

Article

# Eating the [M]Other: Exploring Swedish Adoption Consumption Fantasies

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**Abstract:** Drawing on bell hooks' classic essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, this article discusses ethnic consumption fantasies of white Swedish international adopters. The article uses deconstructive narrative analysis techniques to explore racial desires concealed and revealed in adopters' descriptions of international transracial adoptee bodies in published Swedish adoption texts. Taking the use of food race metaphors (for example, almond eyes, chocolate skin) as a "positive" means of describing race differences in a supposedly post-race, colour-blind discourse as a starting point, the article discusses how ethnic consumption desires are reflective of white adopter fantasies of becoming something more than white Swedish, and even a bit "Other" themselves. The symbolic consumption of both the adoptee and the first mother enable the adopter to imagine internalising a spirit of primordial Otherness, which can fundamentally change them and enable them to step outside the confines of Swedish whiteness. It also gives them a claim to a connection with the adoptee that goes beyond biology. While the desire to consume the adoptee-Other body is imagined as progressive and anti-racist, this paper argues that such fantasies are dependent on maintaining and reinforcing the status quo of the white supremacist patriarchal structures that enable international adoption in the first place.

**Keywords:** transracial adoption; international adoption; Sweden; colour-blind racism; food race metaphors

## 1. Introduction

With over 60,000 foreign children adopted by Swedish parents since the 1960s, Sweden is recognised as having one of the highest rates of international adoptees per capita, and was instrumental in the establishment of the global adoption industry (Hübinette 2006; Yngvesson 2010). While Sweden has seen a significant downturn in the number of adoptions in line with other demand countries, adoption remains something above criticism, and adoptees have found that to challenge the adoption programme on a structural level is taboo (see, for example, Dahlberg 2014; Rooth 2014). The use of adoption and adoptee bodies in commercial and political advertising indicate the continued celebration of the practice (Wyver 2019), and the passing of policies such as a greatly increased tax-free grant for adopters to encourage more middle income Swedes to adopt internationally demonstrate that the pro-adoption discourse is reflected both in practice as well as in the national imagination (SVT Nyheter 2016). The on-going promotion of adoption, and sensitivity towards critique may well be indicative of its central role in national myths of Swedish "goodness", whereby international adoption is seen as being a pivotal part of the imagination of Sweden as the globally good nation (Wyver 2019).

Swedish international adoption is generally transracial (that is, foreign children of colour are adopted by white Swedish parents), and takes place in an extreme colour-blind discourse where race and racial physical differences are supposedly not seen or mentioned (Osanami Törngren et al. 2018, p. 4). Indeed, colour-blindness is an official policy in Sweden, with all references to "race" being removed from legislation, and keeping records of ethnicity data is illegal (Osanami Törngren et al. 2018, p. 4).

However, at the same time transracial adoptees are certainly not excluded from the structural and systemic racisms imposed on other non-White bodies (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009); they are raised in an environment that at once desires, problematizes, and disavows their difference, and the very difference they are desired for in the first place becomes something unspeakable.

Despite “race” being unmentionable, colour-blind silences tend to revolve solely around skin colour, so colour-coding processes such as describing a transracial adoptee’s hair or temperament rather than skin are often used to indicate race, while still being “colour-blind” enough. Descriptions of race differences can also come in the form of food race metaphors: for example, “chocolate skinned”; “almond eyed”; “coffee coloured”. These metaphors function as coded racial markers that, in signifying desire and affection, are accepted as being positive race language, safe to use in a colour-blind discourse. Addressing such food metaphors as a starting point, this article will explore white adopter desires and fantasies that descriptions of transracial adoptee bodies can conceal and reveal. Analysing examples from published adoptee and adopter narratives, and using bell hooks’ *Eating the Other* (hooks 1992) as a framework for investigating ethnic consumption desires, my overriding aim is to explore what food metaphors can reveal about the nature of Swedish international transracial adoption desire, and to discuss how this ties in to the bigger picture of white adopter desiring fantasies.

I begin by introducing hooks’ thesis, before turning to examples of body as food descriptions in adoption literature. I then discuss how the consumption fantasies revealed by food metaphors are part of a fantasy of a shift in white adopters’ subject positions, and a fantasy of self-othering through the consumption of both the adoptee and the first mother; an othering that entails a consuming and reawakening of a primordial spirit and heightened sensuality and senses. Finally, I discuss how such fantasies are dependent on maintaining a status quo of white supremacist patriarchal structures.

My discussion revolves around an analysis of a selection of narratives in published, well-known and easily accessible adoption texts: journalist and adoptive mother Kerstin Weigl’s autobiographical *Långtansbarnen* [The Longed for/Longing Children] (Weigl 1997); Annika Creutzer’s guide to adoption, *Adoptera: Ett sätt att bli förälder* [Adopting: A way of becoming a parent] (Creutzer 2002), published in collaboration with parenting magazine *Vi Föräldrar*; Korean adoptee Anna von Melen’s collection of interviews with adult adoptees, *Samtal med vuxna adopterade* [Conversations with Adult Adoptees] (von Melen 1998), and an article in parenting magazine *Mama* by Lanner (2014). The narratives honed in on from the texts are used as a means of accessing the wider adoption discourse, and the texts were chosen on the basis of their visibility and accessibility, as well as their nature of capturing a range of adoption voices, particularly those of white Swedish adopters of children of colour, over a timeline of almost two decades.

## 2. Eating the Other

Bell hooks’ classic essay, *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* (hooks 1992) explores how desire for the Other is communicated and commodified, and reflects upon what this can tell us about the white desiring subject. Throughout the essay is the question of whether a contemporary open and commodified desire for Other bodies offers scope for resistance, or whether it merely perpetuates and strengthens the status quo of racist domination and white supremacist patriarchal structures. hooks approaches her discussion through a cultural analysis of performance of desires for Other bodies and ethnic consumption in film, theatre, advertising and her own observations.

hooks begins by identifying a contemporary expression of pleasure in the enjoyment and consumption of racial difference. Otherness, she suggests, is commodified and presented as a more intense, more exciting way of “doing and feeling” (hooks 1992, p. 21); and in these times of crises in White Western identities, ethnicity becomes packaged as a spice, “a seasoning to liven up the dull dish of white culture” (hooks 1992, p. 21).

The desire to consume the Other, and the open communication of this desire, positions the White desiring subject as being non-racist, and as breaking with a past of racial oppression and the repressed “dark desires” of old white men. White desiring subjects see themselves as transgressing cultural

taboos about sex and desire for the Other, and transcending racist boundaries of desire: they do not see themselves as perpetuating racism at all, but instead believe that their desire represents a progressive change in attitudes towards people of colour, and a break with a white supremacist past where such desires would be secret and shameful (hooks 1992, p. 24).

Using her observations of white male “jocks” discussing their desires of sleeping with girls of different “races”, hooks discusses white fantasies of being changed utterly by the experience of contact with the Other. It is as if intimate contact with the Other is, “a ritual of transcendence, a transformative rite of passage” where the white subject can be changed, but can return to a world that remains the same (hooks 1992, p. 23). In fact, hooks argues that this contact with the Other is a fantasy of the white desiring subject *becoming* the Other themselves, through their consumption of the Other body (hooks 1992, p. 25).

She explains this fantasy as emerging through the combination of imperialist nostalgia for what whiteness and colonialism has destroyed, and a revival of interest in “the primitive”, arguing that whilst lamenting colonial destruction, there is a renewed White fantasy of a deeper, more sensual, spirituality forever embedded within Other bodies (hooks 1992, p. 25).

To consume the Other is to consume the spirit of primordialism imagined to reside in the body of the Other, a consumer cannibalism that will enable the white consumer to take on elements of the Other themselves. To demonstrate this, hooks uses the example of the film *Heart Condition*, where a racist white cop is saved from death by a heart transplant; the new heart is that of his late love rival, a young black man. The revived white cop then embodies his rival’s good (and sexual) characteristics. hooks suggests that this represents consumer cannibalism repeating myths of primitive tribesmen eating the heart of their slain rivals, to be enhanced by their spirit and to take on their attributes. It also represents a fantasy of Other bodies dying so that white bodies can live. Fantasies of black bodies being closer to death and the ultimate unexplored sensations that that could entail adds to the thrill of consumer cannibalism (hooks 1992, p. 31).

The consumption of the Other is entirely safe for the white desiring subject, however. It does not involve permanently leaving their subject position behind, or any loss of power and privilege. It does not require any structural change, and its promised break with a racist past is ultimately no more than a silencing of on-going racist oppression, and a denial of history and accountability (hooks 1992, p. 31). Consuming the Other, through commodification and exploitation, offers an alternative playground for the white subject, but “reinscribes and maintains the status quo” rather than offering real change (hooks 1992, p. 22).

Concluding, hooks finds that while many of her students and other people she has discussed her research with agree that acknowledging and exploring racial difference’s pleasures can be seen as a challenge to white supremacy, she is wary that such images of desire must be addressed critically, for fear that, “cultural, ethnic and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate [ . . . ] the Other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten” (hooks 1992, p. 39).

### 3. Methodology

Needless to say, hooks is working in a different context and discursive setting, but the parallels with Swedish transracial adoption desires, and adopter fantasies of anti-racism are clear. My intention here is not to prove or disprove hooks’ theories, but to use and develop elements of them as tools to investigate, understand and communicate features of Swedish adoption desire. I use deconstructive narrative analysis techniques to guide my reading and explore meanings and power relations beneath narratives, while interrogating the narratives with my reading of hooks. Deconstructive narrative analysis seeks to disrupt accepted narratives, and to read “against the grain” and below the surface, offering an approach to reading that accepts the premise that “the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means” (Norris 1988, p. 7). Such a technique of analysis unearths hidden meanings and structures behind and beyond texts, and has a focus on uncovering and analysing power imbalances

and their underlying mechanisms. It can also be effective in linking narratives presented as individual stories to wider structural societal narratives and discourses, which is my aim here.

Whilst stressing that there is no “correct” way of carrying out a deconstructive analysis of a text, Czarniawska presents a list of analytic strategies, based on those employed by Martin (1990), which I use to steer my analytical process: (1) Dismantling a dichotomy, exposing it as a false distinction; (2) Examining silences (what is not said?); (3) Examining disruptions and contradictions; (4) Focusing on the element that is most peculiar in the text—to find the limits of what is conceivable or permissible; (5) Interpreting metaphors; (6) Analysing double entendres; and (7) Reconstructing text to identify group specific bias, by substituting main elements (Czarniawska 2004, p. 97 (adapted from Czarniawska 2004, p. 335)).

A major question in narrative analysis concerns the extent to which individuals can control the production of their own narratives (Czarniawska 2004, p. 5). My position on this is that as published narratives are products of societal power mechanisms, they should not be read as free accounts of individuals’ experiences. This is particularly relevant when examining Swedish adoption stories, which are likely to follow strict narrative guidelines within the confines of the pro-adoption and colour-blind discourse. It is important to make it absolutely clear here that my interest is not in the surface “truth” of texts, nor in the intention of the author. This point is also stressed by Martin: “Deconstruction cannot and does not claim to reveal the truth about what the author of a text intended to communicate” (Martin 1990, p. 342). In the highly emotive world of Swedish adoption, it is also important to reiterate that my critique of adoption is at a structural level, and use of narratives that have been written by individuals is a way of accessing the wider discourse and uncovering hidden power relations.

I selected the texts for their availability and popularity, and as texts that contained descriptions of adopter and adoptee bodies. The first text is by white adoptive parent and award-winning journalist Weigl (1997). Something of an adoption classic, it is often to be found on adoption course reading lists, is visible and readily available in Swedish public and university libraries and is recommended reading on the website of MFoF, the authority that oversees international adoptions in Sweden. Published by Norstedts and reprinted twice, this oft-cited text should be treated as a very much well respected, mainstream and hugely influential adoption publication. The book follows the author’s journey into transracial adoptive motherhood, her autobiographical narrative entwined with interviews with other adopters and adoption facilitators.

I selected Anna von Melen’s *Samtal med vuxna adopterade* [Conversations with Adult Adoptees], (von Melen 1998) text as a contrast to Weigl’s, with an interest in seeing how descriptions of the desired adoptee body impact adoptees themselves. The author, a Swedish South Korean adoptee, interviews 18 adoptees who arrived in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s, and as a ground-breaking work, it is widely cited. Annika Creutzer’s accessible, full colour *Adoptera: Ett sätt att bli förälder* [Adopting: A way of becoming a parent] (Creutzer 2002), is a guide for adopters and would-be adopters, and gives an insight into how adoptee bodies are discussed in a “practical” discourse. Finally, for a contemporary example, I selected a recent article in parenting magazine *Mama*, by Maria Lanner, a white Swedish adoptive mother of a black daughter from Nigeria (Lanner 2014). In addition to these main texts, I also draw on Mary Juusela’s *Adoption: banden som gör oss till familj* [Adoption: The ties that make us a family] (Juusela 2010), a collection of interviews with adult adoptees and their adoptive families.

To identify desire narratives and interconnectivity between texts, I used a systematic coding technique developed from guidelines presented by Berg and Lune (2012) and Payne and Payne (2004). A careful coding process can act as both a link between data collection analysis, and can help avoid what describe as exempling (Berg and Lune 2012, pp. 371, 372). Coding also has a vital role in exposing the researcher to unexpected patterns, which would be missed by exempling. Beginning with an inductive reading of the texts, using colour-coding I identified and noted themes and narratives of desire and descriptions of adoptee bodies both inter- and intra-textually (a step Payne and Payne (2004, p. 39) refer to as “the preliminary analysis”). The next step was to carry out a closer deductive reading

of the narratives identified, before analysing specific sections of texts with a critical close reading using deconstructive narrative analysis techniques.

In this article I aim to contribute to an emerging literature of critical adoption studies that endeavours to challenge unquestionable positive adoption narratives, and address not so much the problems that arise within adoptions, but the problem with adoption itself.

#### 4. Food Race Metaphors in a Colour-Blind Discourse

In Sweden's colour-blind discourse, skin colour in particular is unmentionable, simplistically being seen as the racial marker. The colour-blind argument goes something like this, "to see skin colour is to see race, and to see race is to believe in race, and to believe in race is racist". While there are significant arguments against colour-blind ideologies, and their silencing of oppression and voices and experiences of people of colour (see, for example, [Bonilla-Silva 2006](#)), the colour-blind ideology is also fundamentally flawed, in that not seeing skin colour does not mean that race thinking has disappeared; often racial markers just move to other parts of the body. For instance, adoptive parents may claim not to see their daughter's dark skin, but can make sure her race is read through a linguistic colour coding. For example, in Mary Juusela's collection of interviews with adult adoptees and their adoptive families ([Juusela 2010](#)), the author describes the colour-blindness of the parents of Cecilia, adopted from Chile: "The fact that Cecilia's mop of black hair stood out in the otherwise light surroundings was not something Hans and Britta [adoptive parents] thought about" ([Juusela 2010](#), p. 101)<sup>1</sup>. Cecilia's black mop of hair becomes the racial marker, rather than her skin, and the light surroundings allude to the white space she was raised in. Her hyper-visibility as an isolated body of colour saw her standing out, yet her colour-blind parents claim to not even notice.

To use food to describe adoptee's bodies goes a step further, as not only does it emphasise the adoptee's racial difference, it also is demonstrative of the desirability of the body: something wanted, good and tasty. A South American adoptee can be "smooth and coffee coloured" ([Weigl 1997](#), p. 59); a black, African adoptee can be a "piece of chocolate" ([Lanner 2014](#)), and an East Asian adoptee is "almond eyed" ([Helgas dagbok 2010](#); [Lind 2015](#)).

The coffee, chocolate or almond adoptee openly announces the white adopters' desires for difference and for the Other body. It is a declaration of a desire and love that transcends racial boundaries but is also imagined as a special anti-racist desire that is distinct from the secretive desires for bodies of Otherness that fuel racism, exploitation and oppression.

Such descriptions declare difference in a positive way: the difference that the bodies carry is desired, and as race is not directly mentioned, it even becomes acceptable within the colour-blind discourse. Indeed, I would suggest that it also challenges the repressive boundaries of that discourse, and is part of a trend of moving away from pretending not to see difference, or pretending to the adoptee that their body is the same as that of their white peers. Such descriptive declarations of desire are even presented as something non-racist and progressive in terms of adoption politics: the adopter-desirer breaks with the silencing past of suppressed racist desires, breaks with adoption as a project of assimilation and breaks with the pretence that the adoptee body is not a commodity. Yet to describe a person as a food item, however tasty it is, is dehumanising and degrading. Unflinchingly labelling the transracial adoptee as a desirable, consumable commodity certainly concurs with hooks' work on ethnic consumption desires ([hooks 1992](#)), but the question is, what can this tell us about the white desiring subject?

Ghassan Hage, discussing animal race metaphors, suggests that the focus should not be on the accuracy of the metaphor, but on questions relating to the person making the description. He asks, "What does the imagery of the Jewish other or Muslim other as dog, snake, hyena, or wolf tell us about the racists themselves, about their sense of power, about their practical dispositions toward their

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from Swedish to English throughout the article are my own.

other?" (Hage 2017, p. 11). He argues that animal race metaphors should be treated as not merely descriptors, but as "instruction manuals for racists" (Hage 2017, p. 11). Describing a slave as a "bull" or a Jew as a "snake" gives an indication of what is "desirable, possible and preferable" to do with their bodies (Hage 2017, p. 11). Likewise, one should ask what desires, possibilities and intentions lie behind describing people as wolves or cockroaches? The animals arouse different images and fears, but the desires and permissions of eradicating them are similar. Hage argues that such metaphors as should be addressed as statements of intent: when a racist describes a Jew as a snake, the action to be taken is made clearer than describing them as just "inferior" (Hage 2017, p. 11).

Food race metaphors for transracial adoptee bodies should be treated in much the same way. What do we desire to do, and what can we do, with coffee, almonds or chocolate? What is desirable, possible and permissible to do with the almond-eyed East Asian body, or the chocolate skinned African? Food metaphors mark the transracial adoptee as an object of desire, a tasty treat for whiteness to enjoy, but they are also statements of intent and permission: these bodies are for white Swedish consumption and pleasure.

It is notable that the adoptee body-foods are not bland, everyday Swedish foods: there is no sausage skin or brown sauce eyes. Instead, the body foods are all sensual, exotic luxuries that conjure up Orientalist imageries of decadence and sensuality: almonds, chocolate, coffee. As with the adoptee body, they are desirable, slightly deviant exotic treats that can brighten up a bland diet of everyday whiteness, symbolic of hooks' argument that commodity culture uses ethnicity as a spice, as a "seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is white mainstream culture" (hooks 1992, p. 21). The fact that the adoptee body-foods are definitely not staple foods is important. These are treats to be enjoyed amid an otherwise bland diet: delightful in small doses, but revolting in large quantities. Too much chocolate or coffee will make you sick. How telling it is that the food metaphors only apply to the individual desired adoptee body, never to bodies of Otherness perceived as undesirable: there are no descriptions of chocolate-skinned refugees; there are no almond-eyed and coffee-coloured "immigrants".

Kyla Wazana Tompkins, exploring food and consumption of race in 19th Century USA, reflects on who gets to eat, and who gets to be eaten (Tompkins 2012, p. 8). In Swedish adoption narratives, predictably, the eater/eatee dichotomy is clearly delineated: the white Swede eats, the foreign child of colour is eaten; the adopter eats, the adoptee is eaten, reflecting the gross power imbalances in adoption and adoption knowledge production. However, I did come across one curious exception (of sorts). The blurb on the back cover of Juusela (2010) begins thus: "Having daddy's potato nose maybe isn't so fun, but in the end it does show a genetic bond".

While for once the adopter gets to be the food, it is presented in sharp contrast to the desirable body foods of the adoptee. The potato nose is clearly a negative image (not so fun to inherit it), it is also a dull, everyday food. Swedish, home grown, rugged. The contrast serves to heighten the exoticness of the adoptee food examples, and the homely nature of the humble potato reminds us that chocolate, coffee and almonds are not just traditional imports, but were more specifically colonial imports. Discussing Sweden's often disavowed or "forgotten" role in colonial exploitation and expansion, McEachrane (2018) notes that Sweden was very much a participant in the "European scramble for overseas colonies" (McEachrane 2018, p. 6) from the early 17th century, and through its African, East Indian and West Indian Companies was able to become a major consumer of colonial imports produced by slave labour such as coffee, sugar and spices (McEachrane 2018, p. 6). While the rise in popularity of international adoption to Sweden coincided with post-WW2 anti-racism and anti-colonialism trends, the symbolic connection of the commodified adopted body of colour to eras of slavery and colonialism is carried through food.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> see Ahluwalia (2007), and Hübinette (2006) for discussions and reflections on connections between the adoption trade and the slave trade.

## 5. Smooth and Coffee Coloured

The coffee coloured adoptee, “an explosive South American, smooth and coffee coloured” appearing in *Långtansbarnen* (Weigl 1997, p. 59), is a body for consumption, and like coffee, slightly sensual and stimulating. Coffee’s orientalist exoticism could be too much for the Western palate, but can of course be watered down to be translated to other cultures, mirroring the translations through de- and re-territorialising, nationalising and naming of adoptees through the adoption process (Wyver 2018). Like the transracial adoptee, coffee often needs whiteness (milk) to dilute it to make it more palatable, with the adoptee needing the whiteness of racial isolation in white space, with white peers and white parents to be desirable and permissible in a white supremacist society.

As with the international adoptee, coffee comes with a hint of the unknown, a hint of danger and mystery around its background: we hear of stories of brutal exploitation at the supply end, and amid the smell of coffee is the lingering hint of colonialism, slavery, corruption and environmental destruction, and yet we consume it anyway. In fact, we can even tell ourselves that through our consumption (perhaps by buying Fair Trade coffee) we are actually helping, saving people in the “Third World”. Mystery around adoptee origins is central to adoption narratives, as is the often unspoken knowledge of the brutality of the industry, with countless cases of kidnap and trafficking fuelling what can appear as a trade built on racist desires and colonialist fantasies at one end, and destruction, corruption and exploitation at the other. Yet, as with coffee consumption, the desire for the transracial adoptee body in the West is so strong that there are always ways to justify the horrors of the supply chain, and even to believe that adoption is an act of goodness and saviour.

Coffee’s reviving, reawakening and stimulating properties make the coffee adoptee symbolic of the possibility of reviving a dying, non-reproducing white race too; it can reinvigorate Weigl’s motherhood fantasy and Swedish whiteness. Weigl’s narrative of the traumas and struggles of infertility, suddenly cured by the decision to adopt, runs parallel to a narrative of livening up Swedish whiteness by shaking up the dull Swedish gene pool:

*My God, we cannot continue with this inbreeding. Our Swedish genes could do with being mixed up, this sluggish rugged peasantry, this doesn’t really work anymore. A race-mixing . . . that could work as an explosive charge.* (Weigl 1997, p. 59)

Czarniawska suggests focusing on the most peculiar element of a text, to find the boundaries of what is permissible within a discourse (Czarniawska 2004, p. 97). In this case, Weigl takes her adoption desire narrative well out of what one would expect to be the confines of the colour-blind, post-race discourse. Her race-thinking has echoes of eugenics, yet is perhaps permissible as it is “good” eugenics: a eugenics of rejuvenation rather than extermination, and a eugenics turned upon the majority group. Silenced in this narrative, unsurprisingly, are the bodies that are used for the “race-mixing”, the adoptee themselves. While they can wake up the “sluggish” white Swedishness, what happens to their own “genes”, one wonders. It is significant that there is a sense of national duty in her adoption desire too: it is more than just a matter of her and her partner having a child, but it is something for improving the white Swedish nation.

To put the coffee coloured adoptee into context, Weigl’s description appears in a chapter of her book called “Which child do we want?” in which she ruminates on the type of international adoptee she and her partner should choose:

*It’s the exotic children I want. More beautiful than something we could create ourselves. A tight Vietnamese profile, with the distinctive cheekbones. Or maybe an explosive South American, smooth and coffee coloured?* (Weigl 1997, pp. 58–59)

The quote demonstrates the acceptability of open declarations of desires for ethnic Otherness, and Weigl’s desire for an exotic body that is *more* beautiful shows the success of the commodification of Otherness, the fantasy that these bodies can offer up “a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks 1992, p. 21). The “we” can be read as Weigl and her partner,

but also as the white Swedish nation. That limited gene pool cannot offer anything as intense and satisfying as the exotic children that Weigl imagines, displaying, as with hooks' white desiring subjects, the belief that exploring a world of difference through the Other body can provide "a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's racial group" (hooks 1992, p. 24).

Weigl's desires for the exotic adoptee Other are permissible, and made possible by the adoption industry set up to enable the white desiring subject to act out their ethnic consumption fantasies. However, by openly desiring something that "we", or white Swedishness cannot create, Weigl demonstrates a fantasy of being seen as a subversive desiring subject, desiring something that should or would have been taboo; a fantasy of breaking norms of desire, and of being an independent desiring subject that can step outside accepted and permissible flows of desire, to become something more than "just" white Swedish. It is a desire to be seen as transcending boundaries of nation and race, but as it crosses lines dividing sexual and adoptive desires for Other bodies too, it is also a fantasy to be imagined as a *sexually* subversive desiring subject.

hooks argues that the "real fun" of white ethnic consumption fantasies comes from "bringing to the surfaces all those 'nasty' fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (and not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy" (hooks 1992, pp. 21, 22), and this is apparent in Weigl's text when she toys with tantalising flirtations between sex and adoption, often with a touch of humour. For instance, looking for images of adopted children in an adoption agency magazine, she describes her physical excitement as she approaches the "family gallery" page, which displays readers photos of their adopted children in typically Swedish settings: "expectation warms my stomach"; "I love those pictures. I need them to keep the fantasy alive" (Weigl 1997, p. 58). She is suddenly caught looking by her husband, Sigge, who declares, "child porn!" and laughs at Weigl's "hunger" (Weigl 1997, p. 58). The subtler subversive sexual connotations of expectation, fantasy and hunger for the children's bodies are dramatically brought to the surface by Sigge's "Child porn!" interjection, a cry that fully reveals the dark desires that would previously, or in another context, be forbidden.

The fantasy of changing white subject position is also an "anti-racist" one: in Weigl's text this is illustrated by depictions of adoptive parents who chose white children as being racist, but transracial adopters not (Weigl 1997, pp. 66, 67, 69). As with hooks' examples, the white Swedish adopter-desirer seeks to symbolically step outside racist structures and racist pasts by openly declaring and performing their desire for intimate contact with Other bodies. The adopter is changed utterly by the experience of consuming the exotic child, leaving the norms of white desires behind and becoming something more than Swedish. However, they can step back into the familiar world, which has remained intact.

The change in the adopter comes about by the fantasy that the desired Other child is "more than", and the belief that within the body of the Other resides a primordial essence: the "explosiveness" of the coffee coloured South American perhaps. Despite the idealised perfect assimilation into Swedishness, the discourse of colour-blindness, and the "post-race" society, there is an imagined essence within the adoptee-Other body that will always be uncivilised and wild, a mysterious force that ever threatens to explode and destroy myths of sameness.

In consuming the adoptee body, the adopter can consume this essence too, and become a desiring subject that transcends race and blood ties, shatters desiring norms and emerges as a cosmopolitan body.

## 6. The African Blood Pumps through My Veins

Maria Lanner, a white Swedish adoptive mother to a black girl from Nigeria (Mimmi), writes in parenting magazine *Mama* of her experiences of racism. Each time she hears racist comments in her daughter's presence, anger builds up inside her:

*Every time it happens I am dumbstruck, and my African blood starts pumping in my veins.*  
(Lanner 2014)

By the adoption-consumption of an African child, the white Swedish adopter has internalised Africanness to such an extent that when roused the primordial spirit of the Other pulsates through her veins as African blood.

As is common in adopter narratives, the first mother, the Other Mother, is notable by her absence. Yet her absent presence forever haunts these narratives, with the adoptee Other always marked by her genetics, ethnicity and features, however much the adopting project endeavours to silence this. Yet international adoption needs the “death” of the first parents for the adopters to become parents themselves: it is through the death of the Other Mother that the white mother can come to life. The death of the first parents can come through a literal erasure as well as a discursive one. In adoptions from Korea, for instance, parents’ names are removed from documentation through the creation of an “orphan hojuk”, a legal document that registers the child as an “orphan” with no mother or father, rendering them available for international adoption (see, for example, [Sjöblom 2016](#)). With Chinese adoptions, the relinquishment of a child was illegal, so even if a child had somehow been voluntarily given up by their parents, the names of the parents would not be recorded ([Stuy 2014](#), p. 361).

By consuming the child through adoption, the white adoptive parent also consumes the Other Mother, and in a sort of consumption cannibalism akin to hooks’ reading of *Heart Condition* ([hooks 1992](#), p. 31), the adoptive mother is now given the gift of motherhood by the death of the Other Mother. Additionally, the primordial spirit of the consumed Other now lives on in the adopter, creating a bond between adoptive mother and child that goes beyond payments and paperwork, and even beyond biology: it becomes a bond of blood and primordial spirituality. This cannibalism enables the adopter-desirer to shift to become a transcending, subversive almost Other desiring subject. The African blood that pulsates through Lanner’s veins is the blood of the Other Mother; pumping at times of great, uncontrollable, animalistic anger it is the awakening of the cannibalised primordial spirit, the civilised and restrained white Swedish blood explosively replaced by wild African blood.

Lanner’s narrative follows her consumption of the Other Mother, initially acknowledging her existence (in passing):

*I had prepared myself so much. On the artificial attachments, on her background, mourned with the biological mother who could not take care of her own child. (Lanner 2014)*

Then the Other Mother is consumed through Mimmi’s body, as Mimmi emerges from the adoption transaction as Lanner’s “newborn child” ([Lanner 2014](#)). Finally, Mimmi becomes Lanner’s flesh and blood: “All I want is Mimmi to be Mimmi. My daughter. She is my flesh and blood, and I am her flesh and blood. In our own way” ([Lanner 2014](#)). The blood narrative complicates the traditional adoption fantasy of biology not mattering, and the post-race association of blood bonds with essentialism. Instead of replacing or standing in for the lost mother, through her consumption of the mother through Mimmi, Lanner re-emerges from the adoption *as* the Other Mother.

Lanner steps out of her white Swedishness, transformed into a subject that transcends traditional boundaries of desire and race; she can now experience racism, pump African blood, and reach a connection with her daughter on a deeper, more sensual and spiritual level. Her declarations of Other desire, and her use of a language of blood, are coupled with reassuring links to discourses of colour-blindness too: she stresses that Mimmi is *not* her “piece of chocolate” (drawing attention to Mimmi’s desirable exotic Otherness), but rather, is her “godisrätta” [a type of Swedish sweet] just like her white non-adopted daughter ([Lanner 2014](#)). She is still a body to be consumed, she is still a sweet, after all, but now she is a Swedish sweet, marking an imagined biological connection between her and her sister too.

The main premise of Lanner’s story is showing that the white adoptive mother experiences racism, and that this is something she had not been prepared for. The racisms she lists are rather clichéd, that every Swede would be familiar with, be they a victim or perpetrator: the black child being a piece of chocolate; comments about it being dark when the black child enters a space; comments about sun tan, or about the much debated racist name for “chocolate balls” (“N-balls”), or reference to a deleted racist scene from a Donald Duck cartoon that is traditional viewing at Christmas time ([Lanner 2014](#)).

The adopter's change in subject position places her on the receiving end of these racisms now, as the African blooded mother. Yet her surprise and lack of preparation for the challenges of raising a black child in a racist white society is blamed on the state: her adoptive parenting classes did not do enough to prepare her for racism. In fact, preparation for a life of systemic racism was limited to the instructor showing the class a photo of a grown black man, and asking if they could imagine their children looking like that. The class joked that they expected to get a younger child, and Lanner reflects that it would have been just as hard to imagine her daughter as a 30-year-old white woman; there were no further discussions on racism or xenophobia (Lanner 2014).

While Lanner's adventure into the world of the Other saw her desire to be seen as something more than Swedish, to leave a dull white Swedishness behind, it still required and expected the white supremacist patriarchal structures of the state to educate, prepare and protect her on this journey, and to be ready to help if things go wrong. The fantasy of consuming the Other and being changed by the experience still requires being able to re-enter a world that remains exactly the same (hooks 1992, pp. 24–25).

## 7. Awakening Primordial Senses

Through the consumption cannibalism of the adoptee and Other Mother, the "Othered" adopter can enact a fantasy of inheriting a primordial spirit. With that comes a fantasy of more physical, animalistic and intuitive feelings and knowledges, and a heightening of the senses. It is as if the adopter has stepped out of a cold modern Swedish body and been "re-wilded".

This is visible in Weigl's description of her fantasy of the "explosive" "smooth" "coffee-coloured" South American child, a description that goes so much deeper than seeing and desiring racial difference in skin colour alone, but draws on a full range of senses to imagine the body. The coffee of the skin invokes smell, taste and warmth; the smoothness is a physical touching sensation, sensual and bordering on the erotic as she imagines the feel of her hands on the child's skin. The white adopter steps away from the state-led colour-blind project of not-noticing difference (Osanami Törngren et al. 2018, p. 4), and becomes an independent desiring body that dares to not only see difference, but can even smell it, feel it, taste it.

The non-visual senses, with their more primordial and animalistic connotations, can connect the adopter to the adoptee at a level that goes beyond artificial bonds, and beyond even regular "biological" parent-child bonds. In Creutzer's *Adoptera: ett sätt att bli förälder* (Creutzer 2002), the author puts forward a suggestion of how adoptive parents can draw on these re-awakened senses to explore the possibility of the early onset of puberty in their transracially adopted children:

*As parents one can look out for bodily changes, and they are quite easy to spot. Sniff the armpits and feel whether the sweat odour has changed. Look to see if the little girl's breasts have started to ache and grow. It can be harder to see the changes in boys. The testicles could have grown, the sweat odour can be felt, and the skin could be more oily. (Creutzer 2002, p. 111)*

The sniffing of the transracial adoptee's armpits by the white Swedish adoptive parents enables them to draw upon those new animalistic senses to charter and control the development of their child, to sniff out the possibility of an earlier move into puberty than a "normal" child. Visually, focus moves to a permissible looking at the body of Otherness' genitals, a legitimate gaze at growing breasts and testicles, accompanied by the *smelling* of sweaty armpits, and the *feeling* of oily skin: all whilst drawing on an instinctual feeling of whether the development they see, smell, or feel is correct or not. The natural instinct that the adopter awakens to make sense of what they see, smell and feel implies the fantasy of a mystical sixth sense of intuition, something spiritual: arguably, this is the tie that can connect the adopter and adoptee *beyond* biology.

The question of who gets to be the sniffer and feeler and who gets to be sniffed and felt must also be reflected on. Czarniawska (2004), and Martin (1990) suggest exchanging roles in a narrative to identify power imbalances and group bias, and to do that here raises some challenging thoughts:

for instance, it is worth asking whether advising an adult person of colour to sniff and feel a pre-teen white child's body would be permissible, or indeed whether the sniffing and feeling advice would be acceptable in non-adoptive parenting.

Shaped as a body for White Swedish consumption, it could be argued that an excessive level of intimacy with the transracial adoptee body is desired, expected and permitted. As a hyper visible, consumable body that is desired as part of the Swedish white nation as well as for the individual, the body becomes almost public property: it becomes acceptable for strangers to ask an adoptee intimate questions (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009), and the adoptee body can be used in national entertainment (for example in the TV show *Spårlöst*). This permissible intimacy could also be a factor in explaining the indications of a significant over-representation of female Asian adoptees as victims of racialised sexual abuse (von Borczyskowski et al. 2006; Berg-Kelly and Eriksson 1997; Lindblad and Signell 2008).

## 8. Reinforcing White Supremacist Patriarchal Structures

Self-Otherring, race transcending fantasies, while based in an anti-racist discourse, are in-line with traditional assimilationist adoption fantasies: they amount to a brutal racist silencing, a revival of eugenics and white supremacist control. A white Swedish adoptive mother making a claim to "African blood", erases not only the consumed African mother, but also erases her adopted daughter's own experiences of being a black and African child in a white, racist society, by claiming this subject position for herself. In pretending to blur a racial boundary that could never be transgressed from the other side (the first mother would not be able to stake a claim to having white Swedish blood), this fantasy ridicules the racialised inequalities that facilitated and legitimised the adoption in the first place.

Perhaps the fantasy of consuming the Other in adoption, along with the desire to be beyond white and to be re-wilded with primordial sensory intuition is a means of dealing with infertility trauma, or a desperate longing to find a "real" connection with the transracial adoptee. Lanner's African blood, may well be a misguided act of solidarity, a hope to share the burden of her daughter's experiences of racism. Good intentions aside, the question of what happens if the white adopter *does* sniff out puberty in the transracial adoptee's body is revealing.

As we will see in the coming example, the fantasy of re-wilded primordial spirituality, of shared Otherness, of transcended race and subversive desiring subjects stepping outside the confines of white Swedish norms can suddenly end in an abrupt panic, and the cold sciences of medicine, biology and eugenics and the father-like State are ready to step in and take over. While the transracial adoptee was openly desired for their exotic and explosive Otherness, when that Otherness becomes too Other, there are structures in place ready to medicate it back into something much closer to the known safety of Swedish Whiteness.

For Creutzer, the solution is simple: "If it [early onset of puberty] is discovered early one can slow it down with medicine, and one should do this mainly because such a small child needs to remain a child for a few more years" (Creutzer 2002, p. 111), but in Anna von Melen's *Samtal med vuxna adopterade* [Conversations with Adult Adoptees], the brutal impact of both early puberty and its fixing with hormone treatment on the adoptee body is revealed. One of von Melen's informants, Karolina, describes her experience of her adoptive mother discovering her early onset of puberty. Shocked by Karolina having her first period and growing breasts whilst still at primary school, after first attempting to bind Karolina's breasts to conceal them, her mother took her to the doctor:

*I remember the first appointment with the Doctor. Mother stayed to speak to the Doctor alone afterwards, while I stood outside the door and waited. That alone felt wrong. When Mother came out, she was crying and hysterical, and I didn't understand why, what I had done wrong ... (von Melen 1998, pp. 43–44)*

The decision was made to give Karolina hormone treatment to slow down her growth, to stop her growing up too quickly. However, she recounts the renewed panic at her next appointment: her growth was now stunted.

*Now it was the other way around instead, and they wanted to put in hormones to make me grow more and get taller! But by then it was too late. I had already finished growing, so I never did get more hormones.* (von Melen 1998, p. 44)

As an adult, Karolina is under 150 cm tall, about 10 cm shorter than the doctor had predicted. Very short for a Swede, her height has on-going consequences in society and her everyday life: her feet cannot reach the floor when she is sitting on the bus, it is hard to reach higher shelves in supermarkets, it is pointless going to concerts “when you are just standing and looking in other peoples’ armpits” and buying clothes is a challenge, as the Swedish “small” size is still too big for her (von Melen 1998, pp. 44–45).

The intention was to adjust Karolina’s Other body to White Swedish ideals, and to keep her as a child for longer. While arguably succeeding in the latter, the former was an unequivocal failure, making Karolina’s Other body even more different in Swedish society than it would have been if it had been left alone.

Regardless of that failure, attempts at concealment (binding) and finally the strong medical intervention in Karolina’s story exemplify the safety net that White Supremacist Patriarchal Structures can maintain underneath the White Adopter’s re-wilding desires. The fantasy of primordial intuition, the slight shift in subject position and so on can be quickly re-adjusted and brought back into line with whiteness norms if things do not work out; the State and science are there waiting to catch the digressing desiring white subject, ready to safely bring them back into the fold of normal Swedish Whiteness, without incurring any consequences for adopter.

The African blood of the Other Mother may pump through the white adopter’s veins when roused, sustaining a claim to a link to her daughter that goes beyond love, legality and even biology, but her whiteness forever protects her from racism; meanwhile, in eating the Other Mother, she silences her forever, making the continuation of an adoption project that is dependent on the oppression and exploitation of poor women of colour desirable, acceptable and possible. At the same time, she may well see her embodiment of the consumed African mother the ultimate act of anti-racist solidarity, along with her open declarations of desire for the non-white body. As with hooks’ desiring subjects, Lanner and Weigl would not see themselves as perpetuating racism.

*Not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes towards non-whites. They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism. To them the most portentous indication of that change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others.* (hooks 1992, p. 24)

Yet maybe the subversive dark desires that adopters bring out into the open are not even so subversive after all. hooks suggests that contemporary desires for the Other are exploited, used to support to maintain the status quo of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1992, p. 22). The open desire to consume the Other body through adoption simply cannot be separated from the history of racist white desires; and transracial adoption should be positioned on a continuum of racist eugenicist fantasies of controlling, moulding and owning Other bodies throughout Swedish history. From Sweden’s pivotal role in the transatlantic slave trade, to its pioneering position in race science, eugenicist research and the international adoption programme (McEachrane 2018), to shared national fantasies of being the “Third World’s benefactor”, to a relatively generous refugee policy coupled with a relatively brutal processing and deportation programme, a fixation with desiring, measuring, positioning and controlling Other bodies has shaped the Swedish national identity, regardless of whether the desires are currently seen as “good” or “evil”.

## 9. Conclusions

The use of food metaphors to describe the bodies of transracial adoptees is part of a broader discourse of “positive” ethnic Other consumption, where desires for difference and Otherness are

brought into the mainstream. This open declaration of desire is demonstrative of a belief that the Other body offers new delights, and can liven up a dull and declining whiteness. The communication of this desire is a means for the white desiring subject to perform a fantasy of becoming a subversive and transcendent body, distancing themselves from histories of racist oppression and offering themselves as something more than “just” white Swedish. Their desiring fantasies are imagined as non-racist, with their desire for intimacy, ownership, control and consumption of Other bodies somehow outside structures and histories of racist oppression and exploitation.

With adoption consumption narratives, there is a concealed (and often not so concealed) fantasy of the existence of a primordial essence in the Other adoptee. Through consuming the adoptee Other, discursively enacting a commodity cannibalism of eating the adoptee, where the adopter is able to take on some of this essence, this primordial spirit, themselves. This is exemplified by the belief in having awakened senses, transcending race and even sharing Other blood through transracial adoption.

With the elimination of birth families being essential for international adoption per se, but especially for the possibility of a repositioning of white adopter subjectivity, in a sense the Other Mother and Other Father have to die for the progressive white Swedish mother and father to live. My suggestion is that the fantasy of consuming the adoptee is also a fantasy of consuming the Other Mother (or father). As she disappears, it is her primordial spirit, cannibalised by the adopter, that lives on to enable the white desiring subject to be re-wilded, to become a little bit Other themselves.

However, I argue that the fantasies of exclusion from racism, and the imagination of becoming a re-wilded, transgressive almost-Other, work to reinforce the status quo of white supremacist patriarchy. The fantasy of a change of individual white subjectivity is permitted and supported by a structural safety net of science and patriarchal white supremacist state structures that both need to be in place to enable the fantasy and are ready to allow the adopter to move safely back into the fold when need be, and to supply measures to control the adoptee-Other body.

While the acknowledgement of difference, and the open communication of desire for the Other, could arguably offer a starting point for an environment where racial oppression could be challenged, this cannot work if it is performed at an individual level, where isolated adopters are posited as single exceptions of resistance to racist structures. For real change, the acceptance of one’s white self as being part of these racist structures and histories, along with the understanding that the nature and enactment of white desiring fantasies through international adoption are part of a racist patriarchal system of oppression have to be starting points. The fantasy of exclusion from racism, the desire and ability to consume the Other body, alter ones white subject position and transcend racial boundaries both strengthens and is utterly dependent on the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchal structures; the very structures that enable international transracial adoption in the first place.

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