GENDERED RACISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE
Media representations and identity work among “immigrant youth” in contemporary Sweden

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Introduction

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from”, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (Hall 1996, 4)

In a summary of present knowledge as regards sexuality and youth, published by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health, a short chapter on ethnicity and sexuality is also included. In the last part of this chapter the report draws attention to the media’s frequent accounts of how “young men with immigrant background readily have sex with Swedish girls while at the same time holding these girls in contempt precisely because they are sexually active”. The author subsequently concludes that this picture partly is borne out by recent research on ethnicity, youth and sexuality (Forsberg 2000, 26). In some sense this report is symptomatic of both the scanty scope and problematic content of research on ethnicity and sexuality in Sweden. In spite of some important exceptions, this research’s main focus has been on the consequences of the alleged cultural differences between “Swedes” and “immigrants”, as in encounters between Swedish sexual norms and norms presumed to be originating in the young peoples’ ethnic backgrounds.

In contrast to such approaches, this article aims to reflect upon the racialised construction of “cultural difference” and its repercussions on “immigrant” youth living in Sweden. In the first part of the article I survey and analyse some of the contemporary manifestations of racism in Sweden, mainly focusing on recent debates in mainstream media. I pay particular attention to its gendered expressions, and seek to analyse these by drawing from critical scholarship on ethnicity and racism, as well as from postcolonial feminist theory. With reference to my own research, the article’s second part points to some of the ways in which these current racialised discourses play out in the lives of “immigrant” youth in Sweden.

Empirically speaking, this article is based on two case studies. The first one examined mainstream media, engaging in a critical reading that focused on the most repeated statements and commonly used arguments. In it I paid particular attention to how concepts such as culture and cultural difference were being employed, appropriated and defined in relation to ethnicity. The second case study is based on a research project dealing with issues of ethnicity, gender, heteronormativity and racism. The main purpose of the project was to examine how young people (age 18-25) of different ethnic backgrounds living in Sweden negotiate around risk-taking and safety in (hetero)sexual relations. For this purpose approximately 50 young men and women were interviewed, using both individual, separate interviews and gender separate focus group interviews. All the young women and men lived in what often is being described as a multicultural or multiethnic environment (Ålund 1997).
Media and cultural difference

If the issue concerning immigrant youth and gender relations has been fairly neglected within research, it has, in recent years, come to attract an enormous amount of interest in the public debate in Sweden. One of the major debates followed upon an event that Swedish media named “the Rissne rape”, where a young girl was sexually assaulted by several young men in Rissne on the outskirts of Stockholm (in January of 2000). Another intense debate centred on so-called “honour killings”. Although having been discussed off and on during the past years, this issue came back with an immense force following the murder of Fadime Sahindal (in January of 2002). Fadime was killed by her father and the crime was publicly labelled an honour killing, the claim being that Fadime was killed as a direct result of her “Swedish” lifestyle, which was said to have challenged “ancient” Kurdish traditions.

The debate around “the Rissne rape” started off discussing psychological issues as to “why boys commit rape”, but took a sharp turn after it became publicly known that the young men were of “immigrant background” (Bredström 2002b). Subsequently the debate mainly revolved around “their” presumed “culture”, exposing commonsensical conceptions of patriarchal traits in Middle Eastern or Mediterranean cultures. Although all of the young men were either born in Sweden or had been living in Sweden for most of their lives, it was constantly being referred to their “roots” or “countries of origin”. The same applied to the victim’s “Swedishness”, which was put forward as one of the causes of the young men’s violent outburst; hence, she was raped not because she was a woman, but because she was a Swedish woman:

Their contempt for Swedish girls has its basis in the encounter between the Swedish culture and the strongly patriarchal cultures around the Mediterranean. (Svensson 2000)

From this perspective, either “culture” alone or an alleged “culture clash” with Swedish society was used to explain why young “immigrant” men commit such heinous crimes.

Another, although much less frequently utilized explanation sought to challenge this “culturalist” (Ålund 1997) reasoning and instead put the blame on segregation and insufficient integration. Rather than “immigrant culture” it was now “gang-mentality” and “mislead youth” that constituted the problem. Even though this perspective problematized Swedish society, a misogynist ghetto-culture was often deduced from the youngsters’ family relations rather than society at large, blaming single mothers, fathers having lost their authority, or in any other way pathologizing “the immigrant family”. Often these arguments were used interchangeably; reading between the lines, it was sometimes possible to detect that the “insufficient” family was understood as a result of “clashing cultures”:

Young men from patriarchal tribal societies whose fathers have turned bitter and lost their authority in the individual-centred Swedish society do not have an easy time. Family relations are torn asunder, the sons lose their confidence and are drawn to gangs made up of equally lost boys who easily fall into a vicious circle of criminality. What binds them together is the hatred towards the society that failed to provide their parents with the honourable position they deserve. […] And given the gut feeling that these young men have towards women, it lies near at hand that the liberated Swedish girls will trigger both temptation and contempt. (Svensson 2000)

If cultural explanations were omnipresent in the debate on the “Rissne rape”, they were, if possible, even more so in the debate following the murder of Fadime. While the young men above still somehow acted on a public scene, for example in youth gangs, the young girls were seen as more or less banished from public life and constantly referred to the home and the family – i.e. the private sphere. In the aftermath of the murder it was the “Kurdish culture” that became subjected to scrutiny. Portrayed as uncivilised under headlines such as “barbaric tribal custom being brought to Sweden” (Folkbladet 2002), the crime was designated as an “honour killing” and explained as a manifestation of an “old” tradition still practiced by Kurdish families living in Sweden (cf. Grip 2002). The obvious risk that this might lead to a collective stigmatisation of Kurds was routinely brushed aside with
recurrent references to “the fact” that violence against women, after all, was rooted in the Kurdish culture and tradition (e.g. Kihlström 2002). Some writers questioned the idea that honour killings were specific to the Kurdish community by arguing that it was something that occurred among “other immigrants” as well (Olsson 2002). Rather than challenging the culturalist argument then, these voices argued that the problem actually was much more widespread amongst “immigrants” in general than the debate around the murder of Fadime seemed to suggest.

The gendered character of these debates has perhaps already been made obvious. Both incidents focused on highly gendered and sexualised issues: rape and women being murdered by close male relatives are problems that have been on the feminist agenda for years on end. In addition, the debates bore a heavy stamp of stereotypic perceptions of Swedish respectively immigrant masculinity and femininity. “Immigrant men”, we learnt, must be seen as more patriarchal and misogynist than Swedish men, whereas “immigrant women”, correspondingly, need to be seen as more oppressed than Swedish women. Under headlines such as “cooped up” and “threatened immigrant women”, young immigrant women were depicted as severely oppressed – not by Swedish society and its inherent racism – but by their “cultures” and families, foremost their fathers:

> Everything she does is subjected to constant and meticulous scrutiny. Every day her parents and brothers make sure that she follows the family’s moral codes of conduct. […] It is the parents who decide her future. At any time her parents can force her to quit school and have her marry a man that she has never met. (Svensson 2002a)

Finally, the murder of Fadime also sparked off a heated debate among feminists. The main conflicting discourse, in this case, was being produced by those feminists who argued that the murder was an outcome of patriarchy – ever present in all societies – rather than of Kurdish culture. The then leader of the left party, Gudrun Schyman (2002), was one of those who contended that Fadime was a “victim of male oppression”, not a victim of Kurdish culture.

Cultural racism

These debates’ woolly appropriation of culture, by turns designated “Arabic”, “Middle Eastern”, “Kurdish”, “Muslim” and sometimes even “immigrant culture”, has been subjected to much scrutiny by critical scholarship on ethnicity, “race” and racism (e.g. Donald & Rattansi 1992). Culture, this tradition holds, cannot be utilized and applied in this way, as if it constituted some package, baggage or hereditary trait. Neither can culture be seen as something essential or stable, as a bundle of fixed values or traditions, but rather needs to be approached as something much more contingent and as always potentially open for negotiation, as well as for different and conflicting interpretations amongst the interested parties. Instead of searching for some timeless “roots”, Clifford (1997) argues, we should thus search for “routes”, stressing the always already changeable and hybrid character of any given culture. Furthermore, Paul Gilroy (1993b) cautions against what he refers to as “ethnic absolutism”, that is the tendency to conflate nations or ethnic groups with singular and homogenous cultures. Such a tendency, Gilroy argues, renders any other cultural or ethnic identity within the same nation invisible. In most respects this tallies with Brah’s (1994) contention that culture has to be construed as always already infused with power relations. Culture, she asserts, is therefore to be seen as a site of struggle over different meanings, positions and political projects. Thus, an anti-essentialist position does not yield to the temptation of taking some cultural characteristics for granted, but rather focuses on unravelling what enables different accounts of culture to take root and become prevalent at different historical junctures.

Within this field of research, the notion of “culture as heritage”, and the “fatal junction of the concept of culture and the concept of nationality” (Gilroy 1993b, 2), is understood as a “new” form of racism rather than as an accurate understanding of ethnicity. Although there have been several debates concerning how “new” this racism really is, there is quite an agreement on that culture and cultural differences are the main tools employed in the construction of “otherness” in today’s Western societies. Some researchers call this cultural racism (Blaut 1992), others differentialist racism:
It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions. (Balibar 1991, 21)

Ethnicity, “race” and nation are then perceived as better off if conceptualised as “imagined communities”, following Anderson (1983). Rather than the mythical notions of being perpetual entities, they are to be seen as socially constructed and thereby subjected to change. To stress the enterprise as an ongoing process, the term racialisation is also often being used (Miles 1989). On this view, both racism and nationalism need to be seen as constituted in and through processes whereby boundaries between “us and them” are drawn, processes that include and exclude people from any given imagined community (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992).

Examining the media discourse outlined above, these perspectives appear to be highly relevant and applicable. As seen, culture was used to explain and highlight events occurring in a Swedish suburban context, yet these events were continuously made to appear as if they stemmed from another place and another time. In these acts of displacement, words like “ancient”, “primitive” and “old-fashioned” were used repeatedly. Furthermore, culture was only utilized in representations of “the others”, the “immigrants”, the “Kurds”. Whenever Swedishness came to the fore, it was almost exclusively associated with the “normal”, sometimes even “civilised”, thus tacitly or explicitly juxtaposed to the “barbaric” traditions of “the others”. Also, as I mentioned above, even though the subject of segregation surfaced in the discussion, the debate still fell short of pointing to the unequal power relations that facilitate segregation, thereby often resorting to a blaming of “them”, the “immigrants”, for failing to “integrate themselves”.

As I have argued elsewhere (Bredström 2002a), these debates could then be read as revolving less around the question of “how we can make things better for these girls” and more about the construction of “the others”. They could be read as adding yet another chapter to the never ending story in which white men are set to protect their white sisters and to rescue the non-white women from the dangerous and sexually aggressive dark men (Ware 1995). It is, therefore, not far fetched to argue that gender equality increasingly is becoming a marker of ethnic Swedishness (de los Reyes 2002), thus losing, at least in policy terms, its more or less clear-cut reference to gender relations as such. It is a marker that draws the boundaries between “us and them”, between Swedes and immigrants (cf. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992). Of course, and save for mere policy-making, this is by no means a new phenomenon. As Gilroy has demonstrated, gender and sexuality are almost always present in racist ideologies. “What is racially and ethnically authentic”, writes Gilroy (1993a: 197), “is frequently defined by ideas about sexuality and distinctive patterns of interaction between men and women, which are taken to be expressive of essential difference.” Hence, it is far from surprising that debates about immigrants often focus on questions such as gang rape, honour killings, forced child marriages, and female genital mutilation.9 It is, among other things, through these debates that absolute differences between immigrants and Swedes are being constructed, perpetuated and racialised. Cultural, or differentialist racism thus also comes to conceal, naturalize, even legitimise the existent social, economic and political inequalities between Swedes and immigrants (Ålund 1997).10

In this sense, the debates surveyed above work to further foment a racialised consolidation of Swedish and immigrant identities. This was not least to be seen in the sad exploitation of Fadime Sahindal’s funeral. Broadcast live on TV and with dignitaries jockeying for photo ops, the event took on a meaning of state funeral, thus serving as a showcase of a nation intent on defending its alleged culture of gender equality against any incursion of patriarchal cultures from distant lands. This should also provide a clue as to why the numerous women killed every year in Sweden by white Swedish men never are treated to state funerals. When white men kill, rape or batter women this is thus never attributed to Swedish culture (cf. Lundgren & Lilja 2003). And the same must be said to apply to any other expression of sexism in Swedish society. That the connection between culture and sexism only applies to “them”, to the “immigrants”, gets confirmed on a daily basis in Swedish media reporting, where, in addition, crimes against women committed by non-white men always are assigned a higher news value than when white men are involved (Brune, 2002, 180).

Finally, it is important to stress that this discourse was far from confined to debates in the media. First of all, with scores of experts and researchers intervening at all stages, the representations
advanced in the debates often rested upon allegedly scientific findings. Secondly, prominent politicians, such as the Swedish minister for Integration Issues, Mona Sahlin, and even the Prime Minister Göran Persson, also surfaced as important participants in the debate. Needless to say then, the debate proved to be highly consequential in a number of ways, spilling over, as it did, into official investigations and several policy proposals aiming to design measures through which “patriarchal families” could be better informed, monitored and disciplined.11

The postcolonial feminist critique

The heated debates with regard to patriarchal power, gender-related violence and culture incorporated many feminist voices, particularly in the debate that followed upon the murder of Fadime. Here, some supported and helped establish the hegemonic view which held that there is a palpable difference between “our” patriarchy and “theirs”, and where “ours” is clearly preferable; i.e. stating that Swedish men are to be considered less patriarchal and misogynist than “immigrant men”. Historian and gender researcher Yvonne Hirdman (2002), for instance, took Gudrun Schyman’s aforementioned comment to task by arguing that, clearly, the murder of Fadime had everything to do with cultural differences. She also contended that the gender system in Sweden “is something to be proud of” and something to “defend and prefer in relation to a gender order that lies behind daughter murder”. Other feminist cautioned against this perspective, arguing that such an understanding risked making patriarchy synonymous with immigrant men (cf. de los Reyes, Johansson et al. 2002).

These feminists have in turn been accused of being “cultural relativists”; that is, as not attending as much to patriarchal power in other “cultures”, or as having abandoned women from other cultures in an attempt to show respect for other cultures. By saying that she is proud of “being seen as a cultural traitor”, Haideh Daragahi (2003; Svensson 2002b) claims that Swedish feminists are cowards when they are afraid of being called racist should they condemn the cultural roots of the murder of Fadime and the like. They thereby, she claims, support the most conservative parts of these cultures. Instead, she suggests, they ought to repudiate these traditional traits and support those members who represent more liberal values. While it is important to stress that no “culture” is homogeneous when it comes to values or behaviour, this argument is somewhat contradictory in stressing, on the one hand, that culture is the root of the problem while, on the other hand, simultaneously referring to a conflict between conservatives and liberals within one and the same culture. There are, of course, as many different values and political positions among people in any Kurdish community as there are in any other ethnically or nationally defined grouping. Yet, Daragahi’s main argument is not that honour killings are something that a certain group within the Kurdish community in a particular situation might support, but rather that it is something Kurdish in itself. As such her argument is based on a logic that leaves culture within neatly defined ethnic and national boundaries, i.e. it rests upon an essentialist (and ethnic absolutist) notion of culture. Now, since Daragahi takes honour killings to be an essential part of Kurdish culture, this should, per definition, also preclude any type of position within the Kurdish culture, no matter how “liberal”, from which honour killings could be criticized.

Yet another group of feminists sought to carve out a middle ground for themselves by arguing that it was more a difference in “degree” than a difference in “kind”. In discussing a similar debate among Danish feminists, for instance, Yvonne Mørck (2002) advocates this position, seeing it as a possible way of dealing with patriarchal patterns among ethnic communities as well as in the host community. Mørck also points to the importance of taking into account any discrimination towards immigrant communities. However, even this position does not solve the problem of conflating culture and ethnicity, and although it must be said to be a well intended endeavour one needs to ask whether the arguments of difference in degree and difference in kind really differ all that much.

Raising the question of cultural essentialism within certain strands of western feminism, postcolonial feminist philosopher Uma Narayan (2000) argues that western feminism has indeed contributed to imperialist and racialised notions of “other” women. Even the most well-meaning focus on differences between women has, Narayan argues, nonetheless often rested upon essentialist conceptions of cultural difference between the West and the non-West. Another post colonial feminist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 56), suggests that the representation of “third world woman” as “sexually constrained”, “tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.” needs to be perused as an “(implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having
control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.” As Narayan (2000, 84) points out, this is important to keep in mind since the representation of western values as built on “liberty and equality” has squared poorly with the practice of “slavery, colonization, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of Western subjects, including women.”

If this knowledge effectively renders a focus on essential cultural differences impossible, the opposite notion advocated by some feminists – that of patriarchy being present everywhere – cannot be seen as sufficient either. By asserting that there are no differences, the old notion of universal womanhood and an all-embracing patriarchy easily gets reinstated. It might therefore be more fruitful to focus on the unequal distribution of power and its close bearing upon the production of cultural difference. This is not to say that there is no problem with sexism or misogynist attitudes amongst minority groups, or, for that matter, that immigrant women should be “left alone” to solve their problems. Rather, it is to say that there is no such thing as an immigrant culture next to a Swedish culture, but that these two – as Mohanty makes clear – always are intimately intertwined. An anti-essentialist account would thus focus on the production of differences between “immigrants” and “Swedes”, between “Muslims” and Westerners”, as well as on its different repercussions, instead of taking these differences for granted.

Having argued thus far, it is now high time to raise some critical questions as to the possible implications that prevalent representations of immigrants and immigrant youth give rise to. With reference to a series of empirical examples drawn from my own research, I will now go on to evince some of the ways in which the young men and women interviewed could be seen to deal with, experience and challenge these representations in their daily lives.

“Here we’re all the same, we all have different cultures”

Since the media’s treatment and depictions of immigrant youth were ubiquitously present in my interviews, a note on some the numerous responses to media representations serves as an appropriate point of departure here. As one respondent exclaimed:

You see, it’s the media’s fault everything. Telling everybody that we’re acting like that, you know, ten or twelve persons raping a fifteen year old girl and so on. They describe us like animals.

Needless to say then, the group interviews often gave expression to deep concerns as to the stereotypical depictions often conveyed in the media. Indeed, this problematic could be seen to affect practically all of those interviewed; it was something that was starkly present in their daily lives and something which they, in one form or the other, had to confront on a regular basis. “If an immigrant does something good”, one girl said, “they call him a Swede, but if he does something bad it’s because he’s an immigrant!”

To be sure, racism was not only discussed with reference to representations in mainstream media. The young men and women also reflected quite a lot upon how different forms of institutional and structural racism manifested in their lives. All too aware of the widespread ethnic discrimination in the Swedish labour market, and provided that all of those interviewed either had first or second hand experiences of such discrimination, many of them worried about their future and about finding work. Accounts of demeaning treatment by the police and other public authorities were also commonplace.

At another level, experiences of being perceived and treated as “different” and as someone who does not “belong” were also commonly brought up for discussion. “If you don’t speak perfect Swedish”, a young man said, “the Swedes will look at you as if you were some kind of cave-man”. Another young man said mordantly: “No matter how handsome, charming or smart I might be, I would never stand a chance of going out with a Swedish girl from one of those Swedish middle-class areas. She would just say: ‘You have black hair and come from the suburb, and if I were to go home to your place I would probably get raped.’”

The young men and women did not only question these racialised notions; but in some respects their renderings could also be seen to reinforce some of these notions. As one young woman sought to assert: “We immigrant girls are never the same as Swedish girls”. Similarly were boundaries between
“immigrants” and “Swedes” often drawn using gender and sexuality as symbolic lines of divisions. For example, liberal attitudes towards homosexuality were frequently associated with Swedishness (“No gay person could ever come out in my culture”), as was gender equality (“If you date a Swedish woman she should have it her own way, her own rights and God knows what”). These boundaries were not necessarily drawn exclusively between “Swedes” and “immigrants”, but also surfaced in differentiations between, for instance, “Turks”, “Kurds” and “Syrians”. One young woman believed the “Muslims” to be much more patriarchal, whereas another girl held that Syrian girls were those who had a harder time with their families and “cultures”. The racialisation through appropriations of feminism and gender equality also gave rise to some conflicting outlooks on part of those interviewed. Many of the young women could, for example, find themselves in a conflict between defending their rights as women and their rights as an ethnic minority:

What is happening right now is that with all this focus on ‘immigrants’ people tend to forget about the actual rape… It makes me so frustrated, this total neglect of how we immigrants feel when they accuse us.

Counter identities

In discussing a television show where a suburb – (in)famous for its “multicultural” character – was portrayed as rough and dangerous, some young men were upset: “Swedes do not know how it is to live here, they are even afraid to come here”. In the subsequent discussion a few of them went on to ponder how and why such depictions in the end might come to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. They talked about how tempting it could be to try, as they put it, to “live up to the reputation” as “hardened bad boys” and “hoodlums”, and thus start to identify with, even take pride in the notoriety and ill repute assigned to them by others, “by the politicians and journalists”. Speaking with Ove Sernhede (2001, 214), this could very well be understood as a type of “counter identity”. Sernhede suggests that counter identities spring from a sense of alienation, of not being included into the Swedish society. On those occasions where these counter identities get articulated in terms of a macho-oriented masculinity, this might very well be understood as an expression of the current trend where gender equality increasingly is being made synonymous with an exclusive image of (white) Swedishness. Correspondingly, the tendency on part of some of the young women to utilize symbolic virginity as a status marker (cf. Andersson 2001) could also be interpreted as a repudiation of “Swedishness”. The macho-oriented masculinity might, of course, also be construed as a defence against a society that, at best, looks at these young men with suspicion, and sometimes even with hostility; a tendency which, historically speaking, has been quite commonplace amongst men from marginalized, racialised and working class groups (Sharpe& O’Donnell 2000). As such, ethnic identities and boundaries need to be grasped as being both shaped and reshaped in Swedish society, and where discrimination and racism are essential in this process.

However, at the same time as fixed notions of “Swedes” and “immigrants” were being reinforced, ethnic boundaries were also challenged. In the interviews people used the language that was available to them, describing themselves as “Kurds”, “mixed” or “Swedish with Ethiopian background”, just to mention a few. Although there were differences between different ethnic minorities, often due to political affiliations such as those between Kurds and Turks, the young men and women often transgressed these boundaries in their daily lives. The young men and women could thus be said to be living a rather “multicultural” life, adopting, borrowing, reinventing “old” traditions and creating “new” ones (cf. Ålund 1997). In this sense their ethnic identities were highly hybrid and versatile. Hence, if those interviewed used the language and categories available, they also shifted their meanings, claiming, for instance, that we are “all different cultures here” just to go on to claim that “we immigrants all have the same culture”. Indeed, the articulation of an overarching identity as “immigrants” could even be inclusive of Swedes: “I know one Swede, a young man said, “but he’s more immigrant than I am!” Thus, in many ways the young people that participated in my research project are the living proof of the culturalist discourse’ failure to grasp and make sense of their lives (cf. Sernhede 2001).

Finally, it is important to stress that there was very little resemblance between those interviewed and the prevalent depictions of them currently flourishing in Swedish media. Very few young men
held attitudes towards women and gay people that did not tally with the attitudes championed by their Swedish counterparts (cf. Fundberg 1999). The importance of accounting for the abundance of contradicting stories in my interviews cannot be emphasized enough. In all, they point to the impossibility, as well as the danger, inherent in any attempt at homogenizing people on the basis of essentialist conceptions of ethnicity, “race” or nation.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to evince the central role played by mainstream media in the production and reproduction of racialised notions of cultural difference. By illuminating how culture in mainstream media gets treated as a set of foreign values, traditions and practices, devoid of any social and political context, and too often indiscriminately attached to entire non-western ethnic or national collectives (or, for that matter, to even larger entities such as the “Muslim world”), I have argued that this needs to be understood as a form of cultural or differentialist racism. The insistence on “cultural values” as an explanation for crimes committed by certain people (read “immigrants”, “the Kurds”, etc.), but never when crimes are committed by certain other people, those qualifying as individuals (i.e. the Swedes), must then be construed as forming part of the production of racialised difference, rather than as a simple reference to a collection of pre-existent cultural differences. As part of this, the article has also attended to the gendered character of such racialised notions of cultural difference. Here I point to the particularly ill-boding tendency to associate patriarchy exclusively with immigranthood and to make gender equality synonymous with Swedishness.

In line with this reasoning, the article has also sought to demonstrate why discussions of ethnicity and ethnic identity formation in Sweden would benefit from a closer consideration of the role played by the type of racialised discourses examined here. I take this argument to be corroborated by the strong influence that racialised notions of “Swedishness” and “immigranthood” proved to have on the young men and women that participated in my research.

But if racialised discourses could be shown to wield an enormous influence on those interviewed – both in the sense of being challenged and internalised – the young men and women’s often highly hybrid and transgressive approach to ethnicity and identity also defied and so ventured beyond the very logic inherent in cultural racism. This should, finally, serve as yet another poignant illustration of why the current trend of assigning an ever-increasing explanatory value to culture and cultural differences constitutes a non-starter.

1 An abridged version of this paper will be published in NORA, No. 2, 2003. I would like to thank Peo Hansen for reading and commenting on this article.

2 The important exceptions constitute of research which rather approach ethnic identities as necessarily reshaped in the Swedish social context, and where discrimination, racism, and other forms of exclusion become essential components in the theoretical as well as empirical elaborations and analyses (e.g. Ålund 1997; Sernhede 2001).

3 For a critical survey of Swedish research on ethnicity and sexuality, see Hammarén (2001).

4 I mainly refer to mainstream media. I have followed the debate in the major dailies and evening papers – Dagens Nyheter (DN), Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), Aftonbladet and Expressen. See Bredström (2002b) for further elaboration on my methodological approach. Conflicting discourses were sometimes to be read in alternative media, though not always.

5 The project was funded and assigned by the National Institute of Public Health in Sweden.

6 I found the combination of these two different methods extremely helpful; not the least did such a combination facilitate the unearthing of the many ambivalent and contradictory sentiments and claims on part of those interviewed. I conducted the interviews with the young women myself; the young men were interviewed by my colleague Luis Quiroga. For a comprehensive methodological discussion, see Bredström (2003).

7 I put “honour killings” in quotation marks since it constitutes a contested concept. Feminists have, for instance, criticised the ways in which it has been appropriated in the Swedish media debate (e.g. de los Reyes et al. 2002, Lundgren & Lilja 2003). It is also put in quotation marks to emphasize that my focus here is on the discursive representation of honour killings as a marker of cultural difference. For a corresponding critique of western feminists’ analyses of the use of Sati (“the immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands”) and female gender mutilation, see Narayan (2000, 87-9).

8 All translations from Swedish sources are mine.
This reading of the debates stresses the ideological nature of debates in bourgeois media and in other elite contexts. It thus stresses the importance of coming to grips with how and in whose interests the alleged commitments to gender equality are being used and exploited today. For one, we need to grasp how representations of immigrants “at home” correspond with representations of “other cultures abroad”. In other words, the depictions of suppressed Muslim women in immigrant communities in Sweden must be seen in the light of suppressed Afghani Women behind burqas. This was an enterprise that subsequently served to justify the bombing of Afghani women into equality; that is leaving them at the mercy of warlords deemed suitable to the interests of Western powers. Another area that deserves more attention, and in which this problematic increasingly has come to leave its mark, concerns immigration and asylum policy. Just as feminist rhetoric has been appropriated to drum up support for harsher border controls for the supposed purpose of preventing trafficking (Fleischer 2003), we can also see how the debate above, in particular the notion of “forced child marriages”, can be used as a pretext for a more restrictive policy on family reunification (see Rothenborg & Optitz 2002).

On the concept and practice of racialisation in a Swedish context, see further de los Reyes, Molina & Muliniari (eds.) (2002) and Lindberg & Dahlstedt (2002).

See, inter alia, Regeringens insatser för utsatta flickor i patriarkala familjer (The Governments’ measures to assist vulnerable girls in patriarchal families) (2002).

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