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Whatever Happened to the Black Swedes?

Ola Larsmo's *Maroonberget*

ABSTRACT This article examines how historical fiction can impact a nation's narrative of itself, and hence, issues of national identity. Ola Larsmo's *Maroonberget* (1996) presents a story that challenges the narrative of Swedish homogeneity by tracing a history of black Swedes back to the 1700s. The novel undermines binary oppositions such as white/black and Swede/Immigrant by positing a model of hybridity. The reception of the novel in the Swedish press is examined in order to gauge the reactions to Larsmo's novel in the contemporary cultural debate.

KEYWORDS Ola Larsmo, *Maroonberget*, Badin, historical fiction, national identity, racism, multiculturalism, hybridity, Swedish literature

Groups, including nations, constitute themselves by agreeing on a common narrative of emergence. Benedict Anderson notes in *Imagined Communities* that even though the concept of nations is just over two centuries old, modern nations still perceive of themselves as ancient (Andersson 2006: 11). National histories, or narratives of national identity, in most cases can require some deliberate amnesia (Anderson 2006: 204). For example, Britain claims William the Conqueror as a founding father, but generally the detail that he spoke French is passed over. What is left out of such histories can be as significant as what is left in, and the reasons behind such omissions are a fruitful area for analysis and speculation. Nations appeal to the past for legitimacy and to determine who they are in the present. The first lines of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address make this exact rhetorical move: "Four score and seven years ago,

our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation: conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Because Lincoln's nation was defined at the outset as dedicated to liberty and equality, the war against the South becomes necessary in order to maintain the nation's historical identity. This is a clear case of a narrative of the past being invoked in order to legitimate a current course of political action. Who nations imagine they were in the past can affect how they behave in the present, so such narratives are unavoidably political.

National narratives are under constant negotiation. In *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986), David Carr has described this process, noting that settling on a historical narrative is not merely a matter of straightforward historical truth, but also persuasiveness: "Such narratives are advanced as part of the project of community-building and their validity is ultimately a question of whether their advocates succeed in persuading others to join in the community they project" (Carr 1986: 151, n. 31). Carr leaves us to imagine that it is politicians, lawmakers, and possibly historians who do most of the negotiating about the national narrative. This article examines the historical negotiations that go on in the popular media of novels and newspapers, and argues, in part, that such sources may be even more significant than the work of professional historians, geographers, and sociologists in shaping a nation's image of itself. Novels, as well as other forms of popular entertainment such as television and film, reach a broader audience and, as Väinö Linna (1987: 387) has noted, most people get their history from such sources and few read the work of professional historians. From this perspective, the sense of history in a novel is not merely decoration, but potentially a source of cultural self-understanding that can have political consequences. Benedict Andersen (2006: 24–25) credited the novels and the newspapers of the eighteenth century with a form of imagining that made the very concept of nation possible.

In 1996, two novels appeared that featured the historical figure of Badin, a black man raised together with Gustaf III: Ola Larsmo's *Maroonberget* ['Maroon Mountain'] and Ylva Eggehorn's *En av dessa timmar* ['One of These Hours']. This synchronicity might be thought to be a response to the sensitive racial climate in Sweden during the mid-1990s. Although this can be said of Larsmo's book, it is a more difficult argument to make in terms of Eggehorn's novel. Eggehorn's book portrays Badin as a free spirit, irresistibly attractive to all the women he meets. Many reviewers treated the book kindly, but some registered reservations, calling it "chic salon pornography" ['chic salongspornografi'] and "vivid novel writing with physical love and stiffening nipples" ['mustig romankonst med fysisk kärlek och styvnade bröstvårtor'] (Mehrens 1996: 18, Karlsson 1996: 11). Stefan Eklund (1986: 5)

expressed his irritation with the book, and Gun Zanton-Ericsson advanced the specific criticism: “It seems that she is building upon well-known prejudices about the sexual attraction of black men” [‘Man kan tycka att hon bygger på välkända fördomar om den svarte mannens dragningskraft’] (Zanton-Ericsson 1996: A4). This last sentiment is resoundingly seconded by Allan Pred in his book, *The Past is not Dead. Facts, Fictions, and Enduring Racial Stereotypes* (2004). Pred was prompted to write his book when he learned of the publication of both Larsmo and Eggehorn’s novels during his research for his book on racism in Sweden, *Even in Sweden* (2000). He notes that Eggehorn has bought into the stereotype of the hypersexuality of black Africans. This may have been done in all “innocence,” since the portrait of Badin is generally positive, but it unleashes the following diatribe from Pred:

[Eggehorn does this] at a time when (largely unreflected) cultural racism is rampant toward blacks and non-Europeans more generally; at a time when skin pigment, hair color, and other bodily markers are commonly translated into highly charged cultural markers; at a time when entire groups are racialized as a consequence of outward biological difference being automatically (con)fused with stereotyped cultural difference. And at a time when negative stereotyping of the Other has led to widespread racist effects, to marginalization and exclusion, to underclassification and de facto social apartheid, to levels of labor-market discrimination and residential segregation that are matched by few other industrial countries; at a time when culture is repeatedly essentialized in political and mass media discourses as well as in everyday conversation; at a time when it frequently goes without saying that culture is immutable, that it is passed on from generation to generation regardless of setting (thereby ideologically meaning that a person of color or Islamic belief can never become a “real Swede,” never become fully modern, even if born in Sweden) (Pred 2000: 55).

Part of Pred’s point is that Eggehorn’s reinforcement of racial stereotypes in her novel is at best shockingly naïve, at worst socially irresponsible, since it contributes to an already poor racial climate. Novels matter.

Ola Larsmo’s novel, *Maroonberget*, in contrast, garners more approval from Pred, who characterizes it as “moving, tightly conceived, and superbly structured” (Pred 2000: 61). Pred’s focus in his book is examining the fictional re-workings of Badin’s story over the years with an eye to uncovering the “real” story by pointing out the distortions that inevitably insert themselves into any retelling and connecting them with prevalent racial stereotypes. This essay examines *Maroonberget* as a piece of historical fiction that, as a deliberate political gesture, puts forward a new national narrative for Sweden. After this new narrative and its implications are described and

analyzed, Larsmo's literary strategies for getting his message across will be examined. Larsmo's novel quite logically provoked a discussion in the Swedish press in 1996, and an analysis of *Maroonberget's* reception exposes some intriguing cultural assumptions and sheds some light on how prepared some reviewers were to accept Larsmo's imagined community and the challenge he poses to perhaps unexamined notions of Swedishness.

A good example of the narrative Larsmo seeks to challenge can be found in Marquis W. Childs' *Sweden the Middle Way*, a book about the formation of Sweden's Welfare State that first came out in 1936, although the quote that follows is from the 1947 edition. In the introduction, Childs writes:

A homogenous people, with no racial conflicts, both the Swedes and the Norwegians are deeply rooted in ancient culture. In this atmosphere social and economic forms have evolved with far less conflict than in the rest of the world. That is the essence of the Swedish story: there has been an opportunity for evolution. This evolution has occurred through the process of compromise and adjustment. Here, too, perhaps temperament, history, tradition help to explain why it has been possible (Childs 1947: xi).

According to this narrative, Swedes share the same race, temperament, traditions, and history all the way back to ancient times. The Sami are at least one obvious victim of the amnesia required to support this particular narrative. Despite its flaws, this idea of a blond-haired, blue-eyed, homogenous Sweden has been a dominant image throughout most of the twentieth century.

This idea of a unified and homogenous Sweden carried the country through some significant political changes. Sweden was able to create its successful *Folkhem* during the 1930s, in part because of the idea that everyone in the nation lived in the same home, a notion which conjures up the idea of a family. It was acceptable for resources to be used to support members of this extended family, because everyone was related. Thus, Social Democratic politicians could argue for extensive social services and that high taxes were simply the price one paid so that everyone could enjoy a certain standard of living, free from poverty. During the last half of the twentieth century, the face of Sweden began to visibly change as immigrants entered the country to find work or to escape intolerable political situations at home. Immigrants, especially those who look different from the standard image, can be easily identified as outsiders, a threat to the reputed homogeneity of Sweden and not as clearly entitled to its resources. Inevitably, this creates ground for conflict.

In recent years, it has become common in Sweden to refer to the "myth

of homogeneity,” a phrase which labels the narrative of a historically homogenous Sweden as false. Maja Hagerman has traced the roots of this myth in her book *Det rena landet. Om konsten att uppfinna sina förfäder* [‘The Pure Country. On the Art of Inventing One’s Ancestors’] (2006), from a reference in Tacitus through nineteenth-century romanticism culminating in the Institute for Racial Biology, founded in 1922 and active into the 1960s. Hagerman ends her book with something of a plea:

The old narrative needs to be seriously reevaluated. But this is a real challenge in an age when a blossoming interest in history goes hand in hand with so much forgetfulness and unreflectiveness. And when the power of the historical narrative is constantly underestimated. It is therefore my absolutely firm belief that if we do not tell a new story, we only have the old one left.

[‘Den gamla berättelsen behöver omprövas på allvar. Men det är en verklig utmaning i en tid när blomstrande historieintresse går hand i hand med så mycket glömska och aningslöshet. Och när kraften i den historiska berättelsen ständigt undervärderas. Det är nämligen min alldeles bestämda tro att om man inte berättar en ny historia så har man bara den gamla.’] (Hagerman 2006: 421.)

Ten years previous to this plea, Ola Larsmo tried to imagine a new narrative in *Maroonberget*, suggesting that Sweden has been racially diverse for centuries.

Ola Larsmo’s novel *Maroonberget* contains two temporal levels. One level is set in the 1700s and follows the life of Fredrik Adolf Ludvig Gustaf Albrecht Couschi, known as Badin (1747?–1822). Badin was born a slave and, when he was quite young, he was brought from the Danish West Indies as gift for Queen Lovisa Ulrika. This temporal level of the novel takes a first-person perspective and follows Badin from his arrival as a small child at the Swedish court in the late 1750s to his life as an adult in Sweden. The narrative fiction is that Badin is telling his story to a monkey in a cage, another outsider from warmer climes, who has demanded it of him. Badin has spent the night drinking and playing chess with The Poet (undoubtedly Bellman) and tells his story through the early hours of dawn.

Badin’s first memory is white: Snow falling as his ship passes Gibraltar. Gibraltar lies between Europe and Africa, a signpost of the transition the young child is about to make. Queen Lovisa Ulrika initially decides to conduct an experiment and allows Badin to be raised according to Rousseau’s educational precepts, so that he may become a true child of nature. Badin merely becomes a disruptive, undisciplined child and eventually comes to share an education with Crown Prince Gustaf and his brothers. Badin finds

his niche in the royal court as the eyes and ears of the dowager queen. He creates a successful life for himself, complete with friends and a wife. His appearance certainly sets him apart in a crowd, but he becomes accustomed to people's reactions to him. On the two occasions that Badin meets other people of colour, one man and one woman, there is no particular connection established, since he is so vastly different from these two individuals in terms of temperament and life experience.

The other temporal level of the novel is set in contemporary Sweden. The first-person narrator in this case is Jimmy, a man whose mother is Swedish and whose father was an American from the Vietnam era. It is one of the subtleties of Larsmo's novel that Jimmy almost never thinks of himself as black, but the reader comes to understand this from the way Jimmy is treated by those around him. On one occasion, Jimmy's car slides off the road and a motorist slows down to ask if he needs help: "He had already pressed the button to roll down the window when he looked away from the road, in my direction, *saw* me: His mouth has half-open, in the process of asking a question" ['Han hade redan tryckt på knappen för att hissa ned sidorutan när han såg bort från vägen, åt mitt håll till, *såg* mig: munnen var halvöppen, på väg att formulera en fråga' (original emphasis).] Instead of stopping, the man drives on: "That quite familiar rage burst forth..." ['Den välbekanta vreden dök fram...'] (Larsmo 1996a: 33). Evidently, this is not the first time such a thing has happened. Early in the novel, Jimmy must fend off an attack by a skinhead in the subway. The episode illustrates how Jimmy cannot feel safe in Stockholm, his hometown, because there are those who would do him harm because of how he looks. In self-defense, Jimmy uses his camera as a weapon, strikes his attacker on the temple, and steps onto the newly arrived subway car to make his escape. This act of violence haunts Jimmy for the rest of the novel: the skinhead appears as a quiet specter, not really there, at odd moments in the narrative. The trauma of committing a violent act affects Jimmy as it might any Swede unaccustomed to violence.

When we meet Jimmy, he has just experienced a series of personal crises. His mother, who was apparently a drug-addict, has just died of cancer. While Jimmy cared for her during her last months, his marriage to Liz fell apart. Jimmy shares custody of their small son, Theo, with whom he has difficulty maintaining a close relationship. In the midst of these personal crises, Jimmy spots a statue of a black man, covered with snow, in a park. Curious, he begins to investigate the background of the statue, and his research leads him to Badin. Jimmy is a Swede, born in Sweden, speaking Swedish and with no other cultural identity, yet he is treated as an outsider. Finding Badin and other black Swedes from the same era gives him a sense of history and belonging. Black Swedes have a history that goes back hundreds of years.

The narrative swings back and forth between the two temporal levels and uncanny parallels evolve between the two characters. The death of the dowager queen and her awkward meeting with Gustaf III's son and heir on her deathbed is echoed by the death of Jimmy's own mother and a hastily arranged meeting with Theo before her death. Jimmy's search for Badin provides him with a story that includes him as part of the Swedish narrative. Similarly, Badin searches for his antecedents and discovers that his name *Couschi*, the only scrap he retains from his early childhood, stems from the Old Testament: "I know my origins: I am son of Chuso, the King of Ethiopia, the Lion of Juda. In my beginning is my end" ["Jag känner min härkomst: jag är son av Chuso, Etiopernas Konung, Lejonet av Juda. I min början är mitt slut"] (Larsmo 1996a: 280)². This narrative connecting him with the past also provides Badin with a sense of identity and self-confidence.

There are a few occasions when the reader experiences a slight confusion regarding which narrator has taken over for the moment. For example, one passage begins: "The metal of the seventeenth-century canon burned my palm; I quickly drew back my fingers" ["Sextonhundratalskanonens metall brände mot handflatan; jag drog snabbt åt mig fingrarna"] (Larsmo 1996a: 227). It is not until the fourth paragraph and a reference to tourists and melting ice cream that the reader is able to locate themselves in time and place: Jimmy has driven out to Gripsholm castle in order to see the portrait of Badin there. These echoes, as well as this blurring of the first-person identity help Larsmo weave together the important connections between personal and national presents and pasts.

That famous portrait by Gustaf Lundberg shows Badin elaborately dressed, in the company of a chessboard, holding a white knight. Joachim Schiedermaier has written a detailed study of the relationship between Larsmo's novel and Lundberg's portrait, pointing especially to the recurring theme of black and white (Schiedermaier 2002: 105, 112–113). The chessboard is a traditional symbol of political strategy, and Badin's role at court seems to be alluded to by the piece he holds. He was a knight in the service of the queen. Of course, chessboards are also traditionally made up of two colours: black and white. These two colours run as a leitmotif throughout the novel. The statue of the black man is covered in white snow. The chessboard upon which Badin has played with The Poet is black and white. The Poet played black, while Badin played white. The colours are easily reversed; one must simply know what role, what side to play. Jimmy is a professional photographer, and his photo negatives invert that which is black and that which is white. One might add to Schiedermaier's list the monkey listening to Badin, who is both black and white, and even the bark of the emblematic Swedish birch, presented as black and white.

The black and white theme is also established in Jimmy's first scene in the novel, which takes place at the zoo, where the caged animals echo the plight of Badin's monkey-confidante on the other temporal level. Jimmy enjoys an optical illusion as he gazes at a tiger: "Two tigers, both present in the same place, if I moved my head a centimetre in one direction, the bars would show me a completely white tiger: a little in the other direction and there was a black one. *A Swedish tiger*" ["Två tigrar, bägge samtidigt närvarande på samma plats; flyttade jag huvudet någon centimeter åt ena hållet skulle gallret visa mig en helvit hanne: en bit åt andra hållet en helsvart. *En svensk tiger*"] (Larsmo 1996a: 13, original emphasis). Because of its stripes, if the bars block one color or the other, the tiger seems white or black. The tiger is both simultaneously. Jimmy extrapolates that so are Swedes: both black and white, not just homogenous. Of course, black and white tigers are not all that common outside the menagerie of Sigfried and Roy, but it was apparently important to Larsmo to yet again underline the theme of black and white.

The phrase, "a Swedish tiger" ['en svensk tiger'], invokes further associations. During World War II, there was a propaganda campaign run by the Swedish government depicting a blue and yellow tiger with the rubric "en svensk tiger." The phrase is a clever pun which means both "a Swedish tiger" and "a Swede remains silent." This was meant to discourage Swedes from speaking, especially to foreigners, about anything that might harm the strained neutrality of Sweden. It is perhaps significant that Jonas Hassen Khemiri uses the same phrase in his novel *Montecore. En unik tiger* ['Montecore. A Unique Tiger'] (2006) where it is similarly an emblem of divided identity and an admonition to remain silent about any topic that might embarrass the Swedes. Jimmy is Swedish, but wearied and saddened that many Swedes cannot accept him as such. He is caught in a paradox: as a Swede he cannot criticize Swedes for perceived racist behaviour, so he remains silent. The phrase "en svensk tiger" also alludes to the silencing of the history of people of colour in Sweden, resulting in cultural amnesia.

The play of black and white further alludes to the slave trade: "It was all very simple, a matter of just two things: black was transported in one direction, white came back" ['Det hela var mycket enkelt, handlade endast om två saker: svart förs i ena riktningen, vitt kommer tillbaka'] (Larsmo 1996a: 176, see also Schiedermaier 2002: 113). Black slaves are taken to the Danish Virgin Islands: St. Tomas, St. Croix, and St. Jan. White sugar is brought back to Scandinavia. The novel hints that the marriage of Gustaf III to a Danish princess was part of a strategy to keep the sugar flowing: "One alliance among others: people are moved here and there, backwards and forwards, from square to square" ['En förbindelse bland andra: människor flyttas hit

och dit, fram och tillbaka, från ruta till ruta'] (Larsmo 1996a: 176). The white queen is used in the political chess game as well as the black pawns. Economic interests and political expediency move people from place to place and that is how a black man ends up in Sweden. In the final pages of the novel, Larsmo imagines the story that sent Badin upon his journey to Sweden, something Badin does not remember himself. His father, Andriz, is a slave and becomes involved in the murder of one of the slave bosses on the plantation, and facing certain death, urges Von Pröck to take his son with him on his return voyage to Europe. The point is, perhaps, to make note of what compels people to relocate to other nations. Andriz did not ask to be brought as a slave to the Danish West Indies and sends his son somewhere, anywhere, to escape the same intolerable fate.

By invoking Sweden's involvement with the sugar and slave trades, Larsmo acknowledges his nation's participation in the colonial enterprises of the 1700s that created enormous dislocations of people and cultures that keenly affect world politics to the present day. Even if England, Spain, France, and Portugal receive the lion's share of attention in current post-colonial discussions, Sweden was also a colonial power. Many of the most recent waves of immigrants to Sweden have been displaced because of conflicts resulting from the legacy of colonialism. Vietnam was one such conflict, so Jimmy is the offspring of several levels of colonial displacement. Presumably, Jimmy's father's ancestor was an African brought to the United States as a slave. Centuries later, Jimmy's father refuses to fight in a war in a former French colony and ends up in Sweden, which offered asylum to American draft evaders. Larsmo raises the issue of Sweden's colonial past in order to suggest that the country is not somehow specially exempt from the conditions of heterogeneity, cultural interchange, and diversity which have become the signature of modern postcolonial society.

Larsmo ties up the various temporal threads of his novel by exploring the historical rumor that Gustaf III's sister, Princess Sophia Albertina, gave birth to a son fathered by Badin. The birth takes place in all secrecy and the child is fostered into a family named, rather transparently, Swart ['Black']. Badin himself only once catches a glimpse of the boy. Jimmy is put on the track of this missing heir by a note, literally scribbled in the margins of history, in a book shown to him at Gripsholm. He makes contact with an elderly lady named Swartgren ['Black branch'], who has kept the family records. It appears that most of Swart's descendents moved north to Bjuråker parish, the same area Jimmy's mother is from. Moreover, Jimmy's blond wife, Liz, had a paternal grandmother by the name of Swart. That would make Jimmy's son, Theo, a descendent of the Swedish royal house and of Badin through his mother's side. Thus, present meets past: the Swed-

ish tiger that is both black and white and a silenced link to the past.

Instead of a narrative that reinforces prevalent binary oppositions, such as White/Black, Swede/Immigrant, Insider/Outsider, Larsmo points to a hybrid solution: We *are* They and They *are* We. This is a move in line with recent directions in postcolonial theory. As Amy Elias explains:

Rather than taking as its aim the revelation of power relations between colonizer and colonized (or patriarchy and woman, or Self and Other) and the theorization of values inherent in that political and ideological relation, much recent postcolonial culture theory and feminist theory identifies the hybrid character of the national state or the androcentric or heterosexist standard that wants to position and imagine itself as coherent, whole, or pure (Elias 2001: 200).

Binary oppositions tend to reinforce themselves. The proposition of hybridity breaks the cycle and disrupts the implied power hierarchy. Hybridity poses the charged question of why racial purity, or homogeneity, is desirable.³

Larsmo might not have entirely trusted the interpretive skills of his readers, and so he felt the necessity of clarifying the point of *Maroonberget* extra-textually. He was so deliberate about his project of revising Sweden's narrative to include people of colour that he wrote about his intentions in an article in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* ['Bonnie's Literary Magazine'] where he explicitly states that he was working to debunk the, in his view, fictional narrative about Sweden that Sweden is "the long, narrow and poor, but oh-so-diligent realm of the tow-headed" ['lintottarnas långsmala och fattiga men ack så strävsamma rike'] (Larsmo 1996b: 5). Larsmo, unavoidably, turns to history itself to provide him with the tools to create a competing narrative. During his research for the book, Larsmo found that there was "a blue man" ['en blå man'] in the army of Gustav Wasa, and a black nun named *Walska* in Vadstena during the fourteenth century (Larsmo 1996b: 5). He further points out that the majority of the Swedish army during the Thirty Years War was not Swedish, yet returned to Sweden when their service was done. They have disappeared from history, except for a trace of a Scottish tartan in a folk costume from Särna. Moreover, Larsmo found records of well over a hundred blacks living in Sweden at the time of Badin. He notes that often when one mentions Badin, he is characterized as the first black in Sweden, and claims that "[t]his statement says more about Sweden's self-image and mentality than it does about historical fact" ['[u]ttalandet säger mer om svensk självsyn och mentalitet än vad den gör om historiska fakta'] (Larsmo 1996b: 5). Larsmo alludes to the entrenched notion that Swedes have been racially homogenous throughout time, which has erased these individuals from history.

Since Larsmo's novel constitutes a challenge to a widely held narrative of Swedish homogeneity, it is illuminating to follow the reception of the novel in the Swedish press at the time of its release. Although the reviewers are all astute and observant literary critics, a few remain unaware of the implications of their discourse. Larsmo's novel was generally well received, though some critics liked it better than did others. The reviewers Bibi Friedrichsen, Lennart Bromander, and Pär Hellström state that they prefer the parts of the novel that deal with Badin to the story of Jimmy (Friedrichsen 1996: 16, Bromander 1996: S2, p. 4, Hellström 1996: 18). Pär Hellström is the only one who hints why this might be so: "the contemporary portion is a little more tired and more familiar" ['nutidspartiet är lite tröttare och mer välbekant'] (Hellström 1996: 18). This is a matter of taste, but there may be more at play here than a difference of aesthetic judgments. Hellström appears fatigued by the part of the novel that brings up issues that he can read about in the newspaper every day. One might infer that Badin's story has receded far enough into the past so that one does not need to extrapolate any moral lessons into the present and can simply enjoy the illusion of being a tourist in history. The contemporary level of the story interferes with this method of reading the book. The past becomes the present.

Many more reviewers embraced the opportunity to talk about Sweden's problems with racism. Dan Jönsson writes: "The racism of today naturally has its roots in a long history of disdain" ['Rasismen av idag har naturligtvis sin botten i en lång föraktets historia'] (Jönsson 1996: 4). Jönsson suggests here that Sweden has a long history of hostility towards outsiders; however, this does not seem to be Larsmo's point in the novel. The racism in the Sweden of Badin's day is more a curiosity about difference than it is hostility. Badin is not despised, even if he seems unusual to the court. Badin is occasionally treated rudely, as when Wadström asks to check his teeth, but that occurs in a moment of thoughtless ignorance. Badin does not meekly submit, but instead, bites his hand and receives an apology. Edvard Matz claims in his article on Badin, "[p]eople of colour from other parts of the world were greeted by eighteenth-century people with astonishment and curiosity, but not with animosity and suspicion" ['[f]ärgade personer från andra världsdelar möttes av 1700-talets människor med häpnad och nyfikenhet men inte med fiendskap och misstänksamhet'] (Matz 1996: 34). Jimmy, on the contrary, is clearly a victim of hostile racism, hence, Larsmo is presenting the racism existing in Sweden today as something belonging to the current day without such a long history. This is a view at odds with not only Jönsson's claim, but also similar points made by Pred and Hagerman, who both argue for a long history of racism in Sweden. The veracity of Larsmo's stance may be disputed, but Larsmo's rhetorical point is that if hostile rac-

ism has not always existed in Sweden, then it does not have to exist now.

Gun Zanton-Ericsson notes in her review of Larsmo's novel, "[a]lienation and xenophobia is a theme in our day. Oddly enough, we need to be reminded again and again that immigration has roots extending far back in time" ["[f]rämlingskap och främlingsrädsla är ett tema i tiden. Konstigt nog behöver vi åter och åter påminnas om att invandringen har rötter långt bak i tiden"] (Zanton-Ericsson 1996: A4). As this reviewer has noted, Larsmo is deliberately reminding his audience foreigners have made their way to Sweden for centuries and been accepted and assimilated into the population. Zanton-Ericsson's "oddly enough" is an ironic pointer to the resistance many Swedes may feel to this narrative: they, oddly, need to be reminded again and again. Resistance to facts outside the accepted narrative leads to selective historical amnesia. It further indicates that Zanton-Ericsson has heard the argument before, indicating that Larsmo is not the first to stake this claim. Along the same lines, Karin Månsson observes that Larsmo "taught us that black people have a history in Sweden" ["lärde oss att svarta människor har en historia i Sverige"] (Månsson 1997: 4). Magnus Ringgren goes even further to state: "Blacks have always existed in Sweden" ["De svarta har alltid funnits i Sverige"] (Ringgren 1996: 280). Historical memory can be short, and many Swedes have perceived the phenomenon of immigration as new, originating sometime in the 1960s. Both these remarks hint that Larsmo has entered an ongoing and pertinent cultural debate in which the Swedish historical narrative, and consequently the nation's self-image, is being revised. Christina Rosenqvist states quite plainly about Larsmo's novel: "The novel is about Sweden is crisis, about our self-understanding in crisis" ["Romanen handlar om Sverige i kris, om vår självförståelse i kris"] (Rosenqvist 1996: 12). This historical novel is not only about the search of two characters, Badin and Jimmy, for a sense of identity, but about Sweden's identity as well. Larsmo's strategy is to go back into history to show that Sweden has not always been so homogenous. Sweden has absorbed foreigners before with no harm done to its national identity. If there were black Swedes in the 1700s, why shouldn't there be black Swedes now? They married into the family centuries ago.

Some reviews of the book show signs of resistance to this new idea. Stefan Eklund makes the mistake Larsmo warns against, writing: "Badin kan, in short, be seen as our first coloured immigrant" ["Badin kan, förenklat, uppfattas som vår förste färgade invandrare"] (Eklund 1996: 5). Larsmo claimed that this sort of statement says more about Swedish self-perception, than about history. It represents an inherent denial that blacks were a part of Swedish society more than 250 years ago. Acknowledging their existence would contradict the myth of homogeneity that some may still hold dear.

Repeating and thereby reinforcing this statement is even more remarkable, given that Larsmo presents other black contemporaries of Badin in the novel itself. Despite a certain cautious phrasing (“can, in short, be seen”), Eklund has read past the detail of Badin’s black compatriots in order to make this claim.

Badin is referred to by Crister Enander as “our country’s, in a class of his own, most famous Negro” [‘vårt lands i särklass mest kände neger’] (Enander 1996: 4). Word choice can be a touchy issue when discussing issues of race, and translating these terms, because of layers of cultural issues, is difficult. Throughout the reviews in general, even if the word “Negro” [‘neger’] is used in conjunction with Badin – it would have been the word used in the eighteenth century – it is not used in conjunction with Jimmy. Even though Enander’s choice of words is historically correct, the phrase as a whole is unsettling, and if it is irony it is misplaced. Referring to Badin as “our country’s Negro” [‘vårt lands neger’], despite perhaps the best intentions of claiming him “as one of our own,” brings up associations with ownership and slavery, from which Badin was freed by Lovisa Ulrika, not to mention issues of tokenism.

Lennart Bromander is another reviewer who seems to resist the idea that blacks have lived in Sweden for centuries: “There were immigrants in Sweden even in the eighteenth century, but generally they had the same skin colour as the Swedes” [‘Även på 1700-talet fanns det invandrare i Sverige, men de hade i allmänhet samma hudfärg som de svenske’] (Bromander 1996: 4). Larsmo’s novel seeks to dislodge just this assumption. Bromander seems reluctant to give up on the idea that Sweden has been a white country throughout its history. His comment points to a certain confusion regarding whether “Swedish” is a cultural category or a racial category. Is being Swedish synonymous with being Caucasian, or does it imply a certain set of cultural values? There is a degree of awkwardness among several reviewers regarding how to describe Jimmy. He is “a black Swede” [‘en svart svensk’] or “a Swede with brown skin” [‘en svensk med brun hud’] (Rosenqvist 1996: 12, Mallik 1996: 9). The title of the present essay borrows the phrase “black Swedes” from one reviewer, in part to provoke⁴. Because the widely accepted norm of Swedishness includes white skin, a black Swede constitutes an immediate challenge to that idea. Jimmy himself is such a challenge to that notion. Two reviewers refer to Jimmy as “the nigger” [‘blatten’], and each time the word is presented in quotation marks to signal that the reviewers themselves are not using the term, but quoting from Larsmo’s text (Peterson 1996: B2 and Zanton-Ericsson 1996: A4). To invoke the existence of such a slur is to draw attention to the racial tensions in contemporary Sweden and, no doubt, this is the reviewers’ purpose. This word occurs only once in

the novel, and it is Jimmy who thinks it as a woman he is speaking to lets her sentence trail off: "Oh, then it is you who is [...] she interrupted herself. *The Negro boy? The nigger?* It would have been interesting to hear the word choice" ['Med då är det ju du som är [...] hon avbröt sig. *Negerungen? Blatten?* Det skulle vara intressant att höra ordvalet'] (Larsmo 1996a: 98, original emphasis). It is something Jimmy expects to be called, but is not. Lennart Bromander refers to Jimmy as "Swedish but half-blood" ['svensk men halvblod'] (Bromander 1996: 4). This phrase is more problematic than the other designations for Jimmy. A black Swede can be construed as a special type of Swede, but still a Swede. "Half-blood" seems a much more biological, racial term. Bromander's choice of words implies that being Swedish means being of a certain race.

The distinction between race and culture is significant. *Maroonberget* does not actually address issues of cultural diversity. Badin is so young when he comes to the Swedish court that he has no memory of the island he came from. He is raised as a Swede and a member of the Swedish royal court. Class, more than any other issue, seems to separate him from the two other blacks he encounters. He perceives Duke Karls' coachman to be a coarse drunkard, and Daphne, rechristened Fredrika, is a terrified and abused maid in a minister's house. Correspondingly, Jimmy does not represent a different culture from the dominant Swedish culture. He has been raised in Sweden by a Swede. His father has been absent and has exerted no cultural influence upon him. He has immigrated from nowhere – has, in fact, not immigrated at all. The only thing that sets him apart is the colour of this skin. As Nils Schwartz writes, "Jimmy is born and raised in Sweden, but is still made to feel that his right to be there is questioned" ['Jimmy är född och uppvuxen i Sverige, men får ändå erfara att hans närvarorätt blir ifrågasatt'] (Schwartz 1996: 4). Jimmy's problems feeling at home in Sweden are racial, not cultural.

Even so, a number of reviewers reference Sweden's new multicultural reality, indicating that the issues of race and culture are connected, if not confused, in some minds (Mallik 1996: 9, Schwartz 1996: 4, Zanton-Ericsson 1996: A4). The exact term is "many-cultured" ['mångkulturell'], although "multicultural" ['multikulturell'] did appear once (Mallik 1996: 9). The scholar Robert J. C. Young notes some of the hazards of the discourse of multiculturalism:

[T]he doctrine of multiculturalism encourages different groups to reify their individual and different identities at their most different, thus, according to Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, encouraging extremist groups, who become "representative" because they have the most clearly discernibly different identity. (Young 1995: 5.)⁵

Discussions of multiculturalism throughout the world tend to reference the most distinct cultural groups in a population, thus overlooking those individuals who are, in a sense, cultural hybrids who have embraced aspects of the dominant culture to which they have been introduced. If such “extremist groups” are constantly in focus, they can be perceived as a threat to the dominant culture. Thus, a term like “multiculturalism” that is meant to be inclusive can, in some cases, end up reinforcing notions of cultural purity.

Another term used in the reviews, however, was “flerkulturell,” meaning individuals who feel part of more than one culture: Swedish-Americans, for example (Mallik 1996: 9). Hyphenated identities are common in the United States, but it seems a new concept transplanted to Swedish soil. (Can one speak of an American-Swede?) Rather than enriching the cultural tapestry, such split identities can seem merely confusing (are you a Swede or aren’t you?), or, at worst, stigmatizing. These meditations on cultural identity are part of the ongoing negotiations about Sweden’s national narrative. It is moderately curious to find such frequent mention of multiculturalism in the reviews of a book that is not about multiculturalism. Although multiculturalism is clearly a pressing issue in modern Sweden, in this context, it may be employed as a substitute for the more sensitive issue of race.

For individuals as well as nations, tracing our story into the past endows us with a feeling of identity and community. The historical Badin was quite the bookworm, leaving behind him a considerable library, consisting in large part of travel literature. He too attempted to trace his ancestry, to provide himself with a narrative of his past that extended beyond his arrival in Sweden. According to Fredrik Adolph Ludvig Gustaf Albrecht Couschi’s (Badin’s) diary notations, Nimrod was also a Couschi (the son of Chuso, the king of the Ethiopians), the grandson of Ham, Noah’s son and the first founder of cities after the flood. He succeeded in linking his own story with that of the founders of Western civilization and Judeo-Christian values (Larsmo 1996b: 8). The historical Badin may have been driven to find for himself a sense of belonging, just as Larsmo’s fictional character Jimmy. The real Badin found Nimrod; Jimmy finds Badin.

This simply illustrates the power that narratives of the past have to grant both a sense of identity and belonging. But what about the issue of truth? Don’t such narratives have to be true to function? Marie Peterson is rather disturbed by the lack of absolute proof for the narratives of Jimmy and Badin:

He [Larsmo] lets Jimmy and Badin look for a starting point and they cross each other’s paths. They are looking for answers in the past, but they choose the wrong information. Both have an important piece of the

puzzle that they do not understand the significance of, they misinterpret it and choose therefore the 'wrong' story. The question is whether the sense of a 'true' identity then becomes more or less valuable

[‘Han [Larsmo] låter Jimmy och Badin söka en begynnelsepunkt och de korsar varandras spår. De letar efter svar i det förflutna men de väljer fel information. Båda har en viktig pusselbit som de inte förstår innebörden av, de feltolkar och väljer då också ‘fel’ historia. Frågan är om känslan av en ‘sann’ identitet då blir mindre eller mindre värd’] (Peterson 1996: A4).

Although there is no proof of Badin’s connection to Nimrod, nor Jimmy’s connection to Badin, it is perhaps going too far to say that their chosen narratives are “wrong.” Peterson’s utterance is somewhat perplexing since it implies a “correct” narrative that has been missed through faulty interpretive skills, though such a thing is not suggested in Larsmo’s text. Nonetheless, the issue of truth is a central one. Badin and Jimmy are convinced of the connection because they want to be; the reverse is possibly true of the reviewer: neither story seems true or convincing to her.

To possess power such narratives of identity need not necessarily be true, but they must feel true. If an entire group is to subscribe to a narrative, this is especially the case. Contradictions to the accepted narrative disappear, are forgotten, or are consigned to the marginalia of history. Larsmo claims that this is what has happened to the blacks in Swedish history, and his article in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* is where he marshals the facts of his historical research, the traditional tools in such historical negotiations. More importantly, perhaps, Larsmo seeks to persuade his Swedish audience of their historical heterogeneity through his novel by telling the story of Jimmy and Badin. Undermining the myth of homogeneity was a significant political gesture in the tense racial climate of Sweden in the mid-nineties. The reception of the novel demonstrates a mixed reaction to Larsmo’s tale of Swedish heterogeneity, and it is clear that the myth of homogeneity still informed some of the reviews of Larsmo’s novel in 1996. Just as it is important not to silence the history of people of colour in Sweden, it is similarly important not to pass over in silence the remnants of the myth of homogeneity.

NOTES

¹ The translations in this article from Swedish to English are all mine.

² This is one area in which Allan Pred takes Ola Larsmo to task for “distorting” Badin’s tale, since this epiphany about his destiny is said by Larsmo to have been sparked by Fourmont Lécine’s *Reflexions sur l’origine des peuples ancienne*, whereas Pred claims the

insight came from a story told to Badin by a black Caribbean (Pred 2004: 61–63). Pred seems to think that Larsmo should have given the black man the credit, rather than the European.

- ³ I would refer the reader to Robert J. C. Young's book, *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), for an account of just how charged, and revealing, the term *hybrid* can be.
- ⁴ I have borrowed from the title of Tommy Bengtsson's (1996) "Vem skriver historien om de svarta svenskarna?" ["Who Is Writing the History of the Black Swedes?"], *LO-Tidningen*, 75, 37, p. 14. The question, "Whatever happened to the black Swedes?," invokes the process of cultural and historical amnesia.
- ⁵ Young refers to the discussion in Floya Anthias & Nira Yuval-Davis' book, *Racialized Boundaries* (1992), p. 175.

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