

TRICKSTER'S TEARS

AfroNordic Affective Politics and Critical Internet Aesthetics in Lydia Östberg Diakité's *Cry Baby*

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ABSTRACT: Swedish Ivorian artist Lydia Östberg Diakité's digital artwork *Cry Baby* (2020) makes a case for crying as a healing practice for AfroNordic people while navigating conditions for the public, online display of black emotional vulnerability. Composed of GIFs and a soundtrack, *Cry Baby* combines the artist's personal narrative with viral internet content. Across the work's visual and sonic registers, this article argues, Diakité's reconstruction of the troll or trickster figure troubles binary divisions between stylized and sincere emotion. The work demonstrates a self-reflexive and situated engagement with black pop culture, internet aesthetics, and affective politics. Thus, this article explores how *Cry Baby* contributes an AfroNordic perspective to larger, transnational conversations about blackness, digital culture, transparency, and privacy in contemporary art.

KEYWORDS: AfroNordic art, internet culture, public emotion, black affective politics, crying, Lydia Östberg Diakité

In Lydia Östberg Diakité's digital artwork *Cry Baby* (2020), eleven GIFs are arranged in a grid formation, presenting audiences with a series of emotionally charged vignettes (Figure 1).¹ The top left GIF consists of a close-up shot

1. The Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) is a digital image file format developed in the 1980s. Due to its ability to display short, looping animations, the GIF has become a

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of a figure, performed by the artist, adopting a mournful expression as she meets the camera's gaze.² In several other GIFs, the figure pouts and weeps, sobs shaking her shoulders. Other frames depict the same figure twirling or twerking in a rocky woodland landscape. Elsewhere, she sits pensively at the edge of a tranquil body of water bathed in golden light. In another GIF, the figure walks along a path in the woods—a presence passing among the trees. One frame features forest vegetation overexposed by bright sunlight, and another shows the subtly trembling leaves of an indoor plant coated in moisture. Each GIF loops continuously for the duration of a twenty-minute soundtrack composed of vocal samples from internet memes and other viral content,³ an original musical score created by Diakit  in collaboration with multidisciplinary artist Ribka M. Pattinama Coleman,⁴ and a voiceover narrated by Diakit  in both Swedish—her mother tongue—and English. In the voiceover, Diakit  recounts her decades-long separation from her father following his departure from Sweden to his native C te d'Ivoire and the affective tenor of their reunification focused on their experience of crying together. *Cry Baby's* layering of visual and sonic motifs links discourses around crying and emotional restraint in popular and internet culture to the artist's deeply personal account of crying as a source of healing in Afro-diasporic family relations.

Commissioned for the online and physical exhibition platform hydrocapsules.love (2020–24),⁵ *Cry Baby* engages emotional expression as

widely used medium in online visual culture. The term GIF is sometimes applied to short video clips that emulate its looping aesthetic, although such clips are not technically encoded in the GIF format. See Furht (2008).

2. I use the lowercase spelling "black" inspired by AfroNordic feminist scholar Oda-Kange Midtv ge Diallo (2023) who writes, "I do not capitalize black to come closer to a translation of [the Norwegian] 'svart', and to make room for the multitudes of blackness in the Norwegian context, that are both removed from and inspired by blackness elsewhere."

3. The internet meme is a humorous user-generated cultural object (image, video, audio, or text) circulated and adapted on social media and other websites, sometimes achieving "viral" status, achieving widespread popularity. Memes depend on and create a shared frame of cultural reference, such as "Black memetic culture" (Brock 2020). In this article, I sometimes use "internet" as a shorthand for the World Wide Web, with the knowledge that they are not identical. I do not engage in discussion of postinternet art.

4. Coleman is a Copenhagen-based artist of Indonesian and African American descent who engages queer mythologies, memory work, care, and resistance in diasporic experience and in reflection on colonial spice routes through mediums of sound, sculpture, installation, performance, video, food, and beverages.

5. *Cry Baby* was shown on hydrocapsules.love from 2020 to 2024. The work has also been shown as an installation in the exhibitions *Elitism Sucks* (2021) at Thoravej 29 in Copenhagen, *Diasporic Frequencies—Sacred Ecopoetics* (2023) at R nneb ksholm in

a vital element of transnational black body politics mediated by the internet—understood here as both an antiblack infrastructure and a potent space for black aesthetics. Diakit  explores both the directive “cry, baby” (an encouragement to let emotions go) and the ascription “crybaby” (one who cries easily or uses their tears to get attention) as well as using tears as a sign of connection to more-than-human hydrological flows. At the same time, *Cry Baby* troubles distinctions between stylized and sincere emotion across its visual and sonic components in a reflection on what it means to disclose one’s emotions and personal narrative online and for art audiences. This article suggests that Diakit  invokes the figure of the trickster or troll, who traverses internet and folklore landscapes and whose emotional expression refuses to solidify into stable legibility. *Cry Baby*’s interlacing of personal storytelling, samples of viral internet content, and looping GIFs infuse Diakit ’s performances of crying with authenticity, automaticity, and ambiguity. In this way, the work interpellates AfroNordic audiences into a poignant and playful slipperiness between expressions of sadness, aloofness, vulnerability, and deadpanning.

Diakit  is a Swedish Ivorian artist who has been based in Copenhagen since 2013.⁶ Her collaborations with other AfroNordic artists and choreographers, such as Adam and Amina Seid Tahir and BamBam Frost, have explored notions of black excellence, pantomime, and the d tournement of black pop cultural tropes.⁷ Diakit  has also worked with notions of family and community through her participation in EMBRACE performance collective, which takes its starting point in its members AfroNordic lived experience to

N stved, where it was also staged as a live performance, and *Young Danish Photography* ’24 at Fotografisk Center in Copenhagen. Diakit  also performed *Cry Baby* at Simian in Copenhagen on May 3, 2024. At the time of writing, an excerpt from *Cry Baby* can be viewed on Diakit ’s website <https://lydiame.com/>.

6. Diakit  graduated from the Danish National School of Performing Arts in 2017. She is a founding member of the Copenhagen-based Dance Cooperative (2019–), which is a platform organized by twelve artists, and a union organizer with The Union—Cultural Workers’ Union for BIPOCs in Denmark (2019–).

7. Diakit  was the dramaturge on Stockholm-based Swedish Eritrean artists Adam and Amina Seid Tahir’s (2025a) *several attempts at braiding my way home* (2022), a “collection of strategies for creating home in an afro-nordic landscape” inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020). Diakit  co-created the dance production *immortal summit* (2021) with AfroSwedish choreographer BamBam Frost and performed in Frost’s production *YES* (2020). A principal component of Frost’s choreography was an array of facial expressions conveying sadness, nonchalance, concentration, pleasure, even ecstasy, ranging from subtle to pantomime. Her choreography unfolded on and around an expansive, cascading blue plush rug, chosen for its evocation of “the transformative power of water and the revolutionary potential of the storm” (Frost 2020).

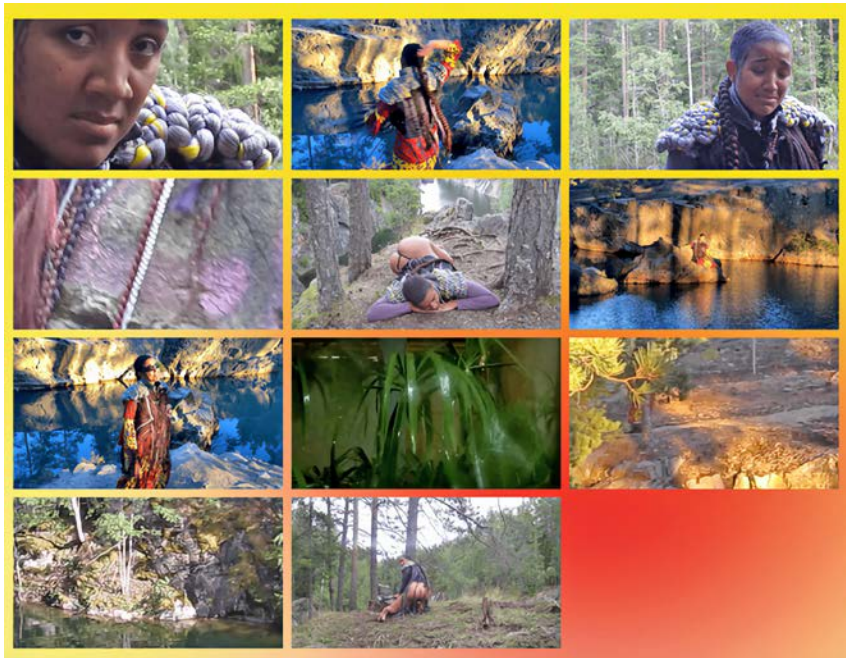


Figure 1. Lydia Östberg Diakité, *Cry Baby* (still), 2020. Eleven GIFs and sound, twenty min. Commissioned for hydrocapsules.love. Videography and sound production by Holger h hartvig nielsen. Costume by Aida Ramana. Music by Ribka M. Pattinama Coleman. Courtesy of Lydia Östberg Diakité.

examine how, “with a backdrop of queers being disowned by their families, parents being separated from children due to immigration policies, living as a marginalized person many times means that creating a chosen family is both a radical but also very necessary practice” (Diakité 2026).⁸ Diakité’s recent solo work addresses racial fetishism in the Swedish cultural imaginary, glitch as a refusal of hegemonic social prescriptions (Russell 2020), and performative modes of working through negative affects like apathy, anxiety, or grief.⁹ An overarching strategy in her practice is creating characters that, as

8. EMBRACE collective was formed in 2024 by Lydia Östberg Diakité, Adam Seid Tahir, and Meleat Fredriksson.

9. Here I am thinking of Diakité’s performance *Främling* (2024) and sculpture *En saga om choklad . . .* (2024), both from the exhibition *Transmissions* (2024) curated by Tawanda Appiah and Ulrika Flink at Skånes Konstforening, and *Untitled (shadow work)* (2025), also at Skånes Konstforening in the series *Beautiful Experiments* curated by Tawanda Appiah.

she describes, “can hold space and that I can step into and perform from,” and which draw on pop cultural references to situate the artist in a “lineage of entertainers” (Diakité 2025).

Diakité’s practice largely unfolds in an AfroNordic contemporary art context in which we both work—Diakité as a dancer, choreographer, dramaturge, and installation and performance artist, and I as an art historian and curator.¹⁰ In our understanding, the term “AfroNordic” signals emerging formations of communality and solidarity among people of African descent across ethnicity, nationality, and location in the Nordic region (Diakité 2025). The AfroNordic gestures toward a shared commitment to challenging antiblackness, hegemonic whiteness, border regimes, Eurocentric aesthetic hierarchies and regimes of representation, and Nordic exceptionalism—the evacuation of racism and coloniality from the region’s self-image—through critical art and exhibition making (Habel and Sawyer 2014; McEachrane 2014; Mostyn 2017; Nunes 2019; Odumosu 2020; Black Archives Sweden 2022; Isaksson 2023; Miller 2024; Appiah and Flink 2024; Rafiki 2025). This article explores how art historical analysis can contribute to articulating AfroNordic cultural politics, drawing on my situated perspective as an AfroDanish scholar and focusing on a close reading of *Cry Baby*. I came to engage with this work through my research on the history of contemporary black artists working in Denmark and have since included it when teaching on black and AfroNordic aesthetics.

As an AfroNordic digital artwork that navigates outside of dominant discourses of race, emotion, and the digital, *Cry Baby* highlights the necessity of engaging with AfroNordic art on its own terms. The critical reception of AfroNordic artworks has been limited by the fact that the Nordic African diaspora constitutes “minority communities” subject to antiblackness and erasure from art historical narratives in the Nordic nation-states and “‘marginal’ black communities” (El Tayeb 2011, 49) in international discourses on black aesthetics where their positions are rarely considered. For example,

10. I use the term “AfroNordic” to describe Diakité’s and my situated contexts in Denmark and Sweden. Unfortunately, the nuanced differences between these two national contexts cannot be unpacked here, although artists like Diakité have unique insights into their overlaps and divergences. On Diakité’s reflections on working in Denmark see Bäckman (2023) and Danish Dance Histories (2018). Diakité is a friend and sometime collaborator—for example, we have collaborated for the festival alt_cph (2018) around the performance *On the DownGlow* by Justin F. Kennedy (Diakité as performer, me as curator) and as members of the Copenhagen-based collectives The Union—Cultural Workers’ Union for BIPOCs in Denmark and Marronage, respectively. I am an art historian of Danish and Malian descent, currently based in Copenhagen.

AfroNordic artists are largely missing from academic surveys of Nordic digital art—a field they have contributed to for decades but that appears as almost exclusively white and unconcerned with questions of racial politics in the existing literature (e.g., Ag 2019; Ekeberg 2019). At the same time, critical and culturally sensitive scholarship on blackness and digital artistic media tends to center black artists and discourses from the United States, leading to a need for more reflections about how other black practitioners position themselves in global black digital culture.¹¹ I contend that Diakité participates in a transnational “black memetic digital practice,” which U.S. scholar of black digital cultures André Brock Jr. (2020, 204) argues “invents, transforms, and signifies upon units of Black and mainstream culture to create a shared social and cultural experience.” More specifically, I argue that Diakité engages with this “shared social and cultural experience” from her AfroNordic locality by using the digital medium of the GIF and sampling social media artifacts to engage a transnational black affective politics of crying. But how are the representational politics of crying affected by artist positionality?

Queer feminist scholarship has pointed out how the reception of artistic mediations of crying is shaped by gendered, classed, and racialized expectations of authenticity and legibility. According to this scholarship, when affect enters the field of artistic representation, “once a feeling becomes an image of feeling, its claim to authenticity (to being a real feeling) is thrown into question” (Doyle 2013, 85). Particularly feminine or feminized expressions of sadness are vulnerable to being “stripped of their critical implications” (Ngai 2007, 130) and thus to being received with suspicion in art criticism as self-indulgent performances staged for the camera or an audience (Doyle 2013, 89). Racism creates still more possibilities for willful misinterpretation, as “almost no level of irony, self-reflexivity, ambivalence, or complexity seems to ward off the urge to read [works of art by artists of color] as naïve, earnest forms of self-expression with no awareness of the complexity of representation, art history, or political institutions” (Doyle 2013, 106). If artistic representations of feminine crying are seen as inauthentic and black artistic representations of affect are seen as devoid of self-awareness, it is all the more important to pay attention to the nuances of “black-fem” (Frazier

11. An important exception that has inspired this article is the anthology *The Digital Black Atlantic* (Josephs and Risam 2021). This article adds an AfroNordic perspective to this literature.

2018, 173) artistic performances of crying.¹² Here I ask: How has Diakité mobilized internet aesthetics to visualize her emotions in and for the public domain? How does the artist strike a balance between emotional disclosure and dissimulation in *Cry Baby*? What are the stakes and frames of reference of AfroNordic affective expression in contemporary art?

This article draws on AfroNordic and black feminist theory, queer of color critique, and affect theory, alongside insights from my 2025 interview with Diakité,¹³ to argue that *Cry Baby* contributes a distinctly AfroNordic perspective on the contemporary politics of black affect. I center Diakité's self-identification with the troll, as both folklore and internet figure, to discuss the artist's self-reflexive affective performance in this work. First, I demonstrate how *Cry Baby* positions crying as a central concern in AfroNordic affective politics and in relation to Diakité's reception of U.S. black pop culture. Then I present the physical site of the Swedish forest where the work's imagery unfolds, followed by a consideration of how *Cry Baby* relates to the internet as a site of display. I describe Diakité's strategy of sampling viral online content and how the artist mediates Afrodiasporic family histories. Last, I demonstrate that *Cry Baby* reconfigures the black reaction GIF and the expectations of black affective excess associated with this medium. Each of the article's sections offers an analysis of Diakité's artistic choices and contexts as a starting point for placing *Cry Baby* in conversation with the politics of affect, black digital cultures, and Afrodiasporic cultural practices more broadly. Throughout the article, I situate Diakité in relation to her peers in an AfroNordic cultural context who work on similar thematics, such as water as a connecting element, queering mythologies and AfroNordic folklore, critical engagement with internet culture, and kinship in the African diaspora. This analysis speaks to both Scandinavian Studies and black diaspora art history, foregrounding the significance of black contemporary art in Scandinavian cultural politics and scholarship, where artworks constitute compelling theoretical contributions in their own right.

12. I invoke black feminist ecocritic Chelsea M. Frazier's (2018, 173) term "black-fem," which describes a community-oriented, queer identification with femininity in connection with radical politics, "refer[s] to a variety of 'affectable' black subjectivities forged through the connective tissue of White, cis-heterocapitalist colonial logics. Second, the term is meant to mark the liminal spaces between the *distinct* (and not to be conflated) categories of Black woman, Black female, and Black (queer) femme."

13. Diakité requested that my interview with her be conducted in English as this is the language she uses in professional contexts.

Crying and AfroNordic Politics of Affect

A central component of *Cry Baby*'s voiceover is the narrator's description of her qualms and hopes around crying, which sets up a push-pull dynamic in the work between resisting and giving in to crying. "I couldn't cry for years," "I didn't cry for years," the narrator reveals.¹⁴ Speaking over the soundtrack's languid, reverberating beat, she muses, "My body memory—filled with water—what happens with my tears when they leave me? Will I forget and will I forgive if I cry?," "Why can't I cry?" The narrator recites sayings and sings lyrics that discourage crying: "Don't cry for me . . . Don't shed a tear . . . So dry your tears I say." Yet she asserts, "Why are we told not to cry? . . . I prefer crying." The voiceover also uses invitations and affirmations to encourage audiences to let go of their inhibitions around crying, insisting that crying can be a sensuous practice to luxuriate in for its healing potential. "I want to invite you to your feelings. I want to invite you to cry," the narrator intones. "Don't hold back your tears," "You don't have to be shy. Your tears are beautiful," she continues, "Do you get that crying is a healing power?" In one refrain that appears throughout the soundtrack, she sings, "Do you cry on the regular?" In another, she sings lyrics from Lauryn Hill's ode to unrequited romantic love, *When It Hurts So Bad* (1998), asking why something that hurts can feel so good. Much of *Cry Baby*'s voiceover thus draws on the idea of crying as a form of catharsis in which surrendering to unshed tears can have therapeutic and restorative effects by enabling one to discharge repressed emotions. The narrator describes crying as a curative purging, an entanglement of emotional pain and pleasure, or what she calls "releasing my trauma" or "releasing my stress" from interior psychological state to exterior expression.

Explaining the conceptual origins of *Cry Baby*, Diakité (2023) says:

I had read about how sound moves slower in water, and I was interested in relating . . . tears and the poetics of water as a constant entity that connects you to your past and future directly. I departed from my own African diasporic experience, the colonial history and reality, families separated by bodies of water, oceans.

Enacting this focus, Diakité's approach to crying addresses water's historical, political, biogeochemical, and spiritual transformations as part of an AfroNordic memory archive in line with black feminist reconceptualizations

14. Quotes from *Cry Baby*'s voiceover are in reference to the transcription of the soundtrack in the exhibition folder "Young Danish Photography '24" (HEIRLOOM 2024). Translations from Swedish to English are my own.

of the archive that “center desire, longing, memory, and experience” (Nash 2019, 108). The narrator continually declares, “This is for all of us who couldn’t cry for years,” “för oss som blivit separerade av vatten” [for those of us who have been separated by water]. In this way, the work models a black feminist attention to “those who have survived a loved one who has passed on, but also survivors who negotiate losses that do not end in death: losses like distance, homeland, diminishment, and the absence of care that often accompanies racialized subjects everywhere they go” (Brown 2025, n.p.).

Cry Baby’s exploration of crying in the Nordic African diaspora can thus be viewed in relation to the ability of emotions to create racialized boundaries through their circulation between bodies, as “emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as ‘being’ through ‘feeling’” (Ahmed 2014, 2). Danish gender studies scholars Mons Bissenbakker and Lene Myong (2019, 418) use the concept of “affective biopolitics” to describe the role of emotions in “the construction, policing and maintenance of borders” in the region. Here nations become “*affective communities* that acquire meaning in part through constructing outsiders as *affect aliens*” (Myong and Bissenbakker and Myong 2019, 418). For example, the Scandinavian nation-states enforce themselves as “objects of happiness,” branding themselves as among the happiest places on Earth (Ahmed 2010, 41; Gaonkar 2022).¹⁵ This racialized affective landscape contributes to demarcating who can claim home and belonging based on their ability to accept the Scandinavian nation as an object of happiness or who is seen as posing an obstacle to national happiness.¹⁶

Reflecting on affective politics of belonging in the Nordics, Ghanaian British Norwegian cultural anthropologist Dubie Toa-Kwapong (2023, 22),

15. For example, Denmark placed second in the 2025 UN “World Happiness Report,” with the other Nordic welfare states in the top ten. This article does not address norms of nonexpressivity in Nordic cultures as part of the construction of whiteness in the region or how variations in hegemonic whiteness globally influence perceptions of emotional sincerity and authenticity.

16. Socially acceptable temporalities of sadness are shaped by the Nordic welfare states’ capitalist logics of productivity, which may frame prolonged periods of mourning, sadness, or crying—for instance, in response to ongoing histories of coloniality—as excessive or self-indulgent. As white Danish cultural studies scholar Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt (2022) observes: “Værdien af lønarbejdet er det dominerende moralske kompas i den nordiske, neoliberale og protestantisk-slidsomme velfærdsstat: Lønarbejdet er bevist på samfundssind og deltagelse i samtidens velfærdsstat” [The value of wage labor is the dominant moral compass in the Nordic, neoliberal, and Protestant-toil-focused welfare state: wage labor is proof of social consciousness and participation in the contemporary welfare state].

describes the pressure of affective conformity in a context that “require[s] material or symbolic splitting from our cultures and homelands, and constant performance of these separations, gestures meant to assure dominant [Nordic] society that we take seriously the ‘privilege’ of being granted entry (albeit tenuous) into the elusive [Nordic] *propter nos*.” Toa-Kwapong critically considers Nordic affective conformity in light of the region’s colonial ideologies. For example, in his influential *Systema Naturae* (1707–78), Enlightenment-era Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus presented his race biology, whose classifications rely not only on physical traits and cultural customs but also on what we can think of as affective dispositions. Where Linnaeus defined Europeans at the top of his racial hierarchy as “sanguine” and “governed by rites,” he defined Africans at the bottom as both “phlegmatic”—unemotional—and “governed by caprice”—susceptible to sudden and inexplicable changes of mood (Charmantier 2020). Toa-Kwapong suggests that the African diaspora in the Nordic region is haunted by this pathologization of African existence and African affect. Linnaeus exemplifies how the Nordics are home to an ideological history that continues to shape the modern colonial regime of representation, which “produce[s] blackness as a locus of incapacities,” and in which “Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology . . . as a sign of both excess and lack” (Palmer 2017, 32).

Queer of color critique has emphasized the potential of dwelling in negative affective states such as depression, mourning, or sadness in response to such ongoing histories of coloniality. In a sociological study of multiracialized subjects in European nation-states, Thai German Jin Haritaworn (2012, 83), demonstrates that to make a legible claim to national belonging, these subjects must pass not only as able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender but also as emotionally conforming, which entails being “fetishistically” cut off from material conditions and histories of colonization.¹⁷ Cuban American queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2006, 680) has argued that where whiteness “prescribes and regulates national feelings and comportment” and imposes a denial of coloniality, insisting on grieving colonial wounds can be a vital mode of social critique.¹⁸ Muñoz (2006, 676) foregrounds artistic mediations of collective political depression caused by coloniality, demonstrating how

17. Haritaworn’s research concerns multiracialized Thai youth in Germany and the United Kingdom and also discusses antiblackness in this demographic.

18. Muñoz makes this argument through the study of the work of queer Latinx artists in the United States. While Muñoz is careful to distinguish “brown feeling” from blackness’s positioning in the domain of a racialized affective field in the United States, his comments on affective belonging are instructive here. Like Muñoz, I do not distinguish here between sadness, depression, mourning, and grief.

they can constitute “a certain ethics of the self that is utilized and deployed by people of color and other minoritarian subjects who don’t feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment.” Thus, aesthetic mediations of racialized sadness carry a reparative potential to facilitate “a larger collective mapping of self and other” and create glimmers of affective recognition between racially minoritized people (Muñoz 2006, 679).

Cry Baby articulates racialized sadness in the Nordics stemming from what Diakit  (2023) calls the region’s “colonial history and reality” while imbuing that sadness with both cathartic pleasure and political charge. Insisting that it feels so good to cry, *Cry Baby*’s voiceover depicts crying as an “erotically satisfying experience” (Lorde 2007, 56). A heightened form of presence, awareness, and pleasure, the erotic can be nurtured in everyday activities to become sensitized to the emotions and needs repressed by racist and patriarchal structures. Thus, the erotic describes a sensuous counterhegemonic knowledge emanating from a subjective, internal world (Lorde 2007; Terletskaia 2022). When I asked Diakit  in my interview with her (2025) if she had an intended audience in mind when creating *Cry Baby* who might benefit from this connection to crying, she replied, “Of course, I do it for us . . . for my kin. Ivorians or the African diaspora or Swedes or mixed kids in the Nordic countries. That’s just so natural for me that I don’t feel that my art was created for a specific audience.” She continued, “I believe that we need to cry more, so in that sense [the work] is for an African diaspora that I often feel doesn’t have the capital to be vulnerable out in society.” *Cry Baby*’s therapeutic orientation toward crying as a mode of healing can thus be viewed in relation to the lack of reliable and affirmative mental health care options for black people in the Nordics whose affective expression is often marginalized or deemed as illegible by white-majority societies.

In this light, the narrator’s question, “Why can’t I cry?” seems to ponder both why she is unable to cry and why she is not permitted to cry. This question is shaped by not only Nordic but also black affective politics. In my interview with Diakit  (2025), she explained that she approached the topic of crying by challenging affective norms in the pop cultural products she encountered in her childhood:

Crying for me is rooted so much in an upbringing of watching MTV and TV with all of these tropes, especially from African American culture that [were a way in which] I could perceive myself in a small town in Sweden where it wasn’t possible for me to see Ivorian movies on TV. So [my ideas about crying] come from all of these things I heard on a loop growing up: “Don’t cry, don’t cry.” If something happened [in the TV programs], they would say, “Don’t cry.” And ever since I was young, I thought, “Why can’t you cry? Why is it so dangerous to show emotions?”

Diakit  describes her consumption of black American culture through TV programs as part of her socialization as a black child in Sweden in the 1990s–2000s and how these cultural products became reference points for a black affective politics that encourages the suppression of vulnerable emotional expression. These affective politics are shaped by histories of antiblack violence, enslavement, and colonization in the Americas, where “bleak political and sociological realities form the backdrop of much black inexpression,” and modes of withholding vulnerability in public become “techniques for survival” (Post 2022, 19). Not only have the cultural products that had a formative impact in Diakit ’s childhood since made their way onto the internet as memes, but the internet is now a primary site for black affective politics to be disseminated, navigated, and creatively contested. I return to the question of blackness’s circulation on the internet later in this article, but first, to understand how *Cry Baby* intervenes into transnational discourses of black affect, it is crucial to take a closer look at the work’s grounding in an AfroNordic locality.

Claiming Locality

The footage in *Cry Baby*’s GIFs was shot over the course of a long summer day in different locations in the province of Dalarna in central Sweden where Diakit  grew up. *Cry Baby* thus occasions and documents the artist’s return to this setting, which she represents as a space of restorative solitude. The forest in Dalarna is a mixed forest of pine, spruce, and deciduous trees growing atop often exposed bedrock and contains several mining sites and limestone quarries. When choosing locations, Diakit  (2025) explained to me:

I wanted to film in the forest and around these waters because when I went to C te d’Ivoire, to Abidjan, it looked so similar. . . . The colors orange and green were so similar to where I grew up [in Sweden]. Because of the limestone [quarries in Dalarna], the water is turquoise, and that’s also how the ocean looks in Abidjan.

The work’s setting thus invokes different locations from Diakit ’s dual heritage, connected through the motif of water and chromatic coincidences. Moreover, the forest landscape inspired Diakit ’s improvised choreography and the work’s videographic choices.¹⁹

19. *Cry Baby* joins a growing tendency of AfroNordic artists using Nordic forests as a setting. See for example Patricia Bbaale Bandak, *Women of Water* (2017), Jeannette Ehlers, *We’re Magic. We’re Real (From Sunset to Sunrise)* (2022), and Harald Andreas Beharie, *Undersang* (2024).

Most of *Cry Baby*'s GIFs are framed so that the reclusive figure Diakité performs is fully surrounded by woodland, obscuring the horizon and conveying a sense of being enveloped in the forest's interior. Much of the footage used in the GIFs are scenes shot from above or from below, reflecting the dynamic vantage points afforded by the hilly topography, such as when Diakité dances at the foot of a cluster of trees on a jagged precipice above a lake, a tangle of roots behind her mirroring her braided costume. When I interviewed her Diakité (2025) explained how her "character is built up [as] carrying emblems or an armor as protection." The combination of softness and toughness that appears throughout *Cry Baby* is exemplified in the braided armor-like costume created by African Norwegian artist Aida Ramana (Figure 2). Thick braids of gray, pink, and yellow synthetic hair form oversized shoulder pads with thinner braids in hues of brown, red, and purple coiling into the shape of a breastplate, their ends cascading loosely around the figure's body. The costume's projection of an image of emotional fortitude recalls "a suit of armor, a protective covering worn by Black women [and black-fems] to mitigate damage from a hostile world" (Walker-Barnes 2014, 34). Furthermore, the costume signals Diakité's family ties as the figure wears a family heirloom underneath the braided armor—a patterned red and yellow dress that was given to Diakité (2025) by her Ivorian auntie, who is now an ancestor, which signals for the artist a "connection to my different heritages, bringing my auntie to Borlänge [in Dalarna]," as she describes in my interview with her. In Diakité's performance, this costume is also used to emphasize grounding and to register a sensuous connection to place, such as the image of braids from the figure's costume draped over a boulder.

The forest in Dalarna constitutes not only a physical space but a cultural space imbued with myriad meanings. In her study of Scandinavian landscape painting, white British art historian Isabelle Gapp (2024, 45, 50) observes how "during the 19th century the pine forest came to be associated with Sweden as a whole, as Värmland and Dalarna were the first to be regarded as authentically Swedish," in a process of shaping colonial and nationalist ideas of these forests as "a resource, cultural domain and subject of aesthetic interest." Given the long-standing interpretation of the Swedish forest as a marker of white nationhood through the nebulous frame of Scandinavian national romanticism, the forests in Dalarna are a charged site for AfroNordic artistic intervention or reconfiguration.

I propose that Diakité's performance in this landscape recalls the huldra—a forest-dwelling figure from Scandinavian mythology. A trickster woodland spirit whose name carries the meanings "covered" or "secret," the huldra has been mythologized as a solitary and sometimes fatally seductive character. Nineteenth-century white Norwegian landscape painter and illustrator Theodor Kittelsen, known for his satirical drawings and use of



Figure 2. Costume for *Cry Baby*, by Aida Ramana. Installation view in *Diasporic Frequencies—Sacred Ecopoetics*, Rønnebæksholm (2023). Photo: Malle Madsen. Courtesy of Lydia Östberg Diakitè.



Figure 3. Theodor Kittelsen, *Huldra* [*The Wood Nymph*], 1892. Pen and paint on paper, 33.2 × 44.3 cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo. Photo: Nasjonalmuseet/Andreas Harvik. Licensed under Creative Commons CC-BY.

folklore figures like trolls as metaphors for socially marginalized groups, influentially represented the huldra as a white female figure (Figure 3). Deceptively humanoid, huldra are sometimes recognizable in Kittelsen's works by their tails, an animal body part that becomes their marker of nonnormative embodiment. The huldra's associations with secrecy align with Diakité's figure's enactment of affective disclosure and dissemblance, including, for example, how *Cry Baby*'s GIFs shift the audience between addressee (solicited through the figure's direct eye contact) and voyeur (placed at a distance from the figure, viewing her from afar). Moreover, the braids of the figure's costume resemble the huldra's tail as her hips shift from side to side like a metronome, harnessing the hypnotic power of the GIF. If landscape painting and illustration have contributed to the ethnonationalist association of Swedishness with whiteness such that "white bodies are naturalized in certain environments and contexts" (Werner 2014, 43), *Cry Baby* subverts expectations of whiteness in artistic representations of femme (mythological) figures in the Swedish landscape by claiming this site instead as one of black presence and performance. The voiceover narrator murmurs,

“Dancing for you. Echoes of liberation move in my body. As I dance for me,”
 “Don’t be shy. Fuck racism.”

Reading the figure in *Cry Baby* in relation to the huldra connects Diakité to a larger tendency for AfroNordic contemporary artists to develop “Afro-Nordic folklore” as a means to “retell the history and mythology of the Nordic land on which they grew up and still live on through a queer Afro-diasporic and post-anthropocentric lens” (Tahir 2025b, n.p.). However, when Diakité channels the trickster, the troll, and the more-than-human, her performance relates not only to the Swedish forest and folklore but also to the internet. The following section examines how *Cry Baby*’s original online context, the website hydrocapsules.love, shaped the work’s storytelling and Diakité’s careful use of the internet as a space for Afrodiasporic connection while grappling with the internet as a site of virulent antiblackness.

Critical Internet Aesthetics

Cry Baby was originally commissioned for the physical and online curatorial platform hydrocapsules.love (2020–2024) as part of the eleventh Berlin Biennale (2020).²⁰ Amid a series of COVID-19 lockdowns, hydrocapsules.love released a succession of artistic contributions exploring conditions for collectivity and care under the pandemic. Although this website is no longer active and *Cry Baby* has since circulated in more traditional exhibition formats, I highlight hydrocapsules.love here to explore the significant self-reflexive work *Cry Baby* performs in relation to the internet. What does it mean to create a personal, vulnerable work about crying for the internet?

Hydrocapsules.love drew inspiration from ecofeminist explorations of the political, ethical, and ecological implications of water as a life source, including the water-based composition of human bodies (Figure 4). White Canadian hydrofeminist philosopher Astrida Neimanis (2017, 2) notes that “the flush of waters sustains our bodies, but also connects them to other bodies and other environments—drinking, urinating, sweating, transfusing, siphoning, sponging, weeping.” Hydrofeminism calls attention to how tears—*Cry Baby*’s central motif—implicate the weeping human body in

20. Hydrocapsules.love was curated by artists Dina El Kaisy Friemuth, Neda Sanai, and Ānitā Beikpour, working together under the moniker D.N.A. Hydrocapsules.love aimed to expose ties between histories of extractive colonial capitalism and ongoing socio-ecological crises. D.N.A. displayed hydrocapsules.love as an installation in the Berlin Biennale exhibition *Storefront for Dissident Bodies* at daadgalerie. In addition to Diakité, the platform featured work by Liz Rosenfield, Juliana Huxtable, Moor Mother, Aysha Amin, Pardis Pourahmad, and Tabita Rezaire.



Figure 4. D.N.A. hydrocapsules.love graphics, 2020–24. Courtesy of D.N.A.

planetary hydrological flows. An interest in large-scale natural processes is also evident in *Cry Baby*'s voiceover, where the quotidian practice of crying mediates between the individual, the planetary, and the cosmic and back again. "Save your tears. In them I can see the ocean. In the ocean the universe reflects itself. You know it is within you," the narrator murmurs. Although hydrofeminism emphasizes the interconnection of the planetary and the personal through a hydrocommons composed of oceans, lakes, rivers, skies, human, and more-than-human bodies, Neimanis (2017, 14–15) stresses that the "waters that we comprise are never neutral; they are directed by intensities of power and empowerment," such that "currents of water are also currents of queerness, coloniality, sexual difference, global capitalism, imagination, and multispecies community." Similarly, as I have shown, *Cry Baby* grapples extensively with tears as part of an "affective ecology" (Post 2022, 11) in which the meanings ascribed to crying are shaped by the weeping body's position in relation to racial formations, nation-states, kinship relations, gender norms, and artistic media or genres.

Furthermore, *Cry Baby* taps into black feminist theory and Afrodiasporic cultural traditions that provide historically sensitive perspectives on water as a marker of implication in the world beyond the scale of the individual. For the African diaspora, the element of water is associated with diverse spiritual meanings, ritual purposes, and historical resonances. Black feminist theorizations of water have emphasized the salt waters of the black Atlantic and the black Mediterranean as the bearers of and witnesses to conditions

of colonial domination, disposability of black lives, displacement, migration, and diasporic longing across continents (Sharpe 2016; Gumbs 2018). In extension, black feminisms emphasize how these conditions have necessitated the development of what U.S. black feminist theorist Christina Sharpe (2016, 14) calls “wake work”—rituals of mourning, memory, and healing in response to the dehumanization of black life in the wake of slavery. *Cry Baby* references historical and ongoing modes of antiblack violence as Diakité’s voiceover dedicates the work to “oss som blivit separerade av vatten” [those of us who have been separated by water] and suggests that “with water we heal / for all our people who have been taken and shipped / died on the ocean / their bodies are still part of our bodies, we are water.”²¹ Here, Diakité references Sharpe’s (2016, 19) concept of “residence time,” which describes the endurance over centuries of bodily traces of enslaved people who did and did not survive the forced voyage between the African continent and the Americas or Europe and that remain in the composition of the Atlantic. These ongoing legacies of coloniality coalesce in the antiblack anthropogenic climate that Sharpe (2016, 111) calls the “weather” that renders black people disproportionately vulnerable to gratuitous harm.

Black feminist theorists and artists have also identified how the colonial histories of oceanic waters are mirrored in the very infrastructures of the internet. U.S. black feminist media scholar Legacy Russell (2024, 15) proposes the concept of “weathering,” the disintegration of materials through exposure to weather elements, to describe the racism endured by black internet users in online spaces. This connection between the erosive force of an antiblack environment and the internet is material and metaphorical. The video installation *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) by multidisciplinary artist Tabita Rezaire, who is of French Guianan and Danish descent, demonstrates that although the internet is often imagined as wireless and immaterial, its infrastructures are indelibly physical (Figure 5). Rezaire’s video shows how the internet transmits data through fiber optic cables installed on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean in pathways that recall the routes of the transatlantic slave trade and connects this correspondence to the internet’s reproduction of colonial, capitalist, classist, racist, homophobic, and transphobic oppressions and exclusions (Gray 2015; Tagny 2016; Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019). *Deep Down Tidal* makes evident that the internet’s data flows, in their form and content, perpetuate historical and ongoing forms of coloniality and

21. *Cry Baby*’s engagement with colonial history and the legacies of transatlantic slavery was emphasized in the exhibition *Diasporic Frequencies: Sacred Ecopoetics* (2023) at Rønnebæksholm, where it was shown with works like patricia kaersenhout’s installation *The Soul of Salt* and Jeannette Ehlers’s *Diasporic Frequencies*.



Figure 5. Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal* (still), 2017, HD video on curved screen, variable dimensions, 18:44 min. Courtesy of Tabita Rezaire.

hydrarchy, antiblack weather and weathering. *Cry Baby* treats the internet neither as a utopian nor dystopian realm but instead navigates the digital realm with criticality to hold space for AfroNordic affective reflection in ways that held particular significance at a time when it was less feasible to gather in person.

Hydrocapsules.love released *Cry Baby* in the summer of 2020—a historical conjuncture that saw the convergence of profound anger and grief in AfroNordic communities in reaction to the disproportionate exposure of black and brown populations to COVID-19, the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the United States, and, for black people in Denmark, the racially motivated torture and murder of the Danish Tanzanian man Phillip Mbuji Johansen on Bornholm in June 2020.²² At this conjuncture, AfroNordic communities were reckoning with renewed urgency with the way black life is lived in proximity to gratuitous violence and premature death while negotiating public displays of emotion in the media, online, and in the streets. Diakit  could not have anticipated, while creating *Cry Baby*, how grief would shape the historical moment into which the work was released. Nevertheless, I ask: How did Diakit ’s encouraging us to cry resonate amid social upheaval? *Cry Baby* coexisted with various forms of online mobilization around the Black Lives Matter movement, but it is not an activist rallying cry, so to speak. Instead, it centers one specific aspect of black affective politics—the right to cry and the need for healing. In its

22. Another crucial example of contemporary art’s role in Denmark in the summer of 2020 is the memorial for Phillip Mbuji Johansen in Copenhagen curated by AfroDanish organizers Susan Zekiros and Xenia Brown Pallesen in close dialogue with Phillip’s mother, Mwajuma Johansen, centered around a contribution by Copenhagen-based Norwegian Nigerian artist Linda Lamignan. The memorial led to the establishment of the association Making Sanctuary, which used the sale of posters to raise money for Mwajuma Johansen’s access to a psychologist.

refusal of easily legible emotional expression, the work also contrasts with white Nordic publics' demands for black emotional disclosure in the form of confessional accounts of individual experiences of antiblack racism (Hunter 2023). This concurrency of *Cry Baby* with other affective contexts indicates the complexities and multidimensionality of black affect in the Nordics where neither public space, the media, art exhibitions, or the internet are safe spaces for black emotional expression.

Given its presentation as an online artwork, *Cry Baby* encouraged at-home viewing on a laptop or phone, calling to mind how browsing social media can mean consuming news of racial violence one moment and a comical meme the next, all in the space of a single scroll. *Cry Baby* illustrates the tendency of digital artworks to communicate the "feeling of a life lived in the digital era [through] the first-person narrator [as] a major navigator through this territory" (Gronlund 2016, 2), with the work's narrator performing as an enthusiast of self-care and emotional release. Equally significant in respect to *Cry Baby*'s representation of an online environment is its use of vocal samples from viral internet content that contribute to the work's tonal shifts between sincerity and irony, vulnerability, and comicality.

Sampling Black Virality

In my interview with Diakité (2025), she described *Cry Baby*'s soundtrack as a "radio play" where "the soundscape is the stage" on which a series of solos, refrains, and interludes play out across musical elements, a voiceover, and vocal samples. To create *Cry Baby*'s musical score, Diakité collaborated with Ribka M. Pattinama Coleman, who interpreted Diakité's GIFs in their composition. Diakité (2025) outlined to me the way Coleman "had been working on these different sounds connected with ancestral soundscaping," which they brought to the project, and "they thought a lot about the physical impact of how it feels to cry. Like, [takes a sharp inhale like a sob]. You know, it [activates] the lungs. So that's why they worked with flutes," to capture the frequencies of breath. Coleman used "beats that feel like heartbeats," in a viscerally affecting manner, as well as "little fairy sounds," thus combining "light sadness and deep sadness" (Diakité 2025).

This combination of light and deep sadness also plays out in the soundtrack's vocal samples. Sampling as a citational method involves incorporating fragments of existing cultural objects as a form of "cultural archaeology" (Rose 1994, 79). Though popularized by hip-hop artists, sampling is also practiced by visual artists such as black American artist Arthur Jafa, who brings social media artifacts into jarring "affective proximity" to interrogate antiblack racism (Malavassi 2020). In its auditory form, sampling

encourages “a way of listening that attends both to the acoustic aesthetic qualities of sounds themselves and to their various associations, histories, and possibilities” (Bitter 2023, 28). Speaking about her sampling practice in *Cry Baby*, Diakit  (2025) explained to me, “I wanted to play with these very recognizable voices” and “instant connotation to pop culture.” This instant recognizability is exemplified by the soundtrack’s use of a “sob story” in the form of a sample from an Instagram Live by Cardi B. In the sample, Cardi B tells her more than 30,000 viewers between sobs how her plans for the evening were canceled: “I’m just so upset because I . . . I can’t cry because I’m a gangsta, but I’m really fucking upset because . . . [At this point, *Cry Baby*’s soundtrack inserts a silent pause for dramatic effect] I look so good and I’m not going nowhere!” The kind of irreverent, humorous stream-of-consciousness livestream from which Diakit  has sampled this audio is a staple of Cardi B’s social media presence as the rapper navigates possibilities of affective disclosure and performance on social media on her own terms. Diakit  (2025) told me, “I love this Cardi B sample because I think it’s so hilarious. Cardi B is also connected, for me, with the troll. And I relate a lot to the troll, having grown up in the forest. She’s just trolling around on the internet.” In its invocation of the troll, I suggest that *Cry Baby* joins a history of artworks that represent, employ, or strive to elicit tears while frustrating audience expectations of authentic emotional disclosure.

While the Cardi B sample is lighthearted and playful, *Cry Baby*’s soundtrack also addresses the internet as a treacherous arena for expressions of black vulnerability, such as in its sampling of the audio from the meme “Best Cry Ever.” The risks associated with vulnerability online are exemplified by the treatment of this tearful exchange between retired boxer Rick “Rocky” Lockridge and his son Lamar from an episode of the reality TV show *Intervention* (2010). The episode sees Lockridge’s family stage an intervention about the former athlete’s substance use, during which Lamar Lockridge tearfully professes his love for his father despite any past grievances, saying “deep down in my heart, I still love you.” In response, Rocky Lockridge emits a sustained cry while other family members place soothing hands on his shoulders. The footage captures, as Diakit  (2025) describes in my interview with her, the family members’ “profound pain from years of not letting go.”

This footage became a meme known as “Best Cry Ever” that went viral in 2010 when social media users autotuned, remixed, and montaged Lockridge’s cry with user-generated footage of people expressing frustration at trivial misfortunes.²³ “Best Cry Ever” demonstrates what U.S. black feminist

23. Jackson (2014) argues that autotuning of sound bites was a staple of 2010s “internet minstrelsy.”

media theorist Lauren Michele Jackson (2014, para. 18) charts as the process by which the circulation of a meme featuring black figures “decays into the grossest displays [of] public ridicule” in the form of “social media spectacle.” In what I see as a caring gesture, *Cry Baby* invokes “Best Cry Ever” retrospectively only through its audio, overlaying it with a somber melody, moving the sample out of a comedic arena and instead acknowledging the scene’s solemnity. In this way, Diakité focuses audiences’ attention on the sonic dimensions of black masculine emotional vulnerability.

The vocal samples in *Cry Baby* may illustrate the observation made by Morgan Quaintance (2015, para. 8), a London-based artist of Jamaican descent, that the “primary domain of interest” for contemporary art engaging with the internet “is not the internet but a portion of the world wide web dominated by US popular culture.” However, the samples also constitute what black American anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown (1998) calls “diasporic resources.” Brown’s (1998, 298) concept describes how black communities in Europe “actively appropriate particular aspects of ‘black America’ for particular reasons, to meet particular needs.” Diakité uses vocal samples as diasporic resources to reflect on family relations and practices of crying. *Cry Baby* marks a negotiation of conditions of black American cultural hegemony, using samples from U.S. pop culture to signal its engagement with internet culture at large, all the while homing in on the AfroNordic. This strategy aligns with reflections by AfroSwedish scholar Nana Osei-Kofi on AfroNordic online safer spaces. Osei-Kofi (2024, 20) writes that “these virtual spaces, where Nordic Black feminist knowledge is produced, are third spaces—neither Nordic (white) feminist spaces nor US Black feminist spaces” but spaces for AfroNordic explorations of “self-contempt, self-love, but above all, self-reflexivity.” *Cry Baby*, though not an online forum, demonstrates a comparable self-reflexivity and cultural specificity. The use of samples in *Cry Baby* demonstrates how digital black diasporic feminist practices encompass both the possibilities of “deploying the Internet as a creative material” (Russell 2020, 9) and the “strategic navigation of online publicness and privateness” (Sobande 2023, para. 4). This negotiation of public or online emotion and personal narrative extends to the artist’s voiceover.

Mediating Family Histories

Cry Baby’s soundtrack uses the exchange between Rocky and Lamar Lockridge to introduce the theme of parental estrangement and reconciliation. The sampled audio from *Intervention* transitions into the narrator’s description of her physical, sensual experience of crying as she rides out a wave of emotion. A soaring melody builds as this description of bodily sensation is

followed by the artist's account of conversations with her father about their decades-long separation, living on separate continents, and its emotional consequences. Diakit  narrates these sequences mostly in Swedish, her mother tongue, indicating their specific address to AfroScandinavian audiences. "F r oss som har blivit separerade av vatten" [For those of us who have been separated by water], she begins. She describes her father's departure from her childhood home in Sweden to C te d'Ivoire followed by years of waiting for his return. "Why did you leave me?," she asks. She narrates her father's response with tenderness, "Jag var aldrig d r och mitt hj rta g r ont men jag gl mde dig aldrig" [I was never there and my heart hurts, but I never forgot you]. When her father says, "Don't cry," she responds "Det f r jag visst" [I am allowed to]. Diakit  says, "Vi gr t tillsammans n stan varje kv ll, de t rarna har aldrig varit tyngre" [We cried together almost every night, the tears have never been heavier]. "We were never meant to be separated," she continues, "My heart is open now."

Cry Baby's mediation of Diakit 's family narrative can be interpreted as an articulation of racial, cultural, and affective "liminality" (Kelekay 2022, 28). AfroFinlandSwedish feminist scholar Jasmine Kelekay develops this concept to describe the experiences of mixed-race AfroFinnish people as expressed in R&B lyrics and music videos. Kelekay examines AfroFinnish artist Rosa Coste's song *Musta* (Black) (2021), which addresses her separation from her Congolese father and the grief associated with the absence of childhood memories of him. As Kelekay (2022, 26) observes, "Coste's analysis of her father's experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and her own relationship to him, as a matter of distance," though far from generalizable to all AfroNordic experiences, resonated broadly among mixed-race members of the AfroNordic diaspora who came of age in the 1990s and whose black parents experienced Nordic societies as inhospitable. Similarly, *Cry Baby* foregrounds an AfroNordic experience of liminality, characterized by "mourning what was lost and what could have been" (Kelekay 2022, 31) in a familial relationship and by inhabiting a threshold between social categories and emotional states.

One way *Cry Baby* emphasizes this threshold is by repeatedly referencing the oceanic as a liminal space in the African diaspora. Diakit 's use of the motif of the oceanic to approach issues of memory and kinship connects her to many AfroNordic visual artists whose moving image works reflect on inter-generational diasporic family relationships.²⁴ For instance, the sound and

24. It is important to note that black artists in the Nordic region also use water to explore kinship relations outside of the biological or reproductive, such as in

video installation *My Fathers Left* (2023) by Amber Ablett, a Bergen-based artist of Irish, Trinidadian, and British heritage, unfolds stories of black fatherhood told from the viewpoints of children of the African diaspora in Europe (Figure 6). Ablett (2024) describes this work as unpacking how the “narratives that British, Norwegian and Western society teach us shaped and warped the way I saw my relationship with my own father and my own history.” Ablett’s installation consists of a wooden structure resembling stands used to hold the hulls of boats that have been brought to rest on land. From another perspective, the video work *I Think of Silences When I Think of You* (2023) (Figure 7) by Malmö-based artist of Ghanaian descent Jonelle Twum (2025) addresses the artist’s mother’s migration from Ghana to Sweden through invocations of oceanic space “where memory is fluid, submerged, and constantly in motion.” Twum pairs a speculative voiceover with home videos that show her mother in moments before leaving Ghana and overlays family photographs with aerial footage of the ocean. Here, as in *Cry Baby*, water is a medium of diasporic entanglement that both connects and separates. Alongside peers like Twum and Ablett, I see Diakité as part of a cohort of AfroNordic artists reckoning with their parents’ migration stories amid larger black Atlantic histories. Here, the AfroNordic is a frame of reference, an assertion of presence, a network of collaborators, and a primary audience in the process of teasing out the relationships between our individual experiences, family histories, and collective narratives.

As mentioned, Diakité developed *Cry Baby* based on childhood memories of growing up in a small Swedish town and identifying with the affective tropes drawn from black American culture that she encountered in reality TV programs. These encounters shaped Diakité’s understanding of crying and emotional expression as black characters and cast members became references for black affective politics due to the artist’s lack of access to local Afrodiasporic community, lack of access to Ivorian culture, and in the absence of her African parent. These conditions correspond to what AfroDanish feminist scholar Elizabeth Löwe Hunter (2023, 2) defines as “representational deprivation” as a result of living in “black racial isolation” in Nordic white-majority societies. For Hunter, these conditions are

Portuguese-born, Copenhagen-based antidisiplinary artist Sall Lam Toro’s conjuring of queer and trans black ancestors in the performance *Dysphoric Seas/Diasporic Seas* (2021) and the graphical piece *Dis Body: Poetics of Self-Aesthetics* (2021). Toro attunes to a nonbiological inheritance, a trans ancestral connection disrupted by colonialism and transatlantic slavery, as they imagine oceanic waters as conduits for the cultural memory of black gender fluidities and self-determination.



Figure 6. Amber Ablett, *My Fathers Left*, 2023–24, research project, workshops, installation of wooden construction and madras fabric, sound, and video. Installation view at Borealis Festival for Experimental Music, Bergen (2024). Photo: Thor Brødreskift. Courtesy of Amber Ablett.



Figure 7. Jonelle Twum, *I Think of Silences When I Think of You* (still), 2023. Video, 9 min. Courtesy of Jonelle Twum.

particular to black people who belong to the first generation in their family to be both European and black and who thus lack culturally specific resources and prior knowledge to navigate this position. Although these individuals, as described by Hunter, do not necessarily have firsthand migration experience, their identity formation is tied to the migration experiences of their black parent(s). With *Cry Baby*, Diakité works through the emotional pain associated with her experience of black racial isolation (her father's absence, growing up without her extended Ivorian family) while reflecting on how this very racial isolation has affected her ability to express that emotional pain through crying. The emotional charge of *Cry Baby*'s soundtrack leads me to consider how affective expression is represented in the work's visuals. Although these visuals do not directly sample online imagery, I propose that they reference a powerful form mediating black affect online, namely, the black reaction GIF.

Reworking the Black Reaction GIF

As a staple of internet aesthetics, the GIF—a series of still images composited into an infinitely repeatable four- to six-second silent moving image loop—is an apt format for artists seeking to engage with digital culture (Quaintance 2013). One of the GIF's most prolific forms is the frame-grab GIF, which appropriates and annotates pop cultural imagery or televisual sequences. The frame-grab GIF rose to prominence in the 2000s and 2010s on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr because of its ability to condense and circulate affect.

As a subcategory of the frame-grab GIF, the black reaction GIF has featured centrally in analyses of the perils of the racialized circulation of affect on the internet. Studying the connection between GIFs, affect, and blackness, Lauren Michele Jackson (2017; 2019) has influentially addressed the use of “digital blackface” in nonblack social media users' consumption of reaction GIFs featuring black figures. Jackson argues that the viral circulation of black reaction GIFs as cultural commentary or pithy reaction in a range of affective economies shoulders the weight of affective expression for nonblack internet users. “We are your sass, your nonchalance, your fury, your delight, your annoyance, your happy dance, your diva, your shade, your ‘yaas’ moments,” Jackson writes, describing the emotional hyperbole online culture ascribes to black embodiment (Jackson 2017, para. 12).

Building on Jackson's commentary on race and digital imagery, Legacy Russell (2024, 19) argues that the looped format of the black reaction GIF feeds into a visual economy predicated on the dehumanization of black people:

Black reaction GIFs provide a container for the holding and control of Black affect—one that performs and circulates without permission of, or payment to, those depicted within them. Fordist in their production and mass consumption, this digital material disassociates the Black body from a living breathing selfhood and makes the Blackness within it a caricature, a cartoon.

In Russell's account, the black reaction GIF's objectifying and decontextualizing logics conscript the black figures they depict to perform relentless affective labor as black reaction GIFs become subject to extraction, replication, and accelerated transmission. It is important to note that black reaction GIFs feature predominantly black American figures whose visibility in popular culture translates into hypervisibility in this online format. Yet the dynamics Jackson and Russell describe exist across Eurocentric cultures, perpetuating what AfroFinnish researcher and community organizer Monica Gathuo (2021, 46), reflecting on the cultural appropriation of blackness by nonblack people of color in the Nordics, calls "the fantasy of the Black Other."

I argue that *Cry Baby* simultaneously participates in and challenges the conventions of the black reaction GIF, particularly its exploitation on digital platforms. Whereas internet culture rapidly circulates reaction GIFs, *Cry Baby* invites its audience to pause, presenting eleven GIFs together in a single browser window and prompting sustained engagement with them for the duration of the work's twenty-minute soundtrack. Furthermore, Diakité reimagines the expectations and burdens of black affective performance and labor online, as identified by Jackson and Russell. *Cry Baby* reclaims the GIF as automated affective repetition, creating a space in which repetition becomes self-determined rather than purely exploitive.

To expand on the possibilities of self-directed automaticity in *Cry Baby*'s use of the GIF form, black American queer of color theorist Amber Jamilla Musser's (2018, 141) discussion of racialized affective automaticity in contemporary art provides a useful perspective. Musser discusses looped video performances by women of color artists that lean into an ambivalence around the automatic and the authentic and subvert the demands of normative chronology to propose "the idea of inhabiting an affective reality in which progress is not the goal, but a masturbatory excess of tears is" (Musser 2018, 132). The loop allows artworks to "foreclose narratives of progress and focus on the pleasures of dwelling on the unfinished" (Musser 2018, 142). Musser (2018, 120) contends that artists develop such strategies in response to the racist notion prevalent in post-Enlightenment thought that black and brown people do not feel but are merely governed by "affectability, reactivity and responsiveness"—the same notion found in Linnaeus's race

biology and underlying the phenomenon of the black reaction GIF. Artists can reclaim automaticity and stylized affective expression with looped temporalities that “[render] corporeality and emotionality suspect, positioning them in relation to theatricality and insincerity and against ideologies of authenticity” (Musser 2018, 121).

Cry Baby explores the pleasures of emotional automaticity and inauthenticity through the GIF. This approach recalls how, in porn studies, the frame-grab GIF has been associated with “nonnarrative pleasures,” as its brief and recursive form lends itself to the automated repetition of concentrated affective moments, such as fleeting facial expressions (Hester, Jones, and Taylor-Harman 2015). The looping GIFs in *Cry Baby* highlight the figure’s embodied performance of dissemblance and her refusal of straightforward affective disclosure. This artificiality is particularly evident in a GIF that shows the figure weeping theatrically behind dark sunglasses, her brow furrowing, her mouth opening into a sob, before reverting to a deadpan expression and swiftly exiting the frame (Figure 8). This looped performance of campy crying followed by deadpan indifference registers as a refusal to express sorrow in a straightforwardly legible way.²⁵ For black American cultural theorist Tina Post (2022, 22), deadpan performance walks precisely this “affective tightrope of (in)sincerity, (in)vulnerability, and (dis)honesty in its (non)revelation,” in a self-reflexive simultaneous “lack” and “abundance” of expression. The GIF of Diakité’s figure crying behind dark sunglasses engages in this form of oscillation between withholding and displaying emotion, sending the message “I want you to know that I don’t want to show my feelings” (Barthes 1978, 42). As Diakité (2025) put it in my interview with her, “you can use shades to protect you, holding back your tears, and you can always connect with this coolness. That’s such a powerful tool for blackness. . . . ‘You can’t see my eyes. You don’t need to see them. You can see your own reflection and how you look at me.’” Thus, more than mere discretion, this GIF demonstrates the artist’s keen awareness that “the stakes of legibility run high for minoritarian subjects, who often encounter overdetermined expectations of when and how their subjectivity should be (il)legible via their embodiment” (Post 2022, 13).

Through its embrace of automated repetition and in/authentic emotional performance, *Cry Baby* both mirrors and interrogates the black reaction GIF. Yet *Cry Baby* nurtures “the comfort of existing in the loop, of existing

25. I draw on Susan Sontag’s (1999, 62) theorization of camp as exaggeration or theatricalization for the purpose of humor and/or critique, particularly her argument that “one is drawn to camp when one realizes that ‘sincerity’ is not enough.”



Figure 8. Lydia Östberg Diakité, *Cry Baby* (still, detail), 2020. Courtesy of Lydia Östberg Diakité.

in repetition, of existing in an affective and emotional reality of one's own choosing" (Musser 2018, 143). Furthermore, the GIFs' autobiographical situatedness through the artist's choice of location ensures that they never become detached "from a living breathing selfhood," as Russell describes. While invoking the trope of the black reaction GIF, *Cry Baby* subverts its logics through strategic affective ambiguity and autobiographical grounding. In this way, *Cry Baby* claims an online "microclimate" (Sharpe 2017) sheltered from but conscious of the weathering effects of the antiblack internet and tropes like the black reaction GIF.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the complex affective tenor of Lydia Östberg Diakité's *Cry Baby*—a digital artwork that encourages AfroNordic audiences to explore "how to release pain" (Diakité 2025). I argued that the work reflects the artist's reconstruction of the troll or the trickster, as an internet and folklore figure, to claim the aesthetic possibilities of ambiguous, bittersweet affective expression. What makes *Cry Baby* a particularly generative work for exploring contemporary AfroNordic cultural and affective politics is its extensive grappling with how the meanings ascribed to crying are shaped by the weeping body's position in relation to racial formations, nation-states, kinship relations, and gender norms. For example, *Cry Baby* deviates from

normative white Nordic affect by insisting that crying can be a sensuous practice for AfroNordic people to nurture for its reparative potential under conditions of Nordic coloniality. At the same time, *Cry Baby* navigates black affective politics disseminated through internet and pop culture characterized by racist expectations of black affective excess—expectations that Western pop culture has particularly placed on black American people—and intracommunal counsels against crying. *Cry Baby* works within and against internet tropes like the black reaction GIF and viral online content to disrupt distinctions between sincere and performed emotion. The work thus takes a self-reflexive approach to disclosing Diakité's personal narrative about healing hurt arising from paternal estrangement—a narrative told through the element of water and the motif of tears—on the internet and for art audiences. *Cry Baby* responds to the need for spaces where AfroNordic people can witness and value their affective lives, articulating a localized perspective on black affective politics.

As visual art continues to become an increasingly prevalent context in which AfroNordic people and communities locate the points where our lived experiences converge and diverge, close readings of artworks can play an important role in teasing out specificities, references, and interventions. The analysis of artworks' formal and thematic concerns can contribute contextualization of AfroNordic artists' choices and ways of navigating local and diasporic cultural codes. In this multidisciplinary network of AfroNordic scholarship and art making, works like *Cry Baby* are not merely illustrations of the critical concepts with which they resonate—such as “Nordic exceptionalism” (Habel and Sawyer 2014; McEachrane 2014), “representational deprivation” (Hunter 2023, 2), and “liminality” (Kelekay 2022, 31)—but theoretical contributions in their own right that call attention to the stakes of contemporary AfroNordic cultural production.

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