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Traces in the History of Swedish Transnational Adoption—A Diffractive Mapping through the Voices of Adoptees and Their Parents

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Abstract: The initial Swedish discourse of transnational adoption as a win-win situation has changed over its more than 60-year-long history. This article aims to trace and present some themes in this history, with a particular focus on the public debate and the different narratives that representatives of the adoption triangle—the adoptees, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents—tell when dealing with transnational and transracial adoption as a personal and political phenomenon. The article draws from an ongoing study of discourses and narratives of transnational adoption based, above all, on journalism, memoirs, governmental documents, and previous research. It attempts to present the contradictory perspectives on transnational adoption to create a diffractive pattern. The diffractive analysis makes it possible to show how the investigated narratives and discourses on transnational adoption change in encounters with experiences made, and even more so, made visible and knowledgeable, in social practices.

Keywords: transnational adoption; Sweden; narratives; experience; diffractive analysis; adoption triangle

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1. Introduction

With an estimated 60,000 transnational adoptions, Sweden is one of the countries in the world that has adopted the most children from other countries per capita. When transnational adoption took off in Sweden in the late 1950s and 1960s, it was discursively made up as a rescue operation. Adoption saved children from poverty and a life in an institution, offering them a new start and new families in a new country. Moreover, the first generations of adoptive parents framed transnational adoption as an ideological family project, with the aim of expanding the definition of family to include non-biological children.

Alongside these perspectives, there existed a significant racist discourse in the 1960s. This discourse both warned of racial mixing and expressed concerns that transnationally adopted children would face social exclusion due to their deviant appearance. These viewpoints sparked anti-racist criticism and a public debate that Hübinette (2021) refers to as the last debate on race in Sweden and describes as a turning point at the intersection between racial thinking and color blindness.[1] Over time, and especially as the transnational adoptees came of age, being adopted has been portrayed in public discussions and much research as a complicated experience. However, according to Elizabeth Martinell Barfoed's (2008) study on Swedish adoptees' life stories, this may not always be the case. In some life stories, adoption is constructed as a complicated experience or as something that has complicated the adoptee's life. In contrast, others tell life stories where the adoption is seen as a relatively uncomplicated experience.

In the complicated adoption stories, the adoptee is constructed as abandoned and as a victim of dramatic and painful events, while the adoptee in the uncomplicated adoption stories is constructed as someone offered a second chance, often long-awaited and even

deeply loved (Martinell Barfoed 2008; Bosseldal 2013, 2014). The two narrative constructions of adoption as a personal experience correspond to the two discourses Martinell Barfoed distinguished in Swedish media in the early 2000s: adoption as a problem and adoption as a solution (Martinell Barfoed 2008, pp. 89–123).

In this article, I will trace some themes in the history of transnational adoption in Sweden. I am particularly interested in the public debate and the diverse narratives presented by representatives of the adoption triangle—the adoptees, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents—when dealing with transnational and transracial adoption as both a personal and political phenomenon. At its core, I am interested in the meaning that different parties assign to transnational adoption and how these meanings interact. In analyzing this, I use the Swedish sociologist Johan Asplund's (1979, 1991) theory on the relation between discourses and social praxis as a heuristic framework.

In this article, the history of transnational adoption in Sweden is structured temporally, starting with the perspectives of adoptive parents, followed by those of adoptees, and concluding with those of biological parents. This structure reflects the evolution where each part of the adoption triangle has been afforded the opportunity to speak publicly (cf. Cawayu and Sacré 2024). It also signifies a shift in perspective, from viewing transnational adoption as a solution to problems, to recognizing it as a creator of problems.

2. Background

The World Has Changed

In many aspects, the justification of transnational adoption in the 2020s is not the same as when transnational adoption took off in Sweden during the late 1950s and 1960s. A globalized world, characterized by political, cultural, technological, and economic interconnectedness, has significantly altered the meaning and perception of nation-states and their relationships (Luhmann 1997, 2012, 2013; Baraldi et al. 2021; Bjereld and Demker 2016). This transformation has been described as a shift from a world of politically and culturally separated regions and nation-states to a world society (Luhmann 1997).

In a world society, the differentiation and segregation between the global north and south, between the West and the rest (Hall and Gieben 1992), can be the same or worsened. However, phenomena such as international law, global trends in education and scientific research, as well as shared use and dependence on technology (cf. Luhmann 1997, 2012, 2013) can make it more difficult today than in the earlier decades of transnational adoption for people in the West to relate to the global south, the post-communist east, the poor and the oppressed as dark continents, or as regions and people subject to different laws and norms than those in the West.

An illustrative example of this shift can be found in two statements made by the former president of the Adoption Center/Swedish Society for International Child Welfare (AC) and the father of three transnationally adopted children, Ulf Kristersson. In 2003, he publicly criticized what he portrayed as Swedish complacent naivety regarding politics, family traditions, and societal cultures in the adoptees' countries of birth. His statement was prompted by a government inquiry titled 'Adoption—at What Prize?' (SOU 2003: 49). The inquiry proposed limiting adoptive parents' fees in the children's countries of origin to costs directly attributable to the individual child to counter the risk of corruption and child trafficking in transnational adoption. AC's president interpreted this proposal as a fundamental flaw in the inquiry's thinking:

> *Democracy is better than dictatorship. Wealth is better than poverty. Enlightenment is better than folklore. Honesty is better than corruption. Nevertheless, rosy-cheeked Swedish wishes for the future do not solve children's problems today. 'Wait for a better world!' becomes the inquiry's message to abandoned children and childless Swedes. Here lies the inquiry's incomprehensible thinking error.* (AC:s president Ulf Kristersson in *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 October 2003, Kristersson 2003).[2]

In the statement, Kristersson creates a gap between Swedish laws and norms and those of poor, corrupt, and repressive countries, advocating for adaptation to the latter

in order to continue transnational adoption. Indirectly, this implies that he also supports transnational adoptions taking place in, from a Swedish perspective, a legal grey area.

Twenty years later, Ulf Kristersson is the Prime Minister of Sweden. When questioned in parliament on November 2022 about why AC, under his presidentship, did not take action regarding the accusations of irregularities and crimes in the transnational adoption business, his response echoes that of 2003, while the conclusion is now different:

> *We are working with countries that often have relatively complicated domestic situations. It is quite obvious that most countries with Swedish prosperity, and with normal democracy, do not need any orphanages, let alone international adoption. One should also be humble about the situation those children face in the countries where it occurs. However, that can never be an excuse to turn a blind eye.* (Ulf Kristersson, in the Swedish Parliament on 24 November 2022, Kristersson 2022)

Between the first and the second statement, perspectives influenced by post-colonial, critical race, and feminist theoretical frameworks have gained impact in research and the public debate about transnational adoption in Sweden as well as elsewhere. These are perspectives that uncover how discursive conditions regarding race and ethnicity impact the lives of transnational and transracial adoptees (cf. Hübinette and Tigervall 2008; Andersson 2008; Hübinette and Andersson 2012; Lind 2012a; Hübinette 2021) and how, in the adoptees' countries of origin, the transnational adoption practices have caused questionable pressure on biological parents, especially vulnerable and powerless mothers, to give up their children for adoption and even take illegal actions such as forced custody and kidnapping to produce more adoptable children (Lundberg et al. 2021, 2022; Selman 2015; SVT 2021; Wyver 2021; Yngvesson 2003; Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). A growing number of adoptees who have searched for their roots in their countries of origin have been forced to face that the stories in their adoption documents are false and fabricated to fit into the international adoption laws or to cover up criminal acts such as abduction and trafficking in children. This creates a new frame for understanding transnational adoption, which has been manifested in the last decades by a growing number of memoir works written by grown-up adoptees (cf. Hübinette and Tigervall 2009; see also Trotzig 1996; Langvad 2016; Lundberg 2013; Sjöblom 2016), investigative journalism (cf. Lundberg et al. 2021, 2022), and even state investigations. In the Netherlands, a government commission found so many abuses in the country's history of transnational adoption that the government decided to freeze all intercountry adoptions for several years (Joustra 2021; Loibl 2021). Similar investigations have been carried out or are underway in several other European countries, including Sweden (Loibl 2021; Socialdepartementet 2021). As recently as January 2024, Sweden's neighboring countries, Norway and Denmark, halted nearly all transnational adoptions due to allegations of stolen children and falsified paperwork (Mfof 2024).

In 2008, Martinell Barfoed concluded that despite the emergence of a more critical adoption discourse, where transnational and transracial adoption was understood in the frame of post-colonial and critical race and gender theories, "adoption as a social institution appears unthreatened" (p. 226). However, when I am writing this, fifteen years later, transnational adoption as a social institution in Sweden seems to be fundamentally contested. The number of transnational adoptions has decreased since its peak in the 1970s from about 1500–1600 a year to less than 200 a year in the early 2020s (Socialdepartementet 2021).[3]

The darker sides of transnational adoption eventually break through a robust public resistance to altering the original perspective—not least through the massive investigative journalism of Swedish journalists Patrik Lundberg, Josefin Sköld, and Alexander Mahmoud. When they received the Swedish Grand Prize for Journalism 2021 for their series of articles about corruption and criminal acts in the adoption business, 'Children—at What Prize?', the motivation for the award read:

> *Now, we cannot go on with shut eyes. We know the truth about the systematic theft of children and that it continued in Sweden—in the name of goodness.* (Stora Journalistpriset 2021)

3. Materials, Methods, and Perspectives

In writing this article, I draw from an ongoing study of discourses and narratives of transnational adoption and adoptees (Bosseldal 2013, 2014, 2023a, 2023b). This study aligns with the principles of slow science (Stengers 2018) and has had to take time. In this article I aim to further develop the themes explored in earlier parts of the research while simultaneously outlining the History of Swedish transnational adoption, and its contradictions, through the various perspectives analyzed. This approach aims to create what Haraway (1997) describes as a diffractive pattern (see below). The analyzed material consists of texts used in parental education, governmental reports on adoption, excerpts from interviews with adoptive parents and adult adoptees, documentaries, and autobiographies. Much of this material originates from earlier phases of the study (cf. Bosseldal 2013, 2014, 2023a, 2023b). In addition, previous research on transnational adoption in Sweden constitutes a new, and vital component of my material. It serves not only as historiography but also as a source of narratives and discourses regarding transnational adoption and adoptees. This previous research and knowledge production is indispensable for contextualizing much of the other material, including government inquiries, guidelines for social workers and parent training, as well as narrative identity work and political demands of adult adoptees.

Narratives are shaped by discourses (Bergström and Boréus 2012, p. 354). However, discourses can also become too narrow to encompass some experiences. In the latter case, experiences can be silenced or hard to express, but they can also over time change the discourse (cf. Asplund 1979, 1991; Bosseldal 2021).

Narrative analysis often grapples with the concept of agency: the degree to which individuals have control over producing their own narratives (Czarniawska 2004, p. 5). According to the relationship between discourse and narrative, I employ a conceptual framework where discourses encompass various ways of perceiving a phenomenon, including ourselves. In the case of transnational adoption, these discourses are heavily influenced by previous research. Narratives, on the other hand, involve the organization of specific histories.

In the analysis, I have focused on how different actors representing the three parties in the adoption triangle interpret and understand the history of transnational adoption and the lives of transnational adoptees, and how these interpretations are related to discourses of transnational adoption. In the analytical process, I have mainly focused on the construction of problems concerning the transnational adoption practices and how this interferes with dominant discourses.

One cannot tell a story without positioning oneself as the storyteller. One sees a chain of events from a particular position. According to Haraway (1988), "vision is always a question of the power to see" (p. 585). I agree. Vision has to do with wherefrom you see, what you represent, and when, and what aspects of a phenomenon you at the moment can distinguish and recognize. It is like an optical illusion where you can see either an older woman or a young woman, either a duck or a rabbit, either a vase or two profiles. You may have the power to see, but you may also have the power to choose what you see (and not see) or you may lack experience which would make it possible to shift between images. In some situations, it can also be the case that one image completely has taken over and covers all other options.

Optical illusions (cf. Asplund 1979, 1991; Bosseldal 2021) have come to me time and again during my interpretation of the public discussion and debate on transnational adoption in Sweden and the different narratives adoptive parents, adult adoptees, and others in the adoption business present while trying to tell their life stories and simultaneously deal with transnational and transracial adoption as a personal experience and political phenomenon. Inspired by Barad (2003) and Haraway (1997, 2004), I see the narratives and discourses as performative agents who intra-act with, for example, autobiographies, documentaries, earlier research, and government reports. They limit my and others' perceptions in specific ways, but, as performative agents, they also interfere with both the empirical

material and my own experiences, and can thus change and broaden the understanding of this.

In this article, I trace and present different narratives of transnational adoption, not primarily in contrast to each other but through each other—or with Donna Haraway (1997)—as diffractive rather than reflective. When Haraway elaborates on the meaning of diffraction, she writes that a "diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of differences appear" (p. 70), and therefore, the rays from her "technical device diffract rather than reflect" (p. 69). Her "diffracting rays compose interference patterns, not reflecting images" (pp. 69–70). In physics, interference refers to a possible interplay between waves and how they, under certain conditions, can either reinforce, weaken, or neutralize each other. Rather than being something that must be captured, assimilated, and even eliminated, different categories, as Minh-ha (1997) discusses concerning identity and difference, can intersect and co-establish one another (see also Geerts and Van der Tuin 2021). In this process, new patterns of thought and even new frames within which to think can develop.

4. The Adoption Triangle

The adoption triangle, also known as the adoption triad, refers to the three primary parties involved in the adoption process: the biological parents, the adoptive parents, and the adoptee. The term emphasizes the interconnectedness and complex relationships among these three parties within the context of adoption. David Kirk (1964) constructed the adoption triangle to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics and relationships involved in adoption and underlined that adoption is not merely a legal transaction but a complex social and emotional process involving multiple parties (Kirk 1964; see also Sorosky et al. 1978).

Today, different actors use the adoption triangle to emphasize various experiences and practices, thereby evolving different discourses. Over time, the meaning of the adoption triangle also has changed, with some versions inverting or altering the relations between the parties. In affirmative adoption realms, such as on adoption organizations' webpages and brochures, the three parties are often depicted as united with a heart. In contrast, the triangle in contemporary critical adoption contexts has been problematized and reconstructed. Some versions of the triangle invert or alter the relations between the parties. In one such version, the adoptee is labeled as the commodity, the birth parents as suppliers, and the adoptive parents as customers; in another, the heart is replaced with a dollar sign (cf. Stulen Identityt n.d.).

Below, I tell the story of transnational adoption in Sweden through the three parties in the adoption triangle: adoptive parents, the adoptees, and the biological parents. In the first section, I explore the narratives of adoptive parents, focusing on the first decades of transnational adoption. During this time, adoptive parents play a significant role in shaping the discourse on transnational adoption in Sweden. In the second section, I explore the narratives of the adoptees. These narratives sometimes challenge each other, but perhaps most significantly, they challenge the discourse of the first adoptive parent generation. The narratives of the adoptees also undergo partial changes during the analyzed period, likely partly due to how research and experience contribute to a changing knowledge production. Finally, in the third section, I explore the narratives of the biological parents. This group has been more or less invisible throughout the history of transnational adoption, and in Sweden, it is only in the 2020s that a more coherent story from the perspective of the biological parents begins to take shape.

The themes that emerge in the analysis and contribute to shaping the historical narrative revolve around tensions in views of the adopted child (rescued, damaged, and/or stolen? Swedish, foreign, or bicultural?), Sweden (racist, non-racist, and/or color-blind?), and the transnational adoption practice (norm-changing, postcolonial, and/or criminogenic?).

4.1. The Adoptive Parents

Sweden's history of transnational adoption in its current meaning—basically "adoption of non-white children from non-Western countries in the postcolonial Third World" (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009)—dates back to the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953). The first generations of adoptive parents saw themselves as pioneers. They aimed to improve the situation for the world's orphans and simultaneously establish adoption as an equivalent alternative to biological parenthood.

> *We witnessed the children in the orphanages, children condemned to grow up in orphanage prisons. Children who lacked most things, above all love. We were fueled by righteous anger and could not accept that children were left there when we knew many wanted to be their parents. We tried and found that we could match children who needed parents with adults who wanted to become parents.* (Gudmundsson et al. 2017, p. 11)

The pioneers were driven by a desire to make a positive impact on both individual lives and societal norms regarding family structures.

> *In times of change, the family, its resources, and opportunities also change. In the age of change, everyone is a pioneer. We no longer have ready-made patterns to try to fit reality into—we have to create them ourselves. /.../ Adopting a child is no longer a last resort for those who cannot have children of their own, but rather an opportunity for all adults who love children and are willing and able to take responsibility for one or more children.* (Bungerfeldt and Ingelstam 1970, p. 55)

Once in Sweden, the adopted child, it was said, would become as Swedish as everyone else (cf. Lindgren 2010; Lind 2012a). Yngvesson (2003) refers to this process, where the child is given a new family, name, and nationality, as a clean break. During this process, the child is separated from its old identity. Everything from its past is detached, and "the child can be reembedded in a new place, almost as though he or she never moved at all" (Yngvesson 2003, p. 7).

Margareta Blomqvist, another first-generation adoptive parent, and co-founder of the Stockholm Adoption Center/Swedish Society for International Child Welfare (AC), expressed it this way in a retrospective interview in 1999:

> *When the [transnational] adoptions began, we had a more naive approach. We believed the children were 'born' when they arrived at Arlanda [the international airport in Stockholm], and we assumed they would always remain small and never question their origins. We thought that as long as we loved them, everything would be fine.* (Cited from Gudmundsson et al. 2017, p. 71)

This perspective is also exemplified in an article from 1981. Representatives of two Swedish adoption organizations, citing Gardell's (1979) study on intercountry adoption to Sweden, reported that transnationally adopted children described themselves as "ordinary Swedish children" who "manage well and do not think that there is anything peculiar or special about themselves" (Andersson and Jacobsson 1981, p. 41). Gardell's research contributed in this way to reinforcing the early discourse on transnational adoption in Sweden.

In the early years of transnational adoption, no clear distinction was made between adoption as international aid and adoption as a means of having children. It was not uncommon for the first generation of transnational adoptive parents to already have biological children (Cederblad 2003; Kats 1969, 1975, 1981, 1990). As Margareta Ingelstam, the first president of AC, expressed in the quote above, the forerunners did not view adoption solely as a last resort for those unable to have biological children, but rather as an opportunity for all adults who desired and could take on responsibility for one or more children (Bungerfeldt and Ingelstam 1970).

Alternatively, as Madeleine Kats, author of several books about transnational adoption and adoptees, articulates:

> *To adopt a child could also be viewed as an opportunity to expand the concept of adoption itself by demonstrating that adoption is not a second choice for lack of better for those who*

> *cannot give birth to children of their own, but rather an equally appealing alternative for those who already have children of their own.* (Kats 1969, p. 44)

Attitudes like these were widespread among the first generations of adoptive parents. However, the viewpoints were eventually challenged and criticized, especially the notion of transnational adoption as humanitarian aid, which was embedded in the idea of expanding the nuclear family with children in need of parents. In 1974, when the National Board of Health and Welfare published the first guidelines for social workers involved in assessing and approving applications to adopt children through transnational adoption, they explicitly opposed the idea of regarding transnational adoption as assistance to developing countries.

> *Anyone who views international adoptions primarily as a form of aid directed towards developing countries is mistaken. Instead, adoption entails collaboration between countries for mutual assistance. Families in our country provide homes and parents for children in need. The greatest source of gratitude lies on our side.* (Socialstyrelsen 1974, p. 7; cited from Lindgren 2010, p. 36)

This perspective is echoed in subsequent guidelines, thereby also reflecting the attitudes towards transnational adoption that are considered acceptable among prospective adoptive parents applying to be approved as adoptive parents (Socialstyrelsen 1986, 2006). Additionally, in the cited government inquiry *Adoption—at What Price*, from 2003, conflating transnational adoption with any form of development or humanitarian aid is described as a conflict of goals (SOU 2003: 49). Instead, primary and secondary childlessness evolves into the most legitimate reason for wanting to adopt a foreign child (Jonsson Malm 2011; Lindgren 2010; Mfof 2022a, pp. 20, 82; 2022b).

The pioneers and the first generations of adoptive parents have been described as color blind (Hübinette 2021; Jonsson Malm 2011; Lind 2012a; Osanami Törngren et al. 2018). Their initial approach did not involve a deeper problematization of racism in Swedish society; rather, it tended to be the opposite. They also wanted to assure the countries of origin that the adoptees would enjoy equal status to children born in Sweden, which may have contributed to downplaying racism as an issue (Lindgren 2010).

In a guide to transnational adoption from 1970, Margareta Ingelstam rhetorically asks if it is worse to be mocked for having a flat nose and curly hair than for being red-haired and speaking a Swedish dialect (Bungerfeldt and Ingelstam 1970). Forty years later, in an interview reflecting on the early years of transnational adoption, she comments that she and others in the early adoption movement were unaware of any racism in Swedish society. 'We had not encountered it, and we did not anticipate that Sweden would become a racist country" (SR 2022).

Notwithstanding the color-blindness, adopted children in the first decades of transnational adoption could also be seen as a means to reduce or counteract xenophobia and racism in society. In that sense, racism was acknowledged among the pioneers, albeit rarely or never explicitly as something that also could exist in their own perception—containing implicit assumptions about what Swedes and Swedishness entail. In an interview published in the Swedish morning paper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1991, Gunilla Andersson, executive officer of AC at the time, described how encountering transnationally adopted children can serve as an eye-opener for many Swedes. Despite their foreign appearance, the transnationally adopted children "speak perfect Swedish" and possess "the Swedish culture and the Swedish mindset as natives" (Hernbeck 1991). Andersson adds that this could be provoking for racists. "People with extreme opinions do not like to be convinced that these yellow, brown, and black youths are 'on our level'" (Hernbeck 1991). Regardless of the intention to convey the opposite, this statement contains discursive assumptions about Swedishness and race that perpetuate racial stereotypes and divisions, implying that true Swedishness is reserved for those who are white.

An odd recommendation, at least seen from the perspective of the 2020s, Is the idea that adoptive parents could "inoculate" their children against experiencing racism by

subjecting them to derogatory racial epithets (Kats 1975, p. 79). on his blog, Hübinette (2019) points to a short interview excerpt from Madeleine Kats´ book *Adoption of Foreign Children* [*Adoption av utländska barn*] from 1975, which he attributes to one of the pioneers.

> *Lisa and Daniel have never had any problems with their color, hair, or anything like that, strangely enough. No one has ever yelled nigger at them. We have tried to use the words ourselves, calling the kids 'nigger' and 'chink', to kind of de-dramatize the words themselves in all possible contexts.* (Kats 1975, p. 161)

During these initial decades of transnational adoption, adoptive parents contributed to the perception of transnational adoption as a rescue mission and a political endeavor aimed at broadening perspectives on both who is considered Swedish and what characterizes a family. However, these ideas were gradually downplayed. Adoption should not be any kind of aid project, nor a family policy or anti-racist project, but a way to match children in need of parents with parents who, primarily due to primary or secondary infertility, want children.

Through the Hague Convention (1993) on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, it is further emphasized that the sole legitimate reason for transnational adoption is the best interest of the child. This best interest is realized when all possibilities for providing the child with a good upbringing have been exhausted in the individual adoptee´s country of birth. Meanwhile, in Swedish practice, involuntary infertility continues to be a strong and legitimate reason for wanting to adopt and be approved as an adoptive parent.

> *There is a cure for infertility. It's called adoption*. (Adoptive mother of two children from Korea, Kats 1975, p. 139).

An important factor contributing to the shift in the perception of transnational adoption is the adoptive parents' realization that it is not as straightforward to move a child from one place to another as the pioneers had imagined.

> *We have had two children who have been completely trouble-free, and then two who have been extremely difficult but where everything has straightened out over time. And then one that we have completely failed with. /.../. . . maybe parents should know a little more about this kind of thing before they adopt. How tough it can be. And how easy it can be at other times. I mean—people who would never dream of wanting to take care of a environmentally damaged Swedish child for example, why do they think everything will be easier if the child is Korean or Ethiopian or something else from afar.* (Adoptive parent, interviewed in Kats 1975, pp. 176–77)

Several of the handbooks on adoption published by adoptive parents in the 1970s and 1980s testify to the fact that adoptive parenthood partly entails different challenges than the pioneers had imagined (c.f. Kats 1975, 1981, 1990; Stjerna 1981). The children are lacking in attachment, struggle with bonding, have developmental difficulties, and challenge the adoptive parents in various ways. These stories are further elaborated when the adoptees reach their teens and rebel. The explanatory framework used to discuss difficulties, such as anti-social behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, and sexually challenging behavior, is almost exclusively individualistic and attributes primarily the cause of various issues to the adoptees' situation in their countries of origin—before the adoption. In cases where the children have been subjected to bullying or racism in Sweden, it is downplayed.

> *We have not had any problems with Anna and Gita looking foreign. Anna is very pleased with herself and her appearance overall. She thinks that Korean children are much more beautiful than other children. . . Gita is very dark and apparently had problems with it already in India, where they are also very conscious of color. Now she seems to care less about it, she has such a cheerful disposition and doesn't take offense, it just rolls off her.* (Kats 1975, pp. 92–93)

Among the first-generation adoptive parents interviewed in Kats (1975, 1981, 1990) who sought help from Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (CAP), many express disappoint-

ment. They experience that CAP is more interested in the parents' emotions or the family as a system than in the individual child´s needs and difficulties.

> *I eventually went to CAD, realizing that we needed help with this. But I can't say that we got much help. The whole family therapy thing seems to be the big theory right now, viewing the child as a symptom of the 'sick family'. But that doesn't fit these kids at all; they don't fit into that mold, and it didn't seem like anyone else had any other ideas.* (Mother of five children, three of whom are adopted, interviewed in Kats 1975, p. 110).

The research and knowledge evolving during the first decades of transnational adoption also largely adopt an individualistic perspective. It focuses on the children and explains problems through psychological and psychiatric frameworks, such as the effects of early separations and the consequences of malnutrition. This perspective remains dominant for a long time (cf. Cederblad et al. 1994, 1999; Hjern et al. 2002; Irhammar and Cederblad 2006; Lindblad 2004; Lindblad et al. 2007; SOU 2003: 49).

In parallel with the development of early research on transnationally adopted individuals in Sweden, there was a change in the perception of the adoptees' geographical, ethnic, and biological backgrounds. As the first transnationally adopted children grew up, it became increasingly evident that the notion of a clean break was an oversimplification. Adoptive parents realized that their children had a history before they came to their adoptive family and in line with these sometimes adoption-related difficulties (Kats 1975, 1981, 1990; Stjerna 1981), adoptees started to request information about their background, and in the late 1980s, there was an apparent turn in how the adoptive parents were advised to approach their children's background. They were now encouraged to pick up the children in their countries of birth instead of at airports in Sweden, and in as many ways as possible, help their children to connect their new lives with their old (cf. Lindgren 2010; Yngvesson 2012).

At this point, the assumed ethnicity of the adoptees began to shift from Sweden to the country of origin. From a brochure published in 1983 by the Swedish Intercountry Adoption Authority (NIA), Lind (2012b) cites a member of the government-appointed Discrimination Inquiry, who statesI'... there is always something in the ethnic identity of the adopted child—sometimes a lot—that is not "Swedish," and you cannot make that disappear' (NIA Inform 1983, 1–2, p. 3; cited from Lind 2012b, p. 121). This leads Lind to conclude that the shift in perspective on the adoptees' encounter with xenophobia and racism is framed as non-Swedishness rather than as a result of the geographical marks on their bodies (p. 121).

These thoughts were further established in the 1990s. The understanding of the adoptees as "bicultural" became a common point of view, and the possibilities of returning and searching for one's roots in the countries of origin were raised—by the adoptees themselves (Swedish adoptees from Korea established the world's first organization for transnational adoptees in 1986, the Adopted Koreans Association, AKF) and eventually also by the adoption organizations (Lindgren 2010; Lindgren and Lind 2009).

> *Adoptees carry with them two distinct narratives of their past. They inherit both the familial history of the adoptive family and the familial history of the biological relatives with whom they have no direct contact. This uncharted lineage can often manifest as emotional baggage, and as a parent, it is my duty to address my children's emotional burdens and assist them in navigating their unknown lineage. Ideally, I aim to facilitate a connection to their roots by helping them establish a link to their country of origin.* (Interview with a Swedish adoptive parent, prepared for adoption in the early 1990s, quoted from Bosseldal 2014).

Another way of expressing this is that the notion of a clean break is complemented, or corrected, by an interest in the adoptees' backgrounds as enrichment. Arguably, part of this shift can be attributed to two international conventions: the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention (1993) on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Matters of Intercountry Adoption. These conventions incorporate elements

of nation, biology, and family in defining "the best interests of the child" (Andersson 2010; Bosseldal 2013, 2014; Jonsson Malm 2011). Article 16 of the Hague Convention asserts the child's right to preserve its "ethnic, religious, and cultural background," which has played a pivotal role in the discursive shift towards a heightened focus on the adoptee's national, ethnic, and biological heritage.

Instead of a clean break where the child is escorted to a national airport and is essentially reborn when she or he meets her or his adoptive parents, it is now about preservation (cf. Yngvesson 2003; Lind 2012b). The adoptees should embrace their dual belongings: they grow up in one national and ethnic context (Swedish) while having roots in another (country of origin). Through adoption, the child is offered a new start in a new country, but the connection to the past must not be severed. Instead, the past is viewed as a constitutive part of the present and personal identity (Lindgren 2010), and the emotional bond to the biological family is considered lifelong and natural (Andersson 2010). In the governmental report "Adoption—at What Price" (SOU 2003: 49), it is even claimed that adoptees' search for their roots must be seen as a natural part of the adoption process. Additionally, in the study material provided for prospective adoptive parents in the new millennium (Bosseldal 2013, 2014), the fact that the child comes from somewhere else is presented as something that can positively impact the entire family:

> *Through the child, the family can have a special relationship with another country, another culture, and another social world. The child's biological family can become part of the family.* (Socialstyrelsen 2006, p. 28)

This process, where adoptive parents seem to abandon their initial enthusiasm and the idea of a clean break, coincides with adoptees beginning to speak for themselves and tell their own stories. We will now turn to these stories, told from the perspective of the adoptees.

4.2. The Adoptees

At the outset of every transnational adoption, there is a child. When this child is moved from its biological, national, and ethnic origin to new circumstances, this tends to create a spatial crack in the adoptees´ narrative identities (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). Something in the very beginning is missing. What happened? Why? And who were the biological parents? Connected to this is also the alternative what-if stories. What if the adoptee had not been adopted? What if the adoptee had been adopted by someone else somewhere else?

Below, I present narratives about transnational adoption shared by adoptees once they have reached adulthood and begun to advocate for themselves. There is no single story here; different adoptees take different positions regarding transnational adoption—over the course of their lives, as well as in different phases of life. However, there are certain common themes in these narratives, such as the relationship to the country of birth and to Sweden, feelings and experiences of belonging or lack of belonging, experiences of racialization, and thoughts about the background of their own adoption and about the biological parents. It is also evident, as we shall see, how there are narratives where the significance of adoption is downplayed, while others do the opposite, seeing it as life-defining in more than just the literal sense, and it is also clear how adoptees draw on perspectives from contemporary research, both to understand themselves and to politically advocate for certain demands.

The emphasized right for the adoptees to preserve their ethnic, religious, and cultural background is, according to Yngvesson (2003), "associated with a root or ground of belonging that is inside the child" (p. 8) but also outside "in the sense that it is assumed to tie her to others whom she is like (as defined by skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and so forth)" (p. 8). Experiences of difference can cause alienation and a psychological need to return to a context where the adoptee, due to likeness, can expect real belonging. Thus, adoptees' demands for support to reconnect with their countries of origin and their biological relatives can be seen as a result of an experience of artificial, or non-real, belonging

offered by adoption. A quote from the author Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom's autobiographical graphic novel *Palimpsest* illustrates these complex feelings of being questioned. Sjöblom was born in South Korea in 1977 and adopted to Sweden.

> *The constant anxiety before meeting new people, having to explain this gap between the Swedish name and the non-Swedish appearance. /.../ The anxiety of knowing that the declaration "adopted" will lead to follow-up questions of a far too personal kind. Did you live in an orphanage? For how long? How come your parents in Korea could not take care of you?* (Sjöblom 2016, p. 18)

The previous color blind approach is definitely challenged when adoptees begin to share their experiences of being singled out as not entirely Swedish (Lind 2012a, 2012b). Their stories about othering, racialization, and discrimination are hard to ignore and explain only with psychological theories about the consequences of early separations and insecure attachment. The adoptees have experiences of not looking like their schoolmates; they have been repeatedly asked questions about their "real" parents and "real" country of origin—and whatever they have been told and however taboo the concept of race has been during these years in political Sweden, they have experienced how they have never had the opportunity to become entirely Swedish (Hübinette and Tigervall 2008, 2009; Lind 2012a, 2012b; Yngvesson 2003).

One interviewee, adopted from China to Sweden in the late 1990s, sums up her experience like this:

> *One day, my mother said to me, 'You know you are from China and that you are adopted'. It sounded like the prelude to a serious conversation. I stopped her and said: - Yes, I know much more about that than you.* (Bosseldal 2023b)

As a second layer to this, the cartoonist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom (2016) adds the following aphoristic expression: "In Sweden, I am at home but feel like a stranger. In Korea I am a stranger but feel at home" (p. 81). This expression recurs in many transnational adoptees' expressions of what can be described as either a double belonging or a double exclusion. Another example is the one below, written by Anna Blades, one of the founders of AKF.

> *As an overseas adoptee, you lose your roots and sense of belonging, which makes you feel vulnerable. When I'm in Sweden, I look Korean, and when I'm in Korea, I feel Swedish. I feel great sorrow for the loss of Korean language and culture.* (Blades 2023)

The Swedish researcher Tobias Hübinette, himself adopted from Korea in the early 1970s, has been strongly critical of ideas like the clean break:

> *When we [adoptees from Korea] come to Sweden, we have to give up our Korean identity, and it doesn't matter if we are five weeks old or seven years old. We are emptied of our inclusive Koreanness, and /. . ./ filled up with Swedishness. /. . ./ When the adoptee leaves the adoptive family to become an adult, the immigrant identity is waiting. From a privileged adopted child with adoptive parents who fight to make their adopted children believe that they are "special", not immigrants, the adult adoptee becomes just one of many other non-white immigrants.* (Hübinette 2004)

Seen from another perspective, not all adoptees are interested in their national, ethnic, and biological roots, especially not all the time. In *Palimpsest*, Sjöblom (2016) writes that it can be easy as an adoptee to make what she calls "myths" about transnational adoption one's own and spread them to others. As a portrayal of this, in one scene in the graphic novel, her young protagonist Lisa announces the following to her schoolmates:

> *Since my parents could not have children of their own, they chose to adopt instead. The nice thing about being adopted is knowing you are wanted, maybe even more than other children. It is not like we came here by mistake; our parents really had to fight to get us here.* (Sjöblom 2016, p. 12)

In parallel, the adult Lisa comments in the novel that these myths, and how they cause the families of origin "and even ourselves" to disappear, have dug holes in her

soul. When she becomes pregnant, her view of transnational adoption in general and her adoption history in particular is turned upside down. The loss of her biological mother now punches her.

> *I was separated from my mother as a newborn. Did she even get to hold me? The image of that separation, stored as a sorrow in my body over the years, now put me in total darkness.* (Sjöblom 2016, p. 13)

It is not only Sjöblom's (2016) protagonist who takes different positions concerning transnational adoption in different phases of her life. Many other adoptees testify to the same (cf. Arpi 2023; French 2005; French and Trotzig 2003; Lundberg et al. 2022; von Melen 1998, 2000). So is the research on adoptee's attitudes to national, ethnical, and biological roots complex and sometimes contradictory (cf. Hübinette 2004; Martinell Barfoed 2008; Lind 2012a, 2012b; Lindgren and Nelson 2014; Gustafsson 2020). Different representatives of adoptees express varying attitudes based on their individual experiences and interpretations. Some take on a pro-adoption perspective, while others are more critical and point to contradictions in the promise of belonging in relation to their experiences of being marginalized and not perceived as someone as Swedish as anybody else (Lind 2012a, 2012b). Still others describe themselves as border wanderers, being both within and outside the nation and the family (Yngvesson 2010, p. 124).

This excerpt from the Danish author Maja-Lee Langvad's poem *She is Angry* from 2016 portrays the ambivalence and border wandering, or, if I should call it, border balancing, in the narrative identity work. It has been read as adoption-critical, but it is also possible to read as a seed for a new understanding of the family ties that—in contrast to the adoption stories of cut ties—can be created through transnational adoption. Langvad was adopted from South Korea to Denmark, and even if Denmark is not Sweden, the mixed emotions she expresses and the experiences of belonging to two different cultures and families may be transferable. When she wrote *She is Angry*, she was living in South Korea and had taken up contact with her biological parents and relatives. The phrase "She is angry" is repeated throughout the text. It ties it together but also allows it to be continuously ambivalent and contradictory.

> *She is angry with those who think she does not like Denmark because she has moved to South Korea. For her, moving to South Korea is about understanding her history and, thus, the history of South Korea, about getting access to one's history.*
>
> *She is angry with herself for thinking that adopted Koreans who move to South Korea did not thrive in their adoptive countries. There are many reasons why adopted Koreans migrate /. . ./ She finds it interesting how remigration challenges the notion that transnational adoption is a movement from one country to another, from donor country to recipient country. When adopted Koreans choose to move to South Korea, she says, it opens an understanding of transnational adoption as a movement that does not necessarily end when one arrives in one's adoptive country.*
>
> *She is angry that she does not feel she fits in her adopted country.*
>
> *She is angry that she does not feel she fits in her country of origin. In some ways, she feels she fits in South Korea, and in other ways, she feels she fits in Denmark. Regarding nature, she feels that she fits in better in South Korea than in Denmark. The mountains suit her temperament better than the flat Danish countryside.* (Langvad 2016, pp. 71–72)

Anna von Melen's book *Conversations with Adult Adoptees* [*Samtal med vuxna adopterade*] from 1998 embodies the diversity in how transnational adoptees can position themselves personally and politically in relation to transnational adoption. Eighteen persons between the ages of 21 and 31 reflect in the book on their experiences of growing up in Sweden as transnational adoptees. One of von Melen's motives for collecting these stories was that adult transnational adoptees at this point were quite invisible in an otherwise lively debate about their lives and health conditions. They were also, she notes, still mostly referred to in terms of "adopted *children*" as if condemned to eternal childhood.

I read von Melen's book when, in the late 1990s, I was on my way to China to meet my first daughter for the first time. The stories made a substantial impact on me, and I realized that as a transnational and transracial adoptee, and regardless of everything else, it can be impossible to escape other people's reactions to what is perceived as a deviant, non-Swedish appearance. The adult adoptees in von Melen's book constantly had to deal with others reacting to their appearance. How they dealt with it differed, but they could not hide.

One of them, Anders, says that he was "so to speak born" into the upper middle class like many other transnational adoptees. It was an upbringing that provided knowledge about Swedish society and taught him to speak perfect Swedish, dress Swedish, and act Swedish. However, despite the privilege he feels his upbringing entailed, he does not escape racism. He is discriminated against because he is black, he is not allowed into the pub, and he is mocked by the police.

> *I am most ashamed, ashamed of Sweden. I feel bad personally because I am part of Sweden. Sure, I have a dual identity. I am Swedish, but I am also adopted from Ethiopia. However, it does not have to become schizophrenic if you allow yourself to cultivate both sides. Some believe that you must decide, but you can be both.* (von Melen 1998, p. 139)

Annelie, who was adopted from South Korea, had just learned to speak Korean when she arrived in her new family in northern Sweden. Learning the new language took a while, but it was fine once it was done. She is happy about her parents and has a strong do feeling of being their child, not their *adopted* child. Moreover, on the whole, her upbringing has been harmonious. She says she was good at school and was more often called sweet and cute than I "Chinese", even if that also occasionally happened.

> *In my teens, I dated a guy who was also adopted from Korea. And then I really felt like a Chinese! People did not understand that we were adopted, and I thought it was a bit difficult. However, I do not think he thought so because he was in a process where he was searching for his origins. I think that is why he wanted to be with me.* (von Melen 1998, p. 163)

Some interviewees in von Melen's book are more distant from adopting a Swedish identity than others. The farthest of them all is Per, adopted from Korea. He eats Korean food every day, reads Korean books, hangs out with people from Korea, and has built up an inner fantasy-Korea. This fantasy-Korea is different from the real Korea, and because he is adopted, he thinks he will never be able to have a normal relationship with the real Korea. He was born there but instead of growing up in the country "as intended", he was abandoned and adopted to Sweden. "When I deal with my fantasy-Korea, it is a way for me to accept my fate" (von Melen 1998, p. 95).

In Irhammar and Cederblad's (2006) research, a majority of the interviewed transnational adoptees, both children and adults, are interested in their ethnic origin and now and then think about their biological background. Fewer, around 20 per cent of the interviewed adult adoptees, are intensely preoccupied with issues surrounding the biological family and/or express a non-Swedish or uncertain ethnic identity. According to Irhammar and Cederblad (2006), this uncertain ethnic identity can be about experiences of a lack of belonging rather than ethnicity. Related to this, Lind (2012a) points out the lack of clear definitions of words such as background, original, and roots in various recommendations on affirming and encouraging the foreign origin of adopted children and how this ambiguity can hide important differences between an adoptee's narrative identity and her or his non-Swedish appearance. Lind (2012a) writes:

> *. . . for those adoptees who do perceive themselves as culturally Swedish and who wish to be acknowledged as Swedes, the visual effects of having a foreign origin constitute the primary reminder of their foreign origin. For them, explicit and positive acknowledgement of their black hair, brown skin, or almond-shaped eyes, in addition to their indisputable right to be considered as Swedes, may constitute a better preparation for questions that challenge their self-perception as Swedes than encouragement to feel proud of the*

> *cultures of their birth countries and hence to adjust their cultural identification to match the geographical marks on their bodies. Just as transnational adoptees' feelings of pride in their foreign origins would be assisted by a more genuine appreciation of multiculturalism, their sense of belonging in Sweden must be buttressed by a broadened concept of Swedishness that does not only automatically include those who are white.* (Lind 2012a, p. 94)

In addition to feelings or experiences of not belonging, there is also an interest in the origin as something else—such as the missing piece, the answer to the crack in the narrative identity, the dream of meeting biological parents, and the promise of belonging. In the public debate, groups of adoptees request financial and practical support—from the state and adoption organizations—to make return trips to search for their national and biological roots. However, there are also adoptees who express no particular interest in traveling to their countries of origin to learn about, search for, or reconnect with a national, ethnic, and/or biological origin. A smaller number of the latter have also been publicly critical of phenomena such as return trips and root searches, which in turn has created tensions within the group of adoptees.

> *When adoptees themselves emphasized the importance of origin, and the adoption triad was recognized, the neglect of biological parents should have ended. Instead, a new group has emerged that, time and again, puts forward the opinion that the only parents adoptees have are the adoptive parents. The group receives much space in the media and mainly consists of successful adoptees /. . ./ Their mantra is: adoptees only have one mother and one father! And thus, these adoptees accept the view that the biological parents are unimportant.* (Jung Johansson 2005)

The experience of being transferred from one national and biological context to another easily produces questions about ethnicity, race, culture, and identity. This can be a result of racialization and discrimination in a Swedish context that equates Swedishness with white bodies (Andersson 2010, 2012; Gustafsson 2020; Lind 2012a). But it can also be a result of everything unknown about these bodies. Giving birth to a child, being asked questions about hereditary diseases or how one's mother's pregnancy and delivery went, can be an ambivalent and even painful experience, which in turn can direct or intensify the adoptee's interest towards the personal—and biological—origin. In von Melen (1998), Annelie says that before she had her own children, she had never thought about her biological parents. But after having her first child, it hit her, and she began to think about who it was that had nursed her and felt the kind of feelings for her that she now felt for her child.

Like Annelie, Lisa, the protagonist in Sjöblom (2016), is deeply affected during her pregnancies by what she does not know.

> *During my first pregnancy, these questions [about my biological mother's pregnancy and delivery] reminded me that my body is a mystery. That I am a person manifested out of nothing, without anchoring. Not born, but still here. When I discovered I was pregnant and expecting my first child, it was as if she took over my body and soul, that mythological mother. As if it was her, I was carrying and not my son. It hit me then, like a shock, that I, too, had once lain in someone's womb. That also my life had begun on the inside of another human being.* (Sjöblom 2016, p. 9)

The biological parents, who were previously invisible, have gained contours and a voice of their own in the 2020s. This development may also contribute to the missing third side of the adoption triangle. Sara Grönroos (2021), adopted from Ethiopia, recounts that she has always missed the biological parents' perspective in the debate and research. Adoptees have been heard, and adoptive parents even more so, but the biological parents have been invisible and silent. At an adoption conference in Addis Ababa in 2012, Sara Grönroos had the opportunity to interview parents who had relinquished children for adoption. She describes this experience as healing. Their stories of grief and loss, so closely related to her own, confirm that the sorrow she has felt throughout her life has been true and real—and that the biological parents should not, as she was taught during her

upbringing, be seen as gone as if they had never existed. Through the encounter with these parents and their longing, sorrow, and stories, it becomes, in Grönroos' words, as if the story finally gets a proper beginning and comes alive.

> *I finally got a complete story, and it had always been there and could be put together, even those parts that had been separated. The meeting with these parents also gave insight that one never forgets the child one has relinquished or surrendered. One does not surrender a child without grieving, without missing, without perhaps regretting or wondering how the child has fared.* (Grönroos 2021)

In the increasingly frequent stories of transnationally adopted individuals who have sought and found their biological parents, this change from being forgotten and unwanted to being someone's long-lost child is prominent and during the period under study, the adoptee´s narratives have gradually changed. Initially, there was caution in relation to adoptive parents and in interpreting the adoptive experience.

> *We do not want to hurt adoptive parents, [but] every time we strive not to do so, by downplaying and embellishing adoptees' experiences, we undervalue and disqualify these experiences.* (Hanna Wallensten, adopted from Ethiopia, in Arpi 2020).

In the 2023 book *The Critical* [*De kritiska*], with interviews with transnational adoptees, there are outlines of entirely new—alternative—narratives. For the first time in my material, some adoptees express that it may have been better to grow up in orphanages in their home countries than to be adopted to Sweden (Arpi 2023, pp. 92, 104). It is also stated more outspokenly than ever before that there may be significant shortcomings in the adoptive families, contributing to adoptees' mental health issues. Additionally, it is emphasized that research must also direct its focus in that direction (pp. 80–81, 170–71).

> *Adoptees' challenges have long been attributed to a difficult background in their birth countries. Therefore, there is a risk of not recognizing and addressing when children also suffer in adoptive families. /.../ The role of adoptive parents has slipped under the radar. It is poorly examined in research, and therefore, it is challenging to know if the difficult, tragic, and dysfunctional examples are isolated cases or if there are patterns and risks that have been overlooked.* (Hanna Wallensten, interviewed in Arpi 2023, pp. 170–71)

For a long time, the leading critical voice about transnational adoption in Sweden has been Tobias Hübinette. He has both as a researcher and activist, and at a high personal cost (cf. blog https://tobiashubinette.wordpress.com/ accessed on 1 August 2023), tirelessly highlighted the post-colonial structures within transnational adoption. Moreover, as an example of how discourses can exclude certain perspectives, he has emphasized how Sweden's reluctance to address race has hindered adoptees from expressing their experiences of racialization and social othering. Today, in 2024, it appears that time has caught up with him, or rather, today his work seems to have contributed to changing the discourse on transnational adoption that previously marginalized him.

This also opens up to perspectives of the biological parents, shifting from experiences of being and growing up as an adoptee, to explore what happened in the outset.

4.3. The Biological Parents

Throughout the history of transnational adoption in Sweden, there have been reports of irregularities and illegal actions directed at biological parents: pressure on mothers to give up their children, children taken into forced custody, false representations about what transnational adoption means, child abduction, sham adoptions, and kidnappings (cf. Lindgren 2010, pp. 59–63; Lundberg et al. 2022). Initially, these issues were attributed to unregulated private adoptions, prompting the Swedish government to gradually address them through legislative changes and increased government oversight. However, this also led to a dilemma, as described by Lindgren (2010, p. 173), which became a permanent challenge for the transnational adoption business in Sweden: should adoption exclusively prioritize the best interests of the child, or should it also accommodate the preferences

of prospective adoptive parents (for young, healthy babies) to combat child trafficking and facilitate more adoptions through authorized organizations in a safe and regulated manner?

Not until 2003 was this dilemma, with its ethical question, brought to a head. This occurred when the government inquiry 'Adoption—at What Prize' (SOU 2003: 49) proposed that adoptive parents should not be permitted to pay larger fees for their child in the birth country than the costs directly attributable to the individual child.

> *When prospective parents must pay more for the adoption than the actual expenses for their child, children tend to become commodities. Even if the money is used for a good cause, such a payment must never become a condition for a child to become available for adoption.* (SOU 2003: 49, p. 21)

As mentioned in the introduction, this government inquiry elicited strong reactions from the authorized adoption organizations, particularly from the AC, whose president argued that decisions about international adoption cannot be made in "a Swedish vacuum" (Kristersson 2003). However, the proposals of the inquiry never materialized into political decisions. The ethical dilemma remained dormant for nearly twenty more years, until it resurfaced due to investigations into illegal adoptions in Chile and South Korea, as well as through various media narratives such as Madeleine's story in Hwa Björks' radio broadcast about her search for her biological family in South Korea (Hwa Björk 2019) and Patrik Lundberg's similar account (Lundberg 2021), TV documentaries like *The Stolen Children* (*Uppdrag granskning*, SVT 2021) and *One child nation* (Wang and Zhang 2019; aired on Swedish television, SVT 2021), and the series of articles published in *Dagens Nyheter* under the heading "Children—at what price?" [Barn—till vilket pris] (Lundberg et al. 2021).

The extensive media coverage eventually prompted the Swedish government, in 2021, to appoint an official inquiry to investigate "possible irregularities" in transnational adoptions to Sweden from the 1950s until the present (Socialdepartementet 2021). In an interview in June 2023, the investigator reported that she had found irregularities in all the countries she had visited as part of the inquiry (Lundberg 2023). This aligns with the findings of the previous Dutch inquiry conducted several years earlier (Joustra 2021).

While narratives from biological parents have long remained untold in the first person, they have not been entirely absent. Primarily, they have surfaced within adoptees' narratives, serving as keys to fractured narrative identities and as potential explanations for unknown beginnings and their underlying reasons. Sometimes, they offer glimpses or reflections of what adoptees' lives might have been like if they had not been adopted. Additionally, biological parents have appeared in documentaries and television entertainment programs, such as the popular show *Traceless* [*Spårlöst försvunnen*], where they represent the ultimate destination for adoptees searching for them. They have also over the years—and for a long time primarily occasionally—been depicted as victims, or potential victims, in media coverage of abuses within the transnational adoption business (SOU 2003: 49; Lundberg et al. 2021; Socialdepartementet 2021). But apart from these occasions where they are most often portrayed in the third person, they have rarely been directly represented. Seldom have their stories been told in their own words—at least until very recently, when media coverage has taken a different direction.

In "Children—at What Prize?" [Barn till vilket pris], the series of articles published in *Dagens Nyheter* 2021, (Lundberg et al. 2021), two sides of the adoption triangle are given a voice: the adoptees and the biological parents. Often, their voices intertwine. Adoptees share their experiences of searching for and ultimately locating their biological parents, uncovering falsified origin stories and adoption documents along the way. Meanwhile, the stories of biological parents are primarily relayed through the adoptees, but in some instances, they also themselves recount how their children were wrongly declared dead at birth, abducted from the streets, or forcibly removed from their custody. These parents did not willingly give up their children for adoption or abandon them; instead, they are victims of abuse and crime resulting from transnational adoptions to the West.

What their testimonies reveal is that earlier narratives about biological parents and the precautions sometimes suggested to shield them from contact attempts by transnationally adopted children have contributed to shaping an image of biological parents, particularly mothers, as rational actors—albeit under inhumane conditions. In various texts, including handbooks for social workers in Sweden and guide materials for prospective adoptive parents, biological parents are often portrayed as having "*decided* to give their child up for adoption" (NIA 1982, p. 53), "often because the mother is unmarried, and it is unacceptable in her society to be an unmarried mother" (NIA 1986, p. 10), or due to "severe poverty" (SOU 2003: 49, p. 143). National policies, such as the Chinese one-child policy, are also cited as reasons for relinquishing a child (cf. Socialstyrelsen 2015). In the most recent version of the study materials for prospective adoptive parents, the rationale behind a mother's decision is summarized as follows: "Unmarried mothers have little chance of coping with the situation, and giving the child up can be a way to secure a future for both the child, and herself" (Socialstyrelsen 2015, p. 44)

These notions regarding the rational motives underlying the decision to relinquish children for adoption have been challenged in the 2020s. In the case of the biological parents interviewed in Lundberg et al. (2021), the reasons are instead linked to instances of abuse resulting from economic corruption.

When the series of articles was published in an edited collection, *Adoptions—an Investigative Reportage* [*Adoptionerna—ett granskande reportage*] (Lundberg et al. 2022), the Swedish author and political columnist Göran Greider wrote a review in Sweden's largest daily morning paper, *Dagens Nyheter*, in which he described himself as flabbergasted and the book as a heartbreaking uncovering of a colonial class drama with poor people, especially women, as the primary victims. His review is an example of the impact the stories and voices of the biological parents are now having.

> *Since the fifties, the international adoption industry has inflicted enormous pain and deepest uncertainty on these mothers and fathers. Case after case passes review, revealing an industry primarily involved in trafficking children. Swedish authorities and adoption organizations have relied on the countries of origin to ensure the legality of adoptions. However, it is often from corrupt countries or dictatorships that children are taken.* (Greider 2022, *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 October 2022)

The emergence and presence of life stories and adoption narratives from biological parents will undoubtedly reshape both the perception and practice of transnational adoption. Greider (2022) questions why it has taken so long for the transnational adoption business to face serious scrutiny from the media and authorities. One possible explanation is that as the world evolves, particularly with advancements in communication technology, new voices can be heard, and new perspectives emerge. In a world society (Baraldi et al. 2021; Luhmann 1997, 2012, 2013), it is no longer as easy as before to justify the transfer of impoverished, orphaned, or abandoned children from the rest to the West.

In light of the recent responses to testimonies from biological parents, the statement by the president of the AC in 2003, where he sarcastically dismisses Swedish complacency, not least reflects a changed perception of the transnational adoptees´ biological parents. As the world becomes more interconnected and, following Luhmann's theory, transforms into a world society, it may become increasingly unsustainable to render biological parents invisible or treat them as mere cogs in inhumane systems.

5. Concluding Discussion

During childhood, adoptees are represented by others. However, as they grow up, they begin to advocate for themselves. This developmental process is more or less common to all children. However, what sets apart the first generations of transnationally adopted children in Sweden is that as they start to share their experiences of growing up, these narratives challenge the prevailing discourse of transnational adoptions as a convenient solution to a complex problem. Similarly, when biological parents are finally given a voice

in the conversation surrounding transnational adoptions, their narratives also challenge the pre-existing discourse of transnational adoption as a solution.

In the first decades of Swedish transnational adoption, it was primarily the narratives and voices of adoptive parents that took center stage. They advocated for and framed transnational adoption in a particular light. They had seen orphaned children in an unjust world, and they wanted to do something to save at least some of them by connecting them with parents in Sweden who desired children. The orphans would gain a new family and a chance to thrive in a country with numerous advantages, compared to growing up without love in orphanages on the other side of the world. Additionally, these "yellow, black, and brown youths" (Hernbeck 1991) were seen as agents of change, capable of challenging outdated notions about family and combating racism.

These early conceptions of transnational adoption align closely with one of the discourses on transnational adoption identified by Martinell Barfoed (2008, pp. 94–116) in the early 2000s: adoption as a *solution*. Key themes in this discourse include the portrayal of the adopted child as saved and chosen, and adoption as beneficial for childless potential parents. This perspective is anchored in a Swedish context and predominantly reflects the viewpoints of adoptive parents. Transnational adoption is framed as a mutually beneficial arrangement, expressed by the 1969 motto of AC as "Children seek parents, seek children, seek parents" (Lundberg et al. 2022; SR 2022). When the adoptees' countries of origin are mentioned within this discourse, transnational adoption is positioned as a remedy for circumstances arising from poverty, patriarchal norms, and child-unfriendly national policies.

The second discourse identified by Martinell Barfoed (2008) is adoption as a *problem*. This perspective gains increasing prominence throughout my research, though traces of it are evident from the outset. In addition to early racist objections, prominent themes in this discourse include the risks of child trafficking, the psychological ramifications of early abandonment, neglect, and separations, as well as the challenges faced by adoptees and their families within Swedish society. The discourse gives rise to criticism of transnational adoption as a phenomenon, with voices raised against the practice as a whole. In 2008, Martinell Barfoed interpreted this criticism as the emergence of a third discourse: the critical adoption discourse. By 2024, this third discourse has undoubtedly been established.

Adoption as a problem, together with the critical adoption discourse, is partly grounded in the adoptees' countries of origin and partly in a Swedish (Western) context. In both cases, the discourses are mainly told from the perspective of the adoptees, although in recent years, there has been a slight increase in the first-person perspective of the biological parents, who otherwise have been mainly invisible throughout the history of transnational adoption. Simultaneously, the perspective of the adoptive parents has become weaker and more infrequent. One reason for this may be the decreasing number of new adoptive parents, another the critical adoption discourse, and a third, the increasing presence of reports on irregularities and abuse in transnational adoption. It is probably more difficult today to adopt a perspective on transnational adoption as a solution compared to earlier.

With growing experiences of what transnational adoption can entail and cause, the public image has gradually shifted from viewing transnational adoption as a solution to recognizing it as a problem. Ingrid Stjerna's book from 1981, *Children as Children* [*Barn som barn*], provided an early example of an inventory of problems based on practical experiences. Psychologist and adoptive parent Madeleine Kats may also have contributed to a shift in perspective through her books *Expect an Adopted Child—A Different Pregnancy* [*Att vänta adoptivbarn—en annorlunda graviditet*] (1981) and *Adoptive Children Grow Up* [*Adoptivbarn växer upp*] (1990). These works demonstrate how discourses can be challenged and transformed through the experiences people make in their social practice (Asplund 1979, 1991; Bosseldal 2021). Moreover, time can play a crucial role in the formation of a discourse, as new knowledge often develops regarding what is defined as a problem at a certain point in time. Both experiences and knowledge production can reinforce a discourse, but also contribute to shifting or completely changing it.

In terms of transnational adoption, the initial discourse about it as a way of rescuing orphans by giving them new families in Sweden has been challenged by the experiences made by both the adoptive parents and the adoptees. As the first generation of transnationally adopted children started school, became teenagers, and perhaps rebelled, parents realized that love and care were not always enough. Their children carried experiences from before the adoption and faced situations during their upbringing in Sweden that defied the pioneers' ideas about transnational adoption as a win-win situation: a simple and inspiring solution to complex problems. Additionally, some adoptive parents likely recognized that they, themselves, harbored issues which made it more challenging to be the adoptive parent they had envisioned.

These experiences contradicted the initial idea that the adopted children could be reborn in their new Swedish families and opened for the turn towards the national and biological origin of the adoptees. The adoptive parents had to admit that the idea of a clean break was wrong (or at least a gross oversimplification), which, on the one hand, led to an increased interest in the adoptees' roots and, on the other, to a growing interest and recognition of the life and situation for adoptees in Sweden. What was the personal cost of being abandoned and replanted into a different country, changing not only caretakers but also language and culture?

The initial answers came above all from psychological, psychiatric, and medical researchers. Their research focused on the individual adoptee and gradually created the narrative about adoptees as psychologically vulnerable—grounded in hard statistics and psychological theory. The adoptees also took up this knowledge production when they began to publicly testify and frame their experiences of being adopted as exposure to several early separations and growing up far from their biological, ethnic, cultural, and national origin. Out of this came demands on both adoptive-specific support and therapy, and the image of transnational adoptees as bicultural carriers of identity with roots in a non-Swedish origin.

With time also came a growing realization that not all adoptions had been conducted properly, and eventually, testimonies from biological parents about coercion and abuse emerged. Somewhere in the history of transnational adoptions, the combination of increasing demand from prospective adoptive parents for healthy, young children and the money these parents contributed—in the form of both reimbursements and donations to orphanages—had become toxic and criminogenic. When this in the early 2020s at last became apparent, it fundamentally altered the prevailing perception of transnational adoption in Sweden.

The early discreditation of the pioneers' idealism, particularly their vision of transnational adoption as a humanitarian aid project intertwined with anti-racist and anti-nuclear family efforts, may have inadvertently delayed the acknowledgement of the challenges associated with transnational adoption. Maintaining transnational adoptions within the original, partly idealistic framework could have facilitated a broader perspective—and capability of seeing the practice from the perspective of both the children and the biological parents—beyond the desires of longing adoptive parents in the West.

The above maping of traces in the history of Swedish transnational adoptin makes it visible how narratives about transnational adoption change through the dynamism of forces that Barad (2007) defines as intra-action: partly with each other and other kinds of narratives, partly and primarily in intra-action with experiences from social practice. Over the span of more than 60 years of transnational adoption in Sweden, various new experiences have emerged, gradually or sometimes abruptly shifting the dominant discourse from viewing adoption as a humanitarian endeavor and solution, to recognizing transnational adoption as a complex issue, and indeed, as a producer of severe problems. In turn, the dominant discourse—as discourses do—produces knowledge, positions the ones involved, and shapes our perceptions (cf. Foucault 2002).

To conclude and reconnect to Haraway's (1997) definition of diffraction in social science as a mapping of where effects of differences appear, this article indicates that in

the case of transnational adoption in Sweden, differences—and through them, changed or challenged meanings—appear when a dominant discourse clashes with experiences made, and even more made visible and understandable, in social practice.

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Notes

1 In later debates about racism and discrimination in Sweden, the term 'race' is replaced with 'ethnicity', as the very use of the concept of race is perceived as an expression of racism and consequently taboo (Hübinette 2021).

2 If not otherwise stated, translations from Swedish editions into English are made by the author of this article.

3 The reasons for the decrease are multidimensional and have to do with circumstances in both the countries of origin and Sweden. The decline is in the West often explained by a reduction in the number of orphans and abandoned children eligible for transnational adoption, due to improved living conditions together with an increase in domestic adoption in the countries of origin. At the same time, changes in legislation concerning insemination and IVF as well as new ways of medical treatment of infertility and surrogacy motherhood have grown as alternatives to (transnational) adoption and led to a decrease in the demand for transnationally adopted children (Jonsson Malm 2011; Statskontoret 2021). Presumably, the disclosure of irregularities and criminal acts in the adoption business also plays a role in the decline, especially recently as it has received more public attention. To what extent though is unclear.

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