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ARTICLE

# 'Happy Stories' of Swedish Exceptionalism

## Reproducing Whiteness in Teaching and Biology Textbooks in Sexuality Education

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### Abstract

Sexuality education (SE) takes place in fields of tension where biology, legislation, norms, and values intersect. Drawing on Ahmed's phenomenological account of whiteness, this article examines how Swedish whiteness is constructed and reproduced within SE. In Sweden, SE is formalised as an overarching, subject-integrated knowledge area where the biology subject plays a crucial role in its delivery. To include a wide spectrum of SE, where both planned and unplanned aspects of teaching are considered, as well as tensions in the content, we have analysed eight semi-structured teacher interviews and five biology textbooks. Our analysis shows how Swedish whiteness is reproduced as a form of institutionalised orientation constructed by norms, social values, people, subject knowledge, policies, and legislation, all intertwined in a complex web. This web places SE, teachers, and pupils in a racial landscape that constructs and reproduces specific forms of Swedish whiteness by assigning each a position in relation to familiarity. This familiarity provides a taken-for-granted starting point in SE, where 'here' is constructed as a place of progression, openness, and possibilities for happy future sexual lives, while other places come to stand out as hyper-visible examples of the less familiar, less happy, and 'far away'. From this outpost, teachers and biology textbooks construct and reproduce Swedish whiteness through 'happy stories' of Swedish exceptionalism. Although these positive messages in SE may stem from good intentions, our findings show that a colourblind view of racial hierarchies in the rendering of 'happy stories, about, for example, gay rights, free abortion, and equality also contributes to reproducing whiteness and reinforcing ideas about race and Swedish exceptionalism in SE.

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## 1 Introduction

Sexuality education (SE) takes place in fields of tension. Different values and interests meet, intersect, influence, and sometimes clash in SE content. Pupils in Swedish schools are expected to gain knowledge about the body and health by learning about the biological and social aspects of sexuality and relationships. Ever since SE became a compulsory part of Swedish schools in 1955 (SOU, 1974:59), the curriculum has evolved from focusing on biological facts and morals to having a stronger emphasis on social value. As an effect of these changes, the national curriculum emphasises how SE must 'develop pupils' critical approach to representations of relationships and sexuality in various media and contexts, including in pornography', and knowledge of 'power structures linked to gender and honour-related violence and oppression' (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2022, p. 8). In the SE classroom, norm-critical pedagogy, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism are exercised to address and problematise various aspects of sexuality, values, and society (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020). However, as Bengtsson and Bolander (2020) show, while norm-critical pedagogy, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism can help pupils explore norms and sexuality, there is also a tendency among teachers to deliver the analysis rather than engaging students to analyse and reach their own conclusions.

When it comes to SE, Sweden has come to represent a progressive, sex-positive, rights-based, and secular approach, along with Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, and the Nordic countries (Jones et al., 2019; Nordberg, 2020; Roodsaz, 2018; Zimmerman, 2015). Liberal sexual politics and gender equality have become a vital part of the Nordic region's nationalism and a form of 'trademark that set[s] them apart from the rest of the world' (Svendsen, 2017, p. 137). Despite these democratic intentions, Swedish education is characterised by racial colour blindness, according to Lundström and Hübinette (2022). Although there are efforts to broaden Swedish SE, certain values appear to be universal and create notions of Swedishness and 'otherness' (Bredström et al., 2018, p. 538). The 'scientifically sound and sex-positive approach' within European SE is, according to Svendsen (2017, p. 137), also a place for unreflective imperial sexual racism.

Race as a concept was abolished in Sweden at the end of the twentieth century (Hübinette & Lundström, 2015, p. 431) and has been replaced by concepts such as 'ethnicity' and 'diversity', which can be seen, for example, in the Swedish curriculum's section on the school's core values (see Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2011, 2019, 2022). 'Culture', 'religion', and 'Swedish' are also common euphemisms used to avoid direct references to race or whiteness (Lundberg, 2021; Wahlström Smith, 2020). In Swedish society, people 'distance themselves from the discourse of race as something that takes place not within its borders but somewhere else', according to Törngren (2022, p. 51), thus allowing for subtle forms of racism to appear as so-called polite exclusions that appear in everyday interactions. Since race is considered to belong to history, it is no longer perceived as relevant in Sweden, for example, in statistical measurements, which is an obstacle to dealing with racism (Lundström & Hübinette, 2022). The UN Human Rights Council has criticised Sweden's reluctance to use race data, despite calls to 'collect and use this data to fight systemic racism' (UN News, 2022). Thus, the Swedish habitual colour blindness continues, a colour blindness that is embraced in a quest for a post-racial society by the Nordics and other western countries as well (Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017, p. 153).

Swedish whiteness is characterised, according to Hübinette and Lundström (2011), by the fact that, on the one hand, Sweden has perceived itself as 'the most racially

homogeneous and pure population of all white ethnicities', and, on the other hand, as 'at the top of the world as the most progressive and left-liberal country', which constitutes a 'double-binding power' that makes it almost impossible for people of colour to be accepted as Swedes (p. 50). The same applies to Nordic whiteness in the Nordic countries, where non-white residents 'experience themselves as perpetual outsiders' (Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017, p. 151). Furthermore, Hübinette and Lundström (2011) argue that 'the presence of non-white, non-Christian, and non-Western migrants' is perceived as a threat to the Swedish self-image as the most 'humanitarian, and anti-racist country in the world', as well as to the image of being 'the whitest of all white countries', to the point where Swedishness has become trapped in 'white melancholia' (p. 50).

To move on from a mourning of a 'glorious past', this article aims to explore how Swedishness appears as specific forms of whiteness in SE. We ask, how is Swedish whiteness constructed and reproduced in SE? To answer the research question, we analysed teacher interviews and biology textbooks. Through a focus on Swedish whiteness within the school's sexuality education, this study contributes to an understanding of how racial relations are reproduced within educational practises. In doing so, we offer perspectives for moving forward from the past without turning a blind eye to racial hierarchies and inequalities in education.

## 2 Background and Previous Research

### 2.1 The Scope of Swedish Sexuality Education

Internationally, Sweden and other northern European countries were the first to make SE part of mandatory schooling (UNESCO, 2018; Zimmerman, 2015). The comprehensive, rights-based approach to SE has been spread internationally (Berglas et al., 2014) and gained strong political support in the region (Sherlock, 2012; Svendsen, 2017). The wide scope of today's Swedish SE can be explained by developments in both practise and policy. A new model was adopted in the Swedish curriculum in 1994, where SE became a subject-integrated knowledge area (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2006). Since then, schools and teachers have been expected to integrate several subjects into SE (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2019).

An overarching goal in Swedish SE is that every pupil, after finishing the 9th grade of primary school, has knowledge of various issues about sex, sexuality, consent, relationships, and gender equality, as well as honour-related violence and oppression (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2022). According to Bengtsson and Bolander (2020), SE has taken 'a significant turn towards inclusion – in the sense of social justice and rights for individuals and groups – and anti-discrimination' (p. 154). They highlight that the turn towards social justice and rights is linked to the legal protection against discrimination on grounds of gender, transgender identity or its expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, functional variation, sexual orientation, and age, which are also linked to children's rights from 2006 (SFS, 2010:800). In the curriculum, policies such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and active measures to counteract discrimination (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2019) impact practise and push towards widening the scope of SE. Apart from teaching the biological facts, SE shall also contribute to pupils 'feeling safe in their own bodies and identities' (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2013, p. 68).

In the past, the Swedish population has been perceived as homogeneous and 'white' according to Lundström and Hübinette (2022). However, this has changed. After labour immigration from Nordic and European countries between 1945 and 1970, international adoptions from the 1960s, and refugee immigration from the 1970s on, Sweden has become one of the most heterogeneous countries in terms of language, religion, and race (Lundström & Hübinette, 2022, p. 12). Despite the apparently heterogeneous population, Sweden and other countries in the region are united under a shared characteristics of 'the Nordic' which is branded as something unique when it comes to gender equality, internationalist solidarity, social democracy, and egalitarianism (Sawyer & Habel, 2014, p. 1). In this construction, the Nordic region is perceived as a 'queer utopia' (Kjaran, 2017, p. 178), where SE becomes synonymous with gender equality, sex-positive attitudes, and norm-critical awareness (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Svendsen, 2017; Zimmerman, 2015). Røthing and Svendsen (2011) argue that gender equality and gay rights are mobilised as markers of a 'national belonging' to the dominant society. Therefore, tolerance towards homosexuality and support for gender equality become political positions. According to Sawyer and Habel (2014), these images support strategic moves to erase and smooth over internal differences and fractions from past power relations of domination and colonisation. Instead of emphasising the past, they shape an understanding of an 'imagined, universalistic, neo-colonial future in which some nations lead others' (Martinsson, 2021, p. 84). Martinsson further argues that this fantasy is ingrained in a notion of Swedish exceptionalism 'built on an understanding of time as linear, making the world's most modern, developed, gender-equal, secular nation a role model for other countries to follow, the one that has found the way to the future' (Martinsson, 2021, p. 84).

## 2.2 Underlying Assumptions in Sexuality Education

Notions of exceptionalism and the progress of the West are also reproduced in schools. According to Quinlivan (2017, p. 392), Western discourses of scientific rationality characterise SE. There is also a paradoxical ideal of cultural sensitivity and diversity within SE in Western European countries (Roodsaz, 2018, p. 108). This ideal of being both sensitive and diverse at the same time creates tensions between secular rationality, science, health, and human rights on the one hand, and morality, religious rights, and faith on the other (Rasmussen, 2010, 2015). In an analysis of Swedish science education textbooks, Ideland highlights that these are characterised by 'a hegemonic discourse about progress, development, and the great rationality gap., which drowns out 'the story about the darker sides of science' (2018, p. 799) and thus reproduces coloniality in the content. In line with this, Svendsen (2017) points out how Norwegian SE constructs a secular native and a religious 'Other', and that there is thus a need for an 'anti-racist critique of sex education' (p. 151). In Finnish SE also, the 'Other' and sexual norms of 'other cultures' appear in contrast to imagined Western forms of liberal and progressive sexuality (Honkasalo, 2018). Furthermore, Krebbekx (2018) has shown that SE in the Netherlands risks producing 'some of the tensions between sexuality and ethnicity that it seeks to reduce' (p. 1336) and thereby '(re) produces ethnic characterizations of sexuality' (p. 1325). To reduce inequalities, there is a need for critical awareness by addressing different norms within SE and being 'open to a diversity of sexual cultures' (Cense, 2019, p. 272).

In Sweden, SE has mainly been taught by biology teachers, and due to SE's roots in science and biology (Ceder et al., 2021), it is intertwined with scientific ideals of objectivity and neutrality (Svendsen, 2017). However, feminist critique argues that in seemingly

neutral scientific approaches in SE, there are underlying normative assumptions based on secularity (Allen et al., 2014; Svendsen, 2017) and individualism (Lamb & Randazzo, 2016). In other words, this criticism means that an education that should enable diversity through multiple voices can instead exclude certain views by, for example, separating religion from other aspects of life. Or, in short, according to Rasmussen (2015) and Lamb (1997), there is no neutral position with regard to sexuality education. Efforts are currently being made in education 'to reveal and dismantle structures of domination by working to reform and reimagine their curricula, and the ethics and values that underpin classroom settings' (Bratman & DeLince, 2022, p. 193). Different interest groups influence SE content and also research to widen its scope. In previous research, SE content has been scrutinised and challenged regarding gender norms (Cense, 2019) and diverse sexualities regarding LGBTQ (Clonan-Roy et al., 2020; Naser et al., 2022; Roien et al., 2022; Røthing, 2017), and heteronormative and stereotypical assumptions of reproduction have been challenged (Martin, 1991). Critical aspects of variations in functionality through crip perspectives (Johnson & McRuer, 2014; McRuer, 2010) have contributed to research, with the potential to broaden norms of sexual possibilities in SE for all (Bahner, 2018; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). Also, intersex and asexuality have been presented as important perspectives in research for expanded views on gender and sexuality and for social justice (Brömdal et al., 2017; Pasley, 2020). In this endeavour, education is also at the epicentre of guarding and upholding racial relations (Castagno, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Garner, 2007). Therefore, it is important to do research also on whiteness and SE education.

Much of the literature on race and whiteness originates in settings where the colonial past and the postcolonial present have some recognition in the social reality of school and education. However, our research is carried out in the colourblind 'non-racist utopia' of Sweden, where race as a concept on a governmental and official level, as well as in academia, is 'considered to be completely irrelevant and obsolete in the contemporary Swedish context since human rights, democracy, social justice, gender equality, and antiracism seem[s] to be already achieved' (Hübinette & Lundström, 2015, p. 431). It is a myth, though, that race is no longer relevant, according to international scholars such as Bonilla-Silva, and this 'seemingly naive colour blindness' (Bonilla-Silva, 2015a, p. 78) legitimises contemporary racial inequalities. This 'new racism', or racial structure (Bonilla-Silva, 2015b, p. 1362), involves, for example, the avoidance of racial terminology and instead concepts such as ethnicity, culture, and diversity are used. Furthermore, people in Swedish society 'distance themselves from the discourse of race as something that takes place not within its borders but somewhere else' according to Törngren (2022, p. 51). This allows subtle forms of racism to appear, such as 'polite exclusions' (Wiltgren, 2022), which appear in everyday interactions in school.

At the same time, organisations that work to promote diversity also harness 'a desire to hear "happy stories of diversity" rather than unhappy stories of racism' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164). Instead of addressing race explicitly, euphemisms for 'race' are in use, in which undefined groups of pupils come to be compared to 'other Swedish pupils' or through references to 'culture and language' (Lundberg, 2021). Thus, Lundberg (2021) claims that these types of euphemisms mark 'race' and show a difference between Swedishness and non-Swedishness. According to Habel (2012), the ascendancy of neo-liberal cultural racism, or 'racism without races', has entailed the use of ubiquitous, more subtle code language, in which the naturalised use of 'ethnicity' and 'culture' or 'multiculture' signals various shades of non-whiteness (pp. 101–102). Nordic whiteness is, according to Lundström and Teitelbaum, 'a fluid and contested but also an enduring and powerful phenomenon' (2017, p. 151). Or, to borrow Bonilla-Silva's words, race 'is in constant flux', and thus, 'we must examine its remaking in societies' (2015a, p. 77).

Operating in a setting that is characterised by racial amnesia calls for inquiry, since 'the success of whiteness is found precisely in its ability to rewrite the contract according to the specific and historical needs of whiteness' (Leonardo, 2013, p. 606). Using whiteness as a theoretical lens enables examination of how SE knowledge intersects with aspects of white supremacy and systems of domination in education (Gillborn, 2013). To conclude the work of critical race scholars, what we need is research on 'how and why race will be organised and lived in various contexts' (Bonilla-Silva, 2015a, p. 82).

## 3 Theories of Race and Whiteness

To explore how Swedish whiteness is constructed and reproduced in SE, we turn to scholarly work within critical race theory and to the concept of whiteness. Using a concept such as whiteness is delicate since it can be misunderstood, misused, and developed into studies that essentialise and stabilise race as an ontological given (Ahmed, 2007, p. 149). According to Bonilla-Silva (2015b), race can be misconceived as a given, although race is an invented social category that becomes '*socially real* and reenacted in the everyday life' (p. 1360). Racial categories, such as whiteness, express a system of dominance and power rather than a skin colour or ethnicity (Frankenberg, 1993). According to Frankenberg, '[w]hiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination' and '[n]aming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance' (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6). In addition to race being an invented social category, Ahmed elaborates on the concept of whiteness as being an unstable category created through "an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up space' and what they 'can do'" (2007, p. 149).

In this article, we draw on Ahmed's phenomenological understanding of whiteness to explore Swedish whiteness in sexuality education. According to Ahmed, historical dominance and privilege have positioned whiteness to operate in the background and appear as a 'shared attribute' (p. 154) that is reproduced through repetition and by attaching familiarity and positive values to it. This creates a sense of belonging and allegiance to what is already in place, and when bodies reach out into the world, they expand spatially towards what is already there. Ahmed argues:

> We do not face whiteness; it 'trails behind' bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect of this 'around whiteness' is the institutionalization of a certain 'likeness', which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space. (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157)

The concept of the body should be understood here from a phenomenological view as something that is experienced from within oneself rather than from an outsider's perspective. To describe how whiteness is constructed as a given that positions bodies in terms of familiarity, Ahmed (2007) uses the metaphor of peas in a pod. Through this metaphor, she describes how bodies take shape in a system of whiteness. According to Ahmed (2007), whiteness is not inscribed in the similarity between the peas, but in the pod itself as a common, shared space where familiarity and division occur. In the phenomenological tradition, the philosopher "asks us to be aware of the 'what' that is 'around'" to acknowledge how '[t]he world that is 'around' has already taken certain shapes, as the very form of what is 'more and less' familiar" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 151). For the peas, the pod is a world that is

already in place and that conditions their shape and constitutes the familiar. According to Ahmed, "[t]he familial is in a way like the 'pod', as a shared space of dwelling, in which things are shaped by their proximity to other things" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 155). Through the metaphor of the pea pod, Ahmed claims that '[o]bjects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others' (2006, p. 51) to point out how whiteness appears beneath the surface of the body as an 'invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants' (2007, p. 157). She further explains that the institutionalisation of whiteness provides a white backdrop that allows some bodies to expand into that familiar space and sink into the background as an unnamed body, while others become extremely visible and come to 'stand out' as 'hypervisible' representations of the less familiar and far away (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). Ahmed explains that institutions are meeting points 'where different lines intersect, where lines cross with other lines, to create and divide spaces' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159), and hence, institutions consist of more or less accessible lines. Hypervisibility occurs when someone crosses lines and appears to deviate, be "out of line", whereas following the lines 'allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). Drawing upon Ahmed's conceptualisation of whiteness allows us to follow the motility of Swedish whiteness in SE.

## 4 Methodology

To explore and analyse how Swedish whiteness is constructed and reproduced in SE, we have combined empirical material from two dissertation projects, one focusing on experiences of teaching and the other on the content of biology textbooks. To account for our data, we first describe how our empirical materials were selected and collected. We then provide reasons for combining our data. Finally, we describe how the data was analysed in relation to the theoretical framework.

### 4.1 The Teacher Interviews

Inspired by Haug's (1999) methodology of collecting experiences of work through memory work, Author 1 used an open approach to interview eight educators, all having experiences of working with SE to understand the practice. Similar to ethnographic interviews, memory work seeks to understand participants' point of view (see Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). In memory work, the interviewee is asked to freely share a memory to describe their practise, and based on that, the interview expands and develops in relation to memories of, for example, SE, as in our article. According to Haug (1999, 2008), memory work derives from the Marxist tradition of consciousness-raising and Foucauldian discourse analysis, whereby individual memories are considered to describe how experiences are filtered through social structures of, for example, sexuality, gender, or, in this case, whiteness. Through memory work, the experience is brought into focus to investigate how social structures condition the body socially. During the interviews, none of the interviewees was specifically asked about their own or others' race or experiences of racism; however, despite their ethnic background, all of them had racialised experiences from work with SE. As our theoretical framework indicates, race and ethnicity are slippery concepts as they are social constructs rather than ontologically given (see Ahmed, 2007). Following Bonilla-Silva (2015b) line of thought, race is acted out in real life. Hence, when interviewing

teachers about their professional experiences, they act out their institutional identity as Swedish teachers in Sweden. Regardless of whether our interviewees have an immigrant background or not, almost all of them have Swedish sounding names, speak Swedish fluently with a more or less distinct Swedish dialect, and have a Swedish style of appearance. Our guess is that in school, our interviewees do not 'stand out' as 'hypervisible' but pass as Swedish teachers. As you will see in our findings, one of our interviewees, called Karim, addresses how institutional whiteness operates and positions teachers regardless of their ethnic background within the institutional lines of whiteness, hence requiring an active move to cross the institutional lines and make use of one's 'hypervisible' background.

The eight interviewees were selected through snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). They work in different schools across Sweden, on different levels ranging from kindergarten to upper secondary school. Due to COVID-19 restrictions regarding physical meetings at the time, the interviews were conducted individually via video meeting or telephone, depending on the interviewee's preference. Two of the interviews were divided into two sessions due to the interviewees' time schedules. Each interview lasted between one and three hours, was audio recorded, and transcribed. To ensure anonymity, all names and geographical locations are given pseudonyms in the transcripts. The study has obtained ethics approval from the Swedish Ethics Review Authority[1] since the interviews contain sensitive personal data. In accordance with *Good Research Practice* (Vetenskapsrådet [Swedish Research Council], 2017), each interviewee prior to the interview was informed about the study and gave informed consent to participate.

### 4.2 The Biology Textbooks

When it comes to textbooks in Sweden, there are no institutions that print, evaluate, or approve the content of textbooks. However, the major publishing houses in this sector are organised within an association[2] that provides policies to ensure the quality standards of the content in terms of curriculum and facts. The selection of five textbooks is representative of contemporary Swedish SE. The textbooks are the latest published editions and printings of Swedish biology textbooks (for grades 7–9) that were available in libraries and online stores before the reform of Swedish SE in 2022: *Biologi Direkt* (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012), *Puls Biologi* (Andréasson, 2011), *Makro Biologi* (Henriksson, 2010), *Spektrum Biologi* (Fabricius et al., 2013), and *Capensis Biologi Del 2* (Martens, 2018). All five textbooks have been analysed in a previous study by Author 2 (2021), but whiteness was not part of that study.

### 4.3 Combining and Analysing the Data

Combining two sets of data is motivated by the social constructivist and feminist methodological approach of *crystallisation*. Instead of finding one representation of SE, crystallisation allows for crossing traditional boundaries of representations to create new coherence in texts by 'building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematises its own construction' (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4). Together, these data enable us to reflect both the planned and the unplanned practises of SE. The textbooks here represent the planned,

[1] Approval number 2020-1873.

[2] The name of the association is *Läromedelsföretagen*. https://www.laromedelsforetagen.se/

reviewed, and edited side of SE that is supposed to communicate clear, nuanced, and accurate information to pupils, while the interviews shed light on some of the more unexpected ad hoc moments in teaching and on how teachers navigate these moments, where different tensions may arise.

Our data is from Sweden, where the educational setting, according to Lundström and Hübinette (2022), is colourblind. They have pointed out that people avoid talking about racial issues, emphasising that 'the silence is simply compact' (p. 184). So, Swedish whiteness is communicated in our data more or less implicitly. To explore how Swedish whiteness is constructed and reproduced in teaching practises and biology textbooks within SE, we divided the analysis into five steps. First, we explored our data through iterative readings inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). Second, from these readings, we selected content on stories, statements, explanations, associations, quotes, and illustrations that related to race, whiteness, and Swedishness. The first readings and selections we made separately to protect the anonymity of the interviewees since not only what is being said but also how someone expresses themselves can reveal identities even if the names have been removed (see Israel, 2015). Third, we coded our quotes that related to race, such as 'culture', 'tradition', 'ethnicity', 'neutrality', 'religion', and 'legislation'. Fourth, we reviewed our codes and developed categories to explain in what ways the data reflected expressions of Swedishness. Fifth, we recontextualised our data to re-explore the content in relation to Ahmed's (2007) conceptualisation of whiteness and began to see how Swedish whiteness was constructed and reproduced as something familiar or something seemingly far away.

### 4.4 Our Positioning in Relation to Whiteness and Swedishness

In the analytic process, we also used our own experiences of Swedishness and whiteness to locate and discuss silences and euphemisms and how they inform us about how the familiar and unfamiliar, the near and the far, are organised. Critical race scholar Bonilla-Silva (2015a) argues that all social locations of identity, including race, affect researchers in 'what they see and study and poses general limits on their ability to understand the world' (p. 76). For clarity, we explain our own positionings in this article and how these can influence and contribute to our interpretations. As researchers and individuals, we consider ourselves to be at the margins of Swedishness, our paraphrase of Garner's (2007) at the margins of whiteness. 'Whiteness at the margins', explains Garner (2007, p. 99), means having an intermediate position between belonging to and not belonging to a white collective. This in-between position becomes noticeable during the interviews, as we will see later in our findings, as the interviewees place the interviewer, Author 1, in different positions. From our experience, Swedishness or whiteness is a never-ending negotiation in a complex web of the socio-political, cultural, economic, and historical landscapes of society that cuts across individual and collective experiences of reality. Our own positions at the margins of whiteness or Swedishness are related to specific demographic phases in Swedish history, namely the eras of international adoptions and labour immigration (Lundström & Hübinette, 2022, p. 11).

Author 1 was adopted from South Korea in the 1980s and grew up in a small and predominantly white community in Sweden where the family had lived for at least three generations. For Author 1, Swedishness was within reach through the family's pedigree, their Swedish-sounding name, and language. Yet, because of the instability of race (see Ahmed, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2022), her position in relation to whiteness is not stable. Instead,

whether Author 1 is perceived to be Swedish is conditioned by context and people's perceptions of her. Author 2 was born in Sweden in the 1960s, just after her Finnish parents immigrated to a Swedish mining district. Despite learning to speak Swedish, she is, because of her non-Swedish names, perceived as foreign. As the immigration patterns have changed over time, she and other Finnish people have become considered more Swedish in other people's eyes.

By not seeing whiteness or Swedishness as self-evident but as a negotiation, our experiences of navigating the social geography of race in Sweden have helped us to notice how belonging and not belonging, inclusion and exclusion, are communicated, both explicitly and implicitly through euphemisms, silences, pauses, avoidances, and politeness. The purpose of positioning ourselves is not to centre ourselves or our experiences. Instead, in line with how Childers (2013) describes methodology in feminist research, we do this to allow a 'slip and slide against personal histories, ways of knowing, and the lived experiences' (p. 600) in our analysis of Swedish whiteness in SE.

## 5 Findings

In the following sections, we present our findings from the analysis of Swedish SE from the interviews and the biology textbooks thematically.

### 5.1 Here-ness, Openness, and the Familiar

If whiteness is a form of repetition and a style of embodiment, we find it crucial to locate the starting points from which 'the world unfolds' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 151). To do so, we identify remarks about familiarity in the textbooks and interviews. Nina has worked as a lower secondary biology teacher in different schools for the past six years. According to her, there are tensions between the values that Swedish schools teach in SE and other religious views and cultures. In her frustration over how to handle it, Nina describes how she at one point turned to the school's principal to get support. Rather than helping her to engage with the tension, as we have already mentioned in the introduction, the principal provided her with a clear message: 'You should just say that this is what Swedish schools teach, this is what you [the pupil] need to know.' Nina reflects on the response and explains that it is more complicated than the principal's simple answer. She says:

> It is hard to have a conversation about it, or it can be hard to talk about, or yes, you know what I mean?! In Sweden, we are supposed to be so politically correct…. What do we do when it is like this? We should not put any value in why they have different views, but more on how we do and what we can demand from them. What can we demand?! Now we are practical, and that is what is written in the curriculum. (Nina, teacher)

In the excerpt, Nina pinpoints the starting point from where the world unfolds for her. The tension between values and expectations also reveals that there is a distance between what seems to be familiar and what seems far away. In relation to her view, there is the undefined 'them' with different views that mark out the unfamiliar and far away. The familiar, on the other hand, is harder to talk about. To explain the familiar, she mentions a certain kind of political correctness. This statement can be connected to a particular form of colour blindness where racial and ethnic differences and inequalities are downplayed (Lundström

& Hübinette, 2022). Although we cannot know for sure exactly what Nina means by her statement, it provides an interesting insight into how familiarity is expressed. When Nina briefly turns to Author 1 (the interviewer) and says: 'You know what I mean', she assigns the interviewer, Author 1, to a position that is close to her own perception of the world. Together, they share an unmarked and unnamed status (see Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6) of the familiar, of here-ness, while the unfamiliar, from this point of view, appears as 'them', far away, who do not know how things work 'here' and have different values and views.

In the interviews, familiarity appears as glimpses of what is taken for granted. When Lena, a lower secondary biology teacher, reflects on whether there are ethical difficulties in teaching SE, she explains that there are no difficulties 'because we (she and her pupils) live in Sweden and are quite open'. For Lena, openness in SE smooths out differences. This is also mentioned in the other interviews. In these interviews, openness appears as a desirable condition where teachers and pupils have opportunities to address a vast range of topics in a profound way. Christian, an upper secondary biology teacher, describes how he has worked in different schools that are more, or less, open in relation to topics in SE. Despite variations in social climate, he describes how openness creates an opportunity for pupils to become engaged in the subject. He explains: 'Something happens there. We do something together, and their [the pupils'] interests are piqued. It is exciting, while my maths lessons rarely reach that level of [Christian laughs] interest and commitment.' Stella, a primary school teacher, describes how openness in SE is not only reserved for the pupils. Instead, it is also desired among the staff. During the interview, Stella describes how she and her colleagues' assumed openness got disturbed during an inventory exercise. Through their exercise, they, despite being a heterogeneous group of teachers, realised their own tendency to exclude a variety of representations in their classrooms.

Openness is a defining attribute of familiarity in the interviews, and openness here works to reproduce particular understandings of Nordic and Swedish exceptionalism (Habel, 2012; Martinsson, 2021). However, as Stella points out, openness does not necessarily lead to openness in practise. Instead, openness functions like a defining attribute of the familiar that sets the unfamiliar apart.

## 5.2 Objects Already in Place

In the previous section, we focused on descriptions of how the world unfolds into the familiar, and in this section, we pay more attention to how Nina and her principal were trying to resolve tensions by reaching out to objects that were already in place. While Nina reached out to the curriculum to find guidance, her principal grabbed on to a notion of how things are usually done in Swedish schools. In this section, we continue to explore how the interviewees and textbooks reproduce whiteness by reaching out to objects already in place.

In all five textbooks, Swedish legislation is portrayed as an important factor in guarding a variety of possibilities for pupils' future sexual lives. The textbooks describe, for example, how Sweden has 'abolished many laws that set boundaries' (Andréasson, 2011, p. 278), and that the law makes it possible for all, regardless of sexual orientation, to marry and to adopt children (Fabricius et al., 2013, p. 370). To describe how love and life are possible for homosexuals in Sweden, one of the textbooks uses no fewer than six different legal reforms and one reference to changes in the Church of Sweden's policy on marriages to do so (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012, p. 231). In the textbooks, the legal reforms are framed as 'happy stories' of sexual and reproductive rights ensuring sexual freedom. This taps into the trademark and self-image of Sweden and other Northern European countries as a

centre for sex-positive and liberal SE (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Zimmerman, 2015). In contrast to the 'happy stories' of legal rights in Sweden, legal norms far away seem to be less happy. For example, one textbook explains that '[i]n many countries, homosexuality is still banned. Homosexuals are persecuted and punished for their sexuality with long prison sentences, and in some countries, with death' (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012, p. 231). Another textbook states that '[f]or more than half of the women in the world, there is no free abortion, while free abortion is legal during the first 18 weeks in Sweden' (Andréasson, 2011, p. 283).

The textbooks in our analysis present Swedish legislation as something exceptional and unique, as an example to follow to ensure sexual and reproductive freedom. Martinsson (2021) argues that within a frame of exceptionalism, internal differences and conflicts become strategically smoothed out. In the textbooks, we notice that, despite accounting for historical developments in legislation, there are hardly any traces of political conflicts or struggles. Rather than informing pupils about how, for example, gender-neutral marriages have been key areas for gay civil rights processes worldwide (Andersson, 2017) or discussing that registered partnership was never equivalent to heterosexual marriage (Rydström, 2012), the textbooks reproduce a happy story of progression and coherence. Similar to openness, the happy story creates a sense of familiarity but also retells a particular history that has been forged over time. In the textbook's content, legislation ensures the happy story by being something already in place, something to grab on to.

This is also noticeable in our interviews. In the interviews, objects already in place, such as legislation, are described as tools to grab hold of to motivate actions within SE. Anton, who mainly works in the school's health services team but also has SE classes, describes how he uses legislation and policy to motivate SE when parents have concerns. He says: 'I think, sometimes, it can be connected to culture, [pause] background, [pause] religion'; however, 'We always lean on Swedish legislation, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and equal value for all'. For Anton, Swedish legislation and policies are something to lean on to motivate actions that might differ from parents' views on SE.

Using objects already in place is also something Robert describes. For the past 20 years, he has worked in various schools and at different levels. Robert describes how some pupils claim religious reasons for refusing to take part in SE. Robert emphasises that this is unusual, but when they do it, he supports their choice of refusing the compulsory SE. To motivate this, Robert explains:

> There is freedom of religion in this country… If they [the pupil] claim it [a religious claim], I will not oppose it. Then, what I think and feel about religion, no matter what religion it is, is not part of the question. (Robert, teacher)

For Robert, religious claims are protected by legislation that trumps the curriculum and his personal opinions on it. Although Anton and Robert make different choices regarding the pupils' participation or not in the compulsory SE, both justify their actions by reaching out to objects already in place. For the interviewees, these objects are also within their reach to motivate actions and provide clarity in ambiguous situations when they are trying to navigate parents and pupils with views that seem far away from the Swedish curriculum on SE. Objects already in place are also evident in the practise of teaching. Lena, a biology teacher in lower secondary, describes how she has encountered difficulties concerning female genital cutting and explains that:

> They They [the pupils] have not chosen [it] themselves, but on the other hand, they [the pupils] should know their rights, what applies in Sweden... It is important not to be too judgmental… but on the other hand, you [the pupil] must be able to describe what is happening, purely biologically, because otherwise it is difficult to take a stand for or against [female genital cutting]. But in Sweden, we are against [female genital cutting], and then you [the pupil] can explain why. [the pupils] have not chosen [it] themselves, but on the other hand, they [the pupils] should know their rights, what applies in Sweden.... It is important not to be too judgmental … but on the other hand, you [the pupil] must be able to describe what is happening, purely biologically, because otherwise it is difficult to take a stand for or against [female genital cutting]. But in Sweden we are against [female genital cutting], and then you [the pupil] can explain why. (Lena, teacher)

Although Lena is not explicit about the pupils' backgrounds, it seems as if female genital cutting and pupils experiencing it are remote from something that applies in Sweden; hence, female genital cutting is a practise representing something far away. To understand Lena's implicit remarks about the 'far awayness' of some of her pupils, Lundberg (2021) points out that '[t]alking about race whilst not utilising racial terminology is a hallmark of the liberal white' (p. 152). So, while avoiding racial terminology, race is still reproduced, but in the pupils' relation to female genital cutting, in which the pupils' awareness and knowledge are put in opposition to a Swedish stance and way of being. In the excerpt, Lena emphasises that it is important not to be judgmental towards the pupils when talking about the issue, but also stresses the importance of pupils gaining knowledge about it to become active and take a stand for or against female genital cutting so they become aware of their rights. However, while Lena is trying not to be too judgmental, she also adds personal responsibility to pupils experiencing female genital cutting. Lamb and Randazzo (2016) explain that this is part of a neoliberal discourse that promotes a hyper-individualised view in which personal responsibility is highly valued as 'each man or woman is responsible for his or her own destiny' (p. 163). Rather than providing tools to acknowledge structural inequalities and social conditions concerning female genital cuttings, Lena reaches out to the pure biological facts and legislation to provide knowledge about female genitals and genitals to give pupils the tools to become active agents in making an individual choice to be either for or against rather than being passive. Lena's emphasis on choice, biological facts, and legislation become objects that put Swedish whiteness within the pupils' reach; however, in doing so, Lena also reproduces the institutional lines of whiteness as the opportunities for choice are conditioned by what is considered to be Swedish and not.

In the findings, Swedish whiteness appears to be reproduced through an unreflective practise. In both the interviews and the textbooks, objects already in place, such as the curriculum, legislation, policy, and scientific knowledge, appear as rigid and neutral ways of approaching SE. However, according to Ahmed (2007), whiteness is reproduced by repeating a particular form of institutional behaviour that institutionalises a certain 'likeness', a familiarity through 'repetition of decisions made over time' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). Therefore, by claiming these objects of legislation and knowledge, or retelling the happy story of progressive Sweden, the interviewees and the textbooks reproduce Swedish whiteness as the taken-for-granted background in which anything else stands out as less familiar.

### 5.3 Conditions for What Bodies 'Can Do'

In the previous sections, we showed how the interviewees and textbooks reach objects that are already in place or extend themselves into a collective or institutionalised notion of us. Swedish whiteness becomes a matter of embodiment, in which motility is possible while remaining invisible. In this section, we focus on embodiments to understand what bodies can do, or seem to be able to do, and what stands out.

In the textbooks, love, romance, or sexual relations are mostly represented by young heterosexual or homosexual couples with white bodies. In the illustrations, we see glimpses of kisses, handholding, physical intimacy, nakedness, and marriage. However, we also see that love and relationships are not always easily achieved. Alongside the subheading '[r]ight to choose partner', there is an illustration of women demonstrating against child marriage in Bangladesh (Martens, 2018, p. 115), somewhere else, far away. It stands out and 're-confirms the whiteness of the space' (see Ahmed, 2007, p. 159), that is, the whiteness of the textbook's 'room', namely the SE content. This is also a reminder that freedom of love and relationships cannot be taken for granted but are something that has been achieved through what we earlier described as happy stories of legal progressions 'here', in Sweden.

Through the textbook content, pupils and teachers become familiar with some diverse possibilities for love and relationships. This is something that also occupies the interviewees. Lena describes how, during her classes, she consciously tries to use gender-neutral pronouns to describe couples to avoid exclusions and reproduce heterosexual norms. Lena says: 'After all, I have several pupils coming out as gay or bisexual, … therefore, I want to be inclusive and not exclusive so that everyone feels that they have a part in my teaching'. Using gender-neutral pronouns and addressing possibilities for various sorts of love and sexual relationships is also something Christian, Stella, and Nina do. In their experiences, SE provides an opportunity for all pupils to learn about the possibilities of finding love and starting a family, despite norms and cultures that might surround them in their everyday life. Thus, through SE, love and opportunities to reproduce in Sweden come within their reach.

In addition to possibilities of love and sexuality, there are also facts for pupils about how different contraceptives work and other consequences of having sex. Alongside facts about abortion, there is an illustration (Henriksson, 2010, p. 319) to show how it might feel afterwards, consisting of a young woman comforted by another woman of the same age, holding her arm around her. The caption explains that there are 30,000 abortions on a yearly basis in Sweden and that the woman can experience a feeling of emptiness and guilt afterwards. Therefore, it is rational that she might need someone to talk to and get support from her surroundings. On the topic of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and contraceptives, another textbook shows an illustration of an inflated condom in the hand of a young child, about 6 to10 years old, standing in a landscape in a seemingly foreign country. In the caption, the textbook states: 'Use a condom? Condoms, if used properly, can help reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. They also provide good protection against infection' (Martens, 2018, p. 113). The two textbooks are set out to treat similar topics in SE, but for some reason, the bodies orient differently in relation to whiteness. In the first picture, the woman's need for comfort and her friend's act of support present a roadmap to abortion in Sweden. Although it is not depicted as a political act, the picture and text mark a standpoint on abortions as an emotional yet non-religious choice for women in Sweden, regardless of their sexual past. In contrast, the child far away

with the inflated condom appears as someone unable to make proper use of the object in their hand. The image stands out and becomes hypervisible. The image of the irrational use of a condom, here as a misused and wasted contraceptive device, reproduces a rationality divide through its distance from progress and development (Ideland, 2018). Instead of harmonising Swedish norms, as in the first picture, the second picture comes to embody difference, something far away.

Ahmed (2007) describes a discourse of 'stranger danger' (p. 162), where threats and unpleasant phenomena are seen as something from outside, from somewhere else, from far away. In the textbook's descriptions, the far away takes on different shapes. For instance, there is a prevailing view of diseases as problems deriving from distant countries. The history of syphilis recounts how the infection was brought from America in 1493 by Columbus' crew (Martens, 2018, p. 108) and spread to Europe (Henriksson, 2010, p. 320). The textbooks also describe how AIDS spread from Africa to the USA (Henriksson, 2010, p. 321) and later to Thailand and Russia (Fabricius et al., 2013, p. 387). In the textbooks, there are illustrations showing one of the, until then, 14 million children in Africa who have lost their parents due to AIDS (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012, p. 241), HIV-infected children in Moscow, Russia (Andréasson, 2011, p. 290), and a world map of HIV infection with a caption stating that most people do not have access to treatment through antiretroviral drugs (Andréasson, 2011, p. 291). Through these examples, seemingly neutral facts about sexually transmitted diseases are repeatedly embodied by people far away.

In the context of female genital cutting, one of the textbooks uses a picture of a girl carrying a bucket on her head in a field somewhere in Africa (Henriksson, 2010, p. 311). Female genital cutting is thus positioned as something far away, somewhere else. However, this is not entirely the case in the interviews. Both Elsa and Lena describe how they have met pupils who have been subjected to female genital cutting. Elsa also remembers how one of her pupils realised how it had been carried out in his vicinity. During SE, he burst out, 'Aha! Now I get what they mean when they say they will remove the foreskin on girls, too.' For her, the pupil's reaction became one of those moments when she felt that she had reached a pupil and made a difference. By not placing a phenomenon solely elsewhere, but rather creating a sense of a shared space, she explains that it becomes possible for pupils to engage in SE. In education, bodies move and orient regardless of skin tone in relation to whiteness. However, in the textbooks, the motility and opportunities for embodiment are less vivid.

Ahmed (2007) argues that institutions can practise a non-performativity of empty signs or illusions that diversity has been achieved and completed. By including and showing diversity, it becomes a 'sign of an overcoming of institutional whiteness' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164): 'Look, you're here!'. In this 'sea of whiteness' (Vidal-Ortiz, 2021, p. 225) that is predominant in all five textbooks' SE chapters, there is at least one picture of a non-white body in each book. There are also some illustrations that are drawn, allowing for almost unlimited variety and diversity compared with photographs. In a multiple-choice task, there is a drawing of five pupils, one of whom is non-white (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012, p. 251). In a drawing illustrating development during puberty (Fabricius et al., 2013, p. 376), there are four naked pairs of girls and boys, in which all the girls are white while the boys have darker skin tones. However, despite the potential for various possibilities, all drawings of genitals and penis-in-vagina intercourse consist of only white or slightly pink bodies. Here, in line with Ahmed's (2007) 'institutional overcoming', we want to draw attention to the risk that the few inclusions of non-whites may constitute 'empty signs' of achieved diversity.

While there are some attempts to mirror the diversity of society today, problems are repeatedly embodied by bodies far away. When one of the textbooks covers prostitution and trafficking, it states that '[i]n Sweden it is punishable to purchase sexual services, but in other countries prostitution takes place more openly' (Kukka & Sundberg, 2012, p. 243). It is explained that in prostitution and trafficking, mostly women, but also men and children, are forced to sell their bodies, both within and across national borders, because of poverty, drug abuse, sexual assault, or social exclusion. On the same topic, another textbook describes how '[y]oung people from other countries are lured to Sweden with promises of ordinary jobs' (Fabricius et al., 2013, p. 381). Little is said in the textbooks about what forces lie behind international human trafficking. Instead, the focus is placed elsewhere. Problems are often associated in the textbooks with non-white bodies, giving the impression that these issues are outmoded, inadequate, and far away, while opportunities are embodied through Swedish whiteness, in which opportunities for love and family are embedded in a happy story of exceptional progress.

## 5.4 Beyond Body—a Landscape of Whiteness

To illustrate how Swedish whiteness goes beyond skin and conditions bodies, we learn from one of our interviewees, Karim. He has 20 years of work experience within SE and describes during the interview how he has faced racism and navigated between a sense of Swedishness and non-Swedishness at school. In Swedish SE, norm-critical pedagogy is part of the work to examine norms around the body, sexuality, and relationships, and in discussions about, for example, gender equality and discrimination (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Bredström et al., 2018). Karim has a norm-conscious perspective in his teaching and adds that it is something he has also developed in other parts of his life. Over the years, he has acquired skills in navigating various social environments by decoding how he 'appears' in relation to a given 'room'. He explains that each room has different 'rules', and depending on the 'room' and its 'rules', he can adjust himself. Although he is not always aware that he is decoding 'the room', he nevertheless feels that he has this knowledge of how different rooms work and how he 'fits in'.

During the interview, Karim gives an example of navigating 'rooms' by telling a story related to SE content from the teachers' lounge. During a break, one of the teachers asked a colleague, here called Nadia, whether it went well with her divorce, gently referring to Nadia's Muslim background. Karim recalls how Nadia responded in a bold tone and replied that her brothers would never dare say anything about the divorce or decide for her. She had simply told her brothers that if they or anyone else tried to decide for her, they could stop considering her their sister or daughter. The other teachers were surprised by Nadia's bold response and wondered if she might be punished because of Muslim honorary culture. According to Karim, their colleagues could not understand how Nadia's divorce was unproblematic, since that went against a Swedish perception of Muslim women, relationships, and honorary culture. However, Karim immediately understood what it was about and therefore asked Nadia further questions. In the interview, Karim re-enacts the conversation as follows:

> Karim: Your father, he is not alive anymore, is he?
> In Nadia's voice: No, my father passed away, but my mother is alive, and I have a bunch of older brothers.

> [Karim pauses the re-enactment and turns to the interviewer, Author 2, and says]: You get honour now, how it works, who will take on the responsibility. [A2 nods and Karim continues.]
> Karim: But you are the youngest one?
> In Nadia's voice: Yes.
> Karim: Then you must have been the favourite.
> In Nadia's voice: Well, yes, I was always the favourite.
> Karim: Ah, then, I get it. You go above the hierarchy and skip the honour part because you are the favourite, and then you can do as you please, but your brothers, they have to follow the honorary codes…

At first glance, Karim's story about Nadia may seem out of place, but when interpreted in terms of whiteness, a web of racial relations is revealed. When Karim addresses how he has faced racism and navigated between a sense of Swedishness and non-Swedishness, his experiences reflect what Frankenberg (1993) calls a 'social geography of race' where people, or Karim in this case, find themselves in systems of dominance and power. In this system, the dominance of whiteness remains unmarked and unnamed while other racial categories are revealed and named. Having experiences of navigating between Swedishness and non-Swedishness and being on the receiving end of racism is a cruel reminder of occupying an unprivileged position in a racial system.

Karim's experiences of navigating different spaces can also be understood as his encountering the institutional lines within organisations (Ahmed, 2007). According to Ahmed (2007), institutional lines provide relative markers of taken-for-granted ways of being within an institution. By staying within these lines, it is possible to sink into the background and smoothly fit into the institution, whereas crossing the lines brings full exposure to something or somebody because they will stand out—become hypervisible—against the taken-for granted backdrop. When Karim provides his story about Nadia and his navigation of a racial geography, he exposes the school's institutional lines and demonstrates that his professional experience cannot be separated from experiences within a system of race. In Karim's story, the Swedish perception of relationships and divorce appears as an invisible background and a taken-for-granted outpost. Without explicitly mentioning it, the colleague's gentle question to Nadia about divorce, relationships, and honour pins down how divorce for Muslim women is imagined as problematic and in contrast to a perception of a smooth, easy, familiar, unnamed Swedish way of dealing with divorce. The unexpected response from Nadia leads to her becoming hypervisible: first in relation to her colleagues' image of her as a Muslim divorcee and second by standing out as the exception to an imagined rule about problems associated with Muslim honour culture. Nadia's deviation from the institutional lines exposes how the casual talk among teachers reproduces Swedish perceptions of Muslim honorary culture as something imagined to be 'far away', while it happens 'here', on Swedish soil. According to Ahmed (2007), whiteness materialises beyond bodily attributes in a form of repetition and style of embodiment, so when Muslim honorary culture appears as something 'far away', it also reproduces the familiarity of Swedishness. Karim also becomes hypervisible as he deviates from the institutional lines. Through exposing his close acquaintance with honorary culture, he breaks with the style of embodiment within the institution. As long as he stays silent, he appears to share his colleagues' perception of honorary culture. However, in the interview, Karim exemplifies how he was able to reveal 'the whiteness of the room' of their workplace.

Considering Ahmed's theory of whiteness, Karim's account can be seen as an experience of the institutional lines of the workplace and school. When Nadia's divorce deviated

from the already 'trodden' lines, notions of Muslim relationships became visible. Thus, by crossing the institutional boundaries of whiteness, bodies and experiences will represent something foreign and thereby reveal or unmask Swedishness. In relation to the latest curriculum, Karim's story seems even more important because honour culture has been added to the teaching content within SE (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2022). According to a quality review of Swedish schools' SE, many teachers state that they feel uncertain about how to handle issues related to honour (Skolinspektionen [Swedish Schools Inspectorate], 2018, p. 32). Regardless of how teachers feel about their competence regarding honour culture within SE, Karim's story provides an example that education does not take place in an 'empty' space. Instead, it is influenced by how particular ways of being and thinking are promoted, where certain experiences will fit in while others will be perceived as foreign and thus not belong to more familiar forms of Swedishness.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

To summarise, drawing on critical race theory and utilising Ahmed's phenomenological conception of whiteness, this article provides an understanding of how Swedish whiteness is constructed and reproduced through a fluid and context-bound racial landscape and orients objects and people so that some seem familiar and 'near', while others appear to be less familiar and 'far away'. In our findings, we show how Swedish whiteness is constructed as familiarity, in which 'here-ness' becomes a taken-for-granted starting point where 'here' is the place for progression, openness, and the possibilities of happy future sexual lives. From this outpost, biology textbooks and teachers reproduce 'happy stories' of Swedish exceptionalism by promoting openness, gender equality, love, and sexuality and navigate the racial landscape of SE by reaching to objects, such as legislation, policies, and biological facts, to justify orientation towards the familiar while simultaneously preventing change. In this construction, stories about 'this happy place' become a background against which other places come to stand out and appear as hypervisible examples of the less familiar and less happy, belonging to something 'far away'. Although the happy and positive messages in Swedish SE may stem from good intentions, our findings show that turning a colourblind eye to racial hierarchies and emphasising the 'happy stories' of, for example, gay rights, free abortion, and gender equality contributes to reproducing Swedish whiteness and reinforcing racialised misconceptions and Swedish exceptionalism.

As we have explored Swedish whiteness, we have found it to reproduce as a form of institutionalised orientation that is constructed by intertwining norms, social values, people, and objects such as subject knowledge, policy, and legislation in a complex web. This web situates SE, teachers, and pupils in a racial landscape that constructs and reproduces particular understandings of Swedish whiteness by assigning each and every one a position in relation to familiarity. The insight that institutions such as schools organise and reproduce race relations is not new, but this article contributes to the literature on critical race theory, education, and SE by showing how Swedish whiteness operates as "an ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150). Although our study is situated in Sweden, we believe that the findings can be useful in analysing other contexts, as they reveal the unreflectiveness of a system of race as both planned and unplanned aspects of education tend to reproduce racial relations through stories that reinforce what is already in place and its exceptionalism in relation to the world.

With that said, we specifically remind the reader that while whiteness can be a powerful phenomenon, it is not stable; race and categories change over time (see Bonilla-Silva, 2022, p. 21). Since whiteness, regardless of its form, is reproduced through repetition, we urge everyone to remember that patterns can be altered. Bonilla-Silva (2022) argues that racial systems are unaware embodiments in which reproduction of domination is fundamentally made possible and maintained by inactions, in which 'neutrality in the face of systemic inequality amounts to supporting the status quo' (p. 20). So, to produce change, or, as Lundström and Hübinette (2022) put it, 'the urgent need to once and for all break with the prevailing colour blindness in Sweden and in the Swedish education system' (p. 194). Similar to Lundström and Hübinette (2022), we too urge a change away from colour blindness as it cannot address the complexities of any racial system. As we have shown whiteness and Swedish exceptionalism to reproduce in SE, we also urge teachers and textbook producers to think about whiteness and whether racial representations can provide a pedagogic resource to explore the instability of race. Even if norm-critical pedagogy, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism can backfire (see Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020), these pedagogic interventions can serve to open up conversations in the classroom to address race and problematise racial hierarchies. Whether promising or not, as educational researchers, we hope that by showing how SE sometimes gets stuck in orientations towards forms of 'here-ness', we, in line with Ahmed (2007), will remind ourselves and others to keep the possibility of new habits and changes open.

> What passes through history is not only the work done by generations, but the 'sedimentation' of the work is the condition of arrival for future generations. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 41)

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