differently in Latvia by individuals of black African descent, than in the dominant literature on blackness, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context. I explore how the concept of blackness (and its sometimes corollary Africanness), based in ‘Western’ formulations of ‘black’ (as in ‘African –’) and ‘African’ identity, can or cannot be applied to the perspectives and experiences of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. My research points to the emergence of three themes connected to this topic: (1) the concept of race or ‘race’ and how it is adopted into everyday and political life in Latvia, (2) the relationship between phenotype

(for example skin color and hair) and sense of self, and (3) the relationship between geographic location and place of birth with sense of self. In connection to the first theme, I argue that a discourse of ‘race’ is still emerging in Latvia, a discourse that is shaped by their membership in the European Union, and that Anglo- American discourses and modes of analysis of ‘race’ are based upon a history of slavery and colonialism and therefore does not map neatly onto the Latvian context. In correlation to the second and third themes, my dissertation reveals that there is not a shared sense of identity among individuals of black African descent in Latvia – that skin color, and even connections to the African diaspora, do not define one’s identity. This is particularly evident in the formation of a “flexible identity” (Vasquez, 2010) among individuals of black African descent, especially those of mixed black African and (white) Latvian backgrounds born and raised in Latvia, in that they navigate (or adapt) their identities within different social, geographic, and political locations. Ultimately, “flexible identity” also plays a role in the discourse of difference in Latvia – which engages with the portrayals and perceptions of blackness (and Africanness) among and of individuals of black African descent.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2004, several individuals of black African descent, many of whom had attended the Rīga Institute of Civil Aviation Engineers during the Soviet period, formed a NGO known as “AfroLat”. AfroLat was a response to incidents of discrimination against individuals of black African descent in Latvia – the most well-known being the June 2002 (far right-wing) Freedom Party election campaign advertisement and leaflets which featured “(...) black men dressed in Latvian army uniforms and the accompanying text: ‘Today-guardian of Latvia, tomorrow – maybe your son-in-law?’ (Secretariat of Special Tasks Ministry of Social Integration, 2003, p. 30). Although the Freedom Party only received a small (%0.2) percentage of the vote in the election (see chapter 3) and therefore did not represent the majority of Latvians’ opinions on individuals of black African descent and other ‘foreigners’, the subsequent lawsuit by the two men featured in the leaflets and advertisement, both of whom were former Aviation Institute students, set the stage for the development of an organization that would advocate for the black African population in Latvia (the population itself is small. The numbers of individuals of black African descent in Latvia according to an informal sampling from NGO studies [Kēšāne and Kaša, 2008, being the most recent] or from individuals [word of mouth] range anywhere between 30 and 300)<sup>1</sup>. One of the founders of AfroLat stated in a 2004 press release that one of the goals of AfroLat was for individuals of black African descent to demand “to be treated like human beings” (Politika.lv, March 09, 2004).

The organization, in its early years, was known for its cultural events – including “Africa Day,” where members and their families would celebrate their various cultures through

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<sup>1</sup> The census and other data compiled by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB) do not provide any further clarification, as individuals of black African descent can fall into any citizenship, ethnicity, or nationality category (African countries do not appear in the list provided by the *Statistical Yearbook of Latvia* [CSB, 2010] or on the CSB website’s database).

performances and discussions. They also traveled to cities and towns outside of Rīga – to make the African presence more visible to the rest of Latvia. The cultural programming made up the bulk of the organizational activities, but the advocacy piece still played an important part: in 2005 and 2006 there were highly publicized accounts of physical attacks on individuals of black African descent in Latvia, one involving an American citizen who worked at the United States Embassy (The Baltic Times, July 13, 2005) and another involving a member of AfroLat, who was attacked as he left one of the organization's meetings (Latvian Centre for Human Rights, June 13, 2006). Following both incidents, AfroLat was sought out by the media to comment on the attacks. The organization came to be seen as the “voice” of black Africans in Latvia.

AfroLat may have started out because there were issues that brought the members together, but the issues were not enough to maintain the organization over time. Starting around 2008, the organization started to fade into the background of the lives of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Even though there have been recently documented cases of discrimination against individuals of black African descent (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2009; European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2012; Providus, 2008), by 2012, AfroLat was no longer as visible as it once was – the members ceased having regular events a few years earlier (save for one Africa Day event in 2011) and no longer held meetings. Some of this was due to economic reasons – the 2008 economic crisis in Latvia impacted government and private financial support of the organization. The crisis also influenced the ability of members to pay their membership dues to AfroLat.

The primary reason for the decline of AfroLat was the changing nature of the relationship between individuals of black African descent and the organization. There were conflicts among the members of the organization, primarily differences of opinion over the direction of AfroLat.

Some members wanted it to become even more vocal politically, while others wanted it to solely engage in cultural activities. One issue was (and still is) AfroLat's membership restrictions, as one has to be living in Latvia legally (either as a citizen or a holder of a permanent resident permit) in order to be a member<sup>2</sup>. An individual with a temporary residency permit (which one can apply for if living in Latvia for a limited time – such as international students or visiting researchers), while legal, does not count in the context of AfroLat membership<sup>3</sup>. The majority of members are, to my knowledge, primarily permanent residents. The organization does not extend membership to African students living in Latvia, because they see them as being temporary, although African students from Rīga Technical University (RTU) were invited to the 2011 Africa Day celebration (one of the AfroLat members works in RTU's International Student Office). There was also the added factor that, some individuals of black African descent who were born and raised in Latvia did not see the organization as representing them: they identify only as Latvian. While they acknowledge their African heritage (primarily through their fathers – the individuals that I know are of mixed black African – (white) Latvian background), it does not inform their sense of self. The organization can no longer function because it lacks a unified cause and an agreed sense about what it means to be “African” in Latvia.

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<sup>2</sup> The requirements for a permanent residence permit, are thus: an individual has to have resided “legally and continuously in Latvian territory for five years, have proof of sufficient resources, and the required knowledge of the State language” (taken and passed the State language exam). A temporary residence permit is required for an individual residing in Latvia for “a period of time exceeding 90 days within half a year counting from the first day of entrance” (<http://www.pmlp.gov.lv>).

<sup>3</sup> In an interview Jean (a pseudonym), a member of AfroLat, stated that “(...) we don't take into account African people who are student in Latvia. They are not here for long time. And sometime they don't have, in order to be a member you have to have lived here legally in Latvia. For student, they have temporary permit for residence and why we do not take into account student who in university (...) because we have a legal organization, and a lot of people are not legal in Latvia and they ask our support, yes we can support you, but you are not a member of our organization. You are member when you have legal residence permit” (Interview, September 24, 2010). Although a student or other individual holding a temporary residence permit is considered to be legally residing in Latvia, Jean is most likely emphasizing that the “temporary” nature of the individual's status prohibits them from being able to engage with the organization over a long period of time. Illegal status would mean anyone residing in Latvia without any type of visa or permit (such as an asylum seeker).

As this dissertation demonstrates, the concept of identity or sense of self is fluid and constantly negotiated by individuals of black African descent through a variety of factors: place of birth, age, socio-historical relationship with Latvia, family circumstances, language, and gender. I argue that the politics of blackness is constituted differently in Latvia than in the dominant literature on blackness, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context. In the Latvian case, it is the influences of the Soviet past, the independent past and present, and the European Union assist in a formulation of blackness that is, with a few exceptions, differentiates from the historical contexts of European colonialism and slavery that shape the Anglo-American conceptualization of blackness.

Within the history of AfroLat resides one of the central problematics specific to Eastern European countries that are now obligated to adopt (primarily) American and British discourses on race and skin color. As Gilroy (1988, 2000) argues, the construction of race has been (and still is) a powerful force within the context of modernity and is currently central to positioning Latvia as a legitimate member of the European Union. However Latvia, due to its history as a subject of the Soviet Union, lacked the political vocabulary of race in its everyday discourse. In fact, race as a social and political category of self-actualization did not exist within official Soviet policy. Currently Latvia finds itself at a critical juncture: in order to be a member of the European Union, the Latvian government must adopt the language of race and racial categories and thereby prove its legitimacy. In my dissertation I explore three areas: (1) how the concept of race – a concept fairly foreign to Latvian nationals – is adopted and incorporated into every day and political life, (2) the relationship between phenotype (skin color, hair) and sense of self, and (3) the relationship between geographic location and place of birth with sense of self. This dissertation argues that the link between the concept of race, phenotype and individual

characteristics (dress, language) with identity is being contested in Latvia. This conflict is clearly illustrated through the interviews and discussions I have documented with my informants, as well as through data gathered through discourse analysis of the Latvian media.

Although this dissertation broadly deals with concepts normally associated in the United States with race, this connection does not apply in the case of Latvia. Because an official discourse of race is still emerging in Latvia, as an American anthropologist, I find myself in a paradoxical situation. The discourse of race is so deeply embedded in American anthropology (See chapter 2 for further discussion), that is it difficult to write an ethnography without using American discourses and modes of analysis of race. This paradoxical situation leaves me in danger of certain ethnocentric tendencies: by using normalized categories of race and methods of analysis derived from the social and cultural context of race in the United States to explain Latvian understandings of phenotypical differences, I could easily produce racialized discourses that may not exist at all in Latvia. My own understanding of race is based upon my personal and academic upbringing within the American discourse of race – one based upon the history of slavery which created a paradigm of hierarchies based upon phenotype (primarily gradations in skin color [“passing” as white due to lighter skin color] and hair texture) and genetic links to formally enslaved black Africans (“the grandfather” clause in Reconstruction-era voting laws). ‘Black’ (or ‘African American’) as an identity in the United States is about slavery-based categorizations: nose shape, hair texture, and skin color ‘types’ being linked to what would constitute ‘black’ or ‘African’ features. This socio-historical dimension informs how ‘black’ is formulated as an identity and how race, racial politics, and discourses of difference exist in the United States and therefore guides my own perspective on race. In short, my personal conceptualization of race has been largely based upon phenotype, descent, and socio-historical

connections: I am ‘black’ because I have brown skin and other features that, for some, mark me as ‘black’, because my father is ‘black’, and because my ancestors were slaves<sup>4</sup>. Because this construction of race does not map neatly onto Latvia (and carries a very specific socio-historical meaning), I avoid using the ossified term race (except in chapters 2, 3 and parts of 4 and 5 where it is deemed necessary due to the thematic elements presented in the source material). Instead, I use the following terms to discuss items that in Anglo-American racial discourse would be construed as being specifically about racial identity: Africanness, blackness (a theoretical category that refers to concepts such as cultural practices and attitudes associated with ‘black’, as in the Anglo-American sense of the term, identity [Johnson, 2003, 2005]), colorism (a term that refers to how African American women (typically) have placed themselves into categories based upon gradations in skin tone [Fleetwood, 2011; Golden, 2004; Wilder, 2009]), and skin color. As demonstrated by the case studies contained in this dissertation, not all of the individuals whom I interviewed interpret their skin color (or other phenotypic characteristics and identifying markers) or heritage as the basis for an individual or collective political identity nor do they assign value (such as in the Americanized discourses of whiteness or blackness) to their skin color and other identifying markers in the same manner that we are so accustomed to in academic discussions in the United States.

### *Background and Methodology*

I had started out my research with one question in mind: How significant is skin color in forming a sense of national and/or cultural identity? This question was influenced by my own identity as African American Ashkenazi Jewish. This was a question that had begun to develop

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<sup>4</sup> While my skin color marks me as having ‘black’ or ‘African’ ancestry, it does not always mark me as ‘black’ or ‘African American’ to others, both within and outside of the United States. I have been asked if I am (or if my parents are) from Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Puerto Rico, or the West Indies.

long before I had applied to graduate school. In 2006, I traveled to Rīga, Latvia for the first time. I did not go there as part of a research trip, but I had already started thinking about perceptions and receptions of bodies of color in the Baltic region before I had even reached the city. I have heritage in the Baltics, Jewish heritage to be specific. My great-grandfather, Samuel Monsein, left the Baltic region around 1903, back when all three Baltic States were still part of the Russian Empire (there is debate in the family as to whether it was Latvia or Lithuania. There is strong evidence on both sides). I have always wanted to travel to the place that my great-grandfather left all of those years ago, but I always also thought about the impact that the other aspect of my heritage would have on my visit – my African American heritage. My skin color marks me as ‘different’ even when I am in the United States, so I assumed my experience in the Baltic States would not be dissimilar from the United States. I became curious about whether there were any other individuals of black African descent in the region and how their background and location impacted their process of identity formation. While there are other “visible” ethnic minorities in Latvia (Central Asian, Roma) that have been just as noticeably “othered” in Latvia due to phenotypic and other differences from the majority population, I was (and am) more interested in how the discourse of identity functions for individuals of black African descent due to my own personal connections to the population. The Latvia of 2006 was different from the land that my great-grandfather left all of those years ago. It was a land that had been changed by a revolution in 1905, a brief period of independence (1918-1940), Soviet occupation (1940-1941), German occupation (1941-1945), and Soviet occupation again (1945-1991), and finally independence in 1990/1991. As I stood on the beach in Jūrmala, I noticed that I was not the only one there with brown skin (unaided by sunlight and sun tan sprays) and I realized that there was a story to be told in Latvia. It was a story about identity, place, and skin color.

I returned to Rīga, Latvia in 2008, 2009, and 2010-2011 for my dissertation research. My research methodology involved 20 unstructured interviews and conversations with government officials, NGO administrators, and with individuals of black African descent. I then narrowed down my subject group and conducted structured interviews with 6 individuals of black African descent and 4 with NGO administrators. These structured interviews are featured within this dissertation. All in-depth interviews were gained through snowball sampling, i.e. asking my contacts to recommend others, thus building on initial connections. After preliminary meetings with individual actors, observations of the activities of NGOs, community organizations, and governmental institutes, a sample of participants were selected from each section or subgroup in an effort to access a range of perspectives. I conducted my interviews in Latvian or English, depending on the interviewee's preference. I digitally recorded all of my structured interviews and translated and transcribed the interviews after recording. I conducted participant observation in a wide variety of settings including functions and events at civic institutions, places of large scale gatherings, places of work and study and concerts by music and dance groups. I also maintained a research journal where I kept a record of conversations with (white) Latvian friends on the subject of skin color in Latvia, as well as my own encounters with identification processes. It was during these three years that I met the individuals of black African descent that form the backbone of my ethnographic work and analysis<sup>5</sup>. The individuals all represented different aspects of the population of black African descent in Latvia: born and raised in Latvia to a (white) Latvian mother and a black African father, moved to Latvia due to work and/or marriage, or came to Latvia during the Soviet times to study at the Rīga Institute for Civil Aviation Engineers. I could not have met any of the individuals without the assistance of my

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<sup>5</sup> All names listed are pseudonyms. Names have been changed to conceal the individuals' identities in accordance with University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations.

growing and ever evolving network of friends and colleagues in Latvia. A friend who had worked at the English-language newspaper *The Baltic Times* provided me with the contact information of some of the AfroLat members, particularly Andrew. Dzintra, who worked at a human rights NGO, introduced me to Martin, and Martin, in turn, introduced me to Jean and Rauna. I met Monir through a colleague and Elizabeth through mutual friends. The following is a complete list of the individuals of black African descent, grouped by their similarities, whom I met and interviewed during my time in Latvia. They are only a small representation of the population of individuals of black African descent in Latvia and represent the various subsets of the population. This list is meant to serve as a point of reference for when later discussions mention these individuals:

1. Former students at the Rīga Institute for Civil Aviation Engineers
  - a. Andrew, mid-late 40s - arrived in Latvia from Nigeria in the late 1980s to study at the Rīga Institute. Stayed in Latvia after independence in 1991 due to marriage and work.
  - b. Jean, mid-late 40s - arrived in Latvia from Benin in the late 1980s to study at the Rīga Institute. Stayed in Latvia after independence in 1991 due to marriage and work.
2. Born and raised in Latvia
  - a. Rauna, early 20s - born in Latvia to a (white) Latvian mother and a black African father (who was a student at the Rīga Institute). Martin referred me to Rauna because they both worked on a commercial together. The casting agency asked for them specifically because they needed ‘black’ actors<sup>6</sup>. Note: while I did meet other

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<sup>6</sup> The casting agency, on their website, lists individuals of black African descent as “American”. Rauna, although she does not identify as ‘black’, is well aware of the symbolic capital of her skin color. She often commented in interviews that her skin color gave her an advantage over her friends who were ‘white’ – specifically, being asked to perform as an extra in the Latvian National Opera’s production of *Carmen* (which takes place in Cuba), being cast as a “singer” in a film, being hired as a retail clerk at a store that sells hair accessories, and being cast in numerous commercials.

individuals like Rauna, they all declined to be interviewed (mostly due to scheduling conflicts [work, travel, etc.]).

3. Arrived in Latvia after independence due to work and/or marriage
  - a. Martin, late 40s- moved to Latvia over 17 years ago from the United States to live with his then (white) Latvian girlfriend. They are now married with children.
  - b. Monir, early 40s – moved to Latvia over 3 years ago from Sudan by way of the United Kingdom (UK) with his (white) Latvian wife whom he met in graduate school in the UK.
  - c. Elizabeth, early 40s – moved to Latvia over three years ago from the UK. She is of West Indian background and came to Latvia to work for an international corporation.

My research was also aided by interviews with (white) Latvian NGO workers, who spoke to me openly about Latvian government policies towards “visible” ethnic minorities and immigrants<sup>7</sup>: Dzintra, Gaismona, Rūta, and Sarma (who heads an immigrant support network).

My fieldwork experience also introduced me to other anthropologists in Latvia who were engaging in similar work. One in particular is Dace Dzenovska, who is one of the only anthropologists of whom I am aware who does work on race, tolerance, and anti-racism in Latvia. Dzenovska’s (2007, 2009, 2010) work is referenced throughout this dissertation, as she was the first to engage with the subject of representation of individuals of black African descent in children’s books and cartoons from the Soviet era. She is an insider, as she is a (white) Latvian scholar studying Latvia. While there are commonalities in our work, my skin color has some

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<sup>7</sup> “Visible” ethnic minorities is the term given (by Latvian NGOs, the Latvian government, and European Union institutions) to ethnic minorities that would be defined as “of color” in the Anglo-American discourse of race (See Ķešāne and Kaša, 2008).

agency: there are times where it does mark me as an outsider, while at other times it makes me a type of ‘insider’ – in that it assists me in understanding the experience of being a person of black African descent in Latvia. Language also aids in the insider/outsider dichotomy: my understanding of Latvian allows me to converse with Latvian speakers, but my accent and limited vocabulary can give away my non-native provenance. These elements have all become an unavoidable part of my work. Therefore, there is a self-reflexive component to my work – one that travels throughout this dissertation.

### *Contextualizing Latvia*

I cannot properly engage in a discussion of sense of self among individuals of black African descent in Latvia without providing some grounding in the larger Latvian identity discourse. By doing so, I am acknowledging that many of my readers do not have a background in Latvian or Baltic Studies and may not come to my work with a deep understanding of how identity is formulated within the Latvian socio-historical context. In order to understand why informants, such as Rauna, and textual sources engage with the notion of “Latvianness” in interviews and articles, it is important to recognize the history and dynamics behind the identity discourse to which they refer.

The nature of the discourse is complicated and fraught with debate over what contributes to a sense of “Latvianness”. The socio-historical context plays a large role in the formulation of Latvian identity. In fact, the idea of a “shared sense of history” is outlined by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia’s (2011) definition of nation (*tauta*) particularly the Latvian Nation or “Latvian People” (*Latviešu Tauta*). The idea of a shared sense of history as being part of “Latvianness” is reflected in media interviews with Lingita Lina Bopulu, a former contestant

on a Latvian reality television program who is of mixed black African and (white) Latvian descent. She defines her Latvian identity by stating that she has participated in folklore groups, danced national dances and has a broad knowledge of Latvian history (mango.lv, January 18, 2012). The most prominent aspect of Latvianness, that is brought up in interviews, as well as in scholarly articles and lay journalism, is that of language. Rauna, who shares a similar background to Lingita and also identifies as Latvian, brings up the topic of language as an important characteristic of her Latvian identity – her mother tongue is part of what makes her Latvian. Latvianness, as illustrated by Lingita’s description, also includes knowledge of Latvian folk traditions (folk dances, *dainas* [Latvian folk songs]). The origins of this identity discourse are typically traced back to the period leading up to the First National Awakening (1850s-1880s). The National Awakenings refer to the series of cultural and political moments in Latvia’s history. There are three in total: the Second National Awakening includes the years leading up to Latvia’s formation as an independent state in 1918. The Third National Awakening includes the years leading up to Latvia re-declaring its independence in 1990<sup>8</sup>. Language played an important role in the First Awakening, as the intellectuals that led the drive towards a Latvian national identity believed that having widely distributed evidence of self-produced Latvian written material would be of utmost importance in the assertion of their identity (Plakans, 1974). The advent of a literary class, which found its bearings in the 1860 publication of the first history of Latvian literature to be written by a Latvian in Latvian (Plakans, 1974), allowed Latvian writers, poets, playwrights and others to attest that the Latvian language was equal to other languages, particularly German which was the dominant language of the land owning class at the time. They could write of the great folktales of the Latvian peasant, turn the *dainas* into symbols of history

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<sup>8</sup> On May 4, 1990, the Latvian Supreme Council of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) declared the Soviet occupation of Latvia as illegal. In August 1991, the Latvian Supreme Council passed a constitutional law which declared Latvia as an independent democratic republic. Source: The Latvian Institute (<http://www.latvia.lv>).

and knowledge, and show that their culture was on par with those of the Russians or Baltic Germans, who controlled the area that is now known as Latvia in the 1860s. Later, in 1873, the first song and dance festival was created by the Rīga Latvian Association (RLB). The song and dance festival is still held in Rīga (every five years) and is a source of national pride.

This history served as a contact point in the establishing of the Latvian state in 1918 – which solidified Latvian as not only the country’s official language, but also as the factor that defined the difference between Latvians and the other ethnic groups residing within the country’s borders. To speak Latvian was to *be* Latvian. The occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union (1940-1941 and 1945-1991) and Nazi Germany (1941-1945) also had an impact on the formulation of Latvian identity, not just through the language, but also through the experience of being occupied subjects. It is the fifty years of Soviet occupation, specifically, that has continued to have a lasting impact on the (re)contextualization of the Latvian identity discourse, as well as upon the discourse of difference in Latvia. The independence of Latvia meant independence from having *another* language displace Latvian as the official language in the halls of government, in the schools, and even at home. Independence also meant the chance to reassert Latvia’s *national* identity on the world stage and to be seen as no longer Soviet, but as European.

Latvia’s entry into the European Union (EU) in 2004 has also been absorbed into the broader identity discourse. It not only demonstrates that Latvia can claim European status, but it also brings up the question of how EU policies and mandates impact how Latvians talk about identity. While chapter 2 provides a bit more detail about the relationship between the EU and Latvia and the work that it does within the Latvian identity discourse, it is important to note that the EU perspective on identity is one that is shared with the British (and broader Anglo-American) discourse, primarily the discourse of race, racism, and phenotype. It is a discourse that does not

fully exist in Latvia (especially in the political sphere)<sup>9</sup> and has the potential to change how Latvians define “Latvianness”. Will being Latvian still be about language and shared social history or will “Latvianness” become defined by the outside discourses on race, racism, and phenotype?

“Latvianness” is only one aspect to the Latvian discourse of identity. There is also the discourse of “otherness” (and its linked discourse of difference), which is evident in my interviews and research, as well as in the articles about Lingita Lina Bopulu and other individuals of black African descent in the public eye (see chapter 4 for analysis of articles on DeAndre Kambala and Lingita Lina Bopulu and chapter 5 for analysis of a *Mans Mazais* [January 2011] cover story on “international families”). The discourse of otherness in Latvia has primarily focused on the dominant ethnic Latvian-ethnic Russian (i.e. Russian speakers)<sup>10</sup> dichotomy that came out of the Soviet era when individuals from other Soviet republics arrived in Latvia to live and work. Many of these workers and their descendants remained in Latvia after independence. Their history and continued presence in Latvia has become the topic of Latvian political and public discussions on citizenship, education, identity, immigration, integration, and language policy (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2006; Galvin, 2005; Ķešāne and Kaša, 2008; Orr, 2008; Rozenvelts, 2010; Schwartz, 2006; Vebers, 2000; Zepa 2004a, 2004b, 2005)<sup>11</sup>. The majority of studies on identity and sense of belonging in Latvia examine

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<sup>9</sup> Although the use of ‘white’ to describe a Latvian is not common, it has started to recently appear in the political arena. In 2011, a Member of Parliament, Jānis Ādamsons, who belongs to the Left-wing (re: Ethnic Russian dominated political party) Harmony Center, stated that “I always believed that we will find a common language with representatives of the white race because of a common mentality, we might have different views but we have a similar scale of values. But if Muslims come here I do not know what we will do” (Raudseps, P. [2011, September 06].Saskaņa Rasismā. *TVNET.lv*. Translation from the Latvian Centre for Human Rights).

<sup>10</sup> Which is made up of several nationalities and ethnicities: Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Polish, among others.

<sup>11</sup> This is also apparent in the majority of dissertations focused on the subject of identity in Latvia (See: Šmidchens, G. and Osterberg, R. (2007). *Baltic studies in North America: A survey of academic dissertations 1911-2006. Journal of Baltic Studies*, 38(4), 463-473.)

these very topics and do so through the lens of the attitudes and experiences of Russian-speakers in Latvia (Cara, 2010; Commercio, 2004; Kronenfeld, 2003, 2005; Laitin, 1998; Pisarenko, 2006; Silova, 2002; Tabuns, 2010; Zepa, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). In these studies, Russian-speakers are positioned as “the other” or “the outsider” in Latvian society – due to language and their connection to the Soviet legacy. It is within this scholarly paradigm that the Latvian discourse of otherness has typically taken shape, but as the case studies presented in this dissertation demonstrate, there is an opportunity to broaden this paradigm and to investigate additional discourses of otherness (Europeanness, geographic origins, immigration, skin color) in Latvia.

The exploration of the Latvian discourses on “Latvianness” and “otherness”, among other subjects (impact of migration to and from Latvia, EU mandates on tolerance) have been picked up by Latvian scholars. Latvian cultural anthropologists, in particular, have contributed to understanding the dynamic and continually changing nature of the Latvian identity discourse in independent Latvia. The most well known Latvian cultural anthropologist is Vieda Skultans (1998, 2007), whose ethnographies consider how Latvian narratives of illness and self (and illness as self) have been influenced by the experience of growing up during the Soviet times. For Skultans, the link between social memory and identity is about a “cultural script” (1998, p. 142) that is shared between individuals that came of age during the Soviet occupation of Latvia. As her work presents a conceptualization of identity as rooted in socio-historical processes, Skultans provides me with a better understanding of how social memory and the socio-historical (the Soviet era) informs one’s own sense of self and “Latvianness”. This influence is apparent in the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia’s (2011) definition of *Latviešu Tauta* (see above and chapter 2), as well as in Latvian NGO documents and studies on social integration and tolerance (Dzenovska, 2009, 2010; Ķešāne and Kaša, 2008) and in research on national identity

and nation building in Latvia (Bunkše, 1999; Pabriks and Purs, 2001; Schwartz, 2006; Zake, 2007) texts with which I am in continuous conversation in my research. Aija Lulle (2006, 2007, 2011) focuses on two aspects of identity formation: (1) dislocation from the “homeland” (Latvian migrant workers in the Guernsey Islands) and (2) the border (relationships and shared discourses on the Latvia-Russia border). In Lulle’s work, I find a source of knowledge about the multiple factors that inform sense of self and cultural identity, namely political, national, and international borders and the movement of bodies across those borders. Her research finds application in my own writing, as it brings in another perspective on how “Latvianness” is a subject which is intertwined with the socio-historical processes that define the movement of bodies, a concept that I need to be cognizant of, as five of my six contacts (Andrew, Elizabeth, Jean, Martin, and Monir) are immigrants in Latvia and this status assists in informing their own sense of self and in comprehending the fluidity of identity among individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Roberts Kīlis (1998) explores the impact of social memory on national identity. As with Skultans, it is his approach to how socio-historical processes impact the formation of national and personal identity that I find to be particularly applicable to my own work, since it is an ever-present factor within the Latvian identity discourse. Finally, Dace Dzenovska (2009, 2010), looks at the ways in which projects of tolerance building and anti-racism play out within the broader discourses of Latvian identity, political identity, and relationship building between Latvia-based NGOs. Her work has assisted me in understanding how Latvian NGO and governmental workers approach the issues of racism and anti-racism in Latvia through the guise of European Union mandated projects, as well as the manner in which the discourse of racism may be formulated in Latvia without a discourse of race.

My own research adds another dimension to the Latvian ethnographic canon. It focuses on the importance of examining the lives of individuals of black African descent in a location that is considered to be outside of the traditional “borders” (the Americas, Africa, West Europe) of the African diaspora. As stated in the opening to this chapter, the history of the AfroLat organization exemplifies that there is more than one perspective on the meaning of sense of self among individuals of black African descent in Latvia. “Latvianness” is one of the many factors that contribute to this discourse of identity, a factor that is becoming increasingly important as individuals, such as Lingita Lina Bopulu, begin to be more prominent in the Latvian media space and the public eye. The fact that Lingita is asked in interviews to “explain” her Latvian identity, due to her visible phenotypic difference from the majority of the population, points to a continued reexamination of what it means to be Latvian.

### *Dissertation Map*

In many ways, Hall’s (1997) interjection that political (and racial) identity is not solely linked to the color of one’s skin, shapes the way that I approach the question about the relationship between phenotype and identity. Hall writes, “Black is not just a question of pigmentation. The Black that I’m talking about is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category” (1997, p. 53). This dissertation contains the stories of two women (Lingita Lina Bopulu and Rauna) of black African and (white) Latvian heritage who were born and raised in Latvia and identify as Latvian – not as ‘African Latvian’ or ‘black’ (‘black’ in the American understanding of ‘black’). Their skin color (“brown” as Rauna states) does not inform their identity. Being Latvian, for them, is about the historical, political, and cultural connections (or categories) that

connect them to the land of their birth. But, before I can delve into the narratives of my informants, I must first situate myself within a theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 explores the ways that race and ethnicity have been theorized and conceptualized in the identity discourse. This chapter starts with an investigation into the place of race and ethnicity in cultural anthropology. I argue that both concepts overlap and that, in the words of King-O’Riain (2007) there is often a “conflation and confusion of these two concepts” (p. 517). By tracing the history and theoretical positioning of the concepts, I am able to point out where the confusion appears in their conceptualization(s). While chapter 2 takes a deep look at how race and ethnicity are “conflated and confused” it also looks at how, in the Latvian context, it is ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nationality’ may be conflated or overlapping. In independent Latvia, this heritage is apparent in the definitions provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia’s (2011) document *National Identity, Civil Society, and Integration Policy Guidelines (2012-2018)* and in the residency application provided by the Office of Migration and Citizenship Affairs (PMLP). Race and skin color, since they are only starting to enter into the Latvian identity discourse, are only mentioned in publications by Latvian-based NGOs – particularly in those sponsored by the European Union. This evolving discourse of identity has an influence on how individuals of black African heritage perceive and discuss their sense of self in Latvia.

Chapter 3 focuses on the history of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Within this chapter, I argue that scholarship on the African diaspora, by concentrating on the West (the United States, West Europe), largely ignores the narratives of individuals of black African descent in the Soviet and post-Soviet sphere. This chapter examines the discourses on the ‘African’ in Latvian history: the narratives of students from the continent who arrived in the Soviet Union from the late 1950s through 1980s, and those who arrived in independent Latvia in

the 1990s. Starting with the 1957 Moscow Youth Festival, the chapter presents the discourse that surrounded (and in many ways still surrounds) individuals of black African descent in the Soviet and post-Soviet space.

Chapter 4 engages with the concept of blackness in Latvia through the portrayals of blackness (and Africanness) by (white) Latvian performers and the perception of blackness among individuals of black African descent in Latvia. This chapter asserts that blackness is a theoretical construction that is essential in locating the identity processes of individuals of black African descent, as well as the portrayals of and by individuals of black African descent, in a larger socio-historical context. The chapter interacts with Roach's (1996) construct of the kinesthetic imagination, Nora's (1989) analysis of "true memory", Johnsons' (2003, 2005) consideration of the appropriation and performance of blackness, and Hall's (1997) work on the disconnected link between 'black' identity and skin color. The first half of the chapter will focus on how (white) Latvian performers portray people of black African descent through the use of blackface and mimicry, as well as the connection between these performances and children's literature and cartoons from the Soviet times. The second half will examine how individuals of black African descent in Latvia perceive (or do not perceive) and portray their identities as 'black', as well as how media portrayals of individuals of black African descent assist in shaping these perceptions.

Finally, chapter 5 considers the lives and perspectives of individuals of black African descent both within and outside of their public and private lives in Latvia. In this chapter, I contend that there is a construction of difference among individuals of black African descent in Latvia, a construction that touches upon the discourses that shape their day-to-day lives: the politics of skin color (and other phenotypic markers, such as hair), stares, and family interactions. The chapter serves as an exploration of how they navigate their public and private

personas in Latvia – particularly how these navigations come into contact with the notions of language, colorism, and “the gaze”. I explore how the concept of colorism is beginning to operate in Latvia by engaging with Rauna’s narratives of identity. I bring in the theories of Fanon (1952/1967), Fleetwood (2011), Hegel (1997), and Lacan (1978), among others, to provide further context to how these concepts currently circulate in Latvia.

Prior to delving into the rest of the dissertation, I must provide a clarifying note about the terminology utilized in this dissertation: I use the term “black African descent” to specify that the subjects of this research who specifically have ties to the African diaspora. The term ‘black’ in Latvia has also been used, historically, to identify those from the Caucasus region (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) or of Roma background, but ‘black’ in this case does not refer to this population. ‘African’ can mean anyone from the continent of Africa, individuals that can be of any race, skin color, or ethnic background. In order to create less confusion and to maintain focus, I use the American formulation of black (as in “of African descent”) paired with Africa to strengthen the connection to the diasporic discourse and to further ground my research interest (the same goes for my usage of the theoretical construct of ‘blackness’). In my use of (white) Latvian – I am aware that for many people the words Latvian and ethnic Latvian evoke an image of a phenotypically white individual. Throughout this dissertation I use the terms Latvian and ethnic Latvian to refer to this specific generalization and stereotype, but I also attempt to complicate this reference by presenting stories of individuals (Rauna, Lingita Lina Bopulu) who identify as Latvian but do not fit into the dominant image of Latvian/ethnic Latvian. Therefore, ‘(white) Latvian’ is used as a distinguishing marker, as my research shows that the term ‘Latvian’ on its own can refer to a person of any skin color.

This dissertation contributes to a wider discussion of the dynamics of skin color and political identity within the African diaspora. Because Latvia is not typically included within the diasporic discourse it provides an opportunity to examine how the connection with the continent, either through birth, marriage, or parentage, does not create an automatic feeling of “solidarity” among individuals of black African heritage. I present a case study that is made up of a complex set of narratives that assist in comprehending how skin color (and African descent) is not a primary factor in determining one’s sense of self: skin color is important, but it is also malleable, determining but unpredictable. This dissertation broadens the dominant paradigm on skin color, diaspora, and socio-historical connectivity among scholarship on the African diaspora. It opens up Latvia as a location for this enlarged paradigm.

## Chapter 2: Race, Ethnicity and the Identity Discourse

This chapter provides a map of how the concepts of race and ethnicity have been wrestled with in the works of anthropologists and other social scientists, as well as how this mapping applies or does not apply to the Latvian context. The overlap between race and ethnicity presents a challenge in writing about the subject(s) and, therefore, I have to struggle with these complexities and how one or the other has been highlighted in scholarship. To quote King-O'Riain (2007), within “both social scientific studies and everyday understandings of race and ethnicity, there has been much confusion and conflation of these two concepts” (p. 517). This “confusion and conflation” is recognized by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) who, a year prior to releasing the “American Anthropological Association Statement on ‘Race’ (1998), published a recommendation to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to replace the term ‘race’ on the United States Census with the term ‘race/ethnicity’. The AAA stated that “Race and ethnicity both represent social or cultural constructs for categorizing people based on perceived differences in biology (physical appearance) and behavior. Although the popular connotations of race tend to be associated with biology and those of ethnicity with culture, the two concepts are not clearly distinct from one another” (American Anthropological Association Response to OMB Directive 15: *Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting* [Sept 1997], 1997, [www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombudsumm.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombudsumm.htm)). The statement argued that there was a public misuse of the concepts of race and ethnicity, that ethnicity, in particular, had been used to talk about the concept of race without actually using the term ‘race’. This misuse was due in part to the public’s own conflation of the terms, as well as an attempt to remove ‘race’ from its past biological connections and into a more culturally based understanding of the term in an effort to avoid implications of racist-thinking (Trouillot, 2002).

The conflation of the terms, as well as the general confusion over how and when to use them in ethnographic and scholarly writing, presents some difficulty when examining the discourse of identity.

In the anthropological tradition, ‘race’ has been a contentious subject. This is addressed in how it is socially and culturally constructed:

The ‘racial’ worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent. Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve and function within any culture, we conclude that present-day inequalities between so-called ‘racial’ groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances.

(American Association of Anthropology Statement on ‘Race’, May 1998,  
[www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm))

The AAA statement maps out a historical trajectory for how race became a concept in the first place, however it avoids mentioning anthropology, by name, as one of the disciplines that aided in the perpetuation of “the ‘racial’ worldview”. Anthropology and anthropologists’ participation in the construction of race as a concept is well known. While the conceptualization of race began prior to the emergence of the discipline in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists elaborated on the role of race in the public sphere and (re)conceptualized the definition of race. The theory of cultural evolution, as exemplified by Morgan (1877) and Tylor (1871), was eventually used to justify racial hierarchies based on the place of their culture in a unilinear evolutionary framework (McGee & Warms, 1996). Their ideas were also taken up by Marx and Engels in their theory on social evolution – which posited that social change was an evolutionary process (McGee & Warms, 1996), a position that was later adopted by the Soviet project as the basis for the Sovietization of nationalities (Hirsch, 2005). There is also the connection between

anthropology and scientific racism, which is apparent in the history of eugenics. Anthropologists who openly engaged with scientific racism, such as Coon (1962) whose texts (*The Origin of Races*, for example) were utilized to justify projects such as school segregation, a use from which he did not actively attempt to distance himself (Jackson, 2001). While some anthropologists did challenge the connection of anthropology with eugenics and other forms of scientific racism (Boas is typically presented as an example), the legacy of the ways in which anthropologists were either directly or indirectly complicit in projects that reified racist practices still haunts the discipline to this day.

With the exception of the 1997 recommendation to the OMB, the AAA does not have an official statement on ethnicity. In the 1997 document, the AAA writes that ethnicity is generally associated with culture (1997), but it does not provide a more explicit definition. That the AAA acknowledges the connection between race and ethnicity plays a part in how ethnicity is written about in modern-day anthropological texts – it is often discussed in tandem with race. Due to this conflation, I will use the formulation “race/ethnicity” in this dissertation, except in cases where it is deemed necessary (due to textual or theoretical considerations) to refer to the two terms separately. While the AAA does not provide a definition, in this dissertation I will be using ‘ethnicity’ to denote what Comaroff and Comaroff view as “membership in a culturally constituted ‘people’, one with customary ways and means that it takes to be distinctive and to which it is affectively attached (...)” (2009, p. 10). I will use ‘race’ to refer to a socially and culturally constructed concept that is typically based upon, but not limited to, phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture. Another key related term in the Latvian context is nationality, which I use to denote what is sometimes denoted as ‘national identity’. In this case, I rely on the formulation presented by Smith (2001) which presents a

national identity that is separate from that of ethnic community or ethnicity (or in Smith's words *ethnie*) due to the latter's lack of a political element. He defines national identity as:

(...) the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements.

(Smith, 2001/2004, p. 20)

Central to Smith's understanding of national identity is that of a "concern for collective character and its historical-cultural basis" (2001, p. 27), as well as the importance of the dynamics of change within a national identity (external and internal events, movement of bodies, generational shifts). While this is the preferred definition for the purposes of this dissertation, I am also aware of other dominant discourses of nationality/national identity and nationalism that underlie much of scholarly writing on the subject (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1994), as well as the Herderian framework of nationality/national identity (shared language and cultural values) that has been supplanted in much of Europe by that of shared heritage (blood) (Linke, 1999).

There is also a relationship between all three terms (race, ethnicity, and nationality) one that can be understood in the theoretical constructions of 'racialization' and 'ethnocization'. Racialization refers to a "process through which any diacritic of social personhood – including class, ethnicity, generation, kinship/affinity, and positions within fields of power- comes to be essentialized, naturalized, and/or biologized" (Silverstein, 2005, p. 364). This can occur even in a country, such as Latvia, where a home grown discourse of race is still in a process of development. Racialization can occur without a concept of race – as demonstrated by the racializing practices applied to the ethnic Russian-minority. In this sense, I would argue, Latvia has already undergone a 'racialization of ethnicity', as well as a 'racialization of nationality' (Spickard and Daniel, 2004) that is defined as "the experience that involved notions of race or

geno-phenotypical and ancestral differentiation” (p. 9). This has been done through the categorizations of Latvian and Russian as they appear both in statistical documents and the media as designators not just of nationality, but also of ethnicity. The history of occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union and the workers who arrived in Latvia during the Soviet period, briefly outlined in chapter 1 and later in this chapter, has assisted in creating this formulation of ethnicity. There is also a type of ‘ethnocization of nationality’ taking place in Latvia that both related to this history and the contemporary categorizations of ethnic groups based upon both language and origin (as well as citizenship). Due to the conflation of ethnicity and race, there can also be a conflation of ‘racialization’ and ‘ethnocization’.

‘Ethnocization of nationality’ is also apparent in the manner in which ethnicity and nationality have become conflated in Latvia. The discourse of ethnicity/nationality in Latvia operates in a similar manner as the discourse of race/ethnicity in the United States. It dominates discussions of identity both within the government and the broader public – one cannot talk about themselves or others without talking about ethnicity/nationality. In order to properly address how the two terms are applied within the discourse of identity in Latvia, I must first explain how ethnicity/nationality are defined in Latvia by the government and NGOs. Below is a translation of a list of terms and definitions included The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia’s 2011 publication *National Identity, Civil Society, and Integration Policy Guidelines (2012-2018)*<sup>12</sup>. I have made every effort to capture the nuances and complexity of the Latvian terms and definitions in English, but as with all translations, it is imperfect. Nevertheless, this gives readers

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<sup>12</sup> Indra Ekmanis and Rolfs Ekmanis assisted with the translation of the Ministry of Culture definitions. My translations of the terms (i.e. *latvietis* means Latvian, *tautība* means ethnicity) were aided by the use of Millere, A. & Mozare, R. (2008). *Latviešu-Angļu-Latviešu kabatas vārdnīca [Latvian-English-Latvian pocket dictionary]*. Rīga, LV: Zvaigzne ABC, Veisbergs, A., et al. (2001). *Jaunā Latviešu – Angļu vārdnīca [The new Latvian-English dictionary]*. Rīga, Latvia: SIA “EKLTV”, and <http://www.letonika.lv>.

who do not speak Latvian access to the array of terms and concepts that play a role in discourse of identity in Latvia:

**National Identity (*Nacionālā Identitāte*)**—a part of one’s personal identity that unites one with other people who share similar national cultural characteristics. Language, values, models of behavior, a set of cultural symbols, [and] social memory is the basis upon which one’s belonging to the nation — and the unity of nationals — is built and maintained. National identity is part of the conception of a nation as unique and different from other nations, as a community of people, and as continually existing.

**Nation (*Tauta*)**— a community of people who, based on national cultural criteria (particularly language, inhabited territory, history, lifestyle, culture) consider themselves to be part of a permanent cultural body. [Note: the concept of *tauta* is translated into *narod* in Russian and *volk* in German -LR]

**Nationality (*Nācija*)** – a nation that has its own national state or is attempting to gain one. Latvians have been a nation since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Latvian people started to spread the idea of self-determination. This became reality in 1918, when, making use of the right of self-determination, the Latvian nation-state was established – Latvia. The cultural Latvian nation had taken shape earlier – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The marks of a nation’s culture are: a unifying national culture, language, shared consciousness, shared national interests, and a willingness to defend those interests.

**Nation-State (*Nacionāla Valsts*)** – a nation, wherein national cultural identity determines the state nationality (*valstsnācija* -LR). The state nationality’s language is the state language – the common language of communication and democratic participation, this nation’s culture, way of life, social memory that is shared among all of the inhabitants. This does not preclude the existence of ethnic minorities alongside the common elements of the nation-state.

**State Nationality (*Valstsnācija*)**— a nationality that has formed its own nation-state and determined the national cultural identity of the nation-state. Latvians are the state nationality in Latvia.

**Latvian (*latvietis*)** – A person, who meets at least one cultural criterion (particularly language, culture, origin) and feels a subjective sense of belonging, who identifies oneself as a member of the Latvian nation. The concepts “Latvian” and “Latvian nation” are broader than –“Latvian citizen”, because one can be of Latvian nationality and not be a citizen of Latvia.

**Ethnic Minorities (*Mazākumtautības*)** – Latvian citizens, whose languages and cultures are different from the state nationality’s [*valstsnācija* –LR], who have traditionally lived in Latvia for generations, who belong to the Latvian state and society, but who simultaneously wish to cultivate and retain their language and culture.

**Citizen of Latvia (*Latvijas Pilsonis*)** – a person, who in accordance with law, has Latvian citizenship. All Latvian citizens, in accordance with the Art. 64 of the Constitution, are the collective legislator of the state, which is composed of citizens with full rights.

**People of Latvia (*Latvijas Tauta*)** – The Latvian State’s sovereignty is carried in the power of Article 2 of the Constitution. The Latvian nation consists of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity [*tautība* – LR], and those belonging to the Latvian nation, regardless of citizenship. All those belonging to the Latvian nation(ality) [*nācija* –LR] must have the right to be a citizen of their nation, where they draw upon their rights to participate in the Latvian state’s democratic governmental process.

**Immigrants (*Imigranti*)** – Foreigners and non-citizens, who live in Latvia with permanent or temporary residence permits. In the context of the Treaty of Lisbon, they are “third-country citizens.” Latvia has three immigrant groups. The largest immigrant group in Latvia is composed of citizens of the former USSR-who arrived in Latvia as a result of Soviet occupation and their descendants, to whom the so-called Non-citizens law has granted special privileges in comparison to other immigrant groups. Unlike new immigrants, noncitizens need not request a residence or work permit. They have the right to be naturalized, join the body of Latvian citizens, and thereby gain all rights, including the right to vote. The second immigrant group: Permanent (long-term) residents, who have citizenship in another country that is not part of the European Union, European Economic Zone or Swiss Confederation (most commonly Russian citizenship, gained after rejecting the status of Latvian non-citizen). The third group: new immigrants, who arrived in Latvia after 1992 from countries that are not within the European Union (commonly those from countries that had been Soviet republics). The fourth immigrant group: European Union citizens, who while in Latvia, in accordance with European Union laws, are defined as having especially favorable status.

**Non-Citizens of Latvia (*Latvijas Nepilsoņi*)** – former USSR citizens and their descendants who, in accordance with the law are ensured special status in Latvia, and who, as individuals, are eligible for naturalization.

**The Latvian Cultural Space (*Latviskā Kultūrtelpa*)** – Latvian language, environment, material and non-material culture, social memory and lifestyles (traditions, symbols, historical events, historical personalities, shared views, festival days [holidays], artistic legacy and creative work, forms of communication, nature and attitudes towards nature, centuries of cultural creativity, geographic names, architectural traditions, sense of color, etc.). Over several centuries, the Latvian cultural space has been influenced and supplemented by other national cultures and their contributions. This unique cultural space promotes the strengthening of national identity in the context of globalization, and keeps and strengthens a sense of belonging to Latvia.

**Social Memory (*Sociālā Atmiņa*)** – a common understanding and interpretation of history, past events, and social-political processes. This understanding shapes an individual’s memory, state politics, educational content, public holidays, rituals of

memory, etc.

(Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, 2011, pp. 5-7)

The definitions included in the Ministry of Culture's *Guidelines* demonstrate an attempt by the Latvian government (it was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers) to create an agreed upon set of understandings about the featured terms. The ones included in this chapter only relate to variations of nationality, citizenship, and culture. Three terms on this list interact with a particular ideology of identity: nation (*tauta*)<sup>13</sup>, nationality (*nācija*), and Latvian (*latvietis*). The Latvian definition and understanding of *tauta* has its roots in the Latvian nationalist movement, known as the First Awakening, of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Plakans, 1974) and appears throughout the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, which was written in 1920 and adopted in 1922 (For example, Chapter 1[General Regulations], Line 2: "The sovereign power of the State of Latvia shall belong to the People of Latvia" [<http://www.humanrights.lv/doc/latlik/satver~1.htm>])<sup>14</sup>. Plakans (1974) writes that the meaning of *tauta*, for the early nationalists, pointed to a sense of unity despite differences in economic status and geographic location. It is significant that it is placed in between national identity (*nacionāla identitāte*) and nationality (*nācija*) on this list, as it serves as a tool to distinguish between two definitions of nationality: (1) "The status of belonging to a particular nation by origin, birth, or naturalization" (Smith, 2001/2004, p.564) and (2) the Herderian idea of nationality (made up of a group of people that share specific cultural traits, who ultimately form a nation based upon a shared identity) (White, 2005).

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<sup>13</sup> The direct dictionary translation of *tauta* is 'people' or 'nation' and can also be translated as 'folk' as in *tautasdziesma* (folk-song) (Millere & Mozere, 2008, p.286). Within the context of *Latvijas Tauta* it is translated as (per the translation of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia) "People of Latvia" (<http://www.humanrights.lv/doc/latik/satver~1.htm>). This assists in explaining both uses of *tauta* in the Ministry's and other government documents, as well as within NGO studies.

<sup>14</sup> "Latvijas valsts suverēnā vara pieder Latvijas tautai" (15.02.1922. likums "Latvijas Republikas Satversme" ["LV", 43, 01.07.1993]. <http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=57980>).

The inclusion of citizenship, immigrants, and non-citizens on the Ministry of Culture's list is understandable, as the *Guidelines* primarily refer to the government's long-term social integration goals. The treatment of immigrants and non-citizens is the primary concern of the European Union and other outside governmental agencies that have declared an interest in the subject of what they describe as "social integration" (*sabiedrības integrācija*) in Latvia. Social integration is a concept that is part of the process of 'modernizing' and 'Europeanizing' of Latvia that began to take place after independence in 1991. Up until 2009, Latvia had a Special Tasks Ministry of Social Integration that was tasked with working alongside ethnic minority NGOs and populations to ease their 'integration' into Latvian society, as well as to address the concerns presented by the European Union in regards to the Latvian government's treatment of its ethnic minority population (After the Ministry of Social Integration was dismantled in 2009, its duties were split between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture)<sup>15</sup>.

The document also provides insight into how the Latvian government views the Latvian population: how it defines and categorizes each group and individual. There is a tension in this categorization, as demonstrated by the careful way in which the Ministry of Culture handles the sensitive topic of the stateless and non-citizens in Latvia. They are aware of the fact that NGOs will pay attention to how they handle this issue, as it is extremely controversial and complicated: it underlines the relationship dynamics between the Latvian government and the Russian-speaking minority, as well as the political discourse between Latvia and Russia<sup>16</sup>. It is within this

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<sup>15</sup> The Special Tasks Ministry of Social Integration's role was first taken over by the Ministry of Children and Family (later Ministry of Children, Family, and Integration Affairs) before being split between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture.

<sup>16</sup> As stated in the introduction, this subject dominates the majority of research and writing on Latvia, Latvian politics, the Latvian identity discourse, and Social Integration in Latvia. See: Aldis, R., Mickiewicz, T., & Sauka, A. (2011), Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (2006), Kronenfeld, D.A. (2005), and Muižnieks, N. (2010).

social and political space that the international discourse of integration, tolerance, and difference emerges as a requisite feature of contemporary Latvia.

Absent from the Ministry of Culture definitions is the term that is also used to refer to ethnicity (*tauta* can also mean ethnicity): *tautība* (The Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2004, 2005, 2006; Ķešāne & Kaša, 2008)<sup>17</sup>. *Tautība* only appears as part of other definitions in the Ministry of Culture's document. Considering the fact that the Ministry of Culture included such detailed definitions of every other term related to this particular discourse, one wonders what the reasoning was behind the exclusion of *tautība* on the list. One thought is that the Ministry of Culture assumed that the Latvian population already understood *tautība* as a term for ethnicity, but yet, the same could be said of nation/people (*tauta*), immigrant, or ethnic minorities (*mazākamtautība*). A more likely answer is that the Ministry of Culture used *tauta* to refer both to ethnicity and nation/people in their definition, a definition which is in line with the one for ethnicity provided by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), and did not feel the need to create a separate category for *tautība* even though they use *tautība* in other parts of the text.

Other governmental agencies and NGOs do not necessarily adhere with the Ministry of Culture's *Guidelines*' terminology and use *tautība* to refer to ethnicity in their documents and reports. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP) is an exception to this rule as it uses *tautība* to refer to nationality on its residence permit applications, which is another example of how ethnicity and nationality are conflated in Latvia<sup>18</sup>. NGOs, such as The Baltic Institute of Social Sciences ([BISS], 2004, 2006, 2009), Centre for Public Policy, Providus (Ķešāne & Kaša, 2008), and the Latvian Centre for Human Rights (2011) prefer to use terms such as *etniskās izcelsme* (ethnic origin) in their reports and studies, although *tautība* does make an appearance in

<sup>17</sup> The United Nations, for example, is translated as *Apvienoto Nācija Organizācija*.

<sup>18</sup> From the Application for Requiring a Residence Permit (*Anketa Uzturēšanās Atļaujas Pieprasīšanai*): "13. Tautība. Nationality/Национальность" ([www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/pakalpojumi/uzturesanas/anketa.html](http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/pakalpojumi/uzturesanas/anketa.html)).

one section of the BISS publication *Etniskā Tolerance un Latvijas Sabiedrības Integrācija* (*Ethnic Tolerance and the Social Integration of Latvia*, BISS, 2004). The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB), a government agency, uses *tautība* to refer to ethnicity in its publications. The CSB's statistical gathering methods are based upon guidelines set up by the European Union and the United Nations. Their definition of ethnicity follows that of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which classifies ethnicity as:

based on a shared understanding of the history and territorial origins (regional, national) of an ethnic group or community as well as on particular cultural characteristics: language and/or religion and/or specific customs and ways of life.  
(European Commission, 2010)<sup>19</sup>

The 2011 Latvian census, produced by the CSB, asked on the Latvian language version “*Kāda ir jūsu tautība?*” which they translated for the English language version as “What is your ethnicity” (CSB, 2011). In *Latvijas Statistikas Gadagrāmata* (The Statistical Yearbook of Latvia), CSB also lists *tautība* as its equivalent to ethnicity in the data summary for “population distribution by ethnicity” (CSB, 2010).

The one term that is typically absent from both the governmental and non-governmental texts is ‘race’ (*rase*). This is primarily because the discourse of race has only recently started to emerge in Latvia due its membership in the European Union, among other factors. The discourse instead focuses on ethnicity (*tautība*) and/or nationality (*nācija* or *tauta*). If race is referred to in publications, it is usually done so in European Union mandated or funded research studies such as those by BISS (2004, 2009), the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance ([ECRI], 2008, 2012), and the Centre for Public Policy, Providus (Ķešāne & Kaša, 2008), which most often use the term *ādas krāsas* (skin color) to address issues that in the Anglo-American context would be perceived of as being about race. Race also tends to make an

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<sup>19</sup> The UNECE definition does not include any reference to self-definition within its classification of ethnicity.

appearance in works by Latvian scholars trained in the United States (Dzenovska 2009, 2010) and in research focused on ‘whiteness’ and Latvian migrant workers in the United Kingdom (McDowell, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009). The research studies by Dzenovska and McDowell also take care to contextualize a difference between the Anglo-American conceptualization of race (based in the history of slavery and colonization) and a still emerging Latvian discourse of race (influenced by perceptions of the Anglo-American discourse, as well as by dynamics stemming from membership in the European Union [such as the politics of immigration, integration, and migration] and the recent Soviet past). Keeping the layered nature of the discourse of identity in Latvia in mind and in order to maintain clarity, I use nationality to talk about *nācija* except in cases where *tauta* seems more appropriate (i.e. when individuals or scholars refer to “the Latvian nation” or “the Latvian people”), and ethnicity to talk about *tautība*. In cases where I refer to the conflated nature of the terms, I will use ethnicity/nationality to refer to *tautība/ nācija*.

### **Race and Ethnicity in Anthropology**

The connection between the discipline of anthropology and the concept of race can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century, when anthropologists grappled with the ideas of social Darwinism and cultural evolution. It was with the latter that anthropology had the stronger relationship (Banton, 1977). While social Darwinism advocated for a view of human diversity that was stratified with “pure” races winning natural selection (fitter, faster, smarter), cultural evolution “directed research workers towards the study of continuities in evolution rather than towards the prospect of group conflict, individual competition, and the selective control of fertility” (Banton, 1977, p. 99). The anthropologists that exemplified this approach to cultural evolution were Morgan (1877) and Tylor (1871).

Marx and Engels, in particular, found Morgan's *Ancient Society* to be highly influential, in that it confirmed their theory on social change and evolution that "saw the history of Europe in terms of the transition from feudalism to capitalism to communism – which they believed the next inevitable step in this process" (McGee & Warmes, 1996, p. 9). This theory was adapted by the Soviet government in its project to initiate the process of Sovietization and "transform 'backward clans and tribes' into 'developed Soviet nations'" (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 142-143). Morgan (1877) and Tylor's (1871) theories would also eventually be used in Europe and the Americas by governmental officials and other individuals in positions of power to bolster arguments for colonialism, subjugation, and institutional racism (Baker, 1994; Kopytoff, 1982; Lewis, 1973; McGee & Warmes, 1996). The problematic outcome of the link between race, cultural evolution, and anthropology, was not just restricted to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Coon (1962) is an example of an anthropologist who, relatively recently, openly engaged with scientific racism. His 1962 text *The Origin of Races*, which postulated that each race evolved into *Homo sapiens* at different times, was utilized to justify projects such as school segregation (it was seen as proof that blacks were not as evolved as whites), a use from which he did not actively attempt to distance himself (Jackson, 2001, p. 249). Coon is only one example of an anthropologist that embodied (or embodies) the issues associated with race in anthropology and exemplifies how the construction of race is seen by many scholars, as a continuing problem even in the twenty-first-century (Gilroy, 1998, 2000). This is one reason why during the 1960s and 1970s some anthropologists decided to move away from a focus on race. The other reason was the change in demographics and population: the presence of European immigrants in the United States and the continued movement of people from one country to another, forced

anthropologists to rethink their approaches to the newly emerging discourse of identity (Williams, 1989; Zaretsky, 2004).

The growth of a focus on ethnicity in anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s presented an opportunity to not only depart from the problematic relationship between race and anthropology (although some anthropologists continued to explore race), but to also investigate other factors that influenced both group and individual identity. One factor in this change was the idea that the increase in immigration from Europe and other parts of the world to the United States, as well as the continued migration of populations across borders in Europe, meant that the groups that anthropologists studied were no longer in geographically distant countries (R. Cohen, 1978)<sup>20</sup>. There were several different approaches to the theoretical construct of ethnicity: primordialism (ethnicity as biological) and instrumental ethnicity (ethnicity as related to political tactics) (May, 2001). However, it is the theoretical position of Barth (1969) that assists me with better understanding the fluid nature of ethnicity and ethnic identity. I focus on Barth because he was one of the first to see boundaries between groups not as rigid, but as porous, shifting and adapting to the movement, back and forth, of individuals and traits. Barth's theoretical positioning has been built upon by other theorists who argue that ethnic identity is fluid and flexible (Fangen, 2007; Vasquez, 2010). This analysis of group interactions (what came to be known as situational ethnicity [May, 2001]), Barth contended, should not focus on the groups' cultural content, such as their rituals or their history (Eriksen, 1995; Triandafyllidou, 2001). Instead, the emphasis should be on the differences between the cultural practices that grounded the dynamics and identity of groups, such as marriage and language.

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<sup>20</sup> In cases, such as in the United States, where there were populations that existed together over a long period of time – there was still an “insider-outsider” “immigrant-native” dynamic that took place – See black Americans being told to “go back to Africa” and, at times, being treated as recent arrivals (also see commentary on white flight from cities, the Great Migration, and movement on African Americans from the cities to the suburbs).

Barth's, among others, approach to ethnicity allowed for a greater understanding of the types of interactions between groups and individuals in the context of identity formation. However, many anthropologists began to argue for a reexamination of race. They argued that the concept of race (especially the continued value placed upon phenotype in certain societies such as the United States) still played an important role in the ways that groups interact, and it was woven into the relationships of power both within and outside of a group (Harrison, 1995).

In the 1980s and 1990s anthropologists and other social scientists started to raise concerns about the focus on ethnicity that had replaced race as a concept essential to understanding groups and individual identity. The contention was that the lack of emphasis that some anthropologists had placed on race in their research on identity had made them 'race avoidant' (Mullings, 2005). Mullings' contention was that ethnicity was being used to talk about race while avoiding using the word "race". This shift in research and in academic discourse produced the unintended consequence of ignoring the problems inherent in racialized discourses – i.e. racism. This has been addressed in articles on the subject of race and racism in anthropological research (Harrison, 1995; Mullings, 2005). The wariness to use race as a term to address identity was linked to the idea that to "use the term 'race' or 'racial labels' would just reify and perpetuate racial thinking" (King-O'Riain, 2007, p. 523). "Racial thinking" meant thinking about race in biological terms – which was the very same discourse from which anthropologists had been attempting to divorce themselves. But, the scholars who were reexamining race saw this new direction as a way to both "correct" the past and to confront the continued reality of racism and racist ideology in the public sphere.

The call for a stronger examination of race and the impact of racism was due in part to the voices of scholars who had suffered from the detrimental effects of racism and discrimination

(Harrison, 1995). They argued that there was a continued importance of race in the identity discourse, particularly in the United States where race frames the manner in which Americans talk about identity. It was also still utilized in government documents and surveys, as well as the census and public school registration forms. By avoiding race, scholars were avoiding the opportunity to discuss how race impacts the lives of individuals. This was not just true for the United States, as Harrison (1995), Silverstein (2005), Wade (2010) have argued, race and raced dialogue were apparent in places such as Latin America, Scandinavia, West Europe<sup>21</sup>. Gullestad (2004), whose work focused on her native Norway, pointed out that this argument went beyond anthropologists and was also taken up by sociologists, political scientists, and other scholars who expressed the desire to investigate the ways in which raced talk (which tended to replace ‘race’ with ‘culture’ – as in “*their* culture is different from *our* culture and therefore they will not be able to fully integrate into our society” or “*our* culture is more enlightened/progressive than *their* culture”) had been co-opted by far right-wing political parties in Europe in response to the increase of immigrants from the Third World. Trouillot (2002) echoed Gullestad’s comment by arguing that anthropologists have avoided attending to how their conceptualization of ‘culture’ (as a replacement for ‘race’) has been taken up in practice within conservative and liberal political discourse in the United States (political representation, cross-racial adoption, white pride organizations). Race, many anthropologists contended, had not disappeared from the public

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<sup>21</sup> The use of ‘race’ to refer to Latin American countries often draws the critique that ‘race’, as US Americans frame it, does not exist within the Latin American identity discourse. Wade (2010), who has spent his career studying blackness and identity in Columbia, argues that enduring categories of race are still at play in Latin America and that “Constant reference to ‘black communities’, ‘Afrodescendants’ and ‘indigenous peoples’, alongside a discourse of nations having emerged from a mixture of Africans, Europeans and indigenous Americans, are clearly examples of racial discourse. It is notorious that, in Latin America, ‘race’ is flexible and can be trumped by ‘culture’: the move from ‘indio’ to ‘mestizo’ is often described as one effected by a change in residence, language or clothing; people can be identified by different colour terms (e.g. more or less black) according to how wealthy they look. Yet in my view we are still clearly confronting something that analytically falls into the social categories of race because, first, the enduring categories of race are being deployed – ‘negro’, ‘indio’ and so on – and, second, reference to racialized phenotype and to concepts of blood and heredity is still an important feature, even in societies where one can become a mestizo by altering behaviour” (pp. 54-55).

sphere and still played a relevant role in the relationships between groups and individuals. To talk about race was also to talk about the power of phenotype –a factor that was often not discussed within writings by cultural anthropologists on ethnicity. The contention was that phenotype (specifically, skin color) was still being utilized as a tool in structuring the power dynamics among and within different groups (Harrison, 1995; Wade, 2010). While the re-focus on race within the identity discourse is primarily about interrogating the ways in which racism operates in different societies, as well as about opening up the discussion to the married discourses of whiteness and white privilege (thereby making it possible for ‘white’ anthropologists to question their own engagement in racist and raced thinking [Mullings, 2005]), it is also about making cultural anthropologists feel that it is “safe” to restore the discipline’s relationship with the discourse of race. This re-engagement with race has also called attention to the ways in which race has been conflated with ethnicity.

Throughout my graduate studies I have discovered that both race and ethnicity are often one and the same, even when an individual scholar is attempting to tease out the difference between the two concepts. One example of how this attempt is made is phenotype. Phenotype, in this case skin color, is typically (although it is not the only identifying factor presented in the discourse of race) utilized to differentiate race from ethnicity. The argument goes that the idea of race, as it is currently conceptualized, leads to certain societies and cultures being categorized and stigmatized based upon the “lightness” or “darkness” of their perceived skin color (Harrison, 1995)<sup>22</sup>. This categorization is typically tied to the socio-historical processes that arose out of European colonization of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, as well as modes of slavery within these locations. This is made evident in the United States census where there is an overlap in the

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<sup>22</sup> See also the concept of colorism, which is explored in more detail in chapter 5.

definitions of ethnicity and race, using phenotype and descent in its definition of race, and heritage, nationality, country of birth, and includes the concept of lineage in its definition of ethnicity (Humes, Jones & Ramirez, 2010)<sup>23</sup>. Phenotype can play a role in how one defines belonging in an ethnic group. The stereotype that European “ethnicities” such as German, Latvian, Swedish and others<sup>24</sup> are marked by certain phenotypical characteristics such as fair skin, light colored hair, etc. demonstrates that skin color is not just the purview of the discourse of race. King-O’Riain’s (2007) example shows how skin color and descent are used as markers for ethnicity in the Irish census – the category of ‘white,’ for instance, is included as an ethnicity

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<sup>23</sup> The United States Census Bureau states “The racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of the race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups” (United States Census Bureau, 2010). An example of this is found in the definitions of each of the main “racial groups” listed in the census questionnaire: ‘black’ is defined as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘Black, African Am, or Negro’ or reported entries such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian”, ‘white’ as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘White’ or reported entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian”, ‘American Indian or Alaska Native’ as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment. This category includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘American Indian or Alaska Native’ or reported their enrolled or principal tribe, such as Navajo, Blackfeet, Inupiat, Yup’ik, or Central American Indian groups or South American Indian groups”, ‘Asian’ as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘Asian’ or reported entries such as ‘Asian Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Filipino’, ‘Korean,’ ‘Japanese,’ ‘Vietnamese,’ and ‘Other Asian’ or provided other detailed Asian responses”, ‘Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander’ as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘Pacific Islander’ or reported entries such as ‘Native Hawaiian,’ ‘Guamanian or Chamorro,’ ‘Samoan,’ or ‘Other Pacific Islander’ or provided other detailed Pacific Islander responses”, and ‘Some Other Race’ which “includes all other responses not included in the White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander race categories described above. Respondents reporting entries such as multiracial, mixed, interracial, or a Hispanic or Latino group (for example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Spanish) in response to the race question are included in this category” (Humes, K.R., Jones, N.A., & Ramirez, R.R. (2011). *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010. 2010 Census Briefs*. (p. 3). Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>).

The United States Census Bureau defines “ethnicity or origin as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States (...) According to the revised Office of Management and Budget standards noted above, race is considered a separate concept from Hispanic origin (ethnicity) and, wherever possible, separate questions should be asked on each concept” (United States Census Bureau, “Questions and Answers for Census 2000 Data on Race”, 2001 March 14, [www.census.gov/census2000/raceqandas.html](http://www.census.gov/census2000/raceqandas.html)).

<sup>24</sup> Which are also nationalities. There is a conflation and overlapping between all three terms, as will be seen in the Latvian context.

(King-O’Riain points out that this is mostly due to the “race avoidance” language mentioned above, as well as the fact that ‘white’ replaced ‘Irish’ on the census: “In the move away from nationality, they suggest not cultural terms that would divorce race from ethnicity, but instead racialized ethnicity by proposing racial terms under an ethnic heading” [2007, p. 523])<sup>25</sup>.

Ethnicity and race are also conflated within the socio-historical context. In the works of Hall (1997) there is an effort to describe the distinction between what is race and what is ethnicity. He defines ethnicity as being related to outward expressions of culture and/or nationality (food, clothing, performance). He contends that racial identity is a political manifestation based upon shared socio-historical processes between individuals. These processes – discrimination, colonization, and oppression – cut across ethnic and national lines. Hall’s (1997) formulation of race is specifically tied to ‘black’ identity, and he states that ‘black’ as an identity is not necessarily about phenotype – it is about ‘black’ as a “historical category, a political category, a cultural category.” He also emphasizes the psychological aspect of racial identity when he states that blacks’ “histories are in the past, inscribed in their skins. But it is not because of their skins that they are Black in their heads” (1997, p. 53). The notion of “Black in the head” is one which I will return to in chapters 4 and 5, but it is important to examine it in the context of this chapter because of the way in which Hall positions it against ethnicity. Ethnicity, he states, is the enemy of racial (‘black’) identity because ethnicity breaks down political solidarity (i.e. instead of uniting under ‘black’ each person unites under their individual ethnicities “Jamaican” etc.)<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> King-O’Riain (2007) writes that the decision by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) to use ‘ethnicity’ instead of ‘race’ in the Irish census, inadvertently brought racial categories and categorization into the census: “Even though it is not billed as a ‘race’ question, it does, in fact, use skin colour and meta-racial designations, but the ticks themselves are on ‘ethnic’ identifiers. No one has to tick black, but they can tick under black. The evolution of the categories moved away from nationality/ethnicity (i.e. the elimination of ‘British’) towards racial designations as white, black and the like. It created an ironic situation where the ‘ethnicity’ question on the census actually has meta-categories of white, black and the like, with Irish (nationality/ethnicity) added and with ethnic identifiers underneath them” (p. 525).

<sup>26</sup> This is another example of how nationality is often conflated with ethnicity and sometimes race.

Ethnicity, namely the shared cultural and linguistic practices, distracts individuals from participating in a larger collective political identity united under the banner of anti-racial discrimination.

Ethnicity *can* be and *has* been talked about as a collective political identity – particularly in the ways that some ethnic groups have formulated their identities based upon historical, social, and political processes – processes that are often seen as connected to the emergence of nationalism (Brass, 1991). Gellner (1994) writes that

Ethnicity becomes ‘political’, it gives rise to ‘nationalism’, when the ‘ethnic group defined by these overlapping cultural boundaries is not merely conscious of its own existence, but also imbued with the conviction that the ethnic boundary ought also to be a political one.  
(p. 35)

Political boundaries are also political identities. There are political identities under which ethnic groups can form common (in-group) bonds against oppression, discrimination, and a number of other factors (Brass, 1991). This has also been a space where race and ethnicity become race/ethnicity – as these socio-historical and socio-political processes are often used to describe both concepts in a manner that makes them look more similar than different (King-O’Riain, 2007; Sandrino-Glasser, 1998). This formulation of political identity through socio-historical processes presents an opportunity to examine how these theoretical positions can be applied to broader examinations of identity, especially within the contexts of geographic location, language, gender, and nationality.

It is also important to pay attention to how these examinations of political identity and the conflation of race and ethnicity have been attended to outside of a historical trajectory. The current approaches to the broader discourse of identity are not only relevant to my work, but also are also critical given the context of the final section of this chapter, which focuses on the Latvian context and how nationality (*nācija*), not race, is in a complex relationship with ethnicity

(*tautība/etniskis*). My perspective on the subject of nationality/ethnicity in Latvian identity discourse is based upon my own theoretical and personal perspective of the manner in which identity, as sense of self, functions within my ethnographic work.

One model that has proved critical in my work is the manner in which identity is negotiated and navigated by the anthropologist within their research. Lena Sawyer's (2000, 2002) research focuses on individuals of black African descent in Sweden. Sawyer attends to how the identity of the anthropologist is intertwined with their own study of the identity of their subjects. This is a piece that is particularly salient to me, as a large portion of my work contains some manner of self-reflexivity. Sawyer, like myself, is of mixed black African and (white) European heritage. The difference is that she grew up with a strong connection to Sweden through one of her parents and is fluent in the language. She notes that her "own background and experiences of challenging people's conceptions of community and belonging (...) surely played a part in my research interest in people whose assertions of belonging are also seen to challenge and defy hegemonic conceptions of belonging" (2002, p. 15). Her project became not only about understanding how her subjects negotiated their identity within Swedish racial politics, but also about how they were attempting to locate Sawyer's own identity within the broader Swedish discourse:

As I was trying to 'place' interview subjects and figure out how they negotiated Swedish politics of racialization and color, they were doing the same to me, sometimes with disconcerting results. My own claims to black (and Swedish) belonging were sometimes not met with the sense of community and acceptance I expected. Instead I was taught about the criterion for inclusion and/or exclusion to Swedish and African diasporic community. (2002, p. 15)

This act of 'placing' is reflected in my interactions with my subjects, particularly Jean, Martin, and Rauna. My own attempts at 'placing' my research subjects' identities within a certain type of discursive context ('race', 'blackness') resulted in understanding that there are multiple contexts at play within my subjects' own discourses of identity, such as age, gender, place of birth,

geographic location, family situation, and language. Sawyer's work has provided me with the opportunity to examine how other anthropologists of black African descent navigate their own identity within their research on identity among individuals of black African descent outside of the dominant discursive borders of the African diaspora (the African continent, the Americas, the Caribbean, West Europe, and the West Indies).

Another model is presented by anthropologists and other scholars who have attended to the fluid nature of race/ethnicity. Fangen (2007) argues that one's identity varies from situation to situation and is impacted by travel, place, and everyday practices (clothing, activities). For Fangen, this view is particularly critical when looking at immigrant populations (in her case, Somalis in Norway) and that it is important to keep in mind that different aspects of ethnicity operate in different ways, that some may come off as stable, while others have an aspect of fluidity:

One possible way of dealing with the different aspects could be to distinguish between the person's more naturalized ethnic identification, which is often expressed in statements such as 'I am a...', i.e. a definition that is often defined in terms of descent. The stability of this definition is related to its being the source of identity ascription from others, such as when immigrants from the same country of origin – in this article Somalis – and people from the majority group (here Norwegians) continue to define a person as Somali, and thus it might be difficult to stop defining oneself as one as well. Subjective ethnic identification, on the other hand, is expressed in sentences such as 'I feel like an X,' but which could include a Y, such as when the person defines her or himself as a Norwegian Somali. Such subjective identifications point to the more fluid character of ethnic identity. (2007, p. 401)

Wade (2004) adds to this conversation by stating that there is a subjective nature to race/ethnicity: "A 'race' is not definable in biological terms; it is a product of social processes. A person with a given biology can be identified, in racial terms, in very different ways, depending on the social and historical context in which she lives" (p.147). It is also a result of socio-

historical contexts, which influence the fluid nature of race/ethnicity. Gullestad (2004) writes that socio-historical processes are part and parcel of the shifts in identification of race/ethnicity:

Interpretations of differences are not universal, but emerge in historically specific processes as human beings give meaning to what goes on around them. When some physical features appear as particularly visible this is not only due to the features themselves, but to historically specific frames of interpretation that have become self-evident and self-explanatory for many people. Visibility, in the sense of prominent features that are invested with particular meanings, is not natural and universal but is historically specific and culturally produced and reproduced through fleeting and shifting negotiations. (p. 186)

Location plays an additional role in the shifting and fluid nature of racial/ethnic identification.

What one person in Cairo, Egypt sees as “looking Egyptian” another person in Seattle, Washington sees as “East Indian” and yet another person in Brooklyn, New York sees as “Dominican or Puerto Rican” and another in Amsterdam, Netherlands sees as “from the islands”.

These differential aspects of identification are also apparent in the narratives presented within this dissertation. Rauna, for example, presents a stable identity as Latvian, but will also, at times, presents other manners of personal identification, such as “mulatto” (Interview, November 10, 2010). These modes of identification are dependent upon context, subject of discussion, and location (see chapter 4 and chapter 5). This fluidity is also apparent within media interviews with Lingita Lina Bopulu, as well as within the ways that identity is constituted among members of AfroLats, such as Andrew, Jean, and Martin (Rauna is not a member of AfroLat).

Another version of fluidity is what Vasquez (2010) terms as “flexible ethnicity”. “Flexible ethnicity” takes into account how individuals navigate their identities within different geographic and political locations. These are not unlike the navigations that Sawyer (2002) describes in her work, in that Vasquez stresses:

“Flexible ethnicity” refers to the ability to deftly and effectively navigate different racial terrains and be considered an ‘insider’ in more than one racial or ethnic group.  
 “Flexible ethnicity” differs from “situational ethnicity” by acknowledging that people

may background or foreground certain identity features in different contexts but there is not a 100 percent correspondence between how people *want* to be perceived and how they *are* perceived (...) “Flexible ethnicity” acknowledges that although actors may assert racial/ethnic identities, their intended audience may not accept these claims. (2010, pp. 46-47)

Here, Vasquez is not critiquing the concept of situational ethnicity, rather she is pointing out that while “flexible ethnicity” with its emphasis on group-individual interactions may *sound* similar to the basic tenants of situational ethnicity (reciprocal nature of identification, ethnicity as a product of relational processes [May, 2001]), it does have its own distinguishing characteristics – one of them being that “there is not a 100 percent correspondence between how people *want* to be perceived and how they *are* perceived”. Vasquez’ contention that there is not necessarily a connection between how one wants to be perceived and how others perceive them is salient in my ethnographic work and analysis, particularly in chapter 4 which attends to the varied perceptions of blackness among individuals of black African descent in Latvia.

The locative, personal, and socio-historical nature of racial/ethnic identity is important to keep in mind as I move to attend to how the discourse of identity presents itself in the Latvian context. In Latvia, it is the conflation of ethnicity and nationality within the identity discourse that plays an important role in how individuals and the government view and construct one’s sense of self. This case examines the role of politics and socio-historical influences, both from within and outside of Latvia, in the shifting and fluid aspects of ethnic/national identity.

### **The Latvian Context**

The discussion of how contemporary discussions of race/ethnicity intersects with the current social and political climate of Latvia is an important topic to bring into full relief. In Latvia, national discourse about identity does address international discourses regarding race (as a

socially and culturally constructed concept that is typically based upon, but not limited to, phenotypic characteristics such as skin color). Instead, the discussion centers on ethnicity (*tautība* or *etniskis*) (as a social and cultural practice) and nationality (*nācija*). In Latvia, the two are often conflated, as is evident in the PMLP residency applications and in the Ministry of Culture's (2011) definitions. While the use of the 1920 Constitution and other government documents from Latvia's first period of independence are important factors in how the Latvian government approaches the concepts of ethnicity (*tautība* or *etniskis*), nationality (*nācija*), as well as nation/people (*tauta*), it is also critical to note the influence of the not so distant Soviet past. As Dzenovska (2010) states, the history of occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union is reflected in both the public and political spheres: "The contemporary Latvian understanding of the national governing public and political space resonates with the ethno-territorial imaginary cultivated during the Soviet times" (p. 435). One of the ways that this history has been reflected is through the formulation of ethnicity and nationality wherein the two overlap and conflate. The definitions of ethnicity and nationality were already being developed by the Soviet government prior to the first Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940. The Soviet Union's policy on ethnicity and nationality has its roots in the development of the 1926 census (Hirsch, 2005). The Soviet government needed a definition of nationality that could be used to classify the population in a way that would assist in hastening the process of Sovietization. Ethnographers were complicit in this definition formation – through their Soviet-government sponsored research on the peoples of the Soviet Union, they were able to give the government data on how different groups viewed their identities (this way they could figure out how to classify each group in the census)<sup>27</sup>. Their

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<sup>27</sup> Starting in the late 1940s, Soviet ethnographers would increasingly engage with the concept of *ethnos* or ethnic community, which they used to replace *narod* ("a people"). Ethnographers felt that 'ethnic community' attended to the growing argument, within their discipline, that ethnic self-identity was a "major determinant of ethnic entities,

findings allowed the government to get a sense of attitudes toward the idea of “nationality” and aided them in the project to cultivate nationalities. Hirsch (2005) explains that the goal was to “accelerate the consolidation of clans and tribes into nationalities – to ‘make nationalities’ out of related ethnographic groups” (p. 105). This goal was driven by the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationalities, which itself was influenced by Morgan’s (1877) and Tylor’s (1871) writings on cultural evolution and had a specific linguistic debate at its center<sup>28</sup>

Closely connected to the discussion about the most effective formula for registering nationality was the question about which term to use in the census questionnaire: the term with the Russian root, *narodnost*, or the term with the foreign root, *natsional’nost*. For decades, educated elites had used both terms, often interchangeably, to signify nationality. But in the aftermath of the revolution, some ethnographers suggested that the terms corresponded to two different positions on a timeline of evolutionary development. They argued that *natsional’nost* was a meaningless concept for the more “backward” peoples they encountered since it implied ‘an understanding of one’s ethnohistorical origins’.

(Hirsch, 2005, p. 111)

While it is *not* influenced by cultural evolution, the terminology used by the Latvian government in their documents reflects this heritage.

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia’s (2011) decision to include *tauta*, which is closer to *narodnost*, and *nācija* (as well as *nacionālā identitāte* – national identity) in their list of definitions instead of *tautība* (although it is the root word of *mazākumtautības* [ethnic minorities] which is included in the list) is telling – it demonstrates the conflation of ethnicity with the idea of nation (*tauta*) and nationality (*nācija*). Meanwhile, ethnicity (*tautība*) does

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including nations” (Bromley & Kozlov, 1989, p. 426). This still resulted in a conflation of ethnicity and nationality, as it focused on the ethnic nature of nationality.

<sup>28</sup> “Statisticians, ethnographers, and officials again debated which term to use in the census: *natsional’nost* or *narodnost*. Many made the case for the term *narodnost*, arguing that *natsional’nost* was a ‘cultural and political category’ that did not necessarily reflect ‘ethnic’ or ethnographic type” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 115).

“Discussions about terminology had serious implications for the shape of the Soviet Union. Experts, administrators, and local leaders recognized that the decision to use particular terms could manipulate census results; this in turn would affect the distribution of land and national-language schools and institutions. Indeed, a number of national republics and oblasts awaited census results about nationality in order to settle border disputes with neighbors” (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 115-116).

appear *within* the definitions of one of the defined terms – *Latvijas Tauta* (The People of Latvia). Two terms that do not appear either on the list or within the body of the definitions are *rase* (race) and *ādas krāsa* (skin color)<sup>29</sup>. Where *rase* and *ādas krāsa* do appear are in NGO documents and publications that are either sponsored or mandated by the European Union (BISS, 2004, 2009; Ķešāne & Kaša, 2008). For example, in the 2009 BISS report on immigrants in Latvia, the authors utilize the terms ‘skin color’ and ‘difference in visual terms’ to talk about the nature of discrimination and hate crimes: “Hate crimes in Latvia most often affect immigrants who are different in visual terms” (p. 7). This difference points to the central problematic as explained in the introduction to my dissertation regarding the social construction of identity within Latvia: whereas the Soviet Union is the influence from the past, the European Union is the influence from the present. It is within this tension that individuals in Latvia are currently negotiating their identity.

Latvia’s relationship with the European Union has created a space where the identity discourse is in constant tension with the raceless view of Latvian identity. This tension is found in the European Union mandates that require member states to conduct research on race and racism, to draft anti-discrimination laws that point out “race based” discrimination, and to use language in their government documents that specifically address the concept of race/ethnicity. This is evident in Article 17.33 of the Law on Radio and Television which states that broadcasts cannot include “incitement to national, racial, gender or religious hatred, to defamation of national honour or respect” (Secretariat of Special Tasks Ministry of Social Integration, 2003, p. 30), the studies produced by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance ([ECRI]2008, 2012), and in publications produced through EU funded agencies, such as those by

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<sup>29</sup> *Dzimums* (sex) also does not appear within the definitions (the term can also be used to refer to gender).

The Centre for Public Policy, Providus and the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (BISS). ECRI (which is a division of the Council of Europe), in particular, makes a point of focusing on how Latvia has not complied with the European Union mandate to construct an anti-discrimination law. In their 2012 report, ECRI writes that

Incitement to racial hatred is the only form of racist speech prohibited under criminal law. There are no specific provisions in the Criminal Code punishing the production, distribution, acquisition, transportation or storage of items that incite hatred on ethnic, racial or similar grounds or the creation of/support/leadership of/participation in a group which promotes racism. There is a low number of investigations and prosecutions of racially motivated offences and the article of the Criminal Code on racist motivation as an aggravating circumstance of an offence has never been applied. Incitement to hatred is interpreted narrowly. Civil and administrative anti-discrimination legislation remains deficient. (p. 7)

ECRI notes that, since its third report, some positive steps have been taken in the field of anti-discrimination legislation. Notably, in March 2010 a new provision prohibiting discrimination on grounds of (...) race, nationality and religious beliefs was introduced in the Law on Education<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, further to amendments, the grounds on which discrimination is prohibited were broadened in the following laws: Law on Consumer Rights Protection; Law on Social Security; and the Law on Support for Unemployed Persons and Persons Seeking Employment. (pp. 14-15)

This above points to a central paradox of racial politics on the international stage and the actual lived and everyday experiences of Latvian residents: how can one criminalize “racial speech” when there is not a discourse on race to begin with in Latvia? The words “Racial” and “Race” are not terms defined by the Latvian government in their documents, and it is not openly discussed by politicians. While race (*rase*) appears in NGO publications and perhaps are assumed to be universally understood, it only appears in ones that are the results of EU-funded

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<sup>30</sup> **“Point number 3. Prohibited attitudes towards difference:** (1) Within this section, these individuals have the right to education regardless of economic and social status, race, ethnicity (*tautības*), ethnic belonging (*etniskās piederības*), sex, religious and political affiliation, status of health, employment, and lifestyle “Grozījumi Izglītības likumā” (“Modifications to the Education Law”) 04.03.2010. likums “Grozījumi Izglītības likumā” (“LV”, 47 (4239), 24.03.2010.) (stājas spēkā 26.03.2010) (“Latvijas Vēstneša” Tiesību Aktu Vortāls, 2010, [www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=206963](http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=206963)).

studies on discrimination and/or social integration of immigrants, visible ethnic minorities, and third-country nationals. The views expressed by EU agencies such as the ECRI do not set out to define “racial” or “racism” for the Latvian authorities, the expectation is that Latvian authorities should already understand these terms. The changes that have taken place in Latvian law, such as the education example described in the ECRI report, are changes made due to EU recommendations. In order to be a member-state, one must comply with a certain set of understandings – the laws and attitudes towards certain subjects need to be standardized (for one thing, it means that EU citizens will be subject to similar legal regulations wherever they go). As Dzenovska (2010) points out in her study of racism and anti-racism in Latvia, that while government documents (under EU and UN guidance) may be attending to the discourses of race and racism, it is still not widely accepted by the Latvian public as “many Latvians considered that the problem of racism did not concern them (...) Moreover, racism was thought to be the problem of former colonial powers such as France or Britain, rather than of the victims of colonial, imperial, or socialist oppression, which is how Latvians often saw themselves in public and political life” (2010, p. 497). This view is constantly shifting, as it corresponds with how Latvians not only understand racism, but also the broader discourse of whether there needs to be a conceptualization of race in order to have racism – a topic that my students at University of Latvia engaged with during a discussion section on identity, culture, ethnicity and nationalism in cultural anthropology. Their conclusion was that perhaps racism *does* include other types of discrimination based upon a person’s (linguistic)identity or phenotypic characteristics even if they are not ascribed to ‘race’, particularly in a location where a concept of race does not fully exist (Journal notes, November 04, 2010).

The discussion among my students on race and racism reflect upon the broader public discourses of identification, participation and representation (political and social). Among my contacts, Martin, in particular, has been quite vocal about the manner in which the Latvian government approaches the issues of identity and discrimination in Latvia. He has pointed out the ways in which, he believes, the Latvian government has not attended to incidents of discrimination. One example is his development of a public service announcement project, which re-creates incidents that both he and others have encountered in Latvia, which he created as “something that can be really good to use to bring out public awareness within society” (Interview, August 02, 2009). There is also a shifting and fluid nature to these discourses in the public sphere, which correspond to political and social changes taking place in Latvia both on the global and local levels. These changes, particularly on the local level, include inter-ethnic contact which Kronenfeld (2003, 2005) lists as occurring through marriage, peer group interactions, school, and work – all of which assist in shifts in ethnic/national identity. This shifting nature is also attended to within media interviews with individuals, such as Lingita Lina Bopulu (see below and chapters 4 and 5), which contain discussions on the impact of racism, skin color, and multi-ethnic/racial backgrounds on an individual’s sense of self.

Other discourses that are impacting the identity discourse in Latvia are that of media and pop culture. Discussions around media in Latvia predominantly focus on the Latvian-Russian binary that exists in the Latvian media space. This is due to the fact that the media is divided between Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking realms. According to Šulmane (2010) this is due to “systemic transformations which occurred in the wake of the restoration of independence” that “not only opened the path toward democratization, but also established two subsystems – the Latvian language media and the Russian language media” (p. 225). Both media spaces influence

the discourse of identity in Latvia, but this dissertation primarily focuses on the discourses that arise out of the Latvian-language media, although in terms of pop culture, the largest music video channel in Latvia (outside of MTV) is OE, which broadcasts in both Russian and Latvian (and the majority of its programming contains videos from United States-based hip hop and R&B artists).

Media spaces and popular culture from outside of Latvia — and here I am not focusing on channels from Russia, but rather upon ‘western’-originated media and information (primarily from Great Britain and the United States, media which is readily accessible through radio, internet, and cable television) — are spaces where one can find sources that depict and discuss issues related to race and racism. These sources, in turn, influence how the Latvian-language media engages with the discourses of race and racism. This is especially apparent in the coverage of United States President Barak Obama, particularly in the events leading up to his election in 2008. The coverage of the issues faced by then-candidate Obama created a space for the Latvian media to talk about or, at least translate, the American discourse of race and racism<sup>31</sup>.

In the area of Latvian pop culture, Latvian-born reality-show contestant Lingita Lina Bopulu, whose father is black African and mother is (white) Latvian (Lingita identifies as Latvian), has openly used the word “racism” in interviews as well as discussed discrimination (in the form of hate mail) that she has faced based upon her “different skin color”. Her story has been widely covered by the Latvian-language media and prompted an editorial by Ivars Āboliņš (2012, March 08) in the newspaper *Diena* titled “Racism and Stupidity” (“Rasisms un

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<sup>31</sup> President Obama has also become synonymous with “black” American. During my second research trip in 2009, teenagers no longer shouted “Yo! Yo! What’s up?” in my direction, but “Obama!” instead. The link between “black” and “American” is also utilized by Latvian-based casting agencies and film studios. Angel Studios in Rīga, has a casting data base that clients can search for individuals to cast in their productions. Under “American” nationality, all of the individuals listed are of medium to dark skin tone and are of black African descent (I only know their heritage because the majority of the individuals pictured are children of AfroLat members).

Stulbums”) as well as a television program on the subject (“Nepatīk ādas krāsas?” [“Do not like skin of color (colored skin)?”] on the LNT call-in show *Tautas Balss* [The Nation’s Voice] on January 19, 2012). This particular area of discourse is examined in more detail in chapters 4 and 5, which look at perceptions, portrayals and, receptions of individuals of black African descent in Latvia.

## **Conclusion**

Race and ethnicity, along with gender and sexuality, are central subjects of analysis in the discourse of identity. While ethnicity has reemerged as a key topic of discussion – particularly with the formation of the nation-state (see Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Gellner, 1994; Smith, 1994), both have worked hand-in-hand in shaping how scholars, lay people, and governments think about modern formations regarding the identity of themselves and others. As we will see, there are some drawbacks to the theories that are linked with the concepts of race and ethnicity because they do not always work in practice or in nature. They are also “conflicted and contested” concepts that have shaped the way that anthropologists, particularly American anthropologists, have engaged with the discourse of identity. Race has been an especially contested topic in anthropology – as the specific ways that anthropologists have dealt with the construction of race has been either directly or indirectly linked with inherently problematic enterprises such as colonialism, segregation, and subjugation. Currently, anthropologists and other social scientists are grappling with this legacy by reengaging with race/ethnicity in a manner that both attends to the problematics associated with past conceptualizations, as well as exploring how racial/ethnic identity is something that has a shifting and fluid nature and is negotiated by the individual.

In the Latvian context, the conflation or overlap of ethnicity and nationality is apparent in the definitions provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, which demonstrates that specific ideologies of nationality (*nācija*) are shaping the Latvian identity discourse. The identity discourse, itself, provides evidence of how ethnicity and nationality overlap within the political and public sphere. In the narratives of Lingita Lina Bopulu and Rauna, there is evidence of the influence of this discourse on their own sense of “Latvianness”. While the discourse of race is not active in the Latvian political and public sphere – it is emerging, particularly through studies conducted by Latvian NGOs. These studies reflect a highly globalized Anglo-American discourse of race (and racism), a discourse that is emphasized by the European Union – the primary funders of the relevant studies. While the NGO documents point to an effort to engage with the concept and discourse of race, they also provide an opportunity to further explore why skin color may or may not become a factor in the broader Latvian identity discourse.

Finally, it is important to investigate how socio-historical processes, such as the Soviet past, influence the discourse of identity in Latvia. In the case of individuals of black African descent, this discourse is couched within the Soviet policies towards ‘black’ African students, workers, and intellectuals from the African continent and the United States. The next chapter explores how the discourses of identity among and about individuals of black African descent have been shaped by this Soviet legacy.

### **Chapter 3: Individuals of Black African Descent in Soviet and Latvian Spaces**

An examination of the socio-historical factors behind the positioning of the African diaspora in Soviet and Latvian spaces provides an opportunity to delve further into a topic that was presented in the previous chapter: that of the ways that identity was structured by the Soviet government. It also assists in demonstrating how blackness (as pertaining to individuals of black African descent) in Latvia is constructed differently than that of the Anglo-American (particularly United States) context. The project of Sovietization was partly about reconceptualizing ethnicity/ nationality; it was also about how the Soviet Union could represent itself as a contrast to the West: an official policy that called for no race and no racism in the Soviet Union. The involvement of individuals of black African descent in this aspect of the Soviet project was of utmost importance and demonstrates that there has been an active discourse surrounding the African diaspora in East Europe long before the end of the Cold War.

Predominantly scholarship on the African diaspora outside of the African continent has focused on the West — Western Europe, The Americas, The Caribbean, and the West Indies — and areas beyond this paradigm, including East Europe and the Soviet/post-Soviet sphere, have been largely ignored. There are works that go beyond this dominant paradigm (Baldwin, 2002; Blakely, 1986; Carew, 2008; Davis, 1960; Dzenovska 2009, 2010; Fikes & Lemon, 2002; Fondem, 1978; Golden-Hanga, 1966; Golden, 2002; Hessler, 2006; Hughes, 1934; Khanga & Jacoby, 1992; Matusevich, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; McKay, 1937; Parry, 1925; Quist-Adade, 2005, 2007; Robeson, 1950; Robinson, 1988; Smith, 1964; Tyne, 1973; Williams, 1998) and they examine how the African diaspora functioned within the Soviet-sphere – particularly the presence of students and workers of black African descent from the African continent and the

United States. When I trace the history of people of black African descent in the USSR and post-Soviet Latvia, I do so knowing that the sources that I draw upon are limited in comparison to the scholarship that focuses on the West/Atlantic. Once the topic enters into the Soviet era, the references become even more complex as they are influenced by the ideologies of the Cold War and all of the problematics that those ideologies bring with them. Some of the texts by African American and black African authors upon their return home from the USSR are filled with just as much anti-Soviet sentiment as the works produced in the Soviet Union are filled with anti-American and anti-Western attitudes (Robinson, 1988, Smith, 1964), while others extoll the benefits of the Soviet system, particularly its policy of anti-racism (Du Bois, 1958; Fondem, 1978; Osei, 1963). It should also be noted that most of the texts only talk about experiences inside Soviet Russia and very few are about life in the other Soviet Republics. This same pattern follows when looking at sources that came out *after* the fall of the Soviet Union – particularly those that examine the post-Soviet sphere; the majority is on individuals of black African descent in Russia (Carew, 2008; Golden, 2002; Khanga & Jacoby, 1992; Matusевич, 2007, 2008a, 2008b 2009; Quist-Adade, 2005, 2007). There are a scant few on the other post-Soviet states (Dzenovska 2009, 2010; Starr, 2009 [and the same goes for other countries in the post-communist sphere – with the exception of Germany, as well as a few texts about black African experiences in Hungary and Poland]) and most are difficult to obtain. This leads me into a bit of a quandary, as I am primarily interested in the history of this population as it relates to Latvia and while I am aware that Latvia *is not* Russia, I am also aware that similar policies were applied throughout the Soviet era. Therefore, a comparison between the two spaces is relevant to my analysis<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Some of the authors of these texts (Davis, 1960; Du Bois, 1958; Fondem, 1978; Golden-Hanga, 1966; Parry,

Texts on the black African experience in the USSR tend to start with the 1920s and 1930s and continue onwards to the 1950s, 60s and beyond. The texts on this subject tend to talk about two separate groups of people of black African descent: 1) those who came from the United States to escape racism back home and 2) those who moved to the USSR from various African countries to study at one of the universities before returning home. There are subsets of both groups, for group 1, the main subset is that of artists and intellectuals who visited the Soviet Union – either on invitation from the Soviet government or due to their own curiosity of what life was like in the “Red Mecca” (W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Paul Robeson, are part of this subset. Some, not all, were also involved in the U.S. Communist Party).<sup>33</sup> The subset for group 2 are those students from the African continent who ended up finding a way to stay in their respective former Soviet republics after the collapse, in order to raise families and work. The majority of those students were ones who went to school in the Soviet Union toward the end of the 1980s (It was rare to find individuals who were able to stay in the Soviet Union after their studies, as the Soviet government tended to not allow foreign students to stay after completion of their programs or for them to gain citizenship [dual citizenship was not allowed in any case] [Quist-Adade, 2007, p. 154])<sup>34</sup>.

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1925; Quist-Adade, 2005; Robinson, 1988) tend to switch constantly between using the terms “Soviet Union”, “Soviet Russia”, and “Russia” when talking specifically about the Soviet era. This is something of which to be aware, as quotes and references from these texts included in this paper may contain any of these three terms.

<sup>33</sup> This linkage did not turn out well for some of the well-known African American sojourners. Paul Robeson is the most prominent example, as he was a victim of McCarthyism and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Carew (2008) and Baldwin (2002) provide a good analysis on this issue.

<sup>34</sup> From Quist-Adade (2007): “Upon graduating the young fathers, especially those from poor homes, faced a dilemma: take their wives and children back home with them to a modest life or leave their families behind. Soviet officials did not allow foreign students to stay in the USSR after their terms of studies. Concessions were not given, even to those who had Soviet wives. Also, Soviet law did not allow for dual citizenship. The official Soviet explanation for not getting permanent residence was that the young specialists must return to their various countries to put their newly acquired skills at the service of their compatriots. Unlike the West, the Soviet Union, the official line went, was unwilling to take part in the brain drain in the developing countries” (p. 154).

While some of the texts on this subject (Baldwin, 2002; Carew, 2008; McKay, 1937) begin their study of black African individuals in Soviet spaces with the 1922 Communist International or Comintern – not only because it was at the start of the Soviet Union itself, but also because it was when the “newly established ‘Eastern Commission’ was asked to investigate the ‘Negro question’ which was particularly directed towards African Americans, not to Africans” (Baldwin, 2002, p. 37)<sup>35</sup> – I have decided to begin my narrative with the Sixth World Youth Festival of 1957 as Latvia was not yet a part of the Soviet Union until 1940 and again in 1945. The Youth Festival, in many ways, sets up the discourse that surrounded individuals of black African descent in the Soviet Union, a narrative, as we will see, that continues into the post-Soviet present<sup>36</sup>.

### **Tracing the Narrative: The Soviet Era**

The Sixth World Youth Festival of 1957 took place in Moscow and invited students, artists, and musicians from around the world to participate in what was intended to “demonstrate the changes that had taken place since the death of Stalin four years earlier” (Richmond, 2005, p.

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<sup>35</sup> The 1922 Comintern was notable because it invited black American scholars and activists to attend the conference – the most well-known being Claude McKay. While 1922 and the Comintern, provide points of exploration (particularly how the “Negro question” was already on the Communists radar and part of the early planning stages of the Soviet Union), Latvia was not yet part of the Soviet Union at that point. It would not become so until 1940 and again in 1945, when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic countries.

<sup>36</sup> There is a certain type of conflation, that begins to occur, of African and African American in the Soviet era. As is noted later in the chapter, while some of the policies in regards to individuals of African descent from either location were similar (positioning the Soviet Union as a place of liberation free of racism and discrimination), other policies were very different (the Soviet policies towards Africa and (black) Africans had more to do with decolonization and increasing the Soviet influence in the continent), most notably in regards to “immigrant” black Africans and African Americans and “permanent” black African communities that had existed in the now Soviet territories since the times of Ottoman Empire and the Tsarist Russia (Fikes & Lemon, 2002). Fikes and Lemon (2002) call attention to this issue and state that “Soviet political and social life was in part constituted through sliding engagements with blackness. The process of representing black individuals (from Pushkin’s grandfather to Paul Robeson) as graciously welcomed, juxtaposed against official representations and policy that erased permanent black or African communities, representing them as not originally belonging, situates one of many playing fields within which Soviet federalism globally opposed capitalism and antiblack discrimination (...) Effectively, this denial and erasure crafted both the invisibility of African communities existing in Soviet territory since imperial times (or earlier) and the celebrity of Soviet black émigrés, represented as short-term or individual residents in Russian space” (2002, p. 517).

243). Matusевич (2009) attributes the historic nature of the festival to its positionality within the post-Stalin “thaw” period, which under the reign of Nikita Khrushchev, presented itself as a “time of cultural and political awakening and relative openness” (p. 20). The festival had an extensive impact on the rest of the Soviet Union and “it provided an opening through which Western ideas and art forms began to seep into the Soviet society” (Matusевич, 2009, p.21)<sup>37</sup>. The Youth Festival was also an event that exposed much of the Soviet population, some for the first time, to individuals of black African descent<sup>38</sup>. While the festival contained 30,000 youth delegates from around the world, it was the African contingent that received the most attention:

Almost fifty years later, Apollon Davidson, the doyen of Soviet African Studies, still remembered the cultural and emotional shock of the festival. Davidson, like other Soviet students of Africa, had never been to the continent and had limited contact with foreigners (...) (Matusевич, 2009, p. 20)

By many accounts, African delegates enjoyed wide (and wild) popularity during the festival. The hotel reserved for African delegations quickly turned into a vibrant social spot, ‘the liveliest place’ in town, with Soviet youngsters (especially girls) crowding its entrance in hope of getting acquainted with the exotic newcomers. Urban folklore circulated the wild tales of Russian girls throwing themselves at the exotic looking delegates. The rumors, undoubtedly greatly exaggerated, cast the festival as a veritable extravaganza of interracial love (...) One of the festival’s unintended consequences was the appearance of a generation of bi-racial ‘festival kids’ whose presence amidst the Soviet populace would serve as a continuous reminder of that 1957 summer of love in Moscow. Indeed, love was very much in the air. ‘Africa is shaped like a heart,’ serenaded poet Evgenii Dolmatovsky, another contemporary observer of the festival. (2009, pp. 20-21)

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<sup>37</sup> “In 1957, after all, the sight of foreigners on the streets was itself a visceral shock for many people. International tourism inside the USSR had only just begun, and most young Soviets’ experience of foreigners was entirely limited to Soviet and foreign mass media sources” (Roth-Ey, 2004, p. 76).

<sup>38</sup> See figs. 1-4. The photos are from the August 1957 issue of *Zvaigzne (Star)* a publication out of the then Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. The photo essay included images of women (and sometimes men) from Latvia in their national folk costumes interacting with festival participants from throughout the world. Out of 28 photos, 9 featured Latvians interacting/posing with individuals of black African descent (7 of these were with Latvian women only [2 are with Latvian women interacting with women from the African continent, 1 is a Latvian man dancing with a female delegate from an African country] including the article’s cover photo (“Festivala Dienās” [“Festival Days”])).

The festival created a space of awareness of the black African other in the Soviet Union and what they might leave behind after the completion of the festival<sup>39</sup>. It also opened up a door for more exchanges between Africa and the Soviet Union. There was an increase in African students at Soviet universities after the festival, an increase that was also linked to the heightened interest in the continent from Soviet authorities. One example of this heightened interest was the Africa Institute, located in the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which opened in 1959 with Dr. Ivan Potekhin (a historian who specialized in Africa) as its first director. The purpose of the Africa Institute was to promote research in Africa and to motivate Soviet scholars to turn their interest to the region (Morris 1973)<sup>40</sup>. The role of the students corresponded to that of the Institute: to promote the Soviet Union (and its policies) in Africa. The African students who started to arrive in the Soviet Union after 1957 found a place where they could receive a scholarship to study in a university and explore a land to which many had no prior exposure and had only heard rumors about what they would encounter upon arrival.

### *The Student Narrative and the Soviet Position on Africa*

The students who came to the Soviet Union from the African continent were able to do so due to scholarships from the Soviet government. This interest in the continent was linked to the policies of Khrushchev, which were heavily promoted by Dr. Potekhin. Khrushchev, in particular, was

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<sup>39</sup> “Mention the 1957 Youth Festival to Russians today, and you are likely to be met with a wry smile and comments about the so-called *deti festival'ya* – the alleged cohort of biracial children born to Soviet women after the festival” (Roth-Ey, 2004, p. 75).

<sup>40</sup> The role of the Institute went far beyond academia and research – Potekhin was also an influential voice in the area of Soviet policy towards Africa (which I will go into more detail in this next section). Morris (1973) writes that the “influence of Soviet Africanists on the policy process towards Africa appears to have been enhanced by two special sets of internal circumstances. One is the highly centralized character of most scholarly research, and the strong, official control and direction of these activities which exists within the Soviet Union. Virtually all significant research, including that on Africa, is undertaken within the framework of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, a vast and highly politicised academic complex (...) A second factor contributing to the apparent influence of Africanists in shaping Soviet relations with Africa is the incredible information gap that confronted the national leaders in their early efforts to formulate policies towards Africa” (pp. 252-253).

interested in expanding the Soviet Union's policies towards Africa, as well as towards black Americans. It was a policy that looked towards expanding the Soviet influence in the Third World, with a specially trained eye towards the entire continent of Africa<sup>41</sup>. The scholarships that the students received were a result of this policy – to encourage students to bring back home what they had learned in the Soviet Union – expansion through the people, as it were:

The Soviet Union sought to attract African students as a way of enhancing its standing and popularity in the Third World at a time when many third world nations were undergoing the rapid process of decolonization. Africans hungered for access to free education and, as one former African student in the USSR put it, were prepared to receive it 'even under the ocean'. (Matusevich, 2009, pp. 19-20)

Khrushchev saw the policy as a means of combating "imperialism" through socialism and the Soviet way – particularly through alignment with the nationalist movements in Africa. This stood in contrast to the position taken by his predecessor. Stalin's "two camp" approach saw the world as being divided into two hostile camps and "Communist parties in the Third World were ordered to sever all relations with bourgeois leaders and to engage in an armed struggle to oust them from power" (Desfosses Cohn, 1972, p. 25). The two camp approach would allow Stalin to exert more influence over the independence movements as well as demonstrate a sharp contrast between the communist ideals of the Soviet Union and the "bourgeois" and "imperialist" ideologies of the West. Upon coming to power after the death of Stalin, Khrushchev continued to support Soviet involvement in Africa and distanced himself from certain elements of the "two camp" approach by allowing the independence movements to have more of a say in their relationship with the Soviet Union all in the name of anti-imperialism. Ogunbadejo (1980) writes that Khrushchev wanted to work with the leaders of the African independence movements

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<sup>41</sup> Some countries received more attention than others, but the Soviets still formulated their policy towards the continent of Africa as a whole and that shaped how they viewed black Africans.

because they could be used “in a concerted effort to undermine the West’s influence” (p. 297)<sup>42</sup>.

However, Khrushchev did draw some clear lines as to *how much* the Soviet Union would support the movements:

Khrushchev did follow Stalin’s lead in subordinating the interests of the colonial peoples to those of the Soviet Union; the essential difference was that Khrushchev was alert to the opportunities presented by the African nationalist movement, whereas Stalin’s ‘two camp’ approach allowed for no such appreciation. Khrushchev was ready to support African nationalism to the extent that it hastened the downfall of imperialism; if, on the other hand, the drive for self-determination aided the imperialist cause, then it was strongly rejected. (Desfosses Cohn, 1972, p. 27)

This was not a plan that could be evenly applied to all African countries at the time. The countries that the Soviet Union kept a closely fixated eye on in the late 1950s and early 1960s – particularly Cameroon, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, and later on, South Africa<sup>43</sup> – were all facing unique situations in terms of their independence and post-independence politics, especially in relationship to state formation. Desfosses Cohn (1972) brings up the example of the Katanga Province in Congo which bid to create a separate state and that “it was apparent to the Kremlin leaders that such a turn of events would not advance the cause of socialism” (p. 28)<sup>44</sup>. In the case of Ghana, the Kremlin was drawn to the country due to its status of being the first of the African countries to declare its independence – in 1957. However, Potekhin wrote that he was worried about Ghana’s diverse mix of ethnic groups: “the ethnic composition of Ghana is

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<sup>42</sup> Ogunbadejo (1980) further points out that “Khrushchev’s warm enthusiasm for the African nationalists and liberation movements had an ideological ring about it. True, some of the so-called progressive African leaders had been downright reactionary from the start, but Moscow believed that, sooner or later, they would assume the stance of the working class, in genuinely striving for the attainment of socialism. Therefore, Khrushchev always ensured that he lost no opportunity in showering praises on African leaders who advocated non-capitalist methods for dealing with the problems of nation-building; since such a posture was deemed quite important” (p. 300).

<sup>43</sup> Also: Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Malagasy Republic ( presently Madagascar), Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe, the Seychelles, Sudan, and Tanzania, [etc]. While the USSR might have focused on specific countries at specific times its policy was aimed towards the continent as a whole. This was also reflected in the population of black African students enrolled in Soviet universities.

<sup>44</sup> States Desfosses Cohn (1972): “First of all, it could be manipulated by the imperialist powers to reconsolidate their influence in South-Central Africa. Secondly, it could lead to a situation of extreme political instability on the continent, one that could only disturb the delicate balance of East-West power” (p. 28).

complicated. There is not one nation of Ghanaians and there are no grounds for such a nation to form in the future” (Desfosses Cohn, 1972, p. 44). It should be noted that Potekhin’s statement was an example of the Soviet academic conceptualization of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’, which posited that the nature of ethnic self-identity was an important component to the theoretical conception of nation (specifically, in this case, that ethnic divisions can and will occur [and have occurred]), and therefore could not be overlooked (Bromley and Kozlov, 1989). The influence of Soviet Africanists on Soviet-Africa policies (and vice-versa) was also apparent in how Potekhin and the Africa Institute’s findings modeled the Kremlin’s attitudes towards certain countries. There was also the usage of anthropology and ethnography to better ascertain whether or not an African country would be receptive to Soviet support and intervention. The main concern was whether or not “tribalism” could be overcome in those countries, which Ethnographer R.N. Ismagilova of the Africa Institute stated was an overblown concern: “(...) she continued to claim that the significant growth of national consciousness, the establishment of national organizations, and detribalization were all hallmarks of all the tropical African countries” (Desfosses Cohn, 1972, p. 43). While the Soviet Union positioned itself as being “concerned” for the fate of the peoples of the various African countries, it did so with a touch of Orientalism thrown into both its academic and political aspirations for the continent.

While Said’s (1978/1979) positioning of Orientalism examines Western hegemony and its dominance in the Orient, the relevance of his argument that “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (p.7) is applicable to the policies of Stalin and Khrushchev. Stalin’s “two camp” approach and Khrushchev’s cautious “anti-imperialist” policies were both designed to maintain the Soviet Union’s

“positional superiority” over Africa. The students who arrived in the Soviet Union from Africa entered into a place of controlled perspective where they were entrusted with embodying the Soviet Government’s policies towards their countries to the extent that they would rally for freedom (i.e. liberation from “imperialist” governments and policies, abolition of a class structure, creation of “anti-bourgeois” policies, etc.) in their countries and not support the current “imperialist” regimes.

This is clearly transmitted in the book *Moscow’s Forbidden Fruit* by Jilly Osei (1963) when he writes of being told by one scholar in Moscow to “study widely Soviet reality and especially Soviet economics, because, she said, Africa has every opportunity to build a new society and every African student, irrespective of his profession for which he is preparing should concern himself with the social sciences as well, as all the African intelligentsia should participate in the building up of a new society” (pp. 49-50). While Matusevich (2007) writes that many of the African students were not “inspired by ideological considerations” (p. 5), it is clear that the expected impact for the Soviet government and the result for the students was for them to be inspired enough by Soviet policies to see “the benefits of the Soviet experience for the modernization projects in their own countries” (2007, p. 5). Some of these students did return to their countries to participate in the independence movements and used the communist philosophies about work as their model.

When Osei arrived in Moscow in 1958 from British Togo (now Ghana) he said of the Soviet Union, that “after all the rumours filtering to us in Africa about bearded Bolsheviks with knives in their mouths behind the ‘iron curtain’ (...) as late as 1958, I was made to believe that Russia was the gateway to hell” (1963, p. 13). Osei, writing in a book that was meant to be published in the Western world to promote the positive aspects of the Soviet Union (The official policy of

anti-racism and equality of races), was creating a description for the reader that allowed them to see how the black African students conceptualized (through a Soviet filter) the Soviet Union while in transit to the land of their university educations.

The publication year of Osei's text was also the same year that 500-700 African students took to the streets of Moscow carrying "placards with such inflammatory slogans as 'Moscow – center of discrimination, 'Stop killing Africans!' and 'Moscow, a second Alabama,' all the while shouting protests in English, Russian, and French" (Hessler, 2006, p. 33). The students were protesting the death of a student from Ghana, Edmund Assare-Addo, who many believed was a victim of a racist attack aimed against his dating of a (white) Russian woman<sup>45</sup>. This protest was reported by the *New York Times* in 1963, but was barely mentioned in any later-published accounts of the time period. According to Hessler (2006) protests and complaints against the treatment of black African students were not uncommon in the Soviet Union at the time:

Grievances about race relations were, in fact, commonplace. Students typically complained to their country's embassy, to their university or institute, and, where relevant, to the public organization that had sponsored their scholarship. In 1962-1963 the Ghanaian Embassy received so many complaints about 'unprovoked assaults by Soviet citizens' that it requested a formal investigation. The resulting report, signed by all the top officials at Minvuz<sup>46</sup> and approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shrugged off many alleged racist incidents as unverifiable (...) The report was accompanied by the draft of a letter to the Ghanaian Embassy, pending Central Committee approval; the letter fell short of a full apology, since roughly half was devoted to instances of bad behavior on the part of Ghanaian students, but the authors had to concede that Ghanaians and other Africans had occasionally fallen victims to racist attacks. Affirming the 'feelings of sincere sympathy and friendship' towards Africans cherished by the 'Soviet people,' to whom 'feelings of any kind of racial inequality or disrespect' were 'alien,' the letter acknowledged that 'unfortunately, even in our socialist society one still encounters isolated unconscious or hooligan elements, through whom hostile attacks on our foreign friends may occur.' This line would

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<sup>45</sup> "Many conflicts centered on what was believed by the students to be the crux of the Assare-Addo affair: romantic relations between black African men and Russian women. This was partly a consequence of the demographic imbalance throughout the 1960s, male students outnumbered female students from the Third World Countries by a factor of eight or nine to one, and scattered evidence indicates that there were no African women for at least several years" (Hessler, 2006, pp. 35-36).

<sup>46</sup> Ministry for Higher and Specialized Secondary Education of the USSR.

become standard in the Soviet handling of racial questions: it avoided an outright denial of the problem, but minimized its significance by presenting racism as purely incidental, a product of criminal, pre-socialist attitudes and behavior. (pp. 37-38)

Osei's book *does* refer to what he calls "incidents between individual African and Russian students", but he echoes Minvuz' and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' position – in so much that he claims "if these incidents be analysed then it can be seen that all the misunderstandings arose on purely personal ground and by no means on racial grounds" (1963, p.31). In this sense, Osei's text was quite possibly an attempt to counter the media attention being paid to the protests and related public grievances against racism in the Soviet Union in 1963 and to ensure that the public face of the Soviet Union – that of a safe place for people of all creeds – would be kept neatly intact.

Both Osei's text and the media reports on the African students' grievances, in their own ways, parallel Matusевич's (2009) observation that students from Africa came to a Soviet Union that did not quite match up with the one in their imaginations (or in the account provided by Hessler [2006] – with the one that was publicized to them in their home countries):

African students traveling and residing in the Soviet Union of the 1960s – 1980s found themselves in a country that bore little resemblance to the Soviet Russia of its heady post-revolutionary days. Much of the early revolutionary fervor had been spent and, under Stalin's reign of terror, the Soviet Union acquired some unmistakable characteristics of conservative statism; i.e., the pragmatic interests of the Soviet state, and not necessarily communist ideology, informed its international behavior. There was no let up in Soviet antiracist and anticolonial propaganda, but it had grown ossified and streamlined to represent the official Soviet line in an ongoing cold war bickering with the West; and thus not necessarily reflecting the popular mood in the country. (2009, p.20)

The "antiracist and anticolonial" stance that was broadcast by the Soviet government was not just meant for Africa. It was also meant to reach individuals of black African descent in the Americas. This was a very pointed strategy as it could showcase the West's "imperialism"

towards peoples living within its immediate borders. This was heightened during the start of the Cold War in the 1950s, as the Civil Rights struggle in the United States provided fertile ground for the Soviet propaganda machine to demonstrate how much better off people of color were within the Soviet Union in comparison to the United States. It allowed them to demonstrate how horribly the (white) Americans were treating their black citizens. There were propaganda posters depicting the plight of African Americans (one that shows a close up of a pair of crying eyes with images of Ku Klux Klan hoods in the place of pupils). There were also cartoons in several of their magazines and newspapers, most notably *Krokodil* with its depictions of lynchings, courtroom injustices and out-of-work African Americans (see fig. 5)<sup>47</sup>. This also occurred in films made for the general public, the most famous of which was *Circus* from 1936 in which a white American woman and her African American baby boy escape a lynch mob and she eventually ends up working, as part of a touring group from the United States, as a circus performer in the Soviet Union where the Soviet people warmly accept her and her little boy<sup>48</sup>. Another way that the Soviet authorities publicly demonstrated their anti-racist positioning, specifically in contrast to the United States, was to go beyond the propaganda and to not only bring black African students to study in the Soviet universities, but also to invite well-known African American intellectuals to visit the Soviet Union and then return home to spread the news.

### **Antiracism and the Soviet “Race Question”**

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<sup>47</sup> There were also posters directed towards black Africans as well. Some of the most famous ones are from the 1960s and 1970s. A poster from 1961 shows a bald black African woman holding up a baby towards the sun with an inscription that reads “Good Morning Africa”. Another shows a black African man tearing apart chains with the words “Africa will fight! Africa will win!” (fig. 6)

<sup>48</sup> Aleksandrov, G. V., Orlova, L. P., Volodin, V., Melnikova, E., Massalskiĭ, P. V., Stoliarov, S. D., Komissarov, A., .Facets Multimedia (Chicago, Ill.). (1936/1990). *Tsirk: Circus*.

The Soviet Union's position as an "anti-racist" society also impacted how the Soviet government conceptualized race – in that, as opposed to Western countries such as the United States, the official policy stated that there was no race (as in a concept based upon phenotypic features) in the Soviet Union:

And while a fortuitous deployment of race as the central concern of national identity served as an enabling scrim for the perpetuation of other class antagonisms, Soviet Russia's refusal to be white allowed for an unctuous rhetoric of racial equality – bound together against the Soviet enemy – as the rallying point for patriotism and national citizenship. As Soviet bureaucrats bought political leverage against the United States by calling their race bluff, with satiric depictions of racial strife appearing throughout Soviet media (...) Although one would not want to make the argument that Soviet Russia had overcome her own issues surrounding racial conflict, nor that the Communist powers comprehended the specificities of the complex workings of race in the United States, it is not absurd to posit that Soviet thinkers had reason to believe that 'race' could be exploited as a potential weakness in the structure of the U.S. economy. (Baldwin, 2002, pp. 178-79)

This stance, did in fact, fluctuate from time-to-time – particularly within the Soviet Union's own policies towards nationalities, which was the "consolidation of clans and tribes into nationalities (Hirsch, 2005, p. 105. Chapter 2 provides more detail on this policy). By the time Khrushchev came to power, the specific Soviet line was that there needed to be one supra-Soviet nationality. The policy, as adopted by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress of 1961, stressed strict assimilation to handle the "nationality problem" via the creation of "a Soviet nation – a homogeneous, cohesive, and assimilated national community fully integrated with the Soviet state" (Vardys, 1965, p. 323)<sup>49</sup>. This process would necessitate for the removal of language and other defining ethnic/ national characteristics of the various republics and their peoples – sometimes by force. But, at the same

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<sup>49</sup> Vardys (1965) writes "The Party is seeking to create in the Soviet Union a melting pot – or more precisely, a number of regional melting pots somewhat different from one another yet all seeking the merger of Soviet nationalities into a larger 'Soviet,' or rather, Russian nation. These melting pots, to be created primarily by economic devices and manipulation, are expected to unleash political, social, and cultural forces that themselves, without government intervention, and certainly without application of violence, would create an atmosphere and incentive for gradual denationalization and then for complete assimilation" (p. 324).

time, the various nationalities/ethnic groups were sometimes asked to display their different styles of dress in parades and other national events – as was evident in the 1957 Youth Festival<sup>50</sup>.

Osei (1963) (perhaps as part of this promotional effort), in particular, takes special care in bringing up race and racism in the Soviet Union several times throughout his text. He asserts that the “absence of racial segregation in the Soviet Union is strikingly obvious even to the casual visitor” (1963, p. 29) that people “of various races live here. Anybody, be white, black or yellow has equal rights. The U.S.S.R. Constitution guarantees these rights and they are jealously guarded by the Soviet peoples” (1963, pp. 29-30). Quist-Adade also writes of the Soviet promotion of a raceless society. In his research on the Soviet attitude towards Africa, Quist-Adade (2005) found that even textbooks written in the 60s transmitted that message to students: “Textbooks used in the lower grades were written to infuse students with compassion for blacks (...) A textbook published in 1967 used stories of racial abuse of African Americans, claiming that a Soviet young pioneer saved a young black slave” (p. 81). These images and words were meant to reaffirm in the mind of the Soviet citizen what type of society that they were to inhabit and represent. The impact of the Soviet policy on race and racism is still apparent in independent Latvia, where race is rarely (outside of European Union mandated studies [see chapter 2]) a part of the political and public discourse on identity.

African Americans who travelled to and/or lived in the Soviet Union did so with an acknowledgement of supposed differences between the Soviet Union and the United States – the positioning of the Soviet Union as not racist and the United States (and the rest of the West) as

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<sup>50</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, British anthropologists Lewis Henry Morgan and Sir Edward Tylor’s views on cultural evolution greatly influenced Marx and Engels; theory of social evolution, which was eventually utilized by the Soviet government and ethnographers in their project of Sovietization. See: Gagen-Torn, N.I. (1971). The Leningrad Ethnographic School in the 1920s (The Origins of Soviet Ethnography). *Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia*, 10(2): 146-167, McGuire, G.V. (2007). *A system of affinity: Lewis Henry Morgan, Fredrick Engels, and Soviet ethnography*. Thesis (M.A.): Indiana University, and Semenov, Iu.I. (1965). The doctrine of Morgan, Marxism and contemporary ethnography. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 4(2), 3-15.

racist in the purest sense of the word (lynchings, segregation, police crackdowns on the Civil Rights Movement, the burning of African American churches, etc.). Those who went in the 20s, 30s, and 40s, were not so different from those who sought out the Soviet Union in the 50s and 60s. There was a feeling that the Soviet Union offered a viable alternative to the Jim Crow laws of the American South and the racism that was pervasive through much of the United States (the North included). In earlier years, workers such as Robert Robinson (1988) were offered employment in the Soviet Union – often in a position that they would have not been able to attain in the United States:

(...) to think about the obstacles I was facing, trying to advance within the institutionalized racism in America – and recalling that the cousin of a friend of mine had just been lynched three months earlier – I made up my mind on the spot. I read the contract and signed it. (p.29)

(...) I felt comfortable here, less pressured than in the United States, more accepted for what I was, a human being whose skin happened to be dark. (p. 62)<sup>51</sup>

Not unlike Robinson, the intellectuals and artists who travelled to the Soviet Union did so whether or not its promise of a racism free land did indeed exist. Many of these individuals were themselves, members of the American Communist Party or were at least attracted to the promises of Marxism. W.E.B. Du Bois was one of these sojourners (Baldwin, 2002).

### *Du Bois and the Soviet Promise*

African American intellectuals such as Du Bois were both attracted to and curious about this claim projected by the Soviet Union. Du Bois, who had travelled to the Soviet Union several times prior to 1958<sup>52</sup> (1926, 1936, and 1949), saw the “race question” as one of the most important factors in the Soviet Union’s relationship with ethnic minorities. Du Bois wrote

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<sup>51</sup> Later in the book, Robinson writes about acts of discrimination and racism that he encountered in the Soviet Union.

<sup>52</sup> During his 1958 visit Du Bois met with Khrushchev.

prolifically about the Soviet Union – in articles, letters, and even in books, the Soviet Union became the focus of his exploration of the race question in the international sphere. In his own words (1927), he asks “To us Negro Americans, the chief question is: What is Russia’s<sup>53</sup> attitude toward the world problems of race? We include in this, her attitude toward Negroes in America and Africa and towards the colored people of the East” (p.1)<sup>54</sup>. This question written in a 1927 article titled *No Race Prejudice in Russia Declares Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois*, was one that he continued to explore during each of his trips to the Soviet Union. Most of his writings about his travels were written in the 1920s and 1930s, but he also made astute observations during his trips in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1958, he wrote about the treatment of Paul Robeson, the African American actor and singer who was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956. Robeson had traveled to the Soviet Union many times and was outspoken about the differences between how he was received there versus back in the United States. Du Bois (1958) wrote in defense of his friend that:

It was that while he did not rail at America he did praise the Soviet Union; and he did that because it treated him like a man and not like a dog; because he and his family for the first time in life were welcomed like human beings and he was honored like a great man. The children of Russia clung to him, the women kissed him; the workers greeted him; the state named mountains after him. He loved their homage. His eyes were filled with tears and his heart with thanks. Never before had he received such treatment. (In Levering Lewis, 1995, pp. 798-799)

This defense was part of a tribute to Robeson that Du Bois presented during his 1958 visit to the Soviet Union. The tribute/defense also included the following lines:

In America he was a ‘nigger’; in Britain he was tolerated; in France he was cheered; in

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<sup>53</sup> At the point that Du Bois had made the quote, Du Bois had only visited the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Du Bois did eventually visit republics outside of the RSFSR – he traveled to the Uzbek Republic in 1958 for the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent – but he still tended to write Russia instead of Soviet Union in his accounts of his travels and experiences in the region. This means that he was also subject to the same dominant narrative effacing other identities/nationalities in the USSR.

<sup>54</sup> Du Bois was also, in 1958, one of the main proponents for the establishment of the Africa Institute (Baldwin, 2002).

the Soviet Union he was loved for the great artist he is. He loved the Soviet Union in turn. He believed that every black man with blood in his veins would with him love the nation which first outlawed the color line. (In Levering Lewis, 1995, pp.799)

The defense and tribute included some of the commonalities to be found in the writings of African American intellectuals of the time in regards to the Soviet Union: that it was there and only there that they were treated like human beings. While most of them went to the Soviet Union on guided tours or on the invitation of the Soviet government, the impact of such treatment, sheltered or not, was extensive – especially considering what was happening to these individuals in the United States.

Du Bois' writing and experiences were emblematic of the draw of the Soviet Union to individuals of black African descent – particularly African Americans. Just the mere suggestion of a society free of racism was an incredibly attractive offer to any African American or to those who had suffered under colonialism in Africa. This is not to say that the students and travelers were not made aware of the negative aspects of the Soviet Union – Du Bois himself commented on poverty in the USSR. Robinson and others commented on some of the injustices that they witnessed during their time living in the Soviet Union. But, even knowing some of the harsher realities did not dent their belief in the possibilities of a place without racism, even if it was a *surface* promise based upon an official stance against racism (Blakely, 1986; Hessler, 2006; Robinson, 1988). This surface promise was an intent that was acted upon in various ways, yet not achieved in others. But, yet, for Du Bois and other African American intellectuals like him – that surface promise was much better than living in a society where racism was official and institutionalized.

*Brezhnev and Beyond*

The Soviet government continued to pay attention to matters in Africa, as well as still promoting itself as a land without racism well into the Gorbachev era. With regards to its positioning on Africa and the Third World, in the 1970s under Brezhnev, the Soviet Union adopted a policy of “changing international correlation of forces” which Kanet (2006) states “referred to a dual development in the global competition between the two social systems represented by the United States and the Soviet Union” (p. 337) that would shape whether the Soviet Union could be in a position (along with the Socialist Community of Nations) to “challenge the international capitalist system for supremacy” (2006, p. 337). What this meant for Africa, is that the Soviet Union would become more actively involved in the nationalist movements – whereas before their involvement was primarily through ideology, training of soldiers, and supplying weapons<sup>55</sup>. Part of the involvement was economic and Brezhnev saw to it that the Soviet Union engaged in both trade with and financial support of African countries:

Moscow in the mid-1970s continued the efforts that it had been making since the late 1950s to encourage African and other Third World countries to shift their involvements from the world capitalist economy to the world socialist economy. Through 1974, the USSR had extended economic credits to 27 African countries – well over half of those that had gained independence by that juncture.  
(Albright, 1992, p. 58)

This support still extended to students from the continent, as they continued to arrive in the Soviet Union for their studies. The Rīga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute<sup>56</sup>, for example, started to see a number of students from Africa arrive on its campus. In fact, the scholarships that had been extended to students from the continent were not discontinued until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

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<sup>55</sup> MacFarlane (1992) writes that in the 1970s the “dominant view appeared to be that backwardness, or the incapacity to develop fully, was not the result of inherent features of African society or Third World economies in general, but was rather the product of the colonial experience and continuing neocolonial exploitation. The answer to the problem of development lay primarily in the dissociation of African economies from the world capitalist economy” (p. 14).

<sup>56</sup> The present day Transport and Telecommunication Institute.

The government's interest in Africa went beyond politics — there was also an effort to nurture engagement with the continent among the Soviet public through the mediums of film, television, and print. During the Brezhnev years, magazines such as *Zvaigzne (Star)* in the then LSSR, published photo essays about travels to African countries (fig. 7 and 8). One in particular showcased photos from the International Exhibition of Photography in Rīga (*Zvaigzne*, 1978, p. 22). The photos chosen for display in the magazine were of scenes from South Africa taken by photographer Andžejs Sava, depicting black Africans in impoverished conditions (the title of one of the photos “When you have lost everything...” [“Kad zaudēts viss..”]). By the time that Gorbachev came to power, this interest became even more visible. Citing a scene from the 1988 film *Little Vera* where a young boy of black African descent sits in front of a television (in a Soviet house) watching a Soviet cartoon that includes a song about Africa<sup>57</sup>, Matusevich (2008a) states that “Africans –African-Russians, to be more precise – function in these films to highlight the absurdity and ‘strangeness’ of life in the U.S.S.R., where the lofty rhetoric of internationalism often failed to capture the reality of African-Soviet encounters” (p. 71). The African came to represent something different from his/her counterpart in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years and Matusevich (2008a) argues much of this had to do with the changes that took place during *perestroika* which gave people more freedom to criticize the Soviet-African relationship:

Soviet economic failures were now routinely blamed on the deficiencies of the system itself in a tendency to provide ‘too much aid for Africa’ and waste national treasure on ‘black-skinned loafers.’ Soviet society, affected by economic distress and an accelerating political transformation, lashed out against the outsiders, especially those deemed complicit in the nation’s decline. Africans and African Russians began to report a steep rise in the number of racist incidents. The country that used to harangue

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<sup>57</sup> The song’s lyrics (as sung by a group of pirates): “Little children whatever you do/Never go to Africa to play/There are Sharks in Africa/There are gorillas there/There are big cruel crocodiles in Africa” (Negoda, N., Pichul, V., Khemlik, M., Zaitseva, L., Skolov, A., Nazarov, I.U., Alekseev-Negreba, A., Water Bearer Films (Firm). (1988). *Little Vera*. New York: Water Bearer Films [distributor].

the world on the values of racial tolerance and ethnic coexistence was now mired ever deeper in xenophobia and a variety of interethnic conflicts. (2008a, p. 74)

The Soviet government, under Gorbachev's leadership, had also developed a more pessimistic outlook towards Africa – they saw economic development in Africa as an impossibility and no longer wanted to take an active part in assisting with Africa's future (Radu & Klinghoffer, 1991)<sup>58</sup>. This change in policy and attitude was also felt by black African students in Latvia. While there used to be a sense that socialism and communism could be used as a tool to uplift the struggles for independence, as well as expand the influence of the Soviet Union into the African sphere, the *perestroika* years turned that vision on its head. By the end of the Soviet era, the students had lost their scholarships and the Soviet Union had disengaged from Africa<sup>59</sup>. But, the presence of the black African students was still felt and seen on the streets of Latvia.

### **The African Presence in Latvia**

It is now important to look at how the formulations of the black African individual played out in pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Latvia. One of the most common remarks that I hear from both Latvians and non-Latvians alike when I describe my work is that “there are no black people here/there” or “Black people have only been here/there recently”. I contend that while the numbers are small, there is a history of contact with and a presence of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. The most recent history is that of the arrival of students from the African continent which, as seen above, was a Soviet-wide phenomenon that increased after

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<sup>58</sup> “Soviet pessimism about Africa's economic future extends to most of the Third World, and it is not surprising that Gorbachev's report to the Twenty-seventh Congress of the CPSU in February 1986 included few comments on the less developed states. Moscow does not want to contribute as great a fraction of its own resources to socialist construction in these areas, preferring that the West bear the economic burden” (Radu & Kinghoffer, 1991, p. 6).

<sup>59</sup> Partly due to Gorbachev's change in policy and partly due to the collapse of the Soviet Union – to which their scholarships were linked. If the country where you have a received a scholarship to study in no longer exists (and therefore can no longer fund your studies) then neither does your scholarship.

1957 – and, in the case of Latvia, with the opening of the Rīga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute in 1960. But there is also a history in the more distant past – that of the colonial desires of Duke James in the Duchy of Courland, which is now a part of Latvia, and the Latvian identity narratives.

While Duke James was a Baltic German, his colonial aspirations are well-known to Latvians. The Duchy had colonial holdings for one decade in The Gambia (1651-1661)<sup>60</sup> and for three years in the island of Tobago (1652-1655). The colonies were established to allow for the trade of goods between Courland and The Gambia and Tobago. Duke James utilized Tobago, in particular, as a place to expand his number of subjects by allowing “numerous foreign colonists – mostly English and Zeeland Dutch – to settle in Courland as long as they swore loyalty to the duke” (Merritt, 2010, p. 493). The Duchy of Courland also transported Africans from The Gambia to Tobago in order to be slaves (Merritt, 2010)<sup>61</sup>. What is not clear from historical texts is whether any of these “slaves” were sent to Courland along with other “goods” such as tobacco and cotton. If Courland followed the same pattern of any of the other colonial empires at the time, then there is good reason to believe that some individuals of black African descent or even Amerindian descent found their way to Courland. There are more Latvian texts and references to Tobago partly because, as Merritt (2010) claims:

Unlike the Duchy of Courland’s other colony at the mouth of the river Gambia, Tobago continues to grow in importance in Latvian culture. Though both Gambia and Tobago were prominent in Latvian national consciousness, in particular during the interwar period, the Gambia has faded while Tobago’s star has risen. The simplest reason for this is that the Gambia is a less appealing target for appropriation into Latvian national history. Few ethnic Latvians traveled to that African trading post and none attempted to settle there permanently, in direct contrast to the settler colony on the island of Tobago. The possessions in the Gambia were held more briefly than Tobago, and the Duchy made fewer attempts to regain them. (p. 505)

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<sup>60</sup> Republic of The Gambia.

<sup>61</sup> The Duchy of Courland saw serfs and slaves as the same thing and owned both as laborers.

Instead of being seen as a people who were always slaves – either as serfs or as occupied peoples – the history of the Duchy of Courland creates a space where the Latvian people can have a connection to a symbol of the *powerful*, not of the *powerless*. Merritt (2010) contends, “the seventeenth-century Duchy of Courland can be re-envisioned by Latvians as another ‘golden age’ for their nation outside of the distant past or twentieth century. Additionally, the freedoms granted to settlers of the Courlander colony on Tobago provide a template by which ethnic Latvians could have become enfranchised members of the Duchy, not unlike other multinational European states in the age of colonial expansion (...) the existence of a historical ‘Latvian’ colony helps to mitigate the negative postcolonial feelings of the present” (p. 492). These “negative postcolonial feelings of the present” refer to the psychological legacy of fifty-years of Soviet occupation – of Latvians recovering from their time as occupied subjects, a status to which Skultans also refers to in her work (1998, 2007). The pride in the history of colonization, as demonstrated by the distinction between the powerless and the powerful, slightly diffuses the impact of Soviet occupation (and pre-1918 colonization)<sup>62</sup>. By re-envisioning the presence of African slavery from the historical narrative of Courland’s colonial holdings in Tobago and the Gambia, pride in this history can remain untarnished by the negative discourse of the slave trade<sup>63</sup>. It also, in effect, silences the early relationships between the land now known as Latvia and individuals of black African descent.

There are also other traces of influences of individuals of black African descent in Latvia – most notably, the House of the Blackheads with its two reliefs of a black St. Mauritius. (The

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<sup>62</sup> See Moore’s (2001) examination of the post-Soviet as the post-colonial.

<sup>63</sup> Merritt (2010) mentions that when the topic of slavery comes up among some Latvian historians who write about the Courland era, they are quick to point out that slavery was “different” in those colonies: “Berkis is quick to add that ‘The fertility of the soil and the rather mild climate for Europeans promoted the establishment of plantations and the colonization of the island’ but ‘Negro slaves were treated rather humanely’” (p. 496).

Order of the Blackheads [a Baltic German society]<sup>64</sup>, which also existed in Estonia, had St. Mauritius, who was Egyptian and is typically depicted as black African as its patron)<sup>65</sup>. Both are mentioned quite often when one refers to black African presences in Latvia and are the most visible of the historical links to the continent.

The recent discourse regarding individuals of black African descent starts with the arrival of students from the continent to the Aviation Institute. Their presence is clear in photos posted by alumni on the website of what is now the Transport and Telecommunication Institute<sup>66</sup>. There are photos of African students lounging in the grass in front of an airplane with their classmates, on excursions with other international students, in class, and in their dorm rooms. This history is visible to anyone who wants to search for it on the Institute's website – it is also known by many Rīgans who were aware of the students, but whose interactions with them were limited due to the fact that the international students were, according to Dzenovska (2010) “segregated inside the campus”<sup>67</sup>:

(...) a wide range of services, including cafes, shops, and discos, were available on campus. The campus was better provisioned than the city, thus the students had no particular reason to leave the campus, unless they had to go to the train station or to the airport (...) by enabling students to obtain products, services, and social life without leaving the grounds of the Institute, the Soviet officials did not encourage their public presence. Some of the people I spoke with about the Civil Aviation Institute suggested that the foreign students who could afford to attend the Institute were kept separate from the less well-provisioned Soviet population so that Soviet citizens would

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<sup>64</sup> The order was linked to the Christian subjugation of the Estonian and Latvian territory in the 1300s.

<sup>65</sup> The building was bombed by the Nazis in the Second World War, demolished by the Soviets in 1948, and underwent the process of reconstruction from 1995 to 1999. Source: Municipal Portal of Rīga ([www.riga.lv/EN/Channels/About\\_Riga/Riga\\_architecture/Old\\_Riga/MelngalvjuNams.htm](http://www.riga.lv/EN/Channels/About_Riga/Riga_architecture/Old_Riga/MelngalvjuNams.htm)).

<sup>66</sup> Photo Gallery: RCAII/RAU Alumni. <http://www.tsi.lv/?id=1259&lang=en&ct=3&cid=1259&r=3642&top=0>. The photographs are submitted by RCAII/RAU alumni, so the number of images in the gallery are dependent on the number submitted. The majority of photographs that feature students of black African descent are from the early 1980s.

<sup>67</sup> According to the school's website, this is no longer the case with the campus. The dorm (the school calls it the “student hotel”), however, is open to “non-resident and foreign students”. Non-resident usually means students coming from outside of Rīga to study in the city ([tsi.lv/index.php?id=4729&top=0&lang=en&top=0&top=0](http://tsi.lv/index.php?id=4729&top=0&lang=en&top=0&top=0)) ([hotelpalenis.lv/lv/about.html](http://hotelpalenis.lv/lv/about.html)).

not be tempted by the items and money in the foreigners' possession. (p. 433)

This perception of a class division between the international students and regular Soviet citizens is prevalent in texts about foreign students in the Soviet Union. The privileges afforded to the foreign students were seen as comparable to that of the Communist Party elite. The scholarships that the students received from the Soviet government also presented an image of the students being better off materially. They were paid money to study and almost seemed to be upper-class in a supposedly "class-less" society. According to Quist-Adade (2001) prior to the *perestroika*-era the international students were "in a privileged class of their own":

They were allowed to travel twice in the academic year to Western Europe, where they bought fashion goods and electronic appliances for sale on the booming Soviet shadow market. They enjoyed a virtual monopoly in this sphere, as Soviet Citizens could not travel beyond the Communist community in Eastern Europe. (p. 82)

Quist-Adade (2001) also mentions that it was seen as not in good taste for the students to show-off their purchases from abroad, as well as what they received for selling said purchases on the shadow market (a color television, for example). The students also used their access to the West to their advantage in other ways – the KGB was well-aware that some of the students were heavily involved in smuggling items such as pornography and hard currency. If an international student did make their material wealth and access to Western goods known it would become "the object of envy and anger from Soviet youths and an irritation to educational authorities and ideological guardians" (Quist-Adade, 2001, p. 82). Minvuz (the agency that oversaw all institutes of higher education) had also told African embassies to not add to the students' allowances, which they felt would make matters worse.<sup>68</sup> These facts combined with the common knowledge

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<sup>68</sup> Quist-Adade (2001) writes: "They argued that the Soviet stipend, 90 rubles (\$90 then), sufficed if students lived frugally. In reality, however, the authorities worried that hard cash given by their home governments enabled Third World students to buy the 'good things' of the 'Wild West' 'to spoil' Soviet youths. Ideological watchers in the Kremlin alerted the KGB to flush out 'extravagant' students. Many were expelled or jailed, especially during the

that the students were somewhat better off economically and socially than the rest of the Soviet population did not work to the international students' advantage.

This discourse of international student wealth and freedom was inarguably linked to how the students were treated when the rules started to loosen-up under perestroika and glasnost.

Andrew, who is a former Aviation Institute student, once told me that “there were protests and demonstrations” by international students in the early years of Latvia’s independence, in 1992 and 1993, due to the fact that they were to lose their formally Soviet government backed scholarships and would not be able to complete their degrees in Latvia (Interview, September, 10 2008. Conducted in English). The years of the late-Soviet period and independence also brought with them a rise in attacks on the foreign students in the Soviet Union – much of it linked to the perception of their “protected” status:

A surge in anti-Third World sentiments accompanied the new revelations about the alleged ‘sources’ of Soviet underdevelopment. The Soviet Union, the public believed, couldn’t afford to support dependents in faraway exotic locations. And Africans, the most visible representatives of the developing world in Soviet public spaces, often bore the brunt of what became a spontaneous campaign of denunciation of Soviet assistance abroad. African residents in the Soviet Union at the time reported a rise in the number of racist incidents as well as mounting difficulties in maintaining government scholarships to continue their education in the country.

(Matusевич, 2008a, p. 77)<sup>69</sup>

The students had come to the Soviet Union to study as representatives of the USSR’s policies towards colonized and post-colonial Third World nations, and once in the Soviet sphere they

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brief Andropov anti-corruption campaign in 1983. Attempts were even made to close the Iron Curtain to foreign students too” (p. 82). Note: 90 rubles was not considered to be a large sum at the time.

<sup>69</sup> Carew (2008) writes “Toward the end of the 1980s, the social, political, and ideological fabric holding the Soviet system together fell apart. It had been fraying for years but was bolstered largely by policies and procedures that provided ‘patches’ to any problems that surfaced. For the most part, incidents were not acknowledged to be racism per se but were considered signs of ‘hooliganism’ or of tensions fueled by alcohol. Earlier, Soviet authorities moved swiftly to correct racist behavior, and there was a concerted effort to match the solidarity rhetoric with action” (2008, p. 208).

ultimately came to be seen as symbols of the Soviet colonization of unwilling nation-states and peoples in the USSR. Thus, the colonized became the colonizer. In Latvia the increase in discrimination and attacks ultimately led to the founding of the AfroLat NGO in 2004, whose story is detailed in chapter 1.

*Present-Day: The Post-Soviet Experience*

The visibility of the foreign students did not fade during the years of independence, either due to the protests or due to the fact that many of the men (either those who stayed or left) had children with (white) Latvian women. Jean told me in an interview last year that his staying in Latvia was not part of the plan, but work and marriage changed everything:

I come to learn in Aviation University in 1989 and I finished my study in 1994 (...) After I am working in a French bank here in Latvia, Société Fédérale and I'm working there for three, three years. After then I find another job for security services with French company too (...) I'm married with Latvian, uh, woman and I don't plan to stay in Latvia when I was a student. My plan is to finish, to go to France, to find job, and to have my family there. But, in the last year in my study I met my future wife and we decide to marry and we are together seventeen-years now.  
(Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English)

His story is not too different from some of the other former students that I have spoken to over the years, who made the decision to stay in Latvia for the sake of love, family, and employment. But, there are also the men who did not stay and had to make the decision to return to their home countries.

The children from these unions serve as a reminder of their time in Latvia. Rauna, whose story is explored in the next two chapters, was born from such a union. Her father, who came to Latvia during the Soviet times (around the late 1980s, Rauna did not provide details), left shortly after the birth of Rauna's younger sister. He now lives in Mali and he and Rauna only speak to each other by phone or Skype. There are multiple stories like Rauna's, children whose fathers

left Latvia for a multitude of reasons – aside from personal reasons, there were economic (offers of employment in their home countries) issues that brought them to the decision to leave their families<sup>70</sup>. Some of these men left during the Soviet period after graduation most likely because the Soviet government did not allow them to stay in the country past their graduation date. The Soviet government’s policy was to ensure that the students would take the skills that they had gained through their studies back to their home countries to assist with development projects (Matusевич, 2007). The students who arrived in 1988 and 1989 graduated in an independent Latvia, which served them with a different set of challenges: whether to stay and attempt to become part of this new nation or to return home to the one that they had left behind for their studies.

One of the challenges faced by Jean and others who stayed after Latvia gained independence is discrimination. The other challenges were that of immigration and citizenship – Andrew (originally from Nigeria) eventually applied for Latvian citizenship, but others are Permanent Residents (Martin and Jean) or European Union (EU) citizens (Monir who is originally from Sudan but grew up in the United Kingdom [UK])<sup>71</sup>. There are also the new comers, who arrived after independence, such as Monir and Martin, who came to Latvia to live with their Latvian wives – Monir from the UK and Martin from the United States. Their perceptions of Latvian society are very different. Martin says he has faced discrimination multiple times since he moved there from the States and is the only one who consistently uses the word ‘racism’ to describe his experiences. His understanding of the word is rooted in the American context, that discrimination or any expression of hate (or even misunderstanding) towards him is based upon

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<sup>70</sup> In chapters 4 and 5 I talk a bit more about Rauna, as well as the story of Lingita Lina Bopulu, who has recently been in the Latvian public eye due to her appearance on the singing-competition “Okartes Skatuve” (“Okarte Stage”).

<sup>71</sup> EU citizenship makes it somewhat easier to seek employment in Latvia, due to the EU’s mobility directive.

on his outward appearance, particularly his skin color (being from the United States also means that Martin comes from the Anglo-American contextualization of the concept – rooted in the history of slavery and the civil rights period). In contrast, Monir (who comes from a British discourse of ‘race’) rarely mentions racism unless asked directly (with the word being used in the question) and for him discrimination or ‘racism’ translates into being physically or verbally attacked: “I don’t have issues with people and they don’t have issues with me” (Interview, June 14, 2011. Conducted in English). Smaller acts, such as staring (see Chapter 5 for analysis of the discourse of the stare), which Martin might construe as having ‘racist’ intentions, are not considered to be expressions of hatred or misunderstanding or ‘racism’ by Monir. For Jean and Andrew, the former Aviation Institute students, the terminology also differs from one another. Jean talks about the attacks against individuals of black African descent in the early 2000s<sup>72</sup> as “discrimination” (Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English) while Andrew uses the word “abuse” (as in verbal or physical abuse) (Interview, September 10, 2008. Conducted in English).

The most well-known of the incidents of discrimination or abuse to which both Jean and Andrew referred to in their interviews (and which was briefly mentioned at the start of chapter 1) took place in June 2002 when the far-right wing For Freedom Party produced an election ad (for the 8<sup>th</sup> Saeima [Parliament] elections) and leaflets featuring “black men dressed in Latvian army uniforms and the accompanying text: ‘Today-guardian of Latvia, tomorrow – maybe your son-in-law?’ (Secretariat of Special Tasks Ministry for Social Integration, 2003, p. 30). This incident brought to light the status of anti-discrimination laws in Latvia, particularly via Latvian Television’s refusal to run the advertisements on the basis of Article 17.33 of the Law on Radio

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<sup>72</sup> Source: *The Baltic Times* “U.S. Warns Travelers to Latvia about Racist Attacks” (July 13, 2005), “Black Man Attacked in Riga Center” (June 13, 2006).

and Television which states that broadcasts cannot include “incitement to national, racial, gender or religious hatred, to defamation of national honour or respect” (2003, p. 30). Members of the musical group Los Amigos, which included former Aviation Institute students from Africa, brought charges against For Freedom due to the use of their images in the campaign. They filed a claim on grounds of defamation, claiming that they were “not made aware of the contents of the advertisement” when they were asked to appear in what they were told was a tourism film (2003, p. 30). In the end, the Rīga District Court satisfied their claims, but did not go as far as branding the advertisement as “inciting racial hatred, as there was no evidence that the party wanted to cause racial hatred or discord in society” (2003, p. 30)<sup>73</sup>. The Rīga Regional Court gave a slightly different ruling, stating that the Freedom Party were to broadcast an apology to Los Amigos on Latvian television, send 180,000 letters of apology to residents of Latvia, as well as pay 3000 LVL (approx. 5,786 USD) in “moral compensation” to Los Amigos and reimburse the band 150 LVL (approx. 289 USD) for court expenses (Secretariat of Special Tasks Ministry for Social Integration, 2003). The Freedom Party only won 2075 or 0.2% of the votes in the election, but this incident brought to light issues related to discrimination and racism in Latvia.

While such cases are rare in Latvia, the use of readily identifiable “foreigners” in far-right wing party advertisements serves as a tool to set-up an Us/Them dichotomy that in post-Soviet Latvia can revive fears of occupation by foreign powers (recent advertisements by far-right wing political groups such as Visu Latvijai! [All for Latvia!] and For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK prefer to use the image of Latvia returning to being a Russian-dominated society – both in language and culture, if the government decides to relax its immigration laws –as it did recently

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with policies towards foreign investors)<sup>74</sup>. This dichotomy sets up the negative aspects of the discourse of difference (and otherness) in Latvia – difference as ‘foreign’ and as ‘a threat’. Such tactics, claims Katherine Verdery (1996), are a result of the end of Communist party rule, which:

produced a crisis in this self-conception: the ‘them’ against which so many had delineated their ‘selves’ had vanished. Senses of self had been built up and perpetuated for decades of the certainty that the enemy was the Communists, now they were gone. As a group of East European social scientists visiting Washington in the fall of 1991 told their host, ‘We had to find a *new* enemy’. That enemy, I suggest, became ‘the *other* others’ – other nationalities, who existed in greater or smaller numbers in every one of these states. (pp. 94-95)

I argue, that in the case of Latvia, these “*other* others” are without a doubt both the Russian-speakers who arrived in Latvia as workers during the Soviet period, as well as the “new” immigrants who started entering into Latvia in 1991 (See chapter 1 for more discussion on “otherness” in Latvia). This aspect of otherness was picked up upon by the Special Rapporteur of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (United Nations) during a 2007 visit to Latvia. The Special Rapporteur, in the 2008 report that resulted from the visit, referred to a “new identity” tension (in regards to the discourse that surrounds the mostly Russian-speaking workers) in Latvia that took into account the impact of the history of occupation:

The central challenge it thus faces is to build a democratic, egalitarian and interactive multicultural society by taking into account both the need to reassert the continuity of its national identity—shaken and eroded by occupation but deeply rooted in a long memory – and the recognition and respect of the rights of minorities that arrived during the occupation. (2008, p. 20)

The concept of “new identity tension” is applicable to the population of individuals of black African descent, as the African students are sometimes considered a part of the group of that arrived during the Soviet times. However, the foreign students are, at times, placed into the

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<sup>74</sup> These kinds of incidents are not limited to the nationalist far-right-wing parties. There is also the recent event involving Member of Parliament Jānis Ādamsons, who belongs to the Left-wing (re: Ethnic Russian dominated political party), Harmony Center. His transgression (an anti-muslim immigrant speech) is noted in an earlier footnote.

category of ‘new’ immigrants – due to perceptions that their marked difference equals the new kind of immigrant that is now the prominent face of immigration in broader Europe. Dace Akule (2007), of the Latvian NGO Centre for Public Policy, Providus, writes that there is a reasoning behind the assumed difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ immigrants:

(...) the term ‘new immigrant’ implies the existence of ‘old immigrants’ assumingly referring to people who were sent to Latvia in the Soviet era, including their offspring born here. (p. 15)

Political and public policy in Latvia on ‘new’ immigrants is influenced by European Union mandates. According to the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (2009), although these mandates are in place, the Latvian government tends to pay minimal attention to immigration related issues:

When Latvia joined the EU, all of the EU’s legal norms became mandatory for it, and many of these have been enshrined in Latvia’s legal regulations. At the same time, Latvia does not have a consistent or all-encompassing immigration policy concept for short, medium or long term. This makes clear the marginal status of immigration policies in Latvia. (p.54)

A 2008 study by Centre for Public Policy, Providus written by Iveta Ķešāne and Rita Kaša , provides a larger framework with which to place ‘visible’ ethnic minorities and immigrants, such as individuals of black African descent, into the immigration and identity debates of post-Soviet Latvia – particularly on the issue of discrimination<sup>75</sup>:

When examined against ECRI [European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance – LR.] recommendations, discrimination in Latvia is manifested in daily communication especially towards representatives of a different race, religion, nationality, and ethnicity. There are discriminatory expressions appearing in mass media, most commonly in the press and by politicians (...) Discrimination is encountered also in the educational system. There are cases when schools have refused admitting children with dark skin. (p.65)<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> As noted in chapter 2, the majority of these studies are funded by the European Union in an effort to widely disseminate EU mandates on racism and discrimination. They are also some of the only politically-oriented texts which directly refer to race (*rase*).

<sup>76</sup> Providus published this document both in Latvian and in English. This is from the English-language version.

This also extends to foreign students and visitors:

There are cases when international students who look different than locals have been physically abused. A study in 2004 focusing on the experiences of racially and ethnically visually different foreigners living in Latvia revealed that almost every respondent interviewed for the study had experienced physical abuse while in the country. At the same time, respondents and researchers were acknowledging that it is hard to tell whether in all instances violence was racially motivated. (p. 66)

Kešāne and Kaša, following the lead of Akule and to some extent Verdery, point to the attitudes of politicians and society as important factors in how immigrants are received and perceived in Latvia. This extends to the population of people of black African descent who have been impacted by both Soviet and post-Soviet policies on discrimination, integration and identity. Kešāne and Kaša admit the lack of visibility of (“visible”) immigrants in Latvia in both the political and media spaces contributes to the lack of understanding of this population and their place in Latvia:

At the moment, there are only a few immigrants in Latvia, and the negative experiences that these people face here are not publicly discussed due to a non-existent policy for immigrant integration. Reports in the mass media about the lives and experiences of immigrants in Latvia are few. These people wage their lives in isolation from the local society, living at the premises of the factories where they work.<sup>77</sup> Due to their short-term stay and the insecurity of their status in Latvia, immigrants neither organize nor engage in nongovernmental organizations.  
(2008, p. 69)

The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of which they speak are those set-up by various ethnic minority and immigrant groups, such as AfroLat, with the support of the Latvian government to provide political and social support to their communities (the word community is a nebulous one, as many of my contacts have mentioned that there is not really a “community” in the American sense of the word – at least for the population of black African descent). While this

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<sup>77</sup> The authors are referring to one segment of immigrant workers – those that have been brought to work for specific companies (corporate or otherwise) and kept in housing that is near their places of work and isolated from the outside (such as the Korean employees of Samsung’s and LG’s Riga headquarters). But, immigrants are not just short-term laborers – they are doctors (educated at Rīgas Stradiņš Universitāte – the local medical school), teachers, soccer and basketball players, artists, engineers, etc.

is a good step on the part of the Latvian government, there is still a lack of participation of these NGOs in Latvian politics – in the sense that they are not protesting in front of the Saeima (Parliament) or encouraging members to become active in political parties. So while there are tools to create a more public platform for immigrants, they have yet to be used at their full capacity.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter I laid claim to the argument that individuals of black African descent have a varied and rich history in the political and social narratives of post-Soviet nations, such as Latvia. This history can be viewed through a diversity of lenses: the Soviet era, the lens of the former African students, the African American lens, the Latvian conceptualization of the colonial aspirations of the Duchy of Courland, and finally, the political discourse that surrounds immigration and “difference” in post-1991 independent Latvia.

The works analyzed and discussed in this chapter are only the start to what is an important avenue of inquiry. This dissertation is designed to build upon the works of other scholars who have already started to develop and introduce new paradigms into the areas of post-Soviet studies and diaspora studies, this includes Baldwin’s (2002) in-depth exploration of the history of African American intellectuals in the Soviet Union, Dzenovska (2009, 2010) and her work on tolerance, race and anti-racism in independent Latvia, Matusevich (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) who has spent the last few years examining the narrative of individuals of black African descent both in the Soviet and post-Soviet spheres, and Quist-Adade (2001, 2005, 2007) who adds his own background as a black African student and journalist in the Soviet Union to his analysis of the experiences of African students during the Soviet period. This list is by no means complete,

but I aspire to use their works as a scaffold to which I will add new paradigms – that of a deeper investigation into how identity functions within these narratives.

The next two chapters delve deeper into the experiences and lives of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Chapter 4 looks at portrayals and perceptions of individuals of black African descent – particularly through the concepts of blackness and Africanness, while chapter 5 explores how individuals of black African descent construct their identities in public and in private. Both chapters are informed by how the influences of skin color, location, and place of birth impact how these individuals are received and perceived in Latvia.

#### **Chapter 4: Portrayals and Perceptions of Blackness and Africanness in Latvia**

In this chapter, I contend that blackness, as defined in the works of Hall (1993, 1997) and Johnson (2003, 2005), is an important theoretical construction that assists in placing the identification processes that individuals of black African descent face in Latvia into a broader context – a context that includes how blackness and its sometimes corollary, Africanness are portrayed in stage performances by (white) Latvians, children’s books, cartoons, and in the Latvian media. This context also takes into consideration how the Anglo-American construction of blackness (as seen in the writings of Hall and Johnson) can or cannot be applied to individuals of black African descent in Latvia: the ways in which individuals of black African descent perceive what constitutes ‘being black’ or ‘being African’ for themselves and for others, as well as how they portray or do not portray their identity as ‘black’ in the media. The ways in which portrayals and perceptions of blackness and Africanness operate in Latvia, assists in extending my argument that the politics of blackness is constituted differently in Latvia than in the dominant literature on blackness and race, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context. The portrayals by the (white) Latvians represent a certain type of understanding of what it means to be or act ‘black’ or ‘African’ – that one has to darken their skin, tease out their hair/wear fake dreadlocks, and perform in a certain manner in order to authenticate blackness or Africanness for the audience. This understanding of blackness or Africanness does not necessarily come from an Anglo-American perspective of ‘blackface’ performance. The media portrayals by individuals of black African descent demonstrate the manner in which blackness and Africanness are constituted differently in Latvia through the origins (i.e. places of birth) of the individuals in the media spotlight – individuals born and raised in Latvia maintain a different type of comprehension of what it means to be and act ‘black’ than individuals (such as American

basketball players) who were born and raised outside of Latvia. The perceptions of blackness and Africanness among individuals of black African descent in Latvia demonstrate how there is not a shared sense of identity among individuals of black African descent in Latvia – that skin color, and even connections to the African diaspora, do not define one's identity, as many of my contacts do not explicitly identify themselves as 'black'.

I begin this chapter by exploring how blackface and mimicry are being utilized by (white) Latvian performers to portray 'blackness' or 'Africanness' on stage. It is important to investigate how blackface operates outside of the context of the United States, as it points to how the American discourse on blackface (one where it is directly linked to racism and the history of slavery) does not evenly apply to Latvia. To assist with understanding the meaning behind the portrayals, I utilize the kinesthetic imagination (Roach, 1996) as a theoretical framework to look at how memory is incorporated into the portrayals of 'blackness' and 'Africanness' in Latvia. The kinesthetic imagination is about the act of simulation, in this sense it exists "to a high degree of concentration in performers" as it is also about bodily movement in that it "is a way of thinking through movements – at once remembered and reinvented – the otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable" (1996, p. 27). Roach uses the kinesthetic imagination to look at mimicry among members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club (who are African American) – who utilize blackface performance in their parade floats during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Taking off from Roach's analysis of the club, this chapter explores the ways which the kinesthetic imagination operates within the portrayals of blackness and Africanness by singers, school children, and children's book authors through their bodily movements and illustrated depictions.

The second section of this chapter focuses on how individuals of black African descent in Latvia identify or do not identify as ‘black’, as well as how their identities are seen through media portrayals. By ‘black’ and ‘blackness’, I am referring to the Anglo-American construction of the terms (‘of African descent’), as it is part and parcel of the theoretical construction of blackness. These perceptions of blackness are negotiated through a variety of factors: place of birth, age, economic status, occupation, family circumstances, language and gender. These factors influence how blackness is or is not inhabited in Latvia. My analysis of the perception of blackness is aided by the writings of Johnson (2003, 2005), who posits that blackness is not just about “acting black”, blackness, for him “has no essence, black authenticity is overdetermined – contingent on historical, social, and political terms of production” (2005, p. 60). Johnson’s argument echoes that of Hall (1997) – ‘black’ identity as based upon political and socio-historical factors, *not just* skin color (or other phenotypic markers). This theoretical framework assists in better understanding how individuals of black African descent in Latvia perceive blackness as either a part of or separated from their identity.

### **The Appropriation of Blackness in Latvia**

It all started with a flyer placed in the bookshelf next to my desk at University of Latvia. I had been told by my colleague Alina that there was a research-related issue occurring in her son’s kindergarten class. She mentioned that it had to do with her son’s school concert and that she wanted to talk to me about how the students were told to dress a certain way for an African dance piece. The flyer read “Representing Africa– little black people” (“*Pārstāv Āfriku – nēģerīši*”. Translation mine). The students were told to wear black tights on their heads in order

to look as though they had black skin<sup>78</sup>. They were to cut out spaces for their eyes and mouths and to wear something that resembled dreadlocks (for boys) and cornrows (for girls). They were also asked to wear black turtlenecks (if they had them at their house), black leggings or tights, and, for around their wrists, legs, and waists, fringe made out of raffia. Around their necks they were told to make necklaces out of paper in order to resemble ivory beads.

Alina, whose son was in the kindergarten class that was to perform in this dance, was quite shocked and immediately voiced her concern to the teachers and the other parents. She stated that the “other parents do not see a problem with this – do not understand how it might offend” (Journal notes, March 29, 2011. Stated in English). When I discussed the performance with her after I returned to the United States from Latvia, she made it very clear to me that this was her perception of the other parents’ reactions or non-reactions, that the other parents did not state that they had any issue with the performance (or vocalize it in public – there were some students who did not wear stockings on their heads in the final performance): “I just remember that parents and teachers were surprised that there is something confusing to me” and that “I can’t remember any other parent in my son’s group who denied participation or commented that such an action is unacceptable or at least confusing” (Skype Conversation, June 02, 2012. Stated in English). During our meetings prior to the performance, Alina expressed that both she and her husband had agreed that this idea, particularly what the students were told to wear, was offensive. It should be noted that she is a (white) Latvian of ethnic Russian descent and her husband is a (white) ethnic Latvian. They are not foreigners from outside of Latvia sending their child to a Latvian school, their opinions on this matter may perhaps be formed by their academic

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<sup>78</sup> Although the students did not literally “paint their skin black” the use of the black stockings had a similar impact. I am still interested in why this decision was made – one thought is that the act of having parents try to find the right type of face paint might have seemed more difficult than buying a pair of stockings, which can be found in any drug, clothing, or grocery store (even at Riga Central Market!) Face paint may be a bit harder to find.

backgrounds<sup>79</sup>, but they are also removed from the contexts in which blackface and minstrelsy would be considered offensive.

Alina spoke to the music teacher after our first meeting in March (two months before the performance) to see if there could be any change in the costumes and/or the dance. Alina informed me when we met a couple of days prior to the performance that the music teacher did not reject the costumes, nor did they change the dance (“too late”), but they did allow for students to opt out of wearing the leggings and pantyhose in the final performance (It was OK to wear, in Alina’s words, “white face” i.e, the students were no longer required to wear the black stockings over their heads) (Journal notes, May 09, 2011. Stated in English). Alina’s child was one of the students that opted out and decided to only dance in the Latvian folk dance portion of the program. She said that, when she explained to her son as to why it might be a good idea to perhaps not even participate, he understood and agreed with the decision (Journal notes, May 09, 2011. Stated in English).

Alina invited me to observe the performance, which took place on May 11, 2011 in a large concert hall in the VEF Palace of Culture (*VEF Kultūras Pils*) on the outskirts of the center of Rīga. The concert was built around the theme of “A Green World (*Zaļa pasaule*)”. The theme of the concert centered on an exploration (or an expedition, as the performance seemed to suggest) of other cultures and nations around the world. One teacher dressed as a ladybug and another teacher dressed as a “world traveler” MC’d the concert. The “traveler” held a globe and they would introduce each country by spinning the globe and then pointing to the country (and it was “country” – Africa was the only continent on the list, but it was still listed as a country) by discussing where they would travel to next and what they would find there (Each country was

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<sup>79</sup> Both Alina and her husband are highly educated and have spent time outside of Latvia for career-related work.

listed with what cultural marker the students would perform, i.e. “America [*Amerika* – LR]– “Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse” [Direct transcriptions from Alina’s copy of the concert program, Journal notes, May 11, 2011]). “Africa” was the third “country” that they travelled to, and as the stage grew dark and the lights came up on the performers, the audience could see the young students and their teachers in full-black regalia. They walked rhythmically onto the stage to the sound of drums. As the students and their teachers began to dance to the song “Hello Africa” by Dr. Alban<sup>80</sup>, they waved their hands (and swayed their hips) side to side in step with the rhythm of the song, sometimes the teachers danced in front of the students as the students stood still. Parents clapped along with the music, as their children (5-7 years old) danced for them on stage. One teacher had her lips painted red and was wearing an afro wig<sup>81</sup>.

Africa was not the only performance that Alina and myself discussed as being potentially problematic for the featured “nationalities”, as each one contained some level of stereotyping and caricaturing: Finland was represented by what I perceived to be elves and dwarves, Japan by, “little geisha and samurai” (this was how it was listed in the program [Direct transcriptions from Alina’s copy of the concert program, Journal notes, May 11, 2011]) dancing to a song sung in Chinese, Austria required the students to don dirndls (for the girls) and cone hats, and Spain contained a mixture of continental and colonial motifs (Salsa dancing, a scene from the opera *Carmen*, and soccer players juggling a soccer ball to the tune of Shakira’s World Cup anthem “Waka Waka” which also happened to be a very popular song in Latvia that year). Alina even remarked, half way through the concert, that “they [the teachers and other parents] just don’t imagine that these things could be sensitive” (Journal notes, May 11, 2011. Stated in English).

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<sup>80</sup> Dr. Alban is a Swedish musician of black African descent. The song is from 1990 and was re-released as a remix for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Sample lyrics: “Hello Africa, tell me how you’re doin’/Hello motherland, tell me how you’re doin’”. <http://www.dr-alban.se>. They chose the ‘country’ before they chose the song, as the goal of the show, according to the program, was to “travel the world”.

<sup>81</sup> I point this out because (large) red lips are typically part of traditional blackface performance.

The representation of certain countries and nationalities as caricatures calls into question how the children were being socialized – how these performances created for them knowledge of a foreign place based solely upon stereotypes, myths, and folktales. Finland, for example, while its national mythology does contain stories of dwarf-like beings (*Maahiset* [Crawford, 2010]), does have other areas of folk culture, which the educators could have drawn upon (i.e. national folk dances and songs). Japan, for instance, is more than just geisha and samurai and would have also benefited from using music that was actually *Japanese*. The use of white face paint in the Japan performance also points to a very specific stereotype based upon images of Japanese women in picture books (with white faces) and does not tap into other formulations of Japaneseness. Although stereotypes and the embodiment of caricatures were seen throughout the performance, it was the “Africa” and “Japan” segments that went to the extreme of coloring the skin, through the use of black stockings (Africa) and white makeup (Japan). The audience reacted to each performance (from what I could see and hear) with applause and adulation for the students. It was, after all, a performance put on by kindergartners for their adoring families and friends<sup>82</sup>. I even found myself smiling during certain segments and, as someone who was once actively involved in theater, was impressed by the amount of effort put into the production (set, choreography, organization of the children). In the end, in an event where part of the goal, as stated in the concert program and the MCs introductions, was to broaden the students’ and the audience’s understandings of other cultures and nationalities, the audience and the students left

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<sup>82</sup> A few days after the performance, Alina asked some of the parents and the teachers if they would be interested in meeting with me to talk about the performance. Unfortunately, this did not happen due to scheduling conflicts. Alina, has, however, relayed some of my questions to the teachers and they also gave her permission to let me view the video from the concert for further research analysis (but not to publish the images in the dissertation).

with only images of surface and un-researched representations of the cultures and nationalities about whom they were to learn<sup>83</sup>.

There is an underlying principle in how stereotypes and caricatures of the other are taken up through ideology and how this particular ideology is part of the socialization process for children. The performances, in particular, highlight how socialization operates through structured and unstructured play. Play “promotes young children’s understanding of their world and their development of learning constructs” and children pattern their social behavior through unstructured and structured play (Saracho and Spodek 2007, p. xii). Play also assists in scaffolding (building upon a child’s prior knowledge) children’s learning (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Fler, 1992), in this case their knowledge of different cultures and nationalities. By embodying these particular stereotypes, the students are actively being socialized to understand those specific cultures and nationalities *through* these stereotypes. The teachers, who Saracho and Spodek (2007) define as “social agents”, are responsible for this type of socialization process. When the teachers took part in the planning and performance aspect of the *Zaļa pasaule* production, they were also modeling this behavior (via the stereotypes and caricatures) as acceptable. Thus, the children did not see any examples that would demonstrate the opposite of the very caricatures that they were personifying in their stage performances. The teachers were also echoing back their own socialization processes from their childhood. In the next section, I explore this particular aspect in more depth by looking at how adults in Latvia also participate in similar acts of caricature and how this links to their own understandings of blackness and Africanness.

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<sup>83</sup> As an educator who has studied social studies curriculum development, I was more shocked by the lack of research that went into the performances and lessons (Alina had relayed to me how the curriculum worked alongside the performances) than the use of the black stockings.

*Portraying Blackness on Stage, in Hotel Bars, in Books, and on Film*

Blackface itself is not rare in Latvia, but it is also not common: it occurs in theatrical and operatic performances and, occasionally, in the media. The act of blackface in order to “authentically” portray a person of black African descent was apparent in a 2011 performance by singer Olga Rajecka at the bartender show “Cocktail Stars” that was held at the Olympic Casino in Rīga (Her cocktail matches: Piña Colada and Cuba Libre<sup>84</sup>). Rajecka (fig. 9) painted her face and arms a dark brown color, accented her lips with hot pink lipstick, and wrapped a red and black bandana around her head (which was covered in a wig of black cornrows). She completed her outfit with a bright green tee-shirt and clunky jewelry. The reason for this costume was that Rajecka was performing to “Waka Waka” and was to portray a theme related to the two cocktails. The accompanying article in the gossip magazine *Kas Jauns* wrote as its description for the photo: “Black skinned [*Melnādainās* - LR] singer Olga Rajecka’s spicy hip movements to the rhythm of the Shakira song *Waka Waka*. Olga found her colorful clothing in her own wardrobe as well as during her travels to Tunisia, Dominica, and Grenada” (“Olga’s Brilliant Transformation”, *Kas Jauns*, 2011, p.22)<sup>85</sup>. Again, a focus on skin color is used in the portrayal of a particular culture, particularly individuals of black African descent.

Another slightly related case, is that of the performances of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in Latvia. Latvia, like the rest of the world, is not alone in staging productions of *Othello* in blackface. The most recent example is that of the Jaunas Rīgas Teātris (New Rīga Theater or JRT) performance of *Othello* in 2010. The majority of the reviews of the JRT performance focused on the contemporary staging of the play (*Othello* rolled around on blocks of wood, affixed to his feet,

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<sup>84</sup> Rajecka was literally matched with two cocktails. Each celebrity was assigned a cocktail which they would then interpret in some sort of performance during the event.

<sup>85</sup> The article also states that “Olga Rajecka, colored as a moor [*moris*-LR] and dressed in colorful Caribbean clothing, performed in tandem with Olympic Casino barman Ivars Rutovski (...)” (p.22).

that had rollers underneath). One review, by Maija Treile (2010) of *Kultūras Forums*, did discuss the nature of a ‘white’ actor playing a ‘black’ character, but only to point out that “blackness (*melnum* –LR) is really blackness, not some sort of imaginative metaphor”, that the blackened skin is just blackened skin and has no other deeper meaning. She also mentions, in her remarks about the costumes, that the main actor’s “dark-colored skin makes the white dress uniform glow” (Demons and Archetypes. *Kultūras Forums*. Retrieved from <http://www.jrt.lv/otello>).

In the United States, the problematic history associated with the use of blackface (or brown makeup on a white actor) has mostly kept American theaters from using a ‘brown’ or ‘black’ faced white actor in their productions of *Othello* (Kolin, 2002). This history makes such productions a rarity, although they are not uncommon. Because Latvia does not share the same socio-historical connection with blackface performance as the United States, the performances of *Othello* (and other theatrical performances that use a white actor in black or brown makeup) are not always met with the same sort of scrutiny as their counterparts in the United States. They are, for the most part, seen as simply being representative of the way it was originally performed in the time of Shakespeare. But, for performances that are not of Shakespeare’s play, such as that of Olga RajECKa, what are the points of reference that these performers are using to create their portrayals?

Some clue can be offered by Cole (2005), who explores how blackface performance and use has traveled from the United States to lands beyond our borders (in this case, Ghana). In the United States, the meaning of blackface harks back to its use in minstrel shows and how they “exaggerated” blackness. The context in Ghana, as Cole discovers, for this type of performance by black Ghanaians at concert parties is comedy. The people that she interviews say that blackface performance in Ghana “was done just to make people laugh – it meant nothing (...) [it]

was but one of the many techniques concert party actors use to transform themselves ‘for show’ (2005, p.48). While she notes that the use of blackface in Ghana might have been a transference from the country’s colonial past, she also argues that it is about more than just the postcolonial present. I find this particular positioning useful for my own investigation into the use of blackface performance in Latvia, as Cole (2005) posits that:

Postcolonial theory asserts that colonial mimicry and stereotypes were ambivalent. But to speak of mimicry and colonial ambivalence ultimately does not tell us very much. What is much more revealing is to analyze in detail *how* specific valences were created, reproduced, and transformed through particular representations over time. What did blackface come to ‘mean’ as it moved geographically from Boston to Hollywood, from London to Africa, and temporally from the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries? (p. 47)

Nyong’o (2009), in turn, writes of the specific appeal of blackface performance (for him in the context of US historical tropes): “While blackface minstrels and comics indeed staged plays, no single genre could capture what was specifically appealing about minstrelization: its facility for inverting, burlesquing, and blackening anything” (p. 108). While it can be argued that the performing kindergartners and Rajecka are not using US minstrel styles as their main influential materials, it can also be argued that there are traces of specific minstrel stylizations in these performances<sup>86</sup>. It is the “inverting, burlesquing, and blackening” that make this type of turn so intriguing and tempting to the performer and so fascinating to the observer.

This type of move can also be analyzed under the guise of appropriation –the taking on of certain features of blackness during performance. Rajecka and the kindergartners, while operating outside of the post-colonial framework of Cole’s Ghana and Nyong’o’s America, are still appropriating certain elements of blackface performance. Blackface, itself, is at the far end of the spectrum of appropriating. In order to gain a better understanding of how appropriation

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<sup>86</sup> They may also be referencing ethnographic films from the Soviet period that portrayed ethnic groups in Africa in a certain manner (grass skirts, little clothing), as well as cartoons that drew caricatures of “Africans”.

works within the realm of blackness, I look towards the definition and explanation garnered by Johnson (2003), who states that appropriation “informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (p. 9). Appropriation, in this context, means that they are borrowing blackface performance tropes and visuals from outside of Latvia and bringing them into their own stage performances. They are also appropriating what they believe constitutes blackness in their specific contexts (Africanness for the kindergartners, Caribbeanness for Rajecka. Even though part of her outfit came from Tunisia, Rajecka’s cocktail matches of Piña Colada and Cuba Libre are Caribbean inspired or have origins in that region and she was meant to convey a sense of the Caribbean to the event’s audience)– they are taking in (stereotypical) images of individuals of black African descent from elsewhere and absorbing and transforming them for their own needs. It is important to examine how this manner of appropriation, the outward expression of blackness by performers that believe that they are performing as ‘black’, is enacted by (white) Latvian individuals through stage performances.

Analyzing these performances may elucidate how these stagings are one way for performers to demonstrate their visual sense of blackness and Africanness<sup>87</sup>. There is also evidence to suggest that, in Latvia, there are other visual reference points which the performers are using as the sources of their appropriation. One example is Zenta Ērgle’s 1974 children’s book *Ieviņa Āfrikā* (*Little Ieva in Africa*), which may have been the source material for the kindergartner’s “Africa” performance in *Zaļa pasaule*. I have found that other elementary schools in Latvia have utilized the book in their classroom lessons on Africa, something that Dzenovska (2010)

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<sup>87</sup> This exploration is important because it has yet to be undertaken in an in-depth manner within research on the Baltic States. Dzenovska touches on this subject in her work, but she is more concerned with expressions of tolerance – not performance or blackness.

indicates in her analysis of the text below<sup>88</sup>. The book, itself, contains illustrations of dark skinned, big lipped, and colorfully adorned Africans. Artis Svece (2008), a Latvian philosopher, wrote an article about the book's illustrations on the website for the Latvian newspaper *Diena*. His article points to an understanding of the complicated history of such portrayals – particularly the origins of minstrelsy and blackface:

The book clearly is not racist, for example, an entire chapter is devoted to talking about slavery. However, there is one problem – the pictures of the black children [the author uses the term *nēģerēni*. But later on simply uses *melnādaini*-LR<sup>89</sup>]. Staraste [the illustrator – LR] is not original, she returned to a stereotypical scheme that has been seen in many places – small black children with white eyes and red lips, loin cloths and rings with native decorations. This is unfortunately quite a problematic scheme, its history cannot possibly be described in a short column. For example, the lips – about this, with which we have to deal with a stereotypical example, such as red lips, because black people (like other races) do not have bright red lips. Where does this idea come from? This portrayal is likely formed due to the so-called minstrel shows that were popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century USA. Black Americans sang, danced and drove the jokes (mostly about themselves). With time white Americans started to perform in the shows, where they colored their faces black, lips were etched in white or red, they sang, danced and joked (about black people). Unfortunately, the shows seemed rather racist, and the black mask (blackface) also took on the status of a negative stereotype.”<sup>90</sup>

(2008, May 17, ¶ 1. Translation mine)

As demonstrated by this example, in Latvia there is an acknowledgement of the discriminatory history of use of blackface in the United States. The author of the *Diena* article was able to make a connection between the images in the book and the history of blackface. Furthermore, Svece

<sup>88</sup> The Kuldīga Children's Literature Center, in 2011, used the text to teach children about Africa: “This week together with Ieva, children will travel to hot Africa. There they will meet Africa's black skinned children, become acquainted with Africa's animals, and also see the Lion, the king of the jungle. Latvian children will make their own colorful clothing and learn African dances. Before leaving, they will refresh themselves with fruit and then fly back to Latvia” (Kuldīgas Bērnu Literatūras Centrs. Retrieved from <http://kuldigasblc.blogspot.com/2011/04/ievina-afrika.html>. Translation mine). The paper-streamer bracelets that the children made at the Kuldīga Children's Cultural Center, are the same type that were worn by the students in *Zaļa Pasaule*. Circumstantial evidence, but again, Dzenovska (2010) also alludes to this book still being used in Latvian classrooms.

<sup>89</sup> His usage of the term *nēģerēni* is intriguing, in that the suffix is commonly used to describe a young animal (kaķēns [kitten], tīģerēns [little tiger]), but not nations or people. Svece is using a construction that describes the characters as “little black animals”. So while he is arguing that the book has racial problematics, he too is engaging in his own problematic language. One wonders if he was conscious of this at the time of writing or if the term exists in the book and he was just repeating Ērgle's words.

<sup>90</sup> Svece, A. (2008, May 17). Ieviņa Āfrikā. *Diena*. Retrieved from <http://www.diena.lv/izklaide/ievina-afrika-605012>

was able to call out the problematics of these types of portrayals both in *Ieviņa Āfrikā* (fig. 10) and in the blackface minstrel shows that the children's book recalls. The illustrations in the book may very well be one of many images that the kindergartners in *Zaļa pasaule* were appropriating in their "Africa" performance. The childhood memories and the objects within which they are represented may also have an impact not only on the portrayals, but also upon how individuals of black African descent are received and perceived in Latvia. The kinesthetic imagination can provide a framework with which to further engage in how memory actively plays a part in the relationship between performance, portrayal, representation, and perception.

Kinesthetic imagination is, according to Roach (1996) the practice of memory:

As a faculty of memory, the kinesthetic imagination exists interdependently but by no means coextensively with other phenomena of social memory: written records, spoken narratives, architectural monuments, built environments. Along with culturally specific affiliations such as family, religion, and class, these forms constitute what Maurice Halbwachs calls 'the social frameworks of memory.' The kinesthetic imagination, however, inhabits the realm of the virtual. Its truth is the truth of simulation, of fantasy, or of daydreams, but its effect on human action may have material consequences of the most tangible sort and of the widest scope.

(p. 27).

For me, Roach's interjection presents an opportunity to examine the impact of memory on performance – the items and events from the past that have an influence on how individuals approach a certain type of portrayal. This departs from earlier explorations into performance by anthropologists (the early days of what was to become known as performance studies), such as Turner (1987/1988) and Conquergood (1988, 1989) who emphasized the importance of the connection between cultural performances and everyday life. Performances based upon memory, however, can function in a different manner than performances that are located within daily rituals. Memory can be muddled through the passage of time, thereby creating a situation where what one thought was an authentic representation could be just as much of a fantasy as a reality.

It brings up how different individuals first came into “contact” with the other – in this instance when (white) Latvians first interacted with media (or mediated) images of individuals of black African descent. In the case of the individual (white) Latvian performers who engage in portrayals of individuals of black African descent, such as Olga Rajecka, their performances are also not just based upon interactions with individuals, but interactions with various narrative devices from their past (transmitted through their visual memory): folktales, Soviet-era cartoons, comic strips from periodicals that they read when they were younger, ethnographic films<sup>91</sup>, and, children’s books such as the Soviet-era Latvian translation of Peter Joyce’s (1962/1971) *Ticky* (*Tikijs*, see fig.11)<sup>92</sup>, and others.

The cartoons, in particular, transmitted a certain type of image of Africa and individuals of black African descent to Soviet youth and adults. The animated short *Mashenkin Kontsert* (1948) featured an African American doll whose features consisted of dark skin, big red lips, curly hair, and large gold earrings (the doll was dressed in what looked like a bellhop outfit). There was also *Chunga Changa* (1970), a short cartoon based on the song of the same name.<sup>93</sup> In *Chunga Changa*, paper cut out characters of two-dark skinned individuals (both half-naked save for a skirt on one and a necklace on the other) with large yellow eyes and lips join in on a song with a giraffe and what might be a parakeet. Matusevich (2008b) writes of the cartoon that in “the minds of millions of Soviet children, Africans became forever associated with the carefree existence on the fictional island of *Chunga Changa*” (p. 73)<sup>94</sup>. Then there are the illustrations and written works, both from before and during the Soviet period, which also may have left an

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<sup>91</sup> There were some ethnographic films produced by the Soviet government that focused on Africa.

<sup>92</sup> It has been brought to my attention that the Latvian version of this book is translated from a Russian version of the book.

<sup>93</sup> See Matusevich (2009).

<sup>94</sup> Sample lyrics from the song: “What a miracle-island. Miracle island/Life is so easy here/Life is so easy here/Chunga Changa!/We’re happy day in and day out: Just munching on coconuts and bananas/Just munching on coconuts and bananas/Chunga Changa!” (Matusevich, 2008b, pp. 73-74).

impression. Dzenovska (2010), for example, mentions Rainis' 1908 poem *Briesmonis* (the monster), which was brought to her attention by a friend. Dzenovska writes, "The poem – all of its six lines – was about encountering *moris* (a moor) in the streets of Rīga. It described the colorful livery he wore and was accompanied by an illustration that depicted a very dark-skinned, thick lipped man (...) (2010, p. 438). Dzenovska then explains that when she asked her friend to "clarify what exactly bothered her, she noted that she thought the title was not appropriate – 'why would you call a black person monster?'" (p. 438).

In an earlier piece, Dzenovska (2009), like Svece, presents the example of *Ieviņa Āfrikā*. The images in the book, like those in the Latvian translation of *Tiki*, show Africans as dark skinned people who wear grass skirts and nothing else. Dzenovska came across *Ieviņa Āfrikā* during her research when a group of teachers used it as an example to demonstrate that such tropes (and their related terminology) were "historically used without any intent to offend" (2009, p. 105). Dzenovska asserts that Latvians "never owned slaves or exploited colonial subjects"<sup>95</sup> and argues that Latvians are removed from the discourse of "images of Africans used in various world fairs deeply embedded in racialized and colonial imaginaries" (2009, p. 105) as part of the reasoning as to why these portrayals may not immediately resonate as "racist" in the minds of Latvians. As pointed out in chapter 2, Dzenovska (2010) argued that most Latvians typically understand racism and racist acts to be associated with countries (particularly those in Western Europe) that were colonial powers.

It is also important to note that images of individuals of black African descent during the Soviet times were not just relegated to children's books and animated films. Those "images of Africans used in various world fairs deeply embedded in racialized and colonial imaginaries"

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<sup>95</sup> Dzenovska, pp. 105-106.

that Dzenovska (2009, p. 105) points to had their counterparts in the Soviet era. The Soviet ethnographic films, cartoons, and media accounts all reproduced similar tropes. The images from the *Zvaigzne* article “Togo-Rīga”, which is covered in chapter 3, focuses on a specific imaging of Africans – playing drums or wearing grass skirts – which plays into an exoticification of the African which is the very type of discourse from which Dzenovska claims Latvians are removed. In this sense, the connection to these images relates to a type of memory, one which functions within the realm of the kinesthetic imagination.

Earlier, I recalled Roach’s (1996) statement that the kinesthetic imagination is a “faculty of memory” (p. 27). Roach’s invocation of how memory works both within and outside of the kinesthetic imagination extends from Nora’s (1989) analysis of memory, particularly that of “true memory” where the kinesthetic imagination finds its home. True memory for Nora is connected to the physical – it is about embodiment and has “taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories” (1989, p. 13). It is critical to bring focus to Nora’s argument that memory is *not* history – they operate in two different, sometimes overlapping, realms<sup>96</sup>. Therefore, the same goes for Roach and the kinesthetic imagination – it draws on memories, not history.

Memory becomes located in the kinesthetic, as a felt and materialized emotion, through bodily movement. For Roach the connection between the kinesthetic imagination and memory is about a “way of thinking through movements – at once remembered and reinvented – the otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable” (1996, p. 27). Bodily movements, such as those through the act of dancing, can convey emotion

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<sup>96</sup> Of history, Nora (1989) writes that while memory is “transformed by its passage through history”, history itself is “nearly the opposite: voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or all encompassing” (p. 13).

through the extension of an arm, a facial expression, the way that the dancer contorts their body in relationship to music or other aural stimuli. A dancer (or even an actor) does not have to speak, cry, or laugh in order to convey an emotion or to transmit a feeling – it is the gestures as feeling that demonstrate the kinesthetic. Memory, through performance, can be transmitted as a feeling – whether it is to communicate the feelings linked with a memory or to provoke a felt and materialized emotion from the memory. In this sense, the performance becomes the embodied feeling or emotion linked to the memory. The teachers and students in the “Africa” performance in *Zaļa pasaule* were transmitting, through their movements, a memory related to the source material – whether it was attempting to embody feelings that they linked to the *Ieviņa Āfrikā* picture book, to the Dr. Alban song, or to another memory connected to the performance.

Memory can also be reimagined and reconfigured and is open to new forms of embodiment – when Dzenovska (2009) and others talk about the lack of a certain type of history – they are really addressing a lack of a knowledge within an individual’s memory of a connection between the images of individuals of black African descent that appear in the children’s books or in the kindergarten performances and the visual representations that preceded them in the near and distant past. In my analysis of the performances, I am specifically referring to the generation that grew up on these cartoons (and the discourse that surrounded them, see Matusevich, 2008b for further context) during the Soviet times and are, therefore, embodying the images of their childhood. The blackface and ‘blackened (via stockings or other methods of darkening) performances by (white) Latvians are based upon their memories of how ‘black’ and ‘African’ were portrayed in cartoons and books – they are drawing upon certain characteristics of those portrayals (dark skin, big lips, a certain type of hair) and then embodying them in their own performances.

In the case of the children in *Zaļa pasaule*, these memory-based portrayals are passed down to them through their teachers, in this sense their performance can be considered a type of ‘living memory’, which exists “through the transmission of gestures, habits, and skills” that have been passed down to them from their teachers (Roach, 1996, p. 26). These transmissions are not through the “body’s inherent self-knowledge” as is the case with true memory (Nora, 1989; Roach, 1996), but rather transmitted from others. The children, while their performance contains some sort of referent to *Ieviņa Āfrikā*, may have not been exposed to cartoons such as *Chunga Changa*, *Mashenkin Kontsert*, among others that inform the social or true memory of their teachers and parents. For Olga Rajecka, her performance does not seem to arise from the memories connected to her childhood; there is a chance that this memory arises from another, more recent, location – such as images or performances that she might have seen during her travels to the Caribbean, the West Indies, and North Africa. The ‘browning’ of her face was an attempt to seem more authentic – to achieve the Caribbean look (even though one part of her outfit came from Tunisia and the music was by a Colombian singer of Lebanese descent).

Blackface performances by (white) Latvian performers are not the only spaces where embodied memory operates. It also operates in the day-to-day lives of individuals of black African descent. The next section explores how the discourses such as authenticity, perception, and portrayal assist in understanding what constitutes blackness and Africanness for individuals of black African descent.

### **Perceptions and Portrayals of Blackness Among Individuals of Black African Descent**

While the previous section looked at how (white) Latvian performers (and book authors) demonstrate a bodily manifestation of blackness as portrayal, this section turns to how

individuals of black African descent in Latvia define ‘black’ and blackness for themselves and others in their day-to-day lives, as well as through media portrayals. My contacts in Latvia who are of black African descent did not all define themselves as ‘black’, one example is found in Rauna who identifies as Latvian and represents herself as “brown” due to her skin tone. But blackness and ‘black’ as an identity is about more than skin tone (or hair or facial features, for that matter) or origins – it is also about what one thinks or believes counts as *being* ‘black’. This recalls Hall’s (1997) observation about being “black in the head”, which relates to a political identity, not only to skin color. My task is to engage with how “black in the head” may or may not be part of the formulation of blackness in Latvia, as well as how it might point to a fluidity or flexibility of identity (See chapter 2; Fangen, 2007; Gullestad, 2004; Vasquez, 2010) and a discourse of difference among individuals of black African descent in Latvia: What does it mean to identify as a ‘black’ or ‘African’ person? How does your identity connect with your background as an individual of black African descent? What are the expectations that others have of you due to your ‘blackness’ or ‘Africanness’? Earlier, I meditated on how (white) Latvian performers who performed “as black” or “as African” were basing their characterizations on images and stereotypes that portrayed individuals of black African descent as a certain type of caricature – an exotic native from a place far away. While some individuals of black African descent in Latvia are indeed from places outside of Latvia, some are Latvian natives born and raised in the Baltic state. The portrayals of blackness on stage and the individual of black African descent’s own representation of self do not quite match up – one relates to images and the imaginary, the other to an individual’s perception of their own identity.

Blackness (as identity), however, is not something that is defined or performed one way. In fact, there are several ways to define and analyze the notion of blackness. One of the most

incisive analyses is provided by Johnson (2003). He sees blackness as something that is not just about “acting black”. He suggests that “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black’ culture” (p.2). Further, Johnson remarks, that blackness “does not belong to any one individual or group” (in Elam, Jr.& Jackson, 2005, p. 60). It can take on many forms and transmutate depending on its location. Further, he remarks:

(...) individuals and groups appropriate it in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude others<sup>97</sup>. When blackness is appropriated to the exclusion of others, identity becomes political. Because blackness has no essence, black authenticity is overdetermined – contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production. (2005, p. 60)

Here, Johnson’s statement that “black authenticity is overdetermined – contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of production” echoes Hall (1997), who states that ‘black’ is “a historical category, a political category, a cultural category (...) Their histories are in the past, inscribed in their skins. But it is not because of their skins that they are Black in their heads” (p. 53). In chapter 2, I provided an analysis of how this formulation operates for Hall, but it is worth noting how the link to ‘black’ identity and blackness are consistently linked to a political project – as represented by the quotes from Hall and Johnson<sup>98</sup>. The blackface performances in Latvia point to *broad* applications of blackness (and Africanness) to the body. It is an overperformance that is not so much about what the performer sees as authentic blackness, but rather what *authenticates* blackness for *them*: whether it is through the books of their childhood or films. I argue that an exploration of authenticating blackness allows us to better understand how people

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<sup>97</sup> Notice that he is using similar language as Barth (1969) to talk about identity.

<sup>98</sup> While Hall does not go so far as to state that blackness arises out of exclusion (that is Fanon [1952/1962], who sees blackness as formulated in opposition to whiteness), he does note that black as a political identity can be silencing in that it does so in the name of political unity.

perceive their own identity as ‘black’ (or not) and how they categorize others as ‘black’ – in short, what does blackness represent to my subjects?

*Perceptions and Portrayals of Blackness in the Latvian Media*

Perceptions of individuals of black African descent in Latvia switch modes depending on the gender, origin, economic status, family circumstances, age and employment of the subject. In interviews and article analysis, I found that preconceptions become real in day-to-day interactions. They also become embodied when described through the written word on blogs and in gossip magazines, as well as in reputable newspapers. They range from “positive” stereotypes of a strong and skilled ‘black’ basketball player to “negative” stereotypes of an overly sexualized and exotic ‘black’ female. An example can be found in the blog of African American basketball player Alex Renfro, who played a couple of seasons with VEF Rīga. In an entry dated September 28, 2009, he answers the question: “Do All Black People Act the Way They Are Shown in Movies?”:

In the movies, black people are always shown as ignorant, poor, loud and very rude and uncivilized people. One of the many stereotypes that are associated with black people is that we kill people and steal from people. But.....This is just a stereotype. Of course there are some black people that fit into this stereotype. I believe that black people are very friendly and caring people. We are usually very family oriented and stay close to our families. But we are loving people. So if you ever see a black person walking in the streets...do not feel afraid to speak to them. Because usually when we are shown respect, respect is given back! For the most part at least!  
(VEF Website, September 28, 2009)<sup>99</sup>

In the comment section for this blog post one commenter used the space to write of how the presence of Alex’s family at one VEF game changed her perception of ‘black’ people:

(Commenter) “Christiana”: Alex, you’re PERFECT. And I see, that not only in

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<sup>99</sup> Renfro, A. (2009, 28 September). “Do all black people act the way they are shown in movies?” *VEF Rīga*. Retrieved from <http://www.vefriga.com/do-all-black-people-act-the-way-they-are-shown-in-movies/>

basketball. I read your text about black people, and in next day, I went to Vef game (15.12.09). There were sitting 2 black people behind me. (maybe they were your relative) Women was looking on you, and her eyes were shining. She said all the time: ‘Alex, you can do it. We love you.’ And I was little bit envy then, because the world there are only few people like them, so great, happy, PERFECT, and I am not one of them... We – white people<sup>100</sup> aren’t so friendly and happy... WE are And I think that you are one of them. You changed my mind about black people. I am only 15, and it was really useful to me. THANK YOU ABOUT THAT.

(Commenter) “Christiana”: :) sorry about mistakes.. :)

(Commenter) Alex: Hey Christiana! Do not worry about the mistakes. I understand exactly what you are saying. Those two black people were my parents. :) But thank you. I try to be happy because I know have something to be happy about everyday. And that is waking up every morning and being able to live! So I always have something to be happy about! But it is great that your mind has changed about black people. You are great!!! I would love to see you at the next game. :)

(VEF Website, September 28, 2009)

Foreign basketball players of black African descent are the most visible (and in some ways – temporary) individuals of black African descent in Latvia. While basketball is not as popular in Latvia as it is in neighboring Lithuania, teams such as VEF have a large following and help to sponsor street basketball tournaments in Rīga. In a country as small as Latvia, celebrity cache comes easily to anyone who is consistently in the public eye – whether it is through theater, television, film, music, or sports. The spectator at the VEF game referenced above is not just a follower of the team, but also of Renfro and, by extension, his blog.

The same can be said for VEF hopeful, DeAndre Kambala, whose celebrity arises out of his status as the ‘black’ adopted son of (white) Latvian basketball star (and public celebrity for some not so celebrated reasons – a drug abuse scandal, for one) Kaspars Kambala<sup>101</sup>. DeAndre was born and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada. Kaspars Kambala was a student and basketball player at University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV) where he met DeAndre’s mother Jessica who had

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<sup>100</sup> It is rare to see Latvians refer to themselves as ‘white’ in conversation – identity. More on this later.

<sup>101</sup> DeAndre’s dreams were dashed when he was unable to secure Latvian citizenship in time to join the team. VEF only allows a certain number of non-Latvian citizen players on its team. DeAndre was not allowed to play last season. This was the story related to me by Martin who knows DeAndre’s grandfather.

taken in DeAndre at the request of DeAndre’s biological mother. Kaspars and Jessica eventually married (they are now divorced) and Kaspars would later fully adopt DeAndre before moving back to Latvia to play basketball<sup>102</sup>. DeAndre arrived in Latvia, in the summer of 2010, after graduating from high school to chase his basketball dreams. The belief was that he would not have a hard time getting on the team due to his international background and his famous father. His arrival was met with much fanfare: newspaper articles, television interviews, and paparazzi shots. In the August 07, 2010 edition of the weekend tabloid journal *Vakara Ziņas*, an article focused on DeAndre’s attendance at a taping of the television show “Singing Families”. Most of the attention from the article was paid to DeAndre sitting next to a blonde coworker of his stepmother’s and their sharing of a bottle of Sprite (zoom in photos included. See fig. 12). The article’s authors suspected that DeAndre went to the taping because he was a fan of the blond Drozdoviča twins who were competing in the show (The article’s headline: “Kambala’s Son is a Fan of the Singing Twins”):

In one of the last performances on the show, twins Ana and Katrīne (Anastasija and Jekaterina Drozdoviča), playfully interacted with their passionate [*kaismīgajam* -LR] fan from the stage. It became apparent to VZ that Kambala’s son had already spent time with the lovely blonds, such as having lunch together, sharing his first impressions of Latvia which were only positive.

(*Vakara Ziņas*, August 07, 2010, p.17. Translation mine)

There are certain hints that the article is making with its wording and photos – hints that point to the well-known trope of the “[foreign] black man admiring/coming to love our blond women” – as well as the commonly held perception in the Latvian public and media that Latvian women are

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<sup>102</sup> The story is a bit more complicated: Jessica worked for the I Have A Dream Foundation, where she worked with at risk families and youth. This is how she met DeAndre’s biological mother who left DeAndre with Jessica when she went to jail. (Burton, S. [2002]. Full House. *ESPN Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://espn.go.com/magazine/vol4no03kambala.html>).

marrying foreign men more than they are Latvian men<sup>103</sup> – all of which are allusions to a broader discourse.

The discourse is alluded to in *Vakara Ziņas*' description of the pretty, playful, (white) Latvian, and blond Drozdoviča twins and DeAndre's "desire" to want to meet and spend time with them. Even more so, the article also goes out of its way to show DeAndre's desire for ALL (white) Latvian women, as is seen in the photos of him sharing a bottle of Sprite with his step-mother's blond shop assistant (The inscription besides the photos: "They drank from one bottle"). There is no discussion of DeAndre being a "handsome black man" or any other related description, but the text of the article does point to his desiring these women. This depiction of a male desiring a (white) Latvian woman that is not mentioned anywhere else in the article in the context of the other celebrities that were there that night (there was not a reference to male stars in attendance being "passionate" fans of the singing twins, or a male celebrity sharing a bottle of Sprite with a "pretty blond woman" sitting next to him etc.).

There is precedent in Latvia for seeing the interactions between (white) Latvian women and black African/African American men as strictly ones of an economic nature (the foreign students were seen as having some sort of capital –see Carew, 2008; Dzenovska, 2010; Quist-Adade, 2001) and (surface) romantic nature. This perception is based upon the public knowledge of relationships between these two populations going back to the Soviet era – one that came to be a cause of some friction: black African students marrying or dating 'white' local women. These relationships did not go unnoticed by the general public and as Osei (1963) writes "Negroes permanently living in Russia have intermarried with the whites. So have number of African and

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<sup>103</sup> See: Sedlenieks, K. and Vasiļevska (2006). *Men in Latvian Public Environment*. And recent articles on the declining birthrate in Latvia. Also see a recent BBC article on the topic of the declining number of Latvian men and the increasing number of Latvian women marrying foreigners. Another article that brings up a discussion of this topic is Mezinska, S., Mileiko, I., and Putniņa, A. (2011). Sharing Responsibility in Gamete Donation: Balancing Relations and New Knowledge in Latvia. *Medicine Studies*, 1-12.

Asian students studying in the Soviet Union married white Soviet girls” (p. 31). The 1963 incident involving the violent beating and death of a Ghanaian student, Edmund Assare-Addo, in Moscow was reportedly linked to his relationship with a (white) Russian woman. Hessler (2006) writes that although “there was no concrete evidence of violence, the possibility that Russians wanted to prevent an interracial marriage seemed a plausible explanation for the Ghanaian’s death” (p. 36). In Rīga, specifically, there were stories of local girls being invited back to the Rīga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute campus to “spend time” with the foreign students. Dzenovska (2010) remarks that “(...) locals, especially women, were not prevented from attending the discos and cafes in its territory” (p. 433). Carew (2008) mentions that there was an increase in the coupling between the men of black African descent (and other foreign students) and the local women across the Soviet Union, particularly starting in the latter half of the Cold War era during the 1980s and continuing towards the fall of the Soviet Union:

(...) students began to experience tensions around dating patterns and male-female relationships. The student group was overwhelmingly male, and growing numbers were developing liaisons with young Russian women they met (...) Russians found it exciting being around exotic foreigners many of whom brought gifts from their trips to Europe over the holidays and had nice housing in the university quarters. The districts around the universities also began to see increasing numbers of mixed race children.  
(p.208)

The experiences from the late Soviet era are only a small piece of what informs the perceptions of individuals of black African descent in Latvia.

The discourse of the foreign as exotic is also part of the larger discourse of difference in Latvia – in that ‘exotic’ is code for ‘different’. The media portrayals of Lingita Lina Bopulu (fig.13), who was a contestant on the LNT reality show “*OKartes Skatuve*” (“OKarte Stage”)<sup>104</sup> – a show that is a combination of a singing competition (comparable to “American Idol” in the

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<sup>104</sup> OKarte is a Latvian mobile sim card company.

United States) and a live camera show that delves into the lives of the contestants as they navigated living in the same apartment (comparable to multiple international versions of “Big Brother”)<sup>105</sup>. Lingita became famous not just because of “*OKartes skatuve*”, but because she is of mixed black African and (white) Latvian descent – her mother is (white) Latvian and her father is from the Congo<sup>106</sup>. Lingita has been the subject of interviews and journal articles, both in tabloid and “legitimate” media. Her appearance and background immediately marked her as ‘different’ in the eyes of the media and (most of) the Latvian public. Her (white) Latvian fellow-contestants did not receive the same level of media attention as Lingita in both the tabloid and ‘legitimate’ journal and television news outlets.

While Lingita’s identity was the main subject of the articles (See chapter 5), the words that the Latvian media tended to (and still) use to describe her features point to the equation between different (that is, different in looks and background from the majority of the [white] Latvian population) and exotic. An equation that was also pointed to in my interviews with women of black African descent. In the case of Lingita’s media portrayal, she is consistently described as “exotic”: “exotic girl” (“*Lingita talantu šovā jūtas nesaprasta*” [Lingita Does not Feel Understood on the Talent Show”], mango.lv, January 25, 2012), “with her exotic looks (...)” (“*Lingita šovā vēlas parādīt savu latvietību*”, Kas Jauns.lv, January 31, 2012), “18 year-old Lingita Lina Bopulu, despite her exotic appearance, is a real Latvian” (“*Talantu šova Lingitu Latvijā diskriminē*” [“Talent Show’s Lingita Discriminated in Latvia”, Delfi.lv, January 18, 2012), “The girl is from Bauska – her mother is Latvian, but her father is from the Congo, which also explains her exotic looks” (“*Talantu šova Lingitu Latvijā diskriminē*”, Delfi.lv, January 18,

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<sup>105</sup> Lingita, at 18 years of age, was the youngest contestant on the show. The show is still on the air, but Lingita was voted off on Monday, March 07, 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Her parents met when her father came to Latvia during the Soviet period to study at the Aviation Institute. He now lives in Congo, not Bauska, but is still married to Lingita’s mother (*Kas Jauns* writes “Lingita’s parents have not lived together for a while, but they are not officially divorced” [ January 31, 2012]).

2012), “Lingita has received cruel comments about her exotic looks” (“*Afrolatvietes Lingitas ģimenei draud*” [“African Latvian Lingita’s Family is in Danger”, TVNET.lv, January 24, 2012), “the exotic beauty Lingita Lina Bopulu” (“*Lingita: Latvietim obligāti nav jābūt baltam*” [“Lingita: Latvians Do Not Have to Be White”], delfi.lv, March 06, 2012), and “Talent Show’s Exotic Lingita’s Nude Photos” (Headline, *Playboy* Latvia, March 2012). Exotic, outside of other identifiers (i.e., brown skinned, African), is perhaps the main way that she is described in articles about her time on “*OKartes skatuve*”. There are no articles that mention her as “curly haired Lingita” or “brunette Lingita”. Every once in a while, there is an article that describes her as a “young girl” or “pretty girl”, but these descriptors appear in articles that also start off labeling her as “exotic”.

The Latvian media is not the only location where the topic of exoticness as difference has appeared in my research. My female informants of black African descent also alluded to this topic in their interviews. Elizabeth, a woman of black African descent (via the West Indies) who came to Latvia from England four years ago, related to me an encounter that she had in a Rīga nightclub:

I hate that place. It’s like paying for hell. It’s one of those places where I walk in and everybody’s dressed up, I’m not going to dress down, I dress up as well. And guys will automatically ask me how much I am. And that just sucks. So, I don’t even, there’s been so many times I’ve walked in and got a drink and walked straight out. Because I’m not. I’m not paying for that. You know? All my friends say it shouldn’t bother me, ‘you should come up with something funny to say’. I take it very personally and I take it as a complete offense. I refuse to share my time with people like that and it happens every time I go in there. So I don’t go there anymore. And they’ve stopped asking me to go, you know? Because they know that I’d rather sit on my own than pay for hell. It’s awful. It’s an awful attitude to have. They’re under the impression that if I’m the only black girl in the club, that I must be a prostitute. Must be. There’s no other reason for me to be there. That sucks. I hate it there. I’m sorry. I feel strongly about that. (Interview, May 07, 2011. Interview conducted in English.)<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> She indicated that she has had these types of encounters at other venues as well.

This particular conversation came about because Elizabeth had told me, when we first met, a story about men asking her if she had a “sponsor”. A sponsor, she stated, is a man who pays for a woman over a long period of time. There have been occasions where men have literally stopped Elizabeth on the street to ask her if she had a sponsor. The assumption that she is a prostitute or a woman looking for a sponsor only supports the argument that the stereotype of women of black African descent as strictly sexual playthings does exist and circulate in modern-day Latvia.

The sexual nature of the woman of black African descent is also at play in the manner with which Lingita Lina Bopulu has come to portray and represent herself in the Latvian media. Shortly after being voted off of “*OKartes skatuve*”, Lingita appeared on the March 2012 cover, with a feature story and spread inside, of the Latvian edition of *Playboy*. It turns out that, according to Lingita’s blog on the social network *draugiem.lv*, the photos were from a photo shoot that took place before Lingita appeared on “*OKartes skatuve*” (she was in modeling school). The transformation of Lingita from an 18-year-old girl who sometimes wore pink fuzzy slippers to interviews and was comforted by her mother at publicity photo shoots for the show to a woman who was half naked (hands placed tastefully over her breasts), save for a pair of feather earrings, marked a turn in her public image. Lingita admitted that she received some criticism regarding her *Playboy* photos. She wrote on *draugiem* (“*Par Playboy*” [“About *Playboy*”] March 07, 2012) that “In recent days there has been an abnormally large uproar not only about my press, but also in relationship to the photos in the magazine “Playboy”, and there have been a lot of letters from my friends to me, where you all express your indignation, or the exact opposite (...)” (Translation mine). Prior to her appearance in *Playboy*, none of the photos of Lingita – either for “*OKartes skatuve*” or for interviews presented Lingita as a subject of desire. The raciest photo in the “*OKartes skatuve*” publicity still is of Lingita wearing a pink dress that is

slightly low cut at the front. Since the *Playboy* with Lingita on the cover came out, Lingita has portrayed herself (mostly in photographs and personal appearances) in a more outwardly sexual manner – in tight bikinis, low cut dresses – and has accepted an offer to represent Latvia at the 2012 “Miss *Playboy*” pageant in the Philippines (This stands in contrast to the other way that Lingita started to publicly portray herself after her issue of *Playboy* appeared on the stands– as a good Christian girl who attends a Christian youth summer camp, prays daily, and justifies her actions through the teachings of Jesus and God. A contrast that is not that uncommon in celebrity circles even in the United States).

It is not only through the discourse of “women of black African descent as sexual playthings” that is attended to in the context of the discourse of the exotic as difference in Latvia. Elizabeth is not the only woman of black African descent living in Latvia who described her experiences with men in my interviews. Rauna<sup>108</sup>, 20, who was born in Latvia to a (white) Latvian mother and a black African father from a country in central Africa, discussed how she was seen as dating material by (white) Latvian men and men of black African descent – particularly how their dating preferences are influenced by skin color. She mentioned in an earlier interview that she thinks that “black men they prefer *blondīnes*” (blonds-LR), but that local (white) Latvian guys preferred “black girls” (Interview, September 23, 2010). In a more recent discussion, she elaborated a bit more about the association between the dating scene and skin color in Latvia:

I hear that they guys [inaudible] where they like black girls, that’s something new and like, all of them, like they think [inaudible] black girl. It’s like fresh meat, they [laughs], it’s like that, they, they, um, want to try something new and that’s why they like the black girls. It’s something different, like, in our country. But for black guys it is more difficult because, like I said, if you are not a basketball star, that you are, it does not matter if you are, like smart or maybe, if you have, you are very rich, then maybe yes, you can live here. If not, it’s very difficult. I know some friends and they have some really big problems with here and because of racism. And they are only

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<sup>108</sup> Rauna does not identify as ‘black’. She identifies as Latvian.

guys. And but with the girls, they like it, because, um, boys all the time they ask for numbers and “would you like, would you want to go on a date?” (...) because they are only interested in my skin tone or but, ah, like in person. And usually it’s because of my skin tone not because of my personality (...).

(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

For Rauna, it is her perceived differentness and exoticness that makes her desirable to (white) Latvian boys. It is also what she sees as making it “easier” to be a woman of black African descent in Latvia, whereas Elizabeth makes a connection between these encounters and racist assumptions. Rauna, however, does not seem to find the interest based upon her skin color to be as jarring. For her, the exoticness is something that eventually fades after a while – it dies down once they get to know each other – but it is the skin color that first draws the (white) Latvian boy to the girl of black African descent in Latvia.

Elizabeth, in contrast, sees the advances that she receives in the club as a personal offence. A “how dare you think...!” Her blackness, through the eyes of the male at the club, is seen as strictly sexual and nothing more<sup>109</sup>. She is nothing higher than a prostitute. As Coly writes (in Thompson, 2008), the image of ‘black’ women as prostitutes stems from something deeper – it is part of how (white) European males attempt to “place” the ‘black’ female body in a type of category that is understandable to them ([white]European males). Recalling Sharpley-Whiting, Coly states that “The European male psyche is torn between the desire to possess and know the mysterious ‘black’ female body and the restrictive codes of social morality that police sexual behavior and construct racial and sexual promiscuity as unlicensed sexual activity” (2008, p. 272). The author adds that the European male then attempts to project “the undesirable into the desired, yet feared object”. Hence, ‘black’ women “came to represent that which the European male could not articulate without psychic crises: uninhibited sexuality. And uninhibited sexuality

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<sup>109</sup> This is also compounded by her low-level Latvian language skills. Her inability to speak Latvian (and Russian) intensifies the perception of her as foreign. The skin color marks her difference and her accent and language-skills demonstrate that she is “not from here”.

is presumably a characteristic of the prostitute” (2008, pp. 272-273). The transformative power of ‘the gaze’ creates a paradigm, in which, out of all of the other well-dressed women in the club, Elizabeth must be the prostitute. She must be a woman looking for a sponsor – someone to pay for her as a (sexual) object<sup>110</sup>.

The gaze forces women of black African descent to come face to face with their perceived differences in the eyes of the other. It is the embodiment of Vasquez’ (2010) statement that “there is not a 100 percent correspondence between how people *want* to be perceived and how they *are* perceived” (pp. 46-47). Their perceptions of themselves are not exactly the perception that the other has of them – whether it is as an exotic object of desire, a prostitute, or something else entirely. Nor is it how they always seem them portraying their identities (see Lingita’s dual portrayal as a sex object versus ‘good Christian girl’). The gaze is not just part of the lives of women of black African descent, but the men too. In Latvia, it is known as the stare and it has its own form of discourse among individuals of black African descent. The next chapter deals with the discourse of the stare more directly, but it is important to highlight some of the concepts and dialogues that inform the perception of blackness among individuals of black African descent in Latvia. The notion of the exotic or the different is located within this discourse and it permeates the discussions that I have with my female contacts.

The men that I interviewed for my research did not discuss such matters as dating with me in detail. It may have been that all of them were married or that they felt uncomfortable talking about the subject with me, someone who, as one individual said, was “like a little sister”. Their focus, instead, was not on dating or advances from (white) Latvian women but on how they see

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themselves being received and perceived on the streets of Rīga and broader Latvia. These receptions and perceptions did not have to do with sex.

*The “Right Type of African”: Variations of Blackness and Africanness*

Martin, an African American male, has lived in Latvia for over 17 years. He moved here to marry his (white) Latvian girlfriend, whom he met in the States, and he is now the father of two children and is a very public figure in Latvia. When he talks of public (female and male) perceptions of blackness, he talks of public expectations of what he *should* be given his skin color – perceptions that change once people find out that he is African American not African:

I am not African. I’m African American. There’s a different dynamic that goes with that baggage, let’s say. I’m not using that word at all in the negative. The fact that I’m African American opens up other doors for me (...). (Interview, August 02, 2009. Conducted in English)

I later asked him to clarify what he meant by implying that there was a certain type of “baggage” that is connected with the identity of “African”. I was also curious as to how being African American “opens doors” for him in Latvia. He clarified these ideas more in an email:

(...) there is a stereotype here about exactly what kind of “African” you are. (Basically being “the right type of African”). It is very much connected with American pop culture. But it is also connected to the former Soviet regime and its friendliness with certain African countries and the allowances of people from those countries to come and study in Latvia. In plainer words, if someone believes that I am here to play basketball, soccer or I am a DJ, it is easier for them to take me in than to think that I am a former guest student of the former Soviet regime.

(Personal email communication, October 20, 2009. Conducted in English)

In this sense, Martin’s blackness and Africanness is determined by his origins in the United States. For him, there are two different types of blackness as Africanness – each with its own meaning. The African American version of blackness is seen as being more about the present than the past. There are certain meanings attached (basketball skills, DJ, rapper), but they are

positive meanings that are not associated with the Soviet era. For Martin, his skin color may “mark” him as being ‘black’, of being of black African descent, but his origins create a space wherein he can operate in a different mode than the former Aviation Institute students. It also means that his sense of blackness is performed in a different arena – it is an arena shaped by his Americanness – he applies his experiences as an African American to his experiences as an individual of black African descent in Latvia. He views the perceptions and portrayals of blackness through that particular lens.

Jean, Andrew and others, who arrived in Latvia from the African continent to study at the Aviation Institute, are also very aware of the different conceptualizations of blackness and Africanness in Latvia. Jean, for one, described to me how his experiences and views are shaped by his origins and how individuals of black African descent from the United States live very different lives<sup>111</sup>:

The African, the black African, they don't, black American, they don't feel like African (...) If you are black and I am black, I think that we are similar and we can, uh, what to say, we can be closer. But, I think that a lot of American, black American, I don't know, but they don't they think that they are more superior than African people and so on.<sup>112</sup> (Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English)

The differing experiences of individuals of black African descent in Latvia are not just based upon their origins, although that does make an impact, they are also based upon the types of spaces that they have created for themselves and that have been created for them – either through a socio-historical period (i.e. Soviet times), age, family circumstances, life history, profession, gender, and marital status. It also means that even though they sometimes meet at AfroLat

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<sup>111</sup> This is a discourse that is also quite common among African Americans born in the United States and recent immigrants from Africa (and their children).

<sup>112</sup> I did not push Jean more on this idea. But, it would be interesting to ask him again to see how this plays out for him specifically in Latvia and why.

events, they still maintain a sense of a separation from each other – their membership in the NGO does not equal a friendship or even a bond in the world outside of AfroLat.

## **Conclusion**

Recalling the concept of the kinesthetic imagination, the portrayals and perceptions of blackness in Latvia are as much about memory as they are about present-day reality. The cases that I discuss in this chapter– first, portrayals of blackness and Africanness by (white) Latvian performers and second, the perception and portrayal of blackness and Africanness among individuals of black African descent, as well as within the Latvian media– all circle back to the embodiment of memory and experience.

The first instance conveys through stage performance an appropriation of a certain “type” of blackness and/or Africanness. This is an appropriation of references made from memories and not from reality. As with the history of individuals of black African descent in Latvia, the Soviet legacy has an impact on how difference is viewed and presented in Latvia. The memories are based upon images of Africans constructed within children’s books, magazine photo essays, ethnographic films, and cartoons from the Soviet era. These visual formats represented Africa (and Africans) as foreign, exotic, and unknown (Matusевич, 2008a, 2008b). The ‘exoticness’ of Africa and Africans during the Soviet times were embodied in images of smiling, scantily-clad, dark skinned children (*Chunga Changa*, *Ieviņa Āfrikā*, *Tikijs*), images which have been interpreted in modern-day blackface performances by (white) African performers. The blackface portrayals of Africanness (and blackness) high-light the exotic African as ‘different’ through the use of make-up, black stockings (on the head and body), fake hair (dreadlocks out of cloth material or as a wig), and brightly colored clothing (the type is important – whether it is a grass

skirt or a scarf worn on the head). It is at both an attempt to perform the exotic and to display a certain type of ‘authenticness’ (Johnson, 2009). The performers also depict Africans as only being located faraway – in a distant and foreign location. A location (and people) that are different from (white) Latvians in dress and looks.

In the second instance, exotic as difference is located in the manner that individuals of black African descent both perceive and portray blackness, as well as how the Latvian media (and the individuals themselves) choose to portray these individuals in journal articles, on websites and on television programs. These portrayals and perceptions, like the blackface performances, also have some connections with the Soviet past – particularly in the case of men of black African descent. The perception and portrayal of men of black African descent in Latvia stems from the narrative and history of relations between men of black African descent who came to Latvia during the Soviet times to study at the Rīga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute. The Soviet authorities maintained a separation between the students and the general public by having them stay on a self-enclosed campus, but the stories of ‘local’ ([white] Latvian) women going back to the campus dorms to spend time with the students was well-known. The discourse of the ‘black African man’ desiring the ‘(white) Latvian woman’ is one that has been transported into the modern day, as seen in the articles written about DeAndre Kambala. In this discourse, men of black African descent are constructed as exotic foreigners who have come to Latvia for its women – playing upon the recent discourse over the increase of marriages between (white) Latvian women and men from outside of the country (Italy, Great Britain, the United States, various African countries), which comes across as a fear that foreign men are coming to Latvia to take away all of the women (as well as concerns over genetics and the birth rate. See Mežinska, Mileiko, and Putniņa, 2011).

The discourse of exoticness also comes into play for women of black African descent as well. The women, such as Lingita Lina Bopulu and Rauna, that are the children of relationships between men of black African descent who are former Aviation Institute students and (white) Latvian women – are children of the Soviet narrative of ‘foreign (black) male’ – ‘local (white) women’ relations. They also represent how perceptions and portrayals of blackness and Africanness are ones of the different as exotic. It is particularly (as with the men) the exotic as ‘sexual’ that has been increasingly portrayed by Lingita Lina Bopulu in her media appearances, post-“*OKartes skatuve*” and *Playboy*. It is a portrayal that existed in how the media portrayed and perceived her during her time on “*OKartes skatuve*”, although the ‘sexual’ piece did not become part of the discourse until the end of her run on the show. The connection between exotic and ‘sexual being’ with women of black African descent was also pointed out by Elizabeth in her interview – particularly in her description of men asking to “sponsor” her in Latvia.

For the women of black African descent in Latvia, exotic as different is not all about sex and sexuality – it is also about the basic level of dating and attraction. Rauna described how (white) Latvian boys were attracted to “black girls” because they are seen as “different” and “new”. This attraction based upon difference, as Rauna points out, fades once (white) Latvian boys get to know the personality of the object of their attraction – possibly realizing that they are really not that different after all.

The next chapter, which explores how the identity of individuals of black African descent operates both within both public and private spaces, will further engage with the discourse of difference among individuals of black African descent, primarily through the narratives presented by Rauna and Lingita. Rauna and Lingita’s narratives are utilized to examine how identity is worked through the theoretical frameworks of language, colorism, and ‘the gaze’.

## **Chapter 5: Lives and Perspectives of Individuals of Black African Descent**

This chapter serves as an exploration of how individuals of black African descent navigate public and private spaces. It provides an in-depth examination of the factors that contribute to the ways in which the politics of blackness is constituted differently in Latvia than in the dominant literature on blackness and ‘race’, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context. While previous chapters have touched on the subject, this chapter delves deeper into the psyche of the people that I interviewed over the past three years in Latvia. I contend that there is a construction of difference among individuals of black African descent in Latvia, a construction that touches upon the discourses that shape their day-to-day lives: the politics of skin color, stares, and family interactions. As with Sawyer (2000, 2002), this type of exploration contains a type of navigation of identity – both for myself and for my subjects, as my perspective on the narrative(s) of individuals of black African descent is influenced by my own experiences as a woman of black African descent in the United States and in Latvia.

My analysis starts with identity and the politics of skin color – specifically how this plays out in the case of Latvia. Rauna, a woman who is a mix of black African and (white) Latvian descent, born and raised in Latvia, serves as an example of how individuals like her navigate the discourses of skin color and identity. Using the theoretical structure of Fanon’s (1952/1967) exploration of the identity and perceptions of individuals of black African descent in Europe, this chapter will attempt to locate how these themes are experienced by Rauna and others as they talk about their own conceptualizations of their identity. This analysis also includes an in-depth examination of whether or not the notion of colorism exists in modern-day Latvia. By using the work of Fleetwood (2011) and others this analysis will create a new window into how colorism operates within Latvia and how it is or is not influenced by outside forces (globalization, for

example). The second analysis delves into the act of staring, in particular how stares and the discourse of ‘the gaze’ dominate conversations with individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Gullestad (2004), Hegel (1977), and Lacan (1978) are especially useful in an inquiry into the nature of the stare and its impact on its object.

Examinations of these subjects, in the past, have mostly focused on individuals of black African descent in the ‘traditional’ places of the diaspora: the Americas, Western Europe (predominantly the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium), and the African continent itself. For me, it is important to bring these themes into the Latvian context. Some prominent exceptions being Campt (2009, 2012), Fangen (2007), Gullestad (2004), and Sawyer (2000, 2002), among others, whose research focuses on individuals of black African descent in countries (Germany, Norway, and Sweden, respectively) which are considered to be ‘non-traditional’ locations of diaspora. I argue that it is not just the socio-historical or the political (i.e. Jean arriving in Latvia as a student during the Soviet era, Latvia becoming part of the European Union in 2004) that influences identity for my contacts – it is also the way that media and (global and local) pop culture travels in Latvia – a movement of images of individuals of black African descent are readily available through music videos (particularly music videos featuring, or influenced by, American hip hop and R&B performers, which practically dominate Latvian music video channels and programs), news programs, magazines, and film. How my contacts see themselves and how they are seen is very much impacted by these images (particularly of African American culture and other ‘influences from the West’) and it requires one to think deeply about how identity operates within Latvia and other parts of the world. Rauna’s story is exemplary of this positioning and it will assist in tying together the strands that make up the discourse of identity among individuals of black African descent in Latvia.

### **Language, Identity and the Politics of Skin Color**

The first time that I met Rauna was at a chain coffee-shop in Old Rīga. She had been referred to me through Martin, who had worked with her on a German commercial that had just completed filming in Latvia (The German advertising company had hired a local casting agency to find ‘black’ actors for its ad). Unlike my other informants, Rauna was born and raised in Rīga. Her father, who was from Mali, came to Latvia during the Soviet times to study at the Rīga Civil Aviation Engineers Institute. It was in Rīga where he met Rauna’s mother, who is (white) Latvian. Their union brought Rauna and her younger sister into the world and shortly after the birth of her sister, Rauna’s father returned to Mali. Rauna spoke to me in a mix of Latvian and English – or, I should say, our first interview started in Latvian but then quickly switched to English<sup>113</sup>. Our conversations mainly focused on school, dating, work, and her identity. It was how she framed this last subject that I found to be the most intriguing. It was the subject that we continued to return to every time that we met – whether it was for another interview (this time at Lido, a popular Latvian-themed restaurant) or during tutorial sessions (she asked me to assist her on her English-language skills for her university coursework). It was also a theme that brought about a new understanding of how women of black African descent construct their identities (and difference) based upon skin color (and other phenotypic markers) in different societies around the world.

Rauna identifies herself as Latvian. When I asked her, in our second meeting, what does being Latvian mean to her, she straightforwardly answered:

You know, I think if I come from other country, and I lived, maybe 20 years, then I can say what it’s like being Latvian. But, if I am really, like born here then, like, it’s difficult to say because I don’t know, like, difference from other people.  
(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

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<sup>113</sup> She told me that she felt that it would be more comfortable for me if we spoke in English.

For her it is not about skin color:

I am with my mother and grandmother and, when I look at the mirror I see as, um, I am like as white. Not like my colors, like, what it feels like, I'm, um, I do not see myself as black (...) sometimes I see in the street some girl and she's black and I sometimes staring and then my mom said "Why are you staring? You are the same." And then I went "Oh. Yeah." My skin is like brown and it is something like strange for me. But, I every day, I see people around me, white people, and I feel like them.  
(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

For Rauna, she is only reminded of her difference from her (white) Latvian family and friends when she notices dark skin color as difference and is told that she has the same difference (as the example of her mom pointing out her similarities to a woman on the street demonstrates).

The same experience is partially shared by Lingita Lina Bopulu, the "*OKartes skatuve*" contestant of mixed black African and (white) Latvian descent, who reached a high level of media attention since the show debuted in January 2012. Lingita's appearance on the show was even promoted in the news program "*Tautas balss*" ("The People's Voice"), which ran a segment titled "Don't like colored skin?" ("*Nepatīk ādas krāsa?*"), where they had viewers email or call in with their opinions on the question. The segment included an interview with Lingita backstage at "*OKartes skatuve*". The website of "*Tautas balss*" includes the following written description of that day's show: "In the second season of LNT's show "*OKartes skatuve*" one of the contestants is 18 year old Afrolatvian Lingita Lina Bopulu. One of the reasons that she participated in the show, is for Latvia's residents to achieve some sort of understanding that what is important is not the appearance and color of one's skin, but a person's inner essence" ("Latvians Do Not Have to Be White", TVNET.lv, January 19, 2012. Translation mine)<sup>114</sup>. In the majority of interviews, as with *Tautas balss*, Lingita touches upon many of the same themes as

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<sup>114</sup> This level of media attention is not just due to her skin color, but also to the fact that several of the media outlets running her story ("*Tautas balss*", TVNET.lv, etc.) are all linked to the television station LNT – which also broadcasts "*Okartes skatuve*" (The news website delfi.lv is also a media partner with the program).

Rauna: her Latvian-identity and her skin color. Like Rauna, she has encountered individuals who are shocked that she is Latvian (a recent magazine story on Lingita featured the following quote

“Yes. I am Latvian!”):

I was born here, I am Latvian. I study in a Latvian school, and Latvian is my mother tongue. When I was a child I went to a Latvian folklore group, I danced national dances and, with regards to Latvian history, I often know a lot more than those who are considered to be the “true” representatives of this ethnicity [*tautības pārstāvjiem* – LR]. I am a patriot, but unfortunately my patriotism is lessened by the attitudes of my peers – this touches upon the knowledge that I am different in appearance and skin color.  
 (“Talent Show’s Lingita Discriminated in Latvia”, mango.lv, January 18, 2012.  
 Translation mine)

She stated in the same interview that:

Latvians have not gotten accustomed to seeing people with different skin colors on the streets, so, of course, I notice this. I had this experience in the past, everyone staring at me like that, and I took it to heart, but now I am no longer disturbed by this.  
 (“Talent Show’s Lingita Discriminated in Latvia”, mango.lv, January 18, 2012.  
 Translation mine)

And in an interview that she gave shortly after she was voted off of “*OKartes skatuve*”, Lingita said that she wanted to “show that Latvians do not necessarily have to be white” (“Lingita: Latvians Do Not Have to Be White”, Delfi.lv, March 06, 2012). For both Lingita and Rauna, their skin color may not mark their identities, but it does mark them as different from their peers. What does define their identities is their Latvianness: they speak the language, they were born and raised in Latvia, they know the history, sing the folk songs, and dance the national dances<sup>115</sup>.

Unlike Rauna, Lingita has also talked openly about her experience of being discriminated against due to her skin color. She has had a few run-ins with discrimination in her hometown of Bauska. In interviews she both discusses an incident where she received anonymous hate-mail

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<sup>115</sup> In chapter 2, I utilized this example to point to how these concepts are considered to be key elements, as outlined in the Ministry of Culture (2011) document, in what it means to be a part of a nation (*tauta*) and to be Latvian (*latvietis*).

(via Latvian social networking site *draugiem.lv*) upon being announced as an “*OKartes skatuve*” cast member, as well as events that are unrelated to her recent fame. In regards to the hate-mail:

The person who wrote this, wished us, the entire family, death – only on account of outward differences and because my mother married a darkskinned man! I have been told many things – to leave where I came from, to go away, although I was born in Latvia, to not appear outside of my house. But no one ever had wished me death. This was a shock. Moreover, we were not the only African family who received this letter. Truthfully, I cannot understand this – a man wishes another person death only because the other person looks different? It is not nice and it is hurtful.

(“Afrolatvian Lingita’s Family is in Danger”, TVNET.lv, January 24, 2012. Translation mine)

The contents of the letter have been one of the main focuses of the media coverage of Lingita.

The majority of interviews are about what she thinks of the letter, how it impacts her family, and whether or not she has experienced this level of discrimination before. Lingita’s experiences with discrimination have been the focus of a couple of other articles written during her time on “*OKartes skatuve*”: “Talent Show’s Lingita is Discriminated in Latvia” (*delfi.lv*, January 18, 2012) and “Lingita: Latvians Do Not Have To Be White” (TVNET.lv, January 19, 2012), as well as a television program focused on discrimination in Latvia (“*Nepatīk adās krāsas?*” [“Don’t Like Colored Skin?” on LNT’s *Tautas balsis*]). In one of the articles, Lingita details her experiences of growing up in the small Latvian city of Bauska:

The show’s contestant admitted during a broadcast that she has spent her entire life trying to prove that she is a Latvian, that she is just like everyone else living here. However, this does not come easily for her. “In fact, in a small town, it is already there, how everyone is like – wow, wow, wow! All of those are times when you attempt to run into people who have already become accustomed to and acquainted with you. From the start, there were already all kinds of people, some who called out to me: little chocolate girl, little chocolate girl or something like that! I want to be like everyone else. The same”.

(“Lingita: In Order To Be Latvian, You Do Not Necessarily Have To Be White”, TVNET.lv, January 19, 2012. Translation mine)

The interview not only elaborates on the discourse that surrounded Lingita and her experiences with discrimination, but also to the feeling of difference, which Rauna also discusses below.

Lingita's story allows for there to be an opportunity to examine the discourse of difference in Latvia in more detail.

The one aspect that Lingita does not bring up in her interviews is how people react when they hear her speak fluent Latvian (it is her first language)<sup>116</sup>. Rauna, however, talked to me at length on the subject of how her fluency in Latvian impacts her interactions with others. This type of interaction demonstrates how language is an iconic representation (Irvine, 2001). Rauna's fluency in Latvian sends a signal to her interlocutor that calls her out as Latvian while her actual physical traits (which are seen as iconically foreign) clash with the social images (of Latvianness) that are linked to a particular command of the language<sup>117</sup>. In other words, her ability to speak Latvian is not just about how she identifies herself, but also about what it does to how others identify *her*. It is not unlike the "flexible" identity described by Vasquez (2010) in that, there is not a complete correspondence between how Rauna (and even Lingita) wants others to perceive her and how others perceive her – she asserts her identity as Latvian, but people who may not know her identify her as something else due to her skin color. Flexible ethnicity, in the case of Rauna also applies to how the perspectives of others change when they hear her speak Latvian without a foreign accent – it "foregrounds" her Latvian identity and "backgrounds" their identifying of Rauna as American or African:

Like I just live here, I was born here, and sometimes I surprise like, people "Oh. Your Latvian is so good!" And they find out I am from here. "Oh yes. Sorry Yes" Then it is possible that you can, like speak very well, like Latvian. Or sometimes people are like, they think that I cannot understand what they say. And I can hear what

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<sup>116</sup> Rauna also speaks Russian, but it is a language that she learned in school, not at home. Her father's first language is French and since Rauna does not speak French, she speaks Russian to him when they speak on the phone (her father learned Russian during his studies at the Aviation Institute). Rauna's first language is an essential part of her Latvian identity and she did not discuss her identity as being something that she chose based upon her language, she just "is Latvian".

<sup>117</sup> I include foreign because she could also be mistaken as having links to countries outside of Africa. Brown skin is not always an iconic representation of Africa or "Africanness". I, myself, have been asked if I am from Brazil, the Caribbean, the West Indies, and even India.

they say about me, and the same with, like, Russian people – cause I understand Russian and it's sometimes funny that they think that I don't understand.  
(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

This interchange based upon presumed knowledge of language and origins, in a way, recalls the Fanon (1952/1967) moment “What I am asserting is that the European has a fixed concept of the Negro, and there is nothing more exasperating than to be asked: ‘How long have you been in France? You speak French so well’” (p.35). A moment that also demonstrates that language functions as an iconic representation. Many will say that this interaction can be attributed to cognitive dissonance: the native (re: white) Frenchman or woman not expecting the ‘black’ (former colonial subject) to be able to speak perfect “Parisian” French. For Fanon, it is not just about the fluency of the language, it is about the accent, the articulation, which is unexpected in the ‘black’ man in France (who is marked as foreign, regardless of colonial affiliation).

In the case of Latvia, I am adapting Fanon’s example to examine how constructions of difference, through language, are reflected upon in the ideas of ‘the foreign’ v. ‘the local’. By ‘foreign’, I am referring to an implied foreignness due to, in this case, skin color (which means that implied localness is due to similar factors that also include hair color, dress, and other identifying characteristics)<sup>118</sup>. This implied foreignness creates a space where an individual of black African descent is assumed to not be from Latvia, and therefore unable to speak the Latvian language. It is about the construction of difference in Latvia – a construction of foreignness. Here, the discourse of difference in Latvia becomes one of outward appearance – be it skin color, hair type, or some other physical or other feature that marks someone as being ‘not Latvian’ or ‘not from here’. As with flexible ethnicity the “intended audience may not” accept

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<sup>118</sup> Language, of course, is also a marker of difference. But, in this case I am looking at the assumptions made before the individual even speaks a word of Latvian (or Russian, or English or any other language). Russian-speakers/ethnic Russians are othered due to their primary language of use, but their difference from ethnic Latvians can also be marked by (according to Latvian and American-Latvian friends) type of dress and facial features.

the claims of localness due to phenotypic or other characteristics (Vasquez, 2010, p. 47). Visible ‘difference’ or ‘foreignness’ from the majority of (white) Latvians is equated with not being able to speak Latvian (with or without a foreign accent). The expectation, from (white) Latvians is that, because “there are none, outside of tourists” (Friend, Journal notes, September 14, 2008. Stated in English), “there are not many black people here” (Shop owner, Journal notes, August 20, 2009, Stated in English; Latvian friend, August 23, 2010, Stated in English), and/or “we do not have a history of having ‘black’ people here” (Journal notes, October, 2010, Stated in English)<sup>119</sup>, someone who looks like Rauna could not possibly be a native speaker of the language. Latvian is Rauna’s first language and she speaks it both in in-group conversation (her peers, her family) and in out-group conversation (strangers, shop keepers). In both cases she is speaking Latvian *well* and *fluently*. The only mark of foreignness on Rauna is her skin color, but yet it is expected that ‘foreignness’ will extend to her language skills as well.

This “Fanon” moment is something that was brought up in interviews and conversations with individuals who were concerned about how their children, who like Rauna and Lingita were born and raised in Latvia, were perceived in Latvian society. Martin talked about his son and daughter, whose first language is Latvian, who he sees as “the next generation – the generation that will change things” (Interview, June 22, 2009. Conducted in English). Jean told me that his son, who speaks fluent Latvian, Russian, and French<sup>120</sup>, had some difficulty at school in the beginning partly due to his skin color and partly due to his French accent. Jean stated that this changed after three months and that “(...) a lot of, what to say, children who are together with

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<sup>119</sup> Which is linked to the small numbers of individuals of black African descent. In this case, the small numbers lead to erasure – even though, there is a history of black African presences in Latvia. The individuals that are acknowledged are viewed as exception.

<sup>120</sup> French is Jean’s first language and he speaks it with his children. He learned Russian as a student at the Aviation Institute. His wife is (white) Latvian and speaks both Latvian and Russian. Jean identifies as African and or Beninian (I do not know which ethnic group he belongs to in Benin), identities that are not based upon language, but upon geographic origin.

him, they become friends because they say ‘Oh. We think that he don’t know nothing, but he know more than us’ (Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English). Rauna’s experience is quite similar to that of Jean’s son: she has a lot of friends, who invite her to go out everywhere to events on the weekends and language is not a problem for her due to Latvian being her native language.

Rauna was also the only one of my informants who delved into the complexities associated with skin color and hair. Jean, Martin, Monir, and Andrew did not explore this in their interviews. Elizabeth only touched on it briefly to note that she braided her hair herself and would have it done professionally when she went back to London. However, it was Rauna who talked about skin gradation, and about wanting straight versus curly hair. Rauna was also the only one who talked to me at length about finding makeup for her skin tone:

Rauna: (...) it’s difficult if you want, uh, makeup with my skin, I think I’m light for a black girl<sup>121</sup>, but uh for maybe very black I don’t know how to explain, it’s difficult to find right makeup and because all makeups its like very, very light. And, uh, I always wanted to, like straight hair, and um, I always had like *taisnot* [to straighten (hair) –LR], I don’t it’s like...

Rauna: And um, but there is like um, maybe African or USA that they have, um, *kīmiski taisnot* [chemical relaxer –LR]?

LR: Yeah. Relaxer.

Rauna: Yes and um, it’s here very difficult to find (...)

(Interview, September 23, 2010. Conducted in both Latvian and English)

The conversations over makeup were not the only ones that allowed us to broach the subject of skin color and how it acts as a marker of identification. However, it was this particular topic and

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<sup>121</sup> Here Rauna is talking about her skin color not her political identity (Hall, 1997). She uses skin color, her phenotype, as a descriptor and marker from others. She does not use it, however, to mark her identity.

the discussions about skin color and identity that brought the discourse of colorism into my work.

### **The Notion of Colorism**

One of the most captivating turns in my conversations with Rauna was her invoking the discourse of colorism. This discourse is a representation of the paradox that I face in writing this dissertation, as colorism (in the manner with which I am familiar) is connected with the Anglo-American discourses of race and racial politics, and therefore by using it to examine Rauna's ideas on difference and skin color, I am in danger of producing racialized discourses that may not exist in Latvia. Colorism is a term or state that is very familiar to African Americans – colorism refers to how African American (particularly) women, since slavery, have placed ourselves into categories based upon the gradations in our skin tone –the darkest skin being relegated to “bad” and the lightest to “good”. Nicole Fleetwood (2011), in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, explores this historically grounded idea in great detail. She is particularly astute at picking up on the genealogy of colorism in African American social discourse:

Over the course of the institutionalization of slavery, its eventual demise, and the continued exploitation of black labor and black bodies post-Civil War, nuanced gradations of racial categorization stratified sectors of blacks and other racialized subjects and governed levels of intimacy with whites. The result was the evolution of a visual system based on an index of skin-color differentiation and premised on the suspicion of racialized subjects slipping through this system undetected. By measuring the subject's value according to epidermal schema and other phenotypic features, colorist logic both reproduces and refutes notions of racial purity and immutability. It is a tenuous gradation that must be constantly monitored and measured. (p. 75).

Colorism is the brown paper bag test<sup>122</sup> and passing, among other examples that impact how African American women feel about the skin that they are in. And it is especially *women* who are implicated in this discourse. The majority of articles and books that circulate around the subject of colorism are about how the politics of skin tone impact the lives of women of black African descent –skin lightening products, for example, are by and large marketed towards women (Glenn, 2008). In the African American space, colorism (a term that has its origins in Alice Walker’s 1983 text *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*), has come to represent what Golden (2004) calls a “pernicious, persistent dirty little secret” which is represented by multiple words and phrases such as “*colorism, color-struck, color complex*” (p. 7)<sup>123</sup>. This “dirty little secret”, she explains, is utilized to divide African Americans through terms that were created (some are highlighted above) to create distinctions in status based upon skin color. Colorism is a constant trope in the writings of African American scholars exploring black identity. It is very much based within the Anglo-American discourse of skin color, but it is also has been applied to other geographic locations (parts of South America, Asia, and Africa)<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> The “brown paper bag test” refers to an urban myth or dominant narrative (it depends on who you ask) among African American circles that describes a time when some African American clubs (including fraternities and sororities) would not allow in new members if their skin tone was not lighter than or the same as a brown paper bag. It has become part of the African American discourse on colorism – a narrative unto itself. “This test required applicants to place their arm inside an ordinary brown paper bag. An individual was denied entry if his or her skin tone was darker than the bag” (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p. 251). It has also entered into the realm of what Kerr (2005) calls “complexion lore”: (...) the notion of the ‘paper bag’ has had complex, perplexing, and obscure meaning in black communities for many decades – objectionable and taboo because its color is the marker that distinguishes ‘light skin’ from ‘dark skin’ and important because it is believed to ‘center’ blackness on a continuum stretching infinitely from black to white. Even more, in what is among the most widely circulated and popular African-American folklore, the brown paper bag is believed to signify degrees of acceptance and inclusion (that is, if one is fairer than the brown bag)” (p. 272).

<sup>123</sup> Wilder (2009) argues that “colorism” is not a term wildly used in the African American community. She states that “Although the term *colorism* is rarely mentioned in the black community (‘light skin versus dark skin’ and ‘color complex’ are more commonly used phrases to describe this phenomenon), there exists an extensive and sophisticated vocabulary for identifying and distinguishing skin color categories”(p. 185).

<sup>124</sup> This is a theme that appears outside of the United States as well: India, certain countries in Africa (prevalence of usage of skin bleaching creams), the Dominican Republic, among others. The linking factor between these places is the experience of colonialism by European imperial powers. So it is *not* a “strictly African American” experience. Latvia was colonized (by Germany, Russia, Sweden, etc), but in some ways it is removed from the context that influences and structures colorism in these other countries. That being said, the connections between individuals

The scholarship on colorism places its origins within the European colonial context, which presumes that the function of “lighter as good” and “darker as bad” is specifically due to how (white) European colonizers categorized the “dark skinned” natives – creating hierarchies among slaves, stating that darker skin was less desirable, etc (Wilder, 2009). There has been some debate as to whether or not this is fairly accurate: is it something that arose out of the colonial experience or is there more to how colorism/the color complex has functioned both historically and socially within the spaces that it operates? Glenn (2008), for one, sees it as not just a part of the colonial legacy (in her case, southern African countries). She even argues that there is evidence that some of these hierarchies of color may have existed before colonial contact: “Some historians and anthropologists have argued that precolonial African conceptions of female beauty favored women with light brown, yellow, or reddish tints. If so, the racial hierarchies established in areas colonized by Europeans cemented and generalized the privilege attached to white skin” (2008, p. 284). Glenn’s argument creates the space to make an argument that perhaps colorism does not only operate within the colonial sphere – particularly within the African continent. However, it comes into direct conflict with the dominant discourse on the subject which contends that the way that colorism is physically perceived, coded, and socially valued, is fully linked to the colonial enterprise.

This contention is primarily demonstrated in the literature on colorism in the United States. Wilder (2009) argues that the color hierarchy that exists among African Americans stems from colonialism and slavery (i.e. the argument that darker slaves worked in the fields and lighter slaves worked as domestic servants) and that after slavery ended in the United States it began to transform into a fully self-sustaining discourse: “socially constructed ideas about skin tone and

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such as Rauna and the African/Caribbean/African-American diaspora can be found in Latvia either through real or virtual (media, internet) connections. See: Glenn, E.N. (2008). Yearning for lightness: Transnational circuits in the marketing and consumption of skin lighteners. *Gender and Society*, 22(3), 281-302.

phenotype” (2009, p. 185) placed lighter skin at the top of the hierarchy – if you were (or are) an individual with lighter skin, you were in a position of privilege. One of the intriguing pieces of this dynamic is how it has evolved over the years – in that those with lighter or medium skin (including myself) are not always aware of how the colorist hierarchy favors their skin tone or that women (again, the majority of the discourse centers around women) with darker skin are told less often that they are beautiful or seen as “worthy” of education, employment, and marriage<sup>125</sup>. There is also a reverse version of this, where darker skinned women exclude lighter women from their social relationships<sup>126</sup>. The gendered aspect of colorism also creates yet another layer to the hierarchy: as it is not only women with lighter skin that are privileged, but men (regardless of skin tone) are allowed to have more control over how colorism impacts their day-to-day lives – particularly in the area of attractiveness:

For men, stereotypes associated with perceived dangerousness, criminality, and competence are associated with dark skin tone, while for women the issue is attractiveness (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 38). Educational attainment is a vehicle by which men might overcome skin color bias, but changes in physical features are difficult to accomplish. (Thompson & Keith, 2001, p. 340)<sup>127</sup>

There is also the dual nature of being female and black, as maleness comes with its own set of privileges – Wilder (2009) states this is what makes African American women (in her case darker skinned women) enter into a space of “quadruple jeopardy: Race, class, gender, and dark skin can serve as mutually intersecting oppressions shaping the experience of dark-skinned women”

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<sup>125</sup> Women who have more medium skin tones, according to Wilder (2009), are usually left out of the discourse of colorism: “In many respects, colorism is situated within the context of a binary structure (light skin-dark skin, good hair – bad hair), yet there is some indication that medium or brown skin is favorable and, therefore, a somewhat protected position (...) Results from this research support the idea that those who are medium or brown skinned are not as affected by the consequences of colorism; yet, some evidence refutes this idea. The focus groups do not point to a universal voice from the middle but rather various internalized scripts on what it means to be brown” (p. 198).

<sup>126</sup> “Not black enough”, however, has nothing to do with skin color. It has to do with “in the head” (Hall, 1997)– a certain set of assumptions based upon what it means to be “black”: positionality, way of speaking, musical tastes, etc. But, there is no universally accepted standard of what is “black”.

<sup>127</sup> One of the issues with studies about colorism is that they are primarily conducted with or about female subjects (See: Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 1998; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wilder, 2009), therefore leaving men out of the equation and making it difficult to truly ascertain how colorism functions among African American males.

(p. 195). While these issues seem to exist throughout the African diaspora, the research and general knowledge is primarily confined to countries and areas that are connected through a specific context of European colonization. But, what happens when colorism is taken out of the African American and colonial contexts?

The closest I have come to finding research that looks into countries that did not have colonial enterprises in the Americas and Africa, is a piece by Rastas (2005) on color categorization in Finland (“Racializing Categorization Among Young People in Finland”). Rastas particularly looks at youth that are either immigrants or children of immigrants<sup>128</sup>. She describes what she terms as “coloring talk” among this population – how younger children of black African descent prefer to use “brown”, “different color” or “not of Finnish color” as a descriptor for their skin tone, instead of ‘black’ – as young children “have not learned that the term ‘black’ can be used as a signifier of racial difference, since among adults those with dark skin are usually referred to by using different terms, like ‘immigrants,’ ‘Somalis’ or ‘negroes’ (2005, p. 157). She also points out that as the children grow older they learn both the “negative meanings” that are linked to ‘black’ as well as the positive (2005, p. 157). Although Rastas comes to the conclusion that the word ‘black’ can eventually be construed positively by children of black African descent, she still leaves the question there as to why ‘black’ is initially seen as a negative term.

Discussions and research regarding skin tone, the color complex, and colorism are still rare in areas outside of the traditional colonization contact points (although, as seen in chapter 3, there was a historical link of Latvia to colonialism and slavery through the Duchy of Courland), which is why I never imagined that it would translate into the Latvian space. I have always seen this

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<sup>128</sup> Rastas also interviews children whose backgrounds are located in Asia, the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe (she does not provide information on the specific countries of origin). Her primary focus, though, is on individuals of black African descent as it links to her own interest in that particular population (she has adopted two children from Ethiopia).

discourse as something that is grounded in the history of slavery and European imperialism, although Glenn's (2008) findings now somewhat disprove this connection. Rauna, although her father is from Mali, which has a colonial past, may have also been in contact with the discourse of colorism through conversations with peers, the media, or other socializing processes – as the African/Caribbean/African American diaspora comes to Latvia from many different places and in many different forms (media, immigration, cultural exchanges).

The term, colorism, was never raised in conversation with Rauna and I did not ask her directly about how she feels about differences in skin color, but yet it came up anyway. Colorism appeared when I asked Rauna about terminology and Latvian terms for individuals of black African descent – particularly how she defines herself. The question posed regarded the terms that are used in Latvian media and the public sphere to refer to individuals of black African descent:

***Melns*** - black (Millere and Mozare, 2008; Veisbergs, 2001)<sup>129</sup>

***Melnais*** - black, negro, (vulgar) coon (letonika.lv, 2011; Veisbergs, 2001). Caucasian (=Armenian, Georgian, Azerbaijani); Southerner. Examples: the blacks have taken over the market; the black comes up and threatens, either you pay 200 rubles for the spot (i.e. a table in the market to sell vegetables etc), or I'll spill your intestines. *Melnie* (see also 'mellie' above 'melnais'): depression (Bušs & Ernstone, 2006, p. 293)

***Melnādainais*** – (literally) black skinned, black (letonika.lv, 2011; Millere and Mozare, 2008; Veisbergs, 2001)

***Melnums*** - blackness, nigrescence, black, (referring to a spot) stain, black spot (letonika.lv, 2011) (used more to describe 'black' as a characteristic or color)

***Moris*** - blackmoor, moor, Negro (letonika.lv, 2011). Note: Archaic term, generally used in Shakespeare or in historical references.

***Mulats*** – mulatto (letonika.lv, 2011)

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<sup>129</sup> *Melnais* is a term, as described in the student's email below, that sometimes has negative connotations. The usage of all of the terms varies. For example, articles in Latvian newspapers (such as *Diena*) use *melnādainais* to describe Barack Obama. In the *Mans Mazais* article, that I will analyze in the final section of this chapter, they use *melns*.

*Nēģeris* - black, black man, black person, Afro-American, (historically) Negro (Veisbergs, 2001).

*Niggers* – “Substantive, often derogative of *Nēģeris*. (1995, youth speak) *All of the niggers were outplayed* [basketball players]. (2004, Delfi) *a nigger was blamed in the incident...* (2005, Delfi) [Comes from the English derogative *nigger*” (Bušs & Ernstone, 2006, p. 313)

*Šokolāde/šokolādes* - chocolate (letonika.lv, 2011)

*Tumšādains* – dark skinned, swarthy (letonika.lv, 2011; Veisbergs, 2001)<sup>130</sup>

Recently, however, there has been a change in the terminology being used to describe individuals of black African descent. This occurred in articles written about Lingita Lina Bopulu. For the first time (and one of my informants confirmed this) I saw the terms *afrolatviete* (African Latvian [female]) and *afroģimene* (African Family)<sup>131</sup>. The latter was used by Lingita in an interview, the first was by journalists. These terms have not appeared in every article, but they stand out as they have not been used before in any articles about individuals of black African descent – with the exception of articles about the AfroLat NGO, which refer to the group being formed by Africans. The only time that I saw *nēģeris* being used in reference to the discourse that surrounded Lingita, was in an editorial on Lingita’s experiences with discrimination by Ivars Āboliņš in the newspaper *Diena* (March 08, 2012).

*Nēģeris* is, by far, still the most controversial of the terms used to describe an individual of black African descent in Latvia. Much of this is due to the fact that when spoken it sounds like “nigger” (to the non-Latvian ear) and it has strong negative connotations for individuals such as

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<sup>130</sup> These are the male forms. The female forms are *melna*, *melnādaina*, *tumšadaina*, and *nēģeriete*. Translations of all terms compiled from the following dictionaries and linguistic sources: Bušs, O. & Ernstone, V. (2006). *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca*. [Latvian slang dictionary]. Rīga, Latvia: Apgāds Norden AB; Millere, A. and Mozare, R. (2008). *Latviešu-Angļu-Latviešu kabatas vārdnīca* [Latvian-English-Latvian pocket dictionary]. Rīga, LV: Zvaigzne ABC; Veisbergs, A., et al. (2001). *Jaunā Latviešu – Angļu vārdnīca* [The new Latvian-English dictionary]. Rīga, Latvia: SIA “EKLV”. As well as the electronic dictionary and language analyzer at <http://letonika.lv>. Bušs, O. and Ernstone, V. (2006). *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* [The Latvian slang dictionary]. Rīga, LV: Norden AB.

<sup>131</sup> Both terms do not yet appear in the sources, including *letonika.lv* (the most recently updated online dictionary), that I use for translation. The terms above are, therefore, direct translations from the Latvian based upon the words used.

Martin and Jean. For others, such as my students (see below), it is a historical term that means no harm and has only recently been transformed into the Latvian equivalent of “nigger” in colloquial usage (specifically in slang). As one of my Latvian students told me in an email, after a particularly intense debate in one of my lectures on race and racism, it is a complicated term:

Do you recall how you reacted when [name redacted] used the term “colored people” instead of “people of color”? I was wondering whether this should not be viewed in context with cultural relativism as well? Surely, you must realize how utterly meaningless the differentiation between the two terms sounds to people from Latvia. The same applies to the word “*nēģeris*” – the equivalent of the English word “nigger” in all ways but the one that matters, t.i. – it has no negative connotations in everyday Latvian rhetoric. Whereas the word “*melnais*”, the equivalent of the English “black” does. Never the less the word “*nēģeris*” has all but disappeared from common use mainly due to exposure to western culture.

(Personal email communication, 2010. Written in English. Permission granted from student)

The impact of “exposure to western culture” on the Latvian language – particularly on the usage of *nēģeris* – argument is a useful one: if visitors from outside of Latvia did not point out that *nēģeris* sounds like “nigger” when spoken, would it start dropping out of use or begin to become closer to nigger in its utilization? This is a pertinent question to ask, as my own kneejerk reaction to the usage of the term *nēģeris* in class was based upon my racial background and the American socio-historical context in which I was raised<sup>132</sup>.

This particular situation was what prompted me to ask Rauna about terminology in the first place. Her answer was a combination of the unexpected and the expected in that it turned my own assumptions on their head. The conversation also brought the notion of colorism into the mix, as it were:

LR: I mean, do people use the term, do people ever use the term *nēģeris* around here?

Rauna: Yes. Yeah. And I was very surprised that black people can say this word but

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<sup>132</sup> Again it is about the way the word sounds more than how it did or does translate.

that white people just can't.

LR: But the Latvian word *nēģeris*, do you use that term?

Rauna: No. I usually use, but ah, *melns*, how do you say, mulattos?

LR: Mulatto?

(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

It was at this moment that our discussion turned from being about which terms were the most appropriate to describe an individual of black African descent, to how Rauna describes her own skin color.

As a tool to describe her skin color, Rauna presented a differentiation between herself and another woman of black African descent:

Rauna: I use brown, because they are lighter. And uh, and the very black people, I know one girl who's, like, she's totally black. And for her it's very difficult because she, because of skin tone and but, for us, who are like light, it's very easy here.

(Interview, November 10, 2010. Conducted in English)

In this statement, Rauna is talking about her own construction of difference based upon skin tone. The difference presented here is one of "easier" versus "harder". She views her lighter skin tone as something that makes life easier for her in Latvia. The message sent by Rauna is that the darker you are...the harder it will be for you in Latvia. It is a construction of difference that allows Rauna to distinguish herself from others. This also points to how difference in skin tone may operate within the larger discourse of difference in Latvia, the view that the greater degree of visibility (through a darker skin tone) is equated with a greater chance of being marked as "different" or "foreign" – that it will be even *more* difficult to avoid the stares, to avoid being treated as an outsider, to avoid the mocking gestures, such as the ones that Lingita described in one of her interviews. To be lighter makes it slightly easier 'to blend in' as it were, to avoid all of the issues that may come with having darker skin.

According to Fleetwood (2011), these types of distinctions are part and parcel of the discourse of colorism:

Colorism attempts to fix a scale of blackness based on dominant structuring principles of the field of vision and through an understanding of the black body as a visibly identifiable body, even in traces (...) Furthermore, colorism structures a relationship between the perception and marking of skin color and a performed embodiment. In part, the subject understands the colorist paradigm and assesses value in relation to the hierarchy; and a colorist gaze frames her understanding and perception of the actions of others marked through this system. (p. 73)

This definition is appropriate in the case of Rauna, for she both recognizes and ignores her own visible difference from the majority of Latvian society. She sees the difference more clearly in others – particularly those that are “marked” as darker skinned. And that is the very nature of colorism, of the politics of skin tone, to create a “spectrum” of hardships and desirability based upon skin color. Her lighter skin tone allows her to other “others” in the same manner that she is “othered” in Latvia. It creates a border between herself and other women of black African descent.

This is not to say that colorism in Latvia is exactly the same as colorism in America. It is not. As stated above, certain threads seem to weave their way into the experiences of women of black African descent– whether it is through global mass media (the most visible black pop stars on the global stage – Beyoncé and Rihanna- are both light-skinned)<sup>133</sup>, encounters outside of Latvia, or perceptions based upon public and private interactions – it has become part of the consciousness of women like Rauna and even Lingita Lina Bopulu. However, colorism was not the only theme that arose when I spoke to Rauna or even Elizabeth. The one theme that was most prominent with both the women and men that I interviewed was the subject of stares – the experience of not being able to walk down the street or into a room without everyone staring at you<sup>134</sup>.

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<sup>133</sup> Rihanna is one of Rauna’s favorite singers.

<sup>134</sup> Lingita Lina Bopulu spoke about the experience of stares in the interview quoted earlier in the chapter.

## The Discourse of the Stare

I locate the act of staring in a place wherein there is a meeting of an individual's private and public perceptions of identity. For both the men and women of black African descent in Latvia, this can mean many different things. As seen above with Rauna, it means that she comes face to face with how her skin color influences how others identify and interact with her. For Elizabeth, it is the stares that she gets when she enters a nightclub right before she is propositioned. And for the men, Martin and Jean in particular, it can take on connotations of what kind of "African" they are, as well as how they are perceived or not perceived as foreign.

Rauna once said to me that on her travels to Sweden she was taken aback by the lack of stares directed towards her person: "(...) when I came there, I thought it was for me surprise, that, like, nobody look at me. Um, they just walk, like *garām* [pass by/go past -LR] and um...but in Latvia I think that all people who just go *garām*? (...) And they all, like, *skatās*"<sup>135</sup> (Interview, September 23, 2010. Conducted in English and Latvian)<sup>136</sup>. There are different kinds of stares in Latvia: there is the quick glance stare, the "I think that you are attractive stare", and there is (as my father described it during a visit to Rīga) the stare that people make when they see someone out of the ordinary: they try to stare without staring, but continue to glance even as they walk away. My (white) Latvian friends always tell me that "everyone gets stared at" – that people just stare because they see someone different. So why is it that the presence of the stares are always brought up in conversation with individuals of black African descent – often unprompted? Why are stares part of the dominant discourse among individuals of black African descent in Latvia?

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<sup>135</sup> *Skatas* translates as "they stare". *Skatīties* translates as "to stare" or to "gaze". *Skatīšanās* is the word for staring or looking.

<sup>136</sup> There are, visibly, more individuals of black African descent in Sweden (particularly in Stockholm and Malmö) than in Latvia. I noticed this during my own visit to Stockholm in 2011. This possibly a contributing factor to the lack of stares that Rauna experienced in Sweden.

When Martin, or any of my other contacts of black African descent get stared at on the street, it is about more than difference. Gullestad (2004) writes that the stares that are directed towards immigrants and citizens of color (in Norway, but this statement seems readily translatable to Latvia, as well) are usually written off by scholars and others as not guided by discrimination because the intent is not considered to be hateful: “(...) the ‘immigrants’ anger at being stared at has to recede in favor of majority people’s natural response to differences” (2004, p. 183). The staring itself can be seen as a hostile act by the one who is on the receiving end of the stare. When Martin tells me that people are now “making a concerted effort not to stare” (Interview, June 22, 2009. Conducted in English) it is because individuals have become fully conscious of the impact that the act of staring has on individuals of black African descent.

The stares recall Lacan’s *gaze* where the act of the gaze is about more than just the action itself, but also about the individual who is doing the gazing and the object of their gaze. Lacan (1978) describes the gaze as “our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it (...)” (p.73). We see what we want to see, we *project* our perceptions unto the other. It may not necessarily be who they really are, but it is who we *think* they are – the gaze allows us to construct an identity for others – to locate them in a specific time or place. The other can automatically be “foreign”, “Latvian” or some other construction based upon our own preconceived notions. At the same time, there is ambiguity within the gaze: the gazer can be left wondering, questioning, grasping for understanding. There are also the parts of one’s identity that are not visible to the person on the street: perhaps it is their religion, what language they speak, etc. This invisible quality is what makes the gaze so jarring to the subject of the action.

Hegel (1977) also deconstructs the gaze, although in his terms it is not the gaze, per se, but the *perception* of the other:

Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demanded of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both. (p. 112)

The gaze is not a one-sided relationship. The object of the gaze is an active participant, as the object can also gaze back. An individual's awareness of how they are being perceived can also impact how they construct their own identity – to want to be seen a certain way in the eyes of the other.

The gaze that is the focus of my analysis is about the impact of the stare on the day-to-day lives of individuals of black African descent in Latvia and how the other attempts to locate them within the Latvian context. As stated earlier, the stare has become part of the everyday lives of people of black African descent in Latvia. The individuals that I spoke to during interviews and conversations see it as something to be expected from the man on the street and fellow individuals of black African descent. There are stares and then there are *stares*. It is the second type that is the most intrusive and haunting. The starrer's eyes are locked upon your face and your body. There is no accompanying smile, grin, or even a frown<sup>137</sup>. They are expressionless. And the stare does not feel like a brief act – it feels as though it is a long, cold, glance. It makes you feel as though you are being attacked, as though you are doing something wrong by just *being*. You sometimes feel (as I did) that perhaps there is something more to it – that maybe your friends are right, that you are looking for the stares. But, I had felt the stares on me when I walked down the street in Rīga or seen how people stop and look at me when I walk into a room (and do not stop

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<sup>137</sup> And even though the stereotype of a Latvian as “unsmiling” does come into play here, the stare itself transforms the expressionless face. It goes back to what my father observed during his time in Latvia – the glance that is more than a glance. There is an attempt to hide the stare from the staree, but yet it still is noticed by the intended target.

looking at me). It does not change based upon the mood of the stare, you can be feeling joyful that winter is now over as you walk into Rimi (a supermarket) to buy an ice cream – but, the minute that you feel the eyes on you, your mood changes. This feeling creates a sense of differentness – you are aware of your (perceived) difference from everyone else. This sense comes from the object of the stare, as it is you who feels the most aware of the action at the time. At the same time, staring can be a relationship between the starrer and the staree – as the staring comes from the starrer’s own sense of what marks someone else as different (be it skin color, hair, or dress). If you stare back (as I have), then it is you who has become the starrer – only this time it is not only about difference, but about trying to connect with the other, to discover if there are other intentions behind the stare or, perhaps, to only do what “is demanded of the other” (Hegel, 1977, p. 112). Therefore, the act of staring, of the gaze, can be an interactive process between two people.

As Rauna stated above, people in Latvia do not pass by – they all stare. There is no difference in the dynamic if you notice the stare or not because your mind is trained to expect that someone is staring. As Lingita Lina Bopulu said in one of her interviews (quoted earlier): “I had this experience in the past, everyone staring at me like that, and I took it to heart, but now I am no longer disturbed by this” (mango.lv, January 18, 2012). Her statement “I am no longer disturbed by this” implies that she acknowledges that she is still being stared at, even though it does not bother her to the extent that it used to in the past. Her new found celebrity status complexifies the reasons for her being stared at – celebrity erodes her privacy more than her phenotypical difference did in the past, as she is now not only stared at because of her visible difference but also because she is known through her work on “*OKartes skatuve*”, her *Playboy* cover and pictorial, and in interviews with the Latvian media.

Individuals of black African descent in Latvia get *used* to the stares – so the action or the experience itself becomes no longer about noticing or not noticing the stare, but about *tolerating* the stare. Individuals of black African descent also find ways to *avoid* the stares: Martin battles the stares by putting on big headphones and walking with his head down as an attempt to avoid noticing the stares. I walked “with intent” – as though I knew where I was going (even if I did not) and wore sunglasses and headphones so that I could block out the world around me. Others do not go out much at all or when they do, they go to Old Town Rīga, where there tend to be more tourists and perhaps less of a chance to run into people who are “not used to” seeing foreigners.

It is important to also take into account that individuals on the receiving end of the stare do the same to other people of black African descent. Rauna admits to staring when she sees other women with brown skin on the street (only to be given a reality check by her mother). Elizabeth, Martin, Jean and even I catch ourselves staring when we see others that look “like us”. It can sometimes be a stare of recognition and other times it is a stare made out of the shock that we are not the only ones or that suddenly there are more of “us” in Rīga. The act of staring at other individuals of black African descent correlates to Latvia having a small number of individuals of black African descent, but it is also about recognizing difference or sameness in others. Staring is not just a (white) Latvian thing.

When finding explanations for the stares, Jean, for one, is of the opinion that the stares have to do with a “removedness of location” – that is if a (white) Latvian went to his small French-speaking country in Africa, he too would be the receiver of stares. And it would not just be the stares, but also the action of verbally being pointed out as “different”. This action would be jarring to anyone, but Jean sees it as a normal occurrence in the lives of those who choose to

move far away from home. He just does not take any issue with the stares or their accompanying (re)actions because he sees it as something that is also cultural in Latvia – it is to be expected and you must understand why, and then, how to deal with the situation:

(...) I know a lot of African people have problems here in Latvia because they pay attention for all thing, eh, around him. And if they say, “Oh. You are black”, they pay attention to that. If I go on the street, and you say, “Oh. Black people.” If you don’t say to them: “I don’t have time to pay attention to that. If I go on the street, and you say, “OK. You are black” and you say “Yes. I am black. But is this a problem for you?” Because you need to know that in this society people are different from us. They think differently. It’s not in Africa or you can go to say to people “Oh. Hi. How are you?” and so on. Here people are different. If you want to live here you need to think like these people. It’s not to say change all people in this country. Any country. It’s not possible to change people. If you come, to live there or (...) I know a lot of people, African people, have a lot of problem here, but I try to explain to them that they need to change, what to say, their attitude to society because to say “Oh! Everybody’s bad!” and so on. It’s not possible to move on in society. You need to see yourself, to be integrated in society and to try to find your place in society. And it’s so hard, because if you don’t have, you don’t know where you are – first you need to know where are you, what’s your plan, what’s your goal, what you need to accept in this, in that country. (Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English)

Jean, in many ways, is directing his comment to other individuals of black African descent in Latvia – particularly those that are from African countries. Those who have openly discussed having issues with (white) Latvians, those who air their grievances against discrimination out in the public eye, and those who complain that Latvia is an inherently racist society. In this quote, Jean pleads for understanding – asking others like him to take the time to get to know the society and culture before making any judgments. For him, the stares are something to be expected in Latvia. One cannot change their reactions to you, but one can influence how they *interact* with you. This is not to say that Jean does not or has not faced any challenges during his time in Latvia, even he admits:

(...) We have in Latvia, an interethnic relation problem, but that it is not to say ‘not to come here. Stay in your country’. Because if you go to Africa, you have the same problem with white people. If you go to Africa we have the same. Because of different people we see you, we pay attention to you. And I have this same problem in Latvia

(Interview, September 24, 2010. Conducted in English).

At the same time, the public has also become aware of the act of staring, either through interactions with individuals of black African descent or media portrayals of said individuals (See: Lingita Lina Bopulu). Even Martin once said to me “people are now making a concerted effort not to stare – not to appear intolerant” (Journal notes, June 22, 2009. Stated in English). It is also publicly commented on in widely-distributed magazines, such as *Mans Mazais* (*My Little One*) a magazine about children and families. *Mans Mazais* can be found in any supermarket, convenience store, or post office in Latvia and in the January 2011 issue (See fig. 14) they even broached the subject of the problems that are faced by families raising children of ‘mixed’ background in Latvia. The featured family, the Okorie’s, are composed of Ilva Banka-Okorie ([white] Latvian) and Kelechi Kennedy Okorie ([black] Nigerian). One of their young children is even the cover model for the issue, which is titled “*Šokolādes Bērni*” (“Chocolate Children”).

Ilva is open about the reactions that their family faces in their day-to-day lives in Latvia.

Although she does not specifically name the stares, she does allude to them in the interview:

Everyone looks at us and our children with interest and pleasure. In the beginning it seemed intrusive and heightened, but [now] I am accustomed to it.

(Bērziņa, Rudzīte & Strūberga, January 2011, p. 37. Translation mine)

As with Lingita, it is not that Ilva no longer notices the stares or that people have stopped staring, but that she has become “accustomed to” the stares that others project onto her family – particularly her children. Kelechi tempers this observation by noting, according to the article, that “Latvia to his knowledge is not different from other countries in the world” (January 2011, p. 37):

Always and everywhere you find people, who are not tolerant and are not tolerant towards people of other ethnicities [*citu tautību cilvēkiem* – LR], just as there will always and everywhere be people that accept and respect others. Therefore there is not an opportunity to generalize and say that in Latvia there would be more bias than elsewhere in the

world (...) And the attention, that we have received in Latvia, is also not that surprising, as here, as in other parts of the world, people are delighted to see small children. Besides, the twins – particularly because they are a boy and a girl – are, in general, rare anywhere in the world. (January 2011, p. 37. Translation mine)

Both Ilva and Kelechi understand the impact that the stares have on their children. It is no longer seen as a negative, just as a constant. A constant that their children will possibly also call attention to when they are older. But, as Kelechi states – he does not see Latvia as any different from elsewhere in the world. Just as Jean also reminds us, the family would get stared at regardless of where they travel. Kelechi, Jean, Martin, Rauna, and Ilva's and Kelechi's children (and Ilva herself) are now fixed points in time – used to the stares and no longer questioning the reasons for the staring that occurs no matter their location.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined how individuals of black African descent in Latvia navigate their public and private personas. I argued that there is a construction of difference among individuals of black African descent in Latvia, a construction that touches upon the discourses that shape their day-to-day lives: the politics of skin color, stares, and family interactions. I explored the various ways that my subjects constructed narratives of identity – through the scopes of language, colorism, and 'the gaze'. The examples of Lingita Lina Bopulu and Rauna presented an opportunity to see, how women of black African descent who were born and raised in Latvia, talk about their identities as Latvian. Both Lingita and Rauna see themselves as Latvian: it is their first language, they know the country's history, they dance the folk dances and sing the folk songs. The narratives that they present as representing their identity fit into the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia's (2011) own definition of "a Latvian" (*latvietis*): "a person who meets at least one cultural criterion (particularly language, culture, origin)" (p.5). Language,

in particular, serves as an iconic device which automatically “calls out” Rauna and Lingita as Latvian. The fact that they both speak Latvian without a foreign accent makes others (Latvians, in particular) recognize them as being Latvian, which carries with it a specific set of expectations.

An additional factor is that of skin color, which may or may not influence how identity is formulated for and by individuals of black African descent in Latvia. Skin color is one factor that marks their difference from the majority (white) Latvian population. Difference through skin color in Latvia is equated with ‘foreignness’. Foreignness comes with an expectation that one cannot speak Latvian, a point that Rauna alludes to when she remarks that people are sometimes surprised that she can speak Latvian well or that Latvian is her native language. Skin color as a marker of difference is not only about foreignness. It is also about how one sees themselves in contrast to others – particularly the perspective that life in Latvia is harder or easier for an individual of black African descent dependent on the darkness or lightness of their skin tone.

It was Rauna’s particular move of seeing herself as “brown” instead of “black”<sup>138</sup> that led me to devote a section to the discourse of colorism – specifically about how one could start to discuss how colorism might function in Latvia. The dichotomy of “lighter as good” “darker as bad” was clearly marked in Rauna’s explanation of why she sees herself as ‘brown’. The one woman that she knows who is “totally black”, Rauna describes as having a more difficult life in Latvia than those of “us, who are like light” (See interview from November 10, 2010). Here she is engaging in a construction of difference based upon skin tone – her lighter skin tone marks a difference in day-to-day experiences from the woman who has darker skin. This identification with ‘brown’ also, as pointed out in the work of Rastas (2005), functions as a certain type of

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<sup>138</sup> Again, this is an identification that is not about political identity it is pointing out the literal – her skin tone.

coloring talk – ‘black’ is not yet formulated as a label under which Rauna can identify with others of black African descent, instead it is the *actual* color of her skin that assists in describing who she is.

Another theme explored in this chapter was that of the stare – how it functions in Latvia and its impact on individuals of black African descent. I was particularly interested in how staring is the location where an individual’s private and public perceptions of identity meet – as it also points to how difference is constructed, and travels, in Latvia. The stare, in this sense operated within the sphere of ‘the gaze’ – as formulated by Lacan (1978) and Hegel (1977) – stares and the act of staring were the most common subjects of conversation with the individuals of black African descent that I interviewed. The stares ‘call out’ their difference from the majority (white) Latvians (and other individuals of black African descent) – whether it is because their presence is ‘rare’ in Latvia or because their skin color attracts some manner of curiosity. The discourse of the stare, among individuals of black African descent, is also about ‘getting used to’ the stares. They have become such an everyday experience in the lives of individuals of black African descent in Latvia that, in the words of Lingita, they are “no longer disturbed” by the stares. The discourse of the stare has also entered into the public sphere of the media – interviews with Lingita in various outlets and the *Mans Mazais* cover story on the Okorie family all referred to the stares in one context or another.

The individuals that I spoke to in Latvia, as well as the ones (the Okories, Lingita Lina Bopulu) that I became familiar with through the Latvian media, have specific shared experiences that have proved to be of assistance in understanding how their identities are formulated in the public and private spheres. I also wanted to demonstrate that is not necessarily a unified discourse among individuals of black African descent in Latvia – Jean and Kelechi, for example,

do not necessarily agree with Martin that the stares are unique to Latvia – that they occur wherever you go. They do agree, however, that the act of the stare has as much to do with a noticed difference than with a search for a commonality (or a marker of a common identity).

Lingita and Rauna, while both have grown up as individuals of mixed black African and (white) Latvian descent in Latvia, still have opposing viewpoints on discrimination in Latvia – Lingita has experienced discrimination herself both from peers and strangers (the letter), while Rauna alludes to discrimination being more limited to individuals with darker skin or to men of black African descent. This type of discrimination can be categorized as racism, but it is a racism that can exist without a fully realized discourse of race (in the Anglo-American context). As my students at the University of Latvia argued, ‘racism’ can be used as a term to describe any type of discrimination based upon difference (be it language, ethnic origin, etc), even if (the Anglo-American conception of) ‘race’ is implied within the term ‘racism’ it can exist without it – as there may be no other correlating terms that work in the same manner or carry the same discursive strength (see chapter 2, also see Dzenovska’s [2010, 2009] discussion of racism and anti-racism in Latvia).

Taking all of these narratives and theoretical constructs into account, this chapter only strengthens the main argument of my work: that the politics of blackness is constituted differently in Latvia than in the dominant literature on blackness and race, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context. This chapter also demonstrates that the concept of identity or sense of self is fluid and constantly negotiated by individuals of black African descent through a variety of factors: place of birth, age, socio-historical relationship with Latvia, family circumstances, language, and gender. The examples in this chapter particularly highlight how

identity is negotiated, by demonstrating how factors such as language, colorism, and 'the gaze' all play a role in how individuals of black African descent (re)conceptualize their identities.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

When I returned to the States after my last year of field work (2010-2011) in Latvia, I started to think about the narratives of identity that I had come upon during my time in Latvia, particularly those of Rauna, whose interviews have added a multi-layered aspect to my understandings of Latvianness, blackness, Africanness, and difference in Latvia. Her story, in addition to the ones of Andrew, Elizabeth, Jean, Martin, and Monir, provided the structuring material of my argument that the politics of blackness and Africanness is constituted differently in Latvia than in the dominant literature on blackness and ‘race’, which is primarily derived from an Anglo-American context – a context that is based upon the history of slavery and colonization. They demonstrated that identity or sense of self is based upon multiple factors: place of birth, age, socio-historical relationship with Latvia (particularly the Soviet era), family circumstances, language, and gender.

As an American anthropologist, I am engaged with the discourse of race in my everyday practices of identity formation. I face a paradoxical situation in my work, which is that the discourse of race is so embedded in American anthropology (and American socio-cultural practices) that it is challenging to attempt to write this ethnography without engaging with racialized discourses and modes of analysis. This paradox was made apparent in the analysis of race/ethnicity in chapter 2, which charted the ways that anthropology has explored and dealt with the concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality throughout the history of the discipline. Those particular concepts are linked, not only through how race/ethnicity and ethnicity/nationality become conflated in scholarly, political, and public discourses of identity, but also within the theoretical constructs of ‘racialization’ (‘racialization of ethnicity’) and ‘ethnocization’ (‘ethnocization of nationality’).

The concept of race or ‘race’ and how it is adopted into every day and political life in Latvia is the first of three themes that formed the structure of my dissertation. In Latvia, ‘race’ has only recently started to become part of the larger political discourse of identity, immigration, and integration, but there is an emerging Latvian-based conception of race (Dzenovska 2009, 2010). It only appears within NGO publications and studies that are funded by the European Union, which is influenced by an Anglo (British) understanding of race – based upon how ‘race’ was shaped and developed within European colonial projects. Dzenovska (2010) points to this understanding in her own work, stating that the majority of Latvians see ‘race’ and racism as being foreign concepts to Latvia due its supposed removedness from the legacy of European colonial history. While there is historical evidence that points to connections between the Duchy of Courland (now part of Latvia) and colonial desires – such as slavery and the slave trade – they do not point to the same formulation of the discourse of race in Latvia that there is in the United States (Dzenovska, 2009, 2010; Merritt, 2010).

The discourse of race (or the former lack of a discourse of race) is also linked to the Soviet past. The official policy of the Soviet government was that race, as well as racism, gender, and sex, did not exist. The Soviet Union was to be a ‘raceless’ society. This policy played into the Soviet government’s outreach to individuals of black African descent both in the United States and in Africa. As outlined in chapter 3 and elsewhere, this policy of anti-race and anti-racism was, in part, about positioning the Soviet Union against the West (predominantly, America) and its well-known issues with race and racism (segregation, discrimination) (Baldwin, 2002; Blakely, 1986; Hessler, 2006; Matusevich, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Quist-Adade, 2001, 2005, 2007). This policy was one that was maintained well into the late 1980s and the period of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. This meant, in part, that there was not a vocabulary of race (at least in the Anglo-

American sense of the word – one based upon the discourses that arose out of slavery and colonialism) in the discourse of identity and difference in the Soviet period.

The second theme of this dissertation focused on the relationship between phenotype (for example, skin color and hair) and sense of self. This theme was inspired by Hall (1997), who contended that for ‘black’ (in the Anglo-American sense of the term) individuals, their “histories are in the past, inscribed in their skins. But it is not because of their skins that they are Black in their heads” (p. 53). Identity can be about more than phenotype or even heritage. There are political, historical, and social factors that assist in shaping sense of self for individuals of black African descent in Latvia. The ‘AfroLatvian’ in the AfroLat NGO was formed from a political moment – a need for a unifying identity that could assist in protecting its members from discrimination. In chapter 4 and chapter 5, I spent time examining the connection (or disconnection) between phenotype and sense of self within the discourse of difference in Latvia. The majority of this exploration focused on the narratives of Lingita Lina Bopulu and Rauna, who were both of mixed black African and (white) Latvian descent and were born and raised in Latvia. I was interested in how they engaged with the discourse of skin color, particularly how skin color may or may not mark ‘difference’ for them. When I speak of difference, I speak of difference from other individuals of black African descent, as well as difference from the majority of (white) Latvians. Lingita, in her interviews, commented upon how her skin color attracts attention – both verbal and physical. Her skin color as a marker of difference has also given her some type of leverage – as it assisted in making her the most popular contestant (among the media, the viewing public voted her off due to her voice) on *OKartes skatuve* and landed her a *Playboy* cover. For Rauna, she notes that her skin color has brought her attention from boys, as well as from potential employers (the German commercial, a role as in extra in the

opera *Carmen*), but she also sees her ‘brown’ skin color as giving her a type of privilege, a privilege that women who are of a darker skin tone may not have – the privilege to have it ‘easier’ in Latvia – to attract less attention and less stares.

The third and final theme deals with the relationship between geographic location and place of birth with sense of self. The individuals of black African descent that I interviewed all came from different geographic contexts – whether it was the African continent, the United States or Latvia. The discourse of the “right kind of African” that was raised by Martin plays into this theme because it highlights how geographic origin can impact how others identify individuals of black African descent. If you are from Africa, the assumption is that you are a former foreign student from the Soviet regime (this is dependent on age). If you are a male of black African descent from the United States, then you must be a basketball player or a DJ. For the individuals of black African descent who were born and raised in Latvia, it is about a sense of ‘Latvianness’ – what shapes their identity as Latvian. For Rauna, it is a feeling that she cannot describe because she has lived in Latvia all of her life and does not know anything different. In the media interviews with Lingita Lina Bopulu, Latvian identity is about a knowledge of the history, the folk songs and dances, and the language.

#### *Topics of Further Research and Exploration*

There are two topics that show promise as areas for my own further research and exploration. The first is a more specific look at the impact of Soviet ethnography and nationality policy on the discourse of identity in Latvia, which builds off of similar points raised in chapter 2 and chapter 3. Soviet ethnography had a critical role to play in the shaping of the Soviet government’s policy on ethnonationality (Hirsch, 2009). The research that ethnographers and other social scientists

conducted throughout the Soviet Union, both in the early years of the nation and later on in its history, provided the government with information on how identity was formulated by each republic's population – particularly the discourses of ethnicity, nationality, and tribal relationships. This assisted in the conflation of ethnicity and nationality, as well as with Soviet social scientists' formulation of *ethnos* (Bromley & Kozlov, 1989).

One example of a text that deals with this legacy is Bruce Grant's (1995) *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas*, which took into account the ways that both Soviet ethnography and nationality policy impacted the identity and cultural discourse of the Nivkhi of Sakhalin Island in Russia's far-east. I am particularly interested in whether a similar study could be conducted on a broader scale on Latvia (on more than one 'ethnic' group) and whether Grant's invitation "to ask how we might produce new readings of Soviet and post-Soviet nationality policies that recognize the very hybrid identities produced by the Soviet state" could be applied to the Latvian context. There are few readily available sources, outside of the ones that are only accessible (in person) through the Latvian National Archives or Library, on Soviet ethnographic studies in Latvia and the other Baltic States. One set of sources is from the Soviet period and look at the development of ethnography and ethnographic studies in Latvia (Dunn, 1969; Gantskaia & Terent'eva, 1967-1968; Potapov, 1962-1963; Stroud, 1963-1964). Another set are collections of studies from the Soviet era on specific groups in the Baltic States (Butkiavichius [Butkevičius], Terent'eva, & Shlygina, 1967-1968; Efremova, Luts, & Chivkul', 1964; Kholmogrov, 1973). The third set are texts produced in the post-Soviet era and explore the history of anthropology, ethnography, and the social sciences in Latvia (Cimermanis, 1996; Golubeva, 2006). However, this would require me to conduct research, on the archival and

scholarly textual level, in order to gain a better sense at how Soviet ethnography specifically impacted the identity discourse in Latvia.

The second area of further research and exploration with which I would like to engage with in the future, taking lead from chapter 5, is the discourse of difference among the ‘second generation’ of individuals of black African descent in Latvia. The ‘second generation’ that I am referring to are the youth that were born and raised in a post-Soviet Latvia and present-day EU nation. I will engage with Vasquez’ (2010) formulation of “flexible ethnicity”, in that I am interested in looking at the degree to which individuals in this generation are able to “deftly and effectively navigate different racial terrains and be considered an ‘insider’ in more than one racial or ethnic group” (p. 46). Vasquez holds a specific place in this research because it assists in understanding how this generation, for example Rauna and Lingita navigate their perceptions of their difference(s) from their friends, family, and colleagues. As well as how they navigate their own identity as Latvian in public and private situations. My research on this generation of individuals of black African descent in Latvia could add to the literature on their peers in other ‘non-traditional’ locations of the African diaspora (Fangen, 2007; Gullestad, 2004; Sawyer, 2000, 2002; Wikan, 1996). While the majority of this research focuses on youth who are immigrants or migrants in their countries of residence, my task is to explore how narratives of ‘native-born’ youth of black African descent can add to the larger dialogue on the discourses of difference and identity among this population. I will also include the voices of individuals who are immigrants in Latvia, as their stories add an additional layer of context to the topic. Specifically, how their constructions of difference might contrast to those of the youth of black African descent who were born and raised in Latvia.

The exploration of the discourse of difference among the 'second generation' of black African descent must also include an element of understanding how the construction of 'mixed' (as in 'mixed-race', 'mixed-ethnicity') may or not play a role in the identity narratives of this generation. The concept of 'mixed-race' presents a similar paradox to that of race, as 'mixed-race' assumes that there is already a discourse of 'mixed-race' that is based upon the Anglo-American construction of race within the society that one studies. The academic discourse on 'mixed-race' tends to be dominated by scholars who locate themselves in the Anglo-American discourses of 'race' and 'mixed-race' and who bring their historical-political understandings of 'mixed-race' (history of miscegenation laws, colonial policies and views on children of 'mixed' parentage, the debate over adding 'multiracial' to the race category in the 2010 United States Census) into their research (Aspinall, 2009; Benson, 2007; Khanna, 2011; Khanna & Johnson, 2010; Lafond, 2009; Nyong'o, 2009; Pabst, 2006; Storrs, 1999). While there are most likely youth of black African descent in Latvia who are not of 'mixed' backgrounds, the ones who are (such as Rauna and Lingita) raise a question about how to approach the subject without making assumptions based upon one's own conceptualizations of 'mixed-race'.

In Latvia, the discussion focuses on 'mixed-ethnicity' and 'ethnic intermarriage' and is primarily concerned with the dominant ethnic Latvian – ethnic Russian binary (BISS, 2004, 2006; Cara, 2010; Kronenfeld, 2003, 2005; Monden & Smits, 2005; Tabuns, 2010; Zepa, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to interrogate the ways in which the discourses of 'mixed-race' (Anglo-American) and 'mixed-ethnicity' (Latvian) are in conversation with each other: Do they share a similar vocabulary? In what ways are these two discourses different? How do my informants, such as Rauna, engage with the Latvian discourse of 'mixed-ethnicity', if at all? By exploring these questions I can interact with and disrupt the dominant binary at the same time, as utilizing

the discursive practices that are already at play will allow me to further understand the nature of ‘difference’ and ‘mixedness’ in Latvia.

In conclusion, my research contributes to a broader discussion on identity and difference in Europe – particularly in locations considered to be outside of the ‘traditional’ borders of the African diaspora. My work is about going past the dominant paradigm – whether it is the Anglo-American discourse of race or the ethnic Latvian-ethnic Russian binary. By exploring the discourse of identity among individuals of black African descent, taking into account socio-historical and political processes that shape this discourse, I am already engaging in a paradigm shift in the Latvian identity discourse. My task, now, is to see how I can make a similar shift occur in the public, political, and academic (anthropology and Baltic studies) spaces that are involved in examinations of identity and difference in Latvia and Europe.

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## Figures



Fig. 2. TASS, Šingareva, S. and Teitelbauma, G. (photos). (August 1957). “Latvia’s, Africa’s, and China’s delegations meet at Rastorgujeva on August 02”. *Zvaigzne 16*(178), 3.



Fig. 3. TASS, Šingareva, S. and Teitelbauma, G. (photos). (August 1957). “Njangora Bua signs autographs for young Latvian women Marija and Larisa Mišina”. *Zvaigzne 16*(178), 4.

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Preemānā laipnā saimniece pacienā savus viesi no Afrikas.

Fig. 4. TASS, Šingareva, S. and Teitelbauma, G. (photos). (August 1957). “At a reception, a hostess treats her guest from Africa kindly”. *Zvaigzne* 16(178), 3.



Fig.5. Cartoons from *Krokodil* (From Nelson, W. [1949]. *Out of the Crocodile's Mouth: Russian cartoons about the United States from "Krokodi," Moscow's humor magazine.* Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 44-45.).

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Fig. 6. “Africa Fights! Africa Wins!” Image: Viktor Koretsky (1971). Courtesy Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. From the exhibition “Vision and Communism” <http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/vision-and-communism/>



Fig. 7. From Kriecbergs, J. (March 1978). “Togo-Rīgā” (“Togo in Rīga”). *Zvaigzne* (5), 31.

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Fig. 8. Sava, A. (May 1978). “Kad zaudēts viss..” (“When you have lost everything”). *Zvaigzne*. (9), 22.



Fig. 9. Singer Olga Rajecka at “Cocktail Stars at the Olympic Casino” Image: Copyright mango.delfi.lv, April 27, 2011.

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Fig. 10. Image from Ērgle, Z. (1974). *Ievīņa Āfrikā*. Rīga, LV: Liesma.  
 Retrieved from [http:// ibook.lv](http://ibook.lv)

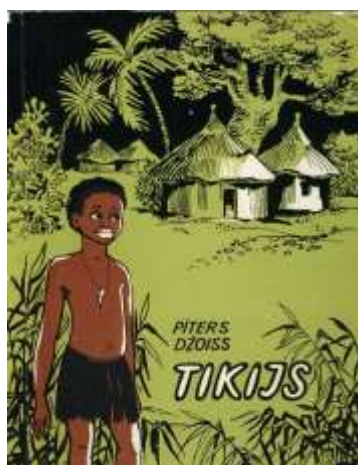


Fig. 11. Cover image from Joyce, P. *Ticky*. (1971). Rīga, LV: Izdevniecība “Liesma”.  
 Translation by Tija Pētersone.

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Fig. 12. Kambala's Son is a Fan of the Singing Twins" *Vakara Ziņas*, August 7, 2010, 35(266): 16-17.



Fig. 13. Lingita Lina Bopulu (photo: Mārtiņš Otto for tvnet.lv)

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Fig. 14. Ieva Andersone (Photographer). Cover of *Mans Mazais*. January 2011.

### **Vitae**

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