10 Othering the rapist

Rurality, sexual violence and the Bjästa case

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Introduction

Sweden has undertaken major efforts to combat sexual violence, particularly since the 1990s, when society came to view such violence as an expression of lack of gender equality. Since that time, the judicial protection of rape victims has strengthened, and society's condemnation of men's sexual abuse has toughened. Today, Sweden enjoys relative political consensus on the issue and, as part of gender-based violence, sexual violence has been central to several governments' gender-equality policies, regardless of political colour. For instance, the commission report that served as the basis for new sexual offences legislation described ending sexual violence as pivotal for gender equality: 'Our proposal to change the sexual offences legislation ... is an important step to a more gender-equal society' (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2016, p. 419). The commissioners argued that stricter laws and preventive work in schools were key in combatting sexual abuse:

If the proposal is implemented and followed by educational interventions and information campaigns in schools and in society, we estimate that the proposal – at least in the long run – may plausibly lead to changes in norms and behaviour related to sexuality and sex so that sexual offences will decrease. ... Our proposal to change the crime designation from rape to sexual assault may also improve equality between men and women.

(pp. 419–420)¹

While sexual violence has long been targeted through legislation and victim support, gender-based violence policies have recently started to endorse universal prevention: that is, health-enhancing activities that address a general population or a specific age group and in which the activities are carried out prior to the violence. Sweden's Minister of Gender Equality has particularly promoted preventive work that involves men and boys and that targets gendered norms that justify violence (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016), including the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) programme, which was developed in the United States and has recently been implemented in many Swedish secondary schools.

Such legislative and interventive efforts in combating sexual violence are part of a longstanding tradition of progressive politics and social engineering that have been decisive in moving Sweden from being a poor, unmodern and primarily rural country on the global periphery to becoming something of a beacon of modernity. Along with parental-leave legislation, gender-based violence policies have been particularly central in presenting Sweden as ‘a gender-equal paradise’ and Swedish men as the most gender-equal men in the world (Gottzén, 2016, p. 165). As a result, the prevalence of the abuse of women appears as ‘an anachronistic remnant’ of traditional Swedish society and ‘an obstacle for the modern regime we already live in’ (Wendt Höjer, 2002, p. 179).

While combating sexual violence is a positive goal, the nation’s gender-equality policies have had a few unintended exclusionary consequences. Since gender equality is typically seen as being more or less ingrained in the Swedish character, acts of sexual violence committed by ethnic minority groups are often considered cultural traits and signs of a lack of Swedish values (Bredström, 2002). In contrast, acts of sexual violence committed by ethnic majority men tend to be regarded as either a consequence of individual psychopathology or of socioeconomic circumstances (Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012).

We analyse in this chapter how sexual violence is discussed in the school-based MVP programme. In classroom discussions about rape and bystanders’ responses to sexual violence, people recurrently distinguished between ‘us’ and the other. Rather than noting a primary connecting of rape to ethnic minorities, however, we identified several othering processes in relation to rurality, including both the male perpetrator (in this particular case) and the community in which he resided. Such othering, we argue, is related to a history of thinking of the countryside as a peripheral place excluded from the modern urban Swedish project; this outlook then enables the projection of negative affect towards rurality.

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of current academic debates about rural violence; we then discuss a documentary film about a rape case in a town in northern Sweden and the media debate about the case, both of which MVP uses in the classroom. We detail how, when students and teachers discussed the case in the classroom, they distanced themselves from the community’s responses to sexual violence. We then discuss how the othering works through an affective politics of disgust.

Sexual violence and rurality

Rural violence has emerged as an important field of inquiry over the last few decades (for overviews, see Edwards, 2015; Hall-Sanchez, 2016; Sandberg, 2013). This research has shown that physical and sexual violence is just as common – if not more common – in rural areas as it is in urban areas (Edwards, 2015), and that such violence has specific rurality-based characteristics. For instance, studies have demonstrated that women in rural areas are

particularly affected by socioeconomic disadvantage and spatial and social isolation, that small communities have a lack of anonymity, and that the countryside is characterised by ‘rural patriarchies’ that provide social and emotional support to men who are violent towards their partners; all these circumstances may exacerbate the victims’ vulnerability (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009). By highlighting the specific problems rurality imposes on victims of violence, such research has questioned notions of the countryside as an idyllic and peaceful place.

While acknowledging the importance of this scholarship, Sandberg (2013) has pointed out that this work tends to reproduce stereotypes of rurality and rural gender relations. In particular, such studies reinforce perceptions of rural localities and inhabitants as deviant, which may further marginalise rural victims of violence. This ‘othering of rurality’ corresponds with a common portrayal of the countryside that co-exists with the notion of the rural idyll: the countryside as a risky place characterised by racism, sexism, poverty and social problems (Stenbacka, 2011). Within this discourse, the countryside is often conceptualised as an unmodern and stagnant place. Similarly to sexual violence in Swedish gender-equality policies, the countryside becomes tied to the past and differentiated from a progressive urban centre. The north of Sweden in particular is often portrayed as a ‘space of exception’, a traditional and undeveloped space, in contrast to an otherwise modern nation (Eriksson, 2008).

In order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of rural inhabitants, exploring the specific intersections between rurality and gender that may cause violence and produce place-specific vulnerability is insufficient; it is also necessary to deconstruct these categories, in particular clichés about rurality (Sandberg, 2013). Following this intersectional approach, in this chapter, we argue that simply highlighting the particularities of a place or group may enhance stereotypes and support the belief that sexual violence is only to be found among certain groups, or that certain groups support such violence more than others. Sexual violence could thus lead to hierarchy reproduction when people argue that such violence is an essential expression of particular groups and places. This notion is particularly important when discussing rural violence, given how both the countryside and violence are frequently tied to notions of unmodern and deviant masculinity. Sexual-violence prevention policies that are unconnected to the intersectional challenges of rape may reproduce ethnic, spatial and other hierarchies that continuously place rape as a crime only committed by other men in other places.

Method

This chapter draws on a larger ethnographic study of the Swedish implementation of the MVP programme that was conducted in 2016–2017.² The goal of MVP is to prevent violence among boys and men. The programme was originally developed in the United States (Katz, 1995) and has recently been reworked to fit a Swedish setting.³ Central in the prevention programme are

(1) the use of a bystander approach, which entails a focus on witnesses or bystanders of violence, rather than primarily the offender; (2) the existence of gender and masculinity norms and how they relate to violence; and (3) a focus on the continuum of violence, a perspective that illustrates how ‘mild’ violence is connected with, and might lead to, severe violence. The programme thus aims to prevent violence among boys by supporting bystanders in recognising violence at an early stage and intervening before it escalates into severe violence, and to alter problematic gender norms that enable men’s violence, with a focus especially on sexual violence. School teachers undergo a three-day leadership training course and then conduct the programme with students at their schools, using a detailed MVP manual. The programme consists of seven two-hour lessons focussed on different subjects regarding the bystander perspective and issues related to gender and violence, specifically sexual violence. The lessons consist of teacher-led discussions and exercises centred on gender and violence, including storytelling about leaders’ experiences with violence, hypothetical examples of violence, lessons on how to intervene safely as a bystander, and discussions about well-known cases of violence, such as the Bjästa case (the subject of this chapter).

The data consist of participant observations of leadership training and supervision as well as group interviews with teachers and students. In total, we interviewed 14 teachers and 26 students from five different schools, all in medium-size cities in Sweden. In addition, we conducted video-based observations of interactions in two classrooms throughout one semester (approximately 25 hours): one in a lower secondary school and one in an upper secondary school. The present study may be understood as an ethnographic case study in which we aim to ‘follow the thing’ (Marcus, 1998, p. 91). The ‘thing’ in this case is not so much a material object or a geographic location as a case of sexual assault in Bjästa, a town in the north of Sweden where a teenage boy who was convicted of rape received the support of his community. We therefore explore how people have discussed and felt about this ‘thing’ in a variety of settings, including a documentary, a motion picture and the media debate about the Bjästa case; we also examine how MVP used parts of the documentary about the rape to discuss sexual violence, gender and bystander responses.

The interviews and observations have been transcribed and coded, which helped us to identify recurrent themes in the talk about violence in general, sexual violence and gender. One such recurrent theme that we found throughout the whole corpus of the data was that of othering when discussing violence, and especially men’s sexual violence. In the following section, we focus on the specific type of othering that we found to have occurred during classroom discussions about the Bjästa case. We have chosen this case since it is a particularly clear example of the recurring phenomenon of othering. We have also chosen the Bjästa case since it emerged as a recurring topic during the interviews; both teachers and students described the case as being particularly useful and interesting for discussion.

The documentary and the debate

In the spring of 2009, a 15-year-old boy raped a 14-year-old girl in a school bathroom in the town of Bjästa in northern Sweden. The boy admitted to the assault and was sentenced in the district court and later in the court of appeal. A documentary titled *The Second Rape* (Swedish: *Den andra våldtäkten*), which aired on Swedish national public television (Sveriges Television, 2010) the following year, tells of how the community turned against the girl and supported the offender. Few believed the victim, who is called Linnea in the documentary, even though her story was confirmed in court.

In the documentary, the boy, called Oskar, is portrayed as popular. Because he is well liked, most people around him argue that he could not have committed the sexual assault. According to the reporter in the documentary, 'Everybody describes Oskar as a social boy who doesn't have any problems getting girls. Nobody understands why he'd commit a rape in the school bathroom'. In interviews with youths and adults from the town, few believe Linnea but rather argue that she is lying or distorting the truth. They contend that she has reported him because she wanted revenge, as she was disappointed that she had been unable to have a relationship with him. The locals who are interviewed claim that her information is fuzzy and contradictory. In general, her picture of Oskar is incongruent with theirs.

The events seem to have engaged large parts of the town. 'Rumours about what happened spread like wildfire in the community, and nobody believed Linnea', the reporter says. Bjästa's small size is self-evident background in the documentary. The town is repeatedly described as a small community, for instance, when the journalist introduces the town in the documentary as 'the small town of Bjästa, outside Örnsköldsvik'. Later he portrays the town as gossip and comments that 'the tittle-tattle in Bjästa has grown to truths online'. In the documentary, the rumours are said to have been caused by the combination of a small town and the power of social media. Many people joined social media groups whose aim was to free Oskar from guilt, while they depicted Linnea as being promiscuous: 'She's called a tramp and a whore on the internet'. Her friends turned against her, and she felt increasingly threatened.

The climax of the documentary is the school graduation held in the local church, where the priest allows Oskar – who is under a restraining order at this point and has been moved to another school – not only to participate but also to hand out roses on stage to his old classmates and teachers. The attendees applaud him for what they consider a gesture of reconciliation. (Linnea dared not participate in the graduation, however.) The same night, Oskar goes on to rape another girl, a crime that he was later also convicted of. When the journalist confronts the priest about the graduation, he argues that 'it was really strong that he managed to' appear at the ceremony and that his doing so 'was a demonstration for human dignity'. The priest does not appear to think about Oskar's restraining order but argues that he is always welcome, sentenced or not. When asked if he has reflected on Linnea's situation, he falls silent. As

a consequence of the bullying and the rumours, Linnea is then forced to move from the small town to the larger city of Stockholm.

After the documentary, the events in Bjästa became national news. The priest and the school were criticised for not supporting the assaulted girls. But the town itself was also denounced. While the documentary had highlighted the hate and the threats the victims of sexual violence had experienced from the people of Bjästa, the perpetrator and the town now became targets of hate and disgust. Oskar and his family were threatened, which caused the police to have to provide special protection. Another boy in the same school was also threatened, since he happened to have the same first name as the perpetrator's fictional name, Oskar.

A newspaper article published a few days after the documentary's airing described the responses from the town:

The inhabitants of Bjästa agree: they don't deserve the hate the entire country has addressed to the community. ... People are angry at the media; they think the media has turned Sweden against the village. The harassments have not ended, just taken a new course. 'Shame on you, Bjästa', 'Burn down Bjästa'. Every day, new protest groups against Bjästa are started on Facebook. The hate mail and the threats never seem to stop. Hell broke loose for many villagers when the documentary was shown last Wednesday. (Sundén Jelmini, Paulin, Nilsson & Baltscheffsky, 2010, p. 6)

In the article, youth from Bjästa argued that the town had become a 'disgrace' but that it did not deserve its bad reputation. 'They tar everyone from Bjästa with the same brush', one boy told the newspaper.

At the end of each year, the Swedish Language Council presents its list of the 'Words of the Year', a list of words that are either new or have emerged in the last year and have become popular. In December 2010, one of the council's new words was 'bjästa', or rather 'doing a bjästa', which the council defined as 'siding with a perpetrator of a crime and bullying the victim [after the events in Bjästa, where many supported a rapist and bullied the victim]' (Swedish Language Council, 2010). Following this announcement of the new word, regional radio channel P4 Västernorrland asked, 'What does it mean for a small community to get such a deprecatory label?' Municipal commissioner Glenn Nordlund argued that 'for us, the event is serious, as it is troublesome in itself – for the parties, of course, but also for the community. We don't need a word to remember [us by]'. The reporter asked him, 'Do you think Bjästa will ever get rid of this label?' Nordlund responded, 'It's been difficult all the same. Now we'll get a label that will probably follow us for a long time' (Sveriges Radio, 2010).

Bjästa continued to be a deterrent example of how a community could turn against a rape victim (e.g. Wennstam, 2015). The motion picture *Flocking* (*Flocken* in Swedish), which was based on the events, premiered in 2015; the film won several Guldbagge awards (Sweden's highest award for filmmaking)

as well as a Crystal Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. The film's director, Beata Gårdeler, saw the film as an example of how 'regular guys' could use sexual violence: 'We've created a picture of what a rapist looks like – he's either an ugly geezer in the woods or a gang of migrants – but the most common is that it's a young guy without a criminal record' (Bendjelloul, 2015, p. 4).

Gårdeler argued that what happens in the film could happen anywhere: 'I don't think that it could only happen in a small village or that [the townspeople] in any way are more stupid or evil [than others], but that it can happen anywhere' (Sveriges Radio, 2015). Yet she also emphasised that there was something specific to small towns such as Bjästa. She saw the town's strong community bonds – its herd mentality – as crucial for the events to have happened:

I grew up in a small community in the north of Sweden, where I experienced that the social patterns felt old-fashioned, and norms were strong. Together with the growing importance of social media, this could make [the risk of] assaults against a person become even greater today.

(Gårdeler, 2015)

The film created controversy. But this time it was not the stereotypical portrayal of Bjästa that people discussed, but rather the director's moral responsibility when making a movie based on a true story. Linnea's family was critical of the film, arguing that it resembled the original events too much, while it portrayed the raped girl's mother as an alcoholic and her father as incestuous. The family argued that these fictive parts could be perceived as real. 'It's like a third rape', the mother wrote in an op-ed piece in the newspaper *Aftonbladet* (Granlund, 2015).

The Bjästa case in the classroom

According to the MVP programme manual, the rationale behind using the Bjästa case in the Swedish adaptation of the programme was to provide an example of severe sexual violence that everybody can take a stand against. The aim was also to give the participants insights into what rape could look like and to realise that it is easy to contribute to spreading rumours. Another goal was to clarify bystanders' responsibility by showing how 'easy it is to do something, good or bad' (Men for Gender Equality, 2014, p. 49). The manual further describes the Bjästa case as potentially fruitful since it highlights the role of social media:

... first, [the case includes] a girl people don't believe. People use Facebook to spread hatred of her. The boy gets support from his friends and the community. Then he commits another rape, and eventually people turn their hatred towards him. All these components are interesting, but Facebook's role in the case is relevant, considering young people's use of social media.

(p. 49)

In the interviews, the teachers recurrently pointed out that Bjästa was an interesting and useful case. They said the case was immensely popular among the students, as it affected them and spurred much discussion in the classroom. They considered the case to be among the exercises in the entire programme that went particularly well:

I'm thinking that what can be difficult sometimes is ... to get the discussion going: breaking the ice and getting everyone to start talking. But when it came to [talking] about the Bjästa rape, that really got the whole class going.

(Male teacher)

The other teachers in this focus group agreed that the film clippings were captivating and said that the students wanted to see the entire documentary. The students were critical of how the town had responded to the rape, and they particularly considered the priest to be 'crazy'. The teachers recalled some of the students' reactions: 'It was almost as if they were a mob themselves'; 'They were thinking, "Oh my god, such idiots!"'; 'That priest!'; 'That's how they are in Bjästa?'; and 'Everyone in Bjästa must be an idiot'.

During an in-service training day, a female teacher from another school also discussed the Bjästa case:

I was also thinking about those video clips about Bjästa: our students really got wound up. Then you really would've wanted to be able to show the whole documentary, and I really wish we could've had those extra 40 minutes to keep discussing.

A male teacher responded:

They made so many mistakes [in Bjästa]. You want to explain to them [when the students say things like] 'But it's because they're totally crazy in Bjästa', and you're just like, 'No, that's not how it is'.

In our classroom observations, the students were clearly intrigued and liked to discuss the case, but the stereotypical descriptions of the town found in the media after the documentary had obviously surfaced in the classroom as well. In the following paragraphs, we analyse the interactions in the upper secondary school, where the Bjästa case was discussed during the second lesson of the programme. During the introduction of the case, one of the two teachers immediately brought the students' attention to the size of the town: 'Has anyone heard about the Bjästa case?' Several of the students pointed out that they had not heard about it. The teacher therefore started what could be described as a collaboratively built narrative by accounting for the events after the rape by emphasising that Bjästa was a small and remote town:

... [The town] was very hyped up at the time. A whole lot was written in the papers about what happened there. Then there was this documentary. There was a fourteen-year-old girl, and Bjästa is located up in ... wait, where is it now? In Övik, right?⁴

Not completely sure of where the town was located, the teacher sought confirmation from the other teacher and then emphasised the size of the community. 'Yeah, so a small town, yeah. Örnköldsvik is small', the teacher said, smiling. 'Bjästa is located [near Örnköldsvik], so you can imagine [what] a tiny, tiny place that is'. Framing the Bjästa case as taking place in a small town is not suggested in the MVP manual, which does not mention the size of the town; this discussion was rather something that emerged in the classroom when the participants engaged in the subject and, as one teacher put it, got 'wound up' in their discussions.

After the teacher had provided some more context to the case, specifically about Oskar being taken in for interrogation, they moved on to describe how rumours about Linnea had begun to spread in the community. Again, the teacher emphasised how small the town was and related its size to how the rumours had begun to spread:

And now the rumours begin to spread. Just imagine, a small community, and the rumours start going around. And the rumours are that Linnea is lying and that Oskar is innocent, and they say that Linnea is, so to speak, promiscuous and that she's reported the rape because she wanted to get back at this guy because he didn't what to be in a relationship with her.

The teacher's continued narrative of the events built on how unlikely it was that this could have happened in the first place: 'And the adults in Bjästa as well – that's what you think is so strange in this documentary, that the adults also were on his side'. A girl in the class raised her hand and asked about when this had all taken place; a recurrent theme was how people described Bjästa as unmodern, which was something the class returned to later in the discussion. The teacher answered, 'It was 2010, so it was six years ago'.

At this point of the introduction, the teachers (following the instructions in the manual) showed two short video clips from the documentary about the rumours that spread after the initial report and Oskar's hearings, and then how Oskar admitted to the rape in his third interrogation – and how people in the town still did not believe him to be guilty. The students' questions homed in on how incredible it was that they would not have believed Linnea at this point. The other teacher continued to explain how the rumours spread, saying that they 'spread like crazy online as well'. And again, the size of the town and what was unique to small towns appeared in the account: 'Even if it's a small town where you might also hang out like' this, they said, gesturing with their arms in what seemed to be a display of physical proximity. One of the teachers continued:

Since it's a small community, you see each other [frequently]. But so, so, so much hatred started to spread towards this Linnea online as well. And groups started to form that really were, like, against her and that believed in him.

The teachers went on to describe how Oskar raped another girl after the school graduation and that, unbelievably, the people of Bjästa still did not turn against him. They showed a video clip of the priest in Bjästa who talked about how great he thought it was when Oskar showed up at the graduation and brought flowers to the other students, and how he felt sorry for Oskar under the circumstances. At this point in the video, many of the students in the classroom burst into loud guffaws, particularly when the priest said 'poor guy – and the girl too'. The teacher commented:

Exactly: this is the reaction you get, 'cause of course you think he's totally crazy, this priest; he doesn't seem to know anything, you know. Then we might not know exactly how the journalists have cut and angled it, and you know how it is ... but this wasn't good, plainly put. This was a big failure on the priest's part.

The students' disbelieving laughter, together with the teacher's confirmation of how 'totally crazy' the priest seemed, continued to present the events of Bjästa as beyond belief and the townspeople, specifically the priest, as irrational and even pathological. Building on this notion, a girl in the class returned to the question of when this had all actually happened: 'Was this really 2010? "Cause it seems as if they were more old-fashiony?"' The teacher answered, 'Yeah, but it was more old-fashioned then, you know'. Again, the girl pointed out that the events seemed old: 'Yeah, but still, it feels kinda like the '90s when you see them'.

The students were then asked to discuss in small groups and were given a few questions to guide their discussions: their general thoughts about the case, how cases such as this could have happened and how people could have become fixed on the idea that Oskar was innocent and that the two girls were lying. After several minutes, the teachers encouraged the students to share their thoughts with the whole class. The first student to speak returned to the description of the priest: 'The priest seems to be totally stupid, but really, he interprets [the case] in the same way as the whole village does anyway, so I mean, it's not just him ... it's the whole village in that case'.

After some more discussion, the students returned to the small groups and talked about the role of social media in the spreading of rumours, as well as how the online bullying of the girls could have been stopped. The students had a lively debate for a while and then shared their thoughts with the class. At first, their comments centred on Facebook being a channel for bullying and allowing large numbers of people to join in, and on how strange they found it that adults would participate in the bullying as well. Then, as this section of the class was beginning to near its end, their attention was once again directed towards the size of the town, this time by a female student.

‘But in such a small town it’s also easy for everyone to follow the trend, that no one dares ...’ She then turned to the class and asked, ‘But how small was the municipality?’ As a response, the teachers introduced the town’s tininess as a laughing matter, saying that Bjästa was located outside of Övik, and that perhaps 20,000 people lived in Övik; the other agreed: ‘And Övik is pretty small, you know’, and laughed. The girl did not appear satisfied with this answer, however, and asked for more detailed information about the size of the town. ‘We’ll have to google it’, one of the teachers responded. Moments later, a boy in the class googled the question and soon proclaimed that in ‘2010, one thousand eight hundred and eight people lived in Bjästa’. One of the teachers asked, ‘In Bjästa?’ as if in disbelief. At this point, the entire class burst into loud laughter. The students and the teachers laughed together, and many talked excitedly to each other, repeating the numbers of thousands of people, seemingly discussing the size of Bjästa and other towns. Someone loudly exclaimed, ‘One thousand and eight!?’ and was corrected by one of the teachers (‘one thousand eight hundred and eight – almost two thousand’). The teacher exclaimed, ‘Yeah, get that!’, confirming how incredibly tiny Bjästa is.

The chatter and laughter in the room continued for a few moments before the two teachers suggested that they take a ten-minute break. On this note, the class ended – one where the entire class together had enjoyed laughter about how tiny Bjästa is. The laughter in this situation might be understood as another way to increase the distance between the ‘us’ in the classroom and the ‘other’ in Bjästa and to provide an implicit, yet clear, answer to the question of how events such as those that took place in Bjästa could have happened. In a sense, the case was now closed, the students asked no more questions about the events (or the reasons they occurred) and the class moved on to a different subject after recess.

While the intention with the exercise was to make the students reflect on the role of social media, students and teachers alike primarily focussed on the small size of Bjästa, which they characterised as a place where ‘everybody knows each other’ and where rumours spread quickly. They argued that social media enhanced the gossip, but any comparisons between Bjästa and how hearsay may function in the school or the city where the participating students lived were absent in the classroom interactions. Instead, the participants repeatedly portrayed Bjästa as a different place, a space of exception (cf. Eriksson, 2008). While discussing the case, they did not consider sexual violence to be something that characterised rurality, but they did make the townspeople’s responses to the rapes intelligible by Bjästa’s tininess and by its community bonds, which they assumed to be strong.

Discussion

Until now we have discussed how Bjästa became a space of exception by its rural qualities, both in the media and in the classroom, particularly its reputation

as a small town with a strong sense of community. In the following, we will add a further perspective in order to understand why the case discussions ended up focussing almost solely on rural deviance rather than on the role of social media. We will do this by focussing on the affectivity of othering processes, particularly by arguing that the Bjästa case is instructive of how negative affect circulates.

Cultural theorists such as Ahmed (2004), Anderson (2014) and Brennan (2004) have posited that affect is completely cultural while also being experienced in our bodies. We discern feelings in our bodies, but affect is also something in between us, as a relational experience. We get angry at somebody, we feel guilty for someone. We are ashamed when we see ourselves through the eyes of others. We sense the atmosphere when entering a room, or the hope in a political rally (Anderson, 2014). Affect ‘transmits’ (Brennan, 2004). We are affected by others’ feelings, we are moved and the affective expressions of others cause us to feel and act in different ways. Another way to put this is to say that affect ‘circulates’ (Ahmed, 2004); it is contagious and moves between bodies. But as it circulates and comes in contact with certain bodies, affect may be channelled into specific emotions and – due to these emotions’ history of associations – stick more easily to certain bodies; some figures may cause more disgust and revulsion than others (Ahmed, 2004). It follows that rapists and batterers of women are ‘sticky’ figures that may be attached to the men in their proximity. If someone has used physical or sexual violence, there is a greater risk that he will be regarded as an undesirable or ‘shady’ figure and hence becomes the target of hate and loathing (Gottzén, 2016, 2017), just as Oskar faced disgust after the documentary.

Bjästa is an interesting case, as it demonstrates how negative affect may spread and get stuck to different bodies. The case shows that affect is not simply something we experience in our bodies, but that it also transmits between us. We first find affective transmission between the perpetrator and the victim in the school bathroom: an event that, according to the documentary, was filled with both sexual arousal and fear. What initially seemed to be mutual desire changed as Oskar used force to get sex; his assaultive bodily confrontation made Linnea afraid and influenced her immobility. This scenario speaks to how encounters between bodies not only enable different affective states – thus making us feel something – but also channel our capacities to act (Deleuze, 1988). This situation also became evident when rumours later started to spread and the community became disgusted with the victim, which restricted her and finally forced her to move from the town. Meanwhile, the community supported and cared for the offender. Oskar seemed too nice and too popular to have been able to commit such a sexual offence. According to the community, rape was not something that happened there, or something that ‘our’ boys did. This outlook corresponds with the work of Wennstam (2015), who has pointed out that in cases where perpetrators of sexual violence receive social support, their relatives and friends have difficulty believing that ‘their boy’ is capable of such a crime.

Affect also transcends beyond the human and appears through digital spaces and their specific affordances. In the Bjästa case, the screening of the documentary enabled somewhat of an affective twist. While people had at first directed their disgust towards Linnea, Oskar later became the target of online hate. People also projected their contempt onto others, particularly the priest. But what is perhaps most distinctive is that the abhorrence became attached to the town itself once Bjästa became a metonym for defective responses to sexual violence and the community the exemplar par excellence of a 'herd mentality' that then enabled derisive comments about the place. Affect may thus not only stick to bodies but may also envelop specific places, as affect is an encounter between both human and non-human bodies and materialities (Anderson, 2014; Deleuze, 1988). It seems reasonable to see that the disgust stuck to Bjästa in light of cultural perceptions about rurality and small villages in northern Sweden and its inhabitants (Eriksson, 2008; Stenbacka, 2011). People explained the villagers' handling of the rapes by Bjästa's small size and its strong sense of community. In all these affective moves, sexual violence was considered as something that happened elsewhere. Notions about rurality served as a backdrop in the documentary, as articulated in the news coverage and in the reactions on social media afterwards; such notions were also a theme in the film *Flocking*.

Disgust and negative affect circulated further. While MVP's intentions of using the Bjästa case was to cause students to reflect on social media usage, both the students and their teachers were occupied with the fact that Bjästa is a small community where everyone knows each other and rumours spread quickly. People argued that social media platforms such as Facebook contributed to this situation, but they made few comparisons between Bjästa and the students' own schools and cities. Even though the MVP manual emphasises that the violence and responses to the violence in Bjästa could have happened anywhere, those in the classroom portrayed the rapes and the bystanders' responses to the sexual violence as exceptional. To them, such violence simply could not have happened in their suburb, in their school, in their city, but only in the 'tiny village' out there, distinguished by its herd mentality.

Distance thus seems to be a crucial factor in affective responses to rape, as responses to violence in general include both relational and spatial positions (Gottzén & Sandberg, 2019). When perpetrators are close to us, when they are familiar, we find it difficult to believe that they could do any harm. When they are more distant – for instance when we learn about them through news and documentaries – they become unintelligible strangers who are radically different from us (Gottzén, 2013). They, and those who support them, evoke disgust. This scenario reflects a more general tendency in Sweden's policies and media debates on violence, where people tend to view sexual violence as something that characterises other men (Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012). In the classroom discussions examined in this chapter, sexual violence – and particularly the 'negative' bystander responses to abuse, where the community gave the perpetrator social and emotional support and bullied the victim – not only

appeared to be an unsolicited reaction but also was something that characterised rurality: a rurality that in many ways seems to be stuck in an unmodern and uncivilised culture.

In this chapter, we have shown that discussing sexual violence is a matter of affect. The designers of the MVP programme appeared to have been aware of this notion when they addressed participants as bystanders rather than possible victims or perpetrators. This approach is generally thought to avoid making boys feel collectively blamed for sexism and abuse and thus reluctant to engage in interventions. Yet, our findings from this case suggest that sexual violence still became a hot topic that had an impact on the participants. In delicate situations such as these, clichés about rapists and rural towns, and the negative affect that coalesces with such figures and places, become resources that teachers and students can use to approach the conundrum of violence by placing both sexual violence and problematic bystander responses in a rural space of exception.

Notes

- 1 The translations in this chapter (all from Swedish to English) have been slightly edited for clarity in English.
- 2 The study was part of an evaluation of the MVP programme financed by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The study has been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (ref. no. 2016/067).
- 3 The US version of the programme was originally aimed at young men in sports programmes. The Swedish version of the programme has been transformed for use with all students in school, and the connection to youth sports has been removed.
- 4 'Övik' is a colloquial abbreviation for Örnköldsvik. Örnköldsvik is a city, but also the name of the municipality that includes Bjästa. The term 'municipality' (Swedish: 'kommun') is widely used in Sweden.

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