

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies

Title

The Swedish Disconnect: Racism, White Supremacy, and Race

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/52h3z2ts>

Journal

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies, 1(2)

Author

Antoine, Katja

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/C81258332

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

The Swedish Disconnect: Racism, White Supremacy, and Race

Katja Antoine

Abstract: This article examines how the Swedish state, by eliminating race as an official demographic category, effectively promotes social and legal conditions that allow racism and White supremacy to proliferate unaccounted for and often also unattended. In doing so, Sweden undermines anti-racist efforts to counter prevalent racial discrimination, creating a disconnect between the country's progressive liberal image and the lived reality of its residents of color.

Keywords: anti-racism, ethnicity, mixed race, race concept, racial demographics, racism, social construction, Sweden, White supremacy

Introduction

The word “racism” is used and misinterpreted in numerous ways. In the United States, people commonly think of racism as the activities and rhetoric of extremist White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Of course, their agenda certainly is racist.¹ Calling someone by a racial slur also fits into this understanding of racism. The link between particular words and a racist disposition is unequivocal. Such expressions of racism are clear and visible to most. This definition of racism, however, is narrow. It effectively erases all the pervasive forms of racism that are far less clear and less visible to those not on the receiving end, so-called covert forms of racism. These are more “subtle” racist behaviors, like crossing the street if a Black man is walking in your direction on the sidewalk, or expecting all Asian-looking people to be good at math, or assuming a Hispanic woman holding a White-looking child is the child's nanny.² Limiting one's understanding of racism to the ideology and activities of White extremists also obscures racism as a system of power—the element that actually makes it an -ism. In the US, that system benefits White-looking people (so, yes, White people as a group but also people of color who look White to others) and disadvantages people who appear to be of color. It is a system that holds White (and light) as superior and Whiteness as normative. It is, in effect, a system of White supremacy. Racism and White supremacy, then, are but two aspects of the same system of oppression. Both are premised on the concept of race. One cannot understand racism and do anti-racist work without recognizing and challenging White supremacy and without recognizing race. To eliminate race as a category from discourse altogether severely undermines any fruitful engagement with racism and White supremacy as power systems of social inequality, violence, and discrimination. While this may sound obvious, the example of Sweden shows it is not.

In Sweden, where I was born and mainly lived until the age of nineteen, mainstream discourses of racism (to the extent such discourses exist in the Swedish mainstream) adhere to a model of racism as an act of discrimination between individuals. Structurally embedded racism is a subject largely relegated to the academic sphere. A more prominent discourse among non-academic Swedes is that of xenophobia.

Discrimination against foreigners has a long history in Sweden, as does anti-Semitism. Racism in Sweden, then, often becomes subsumed under anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourses, where immigrants of color and refugees of color are seen as the most foreign among foreigners. Anti-Semitism also continues to be an issue, as do strong anti-Muslim sentiments. In addition to its foreign-born citizens and residents, Sweden has a non-immigrant population of color. This group includes children born in Sweden to one or two immigrant parents of color. Many of these children are of so-called mixed race.³ I am one of them.

I was born in the southern city of Malmö to a White Swedish mother and an African American father. My father is Louisiana Creole. To most people, I look White, and I have benefited from White privilege all my life.⁴ In Sweden, I have occasionally been singled out as a foreigner but have generally been accepted as Swedish due to my southern Swedish drawl. I am sharing this information both to be transparent about my own positionality and to present a snapshot of the dynamics that complicate discussions of how racism plays out in Sweden. These dynamics are also informed by Sweden's history with racism, its progressive self-image, and the clash between the two.

Sweden's History with Racism

Few people (Swedes included) know that Sweden has a history with racism and the European colonial enterprise. Let me offer a brief synopsis. In 1649, Swedish queen Christina I granted the establishment of the Swedish Africa Company, which for fifteen years traded extensively in enslaved people to great profit.⁵ Sweden also briefly held colonies in the US state of Delaware and in Ghana.⁶ In 1784, Sweden established a colony of enslaved people on the Caribbean island of St. Barthélemy (commonly known in English as St. Barts) through a negotiated secession from France.⁷ Swedish king Gustav III was co-owner of the West India Company, created for the purpose of shuttling enslaved people between Africa and the island.⁸ Although Sweden made trading in enslaved people illegal in 1815, it governed St. Barts until 1878 and during that time permitted foreign traders of enslaved people to use the island for their commerce.⁹ Swedes also participated in the brutal exploitation of the Congo Free State, led by Belgian sovereign king Leopold II, where Swedes comprised the third largest colonizing presence, outnumbered only by Belgians and Brits.¹⁰

Back at home, Sweden established the world's first National Institute for Racial Biology at Uppsala University in 1921.¹¹ Its objective was to investigate Sweden's "foremost natural resource: its ancestral stock" (nationens främsta naturtillgång: folkstammen).¹² As part of this endeavor, the institute collected data on ancestry, social status, and phenotypical traits from one hundred thousand people. These people included Roma, Finns, Jews, and Sámi, all viewed as examples of "less viable" and "degenerated" races of non-Germanic origin.¹³ Sweden also collaborated with race researchers in Nazi Germany, including Hans F. K. Günther, a major influence on Nazi racial ideology.¹⁴ In 1934, Sweden passed sterilization laws to remove "undesirable" races from the national gene pool.¹⁵ Under the cover of this law, the state performed sixty-three thousand sterilizations, second only to the two hundred thousand performed by Nazi Germany.¹⁶ Sweden, then, was a purveyor of scientific racism. According to Swedish journalist Christian Catomeris, the influence of deterministic racial biology on Swedish scientific inquiries lasted into the 1960s. Catomeris suggests that scientific racism, at that time, was gradually replaced by a

view of society as stratified by material welfare and technological development—the ideal of the modern progressive state.¹⁷ In sum, over the course of several centuries, Sweden participated in a global racist–White supremacist project premised on a biological (mis)understanding of race.¹⁸

Sweden’s history of trading enslaved people, colonialism, and scientific racism is disturbing but not shocking. It is right on par with the racist past of most other European nations. What *is* surprising is Sweden’s ability to keep this history hidden and out of public discourse, both nationally and internationally, for so long. One reason for why Sweden has managed to keep its racist past hidden, I propose, is that the adversely affected populations, past and present, have been silenced and dismissed in national media and politics.¹⁹ I also attribute the successful erasure of Sweden’s racist history to its incompatibility with the image of Sweden as a humanitarian, progressive, liberal state, which it has propagated since the middle of the twentieth century. I am not the first to make such an assessment. In 2015, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a report on people of African descent in Sweden. The report states:

It is the view of the Working Group that the Swedish philosophy of equality and its public and self-image as a country with respect for human rights, non-discrimination and liberal democracy, blinds it to the structural racism faced by Afro-Swedes and Africans in its midst. No country is free of racism, and Sweden is not an exception. For a nation that has been perceived as having a long tradition of tolerance and openness, the relative silence around racism, racial discrimination, and Afrophobia is surprising and worrying.

The report also notes that “the Working Group is concerned about the difference between the official discourse and the on-the-ground findings” and that “the lack of knowledge of the history of the transatlantic trade in captured Africans, enslavement, colonialism and the cultures of Africa is perpetuating modern-day racism [in Sweden].”²⁰ Sweden has failed to even attempt to own its racist past, let alone reconcile with it, instead opting for a head-in-the-sand strategy that has started to crack as the past is catching up with the present.

Racism in Sweden Today

Progressive ideals notwithstanding, racism has been, and continues to be, part of the Swedish social fabric. In the twenty-first century, Sweden has seen the growth of a right-wing, socially conservative political party, the Swedish Democrats (Sverige Demokraterna, SD), known for its nationalist, xenophobic political agenda. A 2014 study on racism against Afro-descendant people in Sweden conducted by the Multicultural Center (Mångkulturellt Centrum) notes “an increase in afrophobic hate crimes by 24% since 2008.”²¹ The aforementioned UN report also notes discrimination against Black people with regard to access to justice, health care, education, housing, and employment; media representation; and law enforcement and the criminal justice system.²²

The UN report presents examples of more recent racist incidents in Sweden. One such incident received considerable media attention in Sweden and internationally:

a staged slave auction ... took place at a student association in Lund University in 2011. During the evening, some students representing slaves entered the hall, with blackened faces and with ropes around their necks. They were escorted by white students depicting slave-owners. Later in the evening, the slaves were sold during a staged slave auction. The incident was reported to the police for incitement to racial hatred by an Afro-Swedish human rights defender. He then became the target of racist attacks by a racist artist. A photomontage was manipulated of his face depicting a slave in chains accompanied with the text “Has anyone seen our runaway slave?” The photomontage was posted around Malmö University and in Lund.²³

Other notable incidents include the then minister for culture and sports (*kultur- och idrottsminister*), Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, cutting into a cake designed in the shape of a naked Black woman, as part of a World Art Day at the Modern Museum in Stockholm in 2012.²⁴ The cake was meant to highlight the practice of female genital mutilation, and the minister can be seen cutting into what would have been the genital area of the torso-shaped cake.²⁵ Also, a racially motivated killing of two people and injury of two others by a young White Swede at a school in Trollhättan in 2015 became international news, as did a gruesomely violent racist attack of a Black man and his one-and-a-half-year-old son on a bridge in Malmö in 2013.²⁶

The preceding paragraphs provide a brief picture of racism in Sweden today. It should, however, be noted that racist incidents are of course not limited to people of African descent. People of Asian heritage are openly and routinely mocked through “yellow humor” and theatrical performances with White actors in “yellow face.” Also discriminated against are Roma people (whether Swedish or foreign), Muslims (regardless of racial, ethnic, or national origin), refugees (primarily from the Middle East and Africa), the Indigenous Sámi population, and many others who in some ways do not visually present or sound like the stereotypical White, blond, blue-eyed Swede. Having thus established that Sweden not only has an unreconciled history of racism but also has a present-day problem with racism, I will discuss race and White supremacy as they relate to this problem.

White Supremacy

White supremacy, the ideology and “logic that holds White as superior, normal, natural, and neutral, and where White superiority is unquestioned,” is prevalent in most countries in the world.²⁷ Legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley offers a useful definition:

[White supremacy is] a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of [W]hite dominance and non-[W]hite subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.²⁸

In White supremacy, Whiteness is the standard against which everyone and everything else is measured. Swedish culture is not an exception. For many people, the very term “Swedish” elicits the aforementioned quintessential image of Whiteness: a tall, blond, blue-eyed, “healthy” Aryan specimen of a human being.²⁹

The term does not typically evoke images of the Swedish-born mixed-race population, second-generation immigrants of color, foreign-born naturalized adoptees of color, Swedish Roma, or even the native Indigenous Sámi population. Yet these subjects constitute a noticeable portion of the Swedish demographic landscape.³⁰ There are enough of us present to merit inclusion in defining what it means to be Swedish. There are not, however, any statistics to prove our presence as racial subjects, because Sweden does not officially recognize “race” as a category. Instead, Swedish law explicitly prohibits the collection of demographic data pertaining to race or ethnicity.³¹ My claim of our ubiquity, then, is solely based on observation.

Racism without Race³²

The disconnect this article seeks to bring to the fore hinges on the fact that Sweden officially has no “race” category. The Swedish word *ras* has a dual meaning. It means both “race” and “breed” but is typically used to reference breed, such as the breed of a dog. Even in everyday conversation, the word *ras* is considered an inappropriate way to talk about people. When speaking of humans, Swedes favor the term “ethnicity” (*etnicitet*), disregarding the distinction between that word and “race.”³³ Race suggests perceived differences in biological traits (even though race is not a biologically valid category) and it is premised on traits that are considered socially salient (e.g., skin color but not eye color). Ethnicity refers to cultural heritage and belonging, so, for instance, two people can be of the same race (e.g., Black) but of different ethnicity (e.g., Jewish or Latinx). Ethnicity is a gentler-sounding word to many. It is often perceived as less threatening and provocative than “race” by many White people. Without “race,” however, challenges to White supremacy as a broad concept, as a system we are all born and socialized into, cannot get traction. Without “race” not only is there no “Black” or “Brown,” but there also is no “White.” Eliminating race as a category, then, is the ultimate feat of unmarking Whiteness—a powerful tool of White supremacy.³⁴

The Swedish government has twice (!) decided to completely eliminate “race” as an officially recognized category. First, in 1998, the term was removed from all official texts and state laws, save for some twenty mentions in relation to issues like hate crimes.³⁵ Sixteen years later, in 2014, even these twenty mentions were eliminated.³⁶ Without the race category, one cannot properly discuss racial discrimination in official contexts. “Ethnic discrimination,” its substitute phrase, does not refer to the same type of discrimination. For instance, White Swedish Finns are considered an ethnic minority in Sweden, and they have historically suffered ethnic discrimination from White majority Swedes. They have, however, not been subjected to racism for being White.

Since the collection of demographic data pertaining to either race or ethnicity is not permitted, Sweden categorizes its population into native-born and foreign-born subjects, which obscures both race and ethnicity.³⁷ Without being able to track the racial (or ethnic) demographics of the population, it is impossible to know the number of native-born Swedes of color, many of whom are multiracial. Furthermore, differences and similarities in experiences between different racial groups and different multiracial groups cannot be documented under the aegis of the Swedish state. It is also impossible to accurately survey racially and ethnically motivated crimes.

Why Eliminate Race?

Sweden's stance on the term "race" is premised on the understanding that race is a social construction, not a biological fact. As a result, the government reasons that using "race" as a category promotes racism, because it reinforces the scientifically erroneous belief that humans can be divided into biologically separate races.³⁸ This in turn could be fuel for racist extremists, former minister of integration Erik Ullenhag has argued, and they might then use the government's acknowledgment of race as a justification for their advocacy of racism and White supremacy (here referenced in its narrow KKK sense).³⁹ Negating race, then, is part of Sweden's anti-racist agenda. The Swedish government operates on the misconstrued assumption that it has effectively removed grounds for systemic racial discrimination by eradicating the term "race" from official language. This is where Sweden falls into a trap of its own creation.

First, it commits the mistake of overvaluing the natural sciences while undervaluing the validity of the social sciences. A social construction is not inherently less real than a biological trait. So, for instance, like race, nationality is also a social construction. It is a fluid one, just like race.⁴⁰ Yet no one would deny the reality and importance of nations and nationalities in how societies operate. The fact that nations and nationalities do not exist from a natural scientific perspective does not negate that we, humans, give these categories tremendous validity and meaning. We fight wars over them. Nations and nationalities, then, are very much social realities, social facts, even though they are socially constructed. Sweden recognizes nations and nationalities as valid concepts without question. It is, after all, one of the measures it uses to track and categorize people, "natives" and "foreign-born." But no one has argued that these categories should be eliminated from official language because they might foster increased xenophobia. Yet that is the logic used for "race."

Race *is*, of course, a social construction. While we are all born with certain phenotypical features pertaining to skin color, hair texture and color, eye color, facial features, etc., these are just biological traits. What we call "race" does not map neatly onto these biological features. So, a person can have brown skin and be racially categorized as Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, White (think Middle Eastern), and American Indian depending on a combination of other phenotypical traits.⁴¹ The blurry and differing definitions across time and space make the concept of race and racial discourses complex and often frustrating to navigate. This, however, does not make race less of a social reality than nationality, or religion, or political affiliation, or any other socially constructed grouping we use to identify ourselves and others. Significantly, the fact that race is a social construction does not lessen its impact on the lives of people around the world, whether it is to their benefit or detriment. It is a benefit in the form of White privilege (a derivative of White supremacy) for those who enjoy it. It is a detriment in the form of racism-White supremacy to everyone else.

Sweden *does* recognize that racism exists, but it fails to make the proper connection between racism and race. Race and racism go hand in hand; you cannot unpack the latter without including the former. Race on its own is just a label, a descriptor.⁴² So to recognize the existence of racism but then choose to erase the category used to measure it, and on which it stands, is disingenuous. It undermines the efficacy of the anti-racist initiatives Sweden purportedly supports, and it hides the other side of racism, White supremacy. By

not acknowledging race, Sweden also ignores a large body of scholarship, both domestic and international, that shows race is a crucial category in anti-racist endeavors. It ignores the precedent set by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in its usage of the term and its persistent requests for Sweden to supply racial and ethnic statistics.⁴³ It also ignores the expressed preferences of organizations of people of color in Sweden.⁴⁴

Color-Blindness

Sweden's argument that the race category itself promotes racism (in spite of strong opposing arguments against such reasoning) is, at least in part, the result of adherence to a "color-blind" ideology.⁴⁵ People who adhere to a color-blind ideology of race incorrectly view "seeing difference" as inherently discriminatory. For White adherents to this ideology, color-blindness is the belief that even noticing difference (from Whiteness) will "subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness,' even as their actions reflect the primacy of Whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think."⁴⁶ On this topic, Ioanna Blasko and Nikolay Zakharov note that:

this ideology [of color-blindness] is formative for those living in Sweden insofar as they learn that it is illegal to discriminate, but it also restricts possibilities for acknowledging the enormous disparities in material well-being between different ethnic [and racial] groups.⁴⁷

Acting as if we do not see difference (when, of course, we do) and then instituting policies based on that pretense, like Sweden has, creates a gap, a disconnect. The pretense disconnects us from reality. Trapped in the gap between the two are the people who in reality *are* seen as different in a pejorative manner and who, as a result, are continuously discriminated against by individuals as well as institutions. These "trapped" people are then also deprived of the official language needed to call out and work against that discrimination in meaningful ways. Sociologist Ruth Frankenberg refers to "color-blindness" as a "discourse of essential 'sameness'" that constitutes "a double move toward 'color evasiveness' and 'power evasiveness.'"⁴⁸ Her description succinctly captures the fundamental flaws of this concept and of Sweden's position on race. By pretending race does not exist (through color evasiveness) and by ignoring the function of race in various forms of inequality (power evasiveness), Sweden exhibits both. It should also be noted that, color-blind policies notwithstanding, skin color continues to be a marker of race that elicits stigmatization and discrimination globally. Color-blind policies, then, do not generate greater social inclusion or a more democratic society.⁴⁹ They merely serve to hide abuses enacted under the color-blind ethos.

Mixed-Race Implications

Sweden's negation of race leaves people of mixed race in a precarious position as far as our racial subjectivity and legitimacy is concerned. As with non-White monoracials, our stories and experiences as

racialized beings have no official space. We can only be heard within a foreign-native discourse, which, as I have mentioned earlier, is not the same. For instance, if both parents are Swedish-born, one White and one a person of color, the foreigner paradigm becomes obsolete for statistical purposes. Sayaka Osanami Törngren's research on how "mixed" Swedes identify shows that multiracial Swedes feel caught in the foreigner-native paradigm. They are perceived either as Swedish or not Swedish, as opposed to Swedish of a particular race. Since the Swedish label is strongly linked to being White, multiracial Swedes who do not look White find their Swedish identity dismissed and negated.⁵⁰ Blasko and Zakharov view these individual experiences in relation to the Swedish system of categorization when they observe that "mixed identities in Sweden cannot be accommodated within the contemporary system of social measurement in any conflict-free and consistent way."⁵¹ A racial paradigm, however, can accommodate the experiences of multiracial individuals regardless of parental country of origin and their own phenotypic expressions. At this time, that avenue is not available. As far as the Swedish state is concerned, non-White monoracial and multiracial people simply do not exist demographically. The result is an official erasure of, for many, a salient aspect of how we identify.

As I have previously mentioned, not recognizing race as a category has not eliminated racism from Swedish society. It also has not eliminated unofficial racial categorization as a practice. People categorize each other racially—and act on the categories they perceive—whether the terminology is recognized or not. For mixed-race individuals in Sweden who do not "look Swedish" (i.e., who do not look White), then, this adds the potential for double injury, so to speak. Not only are they denied an official racial identity, but they are also denied an official multiracial identity. While at first glance this may seem to be one and the same issue, it is not. In the United States, a country that has a long history of racial categorization and racial accounting, people who identify as multiracial were not officially recognized and counted until the 2000 US census.⁵² Research shows that denying people who identify as "mixed" or biracial the right to choose such an identity negatively affects self-esteem and motivational outcomes.⁵³ We might then infer that in countries like Sweden, where the right to be counted both by one's racial identity and by one's mixed-race identity is denied, monoracial and multiracial residents of color alike are also likely to suffer negative impact as a result of their official invisibility. It may constitute double injury for mixed folks because, as studies show, a monoracial identity category for people of color does not necessarily encompass the racial experiences of multiracial people, and the latter may be subjected to various forms of slight by the former (regardless of race).

In discussing racism in the form of microaggressions, Marc P. Johnston and Kevin L. Nadal note that multiracial people may be targets of "traditional" racial microaggressions (based on perceptions of one's race or phenotype as a person of color) in addition to multiracial microaggressions, which are daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, enacted by monoracial persons that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights toward multiracial individuals or groups. Multiracial microaggressions, then, may differ from monoracial microaggressions, even though a mixed-race person may experience both (depending on how they are perceived by the offender). Multiracial microaggressions speak to experiences unique to people of "mixed race." These include experiences of being assumed to be monoracial or being misidentified in other ways, and of monoracial people's denial of a differentiated multiracial reality altogether. Johnston and Nadal also note that "not fitting into other people's conceptions of racial categories

may lead to experiencing more racial discrimination.”⁵⁴ For multiracial people in Sweden, then, the option to officially identify with a monoracial category may not sufficiently capture the particulars of their racialized realities, were it to be offered.⁵⁵ Should Sweden at some point decide to provide a platform for its racialized non-White population by recognizing race as a salient demographic category, it would behoove the state to ensure such a category also provides for multiracial identity options.

Conclusion

Sweden has long enjoyed an international reputation for being a socially, politically, and environmentally progressive country. In spite of significant reductions in social benefits over the last decades, it continues to be a model of the quintessential welfare state, one that has welcomed immigrants and refugees from war-torn countries and oppressive regimes around the world (including Black Americans during the Vietnam War). This positive image has to a large extent persisted because Sweden *does* indeed have many admirable public policies and social safety nets in place, the result of a political agenda of social modernization and democratization started in the early 1930s.⁵⁶ Sweden has affordable universal health care, free public education (including higher education), up to eighteen months of guaranteed parental leave at the birth of a child (at up to 80 percent of one’s salary for most of that time), humane rehabilitation-oriented prisons, and a social security system that prevents residents of all ages from becoming destitute. Sweden’s system would vastly improve conditions for people in most countries around the world (the US included). One may generously see the elimination of “race” as an official category as part of this truly progressive agenda and as a means of countering the risk for racial and ethnic discrimination.⁵⁷

More critically, Sweden’s insistence on knowing what is best for its citizens and residents of color and how best to do anti-racist work, without engaging in meaningful discussions with those directly impacted or acting on their advice, is textbook liberal White supremacy. The fact that Sweden may be ignorant of its participation in a global White supremacist project as a result of its racial politics does not make it less complicit. It also does not aid the anti-racist efforts of activists and organizations in Sweden, the mission of which the state purportedly supports. To fight racism in Sweden (and elsewhere), it is therefore imperative for Sweden to recognize that race is a social reality, Whiteness is a privileged position within that social reality, and White supremacy *and* racism must be fought together, as they are but two faces of the same deadly beast. Would such an effort kill the beast? That is unlikely, but hopefully it would weaken it and keep it on a tighter leash.

Notes

¹ In recent years, the KKK has (unsuccessfully) tried to claim it is not racist. Webb, “Billboard Is Not Racist”; Dupuy, “Pro-White Message Isn’t Racist.”

² I place the word “subtle” in quotation marks because the behaviors it describes primarily appear that way to people who are not subjected to them. When a Black man sees people crossing the street to get away from him *every single day* when he is out

walking, there is nothing subtle about it with regard to the message it sends and the impact on his psyche. “Subtle” racism may be invisible and even unconscious to the perpetrator but readily apparent and damaging to the recipient.

³ I say “so-called mixed race” because I am uncomfortable with the implications of most all labels used to describe people of mixed racial heritage, including the terms “biracial” and “multiracial.” My apprehensions are primarily that these terms are sometimes used to suggest a distinct racial category of “mixed race” and frequently include a measure of anti-Blackness (when the “biracials” in question have African ancestry).

⁴ By “White privilege” I mean the privilege of largely not having to think about how to navigate the world as a racialized being and of living in a world that mostly operates for the benefit of people whom I, to many, look like. Here, I should also mention that I am much less likely to be passed for White in the southern US (e.g., Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama) where people are familiar with the phenotypical traits of Creoles. In those places, though, with my subtle Swedish accent, I still benefit from the privilege afforded certain European accents in the US.

⁵ Catomeris, *Det obyggliga arvet*, 30.

⁶ Schmauch, “Den osynliga vardagsrasismens realitet,” 49.

⁷ Catomeris, *Det obyggliga arvet*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

⁹ Schmauch, “Den osynliga vardagsrasismens realitet,” 49; Catomeris, *Det obyggliga arvet*, 39.

¹⁰ Schmauch, “Den osynliga vardagsrasismens realitet,” 50.

¹¹ Pred, *Even in Sweden*, 266.

¹² Hagerman, *Det rena landet*, 10. All translations by author.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10, 370.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

¹⁵ Catomeris, *Det obyggliga arvet*, 247.

¹⁶ Hagerman, *Det rena landet*, 392.

¹⁷ Catomeris, *Det obyggliga arvet*, 24.

¹⁸ I here use the term “racism-White supremacy” to illustrate that they are but two sides of the same ideology and practice.

¹⁹ These discourses have received more public media exposure in recent years as a result, at least in part, of the ascent of the right-wing nationalist party the Swedish Democrats (Sverige Demokraterna, SD). Minority populations have also gained greater publicity through internationally renowned films like *Sami Blood (Sameblod)* (2016) and autobiographies by popular artists like biracial rap artist Jason “Timbuktu” Diakité’s *A Drop of Midnight (En droppe midnatt)*.

²⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council, “Report of the Working Group,” 16.

²¹ Mångkulturellt Centrum, “Afrofobi,” 5.

²² United Nations Human Rights Council, “Report of the Working Group,” 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Karlsson, “Afrosvenskar kräver ministerns avgång.”

²⁵ *BBC News*, “‘Racist Cake’ Controversy.” In a bizarre twist, the cake was the work of a Swedish-born Black artist, Makode Linde, who, by positioning himself at the top of the torso shape, supplied his own head (in grotesque blackface) for the installation-type art piece.

²⁶ Linné, “Tre döda”; Clark, “Attack mot pappa.”

²⁷ Antoine, “Pushing the Edge,” 18. While “White supremacy” in mainstream discourses typically references White racist extremists, I here use the term in the broader academic sense.

²⁸ Ansley, quoted in Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1714. For original, see Ansley, “Stirring the Ashes,” 1024n129.

²⁹ A frequent comment to Swedes of color is “you don’t look Swedish.” Everyone knows what Swedes are supposed to look like, and that visual does not include brown skin unless it was acquired during a summer vacation or a winter ski trip in the Alps.

³⁰ In 2011, Sweden’s total population was 9.5 million, out of which, 666,723 were people born to one foreign parent and one native Swede (this number, then, includes a significant number of people of mixed racial background), and 430,253 were second-generation immigrants (this number includes both Whites and people of color) (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, “Consideration of Reports,” 3). Naturalized adoptees of all racial

backgrounds constituted 56,000 in 2010 (Familjeföreningen för internationellt adopterade [FFIA], “Family Association for the Internationally Adopted”), Sámi between 20,000 and 40,000 (Samer, “Antalet Samer i Sápmi”), and Roma approximately 50,000 (Minoritet.se, “Mer om romsk inkludering”). There are no official statistics on actual race demographics. The number of Sámi and Roma are self-estimates.

³¹ Sveriges Riksdag, Personuppgiftslagen, SFS no. 1998:204, §13, April 29, 1998, http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/personuppgiftslag-1998204_sfs-1998-204.

³² This section title is a paraphrase of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s well-known book title, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*.

³³ During a visit to Sweden in 2017, a dear friend whisperingly admonished me as I was talking about *ras* in some context: “people will react negatively if you use that word; we prefer ‘ethnicity.’”

³⁴ Liberal Whites often unmark Whiteness in an endeavor to be “color-blind” (discussed later in the article).

³⁵ “Ett effektivt diskrimineringsförbud,” 193.

³⁶ Hambraeus, “Rasbegreppet ska bort ur lagen.”

³⁷ See note 30 above.

³⁸ Hambraeus, “Rasbegreppet ska bort ur lagen.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Definitions of racial categories have changed over time and differ across cultures. Historically in the US, for instance, the Italians and the Irish were seen as racially distinct from Anglo-Saxons. Today they are not. In the present, Brazil offers a classic example of cross-cultural difference in categorization with multiple categories of Blackness depending on skin color, hair texture, etc. South Africa, too, makes racial distinctions that are different from those in the US with “Blacks” and “Coloureds” considered two different categories. Similarly, national boundaries change and, with those changes, so do the nationalities of its citizens (e.g., the collapse of the Soviet Union, which officially turned Soviet citizens into Russians, Tajikistanis, Azerbaijanis, etc.; and the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which yielded multiple new states that have continued to change form until present times). Nations, then, like race, are not fixed.

⁴¹ The classification of Middle Easterners as “White” follows the illogical logic of the US Census Bureau, whereby people of Middle Eastern descent are categorized as “White”—arguably not the social reality of, for instance, Iraqis, Iranians, or Lebanese people in the United States or Europe.

⁴² Race is also a meaningful form of identity for many people and is not inherently negative. Racism is. Of course, one could argue that race is only meaningful to people of color as a result of racism, that racism has created a sense of racial belonging and solidarity. Whether that is the case or not (and it is unlikely to be as simple as that), the result is still a category that has positive value for many. Being Black or Asian or American Indian is not a problem. Being discriminated against because of it is.

⁴³ United Nations Human Rights Council, “Report of the Working Group,” 17.

⁴⁴ Hambraeus, “Rasbegreppet ska bort ur lagen.”

⁴⁵ I share Ruth Frankenberg’s apprehensions of this term: “The term ‘color-blindness’ is in some ways convenient because it is commonly used. I find it troubling, however, partly because it places a value judgment on a physical disability, and partly because it offers a quasi-physiological description of what is in fact a complex of social and political processes. Moreover ... differences of racial identity and their connections to positions of domination and subordination are, for the most part, evaded within this discursive repertoire rather than literally not seen.” Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 268n31.

⁴⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 167.

⁴⁷ Blasko and Zakharov, “Mixed Race and Ethnicity in Sweden,” 399.

⁴⁸ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 14.

⁴⁹ Osanami Törngren, Irastorza, and Rodríguez-García, “Understanding Multiethnic and Multiracial Experiences Globally,” 775.

⁵⁰ Osanami Törngren, “How Do Mixed Swedes Identify Themselves?” 3, 7–8.

⁵¹ Blasko and Zakharov, “Mixed Race and Ethnicity in Sweden,” 399.

⁵² US Census Bureau, “Measuring Race and Ethnicity.” The first US census in 1790 provided three racialized categories: free White females and males, all other free persons, and “slaves.” While “slaves” is not a racial category per se, in practice it can only primarily refer to people of African descent.

⁵³ Townsend, Markus, and Bergsieker, “My Choice, Your Categories,” 185.

⁵⁴ Johnston and Nadal, “Multiracial Microaggressions,” 126, 132, 130.

⁵⁵ Some multiracial individuals identify exclusively with one racial category and may not feel adversely impacted by only having that option.

⁵⁶ Pred, *Even in Sweden*, 14.

⁵⁷ Hydén, “Driving while Black,” 122.

Bibliography

Ansley, Frances Lee. “Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship.” *Cornell Law Review* 74, no. 6 (1989): 993–1077.

Antoine, Katja. “Pushing the Edge: Challenging Racism and Sexism in American Stand-up Comedy.” PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2015.

BBC News. “Swedish Minister in ‘Racist Cake’ Controversy.” April 18, 2012. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17749533>.

Blasko, Ioanna and Nikolay Zakharov. “Mixed Race and Ethnicity in Sweden: A Sociological Analysis.” In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, edited by Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall, 389–404. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

Catomeris, Christian. *Det obyggliga arvet: Sverige och främlingen genom tiderna*. Stockholm: Ordfront, 2004.

Clark, Anders. “Attack mot pappa och hans ettårige son.” *Aftonbladet*, September 9, 2013. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article17436394.ab>.

Diakité, Jason Timbuktu. *En droppe midnatt*. Edited by Mustafa Can. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2016.

Dupuy, Beatrice. “KKK Says Pro-White Message Isn’t Racist, Celebrates White Pride.” *Newsweek*, December 29, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/kkk-north-carolina-racist-racism-White-pride-ku-klux-klan-765473>.

“Ett effektivt diskrimineringsförbud—Om olaga diskriminering och begreppen ras och sexuell läggning,” Section 7. Regeringskansliet, January 1, 2001. <http://www.regeringen.se/rattsdokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2001/01/sou-200139-/>.

Familjeföreningen för internationellt adopterade (FFIA). “Family Association for International Adoptees.” Accessed August 23, 2018. <http://www.ffa.se/family-association-for-intercountry-adoption-ffa.aspx>.

Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Hagerman, Maja. *Det rena landet*. Stockholm: Prisma, 2006.

Hambraeus, Ulf. “Rasbegreppet ska bort ur lagen.” *SVT Nyheter*, July 30, 2014. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/rasbegreppet-ska-bort-ur-lagen>.

Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1710–91.

<https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/134-Harv.-L.-Rev.-F.-1-2.pdf>.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End, 1992.

- Hydén, Sophie. "Comment on Patrick L Mason: Driving while Black: Do Police Pass the Test?" *Swedish Economic Policy Review* 14, no. 1 (2007): 115–19.
- Johnston, Marc P. and Kevin L. Nadal. "Multiracial Microaggressions: Exposing Monoracism in Everyday Life and Clinical Practice." In *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics and Impact*, edited by Derald Wing Sue, 123–44. New York: Wiley & Sons, 2010.
- Karlsson, Pär. "Afrosvenskar kräver ministerns avgång." *Aftonbladet*, April 18, 2012. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article14690952.ab>.
- Kernell, Amanda, dir. *Sameblod (Sami Blood)*. Copenhagen: Nordisk film, 2016.
- Linné, Peter. "Tre döda efter knivdådet med rasistmotiv." *Göteborgsposten*, October 22, 2015. <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/v%C3%A4stsverige/tre-d%C3%B6da-efter-knivd%C3%A5det-med-rasistmotiv-1.154794>.
- Mångkulturellt Centrum. "Afrofobi." February 3, 2014. <https://mkcentrum.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Afrofobi-20140203-f%C3%B6r-webben.pdf>.
- Minoritet.se. "Mer om romsk inkludering." Accessed August 21, 2018. <http://www.minoritet.se/romsk-inkludering>.
- Osanami Törngren, Sayaka. "How Do Mixed Swedes Identify Themselves?" *MIM Working Paper Series* 19, no. 2 (2019). <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/29961>.
- Osanami Törngren, Sayaka, Nahikari Irastorza, and Dan Rodriguez-García. "Understanding Multiethnic and Multiracial Experiences Globally: Towards a Conceptual Framework of Mixedness." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 4 (2021): 763–781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1654150>.
- Pred, Allan. *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Samer. "Antalet Samer i Sápmi." <http://www.samer.se/samernaisiffror>.
- Schmauch, Ulrika. "Den osynliga vardagsrasismens realitet." PhD diss., Umeå University, 2006.
- Townsend, Sarah S. M., Hazel R. Markus, and Hilary B. Bergsieker. "My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities." *Journal of Social Issues* 65, no. 1 (2009): 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.01594.x>.
- US Census Bureau. "Measuring Race and Ethnicity across the Decades: 1790–2010." September 4, 2015. https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/race/MREAD_1790_2010.html.
- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). "International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties under Article 9 of the Convention," CERD/C/SWE/19–21. November 5, 2012. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2fC%2fSWE%2f19-21&Lang=en.
- United Nations Human Rights Council. "Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on Its Sixteenth Session," A/HRC/30/56/Add.2. August 25, 2015. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session30/Pages/ListReports.aspx>.
- Webb, Robin. "KKK Says Its New Billboard Is Not Racist." *Palm Beach Post*, January 2, 2015. <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/article/20150102/NEWS/812008303>.