

When racism becomes individualised: Writing about experiences of racialisation among adult adoptees and adoptive parents of Sweden

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With its 50,000 transnational adoptees, Sweden has adopted the most foreign-born children in the world in relation to its native population. Moreover, with a history of transnational adoption going back to Jewish refugee children in the 1930s and Finnish war children during WWII, Sweden also pioneered this specific child welfare and international migration practice in the first place. This demographic and historical background plays an important role in upholding Sweden's image in the international community as a left-liberal and progressive country. Steeped in an antiracist and feminist ideology, adoption is represented as an act of international solidarity and global mothering, the adoptees as reconciliatory bridges between cultures, and the adopters as child rescuers.¹ Moreover, transnational and transracial adoption is not a contested and controversial issue in Sweden compared to the US or the UK, where the practice has been criticized by both antiracists and feminists, of whom several are adoptees themselves and in some cases also adoptive parents, for perpetuating the power imbalance between the West and its former colonies, and for violating the reproductive rights of women of colour.²

However, from the end of the 1990s, transracial adoptees have started to be heard of for the first time in the public sphere of Sweden in the form of memoir works, and recently a new generation of Swedish adoptive parents have also begun to publish autobiographies. Are these contemporary self-narratives challenging Swedish images of transnational adoption, and what are they telling when it comes to the relationship between adoption and race? This article contextualises and examines a selected corpus of these recently published adoption memoirs written by Swedish adult adoptees and adoptive parents, and focuses on the specific experiences of racialisation expressed within the texts. The article also looks at the differences and similarities between these two adoption triad groups in terms of attitudes to issues of racism, and strategies to cope with racialisation.³ Finally, the article suggests that it may be useful to bring in adoptive families within studies of race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, to be able to grasp and understand the contemporary social fabric of not only Sweden, but of other Nordic countries as well.

Sweden as the world's leading adopting country

Sweden passed its adoption law in 1917, at a time when the antique Roman custom of adoption made its sudden return as a legal institute in practically every Western country as a result of the rapid modernisation process, the ascendancy of the nuclear family, and the professionalisation of child welfare (Berebitsky 2000; Zelizer 1985). Between 1918-2006, excluding stepparent adoptions, it is estimated that 50,000 domestic adoptions of Swedish-

¹ At the same time, this post-war self-image of Sweden as a progressive and antiracist country is gradually sounding more and more problematic, given the fact that Sweden has recently implemented harsh asylum policies and practices, which among others have resulted in the troublesome existence of deeply traumatised "apathetic refugee children".

² Transnational adoption is the term being used throughout the article instead of international adoption, as the last term risks to obscure and conceal the fact that it is a matter of a one-way traffic of children from the non-West to the West, while transracial adoption is equally a one-way traffic of children within Western countries from non-white minorities to the white majority population.

³ The third adoption triad member, the birth parents and particularly the birth mothers, are unfortunately still not heard of in the political debate and public discourse on adoption in Sweden.

born children have been processed in the courts, of whom the majority came from poor working-class families or were born by young and unmarried mothers, as adoption is intimately linked to issues of class, gender and sexuality (Lindgren 2006; Nordlöf 2001).

Sweden also has a unique history of adopting foreign-born children. At the end of the 1930s, just before the outbreak of the war, Sweden took in 650 Jewish refugee children as foster children from Nazi-dominated Central Europe, and during the war years, the greatest temporary child removal program ever took place, when 70,000 children from war-torn Finland were transported to foster homes in neutral Sweden (Kavén 1994; Lomfors 1996). At the end of the war, hundreds of more unaccompanied refugee children were brought into the country, ranging from surviving concentration camp children to children of Nazis (Lindner 1988). In the end, at least 10,000 of these Jewish, Finnish and German foster children came to stay in adoptive homes in Sweden in the post-war period. In other words, Sweden pioneered the practice of transnational adoption itself, even if these refugee children were not meant to stay permanently as adoptees from the beginning.

Transnational adoption in its current meaning, which is basically the adoption of non-white children from non-Western countries in the postcolonial Third world, was initiated in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-53), and here again Sweden played an important role (Hübinette 2003). Thereafter, transnational adoption started to increase steadily until it finally surpassed domestic adoption of Swedish-born children from the end of the 1960s, and Korea continued to be the main supplying country until the late 1980s. South American countries like Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala and Colombia, other Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and nowadays China, African countries like Ethiopia and South Africa, and to a lesser extent Eastern European countries like Romania and Bulgaria, have also throughout the years turned up as important countries of origin in Swedish adoption statistics.

Between 1957-2006 it is estimated that 50,000 children from over 150 different countries have been placed in Sweden for adoption, and this means that the country harbours the second highest number of transnational adoptees only after the US, and the highest proportion in the world in relation to its native-born population (Selman 2002). The majority of the adoptees are born in Asia, around two thirds, and around 60 percent are women, a gender imbalance which is caused partly by the fact that girls are less valued in many countries of origin, and partly by the fact that most adopters prefer girls for boys. Finally, the absolute majority of Swedish adoptive parents, whether they are couples or singles, or hetero- or homosexual, are white Swedes belonging to the upper strata of the Swedish society, while Swedes with a non-Western and migrant background or coming from lower social classes are heavily underrepresented.

Swedish discourses on race and adoption

We will now look at a small sample of selected text extracts taken from self-narratives written by Swedish adult adoptees and adoptive parents, which have been published from the end of the 1990s. The article focuses on how transracial adoptees and adoptive parents write about race, and on the intersecting racialized and gendered experiences expressed within the texts from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The use of the concept of racialisation is prompted by the conviction that systematic differentiation and discrimination based on phenotypical bodily features is a naturalised and daily practice in ordinary life in a Western culture and society deeply ingrained with colonialism and imperialism, and that racism is not just limited

to odd individuals, political parties or government institutions (Essed 1991; Mattsson 2005). Racism is in other words not just a question of right-wing political extremism, Nazism and Fascism, as it is mostly perceived and understood to be in contemporary Sweden.

For a long time, it has been taken for granted that Sweden stood outside the histories and practices of Western colonialism and imperialism, and that race is not a relevant concept at all to make use of to be able to understand contemporary Swedish society. However, recently this presupposition has been challenged by a number of studies using a postcolonial feminist and critical intersectional theoretical perspective, and showing that racialisation is at work at all levels of the culture and everyday life in Sweden in different gendered forms, just like in any other contemporary Western society (Ericsson 2007; Lundström 2007; de los Reyes & Kamali 2005; de los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari 2002; Sandell & Mulinari 2006; Sawyer 2002; Schmauch 2006).⁴

Because of this public silence regarding race, transracial adoption has never developed into a political issue in Sweden like it did in the US and in the UK during the same decades, where indigenous and minority populations belonging to the civil rights movements vocally and strongly challenged the rights of white people to adopt non-white children, while feminists in the same countries have argued that it violates the reproductive rights of poor and non-white women who are deemed to be unworthy of being mothers (Herrman & Kasper 1992; Kirton 2000). Contemporary postcolonial feminist critique which recently has been expressed by adult transracial adoptees in many Western countries, claiming that transnational adoption is a continuation of the power imbalance between the West and its former colonies, and that the practice is perpetuating gender inequality in the countries of origin and a racial hierarchy in the adopting countries, is therefore with few exceptions still not often heard of in the public debate in Sweden (Trenka, Oparah & Shin 2006).

Autoethnographic body narratives of adult adoptees

Recently, several autobiographical works written by adult adoptees have come out in Sweden, almost creating a genre of its own and turning the adoptee from merely being an object of political debate and academic research to an independent subject voicing her own perspectives on the state of being a transracial adoptee in contemporary Sweden (French 2005; Holmström 1998; Jo, Ellingsen, Hilmersson & Johansson 2006; Lindström & Trotzig 2003; von Melen 1998, 2000; Trotzig 1996; Åsbäck 2003).⁵ The self-narratives written by adult adoptees can be seen as examples of so-called body narratives which are recognizable from classical autobiographical works of African Americans and Black Caribbeans like Toni Morrison and Frantz Fanon, and where the testimonies and experiences are inscribed on, mediated through, and told by the way of the racialised body. These adoption memoirs can also be compared to the autoethnographic texts, which the postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt define as follows:

A third and final idiosyncratic term that appears in what follows is 'autoethnography' or 'autoethnographic expression'. I use these terms to refer to instances when colonized subjects

⁴ Race is not a question of a biological essence, but a social construction going back to the history of colonialism, as well as a category linked to institutionalised power relations within the society at large.

⁵ It is worth mentioning that it is still only in Sweden that a substantial collection of self-narratives written by adult transracial adoptees have been published, and there are few books at all written by adoptees in the other Nordic countries, in spite of the fact that there are huge adoptee populations living there as well. Official statistics say that there are almost 20,000 international adoptees in Denmark, almost 15,000 in Norway, around 3,000 in Finland, and several hundreds in both Iceland and the Faeroe Islands.

undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (Pratt 1992: 7).

So with the background of this contextualisation, what are the adoptees' self-narratives actually telling regarding issues of race and racism? The citations that are used here are deriving from Anna von Melen's *Samtal med vuxna adopterade* from 1998, and the anthologies *Hitta hem* from 2003, *Fra det fjerne Øst till det hvite Nord* from 2006, and Anette Masui's *Att odla papaya på Österlen* from 1998. Generally, race and racism are seldom if ever mentioned as explicit words within the corpus of texts. The following extracts have instead been selected as they centre around the non-white body of the adoptees in some way or another.

- Are you sitting here spreading SARS?! Surprised, me and my friend look up at the man at the bench behind us. Firstly, I don't understand: 'What does he mean? Why is he saying that to us...' Then I understand, it is only me who have dark hair and slanted eyes, and my friend who is also adopted from Korea. We turn the back to the man, to mark that we don't want to talk to him. – I've heard that you Chinese people eat dead animals. I guess that is why you are spreading SARS... I now realise that the man on the bench will not give up. – We are not from China... we are saying carefully. (Hanna Sofia, adopted from Korea, in Jo et al. 2006: 44)

It is not an underestimation to say that there are plenty of such experiences of racialisation within the autobiographical texts, while they at the same time are not linked to racism, but rather just mentioned as ordinary naturalised events, and as part of the everyday lives of transracial adoptees of Sweden. Hanna Sofia's story can of course only be analyzed as a reflection of racialisation, as both she and her friend are adoptees from Korea, and are therefore linked metonymically by the way of their bodies and appearances to East Asia by the white Swedish man. East Asia is usually in the public imaginary often collapsed into one country, namely China, and linked to a whole repertoire of images and stereotypes such as cruelty towards animals, overpopulation, bad hygiene and dangerous diseases (Lee 1999).

12 years old, in shorts and t-shirt, I am walking along the beach and a middle-aged man stops me and asks what time it is. Kind and 'service minded' me answer with a smile. And he, this middle-aged seaman, starts his tirade: - Where are you from? – Ah, Korea. – I have been there many times. – Let's meet for a beer or so? My blossoming died with that smile. My whole teenage period disappeared in too big clothes (men's clothes) and the make-up account was zero. Today, I can say yes to my femininity, but never will I put on something short and high-heeled shoes [...] The seamen have been replaced by 'businessmen' who have been in Thailand, the Philippines, or in both places. They also know the 'seaman tirade', and their place is the bar. Even today, I avoid having a watch on me. (Anna, adopted from Korea, in Lindström & Trotzig 2003: 101)

Anna's narrative reflects a specific gendered version of sexualised racialisation which is directed towards women of colour in general, and which goes back to the exotic fantasies and colonial practices at the time of the classical imperialist period, where native women in the colonies were perceived and treated as always accessible for white Western men, whether the former were categorised as prostitutes, concubines or just war booties, and whether the latter were coming from affluent or poor backgrounds (Stoler 2002). Scholars with a postcolonial feminist theoretical perspective have also identified a specific Western gendered and sexualised fetish for East and Southeast Asian women in particular, underpinned by a

combination of nostalgic colonial romanticism and American Cold War politics and military prostitution (Kang 1993; Ling 1999).

Anna is also referring to the contemporary context of white Western seamen and businessmen going to East and Southeast Asia either to find a “mistress” or a wife. The recent mass tourism to Southeast Asia, where institutionalised prostitution constitutes an important part of the tourist industry, and the contemporary mass migration of East and Southeast Asian women to Northern Europe, and Sweden in particular, for marriage to white Western men also plays a part in the upholding of this sexualised racialisation. As a huge proportion of the transnational adoptees of Sweden are women from the same countries as the wives, they always risk to be taken as a migrant Asian wife of a white Swedish man in the public sphere, and as migrancy and migrants are linked to lower social classes while adoptive families usually belong to the elite, it becomes crucial for adoptees like Anna to counter this risk of misrecognition by performing a certain kind of femininity which cannot be read as proletarian, and which connotes the sexual respectability and decency linked to the white bourgeois woman (Skeggs 1997). The spectre of the “Asian mistress” is in other words haunting the female adoptees from East and Southeast Asia, who want to be taken as the Swedish middle- and upper-class women they were raised as.⁶

I have always felt like I am any kind of Swede. When I see other, well, immigrants: how they look, how they behave, how they are in general, I am on the Swedish side. I see them as immigrants. Sometimes, I think: 'Look, there's a darkie!'" (Åsa, adopted from Colombia, in von Melen 1998: 130-31)

My hair is black, my eyes dark brown, and I am uncannily similar to an... (=immigrant) you know...but I am not one of those. It is very important to say that. My heart is filled with the same colour as yours, I speak, I live and I eat like you. I am dreaming in Swedish – oh yes! I close my eyes and think of open landscapes and the good old North. [...] But yet, there is something, both you and I know it, which is not fitting. (Lasse, adopted from Iran, in Masui 1997: 135)

It is almost comical how much energy I have used to melt into different situations, and how I always succeeded if there were no other adopted Asians there, having the same kind of survival strategy. I just controlled that there were no other Asians there but me. (Anna, adopted from Korea, in Lindström & Trotzig 2003: 95)

On the other hand, it would be a simplification just to say that the process of racialisation only comes from the side of the Swedish majority population, as adoptees like Åsa and Lasse also apparently racialise other individuals and groups coming from the postcolonial world, and also migrants from their own birth countries. In this way, it becomes clear that the adoptees have more or less fully internalised colonial and racial stereotypes, even if they biologically are non-whites themselves. Given that they have grown up and usually live in wholly white neighbourhoods and surroundings, this internalisation of racist images and fantasies is neither a surprise nor something deviant. To avoid being taken for a non-Western migrant, Anna even went to great pains to avoid other non-white people and adoptees.

⁶ This does not mean that we are condemning the forming of interracial families *per se*. Furthermore, we are not claiming that all white Western men who marry yellow Asian women are expressing colonial fetish desires, nor do we categorise all of the latter as “bar girls” or even prostitutes. For critical postcolonial feminist studies on interracial relations between Westerners and Asians on a global level, see for example Constable (2003) and Kelsky (2001).

The third strategy (28- years and above) was a conscious claiming of the Asian identity. Even if I've always liked to have Asian, mostly Japanese, objects around me, it has always been like a flirtation with my Asian appearance. And a game or even an exploitation. Now, I became even more conscious and consistent and used it in a much more pronounced manner in my own ways. (Lena, adopted from Korea, in Lindström & Trotzig 2003: 112)

He looks like how anyone would expect how a martial arts instructor should look like, with East Asian appearance and a rather short, just like the kung fu masters of the movies. His Asian appearance gives him a different credibility as an instructor. He fits perfectly into the image which the young practitioners have regarding martial arts, ever since they saw Jackie Chan in a video film for the first time. (Daniel, adopted from Korea, in Lindström & Trotzig 2003: 163)

Furthermore, adoptees are not just passive victims of racialisation processes, they are also active agents and in a sense also perpetrators, as they also make use of their situation as a more or less conscious strategy to answer to the expectations of the white majority population, and gain a certain kind of acceptance or even appreciation. Lena and Daniel are both reproducing racial stereotypes of East and Southeast Asians in their most gendered forms. By performing as an Asian geisha-like woman and as an Asian martial arts expert respectively, Lena and Daniel are making use of their East Asian bodies and appearances to get certain privileges and to become recognisable and comprehensible probably both to themselves and to white Swedes. At the same time, they are also reproducing colonial and racist stereotypes, as well as assuring that these stereotypes are continuing to be taken as "common sense" among white Swedes, who may well perceive and also treat them as living and embodied Oriental fantasies.

This reading does not mean that the adoptees are condemned as "stupid Uncle Toms" as they sometimes are criticized to be by minority representatives, nor that this voluntary self-racialisation means that adoptees have acquired and internalised a false consciousness of some sorts. Rather, colonial and racist stereotypes and representations may well be practically the only "role models" adoptees have of their countries of origin and their inhabitants, given that they grew up and are living among white Swedes, and of course very often disseminated by the way of Western popular culture.⁷ Lena's choice to make use of her East Asian body to mimic a Japanese geisha, points to the still rather unexplored and by all means politically incorrect performance of gendered and racialised stereotypes among the minorities themselves. In the former extract, Anna distanced herself from the very same stereotype, but here Lena talks about her embodiment of an "Asian mistress" as a voluntary and conscious act. Another way of looking at Anna's and Lena's different strategies, is to say that while Anna is identifying with a white Western middle-class femininity that is merely the norm itself, Lena is indirectly criticizing colonial Western images of Asian women by choosing to stage and perform this stereotype, thereby highlighting its constructed and fantasised nature, and trying to mock, expose and denaturalise it. The American postcolonial feminist bell hooks (1992) also argues that representatives from minority groups can certainly be allured by and drawn to Western images and fantasies of themselves, as they at least offer a sense of being recognised and affirmed when they previously had been overlooked and invisible. So in this way, it is possible to say that adoptees both challenge as well as reproduce racialised and gendered stereotypes.

⁷ As a male adoptee from Korea, I have of course myself encountered and admittedly also answered to and embraced such stereotypes and representations now and then. I once was madly in love with both high cultural and popular cultural stereotypes of East Asia and East Asians, and for a period of time I also liked to dress up and act like an "Asian businessman" who could well have been taken from any racist television or newspaper commercial in Sweden.

The experiences of racialisation as expressed within the life-narratives, differ from the general perception of what it means to be an adult transracial adoptee in Sweden, and probably also in other Nordic countries. By way of these self-narratives, an unproblematic life among the white elite becomes punctuated and interrupted by the fact that contemporary Swedish society and culture seems to be imbued with racial and colonial thinking. With the background of being the most “integrated” non-white migrants in any Western country, transracial adoptees are of course in no way a danger to the upholding of a perceived and threatened cultural homogeneity and social cohesion in contemporary Western countries. The fact that transracial adoptees are no different from white Swedes apart from their non-white bodies and appearances, make it possible to say that no other variables than race are at work when adoptees are treated differently in a discriminating manner. It might therefore be suggested that the everyday life experiences of transracial adoptees could be the best way of measuring certain degrees and intensities of racism in any Western society, as other variables like culture, language and religion are completely absent.

The voices of the adoptive parents

And now we come to the self-narratives of the adoptive parents. When adoptive parents write memoirs, they usually write about how it felt to realize that they could not get any biological children, how they tried to get pregnant by way of in-vitro fertilisation, the sometimes difficult decision to finally adopt, and the new life as an adoptive family together with the adopted child. We will here instead only focus on how the adopters in their books describe their experiences of racialisation, as there is no doubt that the role of the adoptive parents is of great importance for the adoptive children’s situation when it comes to growing up in the society at large. The adoptive parents’ different attitudes and strategies to deal and cope with their child’s non-white body and “foreign” appearance in relation to racism, are therefore important to examine if we want to understand the environment in which adopted children grow up and form their own image of themselves and the world.

The adoption memoirs examined are seven books written by Swedish adoptive parents, partly autobiographical texts and partly texts with the character of instruction manuals for prospective and new adoptive parents, which started to come out from the mid-1990s. The analysed books are: Eva Brenckert’s *Äntligen adoptivförälder* from 2002, Solveig Bergqvist-Larsson’s *Låtsasmorsa* from 1999, Anna Elias’ *Det livet ger* from 2000, Petter Lidbeck’s *Linnea från Yujiang* from 1997, Kerstin Weigl’s *Längtansbarnen* from 1997, Lena Wennberg’s *En riktig mamma?* from 1999, and finally Katarina Wittgard’s *Vägen till ett barn* from 1994.

Included as empirical material within the study are also texts extracts taken from an adoptive parents’ discussion group on the Internet, Adoptera.nu, as well as information publications produced and disseminated by the government body MIA, the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority, and written for and directed towards adopters. Race and racism is not a central issue in none of these texts, but now and then it is mentioned, since all adoptive parents get in contact with racialisation processes in one way or another in their everyday lives. There are several examples in the texts showing that adoptive parents often problematise racism, and they mostly see it as a problem impossible to escape, but also as a problem which parents to non-white adopted children have to deal with, using different strategies. One of the most common ways in these texts of relating to racism is the antiracist strategy of colour blindness, which basically means to claim that we are all individuals, no matter how we look, and arguing that physical differences are completely unimportant.

I don't see that my children have slanted eyes or look different. You just don't do that as a parent. I am proud of my children, of their appearance. (Birgitta, in Brenckert 2002: 62)

This strategy has its roots in the 1968 movement, and is certainly a sympathetic way of dealing with biological and anatomical differences. It can also be said to be a common standpoint for the earlier and older generations of Swedish adoptive parents, who often as antiracists and feminists took an active part in the social movements following the revolution of 1968. The strategy of colour blindness can also be found among adult adoptees, and it is reasonable to assume that those adoptees are strongly influenced by their adoptive parents, as well as the Swedish antiracist movement at large. Colour blindness can be considered as an important strategy to make adoptive children (and other racialised groups) feeling equal to persons with white Western appearances, instead of provoking uncomfortable feelings of looking strange and being less worth. On the other hand, this strategy also has its internal problems: When we do not consider differences as important, at the same time numerous other individuals in a racist society as ours do so, and the adopted child will get experiences which are difficult, and sometimes even impossible to talk about, since the differences which cause those experiences are viewed as unimportant or even non-existing.

A common pattern in the texts is that when adoptive parents talk about racism, they often turn the question to instead being an issue about the child's national, ethnic and cultural origin, and a subject of having or not having contact with their "roots".

My daughter says that she firstly identifies with her personal interests and talents, and that the ethnic thing comes as number two. She thinks that is it irritating when people only sees the ethnic aspect, and not her unique personality. This doesn't mean that she thinks that the ethnic thing is not important; It is just that she doesn't want it to come first, covering everything else which she is, having her own ideas, feelings and so on. Sure, we have dealt with the ethnic thing, discussed back and forth, and it has been important for her to talk a lot about it. She doesn't want to deny her origin, she doesn't just want it to be what she is. (anonymous, from Adoptera.nu March 2006)

In this quote, we can see how the child feels uncomfortable when people racialise her, although she primarily wants to be an ordinary individual. However, the adoptive parent in the quote interprets this as logically connected to the child's attitude to her origin. This pattern is so common that it can almost not be questioned, unless we realise that the situation of being subjected to for instances racist jokes has really no connection to a person's origin. The racist joke comes from the outside, from a racist structure, while a persons origin and her attitude to it is something else, and really not the same thing as being subjected to racialisation practices in the society!

Our interpretation of why this interest in origin and "roots" is so strong among both adoptive parents and adult adoptees, is that both groups have realised that the strategy of colour blindness does not fully work, but instead causes the problem with suppressed feelings from experiences of racialisation and discrimination. So accordingly, the adoptive parents try the opposite strategy, namely to considering and accepting the (real or imagined) differences, and transforming them into something positive instead of being a negative and uncomfortable detail. When people acknowledge differences, they also in a way accept the nationalist and racist theories claiming that people really are different and have different hereditary characteristics, and which make them belong to a certain geographical place in the world more or less automatically. So when adoptive parents start to acknowledge differences (origin

and “roots”) instead of denying them (colour blindness), they also give up the antiracist and democratic idea of sameness, and instead make use of the concept of difference grounded within nationalist and racist ideologies. We argue that the great majority of adoptive parents express and espouse the hegemonic antiracist ideology of Sweden, which is colour blindness, but they also make use of the idea of difference in order to make the children feel better – so the ideological standpoint is suppressed in favour of pragmatic reasons so to speak. And now we are able to discern an interesting pattern: Both when we focus on difference (related to the idea of origin and “roots”), and when we emphasize sameness (related to the idea of colour blindness), racism is often made invisible, although racism is a structure which evidently causes transracial adoptees serious problems, but instead individual aspects are emphasized.

MIA, the Swedish Inter-country Adoptions Authority, plays a central and crucial role in forming the common discourse on discrimination in relation to adoptive families. The following quote comes from MIA’s handbook for social workers responsible for the screening of adoptive parents:

Many adoptive parents have a fear that their children will not be fully accepted by their environment – because they look different. Research has shown, though, that the children that get bullied do not experience this out of their appearance, but rather because of their inner insecurity. (from MIA’s homepage, March 2006)

There is a lot of research being made, showing that this is not true. Appearance really matters in a lot of contexts, and racialisation is assumed to play a central role when people are getting discriminated at (de los Reyes & Kamali 2005; Schmauch 2006). Our main critique against MIA’s and the Swedish state’s standpoint is however that what they really do when they write like this, is that they say that bullying depends on the victim’s inner qualities. That is nothing else but “blaming the victim”, instead of blaming the perpetrator, which is the culture and the society at large. The tendency to seek the causes of problems in the individual’s abilities and disabilities, instead of in the discriminatory structures and practices, is an overall pattern in the analysed material, namely the texts written by adoptive parents as well as the government texts. Adoptive parents are used to be seen as people who take a big responsibility, due to them adopting transnationally and transracially, and to their privileged socioeconomic status. Our hypothesis is that this cultural and social status of theirs, make them always think of adoption related problems as their own problems, and as we can see this individualistic point of view is strengthened by the authorities.

Conclusion: The relationship between race and adoption in a Swedish context

The self-narratives of the adult adoptees contain many different testimonies of everyday racialisation and sexualisation, and before the publication of these memoirs, such stories were not even brought up as the general public view is still very much that adoptees are not being discriminated at like migrants are, and as the relationship between race and adoption has been such an unexplored issue in Sweden contrary to the previously mentioned situations in the US and the UK. On the other hand, the experiences of racialisation are usually just cropping up in the texts without any kind of socially and politically conscious contextualisation, and they are rarely named as racism, as if the adoptees are not really aware of what they are subjected to other than feeling uncomfortable for inhabiting a non-white body now and then. This apparent unwillingness to identify and name racism is linked to the general public disinclination to discuss issues of racialisation in contemporary Swedish society, except when it is directly connected to extreme rightists or outright Nazis. When it comes to the adoptees specifically,

the refusal to see and identify the role of race within their own lives, is without doubt also a reflection of similar attitudes among most of the adoptive parents.

Moreover, adoptees do not seem to be any different from other white Swedes when it comes to attitudes towards non-adopted non-white migrants. There are instances in the memoir works when adoptees distance themselves openly towards migrants, and there are also examples of hostile and xenophobic expressions and wordings towards non-Swedes. In the more extreme cases, adoptees even distance themselves from other transracial adoptees to avoid being (mis)taken and (mis)recognised for a “Third World proletarian migrant”. Another relationship to the non-white body among some adoptees is instead to make use of it as a kind of an essentialist identity project by trying to perform and embody Western racialised and sexualised stereotypes within the framework of the colonial imaginary. By becoming readable and comprehensible for the white majority population according to classical colonial discourses, these adoptees turn their otherwise “uncomfortable” and “useless” non-white bodies into objects of value and practical tools to gain certain privileges, and perhaps to become culturally understandable and socially acceptable both to themselves and to others. So even if adoptees are subjected to different experiences of racialisation and sexualisation in their everyday lives, and perhaps even more than non-adopted migrants who usually grow up and live with their families and communities, they also racialise other people of colour and in the end themselves, and thereby they risk to reproduce and reinforce colonial stereotypes of race and gender.

Regarding the memoir works of the adoptive parents, there are two main implications of the strategies described within these texts that are problematic, and therefore important to consider. Adoptive parents tend to put the responsibility on themselves in the first place. They see it as their responsibility to prepare the adoptee by talking about, or not talking about differences, in order to make the child strong and self-confident. Of course this is a good and important thing, but it also has a negative consequence: racism is more or less made invisible, since they either see race as non-existing (colour blindness), or turn the question into something else, like the child’s attitude to his or her origin and “roots”. The negative consequence is that the structural problem with racism is almost always individualized. Even if the reasons for adoptive parents to take on individual responsibility are quite easy to understand, we must also notice here that in the case of racism, the structures that uphold this suppressing practice is able to continue unnamed, unchanged and unchallenged, since conscious and collective social and political action is not considered as an alternative by most adoptive parents of Sweden. This means that issues of race and racism are still seldom explicitly brought up and dealt with in relation to transracial and transnational adoption in a Swedish context.

So in the end, the adoption community of Sweden as a whole is unfortunately not a strong agent when it comes to struggling against the society’s racist structures. Given the fact that most adoptive families normally belong to the upper strata of Western countries, the potential for them to be able to influence society is arguably huge, but for the moment this potential of the adoption community to mobilise and accomplish social change has still not been able to articulate and activate itself in a Swedish context. Finally, we suggest that it may be useful to focus on and bring in adoptive families within studies of race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, to be able to fully grasp and understand the contemporary racialised and gendered landscape of not only Sweden but of the other Nordic countries as well, something which with few exceptions has not been done hitherto within academia.

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