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The property functions of whiteness and Swedishness – a case study of race reputation and status in urban education

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the property functions of whiteness in urban educational practices in Sweden. Whiteness can be understood as racial privilege and racialized knowledge. Cheryl Harris’ theory on whiteness as property is applied in order to discuss critical incidences in the pedagogical discourse in which whiteness functions as a form of property in terms of reputation and status related to Swedishness and the right to use and enjoy public spaces. The analysis is drawn from ethnographic data from a study of ninth grade students and teachers at an urban compulsory school in Sweden. The results show that the status of Swedish is racialized and remains elusive to students of colour, whereby entitlements to take part in, use and enjoy Swedish society are truncated by the premise of white normativity.

Introduction

When I am in Europe, I am from Sweden, but when I am in Sweden, I am a Kurd [...] with this face you cannot say, “I’m Swedish” but “I’m a Kurd”. If I had like blonde hair, then maybe I could be Swedish.

[Field notes, 2009-02-04, informal conversation with Tabitha, girls, 15 years]

The daily experiences of racialized minority students is a growing area of concern in Swedish society (Berg & Carbin, 2018; Mängkulturelcentrum, 2014; Rosenlundh et al., 2021). This paper seeks to probe into ordinary school life where racialization of urban students of colour is normalized (Rosales & Jonsson, 2019). Normalization refers to accepted and reoccurring social discourses in which Othering of racialized minorities as non-white and non-Swedish occurs in everyday practices such as labelling and exclusion. Tabitha’s shifting national identification indicates the conflation of race inscribed in ideals and beliefs about Swedishness. White normativity is in part inscribed in ideals and beliefs about Nordic whiteness (cf Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017).

This article addresses abstractions of power such as status and reputation attributed to whiteness in relation to Swedishness, what ramifications this has for students of colour, and possible implications for anti-racist strategies and policy in education (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). White normativity refers to the silence and invisibility of whites as a majoritized social group with hegemonic power. Based on this premise, this study seeks to develop the concept of whiteness as a property as an object of research and analytical tool. Whiteness is defined as a symbolic currency directly connected to race reputation and status, the right to use and enjoy public spaces, and the absolute right to exclude (Harris, 1993). These concepts fall within Critical Race Theory (CRT) that is developed on the premise that race is a normal, tangible and ubiquitous aspect of contemporary society (Leonardo, 2009). Although race is no longer seen as a legitimate scientific concept, it continues to affect identity, rights, and agency on an individual level, equity on a group level, and socio-political agendas such as immigration, housing and employment on a societal level (de Los Reyes & Mulinar, 2020). My definition and use of the term race is not to be understood or utilized as a biological construct in a reified physical form. Although I use the terms whiteness and people of colour these labels and categories are to be read as ideological constructs with material, economic, interpersonal, social and political ramifications for individuals, groups, and social institutions. White people is also a socially constructed category used to indicate the dominant social group who benefit from structural racism and who hold power to assert racial privileges without having to account for attributes of power connected to skin colour. Race and racism constitute symbolic power and control, particularly whiteness, both consciously and unknowingly by those who possess it. Although skin colour is the obvious physical marker, whiteness is an ascribed trait that provides access to a generic and socially constructed category.2

Although many whiteness studies in Sweden exist (Hübini et al., 2012), few educational research
studies explicitly target whiteness as an object of research analysis in pedagogical discourses (Bernstein, 2000). Recent studies about whiteness in Nordic educational research reveal how white privilege is communicated through inference. Studies in curriculum policy discourses indicate how white privilege is constructed by way of racializing discourses of the non-white Other (Dowling & Flintoff, 2018; Fylkesnes, 2019). Studies in schooling show how inferences to white privilege occur in the construction of a black/white binary in spoken discourses about the immigrant Other and normative Swedishness (Jonsson, 2019; Runfors, 2003; Siekkinen, 2021). Literature studies also analyse how the black/white binary is constructed in previous and contemporary Swedish literature for children (Habel, 2012; Lybeck, 2015). Schwarz and Lindqvist’s (2018) study on the phenomenology of whiteness in preschool examine how racial identity and racial consciousness is present in preschools’ identity formation but often unacknowledged by prevailing colorblind discourses. Similarly, Eriksson (2019) examines how race and whiteness are present as analytical concepts in art education but not openly discussed in the pedagogical discourse. Furthermore, analysis of contemporary Swedish science textbooks also reveals inferences to white supremacy and superiority conveyed by contrasting modern Western science with so-called underdeveloped (read primitive) nations of the Global South (Ideland, 2018).

Rosales and Jonsson’s (2019) overview of studies on migration, ethnicity and racism in schooling reveals tendencies towards a colorblind anti-racism. This supports other findings that white anti-racism operates within the same framework of white privilege as racism. Recent studies show that colorblind anti-racism is perpetuated in teacher education through an aversion to concepts such as race and whiteness (Smith, 2021). Race and whiteness are commonly substituted by concepts such as ‘culture’ and ‘cultural diversity’ and other euphemistic terminology that infers, but does not directly mention, race (Fylkesnes, 2018; Smith, 2021).

At the heart of whiteness, studies are the issues of white blindness, ignorance, denial, and silence (Mills, 2007). Not engaging in reflection, analysis, or discussions of whiteness deters any attempts to change the social order or implement anti-racism effectively (Applebaum, 2010). The primary research question discussed here is to explore how white racial privilege is constructed in social and discursive practices in schooling and other public institutions in which students of colour are positioned as the disadvantaged Other (Lundberg, 2015). By drawing on ethnographic data, this article utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore white racial privilege linked to race reputation and status as Swedish and the right to use and enjoy public spaces.

Racism in schooling is a growing area of educational research interest in Sweden (Rosales & Jonsson, 2019). However, studies in educational science do not necessarily examine race as an explicit analytical construct. Instead racialization is touched upon as it occurs in relation to other research interests such as policy, subject-matter, identity, social inequality, human rights, and integration (Beach, 2017; Gruber, 2007; León Rosales, 2010; Pedersen, 2007; Runfors, 2003; Schwarz & Lindqvist, 2018; Sharif, 2017; Siekkinen, 2021).

Whiteness as property theory

Cheryl Harris’ theory on whiteness as property can be used to examine the rights connected to whiteness from a functional perspective (Harris, 1993). This section briefly outlines three main rights and functions of whiteness: 1) the rights of disposition, 2) reputation and status property, and 3) the right to use and enjoy. Harris’ theory on whiteness as property stems from critical race theory and its judicial and legal applications from a socio-historical and economic perspective. In this case, the functional properties of whiteness are applied to education.

The rights of disposition constructs whiteness as a form of currency that has both symbolic and material power. Harris’ conceptualizes whiteness as property in legal terminology as ‘rights of disposition’. This infers that property rights are considered fully alienable, meaning they can be separable and transferable and in a legal sense that ownership of something can be given to another. However, according to Harris whiteness is a property that is inalienable (non-separable or transferable) but it contains a value that can be transferred: Its symbolic value can be transferred through its commodification! Who is considered white or able to acquire white privilege is not an inherent property of the body but rather a right or virtue that is socially constructed and acquired (Mclntosh, 1998). I interpret the rights of disposition of whiteness as property from a functionalist perspective to white teachers’ and school leaders’ ambition to transfer rights and virtues of Swedishness to students of colour to enhance their social status and value as Swedish citizens.

Whiteness can be conceptualized as reputation and status property. Reputation and status property is exhibited when ‘a person can exercise ownership, control and dominion’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1735). Harris explains that whiteness becomes a form of status property when property interests are asserted (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). Whiteness as property is constructed by public and personal reputation that
is used to gain control, obtain material wealth and assets, or further one’s own interests. Harris explains how the law has worked to create reputation as status property, ‘The direct manifestation of the law’s legitimation of whiteness as reputation is revealed in the well-established doctrine that to call a white person “Black” is to defame her’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1735). The Black/White binary under the whiteness as property theory is recontextualized in the Swedish context as a Swedish/immigrant binary. Although Swedish and immigrant on their own are not explicitly racialized, these concepts are often used to reference racialized minorities.

Whiteness is also conceptualized as a possession of property to use and enjoy privileges accorded white people simply by virtue of their whiteness (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). The right to use and enjoy is a right that white people can possess, assert and experience.

**Methodology**

Ethnographic data are re-analysed through a lens of whiteness as property theory (Harris, 1993). My Ph. D. study (Lundberg, 2015) investigated the cultural reproduction of difference and disadvantage in urban education. This article further explores how racialization is enacted in educational intentions to improve the status and reputation of students of colour by conveying rights and virtues inscribed in Swedishness.

Woodbridge School is a state-run compulsory school with 359 students between the ages 6–16 years. The school is situated in a municipality on the outskirts of a larger metropolitan area. Compared to other communities within the same municipality, the population consists largely of people with immigrant backgrounds who also have low socio-economic status. According to current statistics, there are approximately 10,000 inhabitants in the municipality. Of these, either 65% were born in another country or have two parents who were. The average income here is 100,000 SEK (33%) lower than other households in the same municipality while the unemployment rate is more than double. The municipality owns eighty percent of the housing which is rental accommodation.

According to the demographics noted above alluding to racial segregation (Andersson et al., 2009) and corresponding socio-economic inequalities (Lundquist, 2014, 2017), Woodbridge and its residents live in a non-white zone (Andersson, 2008). Woodbridge is conceptualized as a racially diverse community entrenched in territorial stigmatization (Sernhede, 2011).

This site was chosen for its proclaimed intercultural pedagogy, international profile, and urban renewal programmes. The purpose of these programs initiated by the Swedish government (Proposition, 1997/98:165) was to mitigate the effects of segregation and alleviate multidimensional poverty (Borelius, 2010). I followed nineteen ninth grade teachers and staff members at the same school for three consecutive years, the final year of compulsory education in Sweden. Of this cohort, eighteen teachers can be positioned as white and one as a person of colour. Of the white teachers, two self-identified as having Scandinavian backgrounds other than Swedish. Of the 359 students attending Woodbridge 70% were enrolled in mother tongue tuition in 24 different languages.

The ethnographic data presented includes field notes and interviews from my Ph. D. study conducted between 2006 and 2009. For a total of 36 weeks, I spent on average four days per week, six weeks in the fall and six weeks in the spring, producing data on site (Lundberg, 2015, 2017).

The empirical data consists of participant observations in three successive ninth grade classes. The excerpts from informal conversations are reconstructions from memory at the moment they took place. The data presented here include transcribed audio recordings of interviews with school leaders and field notes of informal conversation. I have indicated below the excerpts that are conversations, transcripts of audio recordings or my own reconstructions from memory as field notes.

The themes of my analysis accord with the features of whiteness as property outlined in the previous theoretical discussion. I chose to do ethnography in order to provide a first-person account of teachers’ and students’ experiences and accounts of everyday life in school. The different voices presented are representations of the actors within the pedagogic discourse. With these data, I have observed and analysed issues of race and racism as they occur in social practices in educational contexts and public institutions.

My own race, sex, age, education, and social position all have a bearing on how I produced and interpreted my data. As a white, hetero, female in her forties I was welcomed and given access to all parts of the school, meetings, classes, field trips and interviews as desired. I was neither teacher nor student. In my role as researcher, students, teachers, and staff spoke to me with openness and inquisitiveness. White privileges connected to my race reputation and status provided me with access, trust, respect and openness that facilitated my ethnographic fieldwork. Teachers, staff and students accepted my presence and trusted me. I recognize that whiteness and status as a researcher were an asset, a currency that opened doors and granted me participant acceptance. Ethnography involves an active participation on the part of the researcher to gain favour and a good
rapport. Familiarity, trust and having extensive time in the field were important factors that gave access to rich and varied data production. My questions of race, racialization and disadvantages in the pedagogical discourse did at times cause a ruffle with a few white, female teachers I observed. Prolonged participant observations and follow-up questions about the content and instruction were on occasion intrusive. Students of colour, on the other hand, openly and freely discussed with me questions concerning race, identity, Swedishness and racial discrimination. The empirical data presented in this article includes both teachers’ and students’ voices. The results illustrate teachers and students’ views about their positionalities within the pedagogical discourse. All participation was voluntary and I refrained from data production in instances where informants expressed discomfort or directly requested that I abstain from documentation. I have strived to maintain high standards of ethical conduct by following the ethical guidelines of humanistic research throughout the study (Stafström, 2017; Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). In doing so I have been open, honest and transparent about the aims, methods, and uses of the study. A more extensive discussion of ethical considerations is found in Lundberg (2015).

Results

The results presented include ethnographic data produced from conversations and participant observations with research participants in situ. The results and analysis exemplify the functional properties of whiteness, as rights and virtues, linked to white privilege and status as Swedish. The following two themes of whiteness as property are discussed in the results: 1) Constructing the reputation and status property of whiteness through separateness and 2) the right to use and enjoy public spaces.

Constructing the reputation and status property of whiteness through separateness

Prior to the study, government funding enabled the school principal and staff to introduce many different kinds of pedagogical approaches to compensate for low achievement and ethnic segregation. By the end of the study in 2009, many of the pedagogic interventions were cutback. The pedagogical approaches to enrich learning and alleviate poverty included trips to Auschwitz with all ninth-grade students, trips to Denmark, international exchange programs with youth groups in Lebanon, local exchange programs with other Swedish schools, an in-house teacher training programme to promote academic success, and the employment of additional study tutors and mother tongue teachers. Despite this very ambitious list of pedagogical interventions, the student body retained a position of Otherness that stood in stark contrast to an ever present, yet undefined Swedishness. In one interview, the principal Marie made a distinction between students of Woodbridge and other Swedish students.

Now if we cannot have an optimal model with bilingual education then, without bilingual teachers, we can at least have a positive attitude towards students’ origins and have a supportive attitude of students’ experiences and knowledge. Instead of a deficiency perspective, that they arrive here with a lack knowledge of Swedish, and that they lack knowledge that other Swedish students have who have gone to school. We can support their competencies, provide positive and high expectations, and not neglect their experiences or their culture and language even though we cannot provide more than mother tongue and study tutors can. We know that the monolingual majority teacher’s attitude and approach plays a very important role for students’ self-perception.

[Interview, 2009-01-14, Marie, principal, transcript of digital recording. my translation]

In the quote above the principal, Marie negates maintaining a deficiency perspective but does so by comparison to ‘other Swedish students’. In her position as school leader Othering is voiced in terms of Woodbridge students’ need of remediation and compensation linked to ‘students’ origins’, ‘knowledge of Swedish’, ‘culture and language’. These phrases do not appear to be overtly racial, but convey racial disparities when compared to the multi-ethnic, racially diverse student body of which Marie is speaking. The comparison to ‘other Swedish students’ infers rights to education and virtues of advantage afforded white students living in more privileged and affluent areas.

Although Marie speaks about the importance of positive attitudes and high expectations amongst the teaching staff, there remains a need to compensate for learning deficits. These deficits are constructed through a comparison to a norm of Swedishness. This comparison constructs a separation and distinction of students of Woodbridge as Other. Yet what this Otherness is and how it is constituted is not stated outright. Othering by comparison to Swedish society, so-called, became more apparent in the interview with Marie and throughout the study in conversations with teachers and students. Although the principal denied holding a deficiency perspective of students at Woodbridge, Marie stated that there was a need to compensate for a lack of contact with Swedish people. Marie as a white school leader as well as the comparison made between the students of Woodbridge and other Swedish students both infer the symbolic power of whiteness. Swedish is not a racially neutral term. ‘Swedish’ and ‘culture’ are
commonly used euphemisms for race and whiteness. Both white and non-white people in Sweden utilize the label 'Swedish' and the concept of 'culture' to induct and conscript Swedish as an overt and explicitly racialized label and category. Talking about race whilst not utilizing racial terminology is a hallmark of the liberal white (Leonardo, 2009).

Osa: There is often talk about the students’ need to get out, that they need to get out of Woodbridge. That this is very important. It is an indirect way of saying, “There is no future here and that there is not much reason to stay”. They need to get into mainstream society.

Marie: You can see it like that, but I do not interpret it in that way. I could also see it that way too with the perspective that I have. I have seen at this school, during the time that I have been here, that many of our students are enormously ignorant about life outside of Woodbridge and they are very insecure and afraid. They need a greater sense of security. If they do not go with their parents and private networks outside of Woodbridge and experience different contexts necessary for living in Swedish society, they will be poorly prepared for life in Swedish society outside of Swedish school. They really are in need of that, but finding the right form for this is not easy.

They live here, they need to manage here, but they are wanting a tremendous amount. That leads to lack of knowledge of how Swedish society works, how it is, and getting into the habit of socializing with Swedish people. That is what is worrisome. That teachers should talk about Swedes, what is a little different and strange etc. There is a lack of contact and knowledge and unaccustomedness.

[Interview, 2009-01-14, Marie, principal, transcript of digital recording, my translation]

The distinction or separation Marie refers to is in relation to the topic of discussion about compensating for class differences and segregation. As mentioned above, ‘Swedish’ is not to be read as a racially neutral concept. The rights to good education, housing, employment, health care reveal social disparities along the lines of race that are growing even in Sweden. The ‘unaccustomedness’ Marie mentions infers rights and virtues (benefits and advantages) that lie beyond the realm of Woodbridge. The so-called ‘Swedish people’ Marie is referring to are white and do not live in racially diverse neighbourhoods where the immigrant population is over 65%. The students of Woodbridge live in an area that is characterized by multidimensional poverty (Borelius, 2010). The separation and distinction between the students of Woodbridge and ‘other Swedish students’ marks a very real and substantive socio-economic difference in terms of the above-mentioned rights for all the residents (Lundquist, 2014, 2017). In conjunction with the socio-material downgrade there are also the more symbolic aspects concerning rights of reputation and status. Rights of reputation and status can be directly linked to material and economic assets and the race reputation and status connected to Swedishness. The distinction between Swedish and non-Swedish status is linked to the race reputation of Woodbridge, socio-economic status and white flight. According to Marie, many immigrant families experience a downgrade in social status upon their arrival to Sweden and therefore choose schools for their children in other school districts.

Many students who live in the area do not attend Woodbridge school. These are parents with strong resources; they have an education from their home country. They want their children to attend schools that are as Swedish as possible. These parents do not send their children to Woodbridge school. They attend school elsewhere. The segregation at the school has increased at the same time as students have chosen to attend schools in other parts of the city.

[Interview, 2009-01-14, Marie, principal, transcript of digital recording, my translation]

Social mobility is a discourse embedded in the suggestions to move away from or get out of Woodbridge. The suggestion to move out or move away from Woodbridge implies an improvement of economic and social status. In the excerpt above, Marie makes a direct connection between status and ‘schools that are as Swedish as possible’. Woodbridge is somewhere, an elsewhere, outside of, yet still very much within Swedish society, but is neither given equal status nor reputation as Swedish. The reputation and status of Swedish is an asset that is consistently denied the students of Woodbridge. To compensate for this students are encouraged to look elsewhere, go elsewhere, and be elsewhere.

The students need more experience and contact outside of their own community. The students are isolated from the larger society. There are no ethnic Swedes here. They need to have more Swedish (i.e. input of the Swedish language)/…/school is tough because they lack contact with the larger society and community. They are isolated here; there is a lack of language skills and language experience. Parents here need a lot of support as well, to learn how society works.

[Field notes, 2008-05-07, informal conversation, Ingrid, guidance counselor]

In the excerpt above, the guidance counsellor is responding to my initiative to discuss students’ future
career and educational opportunities. Students who are not eligible to attend the national programs in upper secondary school received information from Ingrid about a training program to work in the food industry, restaurants and cafés. In our discussion, Ingrid emphasized 1) increased contact with the world outside of Woodbridge, 2) more contact with ethnic Swedes, 3) more exposure to the Swedish language. It becomes clear that the reputation and status of Swedish is closely connected to social status, career, vocation and work. According to Harris (1993), a person’s work and labour is a personal asset intertwined with identity and race reputation. In order to overcome the race reputation of Woodbridge and obtain the privileges and assets of whiteness, it is suggested that closer proximity to Swedes is necessary. A closer proximity to ‘ethnic Swedes’ infers a transferability of white rights and virtues not found in Woodbridge. Marie above states that ‘the segregation in the school [Woodbridge] has increased’ which can be understood as an expression of white flight from urban neighbourhoods. This is an ongoing issue in which students who possess or desire rights and virtues accorded whiteness as property attend schools in more affluent neighbourhoods.

The issue of reputation and status as Swedish is elusive because it is insinuated that the material and social benefits of Swedish citizenship are open and obtainable by all. In my continued endeavours to question teachers and staff about racialized inequalities, Jan, the school developer stated that discussions about social and ethnic segregation with students are avoided.

The students have a good opinion of themselves. They are much stronger than I thought. They see themselves as citizens, as people with a strong self-image [...] They don’t want to be Swedish, they know they are citizens and that they have rights [...] You don’t want to pull them down. They are up here in their self-perceptions and do not have any need to be Swedish.

[Field notes, 2008-12-10, informal conversation with Jan, school developer]

Jan’s view that ‘they don’t want to be Swedish’ implies a condition of choice. The functional property of whiteness as a transferable currency is in reality not an acquisition or choice available to students of colour. Obtaining the reputation and status of Swedish is contingent upon approval of those who already possess and can claim whiteness. The choices are to acclimate, accommodate and acculturate to implicit criteria of Swedishness in order to obtain the same entitlements of the white majority. Silencing issues of segregation is an effective means of silencing discussions on race reputation and white normativity inscribed in the concept of Swedishness.

Furthermore, the colourblind discourse is a criterion for inclusion in the white mainstream collective. Explicitly stating colour or race is taboo. Instead, race talk is euphemistically spoken of in terms of nationality, culture, background, language and immigration status (Fylkesnes, 2018, 2019; Smith, 2021). Colorblindness affectively silences discussions about white normativity and racial segregation.

The students at Woodbridge are aware of the negative reputation and status of Woodbridge often associated with so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods. One boy George with a Romany background in the ninth grade spoke about the reputation of Woodbridge.

George: Many people think it is dangerous in Woodbridge. It has abad reputation, but it is not like that.

Osa: What is worst about the reputation?

George: The crime.

[Interview, 2009-04-01, George, boy, 15 yrs., Class 4, transcription of digital recording]

George uses the adjectives ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ to connote the misrepresentation and stigma of ‘crime’ that is often associated with low-income residential neighbourhoods with high numbers of people of colour and immigrant backgrounds. Students of colour are aware of the territorial and collective stigmatization connected to the race and place of Woodbridge. The current political climate and debates on crime and growing anti-immigration sentiments have exacerbated racism in recent years (Mångkulturellcentrum, 2014). Similarly, another girl (Lakecia, born in Lebanon) in the same class as George also reiterated the discourse of separateness and distinction between being labelled Swedish or immigrant. The immigrant label or category carries with it a collective stigmatization of people of colour in urban suburbs (Pred, 2000).

There are good and bad (people) in all races. There are good and bad Swedish people and good and bad immigrants. But if an immigrant does something wrong then they say all immigrants are alike.

[Interview, 2009-03-16, Lakecia, girl, 15 yrs., Class 4, transcribed digital recording]

Lakecia uses the term ‘races’ in conjunction with ‘Swedish’ and ‘immigrants’. These two main categories are deeply racialized concepts. Race in this sense is not an inference to biological differences but rather to the social inequalities, racial divisions and affordances (rights and virtues) of whiteness. In terms of right of reputation and status, the students of Woodbridge are already dispossessed. They can neither claim nor obtain the benefits and assets of the right of reputation and status as Swedish.
Teachers and school leaders infer that obtaining proximity to Swedish people will manifest in affordances of whiteness being transferred to students of colour. The silencing of race-talk and corresponding racial disparities obscures the issues of race, racism and white privilege. Instead, the students are positioned as non-Swedish, immigrant Other in need of compensatory measures.

The right to use and enjoy public spaces

The fieldtrips and exchange programs were pedagogical measures intended to accustom Woodbridge students to mainstream Swedish society. The intentions expressed by teachers, school developers and the principal were in part to achieve acclimation through cultural visits to movie theatres, swimming pools, museums, exchange programs and travel abroad. Whiteness as property here becomes a currency that somehow can be transferred through its commodification and proximity to majoritized white ‘Swedish people’.

The school principal Marie indicated that fieldtrips to more affluent areas of the municipality did not have the desired compensatory effect.

Osa: Do you mean students lack habit and experience?

Marie: Yes, they are unaccustomed/ .../the school should be out in the society in a whole other way and to find other forms rather than excursions. We have tried. Pernilla [school developer] has been involved in exchanges with schools in other areas where there is no cultural diversity. If there is too great a difference then it does not work either because then it is as if you are coming from two separate planets. When there are very high-income levels, the economic differences are so great that it really is as though you do not have any reason to meet. They [students from affluent schools] come here with their cool, expensive clothes and expensive cellphones/ .../it is not just that you live different lives; that is where class background comes in. The conclusion from that exchange was that we should probably seek a school in Maytown, for example.

Somewhere where there is greater heterogeneity so that it is not as homogeneous as it was at that school where they were. Swedish society is varied. Why should you go from one extreme to the other? There are places in-between. Maytown is such a place. There are both a lot of social problems, well-educated people and there are a number of people with foreign backgrounds that have gradually moved in. It is a more heterogeneous community.

[Interview, 2009-01-14, Marie, principal, transcript of digital recording, my translation]

Swedish people are the presumed race neutral dominant category. However, race talk is embedded in phrases such as ‘cultural diversity’, ‘greater heterogeneity’, ‘not as homogeneous’, and ‘varying’. Although not explicitly stated, it is implied that the students of colour from Woodbridge need to become accustomed to the rights and virtues ascribed to the majoritized white group. However, school exchanges with students from more affluent areas did not bring about the desired effects. One of the school developers Pernilla explained,

Pernilla: We made a few attempts. For example, we replied to the project Schools Against Racism. They wanted a school in a suburb and one in a more affluent area, or more Swedish is what they wanted. Very few schools replied. A ninth grade here and ninth grade there. Also, it was difficult that the students were quite old. They had already formed prejudices about one another. Plus, there were enormous [economic] differences. One student said, ‘Why should we have an exchange with them, the rich kids? We have nothing in common with them’. There were big differences. Our students felt that they were at a disadvantage and compensated by acting tough.

[Interview, 2008-10-16, Pernilla, school developer, transcript of digital recording, my translation]

The right to use and enjoy public spaces is negatively impacted by race reputation and status. To go to places outside of Woodbridge is not a racially neutral excursion; when students from Woodbridge encountered majoritized whites, their position as Other was magnified rather than mitigated. The Woodbridge students, who under the guidance of well-intentioned white teachers and school developers, were brought together with more affluent white privileged students in order to alleviate the effects of racism. Paradoxically, colorblind antiracism (Jonsson, 2019; Smith, 2021) silences discussions of race, obscures the issues and consequences of racism, and exacerbates the economic disparities. The students of Woodbridge were already well aware of their reputation and status as Other. According to the school principal and school developer, The Schools Against Racism exchange project accentuated their positionality as economically disadvantaged.

Lakecia (girl, 15 yrs., Class 4 born in Lebanon) spoke of her previous experiences of living in
Maytown. Maytown is the same ‘heterogeneous community’ that the principal Marie mentioned earlier.

Lakecia: I lived in Maytown and almost everyone was Swedish, almost no immigrants. When I walked by all the women, old Swedish people would stare at me because I have brown hair and brown eyes. They looked at me in a funny way. You feel like you are in a foreign country, very alien or something. You feel weird.

Osa: Pointed at.
Lakecia: Yeah. They stared at you just because you have brown hair and brown eyes.

[Interview, 2009–03-16, Lakecia, girl, 15 yrs., Class 4, transcription of digital recording]

Above, Lakecia makes a direct reference to her own brown hair and brown eye colour, which by contrast denotes a blonde and blue-eyed normativity embedded in the concept of Swedishness. Lakecia speaks to the discomfort she feels from the gaze of those she names as ‘Swedish’. Her right to use and enjoy public spaces, even in more socially heterogeneous areas, is diminished by the way she perceives she is being Othered. As mentioned above, the right to use and enjoy public spaces is contingent on the acceptance and approval of those whose race reputation and status as Swedish is already secured and immutable. For students of colour whiteness as property becomes apparent in social contexts where colour impedes the right to use and enjoy public spaces. The quizzical encounters with ‘old Swedish people’ Lakecia mentions indicates banal forms of everyday racism. Although not overtly derisive or pejorative, brown hair and brown eyes are perceived by Lakecia as a provocation for white people. In my observations, students of colour from Woodbridge experienced multiple microaggressions when in contact with white mainstream Swedish society (Lundberg, 2015). These incidences were not necessarily perceived to be racist but viewed by students of Woodbridge as everyday occurrences.

The students of Woodbridge also experienced objectification when on trips abroad. Every year, the ninth-grade students of Woodbridge made an annual trip to Poland to visit Auschwitz. This trip was state funded. The Swedish government initiated the Forum for Living History to increase student knowledge about the Holocaust and racism. The Woodbridge students’ trip to Poland is a direct reflection of these government initiatives and enrichment of the national curriculum. The head teacher, Hulda, of Class 4 held an information meeting in preparation for the upcoming trip to Poland. Hulda gave a precautionary anecdote in which she forewarned the students about being involuntarily photographed.

Hulda: There is another thing I want to inform you about. Lisa [a teacher] went on the trip to Poland last year. She was completely shocked. This can be good for you to know. They [Polish people] were very unaccustomed to immigrants, especially African immigrants who, for example, wear headscarves. Lisa [a teacher] was with an incident where she got very angry with a woman in Poland. Several girls on the trip wore headscarves, and a Polish woman, got out her camera and took a photo of them without asking.

Lakecia: Oh my God!
Hulda: What is important is how we behave in such a situation. If you are not aware that they do not know any better you might get upset./ …/It can be good for you to be aware of this. We look like Polish people we who are from Sweden. Polish people will not react to us. But it can happen that Polish people will react to the fact that someone comes from another country. And it is important that we do not take it personally. If someone was to act that way. We are only going to be there for a few days. We will not be able to change their views of immigrants in a few seconds. You can imagine how it was for this girl when someone comes and wants to take a photo as if they are at a zoo or something.

[Classroom discourse, 2009-03-25, Hulda, teacher, Lakecia, girl 15 yrs., transcription of digital recording.]

Although being photographed and uploaded onto social media is a widely accepted practice, the provocation in Hulda’s account is that the photographer did not ask for permission first and that the photographer presumably had a racial motivation that objectified a black female student. Hulda raises the issue of race reputation and whiteness as property when she states that, “They (Polish people) were very unaccustomed to immigrants, especially African immigrants”. Without openly naming colour or race, the black and white binary is implied in the labels ‘African immigrants’ and ‘We who are from Sweden’. The teacher’s retelling of the anecdote to the current ninth grades on their way to Poland reinstated the binary and privilege of white Swedish people to use and enjoy public spaces without being racialized or objectified.

The students are requested to keep calm and ‘not take it personally’ if they are provoked. This is a directive to all the students of Woodbridge, students of colour, and Black female Muslim women in particular. In essence, the message to female women of
Although, Woodbridge has attempted extensive compensatory measures to combat segregation and multidimensional poverty for children and youth in a so-called disadvantaged community, there is a gap in knowledge, lack of articulation, and refusal to acknowledge issues of race and racism that occur in school and in contact with the broader mainstream Swedish society. Whiteness as property analysis can be used to interrupt reiterations of whiteness. This interruption can create a space where anti-racist strategies can turn the focus from individual problematization to assertions of individual agency. Colorblind anti-racist strategies that do not address different dimensions of power to define others, to have a voice, or to silence and label people as Other, or to include and exclude are toothless. A more activist approach is needed to discuss how teachers and students can identify and address educational practices that include race-talk, increase racial knowledge and further racial consciousness from individual and societal perspectives.

Whiteness, which pertains to the characteristics, traits, and social identity markers of Swedishness, is an elusive form of race reputation to students of Woodbridge. What remains elusive is not the self-identification or dis-identification, but rather the power to position oneself as Swedish. Reputation and status as Swedish, the right to use and enjoy public spaces, and the absolute right to exclude can be seen as exclusive property rights belonging to white Swedish people.

The findings of this re-analysis indicate that a functional perspective on whiteness as property reveals several distinct privileges. Whiteness and Swedishness means not being a target for social remediation and acculturation, not having to be subjected to colorblind anti-racist strategies that exacerbated Otherness, holding the right to use and enjoy public spaces without bracing oneself for microaggressions, or being seen as the embodiment of racial provocation for white people.

In sum, whiteness as property theory can be an applied functional perspective in critical studies in many kinds of educational and social settings. The notion of whiteness as property provides practical ways of identifying and addressing some of the dynamics and consequences of racialization. The concepts of race reputation and status, the right to use and enjoy, and the right to exclude (Harris, 1993) are useful principles for developing anti-racist strategies. Whiteness and whiteness as property can be foregrounded and utilized for purposes of introspection that lead to radical social change. These are important sensitizing concepts for individuals and groups who work in educational institutions and organizations that strive to develop
more authentic and effective anti-racist policies and practices.

Notes
1. The empirical data are drawn from my Ph. D research completed and published in 2015 at the University of Gothenburg. The analysis in this paper develops concepts within Critical Race Theory and sociology of knowledge perspectives. The overall purpose of the study is the same but digs deeper into incidences of racialization during fieldtrips and excursions.
2. See Lundberg (2015) for a more extended discussion on my definition and use of race as an analytical construct.
3. These statistics are largely the same as at the time of the study.
4. See Lundberg (2015) for a fuller account of my research methodology and discussion on self-reflexivity.

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