

PART III

**Representations of Belonging  
and Exclusion**



## CHAPTER 7

# In/Visible Finnishness

## Representations of Finnishness and Whiteness in the Sweden-Finnish Social Media Landscape

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### Abstract

This chapter examines embodied representations of Finnishness and whiteness in Sweden where the collective notion of Sweden-Finnishness is situated in the nexus of migrant and minority experiences. Based on material generated by individuals and activists as part of Sweden-Finnish social media campaigns in the 2010s, the chapter discusses the different ways in which Finnishness and whiteness are negotiated on an individual level and how they are situated in different social, political and historical contexts. By applying the analytical lens of in/visibility and drawing from both critical whiteness studies and intersectionally informed thinking, the study reveals how Finnishness can at the same time be invisible and visible due to the whiteness of the Finns, but also visible as minoritized and racialized others. The chapter provides novel insights into contemporary Sweden-Finnishness and experiences of non-white Sweden-Finns,

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as well as politicized and minoritized Sweden-Finnishness. In addition to highlighting the diversity of different Finnish experiences in Sweden, the study demonstrates that whiteness is a highly fluid, situational and contextual way of boundary-drawing.

**Keywords:** Sweden-Finns, Finnishness, whiteness, in/visibility, national minority, immigration

## Introduction

It is not just me as a Finnish-Iranian who has a complicated identity. Finns sit on a double chair in the Swedish racial hierarchy. One is indeed a damn Finn, excluded, stereotyped, yes even having their skulls measured—but today, one also has the possibility to be included into the white community. The whiteness of Finns is more visible next to the other darker *svartskallarna*. (Farzin 2016: 104–05)<sup>12</sup>

In an essay published in the recent anthology *Finnjävlar* (2016), reporter Maziar Farzin summarizes aptly the complexity of modern Sweden-Finnishness in multiethnic Sweden. While acknowledging his own subjective experience and complicated identification processes, he also notes how the collective notion of Sweden-Finnishness is likewise complex. The contemporary notion of Sweden-Finnishness is not only limited to the narrative of Finnish postwar migration, and later generation social climb and identity negotiations, but it also refers to the political recognition of Sweden-Finns as a national minority in 2000 and the consequent new narrative of Finnishness as part of historically multicultural Sweden. The “double chair” in the quote illustrates the entangled and complex ways in which Finnishness in Sweden becomes represented today in different temporal and socio-political contexts and how the notion of whiteness is operationalized as part of these representations. On the one seat sits the modern, Western and white notion of Finnishness, but on the other persists the notion of Finnishness as historically excluded and racially inferior in relation to “Swedishness,” which has again gained prominence in the contemporary Swedish minority political context.

This chapter examines embodied representations of Finnishness in Sweden by investigating how different subjective and collective positionings of “Sweden-Finnishness” become negotiated in relation to whiteness and in/visibility in the context of contemporary Sweden-Finnish identity politics mobilized in social media. The study is based on an analysis of the contents of Sweden-Finnish social media campaigns #*Vågafinska* [#Daretospeakfinnish] and #*Stoltsverigeinne* [#Proudswedenfinn], and the Instagram account of the activist group *Tukholman sissit* [Guerillas of Stockholm]. While social

media has provided ethnic organizations, media and activists with new platforms for the construction of collective identity and protest (e.g. Gerbaudo and Treré 2015), the highly personalized and individualized character of collective action in social media also gives space for individuals from different backgrounds to voice articulations of identity and belonging. Therefore, this material allows the examination not only of the metaphorical double chair of different collective notions of Sweden-Finnishness, but also how these points of reference are mobilized on individual-level identity projects. In addition, the study provides insights into how boundaries of Finnishness and Swedishness become constructed in different contexts, as they are the two hegemonic domains in which and toward which Sweden-Finnishness in its different meanings is navigated.

The study adopts perspectives from critical whiteness studies as well as intersectionally informed thinking. Following a constructivist approach, ethnicity, race and nation are not seen as “things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world” (Brubaker 2004: 17, emphasis in original). This means the conceptualization of ethnic boundaries as socially constructed, changing and situational (Barth 1969). Whiteness is one important boundary and is seen in this chapter as “a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured” (Dyer 1997: 10), and as a constantly shifting boundary of power and privilege (Kivel 1996). The analytical lens of in/visibility is especially useful in studying intra-Nordic ethnic boundary-drawing as it emphasizes the importance of looking at the different contexts in which individuals and groups become visible and invisible and which shift in time and place (Leinonen and Toivanen 2014; see also Leinonen 2012). Johanna Leinonen and Mari Toivanen (2014) point out that the black–white binary, which is often present in the US context, is not sufficient to understand how collective identities are produced and sustained in the Nordic context, where ethnicity and “race” become visible and invisible not only through visually observable features such as skin color, but also through audible markers such as language and accent. In/visibility can facilitate analysis on the ways in which “race,” as a socially constructed category, operates in positioning and racializing some groups as visible or allowing others to “pass” due to their “whiteness,” thus making them invisible (Leinonen and Toivanen 2014; see also Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Toivanen 2014). To study in/visibility, an intersectionally informed approach is a beneficial addition as it directs attention to how different attributes such as “race,” nationality, class and even age and generation participate in producing subjective social locations (Yuval-Davis 2011). Floya Anthias (2008: 5) further emphasizes how these social settings, or divisions, are not fixed but sometimes also simultaneous, being “context, meaning and time related” and involving therefore “inevitable shifts and contradictions.” In a similar way, Leinonen and Toivanen (2014: 164) note that the “in/visibility of migrants and minorities should be understood as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy: not only is group in/visibility tied to specific socio-historical

circumstances but also each individual's in/visibility may vary according to the social setting that the person occupies."

### **Finnishness, Swedishness and Sweden-Finnishness—Shifting Boundaries of Whiteness and Belonging**

The notion of "Sweden-Finnishness" has generally been underpinned by the assumed homogeneity of white, Finnish-speaking Finnishness. However, due to the possibility of Sweden-Finns to refer today to both their background as immigrants and status as a national minority, this picture is much more complex both in reference to the demographics of the population with Finnish background in Sweden, but also to the entangled, yet fluid and historically shifting boundaries of whiteness and belonging between "Finnishness" and "Swedishness."

Sweden-Finns have their background in the massive Finnish postwar labor, which led to an estimated 250,000 Finns settling permanently in Sweden between 1945–1994 (Korkiasaari and Tarkiainen 2000). In Sweden, immigrant Finns were met with a new social hierarchy, where they found themselves lower in the ethnic hierarchies together with other labor migrants from, for instance, Italy, Yugoslavia and Turkey. Finns were often held as engaged and valued workers, but were simultaneously met with prejudices and stereotyping (*ibid.*). In addition to being characteristically working-class migration, Finnish postwar migration to Sweden also needs to be understood as situated in an era in which Finnish and Swedish understandings of each other were very different. While Finland and Sweden have a long joint history as part of the Swedish kingdom until 1809, the age of nationalism and nation-state forged the former ties into differences. In the 19th century, racial taxonomies played an essential role in constructing difference between Swedes and other Scandinavians, labeled as part of a superior Germanic/Nordic race, and Finns, who represented the more inferior Mongolian or East Baltic race (Ågren 2006; Helander 2007; Keskinen 2019). At the same time, an idea of a culturally and racially homogenous Finnish nation was constructed, for example, in 19th- and early-20th-century Finnish history-writing (Tervonen 2014). The canonized Finnish national narrative also includes certain postcolonial elements due to the vision of the nation as emancipated from the former oppression of two empires, Russia and Sweden, as well as due to the historical position of Swedish-speakers as the educated, political and cultural elite in Finland (Lehtonen and Löytty 2007; Snellman and Weckström 2017). From the latter half of the 20th century onward, the historically asymmetrical relationship between the two countries has become more balanced through, for instance, the postwar shift from pan-Scandinavianism to Nordism (Wickström 2017), the social and economic development of Finland (Korkiasaari and Tarkiainen 2000) and Finland's and Sweden's memberships in the European Union in the 1990s (Helander 2007; Virta 2007).

These broader changes have also affected the position of Finns in the Swedish ethnic and social hierarchies, which has changed rapidly from the 1970s onward. Lotta Weckström (2011) compares the social climb of Finns in Sweden to that of Italians, Irish, Poles and the Jews in the United States, whose gain of social status also led to changing racial perceptions of these groups. At the same time, the new multicultural politics of the 1970s supported the ethnic organizations of Finns. The following decade, a Sweden-Finnish ethno-political movement emerged demanding recognition for Sweden-Finns as a minority and contesting the categorization as immigrants (Huss 2002). The demands were supported by the growing settlement of Finns in Sweden and the changing character of immigration to Sweden, but also newly emerging interest toward older Finnish history in Sweden (*ibid.*). In 2000, Sweden recognized the Jews, the Roma, the Sámi, the Sweden-Finns and the Tornedalians as national minorities, and their respective languages as national minority languages as these groups and languages were seen to have historical or long-lasting ties with Sweden in addition to their linguistic, cultural and/or religious distinctiveness (Elenius 2006). The recognition of national minorities has thus created new hierarchies between the Swedish majority population, old national minorities and new immigrant groups, but it has also institutionalized a new narrative of Sweden as a historically multicultural country (Silvén 2011). Since the 2010s, Swedish minority politics have shifted increasingly from the mere recognition of the country's multicultural past to the human rights framework and reconciling with past injustices experienced by its national minorities (*ibid.*). Throughout the past decade, Sweden-Finnishness as a national minority culture has been taking its form through new shared symbols (such as the Sweden-Finnish flag), the institutionalization of the narrative of Sweden-Finnishness as historically present in the Swedish soils and contemporary popular culture narratives that largely handle the rejection of shame in favor of claiming pride over Finnish language and background (Koivunen 2017).

Despite the many positive impacts, the new field of minority politics has been pointed out to have created essentialized images of national minorities, depicted as historically fixed and stable (Silvén 2011). While Finnish postwar migration is generally depicted as white and Finnish-speaking, the cultural diversity of Finland with different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups was also represented in these migration waves (see e.g. Hedberg 2004; Tervonen and Jeskanen 2012). In addition, many Finnish children have grown up in the super-diverse suburbs of Swedish cities in addition to those who also have multicultural family backgrounds (Lainio 2014; see also Latvalehto 2019). In the contemporary minority political context, the diversity of subjective Finnish experiences is often left overlooked—however, a recent exception to this can be found in the political program of the Sweden-Finnish youth umbrella organization Sweden-Finnish Youth Organization (*Ruotsinsuomalaisten nuorten liitto/Sverigefinska Ungdomsförbundet*, RSN-SFU), which emphasizes the simultaneity of multiple ethnic and linguistic identifications as part of Sweden-Finnish

identity (RSN-SFU 2016). Nevertheless, previous studies have mainly acknowledged how many (white) second-generation Finnish descendants experience that they are able to pass as “Swedes,” some even experiencing that identifying as an immigrant or taking a non-Swedish identity was difficult due to the lack of visible markers such as dark hair (Ågren 2006; Weckström 2011). While a recent master’s thesis by Stellan Beckman (2018) also notes that (white) Finns can pass as Swedes in everyday contexts, Beckman argues that Sweden-Finnishness is at the same time in the margins of “Swedish whiteness,” approaching Finnishness prominently through the lens of ethnic differences. This might be partly affected by the new minority political context, which likewise emphasizes ethnic distinctiveness.

Very recently, postcolonial perspectives to understanding Finnish-Swedish relations have emerged, notably among the Swedish-born generations with Finnish background. They can be characterized as a new cultural elite as they are often highly educated and/or work in media, education and the third sector. For instance, the *Finnjävlar* anthology referred to in the beginning of this chapter not only brings together the voices of the representatives of that generation, but also mobilizes a postcolonial perspective to understand the historical relations between “Finns” and “Swedes” (see Borg 2016). Framed as part of new Sweden-Finnish history writing, the anthology participates simultaneously in the contemporary Swedish memory work concerning race biology and its heritage in Sweden (Hagerman 2018). Concrete efforts calling for a reconciliation were also made at a grassroots level in late 2018, when a committee consisting of Sweden-Finnish activists filed a petition to the Swedish medical university *Karolinska Institutet* (KI), demanding it to repatriate 82 human skulls labeled as Finnish, which it possesses in its historical anatomical collection (KI 2019). At the same time, contradictions deriving from the Finnish immigrant history are present. For instance, many Finns in Sweden have been noted to be politically active in the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) and thus seemingly contradicting their own immigrant background with the party’s anti-immigration ideologies. While the political behavior of Finns in Sweden has remained unstudied, in media, this phenomenon has been framed through the working-class background of Finns, shared Nordic identity, and the strong historical and cultural ties between Finns and Swedes.<sup>3</sup> These highly contradictory positionings emphasize how today, both politics of difference and sameness operate simultaneously between “Finnishness” and “Swedishness.”

## Material and Method

The data used in this chapter consist of the contents of two Sweden-Finnish social media campaigns and one activist account from the 2010s: Swedish Public Radio’s channel *Sisuradio*’s<sup>4</sup> one-week-long Twitter campaign #*Vågafinnska* (2013), RSN-SFU’s Instagram campaign #*Stoltsverigefinne* (2016–) and an

Instagram account *Tukholman sissit* (2017–), run by an anonymous Sweden-Finnish activist group.<sup>5</sup> As the *#Stoltsverigefinne* campaign and the activist account are still active and ongoing, the data collection extended until the end of 2019. In total, the material consists of 3,055 tweets and 701 Instagram posts (including 845 photos/videos and their captions). Combined, more than 400 unique users have taken part in the two campaigns. All material is publicly available under the campaign accounts and hashtags. In addition, material from the campaigns has also been published in two books and as an exhibition.

The *#Vågafinska* campaign took place for five days, from October 21 to 25, 2013. It was intended to gather experiences and stories of the general public about the Finnish language in Sweden. Data used in this chapter consist of tweets shared with the campaign hashtag “#vågafinska” during the campaign week. The *#Stoltsverigefinne* campaign, on the other hand, gives young people with a Finnish background in Sweden a space to share their thoughts about everyday life, roots and identity as part of a national minority. The campaign has been realized as a so-called “relay account,” meaning that individual users update the campaign account one week at a time. Instead of being run by minority language media or an ethnic organization, *Tukholman sissit* is in turn an independent activist group, which combines urban street activism and digital activism by placing Finnish-language stickers in the Swedish public space and posting photos of them on Instagram. The group uses Instagram also as a channel to share other content, such as digital images and news stories about Finns in Sweden or minority issues. To the best of my knowledge, the group consists of representatives of the young Swedish-born generation with Finnish background. The group defines itself as a leftist and anti-nationalist activist group that speaks for the national minority Sweden-Finns (Sonck 2017).

The analyzed campaigns can be defined as hashtag activism as they aim to provide visibility to Sweden-Finnishness and the Finnish language, and support community building and collective identity construction (see also Koivunen 2017; Lainio 2014). All campaigns and the activist account mobilize to a certain extent what Anu Koivunen (ibid.: 64) calls “an economy of pride and shame,” overcoming “social stigmas and traumatic migrant histories,” but they also operate in the contemporary Swedish minority political context, which highlights the strive for the cultural and linguistic revitalization of national minorities.

Analyzing contents of social media campaigns provides both opportunities and challenges. By being formed around specific causes or discourses, the campaigns also affect which discursive affordances are mobilized on an individual level. Social media campaigns also facilitate easy and low-threshold participation. However, based on how the social media users participating in the campaigns represent themselves in the material, the participant base represents very diverse backgrounds in terms of, for instance, migrant generation, age, linguistic skills, ethnicity, “race” and nationality. Therefore, social media material brings out very different experiences and voices under the common

notion of “Sweden-Finnishness” in all its ambiguity, also providing opportunities for a nuanced, critical and comparative analysis. This means, however, that the material is at the same time very fragmented, covering various themes and experiences, which can sometimes be only single tweets or posts. Therefore, the material has been first analyzed using broad content analysis to identify broader themes emerging from the material, and then further examined with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how power, hegemonies and norms become discursively represented, but also contested (van Dijk 1993). While the analysis focuses mostly on texts, social media data is characteristically multimodal and therefore photos, videos, hashtags and emojis are also considered as participating in the construction of discourses.

As part of ethnopolitical campaigns and activism, the data used in this study is both publicly available and targeted at a broad audience. Therefore, information collection and dissemination is seen as appropriate in this specific context (Townsend and Wallace 2017). Nevertheless, the methodological choices of this study ensure that the focus is not on human subjects, but rather on language and discourse. In addition, the data has been anonymized, including also other possible information that might reveal the identity of individual social media users (replaced with “X”). This has been recommended as a good practice in studies where obtaining informed consent is not necessary or otherwise difficult when dealing, for example, with older social media material (*ibid.*).

### **“But You Are a Swede Now”—Invisible Finnishness**

In most of the material, physical appearance is not represented as something affecting individual-level identification processes or the sense of belonging or non-belonging. Therefore, Finnishness in terms of physical appearance often seems to blend in the normative and hegemonic Swedish whiteness, being largely invisible. However, two separate groups of users can be identified, for both of whom Finnishness in terms of physical appearance is invisible, but whose comparison and analysis side by side is otherwise fruitful. These groups are the so-called new first-generation Sweden-Finns—young people mostly in their 20s, who have moved to Sweden as adults—and later-generation Finnish descendants—children or grandchildren of Finnish migrants—who also represent the same generation age-wise.

The relationship of these groups toward Finnish and Swedish societies differ most notably in terms of their citizenship/nationality, but often also linguistic skills. Today’s Finnish migrants move to Sweden from very different prerequisites as the postwar migrants did, representing more individual, circular and privileged migration (Wahlbeck 2015). These users do not refer to themselves as “immigrants” in the material or discuss their position in Sweden in relation to other immigrants, confirming the notion that “immigrant” has become

increasingly racialized in Sweden (see e.g. Lundström 2017) and how Finns have climbed the ethnic hierarchies. Based on the contents of the material and some biographic self-descriptions, it is also evident that contemporary Finnish migration to Sweden is not completely homogeneous white, Finnish-speaking migration, but represents different linguistic and ethnic groups as well. These users, however, do not engage in discussions about physical appearance in defining Finnishness, Swedishness or Sweden-Finnishness.

When looking at the majority of those users who can be defined as new, first-generation Sweden-Finns, cultural elements such as food, material culture and Finnish characteristics emerge as ways to represent and perform Finnishness in the material. However, one clear marker which the users cannot choose voluntarily to signify their Finnishness is language and accent—something that Leinonen and Toivanen (2014: 163) call “audible visibility.” Deriving partly from the discursive affordances of the campaigns, but also the improved status of the Finnish language and broader Sweden-Finnish identity politics, Finnish language and other ethnic markers are generally depicted in a very positive light on an individual level. For instance, in the *#Våga finska* campaign, Finnish was described as a beautiful language or even as a “superpower.” However, the material also includes some examples where these elements are represented negatively as a stigmatizing ethnic marker, revealing how boundaries or exclusion and inclusion are drawn.

Language skills of immigrants and later-generation descendants generally differ especially in terms of accent. Compared with the migrant generation, it is assumable that their children and grandchildren, who are born and raised in Sweden, seldomly have a Finnish accent when speaking Swedish. However, language skills are different and individual. The material includes an interesting example of a young, first-generation Finnish migrant whose accent, however, does not reveal their Finnishness:

Where are you “at home”? I am happy to be able to say that I have two, Sweden and Finland. Nothing strange there, huh? I have however experienced that many who know me often deny my Finnishness. “But you speak Swedish so well, like no Moomin Swedish” “but you are a Swede now”. Why should I need to choose? Why are so many with another or dual citizenship met with this attitude? (*#Stoltsverigefinne*, n.d.)

The Finnish accent is referred to in the example as “Moomin Swedish,” referring to the Swedish version of the 1990s Moomin television series, which was dubbed in Finland in Finland-Swedish. Despite being a Finnish-speaking Finn and having migrated to Sweden as an adult, the user’s lack of accent as an audible ethnic marker affects the perceptions coming from the outside. The example reveals that by sounding like a Swede (and also looking like a Swede, although not consciously reflected), taking a non-Swedish identity becomes

difficult despite one's country of birth or citizenship, contradicting with the user's own self-identification. However, the critical undertone of the example does not represent the outside rejection only as a rejection of the user's Finnishness, but more broadly as a rejection toward multiple (national) identifications and belongings, which are not seen as part of being a "Swede." In this example, the notion of Swedishness is constructed as exclusionary toward other national identifications.

Among later-generation Finnish descendants, the same non-consciousness and invisibility of Finnish whiteness is also present. In a similar manner, self-identification as Finnish is represented as something that is rejected from the outside, as the following example shows:

It is an intriguing thing to be a Swede and feel like a Swede, but to simultaneously feel that I am a Finn. I do not long to move to Finland or follow the local Finnish news. But at the same time, I have a need to every now and then call myself a Finn. To every now and then be able to assert my Finnishness. Something that is often met with a playful dismissal: "You say that only to be cool, you are a Swede after all. If you like it so much, move there then." It is just nice to sometimes call myself a Finn without meaning anything deeper or greater than that. Only to uphold a heritage and a part of my identity. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

While not discussing visual or audible markers, taking a non-Swedish identity is difficult as the user passes as a Swede in the eyes of others. In line with Weckström's (2011) and Koivunen's (2017) notions, Finnishness is represented rather as a feeling, which is enough to uphold the user's heritage and identity. The user highlights how their self-identification as a Finn is not tied to Finland in terms of cultural knowledge or geographical ties. On the other hand, the notion of Swedishness becomes constructed from the outside as something that does not refer to heritage or ancestry, but rather being born and raised in Sweden. Whereas the first example by a new, first-generation Finnish migrant represented the duality of their belonging as a matter of citizenship, this example represents the notions of "Finnishness" and "Swedishness" as separate from political memberships, but rather as cultural identities, formed as matters of heritage and geographical ties. However, the simultaneity of these identities is still represented as difficult.

In the previous example, Finnishness is valued as something positive and "cool" from the outside. This is not always the case, however, in the subjective experiences of later-generation Finnish descendants, as the following extract shows:

We always spoke Finnish at home, in shops, on the telephone but when I went to junior high school some classmates imitated me with a Finnish accent and said repeatedly "Damn *finnjävel*". I remember that I had

my locker close to the floor, it was marked with black strikes which came from these classmates having kicked my locker. They always wore big shoes with steel caps to scare and keep us who did not “fit in” at a distance. It was only for “fun” and everyone laughed. I have also heard countless times that “In Sweden we speak Swedish!” I am a third generation immigrant and minority who has not adapted and forgotten their language. There is a sacred border in Sweden. In Sweden it is the Swedish language which shall be seen and heard in the public. One country, one language. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

While the examples show how Finnish can be used in everyday private life, in the public sphere of school, a Finnish accent becomes a marker of difference, revealing the user’s non-Swedish background and leading to bullying and being called derogatory terms such as *finnjävel* [damn Finn]. The example highlights the role of audible markers, but shows simultaneously and non-consciously how looks play little role in these exclusionary practices. While the role of language is highlighted as a marker of Finnishness, it is also represented as a central marker of Swedishness, as the “sacred border” and the final frontier of belonging. Therefore, boundaries of Swedishness are not constructed only as white, but also as linguistic. However, this almost Herderian notion of one language—one nation—one state, which also reflects the current political atmosphere and the rise of xenophobia and neonationalism in Sweden to a certain extent, becomes contested in the example. Identifying as both “immigrant” and “minority,” the user juxtaposes this duality against excluding nationalist ideologies. By emphasizing that they are a “third generation immigrant and minority,” assimilationist and anti-assimilationist stances are further stressed.

In some posts by users who represent the new generation of Finnish migrants, the Finnish language is also represented as a notable boundary of difference in Sweden. For instance, in the #Stoltsverigefinne campaign, one user tells how they were worried about speaking Finnish publicly in Sweden before moving there. Another user participating in the same campaign writes highly positively about the Finnish language, but also shares negative comments that they have heard of it being called an “ugly, strange, nonsensical [and] meaningless” language.

In addition to language and accent, a Finnish-sounding name can also function as an ethnic marker, as the following example by a later-generation Finnish descendant shows:

X [a Finnish last name]. A name that I both love and hate. Love because it is so beautiful. Hate it because it has been yet another reason to bully me. A name that has gotten my classmates to laugh their heads off and sneer. A name that has presented me as a person who knows all the Finnish words they want to know. A name that has made me

seem different. Every damn time. But I will reclaim it. X is my last name. It is enormously beautiful and everyone who thinks else can beat it. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

A Finnish name is represented here directly as something that has made the user “seem different”; it therefore reveals the user’s Finnishness to the outside. The negative experiences of bullying and ridicule have led to a very ambivalent relationship that the user has toward their Finnish last name. This internal struggle has also been created by the contradiction that their name, signaling an insider position in a culture, and the lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge have created. Because the user has not been able to meet these expectations, the name has become a site of shame. The example, however, mediates a sense of empowerment and a will to reclaim the name—to become visible—which follows the discursive affordances of the campaign #Stoltsverigefinne, but also the broader Sweden-Finnish cultural narratives in the 2010s (see Koivunen 2017).

### “I Do Not Look Like ‘a Swede’ or ‘a Finn’”—Contested Finnishness

Finnish experiences in Sweden are not only limited to those of “white” Finns or Sweden-Finns, but experiences of “non-white” or racialized Finnish descendants are also present in social media, while quantitatively more marginally. This was also noted in one tweet in the #Vågafinska campaign, stating: “Sweden-Finns anno 2013. Not ethnically blond and no Finnish names. But Finnish moms and Finnish souls.” The tweet is accompanied by a photo of *Sisuradio*’s reporter Ramin Farzin, holding a paper with the campaign hashtag #vågafinska. The photo was shared by *Sisuradio* as part of the campaign. The tweet comments on Finnish-Iranian Farzin’s looks by noting that they diverge from the normative depiction of Sweden-Finnishness, which is represented as “ethnically blond.” Farzin’s name is also represented as divergent from “typical” Finnish names. The tweet constructs Sweden-Finnishness as something that has previously been dominantly white, but which is in a state of change, therefore making the whiteness of Finnishness visible. The changing character of Sweden-Finnishness is highlighted by the statement “Sweden-Finns anno 2013,” the Latin word *anno* [in the year] mediating a sense of entering a new age or time period and inevitable change. In the absence of visible markers, which in the previous section made the whiteness of Finnishness invisible, the example constructs Finnishness instead as a matter of family, heritage and “soul,” something inherited, but also something that cannot be seen from the outside, making the whiteness of Finnishness simultaneously visible and redundant. However, while the tweet reveals how non-white Sweden-Finnishness is readily observable, it also mediates acceptance and acknowledgment of new times,

identifying Farzin as a Sweden-Finn among many others who likewise do not fit into the old stereotypical image of what Finns in Sweden look like.

Subjective negotiations of the relationship between Finnishness and physical appearance in the campaigns show more often, however, that being non-white, yet with Finnish background, is often experienced as contradictory and as something that is rejected from the outside. For instance, a user representing themselves as a later-generation Finnish descendant discusses the contradictions between country of birth, language, heritage and looks:

For me it was self-evident, I am a Swede because I was born in Sweden. I speak three languages because my father is from X [country] and my maternal grandparents were born in Finland and have always spoken Finnish with my mom. But I was not believed. I cannot be a Swede. Or half-Finn. Because I am not white. I do not look like “a Swede” or “a Finn.” (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

The user continues by explaining that they likewise do not physically look like their father and the ethnicity he represents. In this example, the user’s own family background, different languages they speak, country of birth, and looks are intersecting but also contradicting in many ways. In terms of Finnishness, non-white looks are represented as an excluding element despite knowledge of the Finnish language and close family ties. The user consciously uses the term “white” as an important marker, which constructs both normative Finnishness and Swedishness, but simultaneously excludes the user from these communities. Despite family background and heritage, looks are represented as the most dominant ethnic marker from the outside, while for the user, their country of birth and language skills play an important role in their different self-identification processes.

In another example, whiteness is likewise represented as the visible norm of Finnishness, but the example additionally highlights the contradiction between non-white looks and speaking Finnish:

I speak Finnish with my mother and my brothers, so Finnish is one of my strongest languages. Sure, it is somewhat surprising in someone’s eyes and to their ears to see a non-white person speaking Finnish so well which can be provocative and sad for me. But that is another question and remains a problem of only one generation, hopefully... (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

Visible and audible markers are represented as contradictory to each other; therefore, the normative notion of Finnishness is again constructed as white and Finnish-speaking, even though it contradicts with the user’s personal experience. The user further writes about their personal emotional reaction, which is caused by the non-conscious assumptions of what Finns or Sweden-Finns

should look like—the persistently existing white boundary of Finnishness. However, in line with the first example, the quote also highlights an ongoing change and contestation over the emphasized meaning of looks as the primary marker of one's cultural identity.

In a similar manner, a third example also discusses the normative assumption of white Finnishness and how language skills contradict non-white looks:

I have worked as X [occupation] for six years. There, Finnish language has been put into good use. For example, once I walked past an old man who muttered in Finnish “check out that troll hair” [in Finnish]. In his defense, I had an afro, which was sticking out from the safety helmet to all directions. I turned around and said “what did you say” [in Finnish] which led to a moment of silence, but then with a wary voice he asked “do you speak Finnish?” [in Finnish]. What had begun as an unpleasant comment then led to many conversations at the workplace, during which I could practice my Finnish and he learnt not to judge a book by its cover. At the same time, I noticed how proud Finns, especially in Sweden, are when you know the language. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

The elderly man makes an unconscious assumption that due to a person's non-white looks (presented in the text as observable due to afro hair) there is no possibility that the person could speak Finnish, thus maintaining a normative image of Finnishness as something tied to looks. While the example shows how the need to make such comments on other people's looks is experienced as uncomfortable, it also underlines certain generational differences. The user is, however, able to rise above the situation and the unpleasant first encounter becomes in the end a long-term relationship. It is transformed into active dialogue where both are able to learn from each other and find common ground in their shared knowledge of Finnish.

The presumed whiteness of Finnishness can also become visible in cultural contexts other than Sweden. In one example, the whiteness of another user's Finnish mother became visible when the family was living in the father's home country in South America:

In X [country] it became obvious that my family contested norms in many ways. My mom was a blond, tall Northerner who was known in our neighborhood as “la gringa.” Her looks raised attention wherever we went, and often she was idealized. All because of a beauty standard which is based on whiteness as the norm. At the same time, she had difficulties in finding true friends from X [the local population]. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

In this example, the whiteness of their mother becomes visible for the user as it differs notably from the rest of the surrounding population. While having

challenges in integrating and finding friends, the mother's looks are at the same time valued positively from the outside because of the socially constructed white beauty standards. Here, Finnishness becomes constructed as part of normative whiteness in a broader global context. In line with some of the previous examples, the awareness of whiteness and structural normalization of certain looks is very conscious in the user's subjective identification processes.

### “Hey China Swedes”—(Re-)racialized Finnishness

In a third discourse which emerges from the material, Finnishness becomes also represented as something visible—however, not as white as in the previous examples, but as excluded and differentiated from the normative Swedish whiteness (see also Beckman 2018). This discourse of marginalized and racialized Finnishness is mobilized especially in *Tukholman sissit*'s activism through references to the history of racial biology and categorizations of Finns. Therefore, the history of differentiation, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, is operationalized as part of this discourse.

In one prominent example from 2019, a digital image depicts four drawn eyes with a text “Epikantus on kaunis [Epicanthus is beautiful]” in the middle. Two of the eyes are different, depicting an eye-type with a so-called epicanthian fold, which is a skin fold that covers the inner corner of the eye, often regarded as an Asiatic ethnic feature. However, in this context, the post makes a reference to the 19th-century racial categorizations of Finns as Asiatic people or Mongols. The phrase on the photo mobilizes a counter-strategy typical for ethnic and social movements (such as the 1960s black cultural movement “black is beautiful,” to which the text makes a direct reference) where negative stereotypes are reversed into something positive (e.g. Hall 1997). The rather long, timeline-style caption of the post is worth quoting fully:

2019-09-18, subway, Slussen, two teenage girls are talking. One understands that they are Finns when one of the girls answers her phone in Finnish and her mom calls. After the call, one girl says to the other: “You look so pretty today darling.” “Dah, no. Look at my eyes, Chinese eyes, so ugly, I look so Finnish.”

1930-07-29 Sports magazine's major headline: “Day of the Mongols on the stadium.” What had happened? Yes—the Finnish athletes had succeeded on the Stockholm stadium, among others, the “slant-eyed” Matti Järvinen had thrown javelin longer than the at the time current world record.

1998: I was new in the class. A girl comes to me and says that I am good-looking. Good-looking for a Finn, in other words. I was just like: How did you know that I am a Finn? “I see it in your ching-chong eyes.” Ok.

1942, Minnesota: "... because the Swedish kids, they knew our grandparents were from Finland, they'd go and put their fingers by their eyes and make slanty eyes and say "Hey, China Swede, hey China Swedes." "China Swede" was one term, "roundhead" was another. There were also more subtle forms of discrimination."<sup>6</sup>

Epicanthus. Not ugly. Epicanthus is beautiful. Do not forget it. #sweden-finns #nationalminorities #epichantus (Tukholman sissit, n.d.)

Knowledge production and distribution is somewhat characteristic for *Tukholman sissit's* activism and is especially prominent in this example, sharing insights into the "racial" histories of Finns in Sweden and beyond. However, it is relevant to note that the examples quoted above are posted without any broader context or sources to these stories, whereas some of the references are more nuanced than how they are represented in the caption.<sup>7</sup> Bringing these short quotes together should therefore be seen rather as the activists' subjective recontextualization, which participates in the discursive construction of Sweden-Finnishness as a national minority, as the hashtags in the post also reveal. The example also shows entanglement of individual and collective experiences, the unique experiences of the activists and the broader narratives and histories of Finnishness, pointing out how the history of differentiation continues to operate in the society. Nadja Nieminen Mänty (2017) has observed similar use of the entanglement of individual and collective experiences in other Swedish minority political material, functioning as a way to reinforce legitimacy of these narratives.

The example emphasizes the racialized otherness of Finns through physical features. "Finnish eyes" are depicted as a visible ethnic feature, described, however, as "ugly," or even with derogatory racialized terms such as "ching-chong eyes." While "China Swedes" in this example highlights ethnic difference, the term also interestingly constructs Finns as otherwise like "Swedes," but differentiated by their different-looking eyes. In all the examples except the first one, Finnishness is represented as something identifiable from the outside, both historically and in contemporary times. In the first example, the overheard subjective representation of "Finnish looks" as something ugly is on the other hand represented as internalized self-understanding, especially as the activists identify them as Finns only based on audible markers.

*Tukholman sissit's* activism is not limited only to promoting rights of Sweden-Finns as a national minority, but it also participates in contesting the broader normative hegemonies and structures that continue to affect the sense of belonging and acceptance of national minorities as part of the Swedish nation in both the past and the present. While the examples above make references to the nationally anchored notion of Finnishness, Finns in Sweden as well as Finnish Americans, it is notable that in all the examples, Sweden and Swedes are represented as the main antagonists in everyday encounters,

media and personal memories, creating juxtapositioning between “Finns” and “Swedes.”

The salience of this discourse is not only limited to activism, but is also present in some individual-level representation of Sweden-Finnishness toward the end of the 2010s, revealing the emerging impact of the new narratives of Sweden-Finnishness that draw from the contemporary Swedish minority political context. The following, likewise a lengthy quote, is by a user who represents later-generation Finnish descendants:

When I was in Egypt almost ten years ago, a street vendor greeted me with “*Terve!* [Hi!]” and I noticed that I did not like that I came across as a Finn. I realized that I thought that Finns are ugly. It took, however, many years before I began to ask why I thought like this. When I read about the position of Finns in Sweden’s history of race biology, I began to think if racist ideas about my ancestors can have impacted what I thought when I looked at myself in the mirror.

Classified as “Asiatic Mongols” many nationalists saw for long that Finns (besides the Sámi) were the greatest acute threat against the “pure race,” beautiful Swedishness. Opinions legitimized by Swedish researches who, for instance, stole and measured skulls from Finnish graveyards.

The State Institute for Racial Biology was abolished only in 1958, two years before grandmother moved to Sweden. ... One can, however, imagine that the ideas of “shortskulls” have lived on for longer than that and affected the Swedish view on “Finnish looks.”

What do you think? Can foolish historical ideas have affected our self-image? Do you think that what is considered as “Finnish features” is beautiful? (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

The post follows the style of *Tukholman sissit*’s post by entangling individual and collective experiences. The post also makes a reference to the skull repatriation case—topical around the same time—to demonstrate how legacies of the past continue to carry meaning in contemporary societies, often as invisible structures. The skulls in the center of the repatriation dispute are part of a collection of Swedish physician and anatomist Gustaf Retzius, son of Anders Retzius, who developed a racial categorization system based on the size of human crania in the 19th century, and in which Finns were categorized as more inferior “shortskulls” (e.g. Keskinen 2019). For the activist group demanding the skulls to be repatriated, the collection represents symbolically the past injustices experienced by “the national minority Sweden-Finns.” Through addressing the history of racial biological research and racial categorization of Finns, the group articulates claims for dignity and equality in Swedish society (see KI 2019). However, on an official level, the case has

so far been handled as an international issue between Finland and Sweden without addressing the Swedish minority political context. As of August 2021, the case is still open.

The example represents “Finnish features” also as a stigmatized ethnic trait and as something distinguishable from the outside. However, the example shows how new awareness of history promoted also by activism affects individual-level identification processes, igniting a process where one’s own thinking and possible internalized behavior patterns are reweighted. By positioning Finns and the Sámi side by side as minorities and juxtapositioning them as different in relation to the “beautiful,” in other words hegemonic, normative and also national notion of Swedishness, the example contextualizes Finnishness most prominently as a minoritized notion in the Swedish minority political context.

Both examples show a certain contradiction and even paradox in how they aim to contest structures and “foolish historical ideas,” but how they simultaneously participate in racializing Finnishness as visible through specific, physical features as markers of difference and exclusion from Swedish whiteness. Stuart Hall (1997) points out that when stereotypes are contested, it might also lead somewhat paradoxically to their reification, however transforming them from negative stereotypes into positive ones. Whether as something positive or negative, in this context, Finnishness becomes represented as visible due to “racial” features, contradicting with the other discourses where Finnishness becomes constructed as “white,” along with hegemonic Swedishness. At the same time, these examples represent Finnishness as something homogenous and as historically stable and fixed. While mobilizing a similar myth of culturally and racially homogenous Finnishness as pointed out by Miika Tervonen (2014) in reference to Finnish nation-building, as part of a minoritized notion of Sweden-Finnishness, such discourse participates now, paradoxically enough, in contesting myths of homogenous Swedishness.

In addition to the new social hierarchies and uses of the past which participate in the construction of Sweden-Finnish national minority identity, the racialized discourse of Finnishness appears in the material also in a completely different context, namely in the form of consumer genetic testing, or DNA tests. A post by a user, who identifies as both Tornedalians and Sweden-Finn, shows how Finnishness can also become visible through DNA:

I am a very curious person. When the hype about DNA tests emerged on my social media feeds, I just could not restrain myself... Here you can see my results! 84,1% Finnish apparently. Slightly deceptive taking in consideration that because of the family research done by my relatives, I KNOW that my ancestors lived on the Swedish side too. Somewhat amusing that my DNA shows that I am more Central Asian and Inuit than Swedish 😂 Joking aside. Of course I am Swedish. I was born in

Sweden, I know the Swedish language the best, I dream, think, and live in Swedish. But I am also a Tornedalian and a Sweden-Finn. My heart, my soul and my core says “*perkele, no niin och lissää löylyä* [damn, oh well and throw more water on the sauna stove],” so it is combinable. I am a living example. (#Stoltsverigefinne, n.d.)

The photo attached to the post shows a screenshot of the test results, showing different percentages next to categories such as “Finnish,” “Eskimo/Inuit,” “Central-Asian” and “Scandinavian.” In the caption, the user equates the category “Scandinavian” with “Swedish”, showing thus non-conscious boundary-drawing by including Swedishness in the category “Scandinavian.” This demonstrates how ideas of “racial” belonging operate even today in everyday perceptions. Consumer genetic testing has been noted to have multiple problems and challenges, for instance, in terms of their interpretation and epistemic validity (Oikkonen 2018). The different “groups” that are categorized as genetic entities (such as “Finnish” or “Scandinavian” in this example) are based on databases of previously collected samples and categorized by the genetic testing companies (*ibid.*). While these divisions to a certain extent are reminiscent of former racial categorizations, it has been pointed out that in the field of genetics an idea of Finns as a genetically distinct, homogeneous population still exists today in the form of “genetic exceptionality” or “genetic romanticism” (see Chapter 1 by Aaro Tupasela in this book).

The test categorizes the user’s genetic heritage dominantly as “Finnish,” while they self-identify as Tornedalian, Sweden-Finnish and Swedish. The user, however, points out the contradictory nature of these results, as the user’s ancestors have also lived on the “Swedish side”—the Torne Valley area in the north of Sweden being a highly multicultural and transnational border region. This interpretation reveals how the ethnic or “genetic” notion of Finnishness as well as Swedishness can become equated to geographical locations and thus projecting the modern nation-states Finland and Sweden as essentialized, static and unchanged in the past. However, the border between Finland and Sweden becomes constructed simultaneously as a “genetic” border, which is, however, in contradiction with different family histories and cultural identities. The user acknowledges this contradiction, thus defining the boundaries of “Swedishness” also as a matter of birthplace and language. Therefore, different national and minority identities are not represented as exclusionary, but as something that can exist simultaneously. While the user approaches the results with certain criticism, equating national communities and genetic identities with each other can create contradictions, collisions and tensions, as the example also shows (see also Oikkonen 2018). While genetic testing has been noted to potentially function as a way to maintain ethnic identities of later-generation immigrants in the USA (Waters 2014), together in the same social media space where the politicized and minoritized notion of Finnishness is discussed, genetic

testing additionally participates in constructing differences between “Finns” and “Swedes.”

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined representations of Finnishness and whiteness in the context of contemporary Sweden-Finnish identity politics in social media. The study shows that the notion of Finnishness in Sweden and its relation to whiteness is multidimensional and situational. The way in which “whiteness” is represented and discussed in the material is highly dependent on the different subjective social settings such as “race,” generation, ancestry, citizenship and language skills, but also on the different collective meanings given to “Sweden-Finnishness.” These, in turn, operate in different socio-political and temporal contexts emphasizing either similarities or differences between Finnishness and Swedishness. Applying the analytical lens of in/visibility on this particular social media material shows that Finnishness in Sweden can become represented as both visible and invisible in different contexts, but it also reveals that these notions have their internal complexities due to, first, the internal diversity and heterogeneity of those with Finnish background in Sweden, and, second, the mobilization of the historically shifting notion of whiteness in different socio-political contexts.

While some are able to pass as “Swedes” due to the invisibility of “race,” for non-white Sweden-Finns, the whiteness of Finnishness (and Swedishness) becomes visible, but also exclusionary. In both cases, Finnishness and Swedishness are represented as part of the same, hegemonic whiteness, yet either as inclusive or exclusionary depending on the different subjective social locations of the social media users. While this chapter has focused mainly on how “race” and whiteness operate in representations of Finnishness, it is evident that “audible visibility” also plays an important role in the negotiations of belonging. For those who are otherwise able to pass as “Swedes,” language, accent and even a Finnish-sounding name are represented as the primary markers of difference. These elements have the power to reveal one’s Finnishness, but are mainly represented in social media as something tied to the stigmatized experiences of non-belonging. For non-white Finnish descendants, language, on the other hand, plays an important role as a marker of Finnishness, but also as a way to mediate belonging to the Finnish community, which is otherwise contradicted by their “non-Finnish” looks. Therefore, the boundaries of Finnishness as well as Swedishness are represented as white, but also linguistic.

The analysis shows additionally that the seemingly white notion of Finnishness can also become visible as something racialized and therefore as excluded from Swedish whiteness. This discourse operates most prominently in the contemporary politicized and minoritized context of Sweden-Finnishness, mobilizing past imaginations of differences in asserting the distinctiveness of the group as a national minority. Therefore, this study suggests that in addition

to the general tendency to depict Sweden-Finnish migrants as a white and homogenous group, also the recognition as a national minority participates in constructing similar essentialist notions of homogeneity. At the same time, a similar discourse of Finnishness emerges from the growing popularity of genetic testing.

These observations demonstrate how whiteness is socially constructed and a normative space of power and privilege, but also highly fluid, situational and even contradictory within the seemingly same ethnicity in the same national context. The study also reveals many ongoing changes and challenges. As part of publicly produced Sweden-Finnishness, the social media, and especially hashtag activism in general, emphasize emotions, grievances and claims (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles 2020), which might promote polarized representations of Finnishness and Swedishness and make stigmatized experiences more prominent. The mobilization of Finnish national myths, as well as how the relationship between Finnishness and Sáminess is represented in the material as inhabiting the same marginalized position, reveal the complexity, entanglement and situationality of intra-ethnic histories and relations in the Nordic context. While the changing political status and institutionalization of new Sweden-Finnish minority narrative constructs Sweden-Finnishness to a certain extent as something essentialized and homogenous, it is at the same time contested by the heterogeneity and diverse realities of individuals with a Finnish background in Sweden.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The translations of the Finnish- and Swedish-language quotes from social media follow the style of the original posts. Due to the empirical focus on individual users' own voice and experiences, the possible use of derogatory terms and slurs in the original texts are included as such, because they are often intended to rather contest use of such terms than reproduce their

derogatory meanings. The term “svartskalle” (singular) used in this example is a Swedish derogatory term for a dark-haired or dark-skinned person.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Kauhanen 2010; Huhta 2014; Pelli 2018.

<sup>4</sup> In April 2020, the name of the radio channel was changed to *Sveriges Radio Finska*.

<sup>5</sup> The name of the activist group is a reappropriation of the term “Slussenin sissit [Guerillas of Slussen],” which refers to a more or less urban legend of Finnish alcoholics and misfits, who held the intersection area of Slussen in central Stockholm as their “base” in the postwar decades. The term was popularized by the Finnish singer-songwriter Juha Vainio in his 1968 song *Slussenin sissit*.

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph is written in English in the original post. It is a quote from a transcript of a radio program from 1997, which discusses the experiences of Finnish migrants in Minnesota at the turn of the 20th century (see Losure and Olson 1997).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the headline “Day of the Mongols” was from the pen of Torsten Tegnér, the then editor-in-chief of the Swedish sports newspaper *Idrottsbladet*. The headline caused a scandal in Finland, affecting even the relationship between Finland and Sweden in the field of sports (see Kanerva and Tikander 2017).

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