Reflections on Whiteness through Conversational Theatre

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"Being the feminist that I am, I refused to change my surname when my husband and I got married," says a woman in the audience of the conversational theatre performance *Du Contrat Social* (2024).[1] "Still, when I couldn't get a job, my friends advised me to take my husband's surname. He is Swedish, after all. They said you belong to a different group, and your surname sounds strange because it sounds very foreign."

Conversational theatre is a participatory theatrical format developed by artistic researchers at the Malmö Theatre Academy to facilitate nuanced, dialogical engagement with complex societal issues (Dahlqvist and Haller 2025; Dahlqvist 2025). Rooted in both performative arts and deliberative democratic practice, conversational theatre blends elements of documentary theatre, interactive performance, and facilitated dialog. Rather than presenting a finished dramatic work for passive consumption, the format stages a series of situations, dilemmas, or testimonies that invite the audience to respond, reflect, and cocreate meaning.

1. All translations from Swedish are by the authors unless otherwise indicated.

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Typically, the performance is structured around partially scripted scenes that reflect real-life tensions or conflicts, often grounded in research or fieldwork. Professional actors and facilitators then open the space for the audience to enter the conversation—sometimes literally, by stepping into roles, or by responding from their seats. The aim is not consensus but critical engagement: to make visible the complexity of lived experience, to surface conflicting perspectives, and to provide a framework for shared inquiry rather than closure.

According to Dahlqvist (2025), conversational theatre seeks to activate the audience in deliberative conversations about societal challenges allowing for a multiplicity of voices to be heard. The method is especially well-suited for contexts marked by polarization, asymmetries of power, or ethical ambiguity—situations where conventional dialog often fails or breaks down. It has been used in diverse settings, including healthcare, education, social services, and organizational development to explore issues such as racism, discrimination, leadership, and systemic injustice.

In ten performances that took place in March and April 2024 at Inter Arts Center in Malmö, participants had diverse ethnic backgrounds, which is unusual for theatre in Sweden. However, during the performances, the audience was mostly white and middle-class; only a few performances had a predominantly nonwhite audience, and some had heterogeneous audience participants. The performance took place in a black box without a fixed auditorium. Instead, the audience was seated in a circle with the moderator. The ambition was to blur the line between audience and performer to create a welcoming atmosphere for dialog. Each performance was different depending on who sat in the audience.

The concept is reminiscent of Augusto Boal's methods, which aim to transform audiences into active participants by empowering them to act to find alternative solutions to concrete political and moral problems (see Boal [1974] 2019). There are also similarities with the pedagogies of Bertolt Brecht's learning plays, which stage various political dilemmas to be explored practically (see for example Brecht [1931] 2003). However, conversational theatre focuses on democratic and societal dialog rather than on how to act as a political subject, as in Brecht and Boal.

We conceived and produced *Du Contrat Social* in response to our own personal backgrounds. Sima Nurali Wolgast was born in Iran and came to Sweden as a political refugee at age seven with her family. She is now a psychologist who has researched how nonwhites are discriminated against in the labor market, research that also forms the basis of the performance. She is the facilitator of the conversation. Jörgen Dahlqvist was born in Sweden to Swedish parents, has a long career as a theatremaker, and uses artistic research to learn how theatre can create societal dialog within audiences. He runs the sound, video, and light, and notes on the discussions unfolding in the performance.

Figure 1. (previous page) Sima Nurali Wolgast facilitates the conversation between audience members in Du Contrat Social *(2024) by Jörgen Dahlqvist and Sima Nurali Wolgast. Studio B at Malmö Theatre Academy, 9 June 2025. (Photo by Jörgen Dahlqvist)*

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During the ninth and second-to-last performance, the women in the audience, among them the woman quoted above, who were all of an ethnic origin other than Swedish, shared their experiences of how they have encountered prejudice and discrimination in Swedish society. The woman in the audience who was advised by her friends to change her surname explained that at first she had no desire to do so: "I am my person," she said, "but then I changed my surname anyway, and the next day the phone started ringing. I'm not kidding. As soon as I became another person, I became very popular. Everyone wanted to employ me."[2]

Studies show that her story is common. Migration researcher Caroline Adolfsson (2024) notes that even if a nonwhite person considers themself Swedish, it does not mean they are categorized as such by the white majority society. For a person to be judged as typically Swedish, they must be white.

In Sweden, the concept of race is a sensitive subject. Since the 1990s, the word "race" has been replaced in legal texts and regulations by phrases such as "ethnicity, national or ethnic origin, skin color or other similar conditions" (Discrimination Act 2008:567). However, in recent decades, it has become apparent that attempts to replace the concept of race have led to injustices based on skin color being overlooked in Sweden. It is also evident among individual Swedes. When participants in one study were asked directly about their feelings towards the concept of race, the white participants felt reluctant about the use of the term. This attitude was not found among the nonwhite participants. At the same time, white participants used race as a mechanism to identify others and themselves as Swedes. This definition of being Swedish affects how people are socially categorized; it affects the possibility of work and access to various societal functions. A study of the Swedish labor market showed how different mechanisms within organizations and institutions contribute to maintaining inequalities based on ethnicity and race (Wolgast and Wolgast 2021). Being a nonwhite citizen in Sweden increases the likelihood of being excluded by the majority society.

The Social Contract

Du Contrat Social is based on the question of a Swedish citizen's rights and responsibilities. What must we do to create a society where everyone has equal opportunities in the workplace, at school, where we live, in our close relationships, and society? These ideas draw on Rousseau's conception of the social contract as a collective agreement that binds individuals into a moral and political community ([1762] 2017). Rousseau envisioned a commitment that would bind people together and provide a foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation among the citizens of a society. This framework should also ensure that the interests of marginalized individuals are protected. The performance poses the question of whether the social contract is still maintained in Swedish society, focusing specifically on ethnicity and race.

The first part of the performance encourages each audience member to reflect on how skin color is connected to privilege and social status. In all performances, participants were invited to respond to statements such as "I'm able to move freely in different environments without being scrutinized" and "I don't have to think about my skin color in social situations." These prompts serve to highlight how individuals with certain status due to race—particularly whites—are often granted the freedom to navigate diverse settings without being surveilled with suspicion. All participants were invited to examine how whiteness operates as an unmarked norm in many social contexts, and to consider how their own racial positioning affords or restricts access, mobility, and voice. The performance illustrates how those perceived as white can often express opinions without having those views racialized or attributed to their group identity (McIntosh 1989).

2. All quotes from *Du Contrat Social* are taken from the unpublished performance text.

At the end of this section, the audience was invited to discuss the statement: "I have certain privileges that I have not earned." This sentence is intentionally open-ended, prompting participants not only to acknowledge whether they hold unearned advantages but also to reflect on what *privilege* means and how it relates to their social position. The goal is not to prescribe a fixed definition of privilege, but to encourage each person to situate themselves in relation to structures of power and inequality. The responses vary between performances, depending on the composition of the audience. In an evening with a predominantly white audience, issues of race and gender often come to the forefront. One man reflected: "I am a white middle-aged man living in a European country. I have a lot more rights than I deserve. Just based on my name. Social status is a very real thing. But I think it informs the treatment of all people." The exercise encourages everyone to consider how systems of privilege—such as whiteness, gender, or class—operate in their lives, whether by conferring unearned benefits or withholding benefits, earned *and* unearned. Discussing one's skin color is not easy when one has not needed to do so before.

"I think it's a bit difficult," said a white man during the second of the ten performances. "Suppose you think about your skin color, for example. There may be contexts where I feel unsafe because I look the way I do. And then it can be...it becomes a big issue. I think that sometimes it might be challenging to answer. Because I might respond differently...depending on..."

Asking the audience to reflect on a simple statement reveals a value system that revolves around class, gender, and, above all, skin color. Research shows that white Swedes often find it challenging to recognize and address racial injustices in Swedish society. They usually resist engaging in conversations about white privilege. This phenomenon is referred to as "white fragility," a term that describes the reactions that white individuals exhibit when confronted with information about racial inequality and injustice (DiAngelo 2018). Such resistance among white Swedes contradicts the image of an equal society that Sweden strives to present. However, white people must recognize and confront their so-called fragility to engage in productive discussions about race and actively contribute to creating a more just society.

There was some initial resistance to *Du Contrat Social*, but the statement's wording—I have privileges I do not deserve—enabled the white audience to reflect on their privilege openly. For women of other ethnic backgrounds, as mentioned above, the phrase is also challenging to respond to at first, but for different reasons. For them, the color of their skin does not give them privilege in society; therefore their answers diverge from those of white audiences.

In the performance, allowing the different groups to discuss their distinct positions in Swedish society is essential. Terms such as "immigrant" carry problematic connotations. Crossing a border defines the individual throughout their life in Sweden and is even passed on to their children and grandchildren (through terms such as second- and third-generation immigrants). The term used in Swedish official statements to describe these different groups is "ethnicity," another problematic word. Scholars and activists have highlighted that using "ethnicity" often leads to the notion that there are fixed characteristics within groups of people—a group identity (Haslam and Wilson 2000). Moreover, while "ethnicity" allows people to be categorized according to their origin (usually, place of birth), it also obscures patterns of domination and subordination, exploitation, and exclusion in *that* society. In the show, terms such as "origin," "place of birth," "immigrant," "ethnicity," and "skin color" are used as near-synonyms for "nonwhite," bringing to the fore the consequences of racism for groups outside the majority society.

The issue of privilege is difficult to confront for nonwhite women because the color of their skin is not something that gives them advantages. "Maybe you don't deserve to get a student loan," a woman says during the ninth performance. "You only get them because you live here in Sweden." Someone else suggests child benefits and housing allowances are also racially tilted. The white women finally agree that the Swedish welfare system is a privilege they have not earned themselves. Through the various conversations, it becomes apparent that nonwhites perceive whites born in Sweden as having more rights than Swedish-born nonwhites.

Racist Stereotypes

In the next part of the performance, the audience's relationship to the "Other" is explored. They are asked to silently complete sentences such as:

All children are...
All blonde women are...
All women who wear a hijab are...
All Arab men are...
All Black people are...

The audience is encouraged not to censor their thoughts during the exercise. Although it lasts only a few minutes, the room often falls into a reflective silence afterward, as participants grapple with their reactions. When asked if they would like to share their thoughts, most people—regardless of race or ethnic background—describe a similar experience: at first, completing the unfinished statements seems easy, but as the exercise progresses, it becomes harder. Words don't come as readily, or a thought is suddenly interrupted by hesitation about which word to choose. During the discussion, it becomes evident that many participants initially try to align themselves with the group by claiming they don't remember what they were thinking. This gesture of self-protection, however, does little to resolve the underlying discomfort. What emerges instead is a deeper tension: when individuals encounter spontaneous thoughts that contradict their self-image as nonracist, they struggle to reconcile these reactions with their moral identity. This internal conflict—between implicit bias and the desire to see oneself as "good" or "colorblind"—produces a kind of cognitive dissonance that the performance deliberately makes visible.

Many relationships are built on a hopeful responsiveness to moral expectations (Walker 2006). Relationships are threatened when this hope diminishes, and a palpable tension arises within the group. The exercise "All X are..." creates an apparent dissonance. Confronting the negative stereotypes and perhaps unconscious racist beliefs that contradict a group's presumed moral code affects relationships (Kite and Whitley 2016). Racist thoughts can be subtle and are not expressed publicly (Dovidio 2001). The tension in the group eases when one participant starts to share their thoughts, as one man did in the second performance, when thinking about "All blonde women are..."

> There were so many choices. That all blonde women are...Well, I thought of the classic jokes that they're stupid. Because there are a lot of jokes like that. Then I also thought of cool blonde women, but then I thought it wouldn't hold up. So, in a way, it became a bit like they were blonde. All blonde women are blonde.

The man's confession opened up a different kind of conversation—one that quickly became more honest but also carried feelings of shame for some participants. For example, in the same performance, a white woman recounted how she was once robbed while traveling in the Caribbean and, in the heat of the moment, used the N-word—something she now deeply regrets. "It was a terrible thing to say. But that was then. It was like that. So, absolutely. What we can do is to become aware and to talk about it. I haven't used that word since then."

When the audience is asked why they hesitated to share their thoughts, they explain that only words they don't want to think about came up. Stereotypes. Forbidden words. Many blame the media for this. They argue that there are racist narratives and discourses in society that are reinforced by the newspapers, radio, TV, and social media that make it difficult not to associate, for example, young people in the suburbs with gang crime. For many years in Sweden there have been highly disseminated reports of shootings among members of criminal gangs, and in the political debate, this violence has been linked to immigrants and nonwhites.

Figure 2. Henry Stiglund (on video) voicing the words of a racialized individual in Du Contrat Social *(2024) by Jörgen Dahlqvist and Sima Nurali Wolgast. Studio B at Malmö Theatre Academy, 9 June 2025. (Photo by Jörgen Dahlqvist)*

Learning from the Experiences of Others

The third part of the performance shifts perspective and focuses on personal experiences and narratives. It opens with a text based on a summary of testimonies collected in the report *White Privilege and Discrimination: Processes that Maintain Racialized Inequalities in the Labor Market* by Martin Wolgast and Sima Nurali Wolgast (2021). The narrative portrays the lived experience of a nonwhite person navigating society and the workplace—an experience that white-majority society often fails to recognize or acknowledge.

This testimony is performed by Henry Stiglund, a white actor in a prerecorded video. At the beginning of the performance, it is stated by the moderator that the actor is not recounting his own experience, but voicing the words of another, racialized individual. This choice is intentional: the use of a white actor potentially prevents easy identification or distancing. The goal is not to effectuate sympathy for an "other," but to encourage the audience to reflect on their position and behavior within racialized power structures. The testimony functions as a mirror, offering the audience a perspective against which they may contrast their own experiences of whiteness.

From the video:

> It doesn't matter what I do—how hard I try. I never really fit in anyway—there is always something that sets me apart. Something that chafes. It always causes me to be defined as different or deviant and not on the same terms. [...] Perhaps the most sickening thing is that I'm expected to be grateful despite all this. Thankful that it's not even worse. Grateful that I can still be here. And when I fail, when I protest, when the injustices or the special treatment go too far, or I just can't take it anymore, then I'm often met with total misunderstanding and anger. Anger that I question and accuse. Anger that I suggested that there is racism in our workplace and that skin color matters. Then I just want to shout: Walk in my shoes awhile! Walk in this society with my skin for a while, and you'll see if skin color matters.

This testimony is followed by a simple question from the moderator: "What does it mean to be white?" The responses to this question varied considerably across performances. Because the performance was

marketed broadly via social media, without targeting any specific demographic or institutional group, the audience composition ranged from university students and cultural sector professionals to social workers and members of the general public. Some audiences were racially diverse, while others were predominantly white. These differences shaped the level of familiarity and comfort participants had when discussing whiteness and privilege. In several performances, it became evident that white audience members were unaccustomed to reflecting on or even acknowledging their own racial identity.

In these discussions, it became apparent that one of the privileges a white person has is choosing whether or not to think about—no less report on—their position in society. In the performances where everyone identified as white, there was often a long silence at first when the question was asked. Then, someone from the audience would tentatively begin to formulate an answer to the question. One person answered that "Being white means being safe"—and several others had the same experience.

When participants were asked to elaborate on their responses, some reflected on how whiteness can mean both visibility and invisibility. Several noted that being white often allows a person to move through society without being singled out, questioned, or marked as "other." This perceived neutrality or anonymity was described as a form of freedom—and, importantly, as a social privilege tied to being part of the dominant norm. These and similar reflections were consistently noted by the facilitator across multiple performances.

In other performances, however, there was a high degree of self-reflection and knowledge about issues related to what it means to be white. In the fifth performance, which by chance was attended almost entirely by white women who worked as teachers, social workers, and psychologists—people who had encountered these issues before in their professional roles—one woman, a teacher, said that her colleagues recognize that society is segregated. She explained that the few times they have talked about it at her job, everyone acknowledges that they know about discrimination, but then the discussion ends with them all thinking that they do not treat people differently. The differences, if any, are not structural but happen on a case-by-case basis—for example, with the assumption that there is a good reason why you need to be stricter with Roma parents. She believes that teachers view each parent differently and that there are different expectations of the individual ethnic groups, even though this is not explicit.

Another woman in the same performance recounts a personal experience from when she was dating a guy who "looked foreign."

> I noticed such a difference when I was walking with him. Suddenly, we always had staff in shops that we were standing near where we were starting to refold clothes. Men would look me up and down with disgust if I was walking with my boyfriend. And I was utterly shocked. It was like a parallel behavior in our society that I had never experienced before. It became apparent to me that he always experiences this, and for him, this is normal. But for me, it was completely abnormal.

She says the experience made her angry, but that anger also made her powerless:

> I knew they wouldn't behave that way if I were alone. It was a painful experience, a game-changer. I also understand that it was a good experience for me. Because I got to experience it with my own body as well. And now I get frustrated that others don't see it because I think it's pretty straightforward. But maybe it's not so apparent if you haven't had such an experience; you must also understand that.

One of the most profound aspects of the performance was its ability to highlight the invisible dynamics of privilege. As one participant from the predominantly white audience in the second performance, said:

> I have always believed that Sweden is a completely equal society, but hearing others talk about their experiences made me realize how blind I have been to the privileges I have as a white person. It made me reflect on how I interact with colleagues from different backgrounds.

This statement is particularly striking because it reflects intellectual understanding as well as emotional resonance. This kind of insight is crucial in a society where issues of race are often sidelined in public discourse. The participant's newfound awareness suggests that the performance created a moment of cognitive and emotional dissonance—a key factor in promoting long-term attitudinal change.

Alliances and Counter-Narratives

To avoid pushing people who had shared their experiences of harassment and discrimination earlier in the performance to listen to the testimony presented above, the group was left to decide whether or not they wanted to hear it. In the second-to-last performance, a woman in a hijab firmly said no. She didn't want to hear the testimony. Her own experiences are enough:

> I was walking in a park in my hometown. Suddenly, a woman approached me and said, "Go back to your home country." I live in Sweden. I didn't know what to say to her.

After she shared the incident, other participants in the group, who happened to all be nonwhite, attempted to lighten the mood. One person joked, "You should have asked, 'Did you buy me a ticket?'" The group laughed at the counter-question. In this moment, humor becomes a way of offering support and helping to cope with the experience—a strategy to defuse tension and avoid confronting the gravity of the derogatory comment. Yet the laughter also reveals a tendency to sidestep the underlying issue.

Another woman in the same performance asked if the theatre is a safe space—looking for confirmation—and when assured that it is, she said she felt afraid of situations where she has to speak her native language in public. She told us that she is from Russia and that after the invasion of Ukraine, she fears that someone will attack her daughter if she speaks Russian when she's with her child. This story shows that discrimination does not only focus on skin color but also language.

In the last performance, where the audience was mainly people with a background in Africa and in the Middle East, the conversation turned to the frisking zones—designated areas introduced by the Swedish government to allow police increased authority to stop and search individuals without specific suspicion. People shared how they have had to tell their younger siblings how to behave if the police stop them. One of the participants also talked about how he tried to create meeting places to discuss this with others, but did not receive support from the municipality.

The transformative potential of *Du Contrat Social* was also evident in the dynamics that emerged among the audience. Although initially reluctant to share their experiences, this changed during the performance. It became clear that the theatre is a place of mutual empathy and community where participants are seen and validated. The shift from hesitation to vulnerability shows that the performance created trust and openness among the audience. Such environments are rare in everyday life, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as race and privilege. By enabling these moments of inclusiveness, the performance highlights societal issues and provides examples of the kind of empathetic dialog required to address them.

Revising the Social Contract

To ensure that the impact of *Du Contrat Social* is not limited to passive reflection, participants are asked to consider concrete changes. It starts with a reflection by us, the creators of the performance, reflecting on the conversation held by the participants. "If we exclude others and fail to open up different social arenas and networks, it means that not all people are treated as equals," says Jörgen. "If it is possible to defeat injustice based on gender, should it not also be possible to change injustice based on skin color?" Jörgen's comment encourages self-reflection and an active reassessment of one's behavior. Participants are asked to suggest ways to renew the social contract. They are asked to avoid suggesting legislative proposals or actions they could take themselves outside the theatre venue. The focus is on the specific actions they could take themselves. Many proposals from participants are about trying to open up their social networks to include community members outside their own homogenous circles and taking a stand against racist slurs, even when it might disturb those present.

This last part led not only to concrete proposals for action but also to further reflections. One white woman in the group of social workers and psychologists explained that she was a feminist and that the performance made her realize that living in Sweden, having a good education, and being financially independent means that she is one of the most privileged women in the world. She has achieved many things, and no one has held her back, except herself. She knows that few women have as much freedom as she does. With that freedom comes a responsibility to overcome prejudice through her actions. She plans now to actively support those from different backgrounds.

These moments of recognition and commitment to action are particularly significant because they allow participants to explore solutions in real-time, turning the theatre space into a microcosm of social change. The performance can bridge the gap between awareness and action by encouraging participants to articulate their thoughts and specify their intentions. The method used in the performance also relates to psychological research showing that verbalizing behavior and potential action for change in groups will make the individual more eager to engage in those actions (Bicchieri 2017). Furthermore, this is in line with other studies investigating how theatre can affect thoughts, intentions, and emotions. A survey by Rathje with colleagues (2021) found that after watching a theatre performance, people reported greater empathy for the groups portrayed in the performances, held views more aligned with the sociopolitical issues highlighted in the performances, and donated more money to charities related to the issues addressed in the performances. In addition, a study by Greene and colleagues (2018) found that middle school students who attended high-quality, professional theatre productions—such as *Hamlet* or *A Christmas Carol*—showed increased levels of social tolerance and a greater willingness to consider other perspectives (Greene et al. 2018).

As the performance nears the end, the discussion turns to what can be done beyond this immediate shared moment. Participants are asked to reflect on their role in shaping a more inclusive society. Rather than focusing on abstract goals and policy changes or changes others should make, the conversation centers on small, everyday choices: Who do we include in our social and professional networks when speaking out about injustices and navigating moments of discomfort? Responses vary. Some acknowledge the weight of ingrained habits and social norms, admitting that change, while possible, is rarely immediate. Others express frustration at the slow pace of progress or question the impact of individual efforts in the face of structural inequalities. The room is filled with both determination and hesitation, a recognition that knowing what should be done does not always translate into action.

Yet, the value of the performance does not lie in reaching definitive answers. Instead, it provides a space where different perspectives coexist, personal experiences are made visible, and reflection unfolds without the pressure of immediate resolution. The process of reckoning with privilege, exclusion, and responsibility is ongoing. If *Du Contrat Social* offers anything, it is not closure but an opening. In this space, assumptions are questioned, narratives shift, and the possibility for change, however uncertain, is contemplated. Whether reflections lead to concrete actions or remain as seeds of thought, they are part of a longer, ongoing process of reckoning with the social contract we participate in daily.

Rethinking Whiteness

The Transformative Possibilities of Embodied Reflection

What is striking about *Du Contrat Social* is that almost all participants shared the same stereotypes, regardless of background, gender, or ethnicity. Several narratives govern how citizens in Swedish society view particular aspects of their lives, such as Arab men or young people in the suburbs. The point of the performance is to show that these stereotypes exist but we can learn not to act with bias. The audience is also confronted with their resistance to seeing themselves as part of the systemic structure of discrimination. At the same time, they are given the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their position in society and in relation to systemic racism and to gain an understanding of their reactions and thoughts. There seemed to be a need to share experiences among the participants. Several expressed both surprise and gratitude for having been given the chance to discuss these complex issues with people they did not know. As one participant in the fifth performance put it, "I didn't expect to talk about

this with strangers—and yet I've probably been more honest here than I am with some of my colleagues. It feels like something opened up." While it is not possible to determine with certainty what changes occurred on an individual or collective level, the testimonies and observations from *Du Contrat Social* suggest some important impact. The shared experiences within the performance space appeared to foster moments of solidarity and mutual understanding among audiences from varied backgrounds. These findings highlight the ability of conversational theatre to facilitate open dialog around difficult and often sensitive topics, such as privilege, racism, and social responsibility, in ways that encourage reflection rather than defensiveness.

In a society like Sweden's, where race and ethnicity remain sensitive and often overlooked topics, *Du Contrat Social* demonstrates the potential of theatre to address complex societal issues. By providing space for reflection, dialog, and imagining possible future actions, such performances complement more traditional methods of social change, such as political campaigning and educational outreach.

Finally, since whiteness functions as an unexamined form of hegemony—often operating invisibly or without critical awareness—it can also be understood through the metaphor of theatre, and more specifically, as a kind of Greek tragedy. A white person is born into a role that upholds the antiethnic structures to the undermining of society. The only way to break this cursed position is for each person to recognize and understand their role in this structure, learn to identify how racist and antiethnic impulses fuel stereotypes, and then change their perspectives on others and behavior towards them.

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