

# Becoming an Activist Citizen: Individual Experiences and Learning Processes within the Swedish Suburban Movement

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## **Abstract**

*Focusing on activism within a new “suburban movement” (förortsrörelse) in Sweden, this article explores the processes of becoming an activist from the perspective of post-migrant youth. The authors ask how individual identities are formed under conditions of social subordination and cultural stigmatization. Using interviews with urban activists the authors elaborate how this experience is contingent on individual and collective learning processes, and related to place struggle; the notion of self-identification for a “justice movement” among Swedish activists in ethnically mixed suburban areas. The article is based on Megafonen, a youth led organization grounded in Husby, a Stockholm suburb. Employing the notions of active and activist citizen, the interconnection of racialization and resistance, as well as how conditions of a racialized being affects the options of becoming an activist citizen, are explored.*

## **Keywords**

*activism, urban justice movements, racialization, narrative analysis, post-migrant youth*

## **1. Introduction**

Today’s socio-economically disadvantaged multiethnic urban neighborhoods in Sweden are becoming spaces of resistance against social exclusion and racialized stigmatization. Young people from these metropolitan areas are among the main actors contesting the adverse effects of the neoliberal turn in Sweden, including unemployment, soaring inequality, and the emergence of an urban precariat (Sernhede, 2014; Sernhede, Thörn, C., & Thörn, H., 2016; Schierup, Ålund, & Kings, 2014). From the beginning of the 1990s, both the political playing field and basic social conditions in Sweden have changed substantially, bearing witness to the impact of a neoliberal economic development, in a country that once epitomised the quintessence of the welfare state (Schierup & Ålund, 2011). It hits in particular so-called “urban development areas” (Regeringskansliet, 2012), which are poor, suburban

neighborhoods in larger cities with a high proportion of citizens from Africa and the Middle East. In other words, visible minorities that are being stigmatized in terms of “race”, “national origin” or “immigrant background” (Schierup, Ålund, & Kings, 2014).

In the United States and the United Kingdom the term “suburbia” denotes, for example, urban decongestion, lower residential density and private home ownership. In Sweden and France, in contrast, “suburbia” (the Swedish *förorten* and the French *banlieue*) signifies deprived municipal housing areas inhabited by a majority of poor immigrants and their offspring, together with members of other disadvantaged groups. These conditions affect, in particular, the lives of migrants from non-western countries and their children, exacerbated by increasing and overlapping ethnic and economic segregation in housing, education, and the labor-market (Léon-Rosales & Ålund, 2017). These suburban neighborhoods, among youth referred to, shorthand, as “*orten*”, meaning “the place”, have become social spaces with particular material, social, and symbolic meaning; soundboards for both identity formation and resistance among youth. We argue that the root causes of resistance lie not in multiethnic city suburbs or in the fact of segregation in Swedish cities, such as Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg, *per se*, but in social polarization—where conflicts over space, race, income and power intersect. This intersection contextualizes how *places of livelihoods* relate to the social forces in which they are embedded.

Place, in this meaning, is closely related to the idea of social “space”; not merely a territorially bounded unit, but a socially produced nodal point of interconnection, filled with power-laden practices (Hart, 2014, p. 14). This idea is our point of departure in the present paper. While focusing on the youth organization, *Megafonen* (the Megaphone) which is based in Husby, a poor multiethnic Stockholm suburb, we relate to the meaning of the struggle for social justice as “place struggle” (*platskamp*), a notion widespread as a meme for self-identification among activists in Sweden’s disadvantaged multiethnic neighborhoods. *Megafonen* is a part of a broader urban movement for social justice that has come to be identified as a “suburban movements” (*förortsrörelser*, e.g., Sernhede & Söderman, 2013; Tahvilzadeh, 2013). An interlinkage between place struggle and youth led activism—based mainly in the multiethnic suburban neighborhoods of Swedish cities—is condensed in this notion. The commitment of the suburban movement involves both critically interrogating and organizing action groups. This challenges different hegemonic boundary making that produces places as spaces of segregated territories; socially and economically marginalized, and culturally stigmatized. Mobilized within the local social room, as more or less internally and externally cohesive and organizationally formalized groupings—such as networks, associations, and organizations—these action groups are centered on common issues of social exclusion/inclusion. They express, following Naomi Abrahams (1996, p. 769), “the production of communities and identities endowed with a purpose and course of action in power relation struggles”.

We define social movements as more or less temporary nodes of resistance, as collective action in confronting the institutional structures; focusing on social change in relation to political, social, and

cultural issues (Note 1). The development of an identity and the related activism capable of transgressing the local and able to communicate a vision of social transformation across a wider socio-cultural field, is a necessary condition for the formation of a social movement (Castells, 1996). We claim in what follows that this has become the case with the Swedish suburban movement (see further in León-Rosales & Ålund, 2017).

Employing the notions of *active* and *activist citizen*, we discuss interconnection of racialization and resistance; that is, how conditions of racialized *being* affect the options of *becoming* an activist citizen. Specifically, we ask how this interconnection of the objective and subjective becomes expressed in the production of situated knowledge in a merger of experience, perception, and agency.

The paper is organized as follows. We start off by discussing major concepts applied in the analysis and their theoretical sources. This is followed by outlining the meaning of *place struggle*, situating Megafonen and interconnecting its claims for social justice within subordinating relations of power. To this background we proceed to address how issues of a democratic deficit and problems of youth representation in local urban governance have generated a critical response and framed the resistance of Megafonen on its route to becoming a movement of activist citizens. The third section provides a presentation and discussion of the narrative of an individual activist. Finally, we conclude by relating *being* to *becoming* and individual experience to collective action.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Racialization, Representation, and Resistance

With public recognition of suburban movement (Schierup, Ålund, & Kings, 2014), Sweden faces the emergence of a vigorous new social movement, driven by a multiplicity of youth led organizations and networks, springing from the socio-cultural contexts of “new ethnicities” (Hall, 1992). Young people, from what is considered some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged metropolitan neighborhoods in Sweden, are the main actors in starting some of these new movements (León-Rosales, 2010). Activists in *Megafonen*, or in similar organizations such as *Pantrarna för upprustningen av förorten* (the Panthers for the regeneration of the suburb) in Gothenburg and *Gatans röst och ansikte* (Voice and Face of the Street) in Malmö, organize and raise awareness among youth, contesting cultural and racial stigmatization as well as the politically orchestrated dismantling of welfare services, most excessively expressed in their local communities.

We understand racialization as interconnected processes of social exclusion and cultural stigmatization through which individuals and social groups are attributed stereotypical identities in terms of skin and bone, culture or religion, hinging on imagined ethnic and racial differences which substantively shape their livelihoods, occupational mobility, and public representation. Thus, racialization includes processes producing alterity (Ålund, 2012) when discursively constructing both “us” and “others” as socio-cultural collectives with distinct imagined histories and distinguishing characteristics. It designates difference as limits to what the Other can become. The symbolic marking of divergence becomes a fact preventing “them” from achieving equal status with “us” (Miles, 1993). Racialization

can be traced to both colonialism and the historical development of capitalism in Europe. Colonial images live on, promoted by contemporary images that help to justify and uphold social inequality.

The multiethnic suburban areas of Swedish cities are, in media and politics, discursively homogenized as problematic and their inhabitants are categorically stigmatized in terms of deviant cultural identities in relation to a supposedly homogeneous Swedish culture. Thus, these groups are “othered” with reference to their inhabitation as *immigrants*, generation after generation. These places have, however, another *emic* symbolical meaning. They are becoming spaces of identification with *orten* (place), a place of subjective anchorage and a place for struggles to belong, on equal terms. These are places of inclusion for the socially excluded “accidental citizen” (Nyers, 2006). In expressing their claims as *place struggle*, youth in Sweden resemble the claims from contemporary youth rebellions in France, Britain, and elsewhere. Judith Ravel and Toni Negri (2011) address these struggles as “The Common in Revolt”, referring to how youth in contemporary appraisal and rebellion express the lack of legitimacy for the existing democratic order, as they claim the right to the public. Also Henry Giroux (2013) writes that young people are especially vulnerable due to the lack of democratic space for their own voices to be heard. They demonstrate all over the world against economic injustice, inequality, as well as cuts in education and public services under the regime of neoliberal economic politics.

This development calls for a perspective on youth activism that reads the predicaments of the political on their terms (De Genova, 2009, p. 450). It has been argued that critical research needs to “see beyond a narrow focus on the ‘political’ while also understanding young people as agents—already actively involved in claiming, resisting and negotiating a range of competing responsibilities and freedoms” (Thomson, Holland, McGrellis, Bell, Henderson, & Sharpe, 2004, p. 221). Fethi Mansouri and Maša Mikola (2014) claim that youth activism represents new forms of citizenship that signals a need to see beyond formalized political participation, such as voting, party politics, and the sanctioned activities of mainstream civil society organizations.

As also Engine Isin (2009) argues, resistance and rights claiming are fundamental aspects of citizenship. Citizenship is not just a formalized being in terms of legal status, but an enacted process: an expression of how subjects act to become citizens. Isin states (2009, pp. 371-372), that through “claims to citizenship as justice that citizenship becomes a site of rights (and obligations)”. Thus Isin (2009, p. 384) merges the notion of citizen and acts, concluding that “to be a citizen is to make claims to justice: to break habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses”. The birth of new “acts of citizenship”, enacted through struggles for rights and justice among various groups, illustrates how acts produce new subjects as activist citizens and “new sites of contestation, belonging, identification and struggle... ...different from traditional sites of citizenship contestation such as voting” (Isin, 2009, p. 371).

Sharing these perspectives on youth activism, we locate our study within the research for social justice, or more precisely, studies of urban justice movements (Dikeç 2007; Schierup et al., 2014). We understand youth activism as a response to a contemporary neo-liberal economic development causing

social polarization of the urban space and, as in the case of Stockholm, multiple expressions of segregation within its multiethnic suburban neighborhoods affecting in particular youth, their social positions, and future options.

Using the notion of “becoming an activist”, our understanding corresponds to what Ted Rutland (2013), in his article *Activist in the Making*, discusses as a process of becoming a political subject. Becoming an activist as a political subject is grounded in the process of an “always unfinished work on oneself”—including “imperfect negotiations among multiple, potentially contradictory identities, interests and subjectivities” (Rutland, 2013, p. 1001). Thus, the making of an activist is “work-in-process” (Rutland, 2013, p. 998), a process of becoming, “contingently remade both prior to, and through, their active participation in contentious urban politics” (Rutland, 2013, p. 989). In this process, different and changing conditions of *being* interconnect youth and their parents, where the parents’ histories of pre-emigration and migration experience meet with youth in their (hi-)stories of post-migrant citizenship struggles.

Inspired by the binary notion of *being/becoming* (Hall, 1990), we explore the interconnection of racialization and resistance among young activists within Megafonen. The emergence of movements claiming rights, with post-migrant (Note 2) youth at the core, demonstrate youth claims being heard in their own right. These claims, relate to the process of *becoming* that we see, following what Stuart Hall (1990, p. 222) notes as connected to relations of power. When Hall (1990, p. 222), discussing colonial experiences of black people in diaspora, critically observes the problems of essentializing identity, he states that identity is continuously in the making, a process that merges *being* with *becoming*, referring to the ways in which individuals are positioned by, and position themselves within, the dominant regimes of representation. As Brian Bourke (2014, p. 3) states, connecting to Hall (1990): “Positionality represents a space in which objectivism and subjectivism meet”. This expresses particular subjects’ acknowledgments of who they are “as individuals, and as members of groups, and as resting in and moving within social positions” (Bourke, 2014, p. 3). Positionality is thus a complex category merging structural conditions with individual experiences.

Following this line of thought we discuss how the interconnection of the objective and subjective becomes expressed in the production of positionalities in the merging of experience, perception, and agency. Namely, how individual and group experiences of socio-cultural subordination relate to moving within social positions, i.e., being positioned *by*, and self-positioning. We elaborate how the parental experience of “migrantship” is interpreted from the perspective of youth, and how this experience is re-told and re-used in their own learning processes in becoming activist citizens, as individuals, and as members of groups.

### 3. Methodology

While relating identity to identification with the movement, and relating agency to structure, we explore how connections between personal and political are expressed in an individual narrative, and how this narrative reveals anchorage of personal experience within the wider social and historical context and social relations of power (Bathmaker, 2010; Ålund, 2014). Our research perspective corresponds to the meaning of narrative approach as “getting closer to the experience of marginalised and silenced lives”, thus calling attention to “those whose lives and histories go unheard, unseen, undocumented” (Bathmaker, 2010, p. 4).

We have since 2012 been gathering data through participant observation, netnography, video recording of meetings and interventions in public media such as articles in newspapers (Note 3). Based on twenty interviews among activists we have chosen to focus on one activist in Megafonen, Jasmine (Note 4). The choice of a single case study is connected to following reasons: Her story illuminates, following Ted Rutland (2013), the formation of identity and identification with the movement *in the process* of becoming an activist.

Furthermore, Jasmine’s narrative is an example of, what Robert Yin (2003, p. 13), when discussing the relevance of a single case study, defines as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. That is, in order to secure an in-depth understanding of the interconnection of personal experience, real-life context, and knowledge production. Jasmine’s narrative is also an exemplary illustration of knowledge production in terms of what Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011, p. 232) refers to as “...situated knowledge to construct understanding out of social contradictions”. We apply this formulation referring to contradictions between belonging, racialization, and social exclusion; and in understanding how conceptualizing the meaning of activism becomes perceived through reflexive self-awareness in the process of constructing self-positionality. Self-positionality can be understood as the critical, self-reflexive response to what Myfanwy Franks (2002, p. 42) phrases as being “positioned by others”, in terms of “enforced positionality”. Franks differentiates positionality, as “ascribed positionality (as is generally the case with gender); selective positionality (as in the case of those who opt for a particular position) and enforced positionality (where others forcibly define the position whether it matches subjective criteria or not)”. Thus, Franks (2002, p. 42) concludes that “our ethnic or ideological position can be thrust upon us and at times they may not bear any resemblance to how we perceive ourselves”.

Through the interplay between self-positioning/positioned by others (ascribed positionality), Jasmine’s narrative brings forward how structural conditions affect individual experiences, perception, and agency. Specifically, how, ethnicity, gender, and class become linked to power relations.

Different social locations—being a young woman with a migrant background, an activist, becoming professional civil servant while still being an activist—merge with geographic location in terms of family background. Jasmine’s parents are of middle class background from the Middle East. This

merger of social and geographic spaces, can, referring to Floya Anthias (2002), be read as a *translocational positionality* which brings forward a complexity of situated knowledge in the production of subject positionality.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Locating “Place Struggle” in the Swedish Urban Context

The (hi-)story of Megafonen is about the mobilization of youth in the multiethnic urban periphery in Sweden; contesting economic subordination, social exclusion, cultural stigmatization, the racialization of segregated residential areas, and demanding democratic space for influence.

Megafonen was founded in 2008, in Husby, a socially disadvantaged Stockholm suburban neighborhood of 12,000 inhabitants, in the area of *Järvafältet* belonging to Metropolitan Stockholm. The activism of Megafonen became world known as the “voice of suburbia” in connection with riots in Stockholm in 2013 (Schierup et al., 2014).

In 2009—a year after the Megafonen was founded—segregation in the area of *Järvafältet* (to which Husby belongs) had developed in an increasingly precarious direction, with about thirty-eight percent of young people (20–25 years) in the community neither working nor studying, and just approximately fifty percent of pupils managing to reach compulsory school goals, compared to over 90 percent in the central city area (By, 2009). In Husby, the employment rate is close to 24 per cent lower than in the greater Stockholm region, and most of those who work hold low-income jobs (Regeringskansliet, 2012). This condition is, in particular, concentrated among youth, with a large number of young people who neither hold any type of formal employment, nor are involved in education. The child poverty rate in so-called “urban development areas”, like *Järvafältet*, is far above the Swedish average, varying between 28 and 62 per cent (Salonen, 2012).

This development, together with urban regeneration plans for the area, was one of the reasons for Megafonen to join local dialogues on the urban development program, *Järvalyftet*, in which local youth were invited by the district administration to present their views. This was also the first time these young people participated in an open forum for citizens’ dialogue (Swedish: *medborgardialog*). *Järvalyftet* was launched in 2007 by the conservative majority in the Stockholm City Hall. The purpose of the program was to stimulate growth of the segregated area *Järvafältet* and promote its closer integration into the development of the Stockholm city region as a whole.

The name of Swedish suburban movement, *förortsörelse*, was publically coined in a press release in January 26, 2012, in connection with the occupation of *Husby träff*. With this press release, “*Husby requires respect*” (Note 5), Megafonen’s working group announced that a suburban conference—to be held that day in *Husby träff*—could “be the start of a new and broad suburban movement (*förortsörelse*) in Stockholm”. The occupation was declared as a reaction to a series welfare service closures such as schools, health centers, the post office, the municipal office, the social insurance office, etc., which had been occurring since 2006 (Megafonen, 2012). This occupation, as well as other public

demonstrations, were perceived as “struggles of the area’s inhabitants for their right to participate in the planning of the new *Järva*”, writes Rami Al-khamisi (2015, p. 159), one of the founders of Megafonen, in a retrospective view under the heading of “a dialogue that ended up as a monologue”. To restore lost confidence, the Swedish municipal-owned housing company, *Svenska Bostäder*, which was responsible for the physical restoration within the program, together with the local municipality, initiated meetings with the residents of the *Järva* area, where their opinions were gathered. Megafonen was then invited by *Svenska Bostäder* to poll opinions among youth. It resulted in the commissioned report “*To be young in Husby*” (Megafonen, 2010). The proposals provided by this report focused, in particular, on the importance of measures such as education investments, and employment and welfare services rather than physical renewal, which was not considered to be a priority. The report had seemingly no impact on the planning process. Commenting on the engagement of “decision makers”, Al-khamishi (2015, p. 164) points to a general lack of information—even among local politicians—and criticizes the actual decision-making process within *Järvalyftet* for being “closed in character and centrally monitored”. Megafonen argued that the authorities are unwilling to listen to local people. The organization’s initial engagement in the planning process is described by Al-khamisi and Basar Gerecci (2012), in a daily journal article, as follows:

Democratic responsibility has been betrayed in the most nonchalant manner. When the citizenship dialogues were first held in Husby several thousand comments were gathered. It is these dialogues and input from inhabitants that the leaders of the city market proudly as a democratic miracle. That there was good attendance on these days is true. But what is a dialogue worth without action and actual measures? How can democracy be reduced to a numbers game, instead of being an issue of citizens’ influence on actual policy?

Summarizing problems of social degradation and democratic deficit in the *Järva* area, Al-Khamisi and Gerecci (2012) conclude that there is a need for the renewal of democratic institutions which could ensure that *Järva*’s citizens are guaranteed their full democratic rights to influence political decisions. Megafonen has thereafter continuously focused on fundamental structural-institutional and democratic problems, manifesting voices of urban suburbia through suburban movement as, using the expression of Isin (2009), a “new site” for claim making.

In July 2013, another manifestation of collective protests was taking place. Through the campaign *Alby is not for sale* (hereafter AIS), activists in Alby, a neighborhood in the Botkyrka municipality (belonging to wider area of metropolitan Stockholm) urged (unsuccessfully) for the organization of a local referendum regarding the decision of the Botkyrka municipality to sell 1,300 publicly owned apartments in Alby to a venture capitalist. The campaign became an important learning experience for the activists as it demonstrated a need for the consolidation of a wider network. Activists in AIS joined Megafonen, which strengthened trans-local alliances of the movement.

It was, as already mentioned, during 2013 that Megafonen became known as the voice of the suburb, disseminated nationally and worldwide in connection with the dramatic youth riots in Stockholm



during 2013 (Schierup et al., 2014). Then Megafonen became known for its sharp critique of the Swedish police, as well as making public understandings of the institutional violence and social marginality through discrimination and racial stigmatization which, they contended, led to the riots in the first place. They stated: “Megafonen does not start fires. We believe that this is not the right method for long-term change. But we know that it is a reaction to the shortcomings of this society. Unemployment, inadequate schools and structural racism is the underlying causes of what is happening today” (Megafonen, 2013).

Through this short presentation of Megafonen we can trace the transformation of a youth organization towards becoming a movement with a trajectory from active towards activist citizenship. To start with, the members of Megafonen were, paraphrasing Isin (2009, p. 381), “active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting”, while in the process of confronting the lack of democratic space, representation, and marginalization of their voices relating to local urban development and planning, they became “activist citizens”. That is, they started to “engage in writing scripts and creating the scene” (Isin, 2009, p. 381) through organizing demonstrations and occupying *Husby träff*, the local meeting point for civil society and inhabitants in Husby, but also organizing public seminars, writing popular and academic articles, participating in a range of workshops and conferences and thus, becoming a public voice (Rosales & Ålund, 2017).

Taken together, these and other similar manifestations are putting forward claims for the influence of local residents which correspond to the emergence of “activist citizens” as new political subjects a “new actors” as claimants of rights, who “break habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses...” (Isin, 2009, p. 383).

#### 4.2 *The Suburb and the Self*

Being placed in marginalized, racialized, gendered, and classed spaces affects knowledge production from the perspective of stigmatized minorities. Narratives on the lived experiences of young women, with post-migrant backgrounds, bring forward how they position themselves by articulating their own truths and imagine their options to challenge being stigmatized and positioned within the racialized spaces of a segregated living. And it is here, through the narrative on activism for social justice, we understand how materialized realities of *place struggle* acquire their subjective soundboards. Interconnecting outcomes of lived experiences with social structure and collective political mobilization, actors, reflexively conceptualizing their outcomes in terms of power and representation, gestate fundamentals of situated knowledge production.

The interconnection of structure and agency is luminously brought out by Emma Domingues (2013, p. 41), an activist in Megafonen with migrant parents of a South American background, in commenting her positionality as activist and young woman from suburbia.

It is impossible to deny that you are born into an area with its own mental barriers and invisible chains. The repression comes from outside and is added to from the inside, but by finding a network of people united to work for social justice, I have learned to find new ways to paint over my own

picture of my place (*orten*) in the city. Especially as a woman. Our place is self-evident in the change. Without us organizing is half.

This understanding of activism among young post-migrant women differs from dominant discourses on “immigrant girls”. The dominant discourses in Sweden have tended to stereotypically stigmatize “immigrant youth”, and separate girls and boys in different categories; usually as violent boys and passive girls (Ålund, 2003). Stereotypically homogenizing parents as traditionalists and portraying young women of migrant backgrounds as victims of tradition, have resulted in rendering their agency invisible (Ålund & Alinia, 2011). Veronika Honkasalo (2013) writes, commenting on understanding of gender equality among youth workers in Finland that the identification of gender-based inequality refers in particular to girls from migrant backgrounds, while youth work itself is often seen as gender-neutral. This illustrates, she argues, migrant girls being seen as victims of a patriarchal order and thus in need of being “saved” from the cultural influence of their parents. This is also the case in Sweden.

Several female activists interviewed in our study express frustration and irritation about being placed into “traditionalist cultures”, and how this affects their life as emancipatory learning processes work. They tell us how gender become prominent dimensions of their response to being racialized and positioned as “immigrant girl”.

This comes out in-depth through Jasmine’s narrative, presented below, which richly connects the history of the subject with *place struggle* and, in Jasmine’s case, her activism in Megafonen. She describes in debt how the influence of her parents has shaped the formation of her gender identity and self-ascribed positionality.

Jasmine tells us how her parents tried giving her better educational opportunities by moving her to the white dominated school in the city center, as school performance and teacher support in local, suburban schools, began to shrink. In this movement away from the suburban school, however, she discovered her identification with the youth of suburbia. The road from suburbia to the central city became long when counted in terms of cultural divisions and social segregation problems. In the local newspaper, Jasmine could daily read reports on “robberies and murders”. She comments:

I began to develop self-hatred and question my identity ... and to think about the area I grew up in ... it’s dangerous ... And then I began to get mad at my parents, “why do we live here?” I said “I am ashamed. I cannot talk to my friends (in the city) because they say that I should need to carry a knife to protect myself. People get murdered here” ... and my parents calmed me down and said that we shall invite everyone from the class, and then we’ll see if they have the same prejudices.

Jasmine remembers how this invitation lit a hope that presenting her family and neighbors would show that “we are just like you when you are at home with confidence in your family”. This performative act, however, was to prompt self-questioning: Why did she need to change school? To prove of being good enough outside the suburb? Why did she need to defend her residential area? She furthers:

I felt that, now, with 15, 16 years of age ... I felt again frustration ... Why do I need to assert myself? Why did I need to prove that my area is a good area? What is there in the city center that I do not have in my suburb?

One of the most important memories of the central city is the experience of being racialized. Telling us of her experience of the school there, Jasmine remembers how she reacts against, what Myfanwy Franks (2002, p. 42) phrases as “positioned by others”.

This is what Jasmine expresses reflecting on the difference between the city and the suburb and how suburban kids were abusively treated by police in the city, as well as how other students in the city schools were reluctant to befriend her:

... Young people tell us that they have been body-searched without reason... And then I could relate this to when I began to understand the students in the city during my college years ... Why did they never come home to me? Why was I called adoptee? Why did my teacher address me as a “good immigrant girl with good grades during Swedish test?” Why? And so I began to understand ... this journey, the trip was very valuable to me, because, I realized the change of the issue. How “you can if you want” becomes “it’s good that you can if you want, but you do not have the same opportunities as anyone else”.

This moment of linking subordinating power structures with location, illustrates, as Anthias comments (2002, p. 502), “the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales”. It points to how structural/institutional discrimination—here brought forward (via the teacher’s comment)—connects location (as a student) with “dislocation and alterity” (Anthias, 2002, p. 499). Being positioned as “immigrant girl” produced resistance, as expressed in Jasmine’s reflections. It brought forward questions and related answers as to why she does not have equal opportunities.

Jasmine realized the meaning of being positioned as the Other, as being located to the stigmatized “outside world” of suburbia. Her conceptual participation in self-positionality creates the backbone of her political subjectivity, in connecting place struggle with her professional work and activism:

We shall claim our rights, and society must meet our needs. It was something that I had with me from high school in town. This I have learned over time to understand. I got an understanding of the area’s vulnerability. And my childhood was a learning context for understanding this ... I landed in my self-image of how my upbringing has been a basis in relation to what I do today as well and why I chose to get involved in various initiatives and movements.

On the road towards engagement in “different initiatives and movements”, Jasmine locates herself in a continuity with her own parents’ struggles to fight injustice, their experience of migration to Sweden, and hopes for the futures of their children. As she expresses:

My parents wanted me to fight doubly as hard as “ethnic Swedes” to succeed in society. There was a constant pressure to manage and refute the stereotype of “immigrant girl”.

This is the process that responds to what Stuart Hall (1990) refers to as re-using and re-telling the (hi-)story. Jasmine furthers:

It was important with our education for them, given their background as academically trained. They had jobs and salary. They have struggled. Dad has a political background. He escaped during the revolution ... he lived in Austria for a couple of years where he studied German, but lived on park benches because he could not afford anything else ... he was a revolutionary in the family.

She learned from her parents the importance of fighting against prejudice and discrimination and for social justice, and to take fight if necessary, not allowing anyone to discriminate or subordinate her. Here, we can follow how she employs her family background in working on herself, in the process of becoming a political subject (Rutland, 2013, p. 1001).

Dad made me start to think critically but also my mother was careful to say “don’t be ashamed of yourself, be proud of your origin, resist and let us in some way alter their view, blowing their prejudices”. And to hear my father telling about being in prison, coming to Sweden and how he also had a really tough time at his workplace. He has always taken the fight, and he has always been very concerned since I was little, telling me that “you should know your rights. You will demand your rights. You should never let anyone harass you or discriminate against you because of your background, because of your gender, because of anything. Never give up, Jasmine”.

Jasmine argues that this combination of self-integrity and a fighting spirit resulted in her becoming “very engaged as a person”. The importance of her parental interest in politics has contributed to bringing together the international, the national, and the local. As she describes: “home was influenced by politics, and I followed all the news about what is happening in the world ... at the dinner table we would talk politics. So I started to see what was happening in the area where I grew up”.

In returning to the local area, she “came to be present in a context that Megafonen arranged, which created great curiosity” in her by realizing that she could identify with the organization’s work. Jasmine becoming a Megafonen activist occurred at same time as a meeting with the intervention of established civil soviet actors in supporting youth in the suburb with a focus on homework support, gender equality issues, and in particular focusing on the improvement of available public space for young girls. This resulted in Jasmine being engaged in a civil society organization in order to activate young girls in different local activities for youth, and generally to work on promoting the representation of women in the local public. She became particularly concerned with the educational work of Megafonen, homework support for school kids, and with *Harakat* (meaning “movement” in Turkish).

...I wanted movement, things to happen, and they were working with my heart issues. And when Megafonen started with Harakat ... I started to become involved there.

*Harakat* engaged in staging public lectures for local inhabitants, involving both local intellectuals and invited researchers, politicians, etc. The connection with Megafonen opened way for Jasmine to affirm the self-respect that was shaken after the years in the city center school. She found out who she is in the process of identification with the movement.

#### 4.3 Finding a Way Home: Becoming an Activist

Jasmine’s narrative illustrates how denied subjectivity can be recaptured; how solidarity becomes

realized, and how reflexive self-awareness is included into politics of belonging. Further, how the personal becomes political (Ålund, 2014). She summarizes the process of identification with Megafonen in a reflexive connection of racialization and self-positioning. On this road she finds herself asking questions:

Why is it that now I feel that I do not need to assert myself as I did in high school, needing to constantly prove that I'm good at everything I do ... in order not to be a bad wog girl but part of a community?

This recognition of being a stigmatized immigrant outside suburbia and becoming a part of a community through a local youth organization are forms of "social action" (Anthias, 2002). Creating self-positioning, and, which she describes as finding a way home and belonging, refers to what Rutland (2013, p. 1001) depicts in the making of an activist as a "work on oneself".

So I started the feeling that I belonged somewhere. During that period, the youth in Megafonen worked a lot to get their voices heard. So I was in the organization, I was not the main driving force, but I started to learn. It was for me a way to learn more about all my "why" as well.

These questions of "why" were central in the educational context of *Harakat*—both in understanding the problems of discrimination and acting against it. This was for Jasmine a learning process connected to real life experience in finding her own meaning "out of social contradictions" (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 232).

Why is it that we are looking for jobs and not getting jobs? Why is it that young people from the suburb have been body-searched but have always been innocent? Why is it that that they (the municipality) renovate our area without asking us? They build roads and bridges that we do not want ... we want to have recreation centers. Why do they close our youth centers? With these questions, *Harakat* started. I had not thought of this perspective before. And by hearing young people challenging the conflicts they face daily, about the homework deficiencies in school, or when school does not fulfil its functions, how you feel as a parent, and when you do not know where to turn to or when you cannot be of support to their children ... Those were the questions that made me contribute to the development of homework support arranged by in Megafonen.

Jasmine's further reflections bring forward the interconnection between being active citizen—with homework support—and becoming activist citizen. While participating in discussion with young people about "challenging the conflicts they face daily" and at the same time highlighting structural problems, "we act locally for social change", she explains. In this way Jasmine illustrates the process of becoming an activist citizen. And she describes her own learning processes:

...I took part in all the initiatives taken for festivals ... the occupations, demonstrations ... I was there. So it was my way to really get into this and to understand.

During this initial period (2012-2014) of her engagement in Megafonen, network building was a priority of the organization's strategy, and a political program was on the way to becoming elaborated. Through a seven-point program (Note 6), Megafonen was to demand opportunities for people in the disadvantaged urban neighborhoods to influence politics which affect the everyday lives of their inhabitants. For

example, development and investment in public services, stimulating social activities in the suburbs, such as: a fair educational system and full secondary competence in all schools; work for all; the replacement of securitization by social programs; a housing policy that recognizes the right to decent housing.

Jasmine summarizes:

Megafonen became a major voice, mobilization became more powerful, and gradually other local groups started popping up. We got in touch with the Panthers (in Gothenburg) and the Hassela Movement (in Malmö). We began to see that in focusing on structural issues we are not alone, and not alone to run a movement at the grassroots level, where we see gaps in society. At the same time Megafonen began to develop a political agenda, so that we should pursue political influence; not party politics, but political advocacy.

In its program, Megafonen interconnects place-based livelihoods with a wider structural-institutional conditionality. While combining local rootedness with national networking, a local organization from the Stockholm suburb became a movement that have extended their activities to other Swedish cities, forged alliances with other civil society actors, and articulated their goals and visions in broader public contexts. They continue to work locally, supporting education and developing critical knowledge, through individual assistance, study-groups, movie seminars, and discussion meetings, directed towards both youth and adults. Their work has provided a critical voice in the mass media and at public demonstrations and conferences on urban issues. Autonomy in relation to political parties is seen as essential, both in terms of legitimacy and the actual capacity for defining independent manifestations and protests against the lack of democratic procedures in local governance. The building of a network across the country became a way of claiming representation in public and creating a space for their voices (Léon-Rosales & Ålund, 2017). This development illustrates how Megafonen, after starting as an organization of active youth, became a movement of activist citizens.

## 5. Conclusion

The complexities of interconnection between ethnicity, migration, social exclusion, and resistance find expression in both Jasmine's narrative and in the collective *place struggle* by Megafonen and similar activist organizations. In defining the struggles of the present, young people create links across time and space in their understanding of social exclusion, cultural marginalization and racialized stigmatization and in their efforts to find their way home and belonging; that is, a process of identity formation in giving a meaning to the issue of *being*. As we have discussed, in this process the personal and political are connected; agency is related to structure, as expressed in Jasmine's narrative. Thus, her narrative reveals anchorage of personal experience within the wider social context of power creating the backbone for the emergence of critical consciousness and related identification with the collective of activists. This comes to expression in the collective articulation of the need to break barriers and norms, excluding youth from democratic participation; that is, their emergence as claimants of rights in the process of *becoming*

activists. Thus, *being* and *becoming* are the two interconnected dimensions expressed both in identity formation, identification with a collective of activists (Hall, 2000) and in the process of becoming activist citizen(s) (Isin, 2009).

In sum: While focusing on *place struggle* as resistance contesting structural/institutional marginalization of suburbia and its residents, we have showed how *Megafonen*, after starting as an organization of active youth, became a movement of activist citizens. The narrative of Jasmine exemplifies the interconnection between structure, agency, and the identification of the individual with the collective in the process of becoming an activist. Furthermore, with her narrative we have illustrated how situated knowledge relates to learning processes and to the emergence of political subjectivity. Namely, how the merging of one's own experience with those of the family and other people from the suburb creates a critical understanding of life on the margin, and how both individual experience and collective agency relate to racialization of post-migrant youth in Sweden and their resistance as activist citizens.

In conclusion we argue that self-positioning on the road towards becoming an activist subject is a process that brings together the personal and the structural, and which highlights the significance of learning processes across generations. While seeking answers to their questions, young people become critical observers of their own lives. They tell us how their parents' struggles become named, renamed, and re-used when translated in their own, gender, antiracist, and citizenship struggles; rising claims for social rights in the process of creating activist citizen(-s). Finally, by elaborating the meaning of learning processes we have demonstrated how the interconnection of social and spatial inequality with subjective experience produces situated knowledge. On this fundament, new trajectories of solidarity building are imagined and enacted, through activism for social justice, gender equality and a homeland as an inclusive community.

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### Notes

Note 1. See also Melucci, 1980.

Note 2. We use the term *post-migrant*, following Kira Kosnick (2010), to refer to individuals born or raised in Sweden whose parents were born abroad.

Note 3. The work has taken place within a collaboration of research projects founded by the Swedish research councils: Vetenskapsrådet [Grant number 2013-7277-102936-14] and Vetenskapsrådet [Grant number 721-2013-885] as well as FORMAS [Grant number 250-2013-1547].

Note 4. Fictive name.

Note 5. <http://www.megafonen.com/husby-kraver-respekt/>

Note 6. <http://www.megafonen.com/om/politiskt-program/>