White on the inside, brown on the outside
An exploration of interracial adoptive identity.

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"When you yourself feel you belong in a place, but don’t appear to on the outside. You end up having to constantly convince the world of your right to be there."
INTRO / PERSONAL MOTIVATION

This project aims to equip people with a more nuanced understanding of cross-racial adoptive identity. This will be actualised through the telling of my own personal lived experiences, as well as other cross race adoptees’ stories.

I feel that this is an alley not too many have fully explored, or have a solid foundation from which to speak. Simply due to the fact that cross-racial adoption is not normally something most people usually even think about unless they know someone, or are related to someone who has been through the experience.
I feel this particular experience could offer a lot that can reveal something more about people’s psychological search for individuality, and innate desire to be understood by the world.
If we, as the general public and people of the world, can attempt to harness the dualities that interracial adoption naturally brings, we may have a far easier time making sense of, and dispelling racial biases and counter this current trend of nationalism to some degree I’d hope.
As someone with some sort of dual identity myself, being adopted into a western society from a totally opposite culture, I am beginning to digest some of the complexities I have lived through as a brown-skinned child raised by a white family.

MY CHANGE MOTIVATION

The world of today is multicultural like never before. Nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and cultures mix and join together in endless combinations. We have come such a long way towards recognising and accepting different strands of identities, for example, the gay and transgender identity and women’s right to their own identity. That is why I want my project to specifically investigate the interracial adoptive experience, as I believe it could be a tool for understanding our new mixed and multicultural world. It also has the potential to redefine how we in the global north perceive identity in today’s multicoloured, open-minded but also at the same time increasingly nationalistic new world.

I aim to make visible the silent dissonance of an interracial adoptee’s experience in hopes of changing how notions of belonging and cultural expectations affect an adoptee of colour, and how their experience is perceived in the world.
METHODOLOGY / PROJECT DESCRIPTION

One entry point to examine is the dilemma of when you yourself feel you belong in a place, but don’t appear to on the outside. Almost where you end up having to constantly convince the world of your right to be there, subconsciously or not.

I understand that there is both a sense of curiosity as well as confusion concerning adoption overall, especially when the parent and child do not have the same outward appearance. This is where I have the opportunity to explore the "White on the inside, brown on the outside" notion, and what is the experience of someone who deals with this kind of inward conflict? How do interactions play out when someone is conflicted in this way? What could the rest of the western world learn about belonging, identity and race from this notion?

CONTEXT SITUATING THE PROJECT

I feel most people do not quite understand the psychological difference between being a cross race adoptee, verses a refugee or immigrant child coming into a white culture. The differentiating factor is that the refugee or immigrant child, for example, has a background, has roots in another culture having been brought to the new country with their families, or at least have known parents who look the same as them. Whereas the cross-race adoptee does not have that. He or she looks completely different on the outside but grows up being exactly like his or her white adoptive parents on the inside.

The refugee or immigrant child has to work at fitting in because they are different. They might speak a different language, they and their parents may outwardly look different from the people in their new environment and they have a different culture from the one they have just immigrated into.

The cross-race adoptee, on the other hand, does not feel that they do not fit in, because they have the same values, the same upbringing, they learnt the same nursery rhymes, they are a part of the same culture, and they do not feel like they have to ‘work’ at fitting in. And yet the shock, as they grow older, of finding that society views them as somebody who does not fit in, is profound.

This realisation can be very distressing since they feel themselves to be just like everybody else, but in reality, the world sees them as somebody almost alien and strange, having nothing to do with their adoptive family which is the only ‘family’ the adoptee has ever known. So suddenly you are all alone, dislocated from everything you know, just because of this self-awareness which comes inevitably as you grow up and naturally become an individual separate from your parents.
World: But where are you really from?
There is a double sense of betrayal, the betraying of your biological origin and also being made to feel that you are not living up to the expectations of the white people around you (usually people who do not know you well). They often expect you to be some kind of ‘ambassador’ for your ethnic origin that you know hardly anything about.

There is this pressure from both sides, from the people who look like you, and from those who you were brought up with (the white world). Both of them make you feel that you somehow are not enough, and are not being the person that you ‘should be’. So actually making the adoptee become very alone in trying to figure out his or her identity because there is no specific group around them that they can fully identify with, who will tell you that you are OK just as you are.

You feel you are betraying your own biological origin (whom you were born looking like) especially in a society where you are told to ‘own who you are’, to be proud of your origin and how you naturally look. But this can be much more complicated for an adopted person. How can you be proud of something you simply have no knowledge of? But now you seem to represent it in other people’s eyes. There is a pressure that you should embrace your origin, therefore your culture, but if all you’ve got from ‘your origin’ is your skin colour, hair and facial features, it’s somehow not enough to connect you to that place or that culture, because, in every other way, you feel connected with the family you’ve grown up with, and the culture you’ve grown up with.

The people who do look like you, often make you feel ashamed as if you have betrayed them by becoming ‘white on the inside’. There is a sense of failure because you are not quite living up to the pressures and expectations from either side.

If you are an interracial adoptee, you may feel another type of betrayal just from the outside version of your own self, on your journey of growing up and detaching from your parents (as most adolescents are encouraged to do).

In a sense, this makes it harder for you as an adoptee to even dare to separate from your parents because, in an awful way, you fear you will not be correctly understood without their presence.

“As adults no longer living with their white adoptive parents, when moving around in urban space alone, they do stick out visually and bodily” (Between Colourblindness and Ethnicisation: Transnational Adoptees and Race in a Swedish Context - Tobias Hübinette, Malinda Andersson, 2012, 2020)

Your parents somehow legitimise your place in this culture (a white country). They are the reason for you being there in the first place. When you are out on your own without the safety of your parents, strangers on the street see someone who they can’t help but detect as someone who is ‘not from here originally,’ and you will get that question “but where are you reeeally from?” for the entirety of your life, unless you are seen with your white parents. Only then will you actually ‘make sense’ for passers-by looking at you bug-eyed.
METHODOLOGY CONT.

Through research I understood that it is a primal and normal human desire to want to belong, so, therefore, it is also on one level logical for humans to be suspicious of those who do not belong or fit into their particular group. It is this dangerous ‘suspicion’ that has the potential to produce racist thinking. This is one area where my project wants to have agency and urge for change.

The dilemma of transracial adoption is precisely this, the world only sees the exterior, many adopted children receive questions that are actually very personal from total strangers. Meaning the child has to learn how to manage this, which in turn means their parents have to learn how to manage it before them.

“The logic of blood and roots positions the adoptive family beyond normality. The lack of family resemblances is constructed as a continuous source of problems in the everyday life of the adoptive family. Racism and discrimination are most often described as a social fact, which the adoptive family and adoptees themselves have to develop strategies to handle.” (Between Colourblindness and Ethnicisation: Transnational Adoptees and Race in a Swedish Context - Tobias Hübinette, Malinda Andersson, 2012, 2020)

THEORY / OTHER’S THOUGHTS

Some designerly works that have helped position my own project is artist Holly Mathews, Cecilia Paredes and the degree project of Cecilia Hei Mee Flumé. These identity projects conjure many images in my mind of how I could experiment with portraits in a similar way. To deconstruct and reassemble with intersections of cultural objects, patterns, figures/ scenes. This kind of juxtapositioning could be a very telling way of communicating visually the kinds of complexities I aim to address with my project.
Holly Mathew's identity project

fig. 3
Fig. 4 Consent to adoption, Cecilia Hei Mee Flumé
I began to reach out to others to learn about how they perceive and process their own identity. To approach this Clara and I held a workshop to test out our ideas on our classmates. This workshop helped me pinpoint any gaps where people could possibly misinterpret our questions or the concept itself. We formulated seven talking points that led each interviewee to talk freely based on how they understood the question. We wanted to gauge how each individual would relate to each question based on their cultural background and identity. We found some patterns in what people said, mainly due to the fact most were Caucasian and from similar paths of life. This was the main drawback of the interviews for me, so I knew I needed to redo this, focusing narrowly on individuals with the experience of transracial adoption.

Clara and I began the workshop by profiling each person. We asked their name, age and nationality. Then about their time spent in Sweden. Then what they felt their ‘visible ethnicity’ was or wasn’t. The first was Ellen, 25, who said she thinks she fits into this cliche of the ‘Swedish blonde girl,’ the perceived version of the ‘traditional Swede’. We asked her to sketch something that symbolises ‘heritage’. She held up her drawing of an eel describing to us the elusive character of the eels, that we do not really know where they come from, which was something she said she could relate to.
We asked Ellen again to sketch, this time the question: ‘how do you think about culture?’ (figure 2) She said culture to her feels very layered. Feeling there is a sense of something constructed about it. She feels the notion of culture is precisely this, the interlocking of eels.” We are like the eels, all of us. Nationality was not important for Ellen. She felt it is a way of deciding power, and that the idea of nationality could even be a system of oppression. She said she did not feel specifically Swedish, and that nationality is something we decide upon. Whether we are something or not. “It all feels a bit made up.” “Belonging is not as important anymore in the context of living in Sweden where it is a privilege to not have the need to belong anywhere necessarily.” Both Hubert and Ellen described the notion of nationality as a negative construction. Hubert said it is a tool of control, he feels there should not be this need of attaching yourself to one nation over another. Jacob and Rory mentioned how they feel they can belong or relate to a group that have things in common with them. For instance, the customs of being a parent in Sweden for Jacob, where he said he adapted to whatever was seen as ‘normal’, and what a parent should do in Sweden to be compatible with society. This concept of being ‘compatible’ with a society felt familiar to me in my experience as an adoptee of colour.

Next Rory, 27, a typically Irish redhead with freckles, found the word ‘ethnicity’ a struggle. Explaining that if he starts to think about it consciously, without just accepting the meaning society has given it. He felt torn between being born to parents who are Scottish, British, Irish and a little American but raised in Barcelona he said: “I could have been Spanish, I didn’t want to be, I don’t know why.” He recalled the feeling of not belonging in Ireland the same as in Spain. But when he is in Spain, he is just more aware of his, “not belonging in the proper way” as he put it.

He said finding a sense of belonging in a community is more about shared experiences that he can connect through rather than nationality or ethnicity. Rory travelled back in time to revisit a particular instance where he was made conscious of his ‘visible ethnicity.’ He told about his time walking through Regents Park every day on his way to a program he was taking in London. There happened to be a Mosque centred smack bang in the middle of the park, he described his curiosity to know more about the people inside, and strong desire to interact with the whole foreignness of another world. One day he tried walking in, but quickly someone told him to stop, and then someone came out from the Mosque, seeing something was happening and said ‘no it’s ok, come in.’ Rory reflected on that moment where someone said ‘STOP’ Rory felt he did not fit into this world. “I felt something about me was not initially...right,”
It was interesting how Rory came to terms of his ‘otherness’ in this utterly unfamiliar situation, where **he** experienced being ‘the outsider’, considering just a couple of steps away from the Mosque, he would be again ‘normal’ in the backdrop of Regents park where he slipped in unnoticed.

Nasra’s intertwined background as a Somali, Kenyan, British Swede exemplifies the stark distinctness between my experience as an adoptee of colour growing up in a white world and her immigrant familial background as a person of colour in a white country. I intentionally refer to it as ‘a white world’ in my experience, and ‘a white country’ in her experience in order to separate between our two very close, yet vastly dissimilar experiences in this specific regard, the two ‘worlds’ we grew up in.

She broke down her complex identity, saying she has always had a hard time identifying with one specific culture, especially because she has spent the majority of her childhood in Sweden. Yet this does not naturally make her feel ‘Swedish.’ She explains: although she feels very much at home in Sweden, in her actual home her and her family speak Somali, eat Somali food as well as Swedish foods. She spoke shyly on why it is and has always been hard for herself to identify as Swedish. Saying it is just due to the fact that she does not look like a native Swede. “It’s hard to identify when people constantly remind you that you don’t.” She said if it were not for that aspect, she would be keener on owning her Swedishness and verbally saying that she is Swedish. She expressed her hesitancy when people ask her where she is from. “Like what do you mean...like the town in Sweden or like originally?” She caught to the chase and said: “most of the time they want to know why I am black.” She said giggling.

Nasra laughed when thinking back to a situation where she got annoyed by Clara who looks traditionally Swedish. When Clara addressed her in English rather than in Swedish at a meeting for the first time, Nasra replied back to her in Swedish with annoyance, thinking here is another one of those situations where I have to prove my ‘Swedishness’. Clara could feel Nasra’s predicament as she told Nasra ‘oh no actually I don’t speak Swedish.’ Now suddenly making Nasra feel guilty for reacting with annoyance in the first place when the situation was indeed the exception to her normal. It is accounts like this where her different but alike experiences intersect with mine on the level that we are both people of colour in a White majority.

**COLLABORATION**

I interviewed 21-year-old Martin Helger and thirty-nine-year-old Mathilde Hylander who are both individuals of colour raised by white parents and both brought up in Sweden. The only difference is, Martin was born and adopted in Sweden which Mathilde was not. Both have a strong sense of self and said they feel their identity is firmly Swedish.
Martin told me he got access to all his adoption documents when he reached a certain age, a requirement of law, but he kept repeating that although he was presented all the facts and details of his adoption, he felt disinterested to read beyond the first page. He told me last year one of his biological sisters reached out with pictures of herself together with their biological mother, and she proposed they meet. But Martin said no, although he said he was curious but deciding that he felt it was not “important enough,” because he always felt that that would be hard on his ‘real sisters’ if he went and met his biological sisters and because they (his adoptive sisters) mean so much more to him.

Martin said meeting his birth sister did not really make a difference. For him it was not “interesting or important enough,” and that it would be a betrayal of his (adoptive) family. He quickly retracted his sentence saying, that doing this might be hurtful towards his (adoptive) sisters, “they’re my sisters for 21 years.” Whereas “this was just someone who popped up in my life.” He ended by saying he was sad for her (his biological sister) sake that she had taken this step and he did not want to do the same. He knew that his biological sister’s life was different to his, saying she’s been having “quite a rough life” and that also made him feel apprehensive, since he has not.

He expressed a sense of guilt for his life turning out so differently when they were both adopted. Meaning that he got a sort of ‘better hand’ in life than maybe she did. He said that him deciding to not meet his biological side was definitely not because his adoptive family would feel attacked. They supported and encouraged him to take this opportunity but somewhere inside, he felt it might have been hard for them (his adoptive family). But the most important reason “is that I don’t care!” He blurted out without repress. As soon as he had said this, he tried to retract that conviction saying “Or, - it sounds harsh to say that I don’t care” he returned back to his calm and collected manner and said,
“I’m just not interested in it and I’m really happy with what I have.” He reiterated that it’s not that he feels guilty about this, it was just that if there was even a minute chance of his adoptive family being hurt by this, he did not want to take that risk. I got the impression that perhaps Martin’s reluctance to make contact with his biological roots was more out of fear how it would affect him, rather than his (adoptive) family.

I asked if at any stage he had been interested in discovering his biological background. He replied, “no I don’t think it’s ever been a part of me since I can remember, I’ve never met them.”

“The only thing that I have from them is, umm umm- or, yeah its just the way I look pretty much.” I could sense all this was not a topic he normally talked about. “Everything I know is what my family has taught me. I walk the same way as my dad does, I say the same things as my mom.”

Martin expressed how grateful he is, saying he would be happy to adopt children of his own one day, “it would feel like repaying your debt.” When he said this I asked if he feels in some way that there is a ‘debt’ to be paid?

Martin: “I’m grateful for my family because they have made me feel so... not different.”

I asked whether he views his adoptive identity as a strength, did he get special treatment?

Martin: “That is, a negative special treatment yes, but sometimes you actually get a positive in that you’re noticed more. Everyone would expect someone who looks like my (adoptive) sister to speak perfect Swedish, but they might not do the same the first time they see me. They do not expect certain things from me, so when you do things, you are recognised more just because you stick out more.”

“You can turn it into something positive, but you can also turn it into a negative, but that’s up to you.”

Martin was very inclined to see the positive in everything, even when discussing something obviously negative or painful. He tended to distract himself in the middle of talking about something painful by speeding up his sentence and adding something cheery, almost as if wanting to appear being very fair and just and politically correct.

I asked if he feels having this identity is giving him an ‘up.’ He told me he liked to believe so but is not sure if it does “but I have to believe it does because I can’t change it.” Martin revealed that in a way you will have to work harder for certain things because people will want to put you in a box.

Martin: “The important thing for me when I’m in a new place, I become more aware of it. If I don’t talk to people, if I’m just standing alone, they will build their own picture of me, but if we could have a chit chat about literally anything just 2 minutes, then they would have another perception of me. Sometimes I think I just need to talk to people.”

Martin explained the situations where he feels unwelcome, I asked: how do you handle yourself there?

“I just don’t go there” replied Martin.

If he were forced to be in those environments he said he would honestly just imagine in his mind that he was far superior to them. Not in a hurtful way he added, in a way where you’re less receptive to picking up negativity when someone might be staring at you, or be whispering something and you kind of understand that it’s about you. “Then if I’m superior, it just bounces off easier.” But he accepts the reality that this happens and it will happen again, which his white non-adoptive friends will not understand, because they do not see him as different. He feels he can not really talk to his friends about his experiences. He feared that talking about with them would maybe make him seem to have special needs. His friends might start thinking about him as a kind of burden “I just want it to be smooth and normal so I don’t tell them.”
I asked if it ever made him feel lonely holding these things to himself. He said, of course, it feels lonely…but at the time, for a short amount of time, but since it is so seldom it’s OK. Similar to something that you might feel sad over in a day but the feeling is fleeting.” If he felt out of place daily, then he would want to share it “it’s not happening a lot, I can handle it.”

He gave the example when his parents suggested that they should travel to Russia together one day. He had this feeling that that might be uncomfortable for him, because he once read on the internet that Russians are not used to people of colour, they don’t like anything interracial generally. Even if they did go to Russia, and he was in the intimate security of his family, he did not want to be in a position where he had to have his parent, sister or friend stick up for him if a situation were to occur. A friendly discussion over dinner about going to Russia turned into something complex and uncomfortable for him. He did not voice his feelings to them, since that is something he does not want them to know. He does not want them to have to ‘adapt to him.’ He knows that they would adapt to him in a heartbeat if he should make it visible to them, but he explained that he would rather adapt to them (his white adoptive family) because he feels he is more equipped to deal with it than they might be.

From my understanding, what Martin illustrates in his relationship with his family is a lack of dialogue, where an acknowledgement of privilege and honesty on his family’s behalf could be essential for him to feel more at ease (unconsciously and consciously) and willing to discuss his experience with them. It is important to be mindful of white privilege as a white parent parenting a child of colour, because fundamentally their experience of the world will be different than their adopted children’s.

Martin explained that he does not have the usual urge to ‘fit in’, saying “the way I naturally am fits in, just not the way I look.” He gave the example of the hockey culture in Sweden. The majority of people who play hockey do not look like him, so they would think he does not play hockey. “They might think you do not know anything about this, so then you are not one of us, but if we can just speak for 30 seconds, then they will automatically think OK, wait he is not different and they kinda forget about the colour thing, it’s just their first impression.”

Martin: “If people sense that you are not out of place, whether you have adapted or have grown up in a typical Swedish way, and do all those typical Swedish things, after a while, it gets into your walk or in your way of doing little things, and if they sense that you are not out of place, they do not notice you. They do not immediately assume there is something different about you.”

Martin tells me he feels quite lucky that he has never really been in many situations where he feels out of place, but he is aware that they could happen tomorrow or on the bus, but he is not afraid of it happening.

He told me of a situation where this sense of inner confidence has shown its efficacy. When he takes the train into the city every morning for work, sometimes the train is full so you can not have your own seat. There might be people of colour there, and he noticed that people will not choose to sit beside them. I was shocked, “Yeah it happens, it’s a thing,” he said casually, he lowered his tone adding “but the thing is, they would still come to sit next to me.”
He reflected on why this might be, saying that he does not feel afraid of people not liking him, and again, people sense that. Whereas other people of colour on the train might be consciously or unconsciously paranoid on some level, thinking prematurely that people (the Swedes/white people) might not like them due to the fact that they perhaps have an immigrant background, are speaking a foreign language, have funny looking ethnic clothes... it could be a plethora of things, or they simply are not at ease around white people/white culture. Whereas Martin is naturally at ease amongst white people and white culture because he has the background of a cross-racial adoptee. He is in essence white on the inside, brown on the outside.

Martin added, “when they sit next to me it’s like a confirmation that they don’t judge me.”

Even when walking with his group of white Swedish friends, and someone on the street says ‘excuse me, do you know the way?’ to Martin and not his other blonde peers, it’s again an affirmation that this person does not see him as any different from his white friends. This mundane gesture from a stranger asking for directions was again a clear symbol and validation they showed by naturally assuming he belongs there.

This same sentiment is present in Cecilia Flumé’s project where she confronts how she, as an adoptee is welcome into a new country and society, whereas an immigrant might not be in the same way. There is a stark contrast between being adopted (welcomed with open arms) into a country as an innocent baby to then grow up and turn into a kind of immigrant. An immigrant who is totally native on the inside, but is detected as a foreigner on the outside. Adoptees are often easily and lazily bunched in with immigrants and ‘others’ (the racially unidentifiables) just because they visually resemble and ‘make sense’ in that category all based on superficial signifiers and stereotypes.
fig.9 Cecilia Flume’s project
If we think about how we actually live: Who do we worship with? Who do we eat dinner with every night? Most of us do these activities with people that share our race. If we’re very honest with ourselves, those are two very intimate experiences and in our most intimate experiences, most of us are living mono-racially, even in today’s diverse society. This includes transracial adoptive households too because the majority of adoptees continue to grow up and live in a white middle or upper-class level of society. In practice, they will often be the only person of colour in their family, school... This inevitably leads the brown-skinned adoptee to develop a ‘white bodily’ self-image. Where they can only see whiteness around them, yet when they stare down at their own limbs, they see a body that is unfamiliar and mystifying. They might struggle with accepting this incongruity and thus, their own body. Even wishing to be white like their parents (whom they love and admire) and their world.

I asked Martin how he thinks this identity interacts with the different relationships he has in his life. He told me he felt freer to talk about his struggles and overall experience to his girlfriend rather than his family. The difference between his parents and his girlfriend is that regardless of you being adopted or not, we usually owe our parents something because they do so much for you as their child. He added, of course, a boyfriend or girlfriend would want to make you happy as well, but they have not done it for 21 years. He would not have to give the same gratitude to a girlfriend. “I don’t owe her that in the same way,” It’s not easy to adopt a child of a different race, adding “it takes a bit extra for them.”

He explained that if he were to tell his parents about a moment or situation where he felt misplaced or uncomfortable, they would be saddened by it. Whereas if he were to tell the same to his girlfriend, she’d instead be angered. That felt easier for Martin to take than upsetting his parents. He said he does not want to cause anyone ‘extra pain.’ “If I had to cause someone pain, I would try to cause as little pain as I can, and that pain would be smaller with my girlfriend than with my parents.”

I finished my talk with Martin by asking about acceptance. I asked: what if he were to feel unaccepted within his own circle of friends? He told me that it has happened that people he grew up with as kids turned a bit racist as they grew older. He can see how they view the world but not directly him, he sees them having prejudice over other people of colour. “They could be shouting something racist but they don’t view me as the same as them.” They do not make the connection about him, they do not understand it at first, but when he reminds them ‘hey you know I’m here right?’ only then do they make the connection and say ‘oh no sorry, I didn’t realise.’
Mathilde talked about her adoption through the lens of a mother, herself being one. Different from Martin, Mathilde spoke very heartfeltly about her need to know her biological past. “To meet the woman who had carried me, and given birth to me.” As an adult, Mathilde and her (adoptive) mother filed papers to find her birth mother in Sri Lanka.

Mathilde’s purpose was to meet them and ask questions, but by her birth family, she was received as a sort of beacon of opportunity, as she was from a far more unimaginably fortunate other world. “As time went by, I started to see that there were more questions about money and me helping them, than love.”

She said it became a burden and surpassed her initial goal of wanting to find her roots and sadness overwhelmed her previous excitement. She told me she had given her partner, a blonde Swedish man, a trip to Sri Lanka. This is how he described his first experience in a parallel non-white world. “I haven’t experienced poverty before...the coolest part was being there with you because I have never felt like an outsider.” Everybody here is white!” Mathilde interrupted “but it’s funny, when I go there I feel so Swedish!”

She looked back on her adolescence in Sweden, telling me that having another colour in Sweden nowadays is not as simple as it used to be. “When I grew up it was not an issue.” She said frankly it’s just a different climate today, she feels growing up in Sweden now will be so much tougher if you are another colour, taking into account the new Swedish political dawn of Sverigedemokraterna’s loom.

Speaking in a very sincere tone she told me that in some way she feels ashamed for being happy and relieved that her own daughter has really light skin. “She won’t face the problems that I might.” I asked how she thinks her daughter Alva identifies, Mathilde told me about her recent conversation with Alva where she said: “mom, it makes me so sad...you have this beautiful colour and you have this thick long black hair, and if I look into your eyes, we have almost the same eye colour but that’s about it.”

“It’s really unimportant, it has nothing to do with who you are!” Her partner exclaimed. This is a harmless statement yet, something I find hard to decipher as an adoptee of colour. If he is right that colour really is unimportant, then why has it been, and is such an inescapable invisible thing blanketing others and myself?

Every time I glimpse my reflection I am reminded of my outer layer that greets the world every day. I understand it could be easy for a white man to lightly exclaim how colour is not an issue and does not matter, because it simply does not matter for him living as a white man in a white country. However, this statement is much more layered when put in the context of someone who is a person of colour living in a white culture but having been raised with this exact belief statement.
Although it is an exciting, relieving yet anxious sensation to be around others who mirror how I look on the outside, but the anxiety in it is me fearing that they will see the ‘whiteness’ in me once they interact with me. It is instances like this where my identity as an adoptee is most pronounced and undeniable.

Race is a prominent part of an adoptee’s identity because it is being called out in a visible way all the time by society. For white people they sometimes can be under the illusion that race won’t matter, especially when we want to feel close to our adopted kids, therefore we do not want it to matter. In order to feel close to someone, we need to see them for who they are, how they look and how they identify all as one unit.

Mathilde embraces both sides of her identity. Like Martin, she expressed she has always felt very Swedish, feeling her dual experience gives her space to experiment in whichever culture she wants to. She does this interweaving between the cultures through wearing sarees and doing different kinds of makeup, living in this cross-section between the Sri Lankan and her Western world. She said, without this, she would feel empty “I like the fact that I can pick and choose.” She mentioned when speaking to other adoptees, she experienced them having a distance from their adoptive identity. Since she herself is very open and at peace about it, she tends to be carefree when asking whether someone else is adopted, but she said she is often met by reluctant replies or no replies at all.

Mathilde told me she and her family moved to a new part of Sweden while Mathilde was little. Her mother went to the daycare Mathilde would be starting a day early to prepare them for Mathilde’s arrival. She did not want to risk her innocent chestnut skinned little girl to feel like an outsider, or be alienated in any way. So Mathilde’s mother brought pictures of Sri Lanka and engaged the kids by telling them the story of how Mathilde had come to be a part of their family. The children became interested and asked more and more questions. In the end, she gave them all a little wooden hand-painted elephant from Sri Lanka as a gift to remember this day. All that so her little girl would feel wanted and welcome in this new class of Swedish toddlers who had probably never seen someone looking so different from them. Mathilde went back to how ‘Swedish’ she feels, while her partner chimed in adding that she probably feels more Swedish than he does, saying he does not even feel that proud of ‘being Swedish’ himself. Looking down Mathilde said, “I think it’s sad that Sweden is starting to become something that I’m not very proud of.”
Through collaboration, I learned that others sharing the same adoptive experience had similar emotions and ideas as I did at the start. Yet, they were very affirmatively quick to declare their identity as ‘Swedish,’ and to their white parents they were raised by without reluctance or questioning.

It was interesting how all of whom I talked to about this displayed an overwhelming need to protect/defend their adoptive parents even from me (a fellow brown-skinned adoptee). Almost as if they themselves were an extension of their parents (not by blood but something perhaps even stronger?). Just like Martin’s and Mathilde concrete feeling of Swedishness that are maybe stronger than those of many natural-born swedes, in the same way, the feeling of love and dependency on your adoptive parents are so strong also because they justify you being in this country and having a good life.

Why is the feeling of wanting to protect and defend your adoptive parents stronger? Is it because you have been chosen, hand-picked by those same parents from the very beginning. You know that you have been so incredibly wanted by them otherwise, nobody would go through the emotional process of adopting at all.

All adopted children have a feeling that they have been ‘rescued’, perhaps from poverty-ridden unhappy lives into a safe, sheltered and loving life. So it is understandable for adoptees cross-racial or not to have a sense of eternal gratitude and loyalty towards their parents and the lives they lead because of them. This can also be a source of stress tied to obligation, where you might feel like you can not rebel or critique your parents due to them having ‘invested’ and picked you as their own, therefore you fear behaving badly (or at all out of the realm of perfection) could be seen as ungratefulness. Whereas, if you were their blood, you might feel you could get away with casual bad behaviour. Like all children, we naturally want to make our parents happy and proud to have them call us their child.

DESIGN QUESTIONS & PROCESSES

I wondered how I could depict the multilayered invisible aspect of dual identity in a concrete way using physical materials. I decided that the technique of collage would be a suitable method. I began experimenting starting off analogue, utilising the elements of size, shape and colour as the basis for each composition. (Fig.10)

Working in this medium using my hands allowed me to make quick decisions of what to take away and what to highlight. But I soon faced a dilemma working with someone else’s outward identity (their face) and their personal symbol of culture which was, in this case, Nasra’s Somali patterns and colours. I doubted whether I had the right as the designer to be chopping and rearranging someone’s identity in this almost violent way (collaging) especially when I knew so little about the Somali culture or what it meant for Nasra.
Figures 10 (all Nasra collages)
Working with the zine format really emphasized the different ‘stages’ or chapters of the adoptive experience I was trying to unpack with this project. I structured the zine to embody the chronological development of a cross-racial adoptee as I knew it. Having the contents be numbered 1 - 4 where the first stage is titled ‘Total belonging’ and last stage ‘Coming to terms.’ (Figures 11 and 12) These segments are very concrete and easy to follow for readers and are short compilations of the total experience that I wanted to bring forth in my visual representation.

In these first few stages titled ‘Total belonging’ and ‘Gradual realisation’ the colours of the background and type are very beige reflecting the whiteness in the early childhood phase of an adoptee’s life. (Figures 11, 12 and 13) The pale white skin shades blend in seamlessly into the background colour of the spreads to mimic the idea of the stages and how overwhelmingly immersed the adoptee is by their white world yet without questioning due to their lack of awareness and maturity at this age.
STAGE 2
Gradual Realization
This beige colour theme gradually fades out through the ‘stages’ as the child ages and becomes self-aware. As the adoptee grows a wider sense of who they are, the colours in the zine reflect this progression and become more confidently browner, from light shades of brown to deeper ones. Yet still interweaving the whiteness within this evolution with certain pages mixed with beige and brown backgrounds, symbolising the dual identity that you can never be just one, even if you do firmly feel white on the inside. (Figures 14, 15 and 16)
There is pressure that you should embrace your origin, therefore your culture, but if all you have got from ‘your origin’ is your skin colour, hair and facial features...

It is somehow not enough to connect you to that place or that culture... because in every other way, you feel connected with the family you’ve grown up with, and the culture you have grown up with.
Having this kind of basic outline (the stages) allowed me to utilise my written work together with shock style imagery. Since this topic was very immaterial I felt including parts of my written essay could support, elevate and be in conversation with my visual work. The drawbacks of working in this practice were that I tended to want to illustrate the text with my visuals rather than expand the text with my visuals. It was hard to separate from creating collages that not only were in dialogue with the text but were challenging and provoking in themselves.

I aimed to create imagery that relayed themes of slight transgression, confrontation and a sense of something that was never really visually juxtaposed in this way before, in essence, a reflection of the entire adoptive experience being an almost taboo subject.

I thought a lot about the placement of each visual to specifically narrates the development journey of the adoptee throughout the zine. I also thought about the colours more deliberately. Initially, I began working on the classic white spreads and black text. Later in a feedback session, I was made aware of this irony, when asked why I chose to use the white background, I answered: “because I wanted something neutral that would not distract from my visuals.” I reflected on my own indoctrination of assuming whiteness as neutral, whereas my entire project was confronting the questions of colour and neutrality within a predominantly white world. From this enlightenment, I went on to redesign each spread to mimic tones found within the imagery on each page. This immediately synced the whole zine together delivering a more authentic actualisation of the subject as a whole.
I made intentional decisions with page and text colour to keep reiterating the confliction the adoptee has of sticking out and feeling odd amongst the white majority as the project title 'White on the inside, brown on the outside' professes. (Fig.16)
fig. 17 A draft of spreads in progress
I accentuated the typography in as many spaces as I could to amplify the text and involve the reader emotionally. (Figure 18) I did this by playfully exaggerating certain letters or quotes to evoke feelings of loneliness or frustration as if you the reader, are the adoptee and this particular feeling or sentiment (whichever page you happen to be on) is also your dilemma, your burden. (Figure 19)

Suddenly you are all alone dis located from everything you know, just because of this self awareness which comes inevitably as you grow up and naturally become an individual separate from your parents.
You may feel another type of betrayal just from the outside version of your own self on your journey of growing up and detaching from your parents (as most adolescents are encouraged to do).

In a sense this makes it harder for you to even dare to separate from your parents, because in an awful way, you fear you will not be correctly understood without their presence.
Bibliography


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZYbR3eQNIs


