
Sweden at a Crossroads: The Struggle for Finding the Truth about Transnational Adoption in the World's Leading Adopting Nation

TOBIAS HÜBINETTE  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6775-6476>

ABSTRACT: Sweden is at the moment grappling with its close to seventy years of transnational adoption that, since the 1950s onwards, has resulted in over sixty thousand adoptions from abroad. In October 2021, the Swedish government decided to initiate a state inquiry. It set up a commission to investigate the widespread problem of illegal and irregular transnational adoption and the systematic use, by adoption-mediating organizations, of manipulated documents and forged identities. The report will be published on March 1, 2025. The background to the government's decision to form what is known as the Swedish Adoption Commission can be found in years of adoptee activism in the form of the persistent voicing, and final breakthrough, of critical perspectives on transnational adoption.

In the context of this ongoing and painful settlement process concerning the country's criminal and corrupt transnational adoption activities, this partly autoethnographic article tries to understand why Sweden is such a latecomer when it comes to finding the truth about transnational adoption, especially given that other countries have already gone through a similar settlement process regarding the dark sides of transnational adoption. Why has it until recently been so difficult to bring up the illicit and unethical sides of transnational adoption in the world's leading adopting nation?

KEYWORDS: transnational adoption, corruption, crime, Sweden, truth and reconciliation, adoptees, activism

Introduction

On the 10th of June 2021, an in-all-respects-unique and historical debate on the criminal aspects of transnational adoption took place in the Swedish parliament (*riksdagen*). All six opposition parties rallied together and vehemently urged the then red-green government consisting of the Social Democrats and the Green Party to set up a state inquiry and form an investigative commission in order to examine and uproot the problem of unethical transnational adoptions to Sweden and the subsequent erasure of numerous original identities by way of manipulated documents and forged identities.¹ This parliamentary debate and the unison and identical demand coming from the opposition parties, from the radical right-wing Sweden Democrats to the radical left-wing Left Party, is unprecedented in a Swedish political setting, as these parties otherwise almost never agree with each other. Their agreement was even more exceptional as Sweden, both its politicians and its population at large, is probably the most staunchly pro-adoption country in the world: Swedes have adopted more foreign-born children per capita than any other nation in history.

In October of the same year, as a direct response to the debate and the full consensus among the opposition parties, the red-green government led by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (who happens to be a domestic adoptee himself) finally initiated a state inquiry into the problem of illegal and corrupt adoptions to Sweden by setting up what is today known as the Adoption Commission (*Adoptionskommissionen*) whose investigative team is led by the respected law professor Anna Singer at Uppsala University.² According to its directives from the Löfven government, the Adoption Commission is looking into over sixty thousand adoptions from abroad to Sweden that have taken place since the 1950s to today. But because of time constraints and for other practical reasons, the Commission focuses mainly on seven of the biggest countries of origin—South Korea, China, Sri Lanka, Poland, Ethiopia, Colombia, and Chile. After the latest parliamentary election in September 2022, a right-wing coalition government has come to power led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and consisting of the center-right Moderate Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. It is this government, which is dependent on the far right Sweden Democrats as its supporting party, that will eventually receive the Adoption Commission's findings and recommendations on March 1, 2025.³

Just like Löfven, Kristersson also happens to have a personal connection to adoption: he is an adoptive parent to three adopted daughters from China, and even more importantly, he is the former chairman of the adoption mediating organization Adoption Centre (*Adoptionscentrum*). Adoption Centre has processed close to thirty thousand adoptions to Sweden since it was founded in 1969, and it is the second biggest adoption mediating organization on an international level and in absolute numbers after American Holt, which in its turn has processed upwards to 100,000 adoptions from abroad since its foundation in 1956. However, as Sweden's

population stands at a mere 10.4 million inhabitants while the US has almost 332 million inhabitants, Swedish Adoption Centre is proportionally by far and without competition the world's leading adoption mediating organization.

During Kristersson's chairmanship in the 2000s, when transnational adoption peaked globally with sometimes around 45,000 processed adoptions annually, according to Peter Selman (381), there are strong indications that among others, Chinese children were adopted to Sweden in illicit ways—meaning that Kristersson will most likely find himself in a delicate situation when the Adoption Commission's report comes out.⁴ While he was chairman of Adoption Centre in 2003, Kristersson also received information about criminal adoptions from Chile to Sweden that took place mainly during the military dictatorship years of 1973–1990. But instead of making it public he chose to investigate the adoptions from Chile internally. Adoption Centre's own internal report then concluded that the adoptions from Chile were not illicit, meaning that the organization basically cleared itself from any accusations and decided that it was innocent of any corruption. This conscious silencing and burying of the knowledge of the unlawful adoptions from Chile meant that as many as fifteen years were unnecessarily lost before the Swedish public service company SVT broke the silence and started to report on unlawful Chilean adoptions to Sweden in 2018.

The immediate impetus behind the 2021 parliamentary debate and the following government decision to set up the Adoption Commission was a highly acclaimed article series titled "Children at All Costs" [*"Barn till varje pris"*]. On February 19 of the same year, the biggest Swedish morning newspaper, Liberal *Dagens Nyheter*, began to publish this series, which focuses on the dark sides of transnational adoption. The series, which appeared over many months, had an enormous impact in Sweden among both the Swedish establishment and the general public. The trio behind it, among whom is the Korean adoptee Patrik Lundberg, was later awarded the country's most prestigious journalistic honor, the Grand Prize for Journalism (*Stora journalistpriset*). The trio also included Josefin Sköld and Alexander Mahmoud, a photographer; together the three co-authored and published a book in 2022 on the same subject, which accounts for how the article series was born and eventually came into being (Lundberg, et al.)

Dagens Nyheter's article series started to run in the wake of the release of the Dutch so-called Joustra Commission's report at the beginning of February 2021 on illicit and unethical adoptions to the Netherlands, which among other things resulted in an official apology from the Dutch government to the around thirty thousand transnational adoptees in the Netherlands. The apology was followed by the temporary suspension of all transnational adoptions to the country (Commissie). The Dutch government report found that about eighty percent of around 3,500 examined adoption documents were irregular in some way or another. This is the most comprehensive official investigation thus far on the problem of corruption and crime within the world of transnational adoption. This study scrutinizes the

failure of a major Western receiving country to hinder numerous illicit adoptions and instead even facilitating all too many of them. Furthermore, in June 2021 the Swedish public service television channel SVT, and its flagship investigative journalism program *Uppdrag granskning*, screened a documentary about the criminal adoptions from Chile to Sweden—*De stulna barnen* [*The Stolen Children*—which also made a big impact among the general public.

Given this final breakthrough on critical perspectives about transnational adoption in Sweden, this article examines why Sweden initiated its currently ongoing settlement process concerning transnational adoption so late: countries of origin such as Ireland in the 2010s had already done so, as had the Netherlands and other receiving countries such as Switzerland and Belgium in the early 2020s.⁵ Why has it until recently been so difficult to bring up the illicit and unethical sides of transnational adoption in the world's leading adopting nation?

This article is divided into two parts, the first one that by highlighting certain ideological and discursive aspects gives the historical and political background about how and why Sweden became the world's most pro-adoption country. The second part accounts for how critical views on transnational adoption coming from Swedish adoptees have developed and how they preceded the 2021 *Dagens Nyheter* series. The second part of the article is partly autoethnographic as I myself have played a role in this development both as an adoption studies researcher and as an adoptee activist who is considered to have pioneered both transracial and transnational adoption studies and adoptee activism. In my conclusion, I argue that the beginning of Sweden's settlement process regarding transnational adoption has come about far too late for adoptees themselves and their significant others, and that the process will remain unfinished as the issues of accountability and reparation have not been taken into account, and therefore the inquiry cannot be conceptualized as being a part of a truth and reconciliation process.

Sweden as the World's Most Pro-Adoption Nation

Apart from US adoptive parents, the Swedes were the first Westerners to adopt children from the Global South beginning in the 1950s. To a certain extent, this can be explained by the fact that thousands of Swedes had volunteered, at the Swedish Red Cross Field Hospital in Pusan and later on at the National Medical Centre in Seoul in the 1960s, to serve in South Korea during and after the Korean War. It was among them that some of the first Swedish adoptive parents were to be found (Hübinette, *The Adopted*). In the 1960s Sweden then entered into several bilateral adoption agreements with a number of countries of origin out of which the one with South Korea, which was signed in 1966, became the most important in terms of the future number of adoptions (Koo). By 1970 there were already an estimated fifteen hundred foreign-born adopted children in Sweden. They had arrived in the country in the 1950s and 60s at a time when most other Western countries, except

for the US and neighboring Norway and Denmark, had barely and or not even started their transnational adoption activities. Most of the adopted children came from South Korea (Statens nämnd).

The number of Swedish transnational adoptions exploded exponentially during and from the symbolic year of 1968, and over time Sweden became the country having adopted the most foreign-born children per capita, with in total well over sixty thousand transnational adoptions. On a demographic level this means an astonishing one to two percent foreign-born adopted children per birth cohort for several decades in a row, peaking in 1980 with a world historical record of 2.27 percent foreign-born adopted children per birth cohort. During the same year it is estimated that the total number of non-white inhabitants of Sweden was about sixty thousand, out of whom one in three were adoptees of color (Statistiska). This extraordinary demographic fact and modern migration history—transnational adoptees making up such a large proportion of all inhabitants per birth cohort and meaning that transnational adoption constituted a huge part of all immigration to Sweden from the non-Western world in the 1950s, 60s and 70s—makes Sweden absolutely unique in a comparative pan-Western perspective. This situation continued well into the 1980s and 90s until, from the end of the 2000s, the number of transnational adoptions began slowly and steadily to decline. Today annually only about one hundred adopted children arrive from abroad among whom most are, as in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, from South Korea. This is both symbolic and ironic as the whole practice began there in its modern form: this world-leading country of origin has sent around 200,000 children into adoption in the West, and nowadays is one of the richest countries on the planet—while at the same time, it suffers from a catastrophically low birth rate.⁶

Swedes have not only adopted more foreign-born children than any other Western country, perhaps even more importantly, Sweden has also contributed to institutionalizing the whole practice of transnational adoption itself. It did that alongside the US in the 1950s and 60s when the legal systems and transportation logistics were not yet fully in place in either country or in the children's countries of origin. Together, then, Sweden and the US turned transnational adoption into a permanent, global, child-migration practice by transforming it from a temporary rescue operation for unaccompanied refugee children, war children, and mixed-race children after WWII and in connection with the Greek Civil War (1946–49) and the Korean War (1950–53) to an institutionalized and fully commercialized reproduction method for Westerners, run by a fully-fledged industry. This is what Kimberly D. McKee calls the “transnational adoption industrial complex.”

In the case of Sweden, it meant among other things adjusting its legislation to make transnational adoption possible much earlier and more fully than the other Western receiving countries did.⁷ For example, since the 1960s a total of eight formal state inquiries investigating legislative matters to facilitate transnational adoption even more speedier and even more smoothly in order to maximize the

number of adoptions from abroad to the greatest extent have been commissioned by various Swedish governments.⁸ This sheer number is unique in itself among Western receiving countries as well as among the non-Western countries of origin. The fact that Sweden did everything to make the processing of adoptions from abroad easier and faster earlier and more fully than other countries is also one of the reasons behind the corruption and crime that accompanied all too many of these adoptions during their heyday in the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 00s. The Swedish branch of Scandinavian Airlines, or SAS, owned by Sweden, Denmark, and Norway together, even commissioned the French fashion house Carven to design a uniform for the flight attendants belonging to the Escort Hostess Service. This service had been created specifically to accompany and take care of children who were transported between 1965–90 from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to Scandinavia during long flights.

It is important to note that Sweden's official pro-adoption stance continues strong regardless of whether the government has been left-wing or right-wing. This means that full consensus has always been the case in Sweden since the end of the 1960s when it comes to backing up transnational adoption as a national project, linked as it is to a pro-natalist reproduction policy that aims at achieving a higher birth rate and at securing everyone's right to reproduce. This also happened according to the logics of what Shellee Colen calls stratified reproduction—that is the Swedish people's ability and right to reproduce was always dependent upon other peoples' reproductive dispossession and unparenting in the countries of origin.⁹ In line with this universalist pro-natalist position, Sweden was the very first country in the world to introduce a state adoption allowance in 1989 with the argument that low-income inhabitants should also be able to adopt from abroad. Today this means that all Swedes who adopt a foreign-born child are entitled to receive 75,000 SEK tax-free from the government. Sweden was also the first receiving country in the world, in 2003, to allow homosexual couples to adopt from abroad.

Furthermore, and contrary to the US and all the other Western receiving countries, from the 1960s until 1980, the Swedish state itself took care of the practical processing of thousands of adoptions from countries of origin like South Korea. Different from its neighbors Denmark and Norway, which are also generally regarded as strong and interventionist welfare states, Swedish state adoptions were carried out by an adoption mediating bureau within the government institution, the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*), which later on developed into today's Swedish adoption central authority under the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Inter-country Adoption. This body is currently called the Swedish Family Law and Parental Support Authority (*Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd*). Apart from the adoptions carried out by the governmental adoption bureau within the National Board of Health and Welfare, there have also been thousands of private adoptions carried out by individual Swedes, as well as tens of thousands of adoptions

processed by several nongovernmental, adoption-mediating organizations such as the previously mentioned Adoption Centre. From its foundation in 1969, this was and still is the leading organization, totaling close to thirty thousand processed transnational adoptions.

Even more importantly, among all the adopting Western countries, transnational adoption came to play such a fundamental ideological and discursive role for the very self-image of the nation arguably mainly in the US and in Sweden from the very beginning. There, transnational adoption is therefore not just seen as merely a reproduction method on a private level but as a matter of national importance, with some adoption agreements even having been signed by the Swedish king. The first US involvement in and engagement with transnational adoption in the 1950s and 60s was intimately linked to what Christina Klein calls Cold War Orientalism and which Arissa Oh has named Christian Americanism, that is an ideology combining American empire-building rhetoric of saving and protecting the vulnerable and the needy from Communism with a typical American Christian missionary zeal. The Swedish one, however, has a different origin as Sweden stayed neutral during both World War II and the Cold War (Klein; Oh.).

In the Swedish case, transnational adoption instead came to play a fundamental role in the construction of post-war progressive Sweden. In this way, it is arguably only in Sweden among all Western receiving countries that the transnational adoption of non-white children became so vitally and intimately linked to the birth and development of antiracism. The reason behind this unique and peculiar Swedish development can be found in its previous, dominant racial thinking. The background to this is that the first wave of transnational adopted children in the 1950s and 60s arrived in a country that was one of the whitest and most racially homogenous in the West and that until then had been imbued by the conviction that the Swedes were the world's most racially pure and valuable white people (Broberg; Kjellman). The fact that Sweden was so extraordinarily white on a demographic level with an estimated proportion of only 0.06 percent non-white inhabitants in 1960 and the "scientific" idea of the Swedes as the whitest of all nations on earth was dramatically challenged by the arrival of the first non-white adopted children from abroad. Taken together, they also composed the first non-white immigrant group who came to Sweden to become Swedes and to stay in the country for life (Statistiska). This sudden and unexpected arrival of the foreign-born adoptees in super-white Sweden eventually led to the final leaving behind of old, race-obsessed Sweden and marked the beginning of a new, progressive and antiracist Sweden.

From the 1960s, and even more so from the 1970s and onwards, Sweden has generally been regarded as the most humanitarian, the most ethical and the most progressive Western nation. This image of Sweden concerns both the Global North and the Global South. Sweden is proportionally the world's leading receiving country for adopted children from the non-Western world and from the

former colonies and this has without doubt played a pivotal role in creating and upholding this image together with Sweden's having been the world's biggest development aid donor per capita, having had the most radical pro-Global South foreign policy, and having had the Western world's most generous refugee policy for several decades in a row. The fact that over the years Sweden became the world's leading receiving country was a direct result of the policies of the winning side of a political debate that raged throughout the 1960s. The conflict was over whether the Swedish government and the Swedish state apparatus would hinder or stop, or support and facilitate, transnational adoption of non-white children (Hübinette, *Overseas*). In this fierce debate, one side represented the old Swedish establishment, which still believed in the racial purity and super-whiteness of the Swedes. On the other side, a younger generation belonging to the incipient new left of the then-nascent pro-Global South 1968 movement, instead argued for a total break with Sweden's racial homogeneity and isolation by the sudden "mass import" of adopted children of color.

While the old establishment continued to argue that white Swedes would not benefit in the least from taking in non-white children from the Global South (as the children would most certainly reproduce with white Swedes as adults and thus give rise to race mixing on a—for Sweden—hitherto both new and massive scale), the winning side of the debate started to formulate a vision of a future Sweden where race mixing and racial diversity were instead seen as something good and progressive in themselves. Adoptees were therefore tasked with both eradicating Sweden's racism and bringing "color" and non-whiteness into the country and into the Swedish gene pool. The avant-gardist pro-adoption camp of 1960s' Sweden can be said to have identified with what Raka Shome calls global motherhood—meaning a feeling of wanting to protect, save, and take care of practically the whole world, and especially the Global South, in particular non-white children—as well as with what Antoinette M. Burton has described as the white woman's burden in her study of British Feminists and their relationship to the British Empire. To give an example of this strong and urgent Swedish desire to become the leading white mother, savior, and protector of the children of the Global South, Eva Moberg, the most famous Swedish feminist of the time, wrote in 1964: "Today, it is impossible to find a country that could be better suited than Sweden for adoption on a large scale of children from developing countries. . . . Prosperity, social security, low nativity, political neutrality, no colonial burden, good reputation among the developing countries, racial prejudices on retreat" (57).¹⁰ Moberg and the other overly enthusiastic proponents of transnational adoption imagined and portrayed Sweden as the ideal, prime white mother of the so-called Third World, protecting all non-white people on earth, including African Americans. Swedes stood therefore in opposition to the other Western countries, which they portrayed as aggressive, violent, and masculine imperialists and racists waging colonial wars as France and Portugal did, and oppressing their racial minorities, as the US and

the UK do. As a result of the intense adoption debate, a state inquiry led by the Social Democratic minister Ulla Lindström was set up in 1964, which eventually led to the final victory of the pro-adoption camp and the full institutionalization of transnational adoption in and to Sweden from the end of the 1960s and onwards (Statens). Overnight Sweden transformed from previously obsessing about both praising and preserving its own perceived racial purity and white superiority, to Swedes almost fanatically embracing the mass adoption of non-white children from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania. This happened at the very same time Sweden was purging itself from its own racist past, both in front of itself and the rest of the world including both the Global North and the Global South. As a result a new Sweden was born—the good and antiracist Sweden.

Sweden's transnational adoptees were, in other words, both urgently needed and heavily exploited in the effort to rebirth and rebrand Sweden, transforming it from a race obsessed and demographically super-white nation to the most progressive and antiracist country in the Western world at a time of decolonization in the Global South, the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid struggle in Southern Africa, and the African American Civil Rights movement. In this way the adoptees were not just perceived as the children of their respective Swedish adoptive parents; they were, on a symbolic level, turned into the collective children of the Swedish nation itself.¹¹ Transnational adoption to Sweden was, in other words, not seen as just a reproduction method for individuals, as was the case in the other Western receiving countries (with the exception of the US, where it was strongly embedded in American anti-Communism and post-war empire building), but the practice also had powerful ideological use-value to Sweden and the Swedes. This use-value is similar to Ghassan Hage's observation, in *White Nation*, that white multiculturalists find a use-value in immigrants in Australia.

However, while Hage talks about the ethnocultural, religious, and linguistic Otherness of Australian adult immigrants, the Swedish case is solely about the racial Otherness of the adopted children, as they are in all respects culturally Swedish. It is therefore only the adoptees' non-white bodies which have a racial use-value that both boosts and props up Sweden as an antiracist nation and erases and conceals the country's not-so-distant, race-obsessed and super-white past. This heavy racialization of adoptees is something that Richey Wyver reminds us of in his analysis of an election campaign film produced by the Sweden Democrats, a far-right party with a Nazi past. In this film, two adoptees, one from South Korea and the other from Sri Lanka, appear together with the party leader Jimmie Åkesson to communicate that his party is not racist: this reveals "a desire for the transracial adoptee body, a body that can produce Swedish goodness, justifi[es] racist policy and conceal linkages to a racist past" (Wyver, *From* 17). According to Wyver, the racial Otherness of the adoptees constructs and reproduces good and

antiracist Sweden, politically legitimizes the Sweden Democrats as a non-racist party, and at the same time hides and obliterates Sweden's racist past.

To sum up, Sweden finally developed into the world's most pro-adoption country, a position that encompasses both the country's elites and its population in general and that nowadays includes even the Sweden Democrats. This development can be traced back to the first years of transnational adoption when the US and Sweden both played a crucial role in institutionalizing the practice, which at that time was still temporary and not yet fully developed, into a permanent one. Transnational adoption was needed to produce a break with Sweden's former racial thinking and to bring racial diversity and race mixing to Sweden as fast as possible and to the greatest extent. This development started in the 1950s, accelerated from the end of the 1960s, and was completed in the 1970s and 80s, and eventually led to Sweden's becoming both the world's leading adopting country on a demographic level as well as the world's most pro-adoption nation on a political, discursive, and cultural level. Finally, this hegemonic pro-adoption discourse, which has arguably been stronger in Sweden than in any other Western receiving countries, is also the very reason why Sweden is a latecomer when it comes to finding the truth about transnational adoption. At the same time, it also must be pointed out that the US has not yet even initiated an inquiry into the problem of illicit and corrupt adoptions, despite being the biggest receiving country in absolute numbers and the country that together with Sweden pioneered the whole practice from the beginning.

The Rise of Critical Perspectives on Adoption

At the end of the 1960s, the Swedish establishment, which had been hesitant about transnational adoption for racial reasons, finally gave in to the younger pro-adoption camp at a time when practically all members of Swedish society came to enthusiastically back up transnational adoption as a national project. The last vestiges of a political hesitance and skepticism toward the practice was to be found among Sweden's Communists and the far right; both the previously mentioned Left Party, which has a Communist origin, and the Sweden Democrats, which has a Nazi affiliation, were once critical towards transnational adoption—the former until the end of the 1970s and the latter until 2002 (Hübinette, *Overseas*; Gomez). In 2002, the Sweden Democrats was a very small fringe party outside of the parliament, having received only 0.37 percent in the 1998 election. It was only after the 2002 removal of the party's anti-transnational adoption position that it started to grow, and in 2010, the Sweden Democrats entered the parliament for the first time. It can well be argued that the removal of the anti-transnational adoption stance in 2002 was absolutely necessary for the party to be able to grow and finally enter the parliament, as it was seen as a major obstacle in a country where most voters were and still are pro-transnational adoption.

The fact that transnational adoption has played such a fundamental ideological role in both constructing and upholding the image of Sweden in the world, as well as its self-image as the world's most radical and progressive antiracist country, is also the very reason why it took so many decades before some of Sweden's adoptees started to voice a critique of transnational adoption in the Swedish public sphere. Because of transnational adoption's ideological use-value for, and its intimate association with, Swedish antiracism, the Swedish dominant view on it has been and still is much more positive and much more glorifying than in any other adopting Western country. This positive view has been hegemonic in Sweden for so many decades; thus, it can be assumed that the vast majority of all transnational adoptees in Sweden, like their adoptive parents and significant others, for a long time also harbored the very same pro-adoption attitude as other Swedes did. A conscious and explicit critique of transnational adoption that brings up the dark sides of the practice, and not least the corrupt and criminal aspects of the adoption industry, therefore only began in earnest as late as the second half of the 1990s and during the millennium shift. This is when the first adoptees (including myself) voicing such perspectives started to appear in the Swedish public sphere, according to Elizabeth Martinell Barfoed's study of the dominant Swedish discourse on transnational adoption and how challenges from individual adoptees and adoptee activism began (Barfoed 108–13).

I am considered to be the first Swede to explicitly raise critical perspectives on transnational adoption in the Swedish public that were not motivated by either racial or religious reasons, such as advocating for fewer adoptions from abroad and more domestic adoptions while at the same time demanding limits on abortion. This is something that I have been engaged in both as a Korean adoptee, as an adoption researcher, and as a political activist. As I was a pioneer and ahead of my time, it is not a coincidence that my name is frequently referenced to in Barfoed's study. This is also the case in Wyver's study of the ideological basis of Sweden's transnational adoption activities, in which a separate section titled "Discomforting an Adopting Nation: the Work and Legacy of Tobias Hübinette" accounts for the significance of my entering the Swedish public sphere and political debate around the millennium shift:

The emergence of Tobias Hübinette as an adoption researcher in the early/mid 2000s has had a significant and lasting impact on Swedish adoption research. The Swedish adoption programme had been understood as an anti-racist, feminist project, where (white) women effectively help women (of colour) in an act of international solidarity, where bodies of colour are brought into colour-blind, post-race Sweden—and their new parents don't even see their difference (see, for example, Andersson & Jacobsson 1981; Cederblad et al 1999; Juusela 2010). However, Hübinette, a Korean adoptee himself, turned these ideas on their head by approaching adoption from a post-colonial, anti-racist, feminist perspective and

arguing that adoption was the antithesis of the ideals that had been used to justify it for so long. His research focused on racism, the exploitation of Third World bodies, and the colonial echoes of the adoption industry and the desires that fuel it. (Wyver, *More* 34–37)

In his study, Wyver also underlines that “with the exception of HübINETTE’s work structural critique of the adoption industry is largely invisible in Swedish research, and criticism of international adoption remains very much a taboo in Sweden, in public discourse as well as in academia” (37). It is important to note that the study came out in January 2021 before the breakthrough of critical perspectives on transnational adoption in Sweden as well as before the first *Dagens Nyheter* articles had been published.

In October 2023, the journalist Agnes Arpi, who is not an adoptee nor an adoptive parent, came out with a book consisting of deep interviews with eleven transnational adoptees in Sweden, including myself, who all have in common that we are active in the Swedish public sphere as critics of transnational adoption. It becomes clear in the various interviews that it was from the 2000s and onward that those of us who were adoptee activists started to find each other. Together we went through something of a collective consciousness-raising process by decolonizing ourselves, educating and supporting each other, and throughout the years, penning several op-ed articles in the Swedish media, together criticizing the Swedish adoption mediating organizations and bringing up various dark aspects of transnational adoption. From about the same time, I myself also started to reach out to other adoptees who were critical of transnational adoption in other receiving countries in the West. We eventually formed a network that became something of a transnational political movement at a time when the practice globally peaked in numbers of adoptions. Most of us who were and still are voicing critical perspectives on transnational adoption are adoptees from Korea in other countries, including the US, Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Australia, and Belgium. At the same time, we were active within the adopted Korean community that Eleana Kim followed when it matured and became global, also encompassing adoptee returnees in Korea, a development that Kim has accounted for and analyzed in her groundbreaking work *Adopted Territory*.

In the role of having been a public spokesperson for critical perspectives on adoption for by well over two decades, I have also been in contact with various Swedish MPs and different political parties, with the goal of initiating an official state inquiry into the problem with illegal adoptions to Sweden someday in the future—something that finally became a reality in October 2021. In addition, throughout the years I have also been behind, and worked for, numerous media productions and media outlets, including television and radio channels, newspapers, magazines, and film production companies. I have also helped other Swedish researchers and Swedish journalists, authors, artists, theatre companies, film makers, performance artists, and musicians with facts, information, data, and input

concerning transnational adoption. In 2002, the first Swedish media production focusing solely on corrupt and criminal adoptions to Sweden was screened on the Swedish public service television SVT in the form of a documentary entitled *Barn till varje pris* (in English, *Children at All Costs*) which exposed and examined hundreds of irregular adoptions from Thailand to Sweden in the 1970s and 80s. In 2018, in collaboration with the Chilean television channel Chilevision, SVT reported on hundreds of illicit and unethical adoptions from Chile to Sweden. I was involved in both these SVT programs and screenings, which led to subsequent debates in the media. My own extensive private archive and library on transnational adoption, one of the biggest in the world, was used as the foundation for the 2021 *Dagens Nyheter* article series, to which I contributed as a researcher. My archive and library has also been used by the Adoption Commission and its investigative team; I also helped with the *Uppdrag Granskning* documentary on the Chilean adoptions as well as with many other similar media productions, and in the French-German television channel Arte's documentary from 2024, *International Adoptions: A Global Scandal* (in French, *Adoption internationale, un scandale planétaire*) I play a part and am presented as the first whistle-blower, exposing the corruption within the adoption industry. The team also visits and films my archive and library.

Furthermore, I penned and ghostwrote an op-ed article, published in *Dagens Nyheter* before the June 2021 parliament debate and thereafter sent to all MPs and parties to be used by them when demanding that the red-green government initiate a state inquiry (Hübinette, *Så*). The article became the basis for the opposition parties' demands to the government and later on for the government's directives to the Adoption Commission; it was historical in itself as the first political statement ever signed by representatives from all the existing adoptee associations, groups, and networks in Sweden, including both those providing domestic adoptees and transnational adoptees coming from the biggest countries of origin. In Sweden, there is a strong tradition among adoptee associations in Sweden never to engage in adoption issues in an explicit, political way, so in 2021 for the first time this tradition was broken in order to set in motion a state inquiry into corrupt and criminal adoptions from abroad.

Since SVT's reporting of them in 2018, Chilean adoptions have been perceived as something of the perfect example of a corrupt adoption industry in Sweden—and not the least, of the corruption at the Adoption Centre, behind almost all Chilean adoptions to Sweden. The association [Chileadoption.se](https://chileadoption.se), consisting of adoptees from Chile in Sweden, formed in 2018 in the wake of SVT's reporting, has fought relentlessly to make themselves heard and to demand justice, accountability, and reparation. In 2018, The Left Party, in close cooperation with [Chileadoption.se](https://chileadoption.se) as well as with myself as an individual, was the first among all Swedish parties to demand a state inquiry into specifically Chilean adoptions. However due to the strong pro-adoption discourse in Sweden, it was not until after the release of the

Dutch governmental investigation in February 2021, followed by *Dagens Nyheter's* highly acclaimed article series and the SVT *Uppdrag Granskning* documentary, that the other Swedish political parties all joined behind the Left Party's demand for an investigation, and finally together made the then-ruling red-green Swedish government set up the Adoption Commission in October of the same year.

For many years it has been more or less commonplace in other adopting Western countries to accept critique of transnational adoption in the public sphere, but for a long time this was not the case in Sweden due to the intimate relationship between transnational adoption and antiracism, and as a consequence of the relationship between transnational adoption and Sweden's self-image and self-identity as the world's most progressive nation. To give an illuminating example from as recently as in January 2021, only some weeks before the release of the Dutch report and the initiation of the *Dagens Nyheter* article series, a Swedish government report was published on the current situation of Sweden's transnational adoption activities that reiterated the dominant Swedish view and downplayed the problem with crime and corruption (Statskontoret).

All this means that the final breakthrough—a public acknowledgment and general understanding of the existence of irregular and unethical transnational adoptions—came about very late in Sweden, to say the least, and adoptees who for years had critiqued transnational adoption, were more or less massively silenced, ignored, marginalized, punished, vilified, and stigmatized as political extremists, including myself; the comic book artist and illustrator Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, author of *Palimpsest* and *Den uppgrävda jorden* (in English, *The Excavated Earth*) that both raise the subject of illicit adoptions from Korea and Chile; adoptee activists Maria Diemar from Chile, one of the founders of [Chileadoption.se](https://chileadoption.se); Daniel Cidrelius from Sri Lanka, who has persistently shed light on criminal adoptions from Sri Lanka to Sweden; Maria Fredriksson from Korea, who is behind the influential Instagram account @stulen_identitet (in English, *Stolen Identity*); as well as Jyothi Svahn from India, who, inspired by American adoptee activists, in 2016 organized the first Flip the Script event in Sweden, an event that has become the most important regular meeting point for adoptees who are critical of transnational adoption.¹²

The shockingly late Swedish awakening to and acceptance of critical perspectives on adoption also means that it is very late, if not far too late, to achieve a satisfactory truth and reconciliation process, as the oldest adoptees in Sweden have turned seventy, and most of the persons involved in illegal adoption have already passed away. This also concerns many of the first parents in the countries of origin, as well as many of the Swedish adoptive parents. All this means that until recently, the extremely strong reluctance even to admit that corruption was rife when Sweden adopted tens of thousands of children from the Global South, and after the end of the Cold War, from post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, has not only postponed but utterly destroyed any possibility of finding

out what actually happened and thus coming to terms with the past for all involved, whether they are former adoption professionals who were responsible for the adoptions, adoptees, first parents, or adoptive parents—and both the partners and the children of adoptees.

Conclusion

I am not very hopeful, when anticipating the Adoption Commission's report on March 1, 2025, that it will be able to find and disclose substantially more than what is already known. Above all, I do not expect Sweden to do the same as the Netherlands did after the Joustra Commission's report was released at the beginning of 2021—that is, the Dutch government apologized officially to the adoptees in the Netherlands, temporarily halted all adoptions, made it possible for individual adoptees to report to the police those former adoption professionals who conducted illegal adoptions, and by removing the statute of limitations for transnational adoption cases, possibly have them convicted (Loibl). Since then the temporary suspension has also resulted in a permanent stop to all adoptions from abroad from May 2024.

I am not hopeful because the Swedish Adoption Commission will not take into consideration any restorative justice or compensatory matters, according to its directives. And as the Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, whose government will receive the report, and its conclusions and recommendations, has himself been deeply implicated in the problem itself given his role as the Adoption Centre's former chairman. The very reason why Sweden is such a latecomer when it comes to finding the truth about transnational adoption is a powerful, fatal combination of Sweden's place as the world's leading adopting country given its world-record density of adoptive parents especially among the highly educated and highly salaried upper echelons of the Swedes, including the Swedish top politicians, and of the fact that Sweden and the Swedes until recently have been the most steadfast pro-adoption nation in the world.¹³ This powerful combination has, in other words, already determined the outcome of Sweden's settlement process concerning transnational adoption.

It is common knowledge that, since the historical South African post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work of the 1990s, for a truth and reconciliation process to be carried out to the fullest extent, not only a political will to do so is necessary, but also a serious consideration of the issues of accountability and reparation.¹⁴ However, with regards to the Swedish Adoption Commission, there is a disturbing lack of considering both the absolutely necessary issue of accountability and the equally fundamental issue of reparation which in reality means that no Swede who has worked with and organized the transnational adoption activities will ever be prosecuted, as the statute of limitations will not be removed, meaning that no adoptee in Sweden will ever be able to get rectification

and justice in a Swedish court. This means that the Swedish Adoption Commission cannot be regarded as being a part of a truth and reconciliation process as it has not been authorized to hold accountable the responsible parties and therefore any repair nor reconciliation will be unlikely.

Simultaneously, it is now high time to decolonize Sweden's dominant view of transnational adoption and acknowledge the devastating loss of first families in the countries of origin as well as the permanent destruction of numerous adoptees' original identities, which means that the vast majority of all Swedish transnational adoptees will never be able to find nor even be able to search for their first parents, as all traces of them have been deliberately erased or manipulated to make the children "adoptable" by way of manipulated documents. In order to decolonize the previously dominant view of transnational adoption in Sweden, in line with at least some kind of reproductive justice, it is absolutely necessary to start to accept that the mass adoption of children from abroad has come at a huge price. Not only have thousands of adoptees been made "adoptable" by way of forged identities and manipulated documents, by being "orphaned" on paper, kidnapped, trafficked, and sold, but the heavy psychic burden and affective labor has also led to staggering suicide rates and record high mortality rates as a result of being forced to carry good and antiracist Sweden on their very shoulders.¹⁵ When the process of decolonizing both Sweden's adoption practice and adoption ideology has been initiated it will not be possible to undo the past wrongdoings or to repair what has been destroyed forever in the form of the violent break-up of numerous first families in the countries of origin and the permanent loss of numerous adoptees' original identities. However, it may at least be time for the truth and a final settlement and reckoning with Sweden's and the Swedes' almost seventy years of engagement with transnational adoption.

Notes

1. See Sveriges riksdag for the transcripts of the debate.
2. See Regeringskansliet for the government directives to the Adoption Commission.
3. The Swedish parliament contains the radical right-wing Sweden Democrats, the traditional conservative party, the Moderate Party, and the much smaller Liberals and the Christian Democrats to the right and the Social Democrats and the much smaller radical left-wing Left Party, the Green Party, and the left-liberal Center Party to the left. Between 2014–2022 Sweden was ruled by a red-green coalition government consisting of the Social Democrats and the Green Party with Stefan Löfven as Prime Minister. Since 2022, it is governed by a center-right coalition government consisting of the Moderate Party, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats with Ulf Kristersson as the Prime Minister. This last government is dependent on the support of the Sweden Democrats, which is bigger than the Moderate Party.
4. See Selman 381; and for Chinese adoptions in the 2000s see Ekman; and Meier and Zhang.

5. See, for example, Conseil Fédéral.
6. For recent transnational adoption numbers to Sweden, see Myndigheten.
7. See Lindgren for an account of the first decades of transnational adoption to Sweden and how it became firmly institutionalized within the Swedish state apparatus and legislation.
8. See Libris, the digital national catalogue of all books in all Swedish academic and research libraries.
9. For an overview of this pro-natalist reproduction policy, see Hübinette, *Transnational*.
10. All translations from Swedish into English are mine.
11. This is also something which Gondouin argues for.
12. These names also appear in Arpi.
13. By “the truth,” I here mean the previously hidden and unknown facts regarding the dark sides of transnational adoption on a structural level.
14. For more on the various aspects of such a process, see de Gruchy.
15. For an overview of the most recent quantitative research on transnational adoptees in Sweden, see Hjern and Vinnerljung.

Works Cited

- Arpi, Agnes. *De kritiska. Berättelser om internationell adoption* [*The Critical Ones. Stories About Transnational Adoption*]. Verbal, 2023.
- Barfoed, Elizabeth Martinell. *Berättelser om adoption* [*Narratives on Adoption*]. Lund UP, 2008.
- Broberg, Gunnar. *Statlig rasforskning. En historik över Rasbiologiska institutet* [*State-Run Race Science: A History of the Race-Biological Institute*]. Natur & Kultur, 1995.
- Burton, Antoinette M. *Burdens of History. British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915*. U of North Carolina P, 1994.
- Colen, Shellee. “‘Like a Mother to Them’: Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Child-care Workers and Employers in New York. Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction, edited by Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (ed.) U of California P, 1995, 78–102.
- Commissie onderzoek interlandelijke adoptie. *Rapport. Commissie onderzoek interlandelijke adoptie* [*Report. Committee Investigating Intercountry Adoption*]. Rijksoverheid, 2021.
- Conseil Fédéral. *Adoptions illégales d'enfants du Sri Lanka. Étude historique, recherche des origines, perspectives* [*Illegal Adoptions of Children From Sri Lanka. Historical Study, Search for Origins, Perspectives*]. Conseil Fédéral, 2020.
- Ekman, Kajsa Ekis. “Kristersson svek de stulna barnen” [“Kristersson Betrayed the Stolen Children”]. *Aftonbladet*, 20 August 2018, pp. 4–5.
- Gomez, Elsa. “Hur skall vi ställa oss till u-landsadoptioner?” [“How Should We Approach Adoptions from Developing Countries?”]. *Ny Dag*, 7 April 1978, p. 8.
- Gondouin, Johanna. “Feminist Global Motherhood: Representations of Single-Mother Adoption in Swedish Media.” *Critical Kinship Studies*, edited by Charlotte Kroløkke, Lene Myong, Stine W. Adrian and Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (ed.), Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 101–16.

- de Gruchy, John W. *Reconciliation. Restoring Justice*. Fortress, 2002.
- Hjern, Anders, and Bo Vinnerljung. *Hälsa och sociala livsvillkor hos internationellt adopterade i vuxen ålder* [Health and Social Living Conditions of Internationally Adopted People in Adulthood], Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd, 2022.
- Hübinette, Tobias. "Overseas Korean Adoption and the Birth of Swedish Color-Blindness. A Study of How the Korean Adoptees Transformed Sweden's Attitude to Race and the Relationship Between Race and Swedishness." *European Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2023, pp. 71–98.
- . "Om att vara forskare och aktivist" ["On Being a Researcher and an Activist"]. *Arena*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2011, pp. 18–19.
- . "Så vill vi adopterade att utlandsadoptionerna utreds" [This is How We Adoptees Want to See an Investigation into the Foreign Adoptions]. *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 March 2021, p. A5.
- . "The Adopted Koreans of Sweden and the Korean Adoption Issue." *The Review of Korean Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2003, pp. 251–66.
- . "Transnational Adoption and the Emergence of Sweden's Progressive Reproduction Policy. A Contribution to the Biopolitical History of Sweden." *Adoption and Multiculturalism. Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific*, edited by Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette and Indigo Willing (ed.), U of Michigan P, 2020, pp. 223–38.
- Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory. Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Kjellman, Ulrika. "A Whiter Shade of Pale: Visuality and Race in the Work of the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology." *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 180–201.
- Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961*. U of California P, 2003.
- Koo, Youngeun. "The Question of Adoption: 'Divided' Korea, 'Neutral' Sweden, and Cold War Geopolitics, 1964–75." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2021, pp. 563–85.
- Lindgren, Cecilia. *Internationell adoption i Sverige. Politik och praktik från sextiotial till nittiotial* [International Adoption in Sweden. Politics and Practice from the Sixties to the Nineties]. Myndigheten för internationella adoptionsfrågor, 2010.
- Loibl, Elvira C. "The Aftermath of Transnational Illegal Adoptions: Redressing Human Rights Violations in the Intercountry Adoption System with Instruments of Transitional Justice." *Childhood*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2021, pp. 477–91.
- Lundberg, Patrik, et al. *Adoptionerna. Ett granskande reportage* [The Adoptions. An Investigative Report]. Natur & kultur, 2022.
- McKee, Kimberly. "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children: The Transnational Adoption Industrial Complex." *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, pp. 137–78.
- Meier, Patricia J., and Xiaole Zhang. "Sold into Adoption: The Hunan Baby Trafficking Scandal Exposes Vulnerabilities in the Chinese Adoptions to the United States." *Cumberland Law Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2008, pp. 87–130.
- Moberg, Eva. "Vill ni rädda ett barn" ["Do you Want to Save a Child"]. *Idun-Veckojournalen*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1964, pp. 24–25, 57.
- Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd. "Statistik om Internationella Adoptioner" [Statistics on International Adoptions]. Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd, 8 March. 2023, www.mfof.se/sarskilda-innehallssidor/statistik/statistik-om-internationella-adoptioner.html.
- Oh, Arissa H. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford UP, 2015.

- Regeringskansliet. *Sveriges internationella adoptionsverksamhet—lärdomar och vägen framåt* [Sweden's International Adoption Activities—Lessons Learned and the Way Forward]. Regeringskansliet, 2021.
- Selman, Peter. "The Global Decline of Intercountry Adoption: What Lies Ahead?" *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2012, pp. 381–97.
- Statens nämnd för internationella adoptionsfrågor. *Barn som 1969–1997 invandrat till Sverige och adopterats senare, fördelade på år, världsdelar, länder, ålder och kön* [Children Who Immigrated to Sweden in 1969–1997 and Were Later Adopted, Distributed by Year, Continent, Country, Age and Gender]. Statens nämnd för internationella adoptionsfrågor, 1998.
- Statens offentliga utredningar. Adoption. av utländska barn [Adoption of Foreign Children]. 1967. Stockholm: Statens Offentliga Utredningar.
- Statistiska centralbyrån. *Folkmängd efter födelseland 1900–2018* [Population after country of birth 1900–2018]. Statistiska centralbyrån, 2019.
- Statskontoret. *Organiseringen av den internationella adoptionsverksamheten kön* [The Organizing of the Transnational Adoption Activities]. Statskontoret, 2021.
- Sveriges riksdag. *Protokoll från debatten om internationella adoptioner 10 juni 2021* [Minutes from the Debate on International Adoptions June 10 2021]. Sveriges riksdag, 2021.
- Wyver, Richey. "From Flat-Packed Furniture to Fascism. Exploring the Role of the Transracial Adoptee in Fantasies of Swedish Goodness." *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 22, no. 7, 2020, pp. 897–915.
- . "More Beautiful Than Something We Could Create Ourselves": Exploring Swedish International Transracial Adoption Desire. U of Auckland, 2021.