

Speaking Swedish While Black in Norway

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Abstract: Swedes are almost unambiguously considered White in Norway and, therefore, labeled as non-strangers and non-marked. One of the most striking aspects of studying young Swedish labor migrants to the Norwegian capital is their positioning vis-à-vis the (White) majority and other (Black) minorities; they are immigrants categorized as “not quite” or “not real” immigrants. However, this position is contested in different ways, among other things, by othering processes taking place through the microaggressions of “What are you?” encounters, when linguistic differences are noted. This article argues that Swedes are an invisible, but audible, minority in Norway, categorized as outsiders not through phenotypical difference but through linguistic otherness. This labeling through language takes on extra dimensions when the individual migrants in question do not fit phenotypically with the stereotypical understanding of Swedes as the epitome of Northern European Whiteness. Many Swedes arriving in Norway as migrants are neither blond nor blue-eyed; they may be adopted, be of mixed race, or have Middle Eastern, Asian, or African family backgrounds. This article discusses aspects of the negotiations that take place in the intersection of phenotype and linguistic labeling when Swedes are Black migrants in Norway.

Keywords: mixed race studies, migration, Scandinavia, othering, audible minority, youth studies, labor migration, critical Whiteness studies

Introduction

Just arrived by train in Oslo from Stockholm. At the station I'm taken aside, with other dark-haired people, to show ID. When I open my mouth and answer, they slap me with “WOW you're Swedish?”

Has anyone else experienced anything like this?

(Bo, in a Facebook group for Swedes in Norway)¹

Language is an important part of human identity, both with respect to how we identify ourselves and with respect to how others identify us.² How we speak is a vital part of how we present ourselves to others, and it inevitably reveals part of our personal origin story. People we meet use the information contained in our language to categorize us. They use, if they detect them, our dialect, sociolect, mannerisms, all aspects of how we communicate, to classify us as belonging to one group of people or another. In addition to phenotype and dress, speech is one of the elements that make up the first impression we get of a stranger, and, therefore, language with all its nuances is an important part of the social classification of individuals.

In the case of migrants, accent is often the element that gives them away as an immigrant, perhaps especially when phenotype does not. Swedish migrants in neighboring Norway discover this quickly, with Norwegians exclaiming “Oh, you're Swedish!” as soon as they discover their conversation partner is speaking Swedish, or Norwegian with a Swedish twang. This article examines a minority among such

migrants: Black Swedes and their ambiguous place in Norwegian racial hierarchies. Jin Haritaworn critiques how scholars have described multiracial people's supposed possession of an "ambiguous phenotype," which creates a crisis of meaning, confusion, in their observers. Haritaworn asks us to move beyond this assignment of race as a pre-social property of particular bodies and to investigate it as a socially productive discourse, as power relationships.³ In this text, I ask what role language, the voice in the migrant body, plays in the complexities of categorizing inter-Scandinavian migrants. With my discussion, I want to add to analyses of context-sensitive potential social porosities of racial boundaries relevant to the critical mixed race studies framework to elucidate the ambiguous, hybrid, and liminal constructions of Black and White identities mediated by language in terms of Swedes in Norway.⁴

In Norway, as in many countries, language is an important part of public debate on immigration, and on immigrants. To take but one example, migrants are often euphemistically referred to as "minority language users," even when language is not up for debate.⁵ Three Nordic countries—Denmark, Sweden, and Norway—have national languages that are mutually intelligible. Yet they are distinct enough to make it clear to speakers and listeners where their Nordic conversation partners are from. In the early 2000s, a strong Norwegian and a weak Swedish labor market led to Swedes going from very few to becoming the second largest migrant group in Norway.⁶

Language issues were a recurring topic when I studied young adults from this group, Swedish labor migrants living and working in Oslo, in 2011–14.⁷ When they move to Norway, these young Swedes are naturally migrants in the literal sense of the word, but they are very often socially and culturally perceived as non-migrants or "not completely" migrants. A contributory factor here is probably that a Nordic policy goal has been in place for decades to facilitate easy border crossings for Nordic citizens, meaning that paperwork is negligent.⁸

The concept of the "outsider" in Scandinavia is today racialized through the image of the immigrant, seen as very different from the majority population.⁹ In the southeastern parts of Norway (in and around the capital of Oslo) perhaps especially, this often means the immigrant is pictured as a Middle Eastern Muslim.¹⁰ In other words, the individuals currently racialized as the fundamental "Other" are primarily people categorized as belonging to the populations of postcolonial migrants and their descendants.¹¹ This trend was only made stronger after the September 11, 2001, terror attack in the United States, which made Muslims and Islam the hypervisible Other not only in North America but also further out in the non-Muslim world.¹²

The perception of Swedish immigrants as "not quite immigrants" is contested in different ways—among other things, by othering processes taking place through the microaggressions of "What are you?" encounters when linguistic differences are noted. I argue that Swedes are an invisible, but audible, minority in Norway. They are categorized as outsiders not through phenotypical differences but through linguistic otherness—linguistic profiling of accent being common in majority-minority power relationships.¹³ This labeling through language takes on extra dimensions when the individual migrants in question do *not* fit phenotypically with the stereotypical idea of Swedes as the epitome of Northern European Whiteness. Many Swedes arriving in Norway as migrants are neither blond nor blue-eyed; they may be adopted, be of mixed race, or have Middle Eastern, Asian, or African family backgrounds. This

article discusses aspects of the negotiations that take place in the intersection of phenotype and linguistic labeling when Swedes are Black migrants in Norway.

The Invisibility of Swedes

Scandinavian countries share history, cultural traits, and policies on many levels. Their inhabitants and languages are routinely labeled similar, and this similarity is quite essential in many aspects of Scandi life, a social ideal.¹⁴ Between 2011 and 2014, I conducted twenty-one life-course interviews with young Swedish labor migrants in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. I also conducted fieldwork on a Facebook group called *Svenskar i Oslo* (Swedes in Oslo), often abbreviated SiO. At the time, this online meeting place was the largest and most important among the diverse array of social media sites used by these young Swedes. In addition, I conducted a media review of how Swedish migrants to Norway are portrayed in Scandinavian media. I quickly understood that they are generally spoken of, and treated as, similar to Norwegians. Similarity leads to a certain invisibility and the privilege of entering Norwegian society without immediately being perceived as out of place. The Swedes I interviewed, whether Black or White, often articulated this as, for instance, not “feeling like an immigrant.”

Yet, on the one hand, being Black in Nordic countries often means being associated with the image of the non-European or non-White migrant. On the other hand, being White, or perceived as White, many of the Swedes are deemed non-strangers and non-marked. In other words, they benefit from a form of “ethnic capital.”¹⁵ In cases where the White Swedes I interviewed recalled being identified as different, it was their Swedish language that served as the identifier. Swedish and Norwegian are similar enough for the Swedes to use their mother tongue in their daily interactions with Norwegian friends, colleagues, and co-workers, although they adapt their language to make it closer to that of their conversation partners. Individual differences in length of stay in Norway, language ideology, flexibility, and proficiency make for great diversity in how Swedes in Norway speak.

Some of the Swedes I interviewed, and many more in the Facebook group, spoke a non-Scandinavian language at home. Nonetheless, all mastered communication in Norway and with Norwegians with relative ease. Some of the young Swedes spoke very close to native Norwegian, but in general Swedes in Norway speak a language hybrid colloquially known as *svorsk*, or Swegian.¹⁶ When they keep some Swedish words and most of their Swedish intonation in this way, it is often easy for the average Norwegian listener to place the Swedes *as* Swedish.

The invisibility/audibility I describe here means that Swedes in Norway in many ways are comparable to the Irish in England. Bronwen Walter and Mary J. Hickman have shown that the Irish are seen as White but different (and inferior) to the English, and it is their accent that makes them stand out.¹⁷ Dialect and accent are class markers in the United Kingdom and have a racial tone in the case of Irish English.¹⁸ In another example of the intimate but complex links between language and race, Johanna Leinonen and Mari Toivanen have shown how American migrants in Finland strike a balance between being seen as “immigrants” and “expats.” While the former has decidedly negative connotations, the latter is discursively linked to a desired internationalization of Finnish society. Speaking American English places these migrants as high class and exotic in a positive sense, while trying to speak Finnish with a still obvious

American accent may place them in a rather more stigmatized immigrant category.¹⁹ Both the Irish and American migrants are negatively racially marked by their audible minority status. However, in the case of the Swedish migrants I studied, their audible differences are not necessarily a negative characteristic.

“Are You Swedish?”

In the twentieth century at least, Swedish has enjoyed a certain high status in Norway.²⁰ This is probably a reflection of Sweden’s position as the “big brother” in the relationship between the two countries; social and political relations have an impact on how we perceive languages. Several of the Swedish interviewees in the project spoke of encountering positive attitudes to Swedish: for instance, work colleagues remarking how “cute” their Swedish is.²¹ Even though this is a form of praise, it is worth noting that Norwegians setting themselves up as judges of the aesthetics of migrants’ accents and vocabulary in itself creates or reinforces a power relationship.

The easy-to-detect, audible difference of the Swedish migrants’ accents led to multiple stories of being “outed” as Swedish and frustration over the recurrence of such experiences, especially when having lived in Norway for many years. Most of the young Swedes are in Norway temporarily, on a gap year or with similar short-term plans. They do not plan on staying in Norway and do not feel the need to be regarded as Norwegian citizens; they have no wish to be Norwegian. In other words, they are not hurt by not being included in the nation. What is problematic, even sometimes exhausting or infuriating, is the constant repetition and reminders that they are foreigners, that they are different. Importantly, the “Are you Swedish?” question was posed to Black and White Swedes alike, hinting toward some potential of primacy of language over phenotype.

Several researchers have studied, in different ways, the widespread Norwegian habit of asking “Where do you come from?” instead of, for instance, asking “What do you do?”²² Norway is a country of many distinct dialects, and the presupposed idea behind such a question is often that where you grew up matters in a profound way. The answer will tell the inquirer not only about childhood but also about sociocultural background and life story. The question is similar to what Teresa Kay Williams has called “‘What are you?’ encounters” in the context of mixed-race individuals but in this case involving the linguistic dissection of the Other.²³

Such questions are obviously, to a certain degree, questions of power and hierarchy. Those who feel they have the right to inquire, the right to know, place themselves in a superior position. It is a marker of the fact that you are slightly different and, in the case of minorities, that you stand out from the crowd, you are the stranger. In the cases I describe here, some were seen as being both linguistically and phenotypically marked; all were marked in one sense or the other. Individuals perceived to belong to hierarchically inferior groups are more exposed than others to the power of definition exercised by those perceived to be superior.²⁴

The reports of such questions from Norwegians were common in my data. They can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, it may be a sign that Norwegians generally regard Swedish as yet another dialect, making it socially acceptable to ask “Where are you from?” in the same way you would ask somebody who sounds like they grew up in a different region of the country. It should be noted that this

would not necessarily make the question completely innocuous, as hierarchies definitely exist between different Norwegian regions, especially between urban and rural areas. Although the regional dialects have been celebrated as a positive trait of Norwegian language and society for decades, all language varieties are not equal.²⁵ The second possible interpretation of the prevalent questioning of Swedish migrants about their origin is closer to what Haritaworn describes from a mixed-race experience, contradicting to some extent the notion that Swedes are regarded and treated similarly to the Norwegian majority population.²⁶

There are also gendered aspects to these inquiries. Whiteness is also attractiveness, and the image of *Swedish sin* has—somewhat surprisingly—a foothold even in neighboring Norway.²⁷ The vision of the blond, blue-eyed hyperborean woman plays into young Swedish women’s encounters with Norwegian men, whether they are Black or White Swedes.²⁸ The young Swedish women I interviewed had met these stereotypes of Swedish women as “easy” both on the dating scene and at work in the service sector.²⁹

The point here is that “What are you?” encounters are context sensitive. When Norwegians ask Swedes this question, in Norway, it has many possible meanings. There is a definite possibility of it being a question of dialect, of finding out where in Sweden your specific way of speaking Swedish originates from, denoting the history of Nordic local regions and the language interest of Norwegians. It may also be intended or interpreted as a question of national borders: are you not from my country? Both these versions of the question may be seen as inclusive as well as exclusionary.

Adding gender, the question conveys the tradition, established over decades, of associating Sweden and especially Swedish women with erotic beauty, sexual liberation, and even sexual deviance.³⁰ The sexualized othering that some of the interviewees conveyed may be interpreted as a relatively benign version of the hypersexualization otherwise associated with White people’s images of Black women.³¹

There is an intersection between a generalized idea of the “Other” as sexually available (or threatening/deviant) and the narrative of Swedish women as modern and amoral. In Norway, this becomes an additional burden for young female labor migrants who speak Swedish. Like their male counterparts, they are completely invisible in some situations and contexts in a Norwegian crowd. If they are White, they are used to, and probably expect to, being treated favorably as a special kind of migrant: normal, Nordic, in short, “not completely,” immigrants. Standing out as different through a trait they can do very little about, their language and accent, makes for an uncomfortable and confusing surprise. For young Black Swedes in Norway, the othering of their language may create another layer of sexualization.

Ambiguities: On the Physical Border

The starting point for this article was the following quote from Bo in the SiO Facebook group:

*Just arrived by train in Oslo from Stockholm. At the station I’m taken aside, with other dark-haired people, to show ID. When I open my mouth and answer, they slap me with “WOW you’re Swedish?”
Has anyone else experienced anything like this?*

The post was “liked” by twenty other members of the group and generated a heated debate with around two hundred comments in ten hours. The group itself, at the time of my fieldwork, was very large, at least

as far as noncommercial Nordic Facebook groups go, with more than thirteen thousand members. I would characterize at least one hundred individuals as very active, posting and commenting weekly, if not daily. The group was a social meeting place for Swedish migrants, primarily in Oslo, but with many individuals posting from other parts of Norway and abroad.

For many newcomers, the group was their first encounter with the young, vibrant social scene of Swedes working and living in Norway and a place to seek advice on both major issues (such as finding work and a place to live) and minor issues (such as finding familiar foodstuffs). As I have argued elsewhere, the group, for a certain period in history, was one of the most important places where a collectively shared identity as an “Oslo Swede” was formed, negotiated, and expressed in various ways.³²

As is quite common on social media sites, the group was at the time marred by regular in-group fights, and schisms had arisen several times in the preceding months, with individuals and groups threatening exodus in protest against too strict or too lenient moderators. They would leave the group or set up their own, competing, Facebook groups—such as the relatively short-lived *Svenskar i Oslo utan censur* (Swedes in Oslo without Censorship).³³ More often than not, the most heated debates on SiO emerged between feminists and supporters of the right-wing populist (and racist) Swedish party *Sverigedemokraterna* (Swedish Democrats), sometimes with genuine trolls chiming in (using here the “original” web sense of the word “troll”).³⁴

The discussion that ensued after the train station post, rather predictably, followed that pattern, although the debate was not as heated as could be expected. What is striking in the thread below the original post is the number of SiO members who identified with the issue or had similar experiences. Among the two hundred comments over ten hours, many SiO members shared their experience of being placed in some sort of “foreigner” category before being recategorized as Swedish when they spoke the language. Many more referred more generally to the experience of being stopped unusually often by border or customs officers.

Border control codes some people as non-Nordic foreigners, a category associated with potential crime. Answering questions in Swedish mixes up the category, and the original poster was not the only one who had experienced that the Swedish language—whether mother tongue or not—would remove them from the category to be frisked and searched. At the same time, other posters in the Facebook thread trivialized the experience. Some pointed out that even blond, blue-eyed Swedes are stopped by customs officers and police when crossing the border. The argument was that everyone should accept such law enforcement, as it is in the interests of everyone’s safety.

One SiO member argued that it was just and fair to stop Black border crossers as “they choose those that they have experience with committing certain acts.”³⁵ In other words, the argument was that Black people commit more crimes; hence, border officers should have the right to search Black people more often. Other members entered the discussion trying to claim on a more principled note that what the original poster had experienced could not be labeled as racism. Many claimed that the original poster and the others who recounted their experiences were overly sensitive:

It's the same thing whenever you stop people in the door or take them out. Bloody racist, just because I'm a foreigner. Stop pulling the racism card and use it when it's needed instead. Cry wolf. (Evert, SiO)

In an effort to get the debate back on track, Bo, the original poster, stressed that what he had tried to convey was the feeling of having his citizenship questioned based on the way he looked. Not surprisingly, the discussion sidetracked into the hot news item of the day: the REVA project from the Swedish Migration Agency.³⁶ “Right of residence” checks were being carried out along with ticket inspection in the Stockholm metro, a system leading to a heated debate in Sweden on structural racism, the system being criticized for being based on people’s appearances.

That Bo’s experience happened as he crossed the border is, of course, interesting in and of itself. Borders will always be perceived differently according to the status of who is crossing.³⁷ Borders, and the act of bordering, is essential in the creation of socio-spatial entities.³⁸ Border controls enable the state to keep its territories free of those who do not belong: stopping an individual says something profound about who or what the person stopping them believes that individual to be.

Swedes and Norwegians have lived with easy border crossings for several decades and have become accustomed to an invisible or at least discreet border. This perhaps makes the singling out of certain—Black—groups even more striking, revealing which groups are routinely deemed as not belonging and suspicious. Bo was scrutinized at the border as Black but allowed through—allowed to pass—as White. This literal passing was made possible by his perceived phenotypically designated category being trumped by linguistics.

Ambiguities: On the Linguistic Border

The young Swedish migrants in Oslo whom I interviewed had a variety of backgrounds and home languages. Some had parents from other Nordic countries, others had spent parts of their childhood living outside Sweden or outside Scandinavia. The variety of family and individual trajectories was broad, especially considering that my call for participants simply asked for “young Swedes.” Three of my main interviewees had phenotypes not routinely classified as Nordic; they were Black or people of color—and they had experience of linguistic labeling reminiscent of that described by the original poster on SiO.

One of them, Sven, was born in Somalia but raised in Sweden. Sven came to Sweden with his family as a teenager. While talking about his language proficiency—I commented on his relative fluency in Norwegian—he explained that he speaks Somali, Arabic, and Swedish. He continued:

*sometimes I'm also a bit mean
people get bewildered
and then I make fun of it perhaps
one example
I don't know
it's my mood*

*yes hahaha how, explain!
yes*

*for instance, I may say
“you may speak Swedish
I understand Norwegian well”* *yeah*
*when people for instance start speaking English
and I’m like
“that’s all right
It’s all right to speak Norwegian”* *hahahaha!*³⁹

What Sven describes is playing with people’s prejudices, intentionally making them a little bit uncomfortable when they are unable to categorize him, or when they realize they have miscategorized him. He told the story in a humorous way, mocking me gently for my compliment on his ability to speak the language when he obviously speaks more languages than I do. At the same time, the story placed him in the role of the trickster, the in-between, who cannot be neatly labeled. It was obvious that Sven was annoyed with people’s labeling practices, but he also had fun playing with them.

Another non-blond interviewee, Vilhelm, was adopted from Korea as a child. He grew up in rural Sweden and recalled being singled out as different by his peers, bullied, and called *svartskalle*. The word *svartskalle* literally means “Black skull” or “head,” and is considered extremely derogatory in Swedish—even in a legal sense, as it has been ruled to be “insulting and offensive.”⁴⁰ In other words, Vilhelm was categorized with the same term as would be used for a Black African. He is labeled as Black because he is non-White.

In Oslo, Vilhelm has been working in nightclubs and bars, sometimes as a bouncer. The job is demanding no matter who you are or how you are racially defined. Vilhelm described being called names by drunk and unruly guests. Nevertheless, he chose to make light of these experiences when explaining them to me, singling out the common Norwegian abuse *svenskefaen* (literally “Swedish devil”):

*back home people say:
“are you Chinese or what?”
here, I’m a Swedish devil
I have never been this Swedish!*⁴¹

Svenskefaen is a relatively old derogatory term in Norway, often associated with the long history of rivalry within Scandinavia. It is a history of wars, but also of trade and cultural exchange, and of the very difficult situation during World War II when Norway was occupied by Hitler Germany while Sweden remained neutral. Even disregarding older layers of history, solely focusing on the post–World War II relationship, the word *svenskefaen* will remind Scandinavians of the decades of Sweden being the richer of the nation-states. In that history lies the fact that Swedes have often been considered more modern and more advanced than Norwegians—and more arrogant.

In Vilhelm’s short remark, we see how he acknowledges that both terms, “Black skull” and “Swedish devil,” are abusive. One refers to his appearance, the other to his language, but both are hateful toward him as a person. Making fun of the names he is called, Vilhelm connects the two forms of abuse.

Both *svartskalle* and *svenskefaen* denote, in a certain sense, that his ethnicity is used as a weapon against him. Ironically, the latter word grants him an ethnic (or, to be precise, linguistic) affiliation to Sweden that the former word denies him.

The two interviewees, Sven and Vilhelm, stand out in my data for choosing a humorous approach to standing out. Interestingly, this is not particularly unusual in terms of mixed-race individuals. Haritaworn writes how some of his interviewees chose a humorous, even theatrical approach to answering “Where are you from?” inquiries.⁴² This may perhaps be a sign of the frequency of this type of questioning of individuals of mixed or ambiguous race; those facing such questions learn to tackle the discomfort by whatever communicative means available. Laughter may be a powerful tool in such cases, as a socially disciplining act.⁴³

In the cases described by Sven and Vilhelm, the Norwegians they encounter see one type of “foreigner” but hear another. The Norwegians have to choose how to categorize the individual standing in front of them, and according to the narratives from Sven and Vilhelm, the category chosen, at least occasionally, is “Swedish.” In some instances, this may be interpreted positively, in others negatively. Johanna Frank, who conducted fieldwork for her sociology master’s thesis among a similar Swedish migrant group as I did, writes of one of her informants that he “originates from Southern Europe but passes as ethnic Swedish thanks to his Northern European looks and his flawless Swedish.”⁴⁴

Looking at the case of Sven, I do not believe a flawless Swedish accent is necessary to pass as Swedish in Norway.⁴⁵ Although Norwegians understand Swedish well, their ability to distinguish between different dialects and accents is probably more limited. Sven probably has an accent that discloses him as “immigrant” in a Swedish context. For a Norwegian, his accent will not have such connotations: what a Norwegian hears is the Swedish tone, and the category of Swede trumps the potential but more complex category of immigrant to Sweden. Sven is a musician, which probably explains to a certain extent why he referred to people initially speaking to him in English. The music scene he belongs to has historically been dominated by African Americans, which may be the association leading him to be deemed an English-speaking foreigner. In Vilhelm’s story, he is not even initially categorized as Black. In the narrative he presents, the first and last category he is placed in is based on his language—Swedish.

The cases presented here describe being singled out as suspicious on account of Black skin, being spoken to in English, and various race-based abuse according to context. They are different, and the gravity of the racism inherent in all three cases is also different—and have different outcomes. What they have in common is that these individuals, as members of audible, as well as visible, minorities find that their Swedish language may outrank their phenotype. In some contexts, their voices sound louder, quite literally, than the color of their skin and texture of their hair. The instances of confusion, of changing categorizations, and the question of “Where are you from?” may be benign, intended as inclusive and trust building.

They may also be markers of social boundaries. They may function as microaggressions, everyday hierarchically based humiliations.⁴⁶ Even in cases where Norwegian and Swedish are regarded as dialects, the “Where are you from?” question may be interpreted as hostile. It is not uncommon for stigma to be attached to dialects, even in dialect-mad Norway.⁴⁷ Those who are the objects of such questions may

interpret them in many ways. One of the options is to draw on previous experience of explicitly racist “What are you?” encounters.

The majority of young Swedish labor migrants to Oslo whom I have studied and interviewed were unskilled when they arrived and had limited financial resources. However, coming to Norway is easy. They are categorized as White but are subjected to othering processes in the same way, albeit not with the same serious consequences, as all other groups of people, who are considered outsiders in the communities in which they reside. As a minority in Norway, they are subjected to categorization by majority Norwegians. The only “non-marked” are Norwegians themselves, in the preferred and privileged position.

One of the most important dichotomies to “Norwegian,” and the contrast on which it relies, is “immigrant.”⁴⁸ In other words, there is a power relationship to the dichotomy, and this is a dichotomy that is activated the moment someone crosses the border. However, the power relationship is complex, and for the young Swedes it is activated in somewhat different, and not unambiguously negative, terms compared to other, less privileged minority groups in Norwegian society. The case of the outliers—Black Swedes—exemplifies these complexities and makes them more visible.

Whiteness is a systematically privileged position in Nordic countries, as it is elsewhere.⁴⁹ If you are lucky enough to be labeled as White in Norway, whether as a function of phenotype, family heritage, or Swedish language, you are granted the possibility of being “one of us.” Still, while the Swedish language may enable you to pass as White in certain contexts—even if you otherwise are considered Black—the Swedish language may, in other contexts, mark you as an outsider.

Race, Mixed-up: Audible Minorities

Whiteness is often a visual quality of the individual body, and it is the lack of visual Whiteness that makes migrants visible as migrants or marks adoptees and mixed-race individuals as different, as Other.⁵⁰ Most, but far from all, young Swedes look like the stereotypical Scandinavian, and it would be impossible to pick them out in an average Northern European crowd. In the same way as other European migrants to Norway, they do not disclose their difference, their otherness, until they open their mouths.⁵¹ Rather than being a visible minority, Swedes in Norway are an audible minority. It is a relative and contextual visibility, one that identifies them as minority not through phenotype, dress, or manner but through linguistic markers.

The three examples I have included in this article—Bo, Sven, and Vilhelm—all identified as Swedes in Norway; they signed up for a research project explicitly looking for Swedes in Norway and/or they were members of a Facebook group named Swedes in Oslo. They may have been identifying as “adopted” Swedes, mixed-race Swedes, Black Swedes, and/or other categories. I do not know. I did not ask. However, their explicit discussion of in-betweenness in being or moving inside and outside Norwegian society makes all three relevant for a discussion of what it means to present as Black when moving between Scandinavian neighboring countries.

To a certain degree, Swedes in Norway as an audible minority may be compared to what has been called “Third Culture Kids.”⁵² These are children who spend important parts of their childhood and youth in a culture outside that of their parents. David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken have proposed a

division of children based on how their surroundings see them: as foreigner (both look different and think differently), hidden immigrant (look alike while thinking differently), adopted (look different, think alike), and mirror (look and think alike).⁵³ Third Culture Kids experience different versions of these positions throughout their daily lives, depending on who they spend time with and where they live. They are not constantly one category or the other, and those who move find themselves changing positions in the eyes of others.

Another important aspect of this four-part model is that it stresses that how others see you—even when their view is benevolent and inclusive—does not necessarily match how you feel comfortable defining yourself.⁵⁴ The young Swedes seem to be balancing between the position of mirror and hidden immigrant. Sometimes they feel, and are seen by others, as being so similar to the majority population that they mirror Norwegians. At other times, they feel conflicted when they encounter Norwegian habits or aspects of Norwegian culture with which they are unfamiliar.⁵⁵ Lastly, they may experience othering and being placed as foreigners.

Speaking Swedish while Black in Norway may somewhat surprisingly enable passing as White—as in the case of Vilhelm being labeled “Swedish devil” when exerting his power as bouncer over drunk (White) Norwegian guests. For some young Swedes this may be an advantage, something enabling play, moments of power over an otherwise powerless situation. Racialization is a sociohistorical process, a phenomenon that happens in interaction. In studying how race and Whiteness operate in the social world, language needs to be taken into account: voice is part of the body and part of racialization.

Swedes moving to the neighboring country are in/visible in Norway: they are an ambiguous immigrant group, in-between an outsider role as immigrants and an insider role as Scandinavian. As a group, they are heterogenous in that they have different cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, and they live with different degrees of fitting in to the standardized ideas of what phenotypes pass as Scandinavian. Leinonen and Toivanen stress the need to see the concept of “in/visibility” not as juxtaposed but as “located on a continuum: a person who in one context is invisible may become visible in the next, and vice versa.”⁵⁶ Both Black Swedes and White Swedes in Norway live within this continuum but may experience the movement along its ambiguous borders in different ways. White Swedes will time and time again experience being othered when they speak: their accent setting them apart from the Norwegian majority and marking them as different. Black Swedes will also experience being othered by their accent but the other way around: while their phenotype places them as something other than the Norwegian majority, their Swedish accent moves them closer into a Scandinavian “we.”

The three cases I have discussed show some of the width of the in/visibility continuum. One Black Swede was labeled as “bloody Swede” when stopping members of the Norwegian majority at a night club door. Another Black Swede was labeled as African American before confusing and teasing Norwegians with his pan-Scandinavian language proficiency. And last, a young Black Swede was stopped because of his phenotype at the physical Norwegian-Swedish border but allowed literally to “pass” when speaking the seemingly magic Swedish language. All three cases are about border controls in one way or another and the negotiations that happen over who is allowed to pass, and with what ease. Categorizing, border making, and passing are all social processes. In the cases of these hybrid identities, the critical mixed race studies

paradigm provides an intersectional eye toward what categories trump others, and who gets to decide, which is crucial to understanding their performance and operationalization.⁵⁷

Notes

¹ All informants interviewed in my project were given pseudonyms from the Vilhelm Moberg novel series *The Emigrants*; Facebook group discussants were given names from 1960s Swedish popular music. All translations by author.

² This article is based on chapter 3 of my PhD dissertation, “Partysvensker; GO HARD! En narratologisk studie av unge svenske arbeidsmigranter nærvar i Oslo.”

³ Haritaworn, “Hybrid Border-Crossers?,” 116.

⁴ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 8.

⁵ Majid, “Svart, brun, eller melaninrik?”

⁶ Statistikkbanken, “Innvandrere, etter kjønn og landbakgrunn,” table 05184, Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2014, <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/05184/>.

⁷ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 57–59.

⁸ Andersson and Jonsson, *Mobilitet i gränsregionen*, 11; Pedersen, Røed, and Wadensjö, *Common Nordic Labor Market at 50*, 11.

⁹ Lundström, “White Side of Migration,” 79.

¹⁰ Gullestad, *Det norske sett med nye øyne*, 89.

¹¹ Lewis and Kennedy-Macfoy, “Race and Anti-race in Europe,” 4.

¹² Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 127.

¹³ Zentella, “TWB (Talking while Bilingual),” 625.

¹⁴ Gullestad, *Det norske sett med nye øyne*, 82; Lien, Lidén, and Vike, *Likhetens paradokser*, 11; Delsing and Åkesson, *Håller språket ihop norden?*, 148.

¹⁵ MacDonald and Twine, “Residential Mobility and the Market Value of Whiteness in Boston,” 225.

¹⁶ Tolgensbakk, “Svorsk helt på grensa,” 23.

¹⁷ Hickman and Walter, “Deconstructing Whiteness,” 5–19.

¹⁸ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, 164.

¹⁹ Leinonen and Toivanen, “Researching In/Visibility in the Nordic Context,” 162.

²⁰ Delsing and Åkesson, *Håller språket ihop norden?*, 148; Nordenstam, *Svenskan i Norge*, 14.

²¹ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 79.

²² Gotaas, *Farger i natten*, 110; Gullestad, *Det norske sett med nye øyne*, 233; Sandset, *Color That Matters*, 98.

²³ Williams, “Race as Process,” 191–210; Haritaworn, “Hybrid Border-Crossers?,” 118.

²⁴ Pripp, *Företagande i minoritet*, 97.

²⁵ Pajaro, “A Norwegian Speaks Norwegian,” 104–5; Lane, “Mediating National Language Management,” 209–25.

²⁶ Haritaworn, “Hybrid Border-Crossers?,” 124.

²⁷ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 43.

²⁸ Schough, *Hyperboré*; Lundström, “Swedish Whiteness in Southern Spain,” 195.

²⁹ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 66.

³⁰ Marklund, “Hot Love and Cold People,” 84; Tolgensbakk and Woube, “Sweden and Swedishness from Migrants Afar,” 29.

³¹ Eriksen and Christensen, *Hvite løgner*, 108–9; Lundström, “Rasifierat begär,” 189–213.

³² Tolgensbakk, “Visual Humor in Online Ethnicity,” 118.

³³ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 162.

³⁴ Morrissey, “Trolling Is a Art,” 75.

³⁵ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!” 70.

- ³⁶ The abbreviation REVA stands for Rättssäkerhet och Effektivt Verkställighetsarbete (Legal Certainty and Effective Enforcement). Willson-Broyles, “Swedish REVA Debate,” 111–13.
- ³⁷ For an interesting discussion of the current ambiguities of Swedish borders, see Peterson, “Humanitarian Border Workers,” 317–33.
- ³⁸ Houtum, “Human Blacklisting,” 165.
- ³⁹ Sven, interview by author, Oslo, 2012. I use ethnopoetic transcription: line shift marks rhythm. Interviewer feedback and questions are placed on the right-hand side of the transcript. All interviews were sound recorded, and quotes were transcribed and translated by me for this article from the original Norwegian, Swedish, or Swegian voices into English.
- ⁴⁰ Brottsbalken 5 chapter 3 § 1, <https://lagen.nu/1962:700>.
- ⁴¹ Vilhelm, interview by author, Oslo, 2011.
- ⁴² Haritaworn, “Hybrid Border-Crossers?,” 124.
- ⁴³ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 198.
- ⁴⁴ Frank, “Likhetens gränser,” 82.
- ⁴⁵ Tolgensbakk, “Partysvensker; GO HARD!,” 70.
- ⁴⁶ Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 5–7.
- ⁴⁷ Hellstad, “Nordlendinger uønsket,” 44.
- ⁴⁸ Gullestad, *Det norske sett med nye øyne*, 164.
- ⁴⁹ Dyer, *White*; Andrucki, “Visa Whiteness Machine,” 121–34.
- ⁵⁰ McIntosh, “Impossible Presence,” 314.
- ⁵¹ See, for instance, Guðjónsdóttir, “We Blend In with the Crowd,” 180.
- ⁵² Fail, Thompson, and Walker, “Belonging, Identity, and Third Culture Kids,” 319–38.
- ⁵³ Pollock and Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids*, 54–58.
- ⁵⁴ Salole, *Krysskulturelle Barn og Unge*, 44.
- ⁵⁵ Tolgensbakk, “Street Food as Ethnic Border,” 24.
- ⁵⁶ Leinonen and Toivanen, “Researching In/Visibility in the Nordic Context,” 162.
- ⁵⁷ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 8.

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